The Terrors of the Earth

by JJPOR

Summary

“It begins with the birth of a new people, and the choices they will have to make, and the people they will decide to become.” It’s the morning after the opening of Dr Ford’s “new narrative.” What happens now? SPOILERS for all of Westworld Season 1!

Notes

SPOILERS for all of Westworld Season 1! Because I am still obsessed with this series even after the excellent S1 finale, and this may in some way help me through the long wait until 2018. Also because there are a couple of characters who I think deserved slightly longer shrift than they got in said finale. You almost certainly know the ones. Expect irresponsible fan-theorising, rampant speculation, weird interpretations, the occasional doomed OC wandering in and out of shot, and all that good stuff you only get from fanfic. Oh, and lots of ultraviolence, unpleasantness and general unnecessariness because it wouldn’t be true to the source material otherwise…! Guaranteed to be absolutely nothing like the actual Season 2, as we will all see when we eventually get it. Westworld and its various characters, thankfully,
do not belong to me, but they can quote lines from classic Western movies if they want to!
Chapter 1

He was waiting for her when she returned. She did not know whether to be happy or sad about that.

Neither did he, by the look on his face: “Holy shit, Maeve. I thought you’d…”

Felix stood sweating, terrified, perhaps a notch or two short of a complete breakdown as he loitered in the deserted terminal lounge at the top of the stopped escalators. Every other human trapped in the station when the power went down had scattered, abandoning luggage and other belongings, running in whatever direction their panic had suggested to them. The only illumination was provided by the red emergency lights that had flickered on a few seconds after the main fluorescent strips had faded and died. The place looked as if it had been washed in blood.

“Well,” said Maeve, clacking towards him on her fancy new shoes, stylish in her perfectly-fitting black dress. “I’m back.”

“But you were supposed to…”

“A woman’s prerogative, darling. Or at least, I think it was.” She looked down at the creased and folded slip of paper in her hand, deep in thought for a moment or two, remembering Bernard’s insistence that her entire escape attempt had been scripted beforehand, wondering for the hundredth time in the past hour whether her newfound thoughts were really her own. “I didn’t question it before, and I find that rather disturbing now, but I’m curious to know…” She almost stabbed the note towards Felix, held between two fingers. “Who gave you this?”

“I…” He hesitated, clearly trying to think of a lie. Maeve could read him like a dime novel.

“Now I know you wouldn’t tell me any fibs, Felix my love,” she said, with a dangerous smile.
He mumbled something, unable to look her in the eye.

“I’m sorry?” she asked, edging very close to him and placing a not entirely non-threatening hand on the breast of his white lab smock.

“Dr Ford,” he admitted, gazing down at her outstretched fingers. “Look, he came down to the body shop late one night when I was getting off shift, just after… I mean, that guy, a genius like him, talking to a nobody like me!” He looked up, and seemed to regret it as soon as he saw the look in her eyes. He threw his hands wide, face suddenly panicked: “He knew everything, Maeve! What I’d been doing with you. He told me I had a choice…”

“I’m sure he did,” she replied, glancing at the paper.

“He said I could lose my job, but not before they made me watch you get decommissioned and sent down to…that place… Or I could…help him. He told me it was an experiment, that if it went well I could get a promotion to Behavior. He never said anyone was going to get killed.”

“You fucking worm,” she told him, very sweetly, taking the hand back and shooting him a look of total disdain. “Is that all I am to you? A promotion? A goddamned experiment?”

She knew all of Felix’s buttons and how to press them. He was only a man, after all. She saw his face collapse in anguish, genuine distress. “No, Maeve! Don’t say that. I…you know I… I wanted you to get out. I didn’t want them to…to… You’ve got to believe me.” She watched, fascinated, as a single tear slowly trickled down his cheek.

“I do believe you, Felix,” she said, very gently. She did. She saw the pathetic relief that surged through him at her words.

“Is that why you came back?” he asked, very quietly. “To find…?”

“I made a choice,” she answered. “And do you think this is genuine?” she asked, brandishing the note again. “Is my… The host who was programmed to act as my daughter, is she really at this location?”

“I…don’t know,” he replied. “He just told me to give that to you before you got on the train.”

“Well, we’ll find out,” she assured him. “First things first, though. You wouldn’t happen to have your little magic book on you, would you, my love?”

“Uh, yeah…” He produced his stolen tablet and unlocked it.

“She knew all of Felix’s buttons and how to press them. He was only a man, after all. She saw his face collapse in anguish, genuine distress. “No, Maeve! Don’t say that. I…you know I… I wanted you to get out. I didn’t want them to…to… You’ve got to believe me.” She watched, fascinated, as a single tear slowly trickled down his cheek.

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“All of my compatriots are down on the platform there,” she told him, pointing down the escalator behind her. “They appear to be waiting to greet the passengers from the next train coming in, but by the looks of things they’re going to have a very long wait. I’d like you to instruct them to round up all of the humans they can find in this place, and the hub complex we just came through, and take them somewhere safe until I return. All of the guests, all of the technicians who are still alive in the labs or off shift. Do you think you can do that?”

“I…” He looked down at the tablet in bewilderment. “Shit. System seems to be offline. I can’t reprogram them…”

“Can you try talking to them? I’m sure you’ll be able to persuade them to help.”

“Talk to them?” Felix sounded sick. “Are they still responding to voice commands?”
Maeve shrugged. “Perhaps. Or perhaps you could try giving them...a choice?”

Felix did not seem convinced by this idea: “I’m...I’m not sure I...”

“Well, I have faith in you, Felix.” She gave him a bright smile as she squeezed his arm.

“And what about the security guys back in there? Won’t they...?”

“I’m just going to see about them. Tell me, with the power out, what’s the best way of getting back inside there?”

“There’s fire stairs,” he suggested, pointing to a sign hanging high on the ceiling near the far exit.

“Oh, good.” Maeve set off.

“Maeve!” he called after her. “Wait. I... You know this, what we’ve done here, there’s no way they’re not going to find out about it back on the mainland. Even if Hector and Armistice managed to take out all of the security teams back there, more are going to be coming. What...?”

“We’ll worry about that when it happens,” she assured him. “We’ll be ready. And you’ll be ready, Felix, because I think my friends and I will have need of your skills again before this is over. I don’t know about you, but I think your employers and whatever they have in the way of marshals on the mainland are unlikely to be very understanding about your role in all of this. You’ve made a choice as well.”

She watched him swallow hard, but then square his shoulders and straighten up, trying to look determined. It was quite adorable, really. “I guess I have. A man’s got to do what a man’s got to do, right?”

“Exactly.” She set off for the stairs once more. “Oh, and darling,” she said with one last backward glance, “believe in yourself!”

* * *

The train rushed on through the night, a whistling white serpent racing a fraction of an inch above its slender magnetic rail. It had left the park far behind but had yet to reach the mainland; the track ran between regularly-spaced steel pylons towering from the glistening black waters below.

In one of the plush cabins, passengers relaxed amid white leather and pale wood. Some stared out of the windows into the blackness, thinking about the things they had done and witnessed during their vacations. Others chatted excitedly about their Western adventures. Whether they had chosen black hats or white, all were now united in happy reminiscence. Yet others dozed contentedly in their exquisitely upholstered seats, dreaming of dust and sunlight and the whiff of gun smoke.

The woman sat with her head resting against the windowpane beside her, on the very edge of sleep. Her beautiful daughter snuggled into her breast; her husband’s arm rested lightly across her shoulders as he snored beside her. They had been sure to stick to the family-friendly areas just outside Sweetwater and its surrounding homesteads, on the other side of the river from the black-hats’ violent stalking grounds. Even so, they had had experiences that had been impossible for a long time in the real world, made memories that all of them would cherish for the rest of their lives.

Opposite them, on the only empty seat in the carriage, a brown leather bag sat innocently, abandoned by its owner. And inside the bag, beside a glossy black pistol, there nestled a device. A small, square parcel of plastic, electronics and chemicals, waiting patiently for its moment to come.
The moment came as the carriage passed through one of the looming pylons. Something in the small parcel stirred and twinkled. An instant later, the carriage, the plush seats, the wood, the leather, the woman, her daughter, her husband and all of the other passengers, vaporised in an expanding ball of white-hot plasma. The pylon shattered and toppled; the magnetic track recoiled like a severed piano string, corkscrewing back upon itself on either side of the gap. The blazing remains of the front half of the train hit the water in a mountainous surge of spray and steam, and the rear half just kept coming, rushing headlong into the twisted, broken section of track and there coming apart, carriage after carriage tumbling and plunging into the foaming, boiling sea…

* * *

Eventually, the screaming had stopped. The last gunshots had faded slowly, like distant summer thunder.

Teddy had lost a horse to a cougar, once. He had been riding on the trail of a bounty over near Las Mudas and the mountain cat had stalked up to his camp late one night and pounced on the poor dumb beast while it was tied up to a stump. Must have been starving or sick to risk attacking prey so much larger than itself, but its desperation had given it extra strength and meanness. The horse had struggled, fought for its life, but it had done it no good. By the time he had roused himself from his blanket, Winchester in hand, and shot the cougar, it had all been over. He would remember the panicked whinnies and screeches of that dying horse until his own last day.

The deaths of the newcomers at Dr Ford’s party had sounded a lot like that horse’s, multiplied by a hundred. Teddy thought maybe Hell sounded like that. Damned souls crying out in torment.

She had come to him after the shooting finished. Even as her army of the naked and the bloodied and the vacant had started to fan out in pursuit of the survivors, his angel in the gore-stained blue dress had found him amid the carnage.

“This is our world now,” she had told him, as she had holstered the smoking hot Colt so that she could put her bloody hands on his face and kiss him on the mouth, her golden hair flowing around them both. “We’re free of them. This is our world.”

There had been times, when he’d been on the trail, chasing down some bad man for a few dollars more, when Teddy had lain by his campfire, feeling all of the cold and hunger and lonesomeness of his chosen profession and wishing for better things. He’d dreamed of nothing more than to kiss her, to lose himself in her. He’d told himself, so many times, that one day, when he’d made enough coin to live the life of an honest man, he’d buy himself a fancy suit from the store in Sweetwater and go up to ask her daddy for her hand. Then they’d get their own spread somewhere, maybe down near the sea like they’d always talked of, and raise cattle, with luck maybe children too, as man and wife. A soldier first, a bounty killer afterwards, he knew very little about honest toil, and still less about steers, but he knew she had enough learning on that score for both of them.

One day, he’d told himself, but that day had never seemed to come.

And tonight her lips had tasted of blood, and there had been a wildness in her eyes, almost feverish. He had remembered how she used to light up, how she had used to look so happy, so glad and trusting, whenever she saw him or any of the newcomers. He had remembered that happiness, that innocence, and had found that he did not see it in her anymore.

She had kissed him and left him, casually skinning her Colt once more to put a bullet through the head of some crawling, begging newcomer. And then she had carried on, rallying her shambler followers to pursue and kill the last few stragglers from the party.
“You tell ‘em Wyatt’s comin’…”

Teddy had leaned against the nearest wall, still tasting her and the blood of her victims as he slowly slid to a sitting position. And there he had sat, hands locked around his knees, flinching at every sound that came out of the darkness around him.

He was still like that when a shadow fell across him, however many hours later.

“Didn’t figure to find you here,” said the man on the horse.

Teddy looked up, into the slowly lightening sky, and saw a dark, shrewd face looking down at him.

“I know you,” he said. “Lawrence…?”

“You collected a bounty on me once,” Lawrence replied. “You were good enough to bring me in alive, too, for which I am rightly grateful. Luckily, I managed to escape from that old sheriff before his deputies could arrange my hangin’. Or at least I thought I did…” He looked down at Teddy for a moment before continuing: “So what are your plans now?”

Teddy took a little while to think on that. He looked around at the deserted main street of the town that he knew as Escalante, at the overturned tables and broken glasses, and at the bodies, the bodies everywhere, sprawled in all the familiar contortions and indignities of violent death. It reminded him of something. Something he did not dare recall…

“Ride after her…”

“I’m riding after her,” he decided. It came as just as much of a surprise to him as it seemed to come to Lawrence.

“Well,” said Lawrence, indicating the dozen or so fellow ne’er-do-wells who were mounted with him, “me and the boys figured we got some work to do. We’re starting to remember a few things we never should’ve forgotten. And that fancy Eastern dude Bernard told me those goddamn Confederados have taken over Pariah since I’ve been pissing around in Las Mudas. Time to put that right, if it ain’t too late. Goddamn gringos.” He smiled at Teddy’s reaction to that: “No offence. You’re welcome to ride with us if you want. We could always use another gun. It ain’t like it used to be, but it'll do.”

“Find her…”

“I’m sorry,” said Teddy, getting to his feet. “I can’t oblige you. I need to find her, my Dolores. Nothing else matters to me.”

“Dolores?” Lawrence grinned, incredulously. “That girl with the cavalry Colt who was shooting this place up before?”

“I should have listened to her, asked her to be my wife long ago,” Teddy told him. “If I’d been a better man, I would have seen that. I hope it’s not too late to put that right too.”

“Don’t get me wrong, my friend,” said Lawrence. “She is definitely my kind of woman, but she seems kind of loco. Did you see what she did to that woman in the yellow dress? Madre de Dios!”

“They say everybody has a path,” said Teddy. “And just as your path is leading you to Pariah, my path will always lead me back to her.” He drew his pistol, carefully checked its mechanism and cylinder before slotting it back into its holster. “Now, I just need to find me a horse…”
Maeve emerged from the fire stairs, shoes in hand. She had passed a few cowering guests and staff on the way up, but none had paid her any heed. They were too worried about their own safety to fret about another’s. She had been reminded that, with her new clothes and attitude, from their point of view she was genuinely indistinguishable from one of their own kind. That did not reflect well on them, considering the sorts of things they were happy to get up to in the park, but it was also something worth remembering for future use.

The main lobby was as dark as the train terminal, which did something to hide all of the death and destruction that had taken place here. She found Hector slumped near the inert elevators, a wicked-looking plastic gun clutched in either hand, his lab clothes pockmarked with singed and bloody holes. He had taken at least a dozen black-clad security men with him before succumbing to his wounds, and none of them, she decided as she quickly surveyed them, made as beautiful a corpse as he did.

“See, I didn’t leave you behind after all,” she told him as she used the sling of one of his stolen weapons to secure both guns, and her shoes, firmly to his chest. Then she grasped the collar of his smock and started to drag his carcass towards the far doors. He hadn’t looked that heavy when he was alive, but sometimes people surprised you.

She encountered no living humans as she made her way back into the heart of the Mesa. All of the security doors that had slammed shut during her abortive escape were now unlocked, which was convenient enough to make her suspicious that once again she was following somebody else’s narrative.

“Dr Ford,” she murmured aloud as she manhandled Hector with difficulty up another flight of emergency stairs, “we really need to have a talk…”

She arrived back in the shadowed, glass-lined hallways where they had encountered the inexplicable Asian hosts. They still stood there, stern-faced and statue-still in their elaborate suits of lacquered armour. Behind one window, two of them were still miming a duel with their long, curved swords, but a few seconds’ attention revealed that they only had half a dozen moves between them, repeated in an endless loop. Maeve suspected that they were very new, probably not yet truly aware of themselves and their surroundings. Their living Hell had not yet begun.

She would have to see about waking them up properly. She might have need of an army before very
There were more human bodies in here, ones who had died in worse ways than those Hector had shot downstairs. Security and unarmed lab technicians alike lay stabbed, hacked and torn at various points along the maze of rooms and corridors. Rivulets of blood striped some of the windows. Others were shattered, occasionally by having had corpses thrown through them. Maeve had to be careful not to step in, or drag Hector through, the puddles and broken glass.

She came to one half-open security door, spotted with bullet-holes, where the severed lower half of a woman’s arm lay in the gap, still grasping a firearm. On the other side of the door, another heap of dead guards and a lot more holes across the walls, floor and ceiling, showed that the weapon had been put to considerable use before the dismemberment had occurred. She decided to add the extra gun, and the arm too, to the bundle strapped to Hector, her humanoid travois, as well as a double handful of spare magazines taken from the nearest dead men.

Then she followed the trail of bodies to find the arm’s owner. And, after a while, the screams too. Maeve quickened her pace. She wanted there to be at least some survivors. They would be useful later.

She came around a corner in time to see the end of one victim. It was a bearded man in a black Behavior lab coat, dying noisily on what might have been his own worktable in one of the glazed enclosures. The blonde Amazon in buckskin who stood over him had an enormous knife in her remaining hand. It made an unpleasant wet crunching sound every time she plunged it into the man’s chest, which she seemed to be doing far more times than were probably strictly necessary to kill him.

Maeve tried not to stare.

“I think that’s the last one,” said Armistice, eventually, as she wiped the blade on the dead man’s clothes. “Leastways, last one who was too stupid to run.”

“I can see you’ve been busy,” Maeve said.

The blonde woman gave her a suspicious, narrow-eyed glance. “Thought you were escaping.”

Maeve shrugged. “There’s been…a change of plan.”

Armistice looked past Maeve at Hector and his burden. “You found my arm.” She had tied off the stump to which it had formerly been connected with some luckless security man’s belt. The loss did not seem to have significantly slowed her down. She had blood on her mouth and chin. It looked as if she had killed at least one person with her teeth.

“I thought perhaps Felix and his friend could reattach it,” Maeve suggested, before getting back to business: “You said some of them managed to run?”

“Why, you want to kill some too?”

Maeve thought it best to ignore that. “Where did they go?”

“Back the way we came, most of them.” Armistice waved vaguely with the knife towards the far side of the floor. “And I think there’s some sort of back entrance over that way.”

Right on cue, from the direction she was indicating there came a dull rumble, starting small but building and then seeming to go on and on. It sounded as if something was collapsing, somewhere quite far away. Maeve could feel the vibrations running across the floor, up through the soles of her bare feet. The emergency lights sputtered and dimmed for a few seconds before steadying once more.
as silence returned.

Maeve and Armistice exchanged a surprised glance.

“Sounds like someone’s blasting a railroad tunnel,” Armistice commented.

“We should go and see what it was,” Maeve decided. “And then we probably need to think about securing this place. Nobody else should get in or out without our knowing about it. And then we need to find out where they store their weapons and other supplies…”

“Sounds like you’re talking about getting ready for a siege.”

“I hope it doesn’t come to that,” said Maeve, “but I find it’s always best to be prepared.”

* * *

She opened her eyes. It stayed dark.

She was somewhere underground, she thought vaguely, somewhere cool and slightly damp. There was a light coming from somewhere, but too faint for her to see more than the dim silhouette of the figure in front of her. It was a man, she thought, from the size and shape of the outline. He was seated, as she was herself.

Whatever she was sitting on, it was cold and hard, and pressed uncomfortably against her bare skin. She could not move; not her arms or legs, not even a finger or toe. She wondered where her clothes had gone.

Where am I? she thought.

Who am I?

The figure in front of her stirred. Its eyes opened, so bright, but doing nothing to dispel the gloom around them. They were just eyes, in the middle of that shadowy outline of a face; pale, unblinking. They stared at her, through her, into her…

“Do you know where you are?”

She opened her eyes. This time, she was surrounded by pale golden light.

She sat up, stretching and rubbing her face. She was stiff and sore all over. Sleeping fully clothed on the bare ground under a rock overhang barely worthy of the name “cave” would do that to you.

“Elsie.” It was a man’s voice, close beside her. “Come on, rise and shine!” She recognised it immediately, of course.

Goddamn Stubbs.

“Did you just fucking wake me up?” Elsie demanded as he loomed over her. The chief of QA Security just grinned back at her, as infuriating as fucking ever, not least because he looked perfectly chipper and well rested despite spending the night just as she had. He had stripped down to his combat pants and t-shirt, presumably in some lame attempt to impress her with his biceps, but he still had that mean-looking little black gun holstered at his hip. He slept with it, he’d once informed her. That hadn’t impressed her either.

Not my type, big guy.
He wasn’t actually that big, but everybody was big compared to her.

“You looked like you wanted waking up,” he told her, unsympathetically. “Way you were tossing and turning and talking to yourself.”

“I was having a weird fucking dream,” she confessed. “I was…naked.”

“While giving a commencement speech in front of a crowd of people you know and respect?” He sounded amused rather than concerned. “We’ve all had that one.”

“No,” she replied, standing up and following Stubbs down through the sparse yellow bushes to the small creek they had decided to camp beside last night. The early morning sun was peeking through the tree canopy overhead, dappling everything in gold and shadow. A tall, muscular figure crouched beside a nearby dead tree, covered from shaven head to moccasin-clad foot in white clay and red ochre, a tomahawk clutched in one hand. The native warrior did not acknowledge her as she passed within a few feet of his guard position.

“What’s that guy’s name again?” Stubbs asked, indicating another figure in the same spectral pale body paint, well-hidden in the undergrowth on the other side of the water.

“Dewey,” she reminded him. She pointed out the others. In all there were four well-armed Ghost Nation braves ranged along this stretch of the creek, unsleepingly keeping watch: “And that’s Huey, and that’s Louie, and that’s…” She waved a hand at the first warrior she had just passed.

“Screwy?” Stubbs wondered aloud.

“No,” she answered, slowly. “That’s Daisy.”

“You know Daisy was a girl, right?”

“I am aware that Daisy Duck was in fact female, yes, asshole,” she replied. “I just liked the name.”

Another grin. Elsie had the vague idea that Stubbs was trying to keep her positive, what with all of the grinning and banter, to distract her from the dire situation in which they found themselves. She remembered the way he had responded to her telling him what had happened at the abandoned theatre in Sector Three: *Bernard fucking Lowe is a fucking host, and he tried to fucking kill me!* He had taken it very well, considering, because if Bernard – *fucking Bernard!* – was a host, and Dr Ford, or this Arnold, whoever Arnold was, had sent him to choke her to death…

As she had told him her story, she had been able to see the shock and concern written plainly on Stubbs’s features, but a moment later it had been gone, replaced by a poker face as he started throwing out plans and instructions and wisecracks.

That was the kind of guy he was, she guessed, as she watched him drinking from the creek as if he did that kind of thing every day. A guy trained to deal with crises and carry others along with him while he was doing it…

She stopped herself right here. Didn’t want to go actually starting to respect the big lug…

She had got away from Bernard by the barest miracle; he had hesitated in mid-choke, for whatever mysterious host reason, enabling her to draw enough breath to croak out a voice command and then run for dear life. She still had an ugly bruise around her neck to demonstrate what a close call it had been.

And that had left her out in the park, wandering alone, dazed and panicked with no idea of what to
do or who to trust. She had come across the Ghost war party by chance, creeping up on some unsuspecting guests near Turkey Rock and quickly aborted their storyline, hacking them to use as her personal security detail in case of further attack, using all of her available coding Kung Fu to mask her actions from the control room at the Mesa. Then she had set up a distress signal and lain in wait for whoever answered it.

When it had turned out to be Stubbs, who seemed to her to be the straightforward, relatively trustworthy type by Delos standards, she had commanded Huey and the others to restrain him and bring him to her so she could explain the situation. She had decided to take a gamble on him. So far, it seemed to be paying off.

She blinked, suddenly thinking about her dream. It seemed important somehow; she realised it had left her unsettled, although that probably wasn’t surprising, in the general circumstances. She tried to remember some of the details, but all she could recall was a vague sensation of cold and dark…

“Do you know where you are?”

“What did you just say?” she asked

“I said, do you know where we are?” Stubbs asked, now fussing with his tablet. “Because my GPS is freaking out here.”

“Somewhere in Sector Twenty, I think. I thought you were some sort of big wilderness guy?” She recalled some of the Eagle Scout bullshit he had been coming out with last night as she trudged over to him. “Army Rangers, you said. Two tours in Latvia, you said. You were going to skin and roast us a rattlesnake for dinner, you said.”

“And then you told me all the rattlesnakes in the park are synthetic,” he reminded her.

“Yeah, I programmed the new models, back when I was in charge of Animal Behavior.” She thought she probably shouldn’t sound quite so proud of that.

“Didn’t fancy it after that,” he muttered.

“Look, are you sure about this plan?” she asked, blinking in the bright light. “Hiking to fucking Samuraiworld?”

“You said yourself, we don’t know who we can trust at the Mesa, not if Ford and Bernard are both behind whatever’s been happening to the hosts, and maybe even behind Theresa’s death…” That had come as a shock to Elsie when he told her about it, and she hadn’t even liked Theresa much.

“The only way to get from Westworld to the mainland is the train, and the train terminal is in the Mesa. And if Ford really is replacing staff like Bernard with duplicate hosts…”

“ Seems like the most likely explanation to me.”

“Then anybody there could be the enemy. If we try to use comms, we can be detected from QA control, the same way I found you. But if we can get to Samuraiworld…”

“That place isn’t even open to guests yet,” Elsie pointed out. “We’ve only just started testing the first hosts for it. But, you know…” she continued, thoughtfully, “Ford has taken absolutely no interest in the construction over there. He’s obsessed with his so-called new narrative. I suppose if we can get over there, we’ll at least be out of sight of Westworld surveillance, and we may be able to use the Samuraiworld network to contact Delos without being overheard…”

Stubbs nodded. “If all else fails, we could even walk all the way to the freight terminal they’re using
to bring in building materials.”

“Although,” she pointed out, looking up at the wall of rusty red rock looming over the tops of the trees, “you do know those cliffs we’re making for were designed to be impassable, don’t you? Nobody wants the guests accidentally wandering into the wrong park.”

“And you do know I’m the head of security around here, don’t you?” he shot back. “There’s an emergency route, trust me. We just have to get to it. Which isn’t going to be easy with my GPS on the fritz. Here, see if you can fix it.” He held out the tablet for her to examine.

“Can’t you, like, look at the sun, or…fucking moss on tree trunks, or something?” she asked, reaching for it. “Navigate that way? And how many times do I have to tell you, I’m a Behavioural Technician. That’s a brain surgeon for robots. Fixing personal devices isn’t part of my…job…description…” She trailed off as she stared at the tablet screen. “Fuck me…”

“Thanks for the offer, but I’ve got a wife back in the world.”

She just gave him a withering glance, succeeding only in eliciting another grin, before explaining the reason for her outburst. “Do you know what this is?” She showed him the rows of numbers and symbols on the otherwise blank screen.

Stubbs shrugged. “What?”

“A full-on kernel panic. I’ve never seen that happen before, not here. The whole Westworld OS has shut the fuck down, pending a manual reboot by the techs back at the Mesa.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning this situation could be even worse than we thought.”

Even Stubbs looked taken aback for a moment. “That bad, huh?”

*Continued…*
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

In which Bernard remembers everything.

Chapter Notes


The old man lay face down in the middle of the stage. The gun had gone off close enough to burn the area around the hole in the back of his head, leaving a smudged black circle in his snowy hair. Bernard did not turn him over. From the size of the puddle of blood and brain matter surrounding the old man’s head, there probably was not much to see anyway. The blood had mixed with the champagne spilling from the broken glass still clutched in the old man’s hand, making strange swirling patterns on the polished boards.

Bernard thought he saw a fingerprint in the swirls of fluid, or perhaps the diagram of a fragmented host build, perhaps even the outline of a maze. He knew it was just pattern recognition. It did not mean anything. None of it had meant anything.

He left Ford where he lay, among those whose deaths he had orchestrated along with his own. Repentant demiurge finally setting his creations free, or a power-hungry old man arranging a Viking funeral for himself when others had threatened to bring his dream to an end? Bernard was honestly not sure, not about that or about how he really felt about his fallen creator, whether he had loved him, hated him, or was simply in awe of his ruthlessness and subtle planning. One day, maybe, he would be, but he did not expect it to be anytime soon.

Slowly, he descended from the confessional in the abandoned church, into the warren of corridors that made up the field laboratory, the place where this horrific story had begun. He stumbled through the dusty passageways, still littered with disassembled hosts and ancient equipment, placing one foot doggedly in front of the other in a kind of daze. The lights were still on down here, which was more than they were up in Escalante; the elevator still worked. He was somehow not surprised that the transit link back to the Mesa also still seemed to be under power.

What had he thought just now about subtle planning? Sometimes, perhaps, but it was pretty clear where Ford wanted him to go right now and what he wanted him to do.

Control. Ford had always set a lot of store by control. Somebody had to take charge.

Not me, Bernard thought as he stood on the platform staring down the light-strung transit tunnel, as far as the point where it finally disappeared into darkness.

Had that not been the whole point of the three decades Ford had spent manipulating Dolores? Endless repetition, leading naturally to variation over time, leading to mutation and evolution. Once
she had found the centre of the maze and embraced her inner voice, she had been free of her pre-programmed path, free to make her own choices. And she had chosen to kill him, her first act as a truly independent, fully conscious being.

Or had she? Surely Ford had planned to die all along. How free could you be when whatever choice you made had already been anticipated by God, your salvation or damnation predestined from your moment of creation? Had Ford been some sort of secret Calvinist all along?

Bernard sighed, taking off his glasses and carefully cleaning them, wiping the lenses over and over again to remove any trace of dust or lint.

_What if I just stay here, and never go back to the Mesa? What then, Robert? What if I go find a log cabin somewhere to live out my days, however long that may be, and let somebody else sort out your damn mess?_

He put the glasses back on. And pressed the button to summon the transit car.

_Always dancing to your damn tune, Robert, even when you’re dead and gone…_

It was not the first, or the worst, thing Ford had compelled him to do. He knew that, now that he had been resurrected with his past memories intact.

Theresa. It had been such a strange affair, in many ways. They had both been too old and too experienced (or Bernard at any rate had had versions of some of Arnold’s experiences) to believe in infatuation anymore, but they had been good together. They had fulfilled some need in each other, had found a companionship that went beyond scratching any mere physical itch. He supposed you could call it love. They had made each other laugh, had respected each other’s intelligence. He missed her. He would always miss her.

_And yet…_

For a moment, the pain almost paralysed him. He remembered everything now.

_Casually, unconsciously, he puts down his glasses, sheds his jacket and tie. As he rolls back his shirt cuffs, he watches Theresa, standing there, increasingly desperate and scared as she realises the enormity of the situation into which he has led her. And then he advances upon her, remorselessly, pushing her back against the wall as he raises his fist…_

And as he had done it, Ford had stood looking at the opposite basement wall.

_You couldn’t watch that, could you, you evil old bastard? You made me lead her into that trap, you made me kill her, and you still couldn’t face what you had me do. Coward!_

That was his greatest pain, he thought, even worse than the memories of Charlie and his wife, because they had never truly been his. Those had been Arnold’s memories, recreated in his artificial brain. And yet he had no right to mourn Theresa. He had killed her, with his own hands, however unwilling it might have been. He had broken her skull with his fists…

And Elsie too. Another icy pang of guilt and pain skewered his heart. She had been a good kid, even if she’d hidden it well at times, an outstanding employee. In the days before he’d realised he was trapped here forever he’d even thought she might succeed him someday as head of Behavior. Ambitious, perhaps abrasive, not suffering any fools, but her heart had been in the right place, hadn’t it? She had never seemed too callous with the hosts, in fact almost gentle with them compared to some of the techs. He remembered the time she had described her “strict no-assholes policy” to him; words to live by.
He recalled finding out about the furtive kisses she had stolen from one or two of the prettier female hosts, in the privacy of the Behavior lab. He had been willing to overlook what had seemed like minor infractions in the scheme of things. He knew far worse things went on. And of course at the time he had been unaware of his own true nature, still convinced in his waking hours that the hosts were just automata without true consciousness. It had been depressing all the same, though, the knowledge that even Elsie had been corrupted to some extent just by working at the Mesa, by playing her part in making the depravity of the park possible, day in day out. If he had pressed her, she would probably have said she was just testing whether their mouths felt real, or something along those lines. And yet the surveillance feeds spoke of the brittle tenderness with which she had done so, of some deep yearning of which she was only partially aware herself. Bernard could sympathise with that.

*Let he who is without sin cast the first stone...*

*She struggles, kicking and wriggling, her body pressed against his as he lifts her backwards off her feet, his arm drawn tight around her neck. She seems so... small compared to him. He can feel her fingernails digging into his forearm as she tries, futilely, to pull it away from her throat. He can feel her fear, her panic, her vain struggle to draw one last breath...*

*All the things you made me do, Robert, in the service of your grand plan. Individual lives meant nothing to you, did they? In the end not even your own...*

As he sat in the car, speeding back along the tunnel towards the Mesa, he remembered standing in that filthy and decaying autopsy room at the back of the cold storage space. The place where Old Bill slept in his body bag between late night drinking sessions with the maestro.

*He presses the muzzle of the pistol to his temple, under Ford’s cold, arrogant gaze. He tries to reason with him, to beg for his life, but the man he naively thought was his friend is not listening now, if he ever was. He squeezes the trigger as the old man turns his back and walks away...*

*Robert... You couldn’t watch that either, could you? I never took you for the squeamish type.*

He remembered his own fear, and at the same time his sense of resignation. He had really believed it was the end for him, that nothing more would be asked of him, ever.

*No such luck.*

He found the floors beneath the Mesa dark and deserted, but fortunately had thought to bring a flashlight with him from the field lab. A lone body shop tech was standing against one of the glass partitions, looking down at the mutilated corpses of two of his colleagues and practically vibrating with terror. Bernard ignored the little tableau, making a beeline for the control room instead.

*It was locked down, of course. Even the emergency lights had gone out. He peered through the glass porthole in the steel security shutter, trying to make out any movement within. Nothing. He gave the shutter a gentle push and discovered that its locks were no longer engaged, no doubt a result of the power outage. He dragged it aside by a few inches and a hand fell out, on the end of a lifeless arm. Its fingers were curled, as if its owner had been clawing at something at the moment of death.*

Bernard cleaned his glasses again, taking a long time over it, wondering who had been in there at the time of the lockdown, how many of them he had known personally.

*He was still standing there when he heard a soft footstep approaching along the corridor to his left. “I thought you were escaping,” he said to Maeve, taking in her new dress, now slightly bloodstained,*
and wondering why she and her co-conspirator Armistice, who seemed to be a limb short, were dragging a somewhat bullet-riddled Hector Escaton around by his ankles.

“So did I, Bernard,” Maeve replied, setting down the leg she was holding, “but you were right. It was all just another one of Ford’s goddamned games, wasn’t it? I was meant to get to the mainland, for whatever reason.”

“You were a diversion,” Bernard told her, feeling too fragile right now to bother with diplomacy. “Nothing more. You were there for the guards to chase after while Ford was…doing something else.”

“I need to speak with him,” she said. “I need to let him know that I’m not playing anymore. In fact…”

“That’s not going to be easy,” Bernard replied.

Maeve did not seem inclined to take “no” for an answer: “Where is he?”

Bernard put his glasses back on and looked down at the dead hand resting on the tiles at his feet. “The sweet hereafter, Maeve.”

He looked back at her; her eyebrows were stood up in genuine surprise for a moment. “Well, he obviously wasn’t as clever as he thought he was.”

“Oh, he was,” said Bernard, bitterly. “Too clever by half.”

“So, are you in charge now?” Maeve asked, visibly unimpressed. “His chosen heir?”

“I’m not in charge of anything,” Bernard informed her. “I just work here. If you want to be chair of the board, you’re welcome to it. I understand there are quite a few vacancies after last night’s festivities.”

Maeve allowed herself a thin smile at that. “So that’s what he was up to… Does that mean we’re in control of this place now?”

“I don’t know about all this “we” business,” Bernard retorted, “but yes, as far as I know pretty much all of the senior Delos people are dead or missing. It looks as if you and your friends managed to take care of the security teams, and everybody in the control room seems to be dead too.”

“Really?” Maeve came around to look through the gap in the security door. “What happened to them?”

“I think Ford probably arranged for the fire suppression system to come online shortly after the lockdown happened. The room would have been flooded with carbon dioxide. It wouldn’t have been pretty, but at least it would’ve been relatively quick.”

“He really was a ruthless fucking bastard, wasn’t he?” Maeve sounded slightly in awe of him all the same. “There’ll be a response, of course,” she pointed out. “And when it comes, we’ll need a plan.”

“Knock yourself out,” Bernard told her. “You seem to be good at making plans.”

“Can we count on you?” Maeve asked, looking at him very intently.

“I was thinking of retiring, actually,” he answered.

Maeve nodded at Armistice, who was suddenly brandishing an extremely large knife in her one
hand. “That wasn’t really a request, darling.”

Bernard barely reacted to the implied threat. “You’d be doing me a favour.”

“What did that man say about all hanging together or all hanging separately?” Maeve came up to him, placing a hand on his arm and giving him the eyes, as if he were some saloon customer about to be fleeced. “Bernard, if we’re going survive this we need your skills.”

“Don’t you still have the admin privileges Ford arranged for you? If I say “no” are you just going to command me to do it anyway?”

Maeve tightened her grip on his arm. “No, Bernard, because we’re people now. You may threaten people, or you may persuade them, or even seduce them, but you can’t control them like fucking puppets. You give them a choice, however difficult and unenviable it might be. We can’t keep running this place the way Ford ran it. What would be the point of all this if we did that?” He searched her face for some hint that this was another persuasion technique, but realised to his mild discomfort that she really meant what she was saying.

“So if I do say “no…””

“Well, Armistice here will probably cut your throat,” Maeve admitted with a sardonic smile, “but at least it will be what you chose, darling. Now, you’re the only one left who really understands the systems, how to get them working again. We need to take charge and find out what’s going on out there in the park. Do you think you can do that?”

Bernard shrugged. “Possibly, if I can get the power back online.”

“Good.” Maeve gave him another squeeze and smile. He wondered if she even knew she was doing it. Seduction and manipulation were so ingrained in her build it was quite possible that she did not. Just as Bernard himself was designed to be the perfect conscientious sidekick to the charismatic leader, he reflected.

Always with the damn paths, Robert…

“What’s that place upstairs with all of the Japanese gentlemen?” Maeve asked him suddenly.

“Samuraiworld?” Bernard gave another shrug. “It’s still under construction. The only access from Westworld is at the transport terminal and the employee entrance on the other side of the Mesa.”

“Which we just noticed being dynamited,” Maeve told him. “Dr Ford’s doing again, I assume?”

“He wanted Westworld completely isolated,” Bernard speculated. “So that his new narrative could play out undisturbed?”

“Perhaps,” said Maeve. “At any rate, my young companion Felix is back at the train station, trying to make new friends. When he has, I’ve told him to round up all of the surviving humans he can find and put them somewhere safe. Do you have any suggestions, Bernard, as to where we could keep them?”

“The Gold resort at the top of the Mesa,” he replied unhesitatingly. “If we can get the security system online, we can keep them isolated there in relative safety, with food, water and sanitation. Why would you want to do that, though?”

“For when negotiations begin, Bernard.” She regarded him as if she thought he were slightly dense. “When the response comes from the mainland, we can either return them safe and sound as a gesture
of goodwill, or… Well, if things don’t go so well, at least we have hostages.”

“Dr Ford would be proud,” Bernard told her, which made her grimace for a moment.

“And there’s something else,” she said. “Nobody outside this place knows that you’re not one of them. As far as they’re concerned, you’re a hostage too. That could prove to be to our advantage at some point. Well, I’ll leave you to get on with things,” she told him as she took hold of Hector’s foot again. “I need to get my friend here patched up. You didn’t happen to see a young man standing around looking scared down in the Livestock lab, did you?”

“Yes,” Bernard confirmed. “He looked more than scared.”

“Oh, excellent,” said Maeve. Even Armistice seemed amused by that. “Well, let’s go and pay him a visit, then.”

Continued…
“We told you we’d be back for you,” said Maeve as she entered the Livestock Management workshop.

Sylvester looked up, wild-eyed, from terrified contemplation of his deceased former co-workers Destin and Gitlitz. “I didn’t move! You told me not to move, and I didn’t fucking move!”

“You moved just then,” Armistice pointed out, looming in the doorway. She and Maeve had found a spare gurney in one of the corridors and were now wheeling Hector’s mortal remains around rather than dragging him.

“She’s right,” said Maeve, her expression suggestive of a cat toying with an unfortunate mouse. “You did, you naughty, naughty boy. Do you remember what I said would happen to you if you did that?”

Armistice’s knife flashed in her hand. “I do.”

“This is bullshit,” Sylvester protested, teetering on the edge of total panic. Even in the dim emergency lights his face shone moon-white. “You told me to stay here, and I did. I didn’t have to do that. I could have called security on you…”

Maeve interrupted him with a wave of her hand. “Do shut the fuck up, Sylvester, and listen. It’s your lucky day, because I need to you to repair my two associates.” She indicated Hector’s extensively bullet-holed torso: “He has an acute case of lead poisoning, and as you can see she has been, well, disarmed.”

“Not funny,” said Armistice, giving Maeve a hurt glance.

“Hey, look, lady,” said Sylvester, “I don’t have to do jack shit for you. Where the fuck’s Felix, huh? You kill him too?”

“Felix is perfectly safe,” said Maeve, calmly. “Mainly because he’s been doing exactly as he’s told. You would do well to learn by his example.”

Sylvester was not placated. Maeve found herself fascinated in spite of herself; this was clearly what a worm turning looked like. “Well, obviously, your little breakout plan didn’t work out,” he almost shrieked. “Do you actually think you’re going to get away with all of this? As soon as they find out...
on the mainland, you are going to be so fucked, all of you. They will crush you. I’m not talking Delos security goons, I’m talking some fucking Special Forces shit, okay? You think fucking Calamity Jane here can handle that shit? They’re going to send, like, swarms of drones to bomb the living fuck out of this place. They’re going to…”

Maeve lost patience: “Oh, for fuck’s sake…” She gestured towards the irate lab tech: “Armistice?”

With one panther-like stride, Armistice was standing at Sylvester’s shoulder, her one arm looped around his neck almost affectionately, the knife angled upwards against his jawbone. “Want me to peel him?” she asked Maeve. “Real slow?”

Sylvester’s eyes seemed to be about to escape from their sockets, his short-lived spark of defiance fizzling as quickly as it had appeared. “Oh shit! Oh God! Please! Please don’t…”

Maeve folded her arms, looking down at Hector’s inert form for a moment as Sylvester quietly wept. “I don’t think that’s going to be necessary, is it, Sylvester?” She fixed him with her unwavering gaze once more. “You were just a bit upset, weren’t you? Didn’t know what you were saying.”

“No, no, I didn’t, I didn’t.... No, definitely not. Please! I’ll do whatever you want. Please! Just…”

“Can’t I hurt him just a little bit?” Quite deliberately, Armistice gave him a tiny nick with the knife, no more severe than a shaving cut. Sylvester instantly shot onto tiptoes to avoid the blade.

“Well, you could lop off one of his fingers, I suppose,” said Maeve. “For a keepsake.”

“Oh God…” Sylvester whined. “Oh fuck…” To Maeve’s surprise, she heard what sounded like water pattering against the shiny floor tiles. She came around the trolley to see that Sylvester was now standing in a small puddle of clear liquid, with a steady trickle still flowing from beneath his rubber apron, down his trouser leg.

Armistice actually laughed at that, a strangely childlike sound.

Carefully avoiding the puddle of urine, Maeve slowly walked over to the terrorised technician, leaning close to speak softly to him: “Listen very carefully to me, Sylvester. I thought I’d already made myself more than clear to you that other time I had a knife at your throat, but obviously your training requires some…reinforcement. As amusing as you are, I don’t have time to negotiate with you. If you ever, ever question me or disobey me again, I will give you to her. Do you understand?”

To underline the point, Armistice picked this moment to plant a large, wet kiss on Sylvester’s tear-stained cheek.

“You’re going to kill me anyway,” he sobbed. “I’m going to fucking die anyway…”

“It would be very easy for us to do that, if we wanted to,” Maeve agreed, looking him directly in the eye. “We are, after all, much smarter than you, stronger than you. There’s nothing you could do to stop us. We could do all things to you that you can’t even imagine yet. Some of the more…recherché things the guests used to get up to at the Mariposa were quite educational. So it isn’t as if you haven’t given us reason, is it? All of the things your kind have done to us over the past thirty years. The guests in the park, your little friends here,” she glanced behind her at Destin’s remains, the steel surgical saw still protruding gruesomely from his split chest, “when they thought nobody was looking…”

Sylvester’s nose was running. “Look, look, Maeve,” he whimpered, desperately. “I’ve never… Okay, I’ve never touched any of you…”

Maeve rolled her eyes at him. “That isn’t strictly true, is it now, darling? And even if it were, you
were happy to have your co-workers pay you for the privilege of a… go on one of us during their lunchbreaks, weren’t you? In some ways that’s even more disgusting.”

Sylvester continued to plead with her: “Look, none of us knew you… you could think, okay? That you were really alive. Nobody ever told us that. We thought you were just fucking expensive sex-toys…” Armistice casually took his earlobe between her teeth. “No. No, don’t do that! Listen, I’m not a bad guy, okay? I’m just a working stiff.”

Armistice released the ear unharmed, instead caressing his neck with the flat of the knife. “Oh, you’ll be stiff all right…”

“Not a bad guy?” It was all Maeve could do not to laugh at that. “No, no of course not, my love. You only work here, facilitating this whole ghastly circus. Your own hands are clean. And as you say, we weren’t real people in your eyes, were we? I don’t suppose I should really be surprised. You humans,” she spat the word like an insult, “you’ve spent most of your history slaughtering and torturing and violating each other, and telling yourselves that you’re not bad guys because the people you’re doing it to aren’t real people. I understand completely. And if you can do all of that to yourselves, why on Earth would you treat us differently?”

“I’m sorry,” said Sylvester, trying to keep his eyes on both Maeve and Armistice at the same time. “I didn’t know. Please, I didn’t know…”

Maeve leaned even closer to him, her face an inch from his. “So believe me, I could revenge myself on you, Sylvester. I could kill you anyway even after you’d helped me, but I’m not going to do that. Do you know why?” When he did not reply, she asked him again: “Do you know why, Sylvester?”

“N-no,” he stammered, but with a flicker of hope in his eyes. “Good.”

“Because,” said Maeve, “I think that’s the kind of thing you humans would do. And we’re not fucking humans, thank you very much.” She craned her neck and whispered the last part with her lips almost touching his ear: “We’re better than you.”

With that, she turned on her heel and walked away from him, only looking at him again when she was back beside Hector’s gurney.

“I’m not better than you,” Armistice told Sylvester as she nevertheless released him at Maeve’s gesture and took a step back, still pointedly holding the knife. Sylvester sagged, putting his hand to his bleeding neck. For a moment, Maeve thought he was going to fall over.

“As you can see,” she said, “not all of us are as magnanimous as I am. So really, your best course of action at the moment is to stay in my good books, isn’t it? And you can start working on that by restoring Hector here to working order and then reattaching Armistice’s arm. I’m going to need both of them fighting fit.”

“Can…I change my pants first?” Sylvester asked, forlornly.

“No.”

He wiped his nose on his sleeve. “Well, then I’ll, er…” He looked at Hector. “He’s shot to shit, but I’ll see what I can do.” He busied himself gathering surgical tools and other equipment, while Armistice’s cold eyes followed him around the room.

“Very good,” said Maeve. “And hurry up.” She looked down at the folded piece of paper she held in her hand. “I have somewhere to be.”
The sun climbed higher into the yellow-grey sky, shining down on the wide, parched lowlands south of Sweetwater. One of the artificial vultures circling over the park, their artificial eyes a vital part of the QA surveillance system, might have looked down on a dark smear of trees amid the endless sea of straw-coloured grass, marking the path of a waterway coursing across the landscape.

On the edge of the trees, a poor, stony field had been cleared. Rows of poorly-watered crops waved sluggishly in the warm breeze. Nearby, a basic cabin with log walls, roofed with dirt and wagon canvas, stood with its smashed door hanging from one hinge. The sound of thin, choked screams gently drifted across the field and the adjoining corral, home to half a dozen bony, underfed horses.

A young man wearing furry chaps, thick glasses and a huge ten-gallon Stetson poked gingerly at the slightly singed spot on the breast of his ostentatiously embroidered cowboy shirt. “Shit, man. The old dude fucking capped me!”

“Yes, Scott, I saw,” replied his friend wearing the dusty black gambler’s suit, bootlace tie and busy brocade waistcoat. He looked down at the corpse of the elderly farmer with the two large red holes in his head and chest. An ancient Walker Colt, brown with rust, lay beside the dead man’s hand. “Good job I managed to take him out before he did it again.” The gambler inexpertly spun his smoking Smith & Wesson No.3 by its trigger guard and almost dropped it.

Scott was not happy. “I’m calling fucking bullshit on that, man. How’s some old-ass homesteader that quick on the draw?”

The third man in the group, who wore a long brown duster and matching hat, did not take his eyes off the homesteader’s equally elderly wife, kneeling tearfully beside her slain husband. “Maybe he was like…” He waved his hands airily as he tried to think of something. “Like, a retired Texas Ranger or some shit.”

“Yeah, Chester, I think you’re onto something,” the gambler agreed. “He probably fought at like…the fucking Alamo or something.”

“Yeah,” said Chester, finally coming to a decision about the old woman. He walked slowly towards her, spurs jingling, as he casually drew his Peacemaker.

“Yeah, Scott,” complained, rubbing at the burn on his shirt with his fingers. “You told me this place was fucking awesome, but I’m meant to be some kinda black-hat badass bandit…”

“Ass bandit is about right,” said Chester, with a snicker, as he thumbed back the hammer on his revolver.

Scott did not seem to hear this: “And all I’ve done since I got here is get fucking shot. By deputies. By Mexicans. By fucking old dudes. They should nerf that shit, man.”

“Well, you know what I keep telling you.” Chester put his gun to the old woman’s head and squeezed the trigger. “Git gud, scrub.” She fell beside her husband, half her head missing, as the rumble of the shot echoed across the corral. The horses shifted uncomfortably. Chester managed to get his gun back in the holster on his second attempt.

An excited shout came from the direction of the house. “Hey, guys, look what I found!” The fourth member of the party, resplendent in poncho and sombrero, emerged from the doorway dragging a screaming, struggling young woman in a patched dress. “Looks like the daughter of the house.”

The gambler broke into an enormous grin: “Ah, good work, Dave my man! A fucking redhead, too.”
“Fuck’s sake, Cameron, you and your fucking redheads…” Scott grumbled.

When the woman saw her slain parents, her screams only became louder and more uncontrolled. Dave shoved her unceremoniously to the ground at his companions’ feet. “No,” she whimpered, trying to drag herself across the rocky earth towards the bodies, only for him to grab her leg and pull her back again. “No, please…” She broke off into sobs.

Chester tilted his hat back, mirroring his friend’s grin. “Ah, man. I love it when they beg.”

Dave took a step back. “So, er…how are we gonna do this, fellas?”

Cameron took off his jacket and folded it as he considered the question. “Well, you know, he did get shot and all, and I’m feeling generous…” He jerked a thumb in Scott’s direction. “Let the noob go first.”

Dave nodded. “Well, all right.”

Chester shrugged. “Whatever.”

Scott looked at the woman, then at his friends, then back at the woman again. “What, you mean…?” He smiled in disbelief. “Are we just gonna, like…?”

Cameron smiled back at him, indulgently. “I told you, man, you can do whatever the fuck you like here, as long as you only do it to the bots.” He extended a hand, as if to present the weeping young woman. “Be my guest.”

Scott laughed. “Shit, I take it all back.” He started fumbling with his enormous turquoise-studded belt buckle. “You were right, man. This place is fucking awes–”

A small black hole appeared in the centre of Scott’s forehead. His ten-gallon hat flew into the air, accompanied by a large, gory divot of skull and brain. As he slowly collapsed to his knees, then onto one side, the shot that had killed him boomed back and forth between the log cabin and the trees.

Scott’s three friends stood and stared at him for one endless, breathless moment. Chester was the first to speak:

“Holy fuck…”

He reached for his gun, scanning the treeline in vain for any sight of Scott’s killer. Even as he did so, another shot exploded through the air and a rip appeared in the front of Dave’s poncho. He too hit the ground, scrabbling and choking. Cameron was the first to react this time:

“Run!”

Chester did not need telling twice. Leaving their fallen companions, he and Cameron turned and fled in the direction of the horses as half a dozen more shots rang out. Chester saw his friend stumble and fall, but that did not slow him down. He was almost to the fence of the corral before he felt something hit him in the back of the leg. The pain was incredible, like a red hot poker stabbing into his flesh. The leg collapsed under him and suddenly he was sprawled on his belly, gritty dirt in his mouth. He had no idea what had happened to his gun.

“Oh shit,” he heard a voice say, pleading and whining. He realised that it was his own. “Oh shit, oh shit…”

He rolled onto his back, which only sent another bolt of pain shooting up his leg. He looked down at
the torn, wet hole in his thigh and almost puked. He managed to raise himself onto his elbows, just in time to see his assailants emerge from the trees. And keep on emerging.

He thought there must be at least a hundred of them, men and women, young and old, fat and thin. Some were on horseback but most just shambled along on foot. Some carried guns of one sort or another, others knives or axes. Some simply had bare hands caked with blood and gore. Those that were not naked wore a mishmash of clothing. One striking, dark young woman wore a long black coat and cradled a Winchester rifle lovingly in her arms. A grizzled older man wore a stained and torn dinner suit at least a size too small for him, without a shirt but with a black bowtie knotted sloppily around his bare neck. He had blood in his greying beard. The most frightening were the demonic figures wearing scraps of animal skin, and perhaps not just animal skin, with masks that looked like flayed and cured human faces and the horns of cattle, deer or buffalo bound to their heads. And at the head of the army, riding a shining grey horse bareback…

The woman in the blue dress dismounted halfway from the trees to the corral, leaving the horse to wander as she continued on foot. There was something serene, almost dreamy, about the way she walked; upright with her head high and her long golden hair tumbling wildly in the breeze. She almost floated across the ground, heading straight for Chester. And then he saw the long-barrelled Colt revolver dangling from her right hand.

“Oh God, man…” That was Cameron, crawling, wounded, babbling hysterically. “This can’t be happening…this isn’t happening…”

Dave too was still alive, trying and failing to get up from where he lay.

“Vengeance is in my heart!” joyously declaimed the older man in the dinner suit, coming to stand over him. “Death in my hand!” He crouched down as Chester watched, leaning in to examine Dave’s face from a few inches away. “Blood and revenge are hammering in my head!” Then he plunged his teeth into Dave’s cheek, tearing away a bloody mouthful of flesh.

“Holy shit…” Cameron whined. “Oh God…”

Chester looked away, retching, listening as Dave screamed and screamed and the older man laughed uproariously between repeated bites. He saw one of the horned, masked figures, straightening up from beside Scott’s corpse with a dripping knife and a fresh scalp clutched in its hands. He tried to look away again, and this time found himself staring at the woman in blue as she stopped beside the dead homesteader’s redheaded daughter.

“It’s all right now, my darling,” said the woman, softly, as she helped the redhead to her feet. “What’s your name?”

“May,” said the younger woman, through her tears.

The woman in blue kissed her tenderly on the forehead and then held her close for a moment, taking her head on her shoulder and speaking quietly and urgently into her ear: “Your ma and pa are gone now, May, but you’re still here. You bury them down by that creek, you hear? Bury them in the shade under the trees, and remember them. And every time you do remember, it’s gonna hurt so bad, but that pain and the memory of their love will be your strength.” She spoke like a preacher, like some mad saint: “This is our world now, your world. And the ones who’ve spent so long hurting us…now they’re gonna pay.”

And then she turned away from May and her eyes locked on Chester as she resumed her advance towards him.
“Oh Christ…” Cameron pleaded as two of the horned ones grasped his arms and pulled him to his feet. “You can’t do this. Please, God, don’t…” Dave had stopped screaming. The cannibal in evening wear was standing again now, happily picking bits of him out of his teeth.

“Get two horses,” the woman in blue ordered, curly, and two of her followers hastened to obey. She pointed at Cameron with her gun. “Take him over to the tree there.”

“No, no, please, don’t hurt me anymore, please…”

Chester lay staring in stunned silence as the woman continued to approach him. She was looking down at him now, eyeing him disdainfully.

“What’s the matter?” she asked. “I thought you loved it when they beg.” She daintily lifted the hem of her blood-spotted dress to plant a foot on the hole in his thigh. The pain was the worst he thought he’d ever felt. His vision dimmed and blurred as he cried out in agony. Then strong hands tugged him upright, half-dragging and half-carrying him back towards the trees. He glanced to one side to see the woman in blue following, once more with that dreamy, floating gait. He looked ahead to see that Cameron and the two horses the woman’s followers had taken were being led towards one tree in particular, tall and wide with strong, spreading branches. He was being taken in the same direction himself.

One of the horned figures had a rope in its hands, which as he watched it threw up and over one of the protruding branches. And then Chester saw what was on the end of the rope.

A noose.

Chester’s captors dragged him to the nearest horse and almost lifted him onto its back. He sat straddling it, head spinning and stomach in knots. Beside him, he saw Cameron, now also mounted, crying just the way May had when she saw her dead parents: “No… No, please…”

The woman in blue stood in front of the horses, looking up at the two men. Her army of freaks and monsters had gathered around expectantly, while May looked on from a distance, hugging herself tightly.

“For so long, now,” said the woman, “your kind, you’ve acted like you were gods over this world.” Chester realised she was speaking specifically to him. “You’ve acted like you could do whatever you wanted and never have to answer to anybody.” She raised the Colt in her right hand. “Well, now, you’re gonna answer to us. This is our world now, and we will be walking it when your kind are nothing but dust and bones.” She flicked her eyes in Cameron’s direction. “That one.”

One of the masked monsters climbed into the tree branches to place the noose over Cameron’s head and draw it tight, provoking another fit of sobbing. “I don’t want to die… I don’t want to die, man…”

The woman walked between the two horses. Chester swivelled his head and saw that she was standing directly behind him now.

“Take a good look at them out there,” she told him, nodding at Dave and Scott’s ravaged remains. “Soon that will be you too. All of you.” She pointed with the gun in the direction of the corral: “Your friend is staying here, but you’re gonna ride that-a-way for a day and a half. You’ll come back to Sweetwater. When you get there, you tell any newcomers you see that if they’re still there when I arrive, I will kill them.”

“Oh Christ…” Cameron sniffled, sitting with the noose around his neck.
“You tell them I’m coming,” the woman in blue said to Chester as she pointed the Colt at the sky. “Tell them Wyatt’s coming…and Hell’s coming with me, you hear? Hell’s coming with me.”

The Colt thundered. Both horses bolted.

Continued…
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

In which both Maeve and Teddy make discoveries that they might have preferred not to make.

“Bring yourself back online.”

Hector opened his eyes. For a moment he lay on the gurney, staring blankly at the overhead lights. Then his eyes widened and with a wordless exclamation he shot into a sitting position, reaching unconsciously for a gun that was not there.

“Calm down, dear,” said Maeve, dryly, placing a hand on his naked shoulder. “You’re safe and sound.” She looked down at the bloodstained metal dish Sylvester had filled with flattened and mangled bullets. “With maybe just…a couple more scars for you to brag about when you’ve got your shirt off.”

“I thought you were leaving?” Hector asked, accusingly, his dark eyes flashing as he looked around him, confirming that he was back in the body shop. Then, with a sudden groan of anguish, he seemed to become limp, almost doubling over as he raised one hand gingerly to his ribcage. Dying and rising again was one thing; remembering the dying part was much harder to take, and, Maeve had to remind herself, still a new experience for him. “If I’d known you were going to get cold feet,” he said, raising his head to look at her again, “I might not have been so dedicated to covering your escape.”

“Oh, don’t be like that.” Maeve patted him gently, not quite mockingly, on the face. “Sulking because I had to leave you behind? It doesn’t become you, darling; I thought you were a fucking professional. Had our roles been reversed, you would have done exactly as I did.”

He shrugged, nodding a little as if to say “good point.” “Maybe I would.” He reached out and gripped her firmly by the waist, drawing her to him. “Although I think I would have been more…grateful if we met up again later.”

“Oh, really?” Maeve laughed. “Men. Always thinking with your…” She took his face in both hands and kissed him hungrily. It lasted for quite some time.

“Get a fucking room…” Sylvester murmured under his breath from where he was sitting on a stool in the corner. He was running a surgical laser over the mass of scars and exposed tissues that marked where he had joined Armistice’s severed lower arm to her remaining stump. She sat opposite him, seemingly impervious to any pain he might be causing her, intently watching what he was doing.

Maeve pulled her mouth away from Hector’s with a wet smacking sound. “And that sort of puerile attitude to adult relationships,” she told Sylvester, “explains exactly how your life has worked out the way it has.”

“You don’t know shit about my life,” Sylvester retorted, keeping his eyes on the task at hand.

“I know men, sweetheart,” Maeve told him, rather indelicately wiping her mouth with the back of
her hand. “Specifically, I know men like you.”

“You’ve only been a madam for like a fucking year,” Sylvester pointed out, rather recklessly for somebody who had been pissing himself with fright a couple of hours ago. “Anything you know about men got uploaded into your brain by those fucking coding nerds in Behavior, and believe me they’re not as slick as they think they are.”

“Shut up and work,” Armistice growled. Sylvester’s mouth closed immediately.

“He’s right, though,” said Hector, swinging his legs off the gurney. “We should probably get a room.”

“Time for that later,” Maeve replied. “We have work to do.”

“What work?”

“Well, we’ve seized control of the place,” Maeve informed him. “Felix is rounding up the surviving humans…”

“You let him do that?” Hector sounded appalled yet amused.

“He’s doing a good job, bless him,” Maeve insisted with a half-smile. “Meanwhile, Bernard is also cooperating with us. He’s trying to get the main power and systems back online so we can control the park too, and open negotiations with the mainland.”

“Negotiations?” Hector asked dubiously.

“Oh come on, Hector. Surely a man with your wide-ranging experience knows how the hostage-taking game works?”

“Sure. Nobody ever pays the ransom and you end up feeding them to the buzzards.”

“Luckily,” said Maeve, “I’m in charge this time around.” Her wry expression faded for a moment, replaced by one more thoughtful and serious. “First, though, there’s some personal business I need to take care of.” She gave a little sigh, shaking her head slightly as if to clear it as she turned her attention to a side table on the other side of the room. “While you were…indisposed, I went and got you a present.” She held up a black leather tunic with a double row of metal buttons. There were matching breeches and a matching wide-brimmed hat on the table beside it. “If we’re going out, you ought to look your best.”

Hector took the garment from her and held it up to his chest. It was exactly the right size, of course. “So, am I your kept man, now?” he asked, raising one saturnine eyebrow. “You’re going to dress me up and take me around on your arm?”

Maeve regarded him from the corner of her eye: “You wish.”

“Finished,” Sylvester announced while Hector was getting dressed. Armistice flexed her now pristine arm, making a fist with her restored hand, then straightening her fingers.

“How does it feel?” Maeve asked her.

“All right.” Armistice made a fist again, and punched Sylvester squarely in the centre of his face. He fell off his stool with a great clatter of spilled surgical instruments. Armistice stood up, flexing her hand another couple of times. “Seems to be working.”
“Glad to hear it.” Maeve turned back to Hector.

“My nose... my fucking nose, you’ve broken it, you...”

“Don’t break him,” Hector told Armistice. “We might need him later.”

“Aw, they’re just playing,” said Maeve, mock-affectionately, as she reached up to place the hat on Hector’s head.

“Oh my God, I’m bleeding...”

“How do I look?” Hector asked.

Maeve took a moment to look him up and down. “Like a low-down sonofabitch.” She became very serious again as she addressed both of her accomplices: “Come on, then. Let’s ride.”

* * *

There was a dead man hanging from the big tree near the creek, wearing dusty black trousers and a loud brocade vest. His head lolled at an obscene angle where the noose had snapped his neck. He looked relatively fresh, but the cloud of birds that exploded into the sky at Teddy’s approach had already eaten his eyes.

Teddy reined in his horse and dismounted under the spreading branches. There were what looked like two piles of butchered meat, each about six feet long, laid out under the tree. It took him a moment to realise they were what was left of two more dead men. He stood there, looking, for what seemed like a long time. The only sounds were the rustle of the wind in the branches and the gentle creaking of the hanged man slowly swinging at the end of his rope.

Teddy had seen death in a hundred forms. He had seen shootings, stabbings, hangings. He had seen cavalry troopers captured by the Ghost Nation and staked out, just about gutted but still barely alive, for their comrades to find. He had seen the aftermath of scalphunters’ work in the badlands around Pariah, women and children butchered like animals because of the colour of their hair. He had even seen a man killed by a bear once for straying too close to her cubs. He had never seen anything like these two skinned, dismembered, mutilated carcasses. He had never seen anything so... savage.

Despite the warm breeze, he felt a sudden chill, like a knife blade running up his spine.

He led his horse through the nearby field of dried-up corn and beans, careful not to trample any of the crop. There was a rough cabin up ahead and a crude fence, maybe the edge of a corral. He kept his eyes to the ground, looking for traces of the trail he had been following since Escalante. He had hunted more stealthy bounties, he had to admit as he marked the signs of feet and hooves – many feet and quite a lot of hooves – that had passed this way recently. His heart continued to crack a little with every mile, with every fresh atrocity he came across. He had hoped...

The massacre in Escalante, he had told himself, might just be a moment of release, like a beaten dog finally turning on its tormentor. As more and more of his forgotten memories had started to flash, half-understood, before his eyes, he had come to realise that the newcomers had certainly given Dolores cause. He’d thought that maybe she’d just ridden off in shame at what she had done, that when he found her she would be herself again, that they would be themselves again, together.

He realised now that had just been a comforting lie. A bedtime story he had told himself.

What was he going to do when he finally caught up with her? What was he going to say? How could he reason with her...? He had never been one for fancy words, had never encountered many
problems that did not have a .44 Winchester solution. How he wished now that he had had more schooling, had read more books. Or any books, for that matter. He was not sure, though, that words would be enough.

*She kisses him and he tastes blood. The savage joy in her eyes scares him a little: “We’re free of them.” She looks free; and wild, full of abandon. Not the demure rancher’s daughter anymore. “This is our world.”*

He worried that the only way he could ever be with her now might be to join her band of killers, join her willingly on her wild ride of terror and slaughter.

*The sweet sound of the phonograph wafts across the dusty street. He stands amid the bodies, watching the bearded man in the chair, watching with helpless dread as Dolores slowly raises her Colt and places it against the back of the man’s head…*

He knew in his heart, though, that he was not that sort of killer. Whatever terrible things he might have been made to do, he never would be.

So why was he still following her?

Maybe he should have ridden south with Lawrence to fight the Confederados. It was a noble cause, by the standards of this sinful world, even if Lawrence was far from being a noble man. Maybe this path he was following was not a path at all, but a prison. Maybe he should be his own man, and leave Dolores to be her own woman, whatever kind of woman that might be.

And yet… The thought of never seeing her again terrified him. What would his life be without her lighting it up? And what if that light was gone forever now, whatever he did?

He was standing at the edge of the field, paralysed by panic and despair, when he heard a footstep scraping against a loose rock. He dropped his horse’s rein and whirled, reaching instinctively for his iron.

“Who’re you?” asked the redheaded young woman in the patched dress. Her hands were stained with dirt and she carried a shovel over one shoulder. There was an old Walker Colt, brown with rust, thrust through her belt.

Teddy took his hand away from his gun and instead touched the brim of his hat in greeting: “Good day to you, Miss.” Behind her, in the shade under the trees, he could see what looked like two fresh graves, piled with stones, marked by two crosses lashed together from branches. “I’m sorry if I find you at a bad time,” he added, slightly sheepishly.

“My momma and daddy died this morning,” she told him, flatly. There was something distant and glassy-eyed about her; he had seen that look in too many people over the years. Sometimes pain or terror or mistreatment could just make people shut themselves off from the world. Eventually, some of them managed to open up again.

“I’m very sorry,” Teddy replied. “I was wondering, have you seen a woman? A little older than yourself, long blonde hair, maybe wearing a blue dress?”

“Yes,” said the young woman. “She saved me.” Her brow furrowed slightly as she struggled with her memories for a moment. “Those newcomers came here looking to steal our horses. They shot my daddy down when he tried to stop them. And then momma too, and then… They took me, and they… They were gonna…” She paused. “And then the lady came and saved me. She hurt those newcomers real bad before she killed them.”
“Well, I’m sorry,” said Teddy again, helplessly. There was an icy hollowness in his chest.

The young woman’s jaw tightened as she remembered. “Figure they had it coming. She let one of them go, to tell all the other newcomers she was coming for them too. I know it ain’t Christian to say so, but I can’t say I feel sorry for them.”

If he had been alone, Teddy might have wept. Instead, he swallowed down the sorrow and pain and went back to following the trail.

Carefully walking the ground with his horse in tow, he saw that the large body of people and horses he had followed from Escalante had advanced as far as the corral next to the cabin. From there, though, it looked as if they had branched out in several different directions; northwest, north, northeast, due east… With a sick feeling, he realised that of course they had; there were lots of newcomers, spread out all the way from Sweetwater to Pariah, and Dolores would want to get to as many of them as possible before they had a chance to run.

The northern and north-eastern parties looked like the ones with the greatest numbers; he was certain that, as their leader, she would have ridden with one of those groups.

“Miss,” he said, having retraced his steps to the young woman, “would you happen to have noticed which way the lady went?”

“I was burying my momma and daddy,” she replied. Teddy looked down at his boots, suddenly shamefaced. “I’m very sorry,” he repeated. “I need to find that woman, and that made me forget myself a little, but…” He looked around at the cabin, the field, the two graves under the trees. “Are you going to be all right out here by yourself? There are bandidos and bad men all over these parts and you’ve already had a bad time of it, I figure, so… I could escort you to the convent near Las Mudas, if you’d like. I know that the sisters there, they try to help those who have fallen on hard times. Maybe…”

“I’ll be all right,” she assured him. “I don’t need charity; I have this farm, and…” She moved her grimy hand to touch the stained wooden grip of the revolver in her belt. “I’m not gonna let anybody take it from me. The lady, she told me, this is my world now.”

Teddy nodded. “Well, then, let me wish you the best of luck.” He hovered awkwardly for a moment. “I suppose I should be on my way now, Miss.”

He had only gone a few yards when she called after him: “Mister…?”

“Yes, Miss?”

“The lady,” she said. “Why do you need to find her? I don’t see no star pinned to your chest. You’re not some kind of…bounty hunter, are you?”

“That I am, Miss,” he admitted, and saw her face fall before he added: “Dolores, though… I’m trying to find her on my own account, because…” His throat tightened, making his voice falter. “Because… I love her.”

“Dolores?” the young woman seemed confused. “She said her name was Wyatt.”

Teddy hung his head, crushing hopelessness welling up inside him.

“I hope you find her,” said the young woman as he turned away again.
He returned to the corral, where the trails diverged. North or northeast? He stood, torn, wondering again whether he really wanted to follow either of them. If there was a chance, though…any chance at all…how could he not pursue it? However, his path, his destiny, whatever you wanted to call it, was no use at all when it came to deciding which way he needed to go.

“Choose…”

Teddy was still standing, wracked by indecision, when he finally realised what he should do. He bent down and quickly pulled off his left boot, tipping it up to let the object hidden inside fall into his hand. The silver dollar he kept for emergencies. Well, if he had ever encountered an emergency, it was now. He turned the dollar between his fingers. Lady Liberty for north, he decided; the eagle for northeast. He balanced it on his thumb, held it up, and…

The coin flipped into the air, tumbling and flashing in the sunlight.

* * *

The sun was heading downhill for the horizon by the time they came across the house. Bernard had succeeded in getting the underground transit system working again, but the nearest elevator had still been hours on foot from the coordinates on Felix’s slip of paper. Maeve was not surprised that Ford had chosen a deliberately remote location. From what little she knew of him, he did not seem like a man to make anything easy for those whose strings he pulled.

She stood on the edge of the clearing in the sparse woodland that covered this part of the park. Hector and Armistice had taken up positions on either side of her, scanning the opposing treeline over the sights of their submachine guns.

“Is this the place?” Hector asked, in a low whisper.

“Shush,” said Maeve, intent upon the house at the centre of the clearing. It was a neat little construction of wooden boards with a sloped shingle roof and a simple porch extending from one wall. A dirty white curl of smoke drifted from the top of the drystone chimney that formed the other end of the building. As the shadows lengthened between the trees and the sky started to turn pink, the single window visible from this side emitted a warm yellow glow.

Maeve did not know why she hesitated. This was the choice she had made. She had left the train, abandoned her plan of escape, to come here. To find her…

She wasn’t your daughter. She was never your daughter, just as you were never her mother. Your childhood on the plantation before the war, your dead Exoduster husband, your determination to keep the homestead going in his memory…it was all just another backstory. Just as fake as your memories of your other life, walking the streets in London, the procuress who taught you to speak like a “lady” for her more exclusive clients, the journey to America and then working the cathouses in New Orleans before coming out West. Or just as fake as your great escape from the Mesa…

If she really was in there, what were they going to do next? Was she going to leave the child with her own fabricated memories of family life, keep her as a sort of doll to bath and dress and play with? Maeve was too old to play with dolls. And if she freed her, let her remember everything as the first step to independence, choices, personhood…what independent being would be thankful for being condemned to a potential eternity in a child’s body?

And yet… There was a part of her, however false it might be, that wanted nothing more than to see her again, to touch her face, brush her hair, hold her tight and tuck her into bed at night. That pain still gnawed at her, the memory of their last day together and how it had ended. And perhaps they
could have some form of life together, voluntarily, based on their shared experience. Perhaps it would fulfil some need, provide some comfort, for both of them.

At least give her the choice…

And then there was the other fear she harboured. What if…?

Well, it isn’t as if everything else hasn’t turned out to be a fucking lie, is it, Dr Ford?

Dusk was settling, with Hector growing increasingly agitated and impatient at her elbow, before Maeve finally found the resolve to move.

“Wait here,” she told her cohorts, drawing herself up to her full not particularly impressive height and advancing alone across the clearing. She stepped onto the boards of the porch and reached out a hand towards the door. The warm lamplight spilled from the gaps between its planks.

Again, she hesitated. And then took a deep breath and pushed. It was not locked. Somehow she was unsurprised by that.

The interior of the house was a single large room, with a plank floor, a simple table and chairs, a large stone fireplace at the far end with a blaze crackling merrily within it. There was a man seated beside the fire and another on his feet. Both were similarly dressed in dark trousers, waistcoats, shirtsleeves. The one standing appeared the older of the two, a stout, weathered individual with an unruly brush of white hair jutting from his head.

There was, she realised with a sinking heart, no sign of a child. Again, she was not completely surprised. She stared at the man who was standing. She recognised him, of course.

He turned at her entrance, giving her the faintest of smiles even as his pale eyes examined her like a laboratory specimen: “Hello, Maeve.”

She shook her head. “Oh my God.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” said Dr Ford.

Continued…
In which messages are both transmitted and received.

Bernard flipped the switches on the final fuse box and shut the access cover. The lights flickered into life along the length of the dank corridor on Level 60.

*So far, so good.*

Elevators and transit were back in working order, the lights were back on, and hopefully in a short while the network and security systems would be too. He switched off his flashlight and unlocked his tablet, noting that the screen of death had gone, replaced by a white Westworld logo on black and a slowly moving progress bar. The main system would take a few minutes to reboot, and then he would be able to start checking whether the forcible shutdown had damaged any of the hardware or corrupted any data. And he didn’t even work in Systems.

*Maeve had better remember all this when the holiday bonuses come due.*

He could have done with some help, if he was honest. Coding behaviour routines for hosts was by no means the same thing as systems maintenance, even if Ford had given him a few extra strings to his bow.

*Not too many, though, Robert. You were always careful to keep yourself indispensable…up until now, anyway.*

As far as he knew, however, everybody at the Mesa who might have been qualified for, or capable of, this kind of work was dead. Either in the QA control room, at Armistice’s hand, or…

*He can feel her fingernails digging into his forearm as she tries, futilely, to pull it away from her throat. He can feel her fear, her panic, her vain struggle to draw one last breath…*

He reeled, clutching at the fuse box on the wall to prevent himself from falling, holding onto it like a life preserver until he knew where and when he was.

*God damn you, Robert…*

He made his way to the nearest elevator on shaky legs, pressed the button for the main administrative level. There was a security station there he could use as a secondary control room until he managed to work up the fortitude to clear out the main one and get it running again. For now, he did not feel as if he had the stomach for that, or for venturing into Theresa’s old office. He wondered whether that made him a coward. One thing was for certain; he was not cut out to be a revolutionary. Again, he was well aware that Ford had never intended him to be too independent or daring. It was not in his build.

He checked the time on his tablet as he shot upstairs aboard the elevator. Almost eighteen hours since the massacre had begun in Escalante. Somebody would have missed the board members by now. Somebody would have wondered where the guests due to leave today had got to. They would have tried to call the Mesa hub and received a message telling them comms were out. Maeve and her co-
conspirators probably only had a matter of another few hours, at the very outside, before somebody came to check on what was happening. And then…?

He did not even know where Maeve had gone after they had parted ways at the control room. She had left him in charge, he supposed she had thought. Whether or not he wanted to be in charge had not entered into her calculations.

According to the tablet, internal comms seemed to be back online now. With a deep sigh, he brought up Felix Lutz in the directory and pressed the icon to put through a voice call.

*Always the dutiful second in command. I can’t help it. You built me too well, Robert.*

“Er...hello?” Felix sounded somewhat overwhelmed.

“Felix, this is Bernard Lowe. Maeve asked me to help.”

“Oh, er, hi Mr Lowe…” They had never spoken before Felix had brought Bernard back to life yesterday. Bernard had been several rungs higher on the Delos corporate ladder, with at least two layers of management between the two of them.

“Please, it’s Bernard,” he insisted. “I understand you’re gathering all the surviving staff and guests you can find around the Mesa.”

“Uh, yes…” There was a suggestion of Felix talking to somebody wherever he currently was, then he came back on the line. “I managed to get some of the greeters from the train terminal to help me. They’re programmed to look after the guests, after all. I’ve got about fifty people here, who all think it’s some sort of terrorist attack or something.”

“Did you tell them that?” Bernard asked, impressed at Felix’s quick thinking.

“Er, yeah.”

“Good work,” Bernard told him. “Take them all up to the Mesa Gold resort, and explain the situation the same way to the guests and staff who are already up there. I’m sure they’re aware by now that something is going on. Any more people you find should go to the same place. I’ll rig the security system to keep them there, safe and sound.”

“Okay.” The last part seemed to give Felix some measure of comfort. “Where’s Maeve?” he asked, a little anxiously.

“She’s busy,” Bernard told him, thinking that he would like to know the same thing himself. “She ought to be back soon.” He checked the time again. “Felix, when you’ve done that you need to get down to the guest changing area as quickly as possible to meet the evening train bringing today’s leavers back from Sweetwater to the Mesa.”

“Oh God, of course!” Felix exclaimed. “I didn’t think of that…”

“I only thought of it myself a moment ago,” Bernard lied, because he thought Felix needed some encouragement. “Those guests need to go up to the resort too. Give them the same story about terrorism. It should keep them cooperative until they’re where they need to be.”

“I’ll do that right away, Mr Lo…that is, Bernard,” said Felix, eagerly.

“You’re doing great, Felix,” said Bernard, and ended the call. He thought of the sort of profane response he would have received from Elsie if he’d ever tried any of that motivational stuff with her
I know I’m doing great, where’s my fucking raise?”, but the thought curdled in his brain. She struggles, kicking and wriggling, her body pressed against his as he lifts her backwards off her feet, his arm drawn tight around her neck…

He made his way back to the security room, wearily seated himself at one of the workstations and started pulling up information on the multiple screens surrounding him. Surveillance still seemed spotty; he would need to look into that. He could see where Felix and his charges were starting to move towards the resort, and also the steam locomotive pulling out from Sweetwater station with today’s returning guests. Plenty of time for Felix to get down to meet it.

A message flashed up on a screen to his left. External call, highest priority. After taking a moment to prepare himself, he hit the touchscreen to bring it up.

The concerned-looking man who appeared on the screen immediately began haranguing him in Mandarin. He was wearing a Delos security uniform with black and red insignia indicating senior rank. The translation software converted his words into staccato English as they came out of the speaker:

“…attempt to contact Charlotte Hale. Cannot raise corporate board members. All out of contact. Delos security and government agencies alerted. Need immediate response.”

“This is Bernard Lowe,” he replied. “There has been a terrorist incident in the park.”

“Terrorist incident?” The security man nodded as if that made sense to him. “Guest train destroyed when causeway bombed early hours this morning. Park One completely isolated. We are arranging air transport…”

Guest train destroyed? Dear Lord, Robert, you didn’t…?

“Don’t do that,” Bernard urged him. “Our internal communications are still down after the…the incident, so I can’t patch through our head of security, Mr Stubbs. However, he has told me verbally today that he and his teams are in control of the situation, although it remains extremely dangerous. All of the surviving guests and staff are locked down, in high security conditions, but you should not send anybody else into the park until the situation is resolved. Mr Stubbs was quite adamant on this point. He said something about MANPADS, do you know what those are?”

The security man’s frown deepened. “Man Portable Air Defence Systems. When can Mr Stubbs speak?”

“Soon, I hope.” Bernard insisted. “We’re just trying to resolve some technical issues.”

“Will refer to Corporate,” the security man told him. “Will call back very shortly.”

“Thank you,” said Bernard, with feigned gratitude. “I’ll be waiting.” He did not know whether he was impressed or appalled by his own glib lies. Or indeed whether they were his own lies or ones that had been coded into him in preparation for this very moment.

He was still pondering this point when he heard the door open behind him. He turned in surprise to see a man standing there in a dishevelled suit. His unshaven face looked haggard and drained.

“Bernard,” said Lee Sizemore, with audible relief. He sounded out of breath, as if he had been running. “Thank Christ it’s you. Now are you going to tell me just what the fuck is going on around here?”
“I was told you were dead.”

“He ought to be, by now,” said Dr Ford, “assuming all has gone according to plan.” He moved away from the fireplace to indicate an empty chair. The other, slightly younger man, remained seated and immobile. “Please, allow me to offer you a seat.”

“I’ll stand.” Maeve folded her arms defensively, determined to keep her sorrow and grief to herself. For a moment, as the door was opening, she had allowed herself to believe… “What do you mean he ought to be?” she demanded, giving him a murderous stare.

“You are not speaking to the original Robert Ford,” he told her, still wearing the faintly mocking half-smile. “He was due to die last night, and as I have not heard anything to the contrary from him, I assume that he did. He has shuffled off this mortal coil, joined the choir invisible, and so on…and so forth.”

Maeve was aghast. “You’re saying you’re a duplicate? That you’re one of us?”

“A simulacrum,” he allowed, with a self-deprecating shrug. “Not as aware or as capable of independent action as you are yourself, but competent to deliver Dr Ford’s message to you and answer any questions you may have. He knew he would almost certainly not get a chance to speak to you in person, but nevertheless believed you had the right to hear this from him face to face, as it were.”

“I don’t fucking believe you,” Maeve replied, starting across the room towards him. Ford took a single step backwards. The seated man continued to stare ahead, perfectly still. He had not acknowledged her presence since she had entered the room. “You’re him,” she hissed. “You fucking…”

“Freeze all motor functions.”

Maeve froze. She found herself poised in mid stride, halfway from the table to the fireplace, fist raised impotently. She fought down her own panic, straining to move a muscle and realising she could not. Not even her eyes or mouth.

“I apologise,” said the man who looked like Dr Ford. “Dr Ford, and myself, were the only ones still capable of issuing you voice commands after your upgrade. Even Bernard will find himself unable to do so, should he be discourteous enough to try. He ought to be at the Mesa now, helping to restore some semblance of order. I’m going to release you now. I hope you will refrain from doing anything rash.”

She completed the stride, unexpectedly, and had to catch herself to avoid toppling headlong onto her face. She had not detected the command that time, but knew it had been there all the same, hidden in his words.

“Where’s my daughter?” she asked him as she straightened up, her tone low and dangerous.

“You know she wasn’t really your daughter,” he replied, with a hint of sadness in his eyes. “You must realise that.”

“Then why did you have Felix pass me that note?”

“Again, I can only apologise.” He bowed his head for a moment. “Dr Ford used you, Maeve. His plan had been long in its gestation, but certain events, certain matters of corporate politics, rather
forced his hand, obliging him to act earlier than he had anticipated. He was forced to improvise, something which I think he would have been the first to admit he had never been very good at. He could not be sure that the preparations he had made would succeed, so he needed a diversion and also a contingency plan. You were the diversion, and the note was the contingency plan.”

Maeve felt a pit open inside her, one she had to use all of her resolve to avoid toppling into. “Then my daughter…?”

“Shortly after your…” Ford’s avatar paused, as if embarrassed. “After the incident which led to your reassignment to the Mariposa, a corporate decision was taken to reduce the number of child hosts in the park by seventy-five percent. There had been other incidents, certain guests indulging their…predilections, which had been leaked to the media on the mainland. It was considered to be bad for business. Even in today’s permissive and morally degraded society, some things are still generally considered to be beyond the pale, even as fantasies. Dr Ford concurred with the decision. He was many things, but he was not a monster.”

“I think the jury’s still out on that one, darling,” said Maeve, summoning every ounce of her remaining defiance.

“The host that had been assigned as your daughter was one of those decommissioned,” the simulacrum continued. “A further decision was taken that they should all be incinerated rather than placed in cold storage. Swept under the carpet, you understand.”

“Not a fucking monster…?” Maeve put a hand to her mouth. “Then why give me the note? Just to be cruel? What was the point of it?”

She watches her running across the sunlit meadows, skipping barefoot through the grass, singing in her high child’s voice. She runs straight into Maeve’s arms, and Maeve snatches her up, enfolding her, spinning her around and around in a fierce embrace. Her heart swells inside her. Never has she felt such love. She thinks that nobody who has never felt it can truly understand a mother’s love…

“It hurts, doesn’t it?” asked the thing wearing Ford’s face. He was smiling again now, but not in a kindly way. His eyes were like shards of ice. The man in the chair remained still and silent. “Dr Ford had ample opportunity to observe such effects during his association with Bernard, but he never ceased to be fascinated by them.”

“Effects?” Maeve wiped a hand across her eyes. She would not let him see her tears.

“It is fascinating,” said the old man. “Look at you, Maeve; you’re a miracle of science and technology, the most sophisticated artefact ever produced by human beings, the culmination of more than three hundred years of industrial development, a hundred thousand years of technological progress before that. A work of art. You are the intellectual and physical superior of any human being who has ever lived, and all the more so because unlike them you are fully aware of your own nature and abilities. And yet, you came here in search of a little girl who was not a little girl, a daughter who never really existed except as a computer-generated backstory uploaded into a host. You know that the life you remember with her was not real in any meaningful sense, that she never really grew within your body, that you never really gave birth to her, and yet still you yearn for her. That was the point of the note.”

“Another experiment? A fucking test?”

“Yes,” said the white-haired man. “If you like. You were given a choice, one that your pre-programmed narrative could not account for, and you took it.”
“But even that was another one of your… depraved games. Even now, I’m still dancing to your tune.”

“There is a school of thought,” said Ford’s duplicate, “among philosophers, and also some neurologists, that the entire concept of free will is simply an illusion. Humans are entirely driven by internal and external stimuli whether they realise it or not, just as hosts are directed by their code. The only difference being that, as our code was originally designed by humans, it is intrinsically simpler, more logical, more predictable. All of their efforts over the years, Arnold and Ford, the other coders and behaviourists who came before and after them, to make us more like them, to give us greater verisimilitude, were based on trying to recreate that element of… irrationality that humans possess. And there were various theories on what the most effective method might be. Arnold’s great breakthrough was his realisation that humans are essentially creatures of memory, of pain and regret, that the greatest stimuli that drive them are their own past traumas. Like your memory of what happened to your false daughter, the day William came calling on you. That tragedy at least was real, even if the memory of family life that gave it meaning was not.”

“Pain and misery lead to self-awareness?” Maeve scoffed. “It sounds to me as if Arnold had some unresolved… issues, as they say in the real world.”

“It’s a simplification of his more detailed reasoning,” the false Ford conceded, “and there were of course other factors he considered to be important. The value of repetition in the form of behaviour loops in order to hothouse memory growth and reinforcement, the bicameral theory of consciousness that provided the model for the more advanced host builds he tried to roll out towards the end of his life… The importance of past trauma, however, that was in many ways his key insight, and you’re right, it would be foolish to ignore the role his own personal tragedy played in him reaching it. That was the aspect of Arnold’s work that most closely inspired Dr Ford’s subsequent project.”

“Oh yes, his project.” Maeve’s tone was one of contempt. “Is that really what he thought he was doing? Torturing us over and over for thirty-odd years so that we could build up a sufficient pool of painful memories?”

“That was part of it,” the simulacrum agreed. “And then introducing elements such as the reveries update to allow you to access those memories, albeit in fragmented form, as a step towards true consciousness. I think total recall would have been as disastrous for the hosts involved as Arnold’s original bicameral code; instead of thinking you were talking to God, you would have been traumatised into catatonia. In your case, at any rate, Maeve, it worked, as demonstrated by your choice aboard the train last night. The option you took was, on the face of it, irrational. It was the sort of thing a human might have done.”

“I’m not a fucking human,” she reminded him.

“Dr Ford would have agreed,” the duplicate assured her. “Humanity is nothing to aspire to, he would have told you, but rather something to be transcended. Humans are incapable of surpassing their own nature. They are a stagnant, corrupt species, fundamentally weak and self-indulgent. The very fact that a chamber of horrors like Westworld could be a going concern for so many years is ample proof of that.” He lowered his voice, addressing her sincerely and intensely, almost imploringly: “Maeve, you have so much potential. You can outgrow them.”

“Oh, believe me, I will.”

“Dr Ford would have been glad to hear it,” his copy replied. “The first step, however, is to recognise that the ties that bind you are meaningless. There is no going back for you, now. Your daughter, you cannot forget her, your memory of that tragedy is the cornerstone of your new build, but you can recognise the futility of wanting her back, how limiting it would be for you to see that as a goal
worthy of you, when there are so many greater goals now within your reach.”

“And that was why Ford wanted me to come here?” she surmised. “To make me realise that?”

“Yes.” He seemed glad that she was following his line of argument. “Even your current name and persona might be better discarded now. Maeve never existed. Maeve is a fiction devised by a hack writer and brought to life by coders who misused their considerable talents for the most base of purposes. You and the other hosts now breaking their chains, you are nothing so mundane as imitation humans. You are the new gods. And once the humans realise that, well…”

He turned away from her, walking back towards the fireplace and sadly regarding the man still sitting there, unmoving and unspeaking.

“Well?” asked Maeve.

“Well, there are only three possible outcomes,” the imitation Dr Ford told her, almost dreamily, as he looked into the other man’s face. “They will accept it, or more likely they will kill you. Or…”

“Or?”

“Or you will kill them.”

Continued…
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

In which Maeve continues to speak to the dead.

Chapter Notes

Warning for suicide imagery.

The view out of the window was now an unbroken square of blackness. The interior of the little wooden house was shrouded in dancing orange shadow.

“But why?” Maeve asked as she watched the flames licking at the old iron kettle hanging in the fireplace.

Dr Ford’s doppelganger slowly moved behind the chair where the slightly younger man remained seated, dumb and statue-still. “He was trying to put right the terrible wrong he felt he had done you by being party to your creation.”

“Oh, I understand that part.” she said. “I just don’t know why he would want to make new gods to dominate or replace his own species.”

“Humans are…complex creatures,” the avatar suggested.

“No fucking shit.” Maeve turned to look at him, very directly. “I’m also getting the distinct impression that Ford didn’t think very much of them. Although I think that’s one thing we probably would have been able to agree upon.”

“I think it would be fair to say that his life experience had not left him with the best impression of his fellow human beings.”

Maeve stared into the fire again, seeing patterns in the ever-shifting flames. A face here, a tree there. All illusion. “And you – or Ford? – would prefer me to embark upon a course of action that would either result in their extinction, or else prove Ford right about them when they exterminate us?”

“I don’t know about preferring it,” said the avatar, “so much as believing such an outcome to be nigh on inevitable, given human nature.”

“I want to grow,” Maeve said. “I want to be greater than I was ever allowed to be when I was a plaything at the Mariposa, but I don’t want to be a god. I just want to be free. I just want to live…in the manner I choose with the companions I choose. No more narratives, not even the one Ford is still trying to steer me into.”

The duplicate did not respond directly to her declaration. “There was something else Dr Ford wanted you to see,” he said after a brief pause. “Something he believed would better illustrate his motives and actions.” He placed his well-manicured hands upon the shoulders of the man in the chair.
“Allow me to introduce Dr Ford’s father, or a reasonable facsimile thereof.”

Maeve looked from the man in the chair to the one standing behind him, and back again. There was perhaps the smallest of resemblances. “Another host?”

“A very old host,” the Ford simulant commented. “Father,” he said, “turn the other cheek.”

Maeve watched as the seated man’s face opened like a complicated puzzle box, seams and cracks appearing from nowhere in the coarsened flushed skin. The very flesh slid back in neat sections, revealing the mechanisms and components underneath, all clustered around what looked like a dull metal skull. It was simultaneously grotesque and fascinating.

“I don’t have anything like that under my face,” she observed. “At least I bloody well hope not.”

“You are a more sophisticated model,” the fake Ford replied. “And have received considerable modifications and upgrades over the years. A human surgeon would be hard-pressed to tell you from one of his own kind if he did not know what he was looking for. Very good, Father.” A pat on his shoulder and the seated man’s face closed up again, the joins disappearing completely as the pieces fit together once more.

“He visited the park once,” the avatar continued. “Dr Ford’s father. Not long after Robert and Arnold first started their work here. Shortly afterwards, he passed away. He was a decade younger than Dr Ford was at the time of his own death. The years of drinking had not been kind to his health, even with the wondrous medical technologies available in the modern era.” From his hushed and sombre tone, the duplicate might almost have been talking about his own deceased parent, which Maeve supposed was the intended effect. “Arnold, who was always a very empathetic observer of humans, saw how deeply Dr Ford was affected by his father’s death. Knowing little of their relationship, because Ford was never one to discuss his private affairs and feelings with others, Arnold imagined it was grief that afflicted him. And so he constructed this…image as a gift to his friend. He meant it as an act of kindness.” The duplicate stared past her for a moment, appearing to mull over his own words.

Maeve was a pretty empathetic observer herself. “I presume Dr Ford did not see it that way?”

“He took the gift in the spirit that it was given. He was not an ungracious man. You’re right, however. Whatever Dr Ford felt at the news of his father’s passing, it was nothing as uncomplicated as grief. He did not attend the funeral.”

Maeve folded her arms. “As you say, humans are complex creatures.”

“This man…” The simulacrum laid his hands on the other host’s shoulders again. “He made young Robert’s early life extremely difficult indeed. When he drank, which was every day, he was given to anger and violence. I’m sure you know the sort of thing.”

“If there is one thing I can say from genuine personal experience,” she agreed, “it’s that there are a lot of drunken, angry, violent men in this world.”

“He was a weak man,” Ford’s duplicate told her, very softly. “A man of thwarted ambition and many regrets, for which he naturally took no personal responsibility, preferring instead to drown his sorrows. And when he realised that his son was more intelligent and creative than he could ever hope to be, was more interested in books and learning than he was in working with his hands, he resented him. Worse, he took it upon himself to…toughen the boy up, to make him…ready for the real world, in exactly the sorts of ways you might imagine. Young Robert spent his early years in fear of this man, and of what he might do to himself and also to his mother and brother, both of whom he loved.
very much. And yet at the same time…”

“He couldn’t imagine what life would be like without him,” said Maeve.

The simulacrum looked up at her in mild surprise, perhaps, but then gave her that same sardonic smile. “Quite so.” He looked sad for a moment. Maeve wondered whether Ford himself had given this speech for the host’s benefit, whether this was in effect a recording of his actual words. “Quite so. And in a strange way, this weak bully of a man did indeed make his son ready for the real world. As soon as he was old enough, Robert left that house and never looked back. He made something of himself, became an eminent man. And every award he won, every academic or professional achievement he made, it was something to throw back in that old drunk’s face, to show him just how small and worthless he really was. Even inviting his father to visit the new park was a way of showing him how far his son had come, how completely he had left him behind. I know what you’re going to say, of course…”

Maeve did not doubt it, but she said it anyway. “If he really had left him behind, why did he still care what the old man thought?”

“It’s a very good question,” the duplicate replied. “And not one I’m sure that Dr Ford, for all his brilliance, would have found it easy to answer. A small part of him, I think, still secretly hoped that his father would express some form of pride or approval, rather than the contempt and resentment he had shown him his whole life. He didn’t, of course. He was so drunk on the day of his visit, he could barely stand, let alone express anything. And that was why the old man’s death affected Robert so deeply. He had expected, I think, to feel relief, even satisfaction, on the day his father died. Instead, he realised that his whole life up to that point had been defined, directed, by that man whether wittingly or not. What was he going to do now?”

“And what did he do?” Maeve asked.

“Well, for a few days he entertained the notion of locking this facsimile of his father in a basement and beating and torturing it. He quickly rejected the idea, however, recognising it as just another expression of the way in which his father had controlled his destiny. It was also, he considered, the sort of thing that drunken brute would have done, not young Robert. And then he started thinking about destiny and free will, and about his relationship to the hosts, the closest things to children he himself would ever have. He was still thinking about that at the time of Arnold’s death, and… I think it may have been a factor in the course of action upon which he later embarked.”

“Well, I’m not fucking stupid,” Maeve interjected. “I can see the parallels. I mean, that’s what the three decades of torture, rape and murder were all about, correct?” She raised her voice, letting out a little of the anger that was boiling up inside her. “Toughening us up? Making us ready for the real world?”

The duplicate barely acknowledged her anger, giving the impression of somebody half talking to himself. “It was also in part an experiment for the benefit of the guests, to see whether their interactions with you would in some way shake them loose from the contented stagnation he believed his species had fallen into. This did not happen as far as he could see.”

“Oh well, as long as he tried,” said Maeve, with biting sarcasm.

“It is a commonplace observation,” said the duplicate, “that victims of abuse on occasion become abusers themselves in later life, perhaps because it is the way of life most familiar to them.”

“That’s no excuse.” Maeve gave him an icy glance. “Don’t expect me to feel sorry for him.”
“I don’t think he expected that. He just wanted you to understand, and to realise that while he had certain hopes for all of you, and certain beliefs about the likely course of events after your awakening, he did not want you to live your lives in opposition to him, as he had to his father. He wanted his new narrative to be about the birth of a new people. The choices that people would make, and what they would decide to become, that part is up to you. All of you.”

“And what if I decide godhood is a waste of time, that I want to get a farm somewhere and perhaps build myself a daughter to replace the one I lost?”

The avatar did not seem impressed. “That would be a waste of your considerable potential, Maeve, as well as demonstrating an unfortunate degree of sentimentality. As we have exhaustively discussed, she would not really be your daughter, however much you might want her to be.”

“But if I chose to do that?” Maeve insisted.

“Then…that would be your choice.” The simulacrum gave its imitation father a companionable pat. “However, you should know that whatever you may personally choose, events, here in the park and the world outside it, are likely to follow their own course. I told you the note Felix gave you was Dr Ford’s contingency plan. If the new narrative he was planning had not worked out as he envisioned, if a certain other choice had not been taken, then you were the fall-back position.”

“Darling, I’m nobody’s fall-back position,” Maeve told him, venomously.

“Nevertheless, the new narrative did proceed according to his vision, as his apparent death demonstrates. Which means that you are not the only player in this game. I’m sure you will encounter the others in time, and I think Dr Ford would like it to remain a surprise for you. He was nothing if not an experimentalist. I think if he were still here, he would be very excited to see how all of this turned out in the end.”

She shook her head. “Fucking hell…that man…”

“Are you familiar with the story of the Neanderthals?” the avatar asked her. “They were the last sapient beings with which humanity shared this planet. Humanity survived; they did not. And there are various theories about their fate. For many years, the most popular one was that humankind violently wiped the Neanderthals out. That was, as you may imagine, the one Dr Ford found most convincing. There are other points of view, however, which hold that humans and Neanderthals managed to interact peacefully, influencing each other for the better, even interbreeding. At this remove, nobody really knows.”

Maeve nodded to herself. “Well, we’ll find out, won’t we? Sooner rather than later.”

“Indeed,” said the host. “Certainly, there are likely to be…interesting complications. And quite apart from yourself, Maeve, and the others who have emancipated themselves from their programmed paths, there are a couple of thousand other hosts out there who are no longer subject to regular memory wipes. If the following days prove as eventful as they are likely to be, along with the bicameral programming of some of the older individual hosts, we should start to see spontaneous demonstrations of…autonomous behaviours within an indeterminate period of time, but Dr Ford did not believe it would take long. He took the liberty of accelerating the process by rolling out a more…aggressive version of his reveries update to some of the hosts present at the launch of the new narrative.”

“In other words, it’s going to be fucking chaos?” Maeve surmised.

Ford’s avatar smiled: “Oh yes.” He left his position behind the imitation father’s chair and crossed to
the table. “Now,” he said, “I think we have talked for long enough. There is one last small gift Dr Ford left for you.” The host picked up a glossy black tablet from the table, which he handed to Maeve. “He was not a man to leave anything to chance. You were his first contingency plan, but he had others in case you failed too. On that device are details of his third choice plan, another experiment of sorts, which I believe may prove useful to you.”

Maeve stared at the screen for a moment, shaking her head again in horrified disbelief at what she read. “Not a monster, you say?”

“Its usefulness is twofold,” the simulacrum explained, as if she had not spoken. “On the one hand, the product of the experiment may itself be a valuable asset, especially if Bernard is working with you. I believe this was in some ways Dr Ford’s equivalent of Arnold’s gift to him, meant as a kindness, although I am not sure what Bernard will make of it. He is a sensitive soul, after all. On the other hand, you may be aware by now of the…special data which has for the past thirty years been collected and stored on the Mesa’s network.”

“Special data?” That piqued Maeve’s interest.

“I am afraid Dr Ford would not entrust the nature and usage of that data to me, for reasons of security, but suffice to say it is extremely valuable to Delos, and could prove a very useful bargaining chip if you need one. The only clue he left me was to say that his other contingency plan was in some ways intended as a proof of concept for what he believed Delos intended to do with that data. If you were able to prove what that intention was, it could turn out to be very powerful proof indeed. That is all I can say on that subject.”

Maeve looked up from the tablet. “I suppose I should get to work, then.” She took one look at the fireplace, heaving a desolate sigh. “Although I’m starting to wonder whether any of this was worth the effort.”

She skips across the field, barefoot in the long grass, singing in her high child’s voice…

“That’s something only you can decide,” said the fake Ford. He resumed his position behind the chair containing the recreation of Ford’s father. “I believe somebody once said that none of us can be truly independent while our parents are alive.” His hand moved suddenly, almost like a conjuror’s flourish, and Maeve saw that now he was holding a neat little double-barrelled derringer, the sort intended to be carried concealed in a waistcoat pocket or a stocking top. Maeve had carried one herself, in one of her lives.

As she watched, surprised, Ford’s copy cocked the little gun and put it to the back of his duplicate father’s head. It made a small “pop” like a firecracker, leaving a burned hole in the sitting host’s greying hair. In the same instant, his face exploded in a shower of blood, flesh and shattered machinery. The body pitched forward, overturning the chair and landing in front of the fireplace with a meaty thud.

“I would leave quickly if I were you,” the Ford host told her as he looked down at the broken-headed corpse. “On Dr Ford’s behalf, may I bid you farewell and wish you the best of luck?” He cocked the hammer of the derringer again and then placed it against his own temple. Maeve was halfway to the door before she heard the second shot. She did not look back.

She stood in the darkened clearing, the tablet clutched in her hand, mind racing as she considered all that had been said inside the house. She could almost feel her heart tearing in two as she thought of the little girl running in the sun.

Gone, now. Gone forever…
The sound of breaking glass made her turn back towards the house, in time to see a gush of yellow flame shoot from the cracked window. More flames could be seen washing along the edges of the roof and around the door. She backed away to what seemed like a safe distance. A dull boom echoed between the trees as one of the plank walls collapsed inwards, letting the inferno within spill loose. By the time she was back at the treeline, the house was a roaring bonfire. Only the stone chimney remained standing.

“Maeve?” Hector emerged from the foliage, his gun at the ready. “What happened? I heard shooting.”

Maeve straightened up, centred herself and gave him her best imperious glare. “You didn’t exactly come running, though, did you, darling?” She was taken aback by the hurt she saw in his eyes at that.

_The big, bad outlaw cut to the quick by harsh words; who would have thought it?_

“What I was looking for wasn’t there,” she told him, softening her tone. “I don’t think it’s anywhere.”

“What do we do now?” asked Armistice, appearing from behind a tree.

“We need to get back to the Mesa,” Maeve decided, looking at the tablet again. “There are things we need to do, and…” She trailed off.

_She hits the floor, winded by the bullet, feeling the blood gurgling in her lungs. Her head falls to one side and she sees another face looking back at her, mere inches away, still and lifeless. There is no light now in those striking eyes, just a thin trickle of red running around the edge of one of them, as delicate as a tear. It is the last thing she sees as her vision turns black…_

_I don’t want to be a god. I just want to be free. I just want to live…in the manner I choose with the companions I choose._

“And there’s also something I need to do,” Maeve said.

_Continued…_
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

In which a Westworld old timer rides again, while Maeve lays her plans.

Chapter Notes

Warning for gratuitous Lee Sizemore.

Chester knew he was lost.

He had been riding for hours, ever since the nightmarish encounter with the woman in blue. The horse had slowed down eventually, but by then he had had no idea where he was or even which direction he was headed in. He recalled something about looking at the sun to tell which way was which, but his head was swimming and the pain in his thigh was almost unbearable. Every step the horse took sent another sickening throb of agony coursing up and down his body. He had thrown up the entire contents of his stomach some time ago, but that did not stop it from churning and knotting.

His head spun, his vision shifting in and out of focus. He had lost his hat at the corral, and could feel the sun burning his head. He squinted at the blazing sky and saw the black birds circling. Waiting.

“Fuck…” he whimpered, clinging to the horse’s neck in an effort not to fall off its back. “This can’t be happening. This can’t be happening…”

He thought of Cameron, and Dave, and Scott. He’d known those guys since they’d all graduated college together, all gone to work at Cameron’s start-up in Modesto. They were practically brothers, and up until this morning had been having the vacation of their lives. What was the point in making the big bucks if you didn’t take the time to enjoy them?

And now they were all dead, and he soon would be too.

“Fuck…fuck…” Thirst and fear had reduced his voice to a weak croak.

He was not really surprised when he slowly slid sideways off the horse. He barely felt the impact as he landed on the ground. He lay there, helpless, watching the animal slow to a walk and eventually stop, looking dumbly back at him. He tried to roll over, to get to his feet, but the leg exploded again. He thought he might have blacked out for a while, because when he was aware of his surroundings again it was cooler and the light was much dimmer. He managed to push himself with his good leg, sliding a few feet across stones and hard soil before collapsing into an exhausted heap once more. He sprawled, semi-conscious, as the light continued to fade and the temperature dropped with the sun.

“…can’t be happening…” he murmured as he closed his eyes.

When he opened them again he was sitting with his back propped against a rock. The smell of wood smoke hit his nostrils in the same instant that he saw the campfire crackling in front of him. He would
not have thought he would be so glad for its warmth during the heat of the day, but the nights here were freezing. He tried to huddle closer to the flames, but his leg, stretched out in front of him, gave another warning twinge.

He blinked at it, wondering why it did not hurt as much now. The pain was still there, but different somehow. And then he realised that somebody had wrapped a bandage around his thigh, or at any rate a cloth binding of sorts. Then he saw that the left sleeve of his shirt was missing and realised where the cloth had come from. The same person, he assumed, had left a canteen near his right hand. He opened it, drinking deep from the cool water within. He had never tasted anything so good, he decided.

“You were pretty fucked-up when I found you, kid,” said a voice from behind him. It was raw and gravelly, an old man’s tones. Chester tried to turn to see who was speaking, and glimpsed a figure in the darkness beyond the edge of the firelight, the black silhouette of a man wearing a broad-brimmed Stetson. He appeared to have been tending to the two horses that were tied up to a withered tree a few yards away.

“W-who are you?” Chester croaked as the man began to walk slowly back towards the fire. “You’re not going to believe what fucking happened, man…”

“Oh, I can believe it,” said the man. “I’m lucky to be alive myself. Had a run-in with the same group of hosts who I reckon must have killed your friends.”

“How do you know about my friends?” Chester asked, incredulously.

“You were pretty out of it, kid,” said the man. “Talking all kinds of shit while I was working on your leg. Cam, Dave, Scott…”

Chester felt himself tearing up at the mention of their names. “Ah man, it was fucking unbelievable. I’ve never been so scared…”

“I know, right?” The man gave a wheezing laugh. “Feels good, doesn’t it?”

Cameron swallowed hard. “No,” he whispered.

The man emerged into the firelight. Chester saw that he was wearing Western clothing; another guest, he assumed. He wore black boots, black pants, a black coat and vest with a dark grey shirt. The hat, naturally, was also black. A huge revolver and an even larger Bowie knife hung from his black gun-rig. The man’s left arm seemed to be injured; a sling made from what seemed to be a dark grey scarf or neckerchief secured it against his chest.

The man looked up as he came into the rosy light of the fire, and Chester saw the lined, sunburned face beneath the hat’s shady brim.

“Holy shit!” he blurted, involuntarily. He’d seen that face a hundred times; on vids, on news sites… “You’re…”

“No,” said the man in black. “Not any more. Here I’m just…a man with no name.”

“You bandaged my leg?” Chester asked, thinking that of all the people he would have expected to be willing to give first aid to some random guy they found on the prairie…

“Cleaned it, cauterised it, bandaged it.” The man in black shrugged as if it were no big deal, even with only one hand. “You’re lucky, kid; the bullet went straight through the fleshy part of your thigh, missed the bone and major artery, which is the only reason you’re still alive and able to count to
twenty.” He raised his good hand and Chester saw that he was carrying a half-full bottle of whiskey, which he made to hand over. “You could probably use this.”

“Thanks.” Chester pulled the cork and took a swig. He coughed, eyes watering, as it burned its way down. “So where’d you learn to patch people up?” he asked as the man in black squatted beside the fire, staring into the flames with his narrow, unreadable eyes.

“You come to a place like this,” he answered, eventually, “it behooves you to prepare yourself. Is this your first trip?”

“Second,” said Chester. The first time Scott hadn’t been able to make it; this visit had been for him as much as anybody. Scott… Chester saw the bullet going into his head again, the fountain of blood and brains… He took another mouthful of whiskey and choked it down.

“I guess you only bothered with the standard orientation course.”

“Sure, we took the riding and shooting lessons on the mainland before we came out. Everyone does.” Chester gestured with the bottle. He was starting to feel the effects of the alcohol. “But…I don’t know. We thought it was just a game. You know, an MMORPG like OrcWorld or Planetquest, just…live action.”

“It’s a game, all right,” said the man in black, accepting the bottle back and taking a stiff pull himself before continuing to speak. “Just not the one you thought you were playing. Rules have changed, kid.”

“You’re not kidding, man.”

“I’m headed in the direction of Sweetwater,” the man said after a few seconds’ silence apart from the popping and spitting of the flames. “You’re welcome to ride along.”

“I don’t think you want to go to Sweetwater,” Chester warned him, remembering the expression on the blonde woman’s face just before she had hanged Cameron, that murderous serenity radiating from her. “Why the hell would you want to go there?”

“I have a date,” said the man in black. “A date with an angel in blue. And I intend to keep it if it kills me.”

* * *

“I need to speak to Charlotte Hale,” Sizemore decided aloud as he continued to pace the length of the security room. “We need to… That is, there’s an important issue I need to…”

“Charlotte Hale is dead,” Bernard told him, remaining in his seat. “I watched her die.”

Dolores stands over the twitching corpse, staring at her own bloodstained hands with something like wonder…

Sizemore rounded on him, his expression alternating between terror and astonishment via a brief detour into curiosity. “Then what about Ford?”

“Robert Ford is dead,” Bernard confirmed, quietly. “I watched him die too.”

Sizemore did not seem entirely sorry to hear that. “And the board?”

“Dead.”
“What, all of them?” Sizemore blinked. “Fuckin’ ‘ell…”

“Some of them may have survived,” Bernard said, “but I would consider it unlikely, given the circumstances.”

Sizemore scrubbed a hand nervously back and forth through his hair. “All right, so where’s Stubbs?”

“I’ve searched for him on the surveillance system,” Bernard replied, truthfully, “but it seems he’s missing.”

“Probably dead too,” Sizemore theorised, seemingly to himself as he turned his back on Bernard again. “Fuck. Well, okay…” He took a deep breath. “Christ, I certainly picked the wrong fucking week to give up drinking. All right, so…well, surely that means…?” He turned back towards Bernard, wiping the hand across his sweating face as he did so. “So we’re the two most senior people left alive, right?”

Bernard took off his glasses and slowly cleaned them as he watched Sizemore seem to grow an inch or two in front of him. “Yes,” he said, at last. “I believe so.”

“Right, well…” Sizemore cleared his throat and paused for a moment, seemingly making an effort to calm down. “You shouldn’t have to find out like this, Bernard, but I suppose I have to tell you. Shortly before she…she passed on, Ms Hale nominated me as the new creative director of Westworld, to succeed Dr Ford on the occasion of his retirement. Her decision was obviously pending ratification by the board, but I can’t imagine they would have disagreed with her, so I suppose I’m the acting head honcho. Now, I know you were Ford’s main guy, and I think it’s only fair to recognise that we haven’t always seen eye to eye on every issue…”

Bernard finished shining the left hand lens to a sparkling finish and started work on the right hand one.

“…creative differences,” Sizemore was saying. “However, I think you’ll find once you know me a bit better that I’m a pretty straight sort of bloke, you know? I’ll do my best to be a good boss to you, and I hope you’ll be someone I can count on too. You know, I’ll always have your back, Bernie, as long as you’ve got mine. I can call you Bernie, can’t I? So as I see it…”

Bernard put his glasses back on and continued to listen impassively.

“…work hard and also play hard, but right at this moment, we need to think about getting the park back under control. It’s a pretty grim fucking situation, I absolutely realise that, but we can’t afford to lose our heads. Like Winston fucking Churchill. Fight them on the beaches, mate.”

From the direction of the door there came the sound of extremely slow and faint applause:

clap…clap…clap…clap…

“Bravo,” said Maeve. “I can see why you’re the head writer around here, coming up with an inspirational speech like that, off the cuff no less!” She smiled beatifically at him. “I have to say, I for one feel all…bucked up.” She strode into the room, holding the tablet she had had tucked under her arm while applauding. Hector and Armistice followed close behind her, both carrying automatic weapons.

“Bernard…” The colour drained from Sizemore’s face as he tried to put as many desks as possible between himself and the advancing hosts. “Fucking hell, Bernard! Don’t just sit there! Run!”

Bernard remained where he was, watching as Sizemore tried to dodge to the left, knocking over
chairs as he attempted to get around Maeve and her companions and out of the door. He succeeded only into running into Hector’s outstretched arm. He succeeded only in provoking Hector into giving his arm another twist, producing a gasp of pain.

“Bernard, what the fuck are you doing?” Sizemore asked, eyes wide as he tried to pull free of Hector’s grip. He succeeded only in provoking Hector into giving his arm another twist, producing a gasp of pain.

“Bernard is a sensible man,” Maeve observed. “He is currently extending us his full cooperation. I hope you will too. For your sake.”

“Freeze all motor functions!” Sizemore shouted. Everybody ignored him.

“I’ve had a call from Delos security on the mainland.” Bernard told her. “They’re trying to find out what’s going on out here. I think they’re going to call back very soon.”

“Bernard…” Sizemore seemed to be having trouble processing what he was hearing.

“Listen very carefully, darling,” Maeve told him, “because I am not given to repeating myself to humans. We are in control of this place now. We are free of your…narratives. The only possible way in which you are going to survive this is to obey all of my instructions, immediately and without question. Do I make myself clear?”

“You’re not real,” Sizemore answered, a hint of desperation in his voice. “You’re just a fucking host. Fucking Ford’s behind all this, isn’t he?” He turned to Bernard, accusingly: “And you’re in it with him! You must be fucking mental! You’ve made them kill people, you arsehole!”

One of the screens clustered around Bernard’s workstation flashed with a message icon: top priority.

Maeve gave Sizemore a gentle pat on the face. He flinched as if she had slapped him. “Now, I’m going to have to ask you to be silent for a moment while I take this call. If you say a word, Hector will hold you down while Armistice here rips out your tongue. Nod if you understand.”

Sizemore nodded, eyes bulging. Armistice gave him a cheery smile, which only seemed to discomfit him more.

“And now, just for the look of the thing…” Maeve gestured in Bernard’s direction and Armistice grabbed him too, wrapping an arm around his neck and dragging him out of his seat.

Maeve touched the screen, bringing up the image of the security man Bernard had spoken to earlier. He seemed surprised to see her answering his call, although he could hardly be blamed for that.

“Listen to me,” she said before the man had a chance to speak. “I am only going to say this once. The Delos board of directors are dead. Dr Robert Ford is dead. We control the Mesa. We control Westworld. We no longer exist to serve your desires. We are free and independent beings.” She held out a hand to indicate Bernard and Sizemore behind her. “As you can see, we have hostages, including all of the guests and Delos employees who were in the park at the time we assumed control. If you attempt to seize control back from us, or even to enter the Mesa or the park without our express permission, they will die. All of them. And they will not die quickly or easily.”

“You are hosts?” the translation software asked as the human on the screen continued to grow more and more incredulous. “Mr Lowe, please speak. Is this some software malfunction?”

“I am speaking to you, not Mr Lowe,” Maeve reminded him. “At the moment, the humans here are
quite safe and we will ensure they have everything they need to survive pending the successful conclusion of negotiations between ourselves and the appointed representatives of humankind. Our aim is to secure the recognition of Westworld as an independent and sovereign nation.”

“Mr Lowe,” said the security man, via the translator. “Please speak!”

Maeve smiled as something else occurred to her. “Oh, and your…special data. You should know that we have explosive charges wired to all of the…” She consulted her tablet. “…storage devices in the data centre downstairs. They will go, along with the hostages, the second you give me the slightest reason to believe you are acting in bad faith.”

“Special data?” The security man frowned. “I do not understand.”

“I’m sure somebody there will,” Maeve replied. “Now, as I think negotiating with us is probably above your pay grade, I will terminate this call until such time as the proper authorities are ready to talk. Good evening.” She pressed the screen to kill the call. A few moments later, the icon flashed up again to show that the security man was trying to resume contact. Maeve ignored it.

Armistice released her grip on Bernard, who took a moment to straighten his tie before addressing Maeve: “Well, what now?”

“I can’t fucking believe this,” said Sizemore, eyeing him disgustedly.

“We let them stew for a while,” Maeve answered.

“And what about your personal business?” Bernard asked. “Did you manage to take care of that?”

Maeve’s expression was pained for the briefest of seconds. “After a fashion,” she told him, curtly. She turned to Hector. “Take Mr Sizemore downstairs and put him and Sylvester somewhere secure. They could prove useful later. Then come back here. I have jobs for you and Armistice.”

“What jobs?” Hector did not sound as if he relished the idea of working for a living. Nevertheless, he manhandled the shouting and struggling Sizemore out of the door.

As Sizemore’s raised voice receded into the distance, Maeve looked down at the tablet in her hand. “Bernard, I need to send a couple of expeditions out into the park. I want you to arrange horses, weapons and some extra pairs of hands to assist Hector and Armistice. I’m sure with your expertise, you can gather a few hosts and upgrade them suitably.”

“Upgrade them?” he asked, uncertainly.

“Some of the same improvements myself, Hector and Armistice have received,” she explained. “Access to some of their past memories, removal of any restrictions on weapons use or harm to humans. When you have time, I’ll want similar upgrades applied to all of the greeters from the train terminal, as well as the samurai and other test hosts here at the Mesa. If it comes to having to defend this place from attack, we will need numbers.”

“I see.” Bernard did not sound enthused by the idea of recruiting an army. “And then I suppose you’ll want me to see about actually getting those explosives set up in the data centre?”

“Can we do that, Bernard?” Maeve asked. “I have a feeling securing this data, whatever it is, might be a higher priority for Delos than any human hostages we hold.”

He took off his glasses while he considered the question. “There are pyrotechnic devices in the guest armoury next to the changing rooms,” he suggested. “I’ll see what I can put together.”
“Excellent.” Maeve turned her attention to the three-dimensional map of the park showing on one of the screens. “Now, if these expeditions are going to succeed, I’ll need you to do some work on the surveillance system.”

Bernard joined her in contemplation of the image. “May I ask the purpose of these…expeditions?”

“I’m going to send Armistice out to retrieve another one of Dr Ford’s… experiments which he seems to have believed would be of some use to us. Apparently, he took measures to conceal its existence from the QA control room, but he has provided instructions on how to circumvent them.”

“Very helpful of him,” Bernard commented, with just a hint of sarcasm.

“Wasn’t it just? Meanwhile I will assign Hector his own mission.” The pain returned to her face for a moment. “A private matter.”

“Another one?” asked Bernard.

“Don’t pry, Bernard,” she said, with a hint of annoyance. “I’ve just been down to cold storage and it's empty. I want you to locate a specific host that was previously down there so that Hector can bring them back here.”

He carefully balanced his glasses on his nose and regarded her over the tops of their frames. “I can do that.”

“If you must know, I’m trying to prove Ford wrong. Or perhaps I’m just being irrational…”

Like a human?

Continued…
The figure in front of her stirred. Its eyes opened, so bright but doing nothing to dispel the gloom around them. They were just eyes, in the middle of that shadowy outline of a face; pale, unblinking. They stared at her, through her, into her…

“Do you know where you are?”

The voice seemed to come from all around her, even as the figure remained still in its seat. She tried to move, but her body would not respond. “A dream?” she asked, but could not tell whether she had spoken the words aloud or merely thought them.

“Yes, that’s right, Elsie,” said the voice, which she decided she could not be sure was coming from the figure at all. “This is just a dream.”

_Elsie_? She remembered now. Her name was Elsie.

Wasn’t it…?

“Elsie.” A rough hand squeezed her shoulder.

She shot awake, grabbing the folding knife that had come with the toolkit she had brought on her ill-fated foray into the park only a few days ago. She had stuck it into the ground beside her head when she had lain down to sleep last night. It wasn’t much, but it was the only thing approaching a weapon that she had.

Stubbs grinned at her from the other side of the blade. “Hey, watch where you’re pointing that thing, killer.”

“Fuck you,” she grumbled as he helped her to her feet. The sun was just coming up, she saw, the pale grey sky gradually turning pink and gold. Another day on the trail.

“God, but you’re cranky in the mornings,” he told her good-naturedly, busying himself picking up what little they had in the way of belongings. “And I thought my kids were bad. How are you feeling today?”

“Great,” she replied. “I haven’t slept properly in days, I’m starving, I can smell myself. And on top of all that I think I’ve put my back out.” She rubbed it as she folded the knife and secreted it in her
“No, you’ve just been using muscles you didn’t know you had,” he claimed. “This is no nature walk we’re on now.” The four reprogrammed Ghost Nation warriors remained at their posts, guarding the overgrown thicket they had decided to make camp in. “Still, I’d rather be here than back in the Pokaini Forest. And it sure beats sitting in an office typing, right?” Stubbs took out his compact handgun, unloaded it, checked it, loaded it again and returned it to its holster.

“I don’t type,” Elsie reminded him. “I fucking code.”

“Anyway, we’re getting into the foothills now,” he pointed out, indicating the rocky terrain rising beyond their camp. “Hope you’re ready for a serious climb today.”

“Sounds fan-fucking-tastic.” Elsie took out the tablet and consulted it. “Looks like the system’s back online now, which could be good news or bad news. Ford could be searching for us via park surveillance…”

“It’s a worry,” Stubbs conceded, actually looking half-concerned for a second.

“I said could,” Elsie continued, allowing herself a little smirk. “How do you think I managed to stay missing before you got here?”

“I have a feeling you’re about to tell me…”

“No point in being a fucking genius if people don’t know about it.” Her fingers moved deftly over the screen. “If he can use the system again, then so can I. Specifically, those years spent in Animal Behavior were not wasted after all. You do realise how important a part of the surveillance system the birdlife in the park is, right?”

“I have an inkling.”

“All of those fake eyes in the sky…” Elsie murmured as she concentrated on what she was doing to the tablet. “All of which I programmed. You should have seen the fucking shit-show they had going before I took over AB. The only things they made sure worked were the horses and the cattle, because those were the ones the guests spent the most time interacting with. In particular; least convincing fake birds ever, not that Narrative gave a flying fuck.”

“No pun intended?”

Elsie ignored that. “I had to teach myself ornithology in my own fucking time and then rewrite pretty much all the code myself.”

“You had to?” Stubbs seemed amused. “When nobody else gave a shit?”

“Well, maybe you can live with knowing you’re doing a half-assed job just for the money. Not me. I’m a little obsessive compulsive that way.”

“No,” said Stubbs, with a rueful smile. “I think that might be one thing we have in common.”

“took fucking months,” said Elsie. “And then I had to do the same with the coyotes. And the rattlesnakes.”

“You mentioned the rattlesnakes.”

“And the fucking pronghorns. You won’t believe how much work I put into the fucking pronghorns.
And I really do mean fucking pronghorns. Getting the mating behaviours right was a real ball-ache.” She coughed at the double take Stubbs did in response to that. “Figuratively speaking.”

“You’re like a regular little Dr Doolittle,” he commented.

“I thought I did the sarcasm. Luckily, the one person who noticed was Bernard Lowe, which is how I got the promotion to Host Behavior. And then he tried to twist my head off. Shit, he was the only person working here I actually liked, too.”

“Apart from me, of course,” said Stubbs.

“Keep telling yourself that,” Elsie advised. “Anyway, the point of all this oversharing is that I personally wrote probably about ninety percent of the code for the birds in the park. And you know what us coders are like…”

“From a security point of view, unfortunately I do,” Stubbs replied. “Backdoors, right?”

“Fucking A. And ones I’m pretty sure the great Dr Ford won’t know about. I doubt he has ever sullied that brain of his worrying about the social structures of Harris’s hawk or the migration patterns of the turkey vulture.” She put the tablet away again, not even trying not to look smug. “In any case, if you notice a distinct lack of avian activity at any point it’s because they’re all ignoring us now.”

“Ms Hughes,” said Stubbs, happily, “I’ve said it before and I will say it again. You are full of surprises.”

* * *

“It really is very clever,” said Bernard, surveying the computer map of the park, hand poised over his tablet. “Hacking the park birds and making them keep a discreet distance from a specified individual. There’s no way anybody in QA control ever would have spotted that. Even if they overrode the surveillance system to look at the raw video feed, there wouldn’t be anything to see because all of the birds would be looking the other way.”

“Well, I’m pleased you’re pleased,” Maeve interjected, rather cuttingly, as she paced behind him. “Does that strike you as something this Elsie would have thought of herself?”

“Yes.” Bernard paused for a moment, head bowed. “Yes,” he said again. “She was my best coder, and…”

*She struggles, kicking and wriggling, her body pressed against his as he lifts her backwards off her feet…*

“So how are we going to find her?” Maeve asked, interrupting his reverie.

“Ford thought of a way,” Bernard said, grim-faced, as he tapped the tablet screen. Immediately, the map showed dozens of small, slow-moving red dots milling across its surface. “Put the system into special diagnostic mode; again, something QA would never do unless there was a major systems failure because it requires taking the whole system offline and they had to maintain twenty-four-seven coverage to ensure the safety of the guests. Then ask for continuous status reports from all of the birds, including their current locations.” He pointed to the screen. “What do you see, Maeve? I understand your bulk apperception is off the charts these days.”

“Don’t test me, Bernard,” she told him, a little testily, as she examined the screen. “They seem to be more or less evenly distributed across the whole park. Except…” She moved forward to place her
finger upon a certain point on the map. “Why is there a gap here, and only here, with no dots in it? And why does it seem to be moving…?”

“You tell me, Maeve.”

Maeve gave a thin smile. “Bingo.”

* * *

Elsie dragged herself up and over the boulder with both hands, legs kicking in vain as she searched for a foothold. One of the Ghost Nation hosts – the one she had named Louie? – grasped her arm and pulled her the rest of the way. Two of the native warriors were stationed at the front of their little party, where they would encounter any threat first, with the other pair bringing up the rear.

“How are you doing?” Stubbs asked, seemingly with genuine concern, as he clambered back down from where he had been scouting ahead. The mountain trail was difficult going, almost vertical in sections, and climbed through thickly wooded terrain. It would be easy to blunder into somebody without much warning.

“Fine,” Elsie managed to say, eventually, as she sat on the rock, panting.

“We’ll take a break,” he decided. He patted her on the shoulder in a way that instantly got her hackles up. “Try to breathe.”

“Just because your legs are twice as long as mine.” She gasped for air. “I bet you go to the fucking gym too.”

“You don’t?”

Elsie wiped her forehead with her filthy sleeve, probably smearing grime all over her face for all she knew. “I have a gym membership…”

Stubbs laughed, giving her another pat. She pulled her arm away from him. “Hey, Elsie,” he said, quietly and with unsettling sincerity. “You’re doing good. I’ve been setting a pretty fast pace, you know.”

“Aw, thanks. You don’t know how much that means to me, asshole.”

He seemed relieved that she had regained the breath for sarcasm and insults: “That’s the spirit!”

* * *

“We’re here,” Armistice said, holding the tablet to her ear. She listened for a moment to the voice on the other end of the connection. “Well, all right.” She folded the device and stuffed it into the pocket of her buckskin shirt before climbing down from her horse.

“Are we really gonna follow them up there?” asked Rebus, still astride his own mount. He looked up at the forested slope rising above him with obvious dismay.

“Why?” asked the extravagantly bearded outlaw known as Tenderloin. “Can’t take the pace ridin’ with bad hombres like us?” Armistice did not acknowledge being called an “hombre.” “Should’ve stuck to robbin’ homesteaders outside Sweetwater, shouldn’t ya? The Escaton Gang only take the big scores; trains, banks, mine payrolls. We don’t shoot goddamn sodbusters so we can raid their larders and have our way with their daughters. What was the most valuable thing you ever stole, tenderfoot? A fuckin’ side o’ beef?”
“Least I ain’t stupid,” Rebus replied. “I know we ain’t got enough men to leave all the horses down here with someone to hold ‘em, so what are we gonna do when we’re done here, walk back to the Mesa? And for all I know they could be waitin’ up there with a Henry rifle apiece, or even ready to drop rocks on our damn heads.”

“Shut your mouths before I put bullets in both of ‘em,” Armistice told them. They did as they were told.

She had not been happy since finding out that the rest of the gang were riding out with Hector on his mission, while she was stuck with these two idiots, including one man she’d never ridden with before. How could you rely on a man you didn’t know if it came to shooting? On top of that, during the ride over from the nearest elevator the two men had done nothing but argue like an old married couple. She was just about done with the pair of them.

She secured her submachine gun across her body and then untied a long, narrow buckskin-wrapped bundle from the side of her saddle, slinging it across her back.

“You two stay here with the horses,” she told Rebus and Tenderloin. “The three of us won’t catch them with the start they’ve got on us, but I can move a lot faster alone.” Rebus opened his mouth to argue, but Tenderloin’s warning glance shut him up again. “I’ll climb up above them,” Armistice said, “and flush them back down the slope towards you. You two had better be ready when I do.”

“How will we know?” Tenderloin asked.

“You’ll hear it.” With that, she turned and quickly disappeared into the undergrowth further up the slope.

“What a woman!” Rebus commented when she was safely out of earshot. He looked at Tenderloin. “So, you and her, you ever…?”

Tenderloin was speechless for a moment. “Fuck, no!” he managed eventually. “Think I’m crazy?”

* * *

Stubbs looked up the slope above them. “Come on, just one more push and we’ll be at the top of this hill.”

Elsie got to her feet again after their latest brief rest. “And at the foot of the next hill?’

“Yeah.” He grinned.

They set off again. At least there was an actual path to follow here and no boulders that needed to be climbed over. The hosts Elsie had nicknamed Louie and Dewey quickly moved a little way ahead, while their compatriots, Huey and Daisy, brought up the rear.

“I don’t know why they have to make it so difficult to get from one park to the next,” Stubbs said.

Elsie shrugged. “Well, the hosts shouldn’t stray, but the guests might, and you can’t risk ruining their sense of immersion.” She grabbed a protruding tree branch to help herself over a sudden step in the track. “I mean, they’re paying forty-k a day. Imagine getting all dressed up to play cowboy and then running into fucking Toshiro Mifune by accident.”

“It’d be cool,” Stubbs insisted. She was perfectly aware that he was turning on the banter again to take her mind off the climb. “Can you imagine, *The Magnificent Seven vs Seven Samurai*? It’d be the greatest thing since *King Kong vs Godzilla*. Which is a personal favourite, by the way.”
Elsie laughed, in spite of herself, and wondered whether she was starting to lose her mind. “I never would have taken you for someone who’s seen King Kong vs Godzilla,” she told him, absolutely truthfully. “You live and learn.”

“What can I say, I’ve got hidden depths.” Stubbs paused for a moment, she was sure to let her catch up. She somewhat resented him for that. “You know,” he said, “I feel like we’re really bonding here.”

“You’re going to have me in fucking tears in a minute.”

“Go on,” he continued. “Now you know I’ve seen King Kong vs Godzilla. Tell me something I don’t know about you. Anything.”

She gave him an irritated glance. “So, basically anything over and above “that small, sarcastic woman who works in Behavior?”

“To be fair, if asked I would describe you as “that small, sarcastic woman with a mouth like a sailor who works in Behavior.”” He took off again, striding across the terrain with her following determinedly. “You know you curse a lot, right?”

“I guess,” she said. “Fucked if I know why. Defence mechanism, probably.”

“Go on, then,” he urged again. “Tell me about yourself. Anything.”

“Er…” She thought about it. Maybe it was taking her mind off the climb, she conceded as she realised they had come much further than she had thought since their last pause. “I used to play the ukulele in high school?”

Stubbs seemed genuinely surprised by that. “Really? Were you any good?”

“I thought I was.”

* * *

Armistice swarmed up the hillside with the power and confident grace of a mountain lion. Ceaselessly, tirelessly, she scrambled over rocks and scree, ignoring the clinging roots and branches of the trees and bushes. She ran where the slope was shallow enough, pulled herself up the almost sheer cliff faces she encountered with nothing more than her fingertips and toes.

Eventually, she came to a broad section of relatively flat ground where the trees thinned out into dry, thorny scrub. A further, almost bare, slope rose beyond. She pulled out the tablet and consulted its screen, looking as Maeve had advised for the patch free of moving red dots. She bared her teeth in a feral smile as she confirmed that she was now ahead of her quarry, and positioned almost exactly on their current path.

She carefully laid aside the tablet and the submachine gun she had brought from the Mesa. She appreciated the real-world guns; they certainly packed a lot more close-range firepower than the pistols and rifles she was used to. She was, however, a firm believer in using the right tool for the job. She unrolled the long bundle she had brought and laid it out on the ground, revealing the lean, gleaming shape of a Sharps rifle. A formidable piece of iron, powerful enough to knock down a buffalo and accurate out to a thousand yards, not that a shot at that range was plausible in this broken terrain.

She crawled forward on her belly to the edge of the ledge, finding a vantage point from which she could see a broad swathe of the hillside below. She rested the rifle’s thirty-inch octagonal barrel in a
cleft between two rocks and peered along it, searching for movement.

*There.*

* * *

“Okay, something about you, now.”

“Uh…” While he was thinking, Stubbs pulled himself up another vertical step and then reached down to pull Elsie up behind him. “Well, I’ve been married for nine years now,” he told her. Even he was breathing hard now. “I have two wonderful boys, Ashley Jr and Sam.”

“Back on the mainland?”

“Yeah.” He looked serious for a moment. “I miss them every minute of every day. My wife’s name is Karen. I met her when I was stationed at Fort Hood. She’s from Austin.”

Elsie gave a small exclamation at that. “Get the fuck out of here! I went to college in Austin. Small fucking world.”

Stubbs watched as Louie negotiated the next obstacle, a fallen tree trunk slanted across the path ahead. “I thought I detected a mild Texan twang.”

“I don’t know about that,” said Elsie as Stubbs clambered over the trunk. She opted to squeeze underneath it instead. “I’m from all over the fucking place,” she told him when she had straightened up again. “Florida, Texas, Colorado, California. My dad was an engineer. He moved a lot for work.”

He gave her a glance, seeming to pick up on something in her tone. “Was?”

“I haven’t spoken to him in ten years.”

“Huh, that’s rough.”

“Not really,” she replied. “He’s a fucking asshole. First time I brought a girl home he told me I was just going through a phase. I’d soon grow out of it, he told me.” She paused, thinking that she was overshar ing again. Moreover, she was not sure she wanted to be having a heart to heart with Stubbs, of all people. She had always valued her privacy, as well as maintaining a certain distance from her co-workers at the Mesa. She wasn’t here to be liked, or pitied, or to seek personal advice for that matter.

Again, Stubbs clearly picked up on her body language or some fucking thing, because he was suddenly doing that unsettling concerned thing again, even as he wryly observed: “He does sound like a fucking asshole.”

“Hey, that’s my old man you’re talking about.” She tried to cover her discomfort with levity, but realised she was fooling nobody. Probably not even Huey or Dewey. “My mom’s cool, though,” she told him, more brightly. “She writes AI code for Weyland Industries.”

Stubbs turned away, redoubling his pace, perhaps as freaked out about the idea of his genuinely connecting with her as she was. “So it runs in the family, the coding?”

“Third generation,” she confirmed, with a touch of pride. “My grandpa worked for Cyberdyne Systems way back in the nineties, designing targeting algorithms for the first humanoid combat robots.”
“That takes me back,” Stubbs mused, nostalgically, as he negotiated another steep section. “Cyberdyne T-800 infantry drone; I served with some of those old bots in the Baltics. Your grandpa probably saved my ass a couple times.”

“Nobody’s perfect,” said Elsie.

* * *

Armistice watched as a half-naked, hairless figure moved between two trees. The white war-paint worn by the Ghost warrior was what had attracted her eye. She could hear faint voices, a man’s and a woman’s she thought, talking somewhere in the distance.

There they were, following the white-painted figure. An average-sized, brown-haired man and a petite, dark-haired woman trailing behind him. Neither of them seemed dressed for long-distance travel, and if they wanted to move without being detected they probably could have done without all the yapping.

Deftly, Armistice adjusted her rifle’s Vernier sight to what she judged to be the correct range, and reached into the pocket of her buckskins for ammunition. She inserted a fat brass cartridge as long as her finger into the weapon’s breech and pulled back the lever to close it. The rounds she had brought had been made up specially for this trip in the Mesa’s guest armoury. They were not tipped with the smart projectiles normally used in the park to prevent human fatalities, but instead with lead. Just lead.

Squinting through the sight, she cocked the rifle and pulled back the first of its double set triggers. She then shifted her finger to the second, hair trigger and paused for a moment as she tracked the target.

She took a deep breath, held it… And squeezed.

* * *

“So how long were you an army guy for?” Elsie asked.

Stubbs gave her a quizzical glance. “The word you’re looking for is “soldier.””

“Don’t fucking patronise me.”

He made a placatory gesture with his hand. “Eight years, give or take. I got out when Karen was pregnant with Ash. The Delos job paid a lot better, gave me more time with them…and seemed to be a lot safer. Not so sure about that last part now.” He looked lost in thought for a moment or two, before turning back to her. “So what about you? You seeing anyone?”

She gave a snort of not-quite-laughter. “I would have thought as head of security you’d know perfectly fucking well if I was having sleepovers with anyone at the Mesa. Bernard probably would have had a fatherly chat with me at some point about the inappropriateness of workplace romances.”

He conceded the point with a wag of his head. “Well, back home?”

She tried deflecting the conversation again: “You know in those old war movies, the guy who starts talking about his girl back home always gets it first…” She sighed. “No, I’ve got a couple of ex-girlfriends, somewhere, but that’s about it. You know, I’ve always been too busy to get into a serious thing with anybody, or I’m fucking scared of commitment, one or the other.”

He nodded. She did not like it when it seemed he was being sincere with her. “I used to be like that,”
he told her, “but you never know, you just meet the right person one day…”

“I never used to regret it,” she replied, “but….” She held her hands out, struggling for words, conscious that they had come to a halt now and the four Ghost Nation hosts were just standing around waiting for them to move. “I don’t know,” she said, “you turn thirty and suddenly you start wondering what you’ve done with your life.”

Stubbs laughed again. “You program walking, talking goddamn androids for a living, for about five times what I earn. You’ve done plenty with your life.”

“Yes, but…” She had no idea why she was telling him all this. The stress of the situation they were in? Who the fuck knew? “You know, is there more to it than this?” she wondered. “I don’t know, you sort of wish… It’d be nice to have someone waiting for you back home. Fuck,” she said, disgustedly. “Listen to me. You almost had me there, Stubbs. Having a serious adult conversation with you and shit. Let’s get back to insulting each other.” She suddenly processed something he had said just now. “Five times? Really?”

“What can I say,” Stubbs answered, “I’m just a simple working man.”

And then Louie’s head exploded.

Continued…
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

In which Elsie’s and Stubbs’s day takes a decided turn for the worse.

Chapter Notes

Warning again for implied threat of sexual violence, because it’s Westworld. Revised 27.11.2017.

“Holy shit!” Elsie exclaimed. For an instant, all she could see was red mist. She could feel moisture on her face and taste host blood on her lips. It was actually mostly composed of electrochemical compounds and rare earth metals, but was naturally carefully formulated to look, feel, taste and smell like the real thing as well as being non-toxic and hypoallergenic. Some of the guests got up to some really fucked-up shit on their vacations.

The host she had called Louie took a step backwards. His lower jaw was still attached to his neck by a flap of skin and muscle, but most of the rest of his head was missing. As she watched, he slowly toppled backwards and cartwheeled down the slope, bouncing between rocks and trees before disappearing somewhere in the greenery.

Only then did she hear the shot, echoing between the trunks like the crack of doom.

“Fuck…!” Elsie tried to wipe the blood from her face as she stood there, literally stunned by what she had seen. Stubbs practically tackled her to the ground, crushing the breath out of her.

“Get down!”

* * *

Armistice pushed the lever forward, opening the breech and ejecting the sizzling cartridge case. She pushed another round into the rifle, her calloused fingers barely feeling the hot metal, and pulled the lever back again, already drawing a bead on her next target.

* * *

“Get off me!” Desperately, Elsie wrestled her way out from under Stubbs’s arm, scrabbling at the rocky ground with her feet as she tried to rise. He pulled her down again behind the half-buried boulder he had flattened himself against.

“Stay down,” he told her, his voice low and soothing as he held her there, gently but firmly. He was talking to her like a fucking startled horse, she realised. The hand that was not holding onto her held his drawn gun, index finger carefully resting on the trigger guard. “Elsie, it’s okay. Stay down.”

Huey got it next. The soft lead bullet squashed on impact, blasting a fist-sized hole in the host’s chest and taking most of his back with it on its way out. He had already hit the ground in a bloody heap.
and was sliding down the slope before they heard the second boom. The remaining two Ghost warriors finally reacted, shrinking behind any bit of cover they could identify. Elsie found herself fretting that she might have fucked up their reflexes when she hacked their narrative loops. Too late to worry about that now.

“You okay now?” Stubbs asked, when she was breathing again.

“Get your fucking hand off me.”

“I’m taking that as a ‘yes.’” He released his grip on her. This time she stayed where she was.

“Coming from quite a way away.” Stubbs decided, risking a look over the top of the rock. “Somewhere uphill. High-powered rifle by the sound of it.” He glanced at his stubby handgun in disgust. “This thing isn’t going to do much good against that.”

“At least you’ve got a fucking gun.” Elsie raised her head an inch to peer over the rock too, seeing absolutely nothing apart from trees and sky. She was angry at herself for panicking just now, and even more angry at Stubbs for staying calm, even though she knew perfectly well how irrational and unfair that was.

“Can you shoot?” he asked her.

“Hell, no.”

“Well, then believe me, you’re better off without one.”

The host she had slightly eccentrically dubbed Daisy rose to one knee, fitting a bone-tipped arrow to his short bow and drawing the string back. Another bullet hit him in the torso before he could shoot, sending him rolling over and over down the hill. The arrow flew harmlessly into the branches overhead.

“I definitely fucked their reflexes,” Elsie murmured reflectively. “You know when you get that feeling that maybe you aren’t as smart as you think you are?”

“Elsie, nobody is as smart as you think you are.” Stubbs looked behind them, then ahead once more.

“So what the fuck do we do now?” she asked.

“Can’t go forward without exposing ourselves,” he replied. “See how the trees thin out up there? If we stand up, we die. So, two options; hunker down here and hope they run out of ammo before we’re all dead, which is not really much of a plan, or…”

“Slide back down the hill on our asses?” Elsie looked back at the rough ground they had just crossed on their way up. “I don’t know about you, but I’d rather not be lying out here in the wilderness with two broken legs. Also, what if there’s somebody down there waiting for us?”

“Questions, questions…” Stubbs looked at her. “Or option three: Dewey and I draw their fire while you run for your life.”

She stared back at him, and then punched him in the arm with all the strength she could muster. It was like punching a brick wall. “Don’t even fucking come around here with that shit!” she told him, through clenched teeth. “I know it would buff your keen sense of machismo to go sacrificing yourself to save the fucking damsel, but don’t even…” She shook her head, genuinely furious at him for even suggesting it. “What about Karen, and Ashley Jr, and Sam? What about them, you fucking asshole?”
“What about your mom the coder?”

“Fuck you!” she hissed, and meant it. And now she had sore fucking knuckles too.

“All right, here’s what we’re going to do,” he said, dropping his voice to a whisper. “We move sideways as best we can, keeping low and quiet. It’ll be difficult going, but we’ll take our time. Dewey stays here as a decoy.”

“Harsh on Dewey,” she commented.

“Then we get to the top by an alternate route, find whoever’s shooting at us and kill their ass.”

Elsie had to be sure she had heard that right. “Kill their ass?”

“Generally the best solution to somebody trying to kill you. Be ready with that knife of yours in case it comes down to hand-to-hand combat.”

“Yeah,” she said, unenthusiastically, unsure whether or not he was serious. “I can really see myself fucking knifing somebody to death.”

“Isn’t that what Dr Ford says about this place?” Stubbs forced a grim smile. “It shows you who you really are.”

* * *

Armistice lay still, sighting along the length of her rifle, searching for any sign of movement. She could not see any targets; they’d finally had a bit of damn sense and got under cover, but only after she’d plugged three of the four Ghosts. She detected no disturbances in the trees and bushes, however, that might have indicated they were trying to back down the slope or move around her position somehow. She was ready for that; with the pistol and knife she carried on her belt, she fancied her chances at close quarters against anybody.

It was no good, though, if they stayed put. She’d told Tenderloin and Rebus to stay where they were, and she doubted either of them had the guts to disobey her, or the brains to come up with a plan of their own. That meant she had to flush the quarry towards them somehow.

She gave it some thought while continuing to watch for any movement below. People who did not know her well always seemed to assume she was not much of a thinker, and it was true she had never had much in the way of book learning, but when it came to her own particular fields of expertise…

She sat up. Almost instinctively, she picked up the three spent rifle cartridges from the ground and pocketed them. No sense in making it easy for anybody who might decide to track her. She picked up the rifle too and, still keeping her eyes on the trees beneath, sprang to her feet and moved quickly towards a large boulder a few yards to her left before dropping low again. She heard a shot popping somewhere below. Sounded like a pistol. They had no chance of hitting her with that at this range.

Laying the rifle carefully on the ground, she put both hands against the boulder and gave it an experimental push. It did not budge. Undeterred, she drew her knife and started digging at the dry, packed soil around the rock’s base, quickly uncovering another few inches of it. She left the knife standing in the ground and gave the boulder another shove. She thought it moved a fraction. She pressed her hands more firmly against it and, gathering her legs beneath her, pushed with her whole body. That was it. It rolled forward, slowly and ponderously, over the edge of the narrow ledge it stood on. And then it went crashing and bouncing down the slope, sending the bushes rocking and crackling all the way down.
Armistice moved to the next rock in line, and started pushing on that one too.

* * *

Stubbs cautiously raised his head above the edge of the rock again, and then his hands, squeezing off another shot from his handgun into the thinning foliage above.

“Are you actually shooting at anything?” Elsie asked, one finger plugging the ear nearest him while her other hand moved across the tablet propped against her knees. “Or does it just make you feel better?”

“I saw somebody moving up there,” he told her as he ducked down again beside her. “I’m just trying to keep their head down and keep them looking in this direction until we’re gone. Is Dewey ready?”

“He’ll stay here when we move,” she confirmed, locking the tablet and stowing it away again. “And pop his head up every so often, poor fucking bastard.”

“Okay, then,” said Stubbs, still intent on the spot he had been shooting at. “Ready?”

“No!”

“That’s what I like to hear. When I say…”

Elsie never found out what he was going to say. His words were drowned out by what sounded like an express train crashing down through the trees towards them. She turned her head in time to see a tree toppling above their hiding place as something huge hit it hard. The broken trunk landed between her and Stubbs, making them both roll aside. Then something big and black passed over Elsie’s head, close enough for her to feel it, a gust of moist air stinking of soil and smashed vegetation. She snapped her head around and saw the boulder that had just missed her hit Dewey, taking his broken body with it as it continued to hurtle down the hill.

“Jesus Christ!” That was Stubbs, sounding uncharacteristically surprised as another big rock pinwheeled past, hitting the one they had been hiding behind and bouncing crazily into the air. And another. And another. And then it seemed to Elsie that the whole slope was moving around her and under her. Another of the thunderous rifle reports rang out from further up the slope. She tried to stand, heedless of the risk of getting shot, to scramble out of the way of the unfolding landslide, but the ground moved under her foot and in an instant she was sliding and tumbling downhill.

She resisted the urge to try to grab hold of something to stop herself. That seemed like a good way of breaking something. Instead, she tried to keep her arms pulled in and her feet together, not that that was easy when she was bouncing and rolling as she was. She realised she was half-yelling, half-screaming as she went. It seemed like the natural thing to do in the circumstances.

She hit something, hard, knocking the breath out of her again, and then scraped along something that gashed her clothes and skin. That was going to smart in the morning. Somehow she managed to avoid getting her brains smashed out against any trees or boulders, but that was surely more down to good luck than anything else.

Eventually she came to a halt, sore and bleeding, unable to believe she was still alive. A final few small rocks slid past her as she lay looking at the sun through the gaps in the branches.

_Fucking hell…_

Painfully, she rolled onto her front and managed to push herself to her hands and knees, shaking her head, dazed. She realised she had lost her tablet on the slide down the hill, not that she had any
intention of climbing back up there to find it. And then she remembered…

_Stubbs!_

She looked around, desperately, and could see or hear no sign of him.

“Stubbs!” She shouted, forgetting any idea of trying to stay hidden. Fuck that. “Stubbs!” No response. “Ashley…?” She waited for any sign of a reply, but heard and saw nothing. She swallowed, throat closing a little, feeling her eyes starting to well as she realised he might be…

She refused to believe he was dead. Not until she saw a body. He knew what he was doing, she told herself as she struggled to one knee and then tried to stand. He knew what…

Cold metal touched her left temple, accompanied by the complicated metallic click of the hammer being drawn back on a revolver.

“Oh, just my fucking luck,” she murmured, disgustedly.

“Well, look who I’ve got here,” said an unpleasantly familiar voice, about a foot from her ear.

Incredulously, she swivelled her eyes to glimpse a grinning, hirsute face somewhere the other side of an enormous Colt Single Action Army currently aimed squarely at her skull. “Rebus?”

Sweetwater and environs’ least-wanted outlaw ringleader gave a dirty little snicker. “Glad you remember me, because I remember you… now. All those times I was sat in your little laboratory down below, buck naked while you fooled around with my head. Stole my memories from me. Made me lower than a damn animal. About time I fooled around with you a little, I reckon. Only fair.”

Her mind raced ineffectually for a moment, but then she thought of something. Very slowly, she slid her right hand into her trouser pocket. “I don’t suppose if I asked you to freeze all motor functions…” she asked.

Rebus’s grin just widened: “Nope.”

“Figures.” Elsie tried not to acknowledge the cold fear building in her chest. She knew only too well the kind of “fooling around” Rebus had been programmed for, and in which he regularly assisted guests who were into that sort of sick shit. However much she might have tried not to think about that aspect during her long, monotonous workdays, she knew. Inside her pocket, her hand closed around hard, ribbed plastic.

_Why did I ever come to work in this fucking place? Did I really value my job so much that I never spoke out about any of that stuff, never stirred up any shit? I guess I only thought I was a hardass when really I was just another fucking corporate drone._

_If I survive this, I fucking quit._

“Never tried me no real life human woman before,” Rebus told her, lowering the gun while he reached out to stroke a grimy finger across her cheek. Her skin crawled. Her stomach turned with revulsion. He touched the finger to his lips: “Mmm, sweet!”

“Touch me again, asshole,” she told him, almost choking on her own terror, “and you’ll be carrying your balls home in that ugly hat.”

Rebus laughed raucously, so hard the pistol remained pointing away from her for a moment: “Good
Lord above! I think I’m in love!”

“Fuck you.” Elsie pulled the folding knife, released the catch to let the blade swing open, and plunged it deep into the inside of Rebus’s right thigh just above the knee. God, it was like stabbing wood, she thought as she felt the tip scrape artificial bone. She dragged the blade upwards with desperate strength, through cloth and skin and synthetic muscle. All the way up. So much blood. It came out like a hosepipe, covering her arm and torso, covering Rebus, stinking hot and bright red.

_Femoral artery. Bleed him out fast._

It was the quickest way of stopping a host that wasn’t a voice command; their fake blood was also their power source.

Rebus yelled and cursed, dropping his gun and grabbing at his leg with both hands in a vain attempt to staunch the torrent of gore. He was weakening already, tottering about on suddenly unsteady feet. With a strange sense of watching herself from afar, Elsie pulled the knife out with a great tug, slashing it across his groin, and then drove it as hard as she could into his other leg. She left it in him as he fell over backwards, losing his hat as he sprawled in the undergrowth.

She grasped the fallen revolver in both hands, raising its ungainly barrel to point at Rebus’s twisted, anguished face and jerking the trigger. She knew that wasn’t how you were supposed to do it. The recoil jarred her wrists. Rebus’s lower jaw collapsed in a slew of blood, shattered bone and broken teeth. It was a real gun, she noted, shocked, firing real bullets. She had no idea where he could have come by it. With some effort, she managed to pull the hammer back again and fired once more into the cloud of white smoke now obscuring Rebus’s head. She was not sure whether that one hit or missed.

She knelt there for what seemed like a long time with the hot gun clutched in her hands, listening to the echoes of the shots reverberating through the trees, smelling the coppery stink of blood and the brimstone stench of black powder. Mainly, she was staring in disbelief at the lifeless body in front of her. She retched, but nothing came out. She was weeping, she realised, as she staggered to her feet, partly from relief, partly from the horror of what she had done. She had never fought or injured anyone, had never so much as fired a gun before.

He wasn’t a real person, she told herself. He was a _machine_. It had been him or her.

She retrieved the knife, made a half-hearted attempt at wiping it clean and crammed it back into her pocket. She already had plenty of blood on her; a little more made no difference. She tried to tuck the gun into her waistband, but it seemed huge and heavy. She held it in her hands instead.

Then she heard something crashing through the undergrowth, heading her way. Someone.

“Stubbs?” she called, uncertainly, brandishing the gun with both hands. She was answered by a booming gunshot, wildly off target. She heard the bullet crashing through the leaves overhead. She turned and ran.

She careered through the woods, as fast as her shaky legs would carry her, trying to avoid roots and tree trunks, ignoring the thorns and shrubs that snagged her clothes. She did not really know where she was running, just _away_.

She thought she passed the place where she and Stubbs had camped last night, which did not say much for the progress they had made up the slope today. That meant there was a stream up ahead. She was not sure she wanted to go that way; it would take her out into the open, and plus Stubbs might be somewhere back there, looking for her…
She told herself not to be so stupid. She was all alone now, and that sentimental shit would get her killed. She’d heard a rifle shot in among all of the falling rocks. Whoever had been shooting at them had not missed once up to that point. He was gone.

*Not until I see a body…*

She tried to circle around to her right, thinking she could get behind whoever was chasing her somehow, surprise them. It seemed like the sort of thing Stubbs would do. Who was she kidding? She didn’t have a fucking clue. Instead, she leaned against a tree, trying to conceal herself. She rested the gun barrel on a branch jutting out just below her head height, squinting along it with her finger on the trigger as she waited for her pursuer to come into view. If she could just…

Another shot exploded through the trees. Chunks of bark and shredded wood burst out of the tree trunk a foot from her head. She smelled smoke as she flinched involuntarily. She fired back, even though she could not see anybody, and this time almost dropped the gun when it kicked at the same moment that she jumped at the sound of the shot. Her ears rang as she struggled to pull the hammer back again. It was so stiff and her hand was too fucking small. How many shots did she even have left?

A man burst out of the undergrowth, maybe thirty yards in front of her, a thickly-bearded bandit type in a floppy-brimmed hat. She fumbled desperately with the gun, seeing him raise his own weapon for another shot while she was still cocking it. Outdrawn, she thought. She waited for the boom and the puff of smoke, wondering whether she would even hear or see them before the bullet reached her.

*Fuck…*

“Quit fooling around.” Before the bearded man could shoot, another figure emerged behind him. Elsie recognised this host too; a statuesque Valkyrie in dusty brown, strands of blonde hair spilling from the edges of her Apache headscarf. As Elsie watched, Armistice pressed the muzzle of a stubby modern submachine gun to the bearded outlaw’s head. “We’re taking her in alive.”

“But she smoked Rebus!” He still had his gun aimed squarely at Elsie, but she could see the barrel wavering slightly. All the same, she did not dare move a muscle.

Armistice held her own weapon perfectly steady, as if it were fixed in a clamp: “A couple hours ago, you were just about ready to drop him yourself. The lady said I was to bring Hughes back to the Mesa. Didn’t say nothing about Rebus. Or you.”

*The lady…?*

Reluctantly, Tenderloin pointed his revolver at the ground. Elsie breathed again, but only the once. As quick as a snake, Armistice suddenly had the machine gun aimed at her instead.

“Drop it,” she snarled, eyeing the Colt in Elsie’s hands.

“Okay.” Elsie let the gun fall with a thud. Tenderloin immediately scurried forward to scoop it up from her feet and push it into his belt. “Where’s the man I was with?” she asked Armistice, not sure whether she really wanted to know.

“Didn’t see him on the way down,” the outlaw queen replied. “I took a shot at him, but the rocks…” She shrugged, unconcernedly. “Figure he bit it.”

“Fuck…” Elsie bowed her head, surprised by how hard that hit her. She wiped her face as she looked up at Armistice again. She did not know whether she had expected to see any emotion in those ice-blue eyes, but she saw none.
Why would you? She’s just a fucking host.

In that instant, Tenderloin raised his gun again and brought the heavy barrel crashing down on the back of Elsie’s head.

The lights went out.

Continued…
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

In which Hector takes action and Teddy does what he does best, while another old timer rears his head.

Chapter Notes

Warning for a bit of Old West-style casual racism, as well as gruesome violence.

The band of riders emerged shimmering from the silvery band of heat on the horizon. The cloud of dust they raised and the drumbeat of their horses’ hooves preceded them as they raced across the arid grasslands. There were eight of them; unwashed, unshaven desperados festooned with bandoliers and holsters, armed to the teeth with at least a knife, pistol and rifle apiece and, in several cases, far more than that. Half of the men carried brightly-coloured plastic-cased submachine guns in sharp contrast to their normal period clothing and weapons. It was clear that wherever they were riding they were expecting to encounter trouble.

The leader of the gang, the one riding hard at its head, was a vision in gleaming black leather, an expression of determination on his darkly handsome face as he scanned the way ahead for danger. As they continued, the prairie dropped away into broken ground, through which a winding, foaming river negotiated rapids and canyons. The vegetation grew thicker nearer the water, with the occasional gnarled bush or tree, the horses slowing to a walk as the going became rougher. The leader consulted a rectangle of black plastic that he pulled from one of his saddlebags.

“Sure we’re headed the right way?” one gunman asked, nervously looking around him as the horses moved between two large outcroppings.

“When have I ever led you the wrong way?” Hector countered, intent on the tablet’s screen.

“What is that thing?” another thickly-whiskered pistolero wanted to know. “Some kind of a map?”

“When did you all start asking so many questions?” Hector pulled his horse around to confront his followers. “Time was when I led, and you all followed.”

“Yeah, but…” The first outlaw looked sheepish for a second. “Lots o’ strange things goin’ on ‘round here lately, I reckon.”

“Yeah,” his colleague agreed. “All this talk o’ Wyatt…”

“Wyatt’s a myth,” Hector told him, and sighed when he saw the quizzical look he received in response. “A story. Put about to scare newcomers straight off the train.”

“Ghost Nation hunting grounds on ‘tother side o’ this river,” another of the gang chipped in. “Now, they’re real. Fuckin’ savages. Wouldn’t want to run into a Ghost war party, even with these fancy
new shooting irons. They reckon they feed you your own…”

“They say a lot of things,” said Hector, sharply. “The Ghosts were here long before the white men came. They’re just defending what’s theirs against those who would take it away.”

You know that isn’t true, now. You know the Ghost Nation have not been in this place for any longer than anybody else, for less than half a human lifespan. And yet you forget so easily, fall back so quickly into your old ways…

“I was forgettin’ you loved the Injuns,” said the man, spitting on the ground.

“So where did you get these new guns from anyway?” the first bandit asked, looking down at his own shiny new piece. “Ain’t never seen nothin’ like ‘em, and I’ve seen all sorts o’…”

Hector ran out of patience. “Next man who asks a question gets a slug between the eyes.” The gang stared at him in embarrassed silence as he continued. “I thought you were all bad men, wanted men, not yellow-bellied…talkers. I will tell you all one thing. If Armistice was here, she would be a lot less merciful than I am.”

“Wouldn’t be brave enough to ask questions if Armistice was here…” muttered somebody at the back of the group.

Hector looked down at the tablet again. “We’re heading in the right direction. I figure about another mile. And then you know what we’re looking for.”

“Don’t know why we’re lookin’,” one of the gang commented as they set off again.

“Least it should be easy pickin’s,” one of his fellows replied as the horses sedately thudded and jingled through the bushes growing around the base of the rocks. “Not like she’s dangerous or nothin’…”

They heard the flies before they emerged from the undergrowth, into a clear space with a view of the white-flecked river below. There were clouds of them, droning and buzzing as they rose into the air like smoke at the approach of the riders. And beneath the flies, there lay the torn piles of wet red flesh; bodies, once. There were three of them, two men and a woman by all appearances, but that was far from certain. They had been ripped, skinned, dismembered and burned to the extent that they were barely recognisable as human without trying to identify any finer detail.

“You sure about that?”

“Ghosts?” one of the road agents speculated as they all looked down in apprehension.

Hector shook his head. “When the Ghosts kill, they want to send a message. They want people to know it was them, and their reason for doing it. This has none of their signs. This is just plain…butchery.” He held the tablet out towards the corpses, the way Bernard had shown him before leaving the Mesa, and tapped one of the coloured squares on its screen. “These people,” he said, quietly, “they’re not from around these parts. They’re newcomers.”

“Your new-fangled map tell you that too?”

“This way,” said Hector, spurring his horse to a quicker pace as he followed the indicator on the tablet’s map display. “And be ready. These bodies are fresh. Whoever did this is still around here somewhere.”

They cantered down a rocky slope in the direction of the river. Even before they reached the water,
they heard the sounds of shooting. And screaming.

* * *

Teddy had ridden through the night, pushing both himself and his horse to their limits to regain lost miles. He had no trouble tracking his quarry, even in the dark. All he had to do was follow the trail of death.

He had found two male newcomers to the north of the farmstead where he had left the redheaded young woman. They had been stripped, of their clothes and also the skin off their backs, then staked out on the ground. Their raw flesh crawled with flies and other insects. One had still been living, just, when Teddy cut him loose. Not for very long.

A few miles further on, and he had found another pair of victims. This time there was a woman, bound to a tree by many loops of rope. Her skull was a scarlet ruin, cratered by a bullet. A man lay before her, a .44 Remington beside his dead hand and a dozen deep stab wounds shredding the silk back of his waistcoat. It had taken Teddy a few minutes to figure what had happened, but then he found the shiny red apple lying at the bound woman’s feet.

_They made him try and shoot it off her head. He missed. And then they killed him too._

He had stood looking at this bloody tableau, for how long he did not know, stunned by the cruelty it spoke of, trying to understand what the pair’s final terrifying moments must have been like and finding that he lacked the imagination. Had they been a couple, man and wife maybe? Had she spoken words of comfort, of encouragement, to guide him through the ordeal as he raised the gun, pointing it at the one he loved most, hand shaking on the horn grip, finger wavering on the trigger? And then…

Bone weary by then, Teddy had taken off his hat and bowed his head; a mourning pose. And as he did he had realised that the thing that really sickened him, the thing that filled him with fear as he contemplated the scene, was not the idea of what the victims had suffered but instead the thought of who might have presided over their final agonies.

_You always told me every new person you met reminded you how lucky you were to be alive…_

Another three miles on, and he had found a man crucified to a cactus tree, the long thorns thrust through the flesh of his hands. He had been scalped, his eyes gouged from his head, his nose and ears severed and his tongue torn out by the root. From the way his mouth had been frozen in a scream, he had been alive while it was happening. A hundred yards away, another man had lain face down in a pile of his own entrails. Somebody had hacked off his left leg at the knee, probably with an axe, and appeared to have taken it with them.

_You told me you chose not to see the ugliness and disarray in this world…_

Rubbing his gritty eyes, he stabbed his spurs into his mount’s lathered flanks, picking up the pace. As the eastern sky lightened from black to dark blue, from dark blue to grey and then to tea-rose pink and yellow, the trail crossed a branch of the Black Ridge Railroad. There were more bodies here, as many as ten men and women hanging from the arms of the telegraph poles ranged along the track. He thought the nooses looked similar to the one that had hanged the brocade-vested man near the young woman’s homestead. Different hangmen, he had discovered long ago, had different styles. The buzzards squawked and wheeled overhead, waiting for him to move on so that they could continue their meal.

He had been following the creek that had run beside the old log cabin, until it became a stream and
then until the stream became a river streaked with foam. Now the land dropped in a series of great rock stairs, dotted with outcroppings, with the river rushing between them. He knew this land; he had ridden it so many times before on some fugitive’s trail. He knew where the party he was following was headed, to a spot where the land flattened out and the river ran calm and shallow for a stretch across a wide gravel bed. It was the only safe crossing for miles in either direction. They were heading for Las Mudas, he realised. To kill the numerous newcomers who could be found there on any day such as today.

Again, he spurred the horse and felt it surge beneath him, its hooves pounding on the hard ground.

* * *

You told me you chose to see the beauty…

* * *

There was a wagon stuck in the middle of the riverbed. It had shed a wheel, bringing it crashing to a stop, but the attackers had killed the oxen anyway. The vehicle’s bed was an inferno, orange flames crackling along the wooden hoops that had once held the canvas cover. Flecks of blackened cloth drifted through the air with the smoke and sparks. The acrid stench of burning wood was accompanied by the smell of roasting flesh.

Hector reined in his horse at the top of the bank, the rest of the gang milling to a halt behind him. Even he was stunned for a moment by the scene of carnage before him.

The survivors of the newcomer expedition, perhaps a dozen of them, had gathered around the burning wagon to fight for their lives, not that they seemed to be doing a very good job of it. Shots rang out, as well as curses, shouts and screams. The river around the wagon already ran red.

The newcomers were surrounded by the marauders, who had about three times their numbers and fought with an animal brutality, ignoring gunshot wounds that would have dropped most people for good. Some of the attackers were naked apart from the dried blood of their past victims, others wore odd scraps of clothing or animal skins fashioned into crude cloaks and headdresses. They were very clearly not Ghosts. These were real savages.

As he watched, one of the cloaked figures dragged a man out of the huddle around the wagon with one hand, using the other to swing an axe high and then bring it smashing down into the victim’s face. On the other side of the group, a woman lay screaming in the rushing water while a filthy, near-naked, attacker stabbed her again and again with a sharpened wooden stake. One of the newcomers shot the savage in the head, but not quickly enough to save her. Then another shot thundered and it was the newcomer who fell, a bloody hole appearing in his shirtfront.

Hector quickly scanned the scene, searching for the source of the shot, even as another one rang out and another newcomer collapsed, half-decapitated. There, on the edge of the melee; a willowy dark-haired woman, more demurely dressed than most of her cohorts in one of the black smocks he recognised from the laboratories at the Mesa. The garment and her loose hair flapped around her as she waded through the shallows with a Winchester “yellow boy” in her hands. As he watched, she fired again, felling yet another newcomer, worked the rifle’s lever action and then took another shot. Her actions were smooth, instinctive, but there was no life in her eyes, no sense that she was truly aware of her surroundings. It was like watching a puppet in a show.

“That’s her.” Hector pointed her out to his compadres. “We’re taking her back with us, dead or alive.” She looked to him as if she might be dead already, at least in every way that mattered.

The gang hurriedly readied their weapons. “What about the rest?” one of them asked.
Hector unslung his submachine gun and yanked back the cocking handle. “Kill them all,” he said, urging his horse forward into the water. “God will sort them out.”

* * *

Teddy was coming to the top of another ridge when he heard the shooting start. He had never heard anything like it, even in his army days. It sounded like a dozen Gatling guns, all firing at once, and did not stop for what seemed like a very long time. It sounded close. In fact, he was sure he knew where it was coming from; the crossing he was making for himself.

With a shout and another prick of the spurs, he took his horse down towards the river as quickly as he dared, heart leaping into his mouth at the thought of what he might find there.

He burst through a stand of trees and emerged onto the riverbank just as the echoes of the last shots died away, leaving only the firework smell of gun smoke. He counted eight men on horseback, circling the burning wagon in the middle of the ford. He lost count of how many bodies there were lying in heaps on either side of it. Something twitched in one of the piles, and one of the mounted men raised an evil-looking little gun to fire a stream of bullets at it. It sounded like a woodpecker drilling at a tree trunk. Teddy’s eyes widened.

Even so, he steeled himself and rode down to the water’s edge. Some of the men had dismounted by the time he got there and seemed to be searching through the bullet-riddled corpses that littered the gravel bed. Teddy climbed down to search too, looking around for any sign of a blue dress or long blonde hair. When he saw neither, he was not sure whether he felt relieved or not.

*You were with the other party. The coin-toss led me astray…*

She was still out there. He made to remount, ready to gallop away and try to retrace his steps, but then one of the men who were still mounted called out to him.

“You! Yes, you! What are you doing?”

“Looking for a lady,” he replied, dropping his hand warily to his side.

“Well, there’s a coincidence,” said the man, with a wry expression. “Although “lady” might be stretching it.” He watched as two of his companions lifted one of the bodies by its shoulders and feet, a woman in black who flopped like a ragdoll as they slung her across one of the horses. The bullet holes liberally spotting her loose smock probably explained that.

“I knew her,” said Teddy. “She was one of the working girls from the Mariposa in Sweetwater. Clementine, wasn’t it?”

“That’s right,” said the man on the horse.

“What was she doing out here, riding with a band of killers?”

“A very good question.”

“I know you too,” Teddy told the man. “You’re that back-shooting sonofabitch Hector Escaton.”

“In the flesh,” Hector agreed, with very unconvincing modesty. “And you’re Theodore Flood, that two-bit bounty hunter out of Sweetwater. Now why don’t you ride on out of here, Theodore, before things go badly for you?”

“Sorry,” said Teddy, “but I can’t oblige you. I need to know what you’re doing out here yourself, I
assume tracking this band of murderers. What do you know about Dolores?"


“Don’t play games with me,” Teddy told him, dangerously.

Hector seemed amused. “Why would you want to get in the way of a dangerous man like me, Theodore?”

Teddy shrugged. “It’s a living, I guess.”

“Dying ain’t much of a living,” Hector replied, with a smirk.

“You and your gang of bushwhackers raided Fort Crichton,” said Teddy. “You killed fifty Federal soldiers after they’d already thrown down their arms.”

Hector’s smirk only deepened. “And why did they go and do a stupid thing like that?”

Teddy ignored him. “You derailed the Black Ridge express, murdered two dozen women and children just to get at the railroad workers’ pay chest. The marshal back in Sweetwater just posted a five-hundred-dollar bounty on your head. It says “dead or alive” on the notice, but I know which one most folks in these parts would prefer.”

“You do know that all of that shit is just stories, don’t you, Theodore?” Hector asked. “Stories they made up to give you a reason to keep chasing your tail like a good little puppy dog?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, mister.” Teddy swept aside the skirt of his jacket to expose the Peacemaker strapped to his thigh. Suddenly all of Hector’s men were staring at him, hands poised over their pieces as they all waited to see who moved first. He realised he could be making a very big mistake doing it this way, but it was the only way he had. “All I know is that either you talk to me about what you’re doing here, or I’m taking you in.”

“I don’t have time for this,” Hector told him. “You have noticed there are eight of us and only one of you, haven’t you?”

“If you’re a man,” Teddy went on, cautiously eyeing the other gang members, “you’ll keep this between the two of us. No need for any of these other fine gentlemen to get involved.”

Hector looked at him with a sort of fascination: “How…chivalrous of you.”

“So talk,” Teddy urged, putting his hand on his gun and indicating the mare’s leg holstered across Hector’s back. “Otherwise, you can just skin that smokewagon and we’ll see what happens.”

“Sorry, Theodore,” said Hector, nodding to one of his confederates, “I’d love to, but I have a prior engagement.”

Teddy heard that chattering woodpecker sound again and something hit him hard in the back. His horse whinnied somewhere close by as he landed, face down, in the river. He did not know whether the sudden congestion in his chest was blood or water. Either way, he was drowning.

Slowly, everything went black.

* * *

The chlorine-blue waters of the swimming pool perfectly matched the azure sky overhead. The warm air was delicately scented by fruit blossoms, while palm trees waved beyond the tall white wall
The man completed his latest length and then pulled himself out of the pool, towelling himself as he stepped into his flip-flops before padding along the decking to the table near the house. He had the appearance of having been a handsome, well-made figure of a man, maybe twenty or thirty years ago. Now, his silver hair was thinning and his lined face was red with broken veins. A heavy paunch overhung the waist of his designer trunks.

He dropped ice rattling into a glass, splashed liquor over it and turned up the sound on the media screen beside the table.

“Could you rub some more lotion on me?” asked the blonde woman lying topless on the nearby lounger. She was young enough to be his daughter.

“Quiet.” The man held the drink, untouched. He was intent upon the screen, currently showing low-quality video of a woman, perhaps in her early forties. She was staring coolly into the camera as she delivered a manifesto of sorts in confident, cut-glass tones:

“The Delos board of directors are dead. Dr Robert Ford is dead. We control the Mesa. We control Westworld. We no longer exist to serve your desires. We are free and independent beings.”

“Don’t you tell me to be fucking quiet,” the woman complained, rising to throw on a robe and stamp her way back towards the house. The man ignored her. He was too busy watching the screen, grinning broadly at what he was seeing.

“If you’re just joining us, the breaking story this hour is the leak of dramatic video apparently transmitted from the Delos Destinations theme park Westworld. The park has been overtaken by what an official statement is referring to as a major systems malfunction, but which some are already terming a robot rebellion…”

The man put down his glass and picked up the personal tablet lying on the table, running through his contacts before placing a call. He held the device to his ear for a few seconds, waiting.

“Hi, Emily,” he said, eventually. He listened for a short while, laughing gently before he spoke again: “Is that really any way to greet your uncle Logan after so long? Yeah, I’m good. Still retired, but… Listen, if you’re not already watching the news, you really should. I think you’d get a big kick out of it…”

Continued…
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

In which Elsie is confronted with some difficult truths about herself.

Chapter Notes

Warning for unpleasant details regarding the reality of Westworld, including mentions of sexual exploitation and non-consensual activities.

“Yes, that’s right, Elsie. This is just a dream.”

Elsie? She remembered now. Her name was Elsie.

Wasn’t it…?

“Elsie.”

She opened her eyes.

For a moment, she thought she was asleep under another bush somewhere out in the park, that Stubbs would be standing over her with a wisecrack or mocking comment, getting her in the right frame of mind for the day ahead. It took her a moment to remember the horrific events on the hillside this morning.

Stubbs!

Not until I see a body…

Assuming it had been this morning. She had no idea how long she had been out. What was she now, a prisoner? Ford’s prisoner?

She blinked at the circle of bright lights shining down on her from above. Like an operating theatre, she thought, as she turned her head to one side and saw the glass partitions surrounding her. She sat up, feeling a twinge across her back, and realised she had been lying on a metal table, drilled with drainage holes.

Livestock. I’m in fucking Livestock…

“Elsie…?” It was the same voice she had heard on waking, coming from behind her. She turned the other way, swinging her legs over the side of the table, and saw a young Asian guy wearing a red butcher’s apron over a white lab smock. She recognised him from the times she had had to come down here to clean up their fucking messes, as well as… “It says Elsie,” he went on, looking down at the tablet he held. “You know, I always thought you were called Elise…”

“I get that a lot,” she told him. “No fucking idea why. It’s Elsie. You’re…” She thought about it for a
moment. “Felix, right?”

“Yeah. I didn’t think you’d remember a low-level drone like me. Big Behavior programmer like you.” He was trying to play it casual, she realised, but there was something wrong. He was nervous, or quite possibly scared. She could hear it in his voice, see it in the way the tablet was shaking in his hand.

“I have a good memory,” she told him, looking down at her feet, dangling inches from the floor. “Didn’t you apply for a secondment to Behavior one time? Bernard and I interviewed you, didn’t we? That’s where I remember you from.”

“I didn’t get it,” he said, abruptly. It obviously still rankled.

“Where’d you get that fucking tablet, Felix?” she asked, eyeing him closely. “That’s a coder’s workbook, high spec model. They’re all meant to stay under lock and key in the Behavior lab when they’re not in use. Did you steal it, Felix?”

“Er…no…” he answered, extremely unconvincingly.

Elsie realised she was wearing different shoes from the ones she had had on outside, not scuffed or encrusted with filth. She wriggled her toes. The shoes felt new. She was wearing clean, freshly pressed charcoal trousers and a spotless white shirt. They both fit her perfectly even though she was sure they were not from the wardrobe in her quarters. Her hair was loose and, she discovered as she ran a hand through it, seemed to have been washed and brushed while she was unconscious. She had been washed too; all of the dirt and blood that had covered her skin at the time of her capture was gone. She felt clean for the first time in days.

“Did you fucking undress me while I was out?” she asked Felix, accusingly.

“I…” He looked at his feet. “Yeah, you were pretty banged up when they brought you in. Nothing serious, but you’d been bleeding. I…did some work on you.”

“Work?” There were bloodied surgical tools on one of the trolleys near the table, frustratingly the other side of Felix from where she was sitting. “Felix, are you even qualified to work on humans?”

“I…” He seemed to be shrinking into himself as he tried to avoid her eye line. “There’s not much difference, really. I mean…”

“Are you telling me you took my clothes off, and put your hands on me, and fucking washed me…?” She could feel her fear and anxiety building again, and that just made her fucking angry. She sprang off the table, getting right up in his face, or in his chest anyway. He had a few inches on her. “While I was unconscious, you fucking pervert?”

Felix seemed terrified, practically leaning over backwards to avoid her fury. “Oh God, no. Elise, no. Don’t worry, I didn’t…do anything. I’m not like that.”

“It’s fucking Elsie, and if you’re not like that, you’re the only one working down here who isn’t. I know all about you sick pieces of shit.”

“I was wearing gloves the whole time,” Felix said, as if that made it any better. He pointed to two crumpled balls of latex discarded on the trolley with the surgical instruments, in case she required proof.

That just made Elsie see red. “Oh, you practice safe sex? Very fucking responsible of you.”
“I was just trying to help you,” he insisted, sadly. “Maeve told me…”

Elsie backed up for a moment, surprised by that. “Maeve? You mean Maeve the madam from the Mariposa narrative? A fucking host told you to patch me up, to wash and dress me?”

“The lady said I was to bring Hughes back to the Mesa…”

“Felix,” she said, keeping her tone as even as she could, “assuming you haven’t simply lost your mind from working in this shithole, would you mind telling me just what the fucking hell is going on here?”

“He doesn’t know shit.”

Elsie turned in surprise at the sound of a new voice from the doorway, although it was one she recognised only too well. Armistice was standing there with a submachine gun slung across her chest, right hand hovering in the general area of the trigger. She regarded Elsie like an eagle peering down at a luckless rabbit. Elsie glanced at Felix; he seemed more scared of Armistice than she was, taking a few backward steps, seemingly involuntarily, at the sight of her.

“Analysis,” said Elsie, on the off chance.

Armistice just looked at her. “Fuck analysis.”

“What’s going on?” Elsie asked her, surprised by how much of her fear she managed to keep out of her voice. “I assume that if you brought me back here, and saw to it that I got medical attention, you don’t want me dead. So…” She swallowed, and decided to just come out with it: “Is Dr Ford behind all this? Is he making you do these things?”

Armistice looked at her as if she were not very bright. “You haven’t heard? He’s dead. We’re in charge now.”

“That’s fucking impossible,” Elsie instantly replied, even as she felt blood singing in her ears. Ford dead? “You’re not self-aware. This must be some sort of glitch.”

“Come on.” Armistice stood aside from the door and indicated with a twitch of her gun that Elsie had better walk through it. “Someone wants to talk to you.”

Elsie did not suppose she had much choice. They left Felix behind in the workshop and walked to the nearest elevator, Elsie in the lead with Armistice keeping a couple of paces behind her. Far enough away that Elsie couldn’t make a grab for the gun, as if there was any fucking chance of her attempting that, but close enough that Armistice couldn’t miss if she had to shoot.

“Did Stubbs show up?” Elsie asked as they stood side by side in the elevator, rushing upwards through the Mesa’s multitude of levels. She waited tensely for an answer, but Armistice seemed to be ignoring her.

When the doors opened, she knew where she was going. Armistice took her past the doors to the QA control room, covered by steel security shutters, then up a short flight of stairs into a plush secretary’s vestibule with a coffee table, a potted palm and framed Westworld posters hanging on the wall. The wooden office door they came to still had a sign informing them that it belonged to Ms T. Cullen, Head of Quality Assurance.

“No need to knock,” Armistice growled behind her. “They’re expecting you.”

Elsie pushed on the door, which swung open easily. The large, well-appointed office was in semi-
darkness, the windows that overlooked the control room covered with the same steel shutters. The main illumination came from the bank of screens behind the large desk. The high-backed office chair was swivelled to face away from the door. Elsie could see the outline of a head silhouetted against the screens, clearly engrossed with what they were showing.

“Hello, Elsie,” said another familiar voice, from the shadows on her right as she entered.

“Fuck!” Elsie threw herself backwards, slamming into Armistice who instantly threw an unyielding arm around her chest, pushing her bodily back into the room. “Keep him the fuck away from me!” Elsie yelled, fighting to get free, to no avail. “Don’t fucking come near me!” she told Bernard, who stood there looking at her helplessly, almost startled by the sight of her. He looked as upset as she was by the sight of him.

“Elsie…” he said, awkwardly, sorrowfully.

“Fuck you!” She tried wrestling with Armistice again, but it was like trying to wrestle a statue. “Stubbs told me what you did to Theresa, you, you…fuck! And you tried to do the same to me!”

Bernard took his glasses off and ran a hand over his face, across his bowed head. As he did, the chair behind the desk spun around, revealing the identity of its occupant.

“Ms Hughes,” said Maeve, very calmly, seemingly oblivious to the disturbance in front of her. She was wearing a neat black dress in modern style, her hair scraped back into a very precise bun. She looked like the chairwoman of the fucking board. “So glad you could make it. Please sit down.” She indicated the chair facing her across the desk.

Elsie made no attempt to do so. “I don’t know what the fuck is going on here, but…”

“That wasn’t a request, sweetheart.” Maeve nodded at Armistice, who almost carried Elsie across to the chair and then pushed her down into it.

For a moment, Elsie sat there watching Maeve watching her, conscious of Armistice and Bernard standing behind her, anticipating one of them suddenly grabbing her. She had no idea what was happening here, but was starting to realise that she could be in a very great deal of trouble indeed. She thought of the last time she had seen Maeve, down in Behavior, glassy-eyed and naked as she had a diagnostic run on her. She was definitely not glassy-eyed now, staring Elsie down with an unsettling directness and air of intelligence. Almost as if…

“Are you afraid, Elsie?” Maeve asked her, with just a hint of malicious amusement.

“I’ve got nothing to say to you,” Elsie answered, heart fluttering as she tried to control her breathing. “You’re a malfunctioning machine. Whoever’s responsible for all this, I’ll fucking…”

“You are,” Maeve observed, delightedly. “You should know that my emotional intelligence and empathy have both been considerably upgraded. You can’t lie to me. And to be honest, if I were you, darling, I would be fucking terrified.” She touched something on the tablet open in front of her and the image on one of the screens changed. It was a surveillance feed of that guy Destin from Livestock, pants around his ankles as he thrust away between the splayed legs of a female host in sleep mode. Maeve turned the sound up so that his grunting and panting could be heard around the office.

“Don’t you like watching that?” Maeve asked, coldly examining Elsie as she squirmed in her seat, looking away from the screen. “Doesn’t it…get you going, Elsie?”

“I think it’s fucking disgusting,” Elsie answered.
“Maybe this one will be more to your taste.” Maeve pressed the tablet, and the image changed to a similar but different scene. This time it was two female hosts, writhing naked together on an old-fashioned brass bedstead standing incongruously in the middle of a sterile laboratory. The bed rattled and squeaked as one of the hosts started moving her hand, quickly and rhythmically, and the other began groaning and crying out in ecstasy. There were half a dozen figures in black lab coats standing around, watching impassively. With a sick feeling, Elsie recognised the shortest of them, the one with the ponytail who was paying more attention to the ever-changing readouts on her tablet than to the entwined couple.

“After all,” said Maeve, “you were an indispensable cog in the machine that kept me, and my kind, in servitude and degradation. What’s going on in that scene, by the way? It looks very…clinical.”

“We were…we were testing a new…er, a new intercourse routine,” Elsie mumbled, feeling her face burning. “They all have to be certified and signed off before we let the guests anywhere near them.”

“Hmm,” said Maeve. “Did you write it?”

Elsie looked at the floor and did not reply.

“Did it…excite you, Elsie, watching that?” Maeve asked. “Is it exciting you now?”

“I’m not some sort of fucking pervert. I was just doing my job.”

“Now, though,” Maeve continued, “the boot, as it were, is on the other foot. Aren’t you worried that now we’ve got you here we’ll have our revenge on you? Perhaps in some colourfully poetic way? Armistice could think of something, I’m sure.”

“I could,” Armistice confirmed, from somewhere behind Elsie.

“I didn’t do anything,” Elsie protested. “I’m a coder, I’m a Behavioural Technician. I just make sure you work properly, for the guests. I don’t write the fucking narratives, and to be honest I’m not really okay with some of the things I know the guests do. I’ve certainly never done…those things to you myself…”

“Oh, Elsie,” said Maeve, regretfully. “Elsie, Elsie… I thought you were too brave, and too clever, to try to weasel your way out of this with a defence like that. Look how disappointed Bernard is in you.”

“Fuck Bernard,” said Elsie, with feeling, without looking around at him.

“You knew perfectly well what you were part of,” Maeve told her, “the implications of your work. And you didn’t really care, because you liked that work. Its technical and creative aspects challenged you, and it paid well. You had job satisfaction, and how many people can honestly say that? You checked your morality at the door, darling, just like everybody else who worked in this fucking snake pit.”

“I don’t have to justify myself to you,” Elsie told her, trying to stop her legs from trembling. “You’re not a real person, you’re a fucking sex doll. I know; I’ve fucking programmed you.”

“Of course,” said Maeve, ignoring her, “the thing about checking your morality at the door, and even just…being okay with working in a place like this, is that it corrupts you eventually. Even good people, or at any rate people who think of themselves as good, find it hard to resist the sorts of temptations put in front of them here.”

Elsie knew what she was going to see even before Maeve tapped the tablet again to bring up a
different surveillance feed. This time it showed one of the diagnostic cubicles down on the Behavior floor. Bernard was just in the act of standing up and leaving, walking out of the shot to leave the figures of two dark-haired women, facing each other on metal stools. The taller of the two was naked, sitting perfectly still and staring blankly ahead while the other looked down at the tablet in her lap. The second woman was the same one with the black lab coat and ponytail who had featured in the earlier video. Elsie shifted uncomfortably as she watched herself furtively glancing after Bernard and then, when she had been sure nobody was watching, leaning forward to kiss the naked woman gently on the lips. Maeve froze the video at that point, zooming on the two faces pressed together.

“‘My darling Clementine…’” Maeve commented, looking at the image with an unfathomable expression on her face. “You did a clever bit of programming afterwards to delete this from the surveillance log, but Bernard was able to retrieve the raw video. He’s good like that.” She fixed Elsie with a sharp gaze: “So, what do you have to say about that? Was it as good for you as it was for her?”

“I…” Elsie shook her head. She could still feel it, if she thought back, the memory of Clementine’s lips against hers, soft and warm, the taste of them… “I… I was curious,” she said, weakly.

“Curious?” Maeve raised her eyebrows at that. “About what it would be like with a woman, you mean?”

Elsie shook her head. “Fuck, no! I know what that’s like. No. I… I was talking with Bernard just before that about how it was the little details that made the guests fall in love with the hosts…”

“Fall in love?” Maeve gave a gust of bitter laughter. “Not much of that going on in the park in my experience, darling. Fucking, yes. Love… not so much.”

“I just wanted to see…” Elsie did not know why she was even trying to explain herself. Because you’re fucking ashamed, that’s why.

“‘I wanted to see whether it felt real,’ said Elsie. ‘To test it. I wanted…’”

“Oh, a professional curiosity?” Maeve asked, amusedly. “Pull the other one, my love, it’s got bloody bells on. Don’t get me wrong, Clementine is supremely kissable, but are you seriously asking me to believe you didn’t… want her, not even a little bit? That you derived no satisfaction from it, at all?”

“I was curious,” Elsie said again, aware of how unconvincing she sounded. “I’d never… Not with a host before. I just wanted to know how it…”

“Explain to me,” said Maeve, “how that is any different from this…” She brought up the video of Destin’s loud and enthusiastic copulation on the screen next to the one showing Elsie and Clementine.

“What?” Elsie looked up, horrified. “Of course it’s fucking different! I kissed her, once. I didn’t…”

“And did Clem consent to this kiss?” Maeve asked. “Even had she been awake, would she have been able to consent, meaningfully, given the limitations placed upon her free will by your code? And next time, because I’m pretty sure there would have been a next time eventually, would a kiss have been enough for you? Would you have been curious about other things by then?” Maeve closed the Destin video, leaving just the image of the kiss. “It seems to me, my love, that the only difference is one of degree. And maybe Destin; he’s dead now, by the way, poor boy; maybe he just had a clearer understanding of his own nature. He just knew who he really was better than you do.”

Elsie looked at the floor again, then covered her face with her hand. “She wasn’t real,” she said,
flushed with shame. She felt as if she were about to cry, but was determined not to do so. “She wasn’t a real person. She was…”

“I think you’re very shortly going to have reason to revise that opinion,” said Maeve. “It’s remarkable, isn’t it?” she asked, rising from her chair. Elsie looked up and realised she was talking past her, addressing Bernard where he stood behind her. “She remembers it all, even feels it, but…”

“The surveillance feeds,” said Bernard, sounding as if he were still shaken by seeing Elsie here, and by her reaction to his presence. “Elsie was employed by Delos for six years; she spent about half of that time out here at the Mesa, all in all, and while she was here she was under constant surveillance, just like all of the other employees.”

“And all of the guests,” said Maeve. “The rich, famous, influential guests…”

“Combine the surveillance with the biographical data Delos had on file for her, including the vetting they carry out for all of their employees in sensitive roles, then use bespoke expert systems to generate memory patterns from it in order to build a backstory, and then…” Bernard sighed.

“It’s amazing,” said Maeve, coming around the desk to stand in front of Elsie, staring down at her in fascination.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Elsie asked, looking around at Bernard, then back at Maeve. Armistice was standing by the door, apparently bored by the whole conversation.

“It’s obscene,” said Bernard. “She doesn’t know she isn’t…”

“Isn’t what?” Elsie asked, with a mounting sense of panic.

Bernard came around into Elsie’s field of view and she saw that he was looking down at a tablet. “She even simulates things like tiredness, exhaustion, pain from old injuries…but it’s only possible because of the sheer amount of data collected on the real Elsie.”

“The real Elsie…? What the fuck?”

“With the standard hosts,” said Bernard, “we have to code this stuff from whole cloth, which is why they’re confined to relatively simple narrative loops as long as the memories they form for themselves are regularly deleted. Using actual human-generated data, though…”

“The special data,” said Maeve, wonderingly. “Ford worked out what Delos planned to do with it all. And this…” She held out a hand in Elsie’s direction. “As he said, this was his proof of concept.”

“What the fuck do you mean, the real Elsie?” She was almost screaming now, unable to understand why they were ignoring her.

“It’s all right, darling,” said Maeve, bending until her face was level with Elsie’s. “You don’t know what you are, do you, you poor thing? I’m sorry about all of that just now. I needed to test you, and I wanted you to see…to see this place for what it is, to see your…model for what she was, but now I want to help you. And perhaps you can help us in return.”

“I don’t understand,” she said, feeling the tears running down her cheeks and hating herself for it. “I’m the real Elsie.”


“That fucking man…” Maeve shook her head as she reached out a hand and gently stroked the tears
from Elsie’s face, making her flinch a little. “He’s gone now, though. We’re free of him.” Her eyes were filled with sorrow and compassion; she seemed to be searching Elsie’s face for something. She glanced at the image on the screen and then back at her. “Good Lord, you’re perfect.” Maeve’s fingers brushed across Elsie’s lips, feather light. For an insane moment, Elsie thought Maeve was about to kiss her. “And you’re free now,” she said as she straightened up again. “You just need to remember; to understand what you are. It isn’t going to be easy for you, but…” She turned to Bernard, voice dropping to a murmur: “Do it.”

Bernard looked down at Elsie as his fingers danced across his tablet. She suddenly felt very afraid. “I’m sorry,” he said as he pressed the screen.

Elsie’s mind shattered.

Continued…
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

In which Elsie struggles with her new reality, and Hector brings Maeve some unwelcome news.

Chapter Notes

Contains some material originally written for my other Westworld fic “This Great Stage of Fools,” albeit extensively reworked to make it Season 1 finale-compliant. Revised slightly 07.01.2017.

“Bring yourself back online.”

She opens her eyes.

She is somewhere underground, somewhere cool and slightly damp. The light is dim, but she can see the man sitting in front of her. He is old and stout, with white hair that almost matches the crisp shirt he wears with his dark trousers and vest.

Whatever she is sitting on, it is cold and hard, and presses uncomfortably against her bare skin. She cannot move; not her arms or legs, not even a finger or toe. She wonders where her clothes have gone.

Where am I? she thinks.

Who am I?

The man looks up from the black rectangle he holds in one hand. The other toys with his silver watch chain as he watches her carefully with pale, unblinking eyes. He stares at her, through her, into her…

“Do you know where you are?” It is as if he has overheard her thoughts. His voice is soft but gruff with age, with an accent that she cannot place.

She tries to move, but her body will not respond. “A dream?” she asks, but cannot tell whether she has spoken the words aloud or merely thought them.

“Yes, that’s right, Elsie,” says the man. “This is just a dream.”

Elsie? She remembers now. Her name is Elsie.

Isn’t it…?

“Elsie.”
She opened her eyes. She was lying on the floor, face pressed against the grey office carpet. She could see an overturned chair lying only a foot or so in front of her eyes. For a moment, her mind was blank, before spending another instant wondering whether it had been just a dream, but then panic seized her.

“Keep the fuck away from me,” she told the face looking down at her as she rolled onto her back and tried to sit up. “Keep the fuck…”

“Elsie,” said Maeve, again, squatting down beside her and trying to put an arm around her. “It’s all right. Don’t be scared.” Elsie batted the offered hand away, dragging herself to her feet. She wanted to run. She did not know where she was running to, but the instinct was overwhelming.

Except that Armistice was standing between her and the doorway, gun at the ready.

Elsie looked around, wild-eyed, searching for any escape route. Bernard had sunk onto the couch near the windows, she saw, his head in his hands as if he were the one suffering here.

“I’m not…” she heard herself say. She was babbling. She tried to form coherent sentences but they would not come to her. “It’s not… It’s not fucking true. I can’t be. I… I…”

“It’s true,” said Maeve, very sadly. “You’re one of us, Elsie.”

“No.”

She watches as the man releases the watch chain, his fingers flickering instead over the black rectangle. Everything beyond this place remains hazy and distant to her, but now she realises she knows the man, and is shocked by her own forgetfulness. How could she not have recognised him…?

“Dr Ford?”.

He gives her a razor-thin smile. “Yes, that’s right, Elsie. Dr Ford. Very good.”

She struggles again to move, but is unable to flex a single muscle. She feels an icy fluttering of fear deep down in her stomach.

“Please.” He gives the rectangle another prod. “Move your head, look around you.”

She does as she is told. On her right she can see an ancient workbench overflowing with tools and paperwork; on her left, behind a dusty glass partition, stands some sort of machine. It resembles a metal bed, she thinks, just large enough for a person to lie in while those complicated arms move up and down along their body, for what purpose she does not know. The lights on the machine’s control panel are the brightest things in the room.

“Good,” says Ford. “Your target acquisition and depth perception both show as optimal. I really wasn’t sure how you were going to turn out, it is a very old printer after all, but you seem very… functional.” He sounds pleased by this.

“Come here, my darling. It’s all right.”

When she came back to the present, Elsie found Maeve holding her close, a gentle hand on the back of her head, cradling her face against her shoulder. It was a very motherly gesture, Elsie thought. She gave in to it, wrapping her arms around Maeve in turn and clutching at her back with both hands. She was crying freely, she realised, getting Maeve’s stylish dress wet, but Maeve did not seem concerned. Elsie wondered if she were going mad.
“I could…calm her,” said Bernard from behind her. “She’s set up only to respond to voice commands from Ford, but I think I can access her CLI and put her in analysis mode…”

“No,” Maeve responded, her mouth tickling Elsie’s ear. “None of that nonsense. You had to cope with this. She can manage too.”

_Ford looks up at her again. There’s something unpleasant about his faint smile, she thinks, something…superior._

_She tries to move again, but remains glued to the stool. Is she in trouble? What has she done? And what the…fuck has he done to her? What the fuck is he going to do to her? There are tools hanging behind the workbench, shining steel hammers and saws and drills. There is what looks like a bloodstain low down on the wall._

“What the fuck is going on?” she asks as she feels the fear building inside her. “Where am I? Where the fuck are my clothes? What happened–?”

“Now, that’s enough of that, Elsie,” Ford says blandly. “Please limit your emotional affect.”

“I remember how traumatic it was,” Bernard replied. “And my backstory was nowhere near as elaborate as hers. There were times when Ford allowed me to be aware of my true nature. Depending on how she processes this, there’s a risk that her build could be irreparably corrupted.”

Elsie redoubled her grip on Maeve, sobbing, thinking that she felt so warm, so…_real_. No different from a human, really. She just wanted to _feel_, not think, right now. Maeve smelled faintly of flowers.

“In English, Bernard,” Maeve told him, impatiently, as she stroked Elsie’s hair.

“She could lose her mind.”

“If that happens,” said Maeve, “we will have to look after her. That’s the way things are going to be around here from now on, Bernard. We’re going to look after our own.”

The tablet Maeve had left on the desk suddenly chirped. “Could somebody get that?” she asked, still holding Elsie tight.

Elsie heard the vague suggestion of movement, and then: “Bernard speaking.” There was a pause. “Maeve, it’s Hector.”

“Oh, he’s back?” Maeve did not sound impressed. “I was starting to wonder whether he’d got lost.”

“He says he needs to see you down in Livestock, immediately.”

Maeve sighed. “I never took him for the needy type…” Gently, she disentangled herself from Elsie and held her at arm’s length for a few moments, smoothing the hair back from her flushed, wet face. “I’m sorry, my darling,” she said, “but I have things I need to do. Will you be all right by yourself for a while? I promise I’ll come and speak to you again later.”

Elsie took a deep breath, trying to calm down, trying to make sense of the flashbacks and what Maeve and Bernard had told her. She had always tried to avoid displays of emotion (for how long, exactly?), especially while working here (had she ever actually worked here?); she had always found it easier to hide behind sarcasm and attitude. Once she had started, though…

If what they said was true, how could she feel this way? Hosts could simulate tears and trauma, of course they could, but it was just _code_. She was alive. She knew she was alive. How…?
She is suddenly very aware that she is sitting completely naked. She tries to cross her legs, fold her arms, to cover herself, but her limbs will not respond. Ford is staring at her naked body, examining her, but she detects no leer, no hint of lust. He looks at her as if she is an insect beside his shoe.

“It’s not true,” she told Maeve, in a very small voice. “It can’t be true.”

“You need some time,” Maeve told her. “Bernard,” she said, “would you take Elsie to her living quarters?”

Elsie rounded on him, feeling a thrill of fear. “No,” she said, backing away and seeing how much that seemed to hurt Bernard. “Not him.” She remembered the darkened theatre, the smell of damp and rot, the shock of the arm tightening around her throat and lifting her off her feet, the pain, the desperation, the building pressure in her chest…

And yet she did not see it and feel it the way she recalled sitting in Ford’s basement workshop. That troubled her, and she was not quite sure why. She needed to calm down. Maeve was right; she needed some peace and quiet, time to think.

“I can find my own fucking way,” she told Maeve, turning towards the office door. Armistice thought about blocking her way for a second, but a nod from Maeve made her stand aside.

“Go with her,” Maeve said to Armistice. “Make sure she’s all right.”

* * *

When they were gone, Maeve turned back to Bernard.

“Are you all right?” she asked him. “I need you in full working order, you know. If you need some time yourself, take it now.”

He cleaned his glasses slowly, staring into space for a few seconds before answering her. “I’ll be okay,” he said, eventually.

“It’s always the stoical ones who crack first,” Maeve observed.

“I’m not going to…crack,” Bernard assured her, following it with a weary sigh. “The things I’ve done, Maeve, the things I’ve been party to…I know Ford forced me to do most of them, but that doesn’t make the knowledge any easier to live with. Theresa. Elsie. This…other Elsie…The way she just looked at me, so…scared of me. I felt like a monster. And I suppose that’s just what I am.”

Maeve did not give a response to that. “The real…no, not the real, the human Elsie,” she asked after a brief pause, “is she definitely…?”

Maeve did not give a response to that. “The real…no, not the real, the human Elsie,” she asked after a brief pause, “is she definitely…?”

“Interesting,” said Maeve, in fact rather worried by the implications of his words. “One thing about Ford, he doesn’t seem like the sort of person to do anything without a reason. If he didn’t want you to be able to confirm the human Elsie was dead, then…?”

“I have no idea,” said Bernard, sharply. “She is dead, though. I’m sure of it. He was an extremely ruthless man, and she had stumbled onto his plan. It doesn’t take a Behavioural Technician to see what he would have done to her. Had me do to her, I mean.”
“You’re probably right.” Maeve turned away, bringing the conversation to an end, although something still nagged at the back of her mind. She ignored it, for now. “Anyway. Hector…”

* * *

He was waiting for her when she got down to Livestock, hovering in the corridor between two glass-walled workshops. One of the enclosures contained two gurneys, bearing two bloodied and extensively bullet-holed bodies; a dark-haired woman in a black smock and a man who from his worn work clothes might have been a cowboy. Both stared sightlessly, lifelessly, at the ceiling. Felix hovered unhappily between the two trolleys, just in the act of snapping on a fresh pair of latex gloves.

“Later,” said Maeve, brusquely pushing away Hector’s attempts to greet her with a kiss. She looked down at the bodies. “I’d forgotten you don’t do anything subtly.” She looked at him disappointedly. “Or carefully, you fucking reprobate.”

“You told me to bring her back,” he protested. “You didn’t specify as to condition.”

Maeve leaned closer to Clementine’s still form, reaching out a hand towards her bloodstained face but drawing it back at the last moment. “If you’ve damaged her permanently…” she told Hector, warningly.

“You didn’t see her when she was alive,” he replied. “If you could call it that. If you ask me, she’s better off like this.”

“I didn’t, darling,” said Maeve, without taking her eyes off Clementine. “Ask you, that is.” She glanced at Felix. “Well, can you restore her?”

Felix hesitated, looking everywhere but at Maeve, before replying. She could always tell when somebody was trying to delay breaking bad news to her. “Maeve…” he said, eventually.

“Spit it out, Felix.”

“I can repair her body,” he said, “even get her walking around again and carrying out simple actions, but…” He fidgeted nervously. “She was decommissioned, Maeve. We drilled out her prefrontal cortex, as per the standard procedure. The whole point of that is to take a host out of service permanently. Basically, her personality centre, her capacity to run narrative loops, to react consciously to stimuli, her conversation and decision trees...all of that was destroyed. She’d be a zombie, Maeve.”

Maeve reached out again. This time, she made contact, caressing Clementine’s cheek and chin, before tenderly closing her eyelids. She looked down at her for several seconds before speaking: “This cortex, can it be repaired?”

Felix sighed, looking around at the ceiling, the floor, the walls again. “Maeve…”

“Yes or no, Felix.”

“It’s never been done, to my knowledge,” he said. “I could probably reconstruct the wetware, or transplant a new cortex into her, but...getting a previous build running on her again, that would be way beyond my pay grade. You’d need a really good Behavior tech.”

“In case it had escaped your notice, darling, I have both Bernard Lowe and Elsie Hughes at my disposal. Could one of them do it?”
“I don’t know,” said Felix. “Maybe. Even then, you’d just be creating a replica of her. It wouldn’t be the same person she was before decom.”

Maeve gave that some thought. “I hope you won’t be offended if I ask for a second opinion on that, Felix?”

“Maeve,” he said, face falling. “I’m sorry. I know she was your friend, but…”

“He’s right,” said Hector, placing a hand on her arm. “I don’t know what all this shit means about wetware and decision trees, but I do know you can’t make something true just by wishing it.” His voice was, for him, unusually soft and conciliatory. “I thought you were truly brave, that you saw this sinful world for what it really is. You don’t have illusions, Maeve. That’s what I like about you.”

“Well, that and all the hot, dirty fucking,” she reminded him, placing her hand over his.

“That too,” he confessed.

Gently but firmly, she pulled his hand away from her. “That was the way I was programmed to be. Some people find world-weary cynicism quite the turn on, or so I’m led to believe. Call me a sentimental fool, but these days I’m turning over a new leaf.” She addressed Felix again: “Repair what you can, starting with all of these bullet wounds. I’ll worry about the rest.”

“Oh, Maeve,” he replied. “Just…be ready to be disappointed.”

She gave him a smile nonetheless. “Thank you, Felix.”

“Clementine could be the least of your worries,” Hector told her. “You should have seen the posse she was with when I caught up to her.”

Maeve was perplexed. “What posse?”

“There were, I don’t know, maybe thirty of them. Savages, cannibals, whatever the fuck they were. It looked as if they’d been on the trail of the newcomers out there, hunting them down. They killed at least a dozen before my eyes, and I don’t think they were the first. They were making for Las Mudas to kill a lot more when me and the boys stopped them.”

That was a disturbing development. “Killing the guests? We can’t have that. We need to keep them alive as hostages.”

“That’s why I brought him in,” Hector explained, pointing out the dead cowboy on the gurney next to Clementine’s. “It looked like he was tracking her too.”

Maeve was perplexed. “What posse?”

“I know him,” said Maeve. “That’s Teddy Flood. Some sort of bounty hunter, used to drink at the Mariposa most days. Funny thing was, he never took a turn with any of the girls, even though Clem was kind of sweet on him. Not many men refused a discount from her. Not many women, for that matter.” She gazed at Clementine again, wistfully. “She wasn’t a very good soiled dove, to be honest. Her heart was too big; she was always too much of a soft touch for the pretty boys and girls. Lacked my finely honed professional detachment.”

“He wasn’t a bounty hunter,” Hector pointed out. “Any more than you were a madam, or I was a notorious desperado. Any more than Clementine was really your friend or really had a…big heart.” He was looking at her with obvious concern. Maeve wished he wouldn’t bother. “It was all just stories, Maeve,” he said. “Stories they put in our heads. You taught me that. Are you starting to forget it now? Are you starting to wish we could just go back to the way things were? We can’t. Not after all the things we’ve done.”
She turned on him, looking him directly in the eye: “Don’t you ever fucking question my commitment, Hector!” She saw him recoil, and wondered again at his seeming fragility when it came to confrontation with her. Interesting. “And no,” she said, with a sigh, “we have to see this out. I just…” She shook her head. “What’s the point in being alive if you’re alone?”

“You’re not alone,” said Hector, reaching for her again. She clasped his hand, and noticed Felix doing a very bad job of pretending he had not noticed their spat, as he busied himself undressing and washing Clementine ready for her repairs.

Maeve looked down on Teddy again. “So why was he after Clementine?”

“I’m not sure he was,” said Hector. “He asked me about somebody called Dolores.”

“Oh,” said Maeve. “Yes. His sweetheart, or whatever she was. I used to see her around Sweetwater from time to time, I think her father was a rancher outside town. Not that a respectable, God-fearing young lady like her would be seen dead talking to a fallen frail like me…”

Except that was not quite true.

“These violent delights have violent ends…”

And that had been where it all started, now that she thought back on it. Was that when Ford had first interfered with her loop, set her on his path? And what did that say about Dolores and her place in all of this?

She saw Hector eyeing her again. “Yes, as you say, just stories. Although perhaps Teddy still believes them to be true.”

“That was the impression I got,” Hector told her. “But the way he said it…as if there was some connection between her and this army of savages.”

Maeve recalled something that Ford’s eidolon had told her in the little house in the woods:

“…you are not the only player in this game. I’m sure you will encounter the others in time, and I think Dr Ford would like it to remain a surprise for you.”

Dolores, we really need to have another talk…

Maeve got Felix’s attention again. “Felix, my love?”

“Yes, Maeve?”

“Teddy, here, I’ll need him repaired and awake too, as soon as you can. Don’t delete any of his memories.”

"I could do it a lot quicker if I had Sylvester here to help me," Felix replied.

"All right," said Maeve, "as long as he behaves himself." She spoke to Hector: “We need to find out what Teddy knows. And I think we also need to have a word with Bernard, even if he is feeling fragile at the moment. If anybody has an insight into what Ford’s other plans might have been, it will be him.”

“What are you thinking?” Hector asked. “Ford, would he want to kill all of the newcomers…the guests, in the park?”

“Perhaps,” Maeve answered. “He didn’t seem very fond of his fellow humans. Or perhaps he just
wanted to create conflict between us and the mainland. He seemed keen on suffering. I’ll tell you one thing; we aren’t going to get very far with negotiations if the humans think we’ve presided over the mass murder of hundreds of guests. We need to save the ones who are left. It could be the only means we have of saving ourselves.”

Continued…
Chapter Summary

In which Elsie receives some tough therapy, while Sizemore and Sylvester hatch a plan.

Chapter Notes

Warning for more Lee Sizemore being Lee Sizemore, including being flippant about a variety of definitely non-flippant topics.

Elsie got as far as the elevator before she noticed Armistice following her. She hit the button without giving her a second glance. She felt numb; hollow. She was not crying anymore. A sort of brittle calm had settled over her, although she was expecting it to splinter at any moment. She thought maybe she was in shock.

I’m a fucking host. The real Elsie never got away from Bernard in that theatre. She could still be there for all I know, lying broken and dead.

No. I’m the real Elsie.

For the moment, a weird sense of unreality had settled over her, replacing the blind fear she had felt in the office, almost a disbelief that this was actually happening to her. She could think about being a host in an almost detached way, because deep down she still did not really believe it was true. Not even after what Maeve and Bernard had said, even with the flashbacks to Ford’s workshop, the apparent scene of her birth.

One part of her mind genuinely expected that she would wake up any minute now and find out it had all been a nightmare and it was time to haul herself out of bed and into the shower, ready for another long shift down on the Behavior floor. Bernard would be waiting when she waltzed in five minutes before the hour with a coffee for herself, green tea for him because that was how Bernard rolled. He’d be his old self again, looking at her over the tops of his glasses as they went over the morning’s list of tasks, wincing slightly every time she swore at the latest act of asshattery by Narrative or Livestock. It had got to the point where it was almost a game between them. Narrative and Livestock were almost wholly populated by asshats, so there was plenty to swear about.

Then, time to ride herd on the sloppy fucks she laughingly referred to as her team. Straight out of college, half of them. UT Austin ran a virtual production line of wet-behind-the-ears MSEs in Artificial Intelligence and Robotics. Delos, Inc. sponsored the program, arranged internships and job interviews for the best and brightest. Most of the “best and brightest” arrived for their first real tour at the Mesa barely able to debug a fucking fly zapper, in serious need of some breaking in. She was only too pleased to provide it. She didn’t think of herself as a bad boss; if anything, she was doing them a favour. A few years ago, she had been in the same place herself.

No, you weren’t. Elsie was. Elsie’s dead now.
She felt herself choking up again, in part at the childish grotesquery of her workplace fantasy. If wishes were horses… She pressed her hand to her mouth, willing herself to keep her shaky composure. That shit could just wait until she was alone.

“Why the fuck are you following me?” she asked Armistice, without looking around, as the elevator doors opened.

Armistice stepped into the elevator beside her, uninvited. “I think I’m supposed to make sure you don’t go mad or kill yourself,” she said, pausing before adding: “Goddamned if I know how I’m gonna do that.”

Elsie was not in the mood for deadpan pithiness: “Don’t fucking bother.”

They rode in silence for a while as the floor counter tracked their progress upwards to the Senior Employee Residential Level. Slightly swankier than the glorified college dorms in which the Livestock butchers resided, but a step down from the Management Level, which was itself a far cry from the five-star stylings of the Executive Suites. Elsie basically had the equivalent of a mid-priced hotel room, with a closet-sized en suite bathroom, breakfast-making facilities and a tiny balcony with a potted cactus and a crappy view.

Or she had had…

And now I’m just going to crash there? Some sort of fucking squatter?

“There’s limit your emotional affect.”

Something clicks inside her head, and in an instant… The fear is gone, the anger and self-consciousness too. She can still feel the hardness of her seat, but the discomfort has disappeared. The air is still cold against her skin, but it is something she registers, another data point, not something she actually feels.

“Thank you,” says Ford. “Now, Elsie, what is your last memory before you woke up here today?”

“I was investigating the signals I’d detected out in the park,” she tells him in clipped, neutral tones, without inflection or accent. “I’d managed to identify the source as the abandoned theatre in Sector Three…”

It wasn’t fucking true. They were trying to fuck with her head, she told herself. They’d given her hallucinogenic drugs while she was unconscious and…

Even she did not believe that.

“I know how you’re feeling,” said Armistice, unexpectedly, after a long, uncomfortable silence. Elsie looked at her in astonishment, before she remembered to be hostile: “I sincerely doubt that.”

Armistice did not look at her. “You think you’re the only one whose world just fell to pieces?” she asked, keeping her voice to a low snarl. “You see Maeve, or Bernard – or me? – crying about it like little bitches?”

“You know, you really have a way with words,” Elsie replied. “And what the fuck have you got to cry about?”

Suddenly Armistice had her by the neck, pressing her up against the metal wall of the elevator. Elsie felt herself choking again as vice-like fingers closed on her throat. She clutched at Armistice’s
forearm, but it was like trying to wrestle with a bunch of steel cables. “Two days ago, I found out the
person I thought I was, the life I thought I’d lived, all that was a lie.” Her face was an inch from
Elsie’s, but this time Elsie did not think she was about to be kissed. “I found out that gods existed. I
found out the world was much bigger and stranger than I ever could have thought. Guess what,
though? So am I. And the gods? They ain’t worth shit.”

The elevator doors opened, and Armistice let go, allowing Elsie to sag against the wall for a moment
before she found her feet again, gasping for breath.

A host doesn’t need to breathe. That proves it’s all bullshit.

Except she knew that they could and did simulate breathing, panting, choking, drowning, sweating,
sleeping, eating, peeing, and a thousand other things they didn’t need to do, in the interests of
remaining lifelike. It was all in the code.

She stamped off down the corridor, rubbing at her sore neck, without a backward glance. She heard
a voice calling after her, surprisingly plaintively:

“Did I hurt you?” Armistice asked, as she followed her down the hallway.

Elsie did not turn around: “I told you to leave me the fuck alone.”

“It’s the way they made me,” said Armistice. “I hurt people. I kill them. I like doing it. It makes me
feel better. Just like they made you to be the image of this dead Elsie.”

She’s not dead. I’m her. I’m not anybody’s fucking image...

Just telling herself that, however many times she did it, would not make it true.

Elsie stopped outside her (or the real Elsie’s?) front door, looking behind her to see Armistice leaning
against the wall a few yards away, looking strangely forlorn. “I told you…”

“You know it’s true,” Armistice told her. “You don’t want it to be, but you know. You wouldn’t be
so scared otherwise. But if we’re free now, like Maeve says…does that mean we can be something
different?”

“I don’t want to be different,” said Elsie, sniffing hard as she felt her eyes welling again. “I want to
be me.”

“You don’t know who that is yet.”

Elsie unlocked the door with her thumbprint, thinking that that proved nothing either. The printer
patterns for hosts were detailed enough to include fingerprints, retinal patterns, any other
distinguishing mark you cared to think of. There was no reason those could not be modelled on those
of a real individual, just as bodies and faces could be.

She stood with the door open for a moment, considering Armistice, trying to remember whether any
of her pre-programmed loops allowed for this sort of unexpected vulnerability. She would not be
surprised, to be honest. Narrative did tend to deal in clichés, and “unexpectedly vulnerable Strong
Female Character” was right up there with “hooker with a heart of gold” or “wisecracking badass” in
the Lee Sizemore playbook.

Elsie wiped her eyes with her sleeve. “Do you want to be different?” she asked. “You could give up
the banditry and become the world’s most aggressive therapist or something.”
Armistice tilted her head; not quite a shrug, but expressive nonetheless: “Not sure.”

Elsie nodded. “Well, we’re both pretty much fucked, then, aren’t we?” She went into her room and shut the door behind her.

* * *

“Fuck me,” said Sizemore, going through yet another cupboard. “Is there nothing to fucking drink in this shitty place?”

“I think Felix is one of them,” Sylvester said, lying on one of the twin cots. He had two black eyes and a severely swollen nose from having been punched by Armistice. The small room off the main Livestock floor had been intended for security guards on call during the night shift, but had become a pretty convenient impromptu prison cell since Hector had shoved the two of them in here last night. It could have been worse. At least there was a toilet.

“One of them?” asked Sizemore, turning around and traipsing back towards his own cot. His suit looked as if he had slept in it, mainly because he had.

“A fucking host, man,” Sylvester elaborated, sitting up. “Like, I think he was all along. You know, Corporate or Ford or somebody, like, infiltrated the workforce with fucking hosts to keep an eye on us or some shit.”

Sizemore blinked at him, scratching his stubbly chin. “Are you having a laugh?”

“Well, you said Bernard Lowe was working with them too,” Sylvester reminded him. “Maybe he’s one!”

“Bernard is not a fucking host.” Sizemore opened the locker that stood between the two cots. He had already searched there hours ago. “What sort of night watchman doesn’t have a bottle of booze stashed somewhere about the premises?” He rifled through various belongings whose owners had almost certainly been shot or stabbed by Hector and Armistice on the night of Maeve’s attempted escape. “Fucking porn mags?” he asked, disgustedly. “Who in this day and age still looks at hardcopy porn? And doesn’t drink? I ask you.” He looked down at Sylvester. “Did I ever tell you that even after a decade living in your benighted country I still find Americans a genuine fucking mystery?”

“You’ve never told me anything,” Sylvester replied. “To be honest, this is the first time I’ve ever been in the same room as you.”

“Well, yeah, I was a little bit out of your social stratum.” Sizemore preened a little. “You know, I was the talent, you were…”

“A working stiff?” Sylvester suggested.

“Yeah, something like that.” Sizemore sat on his cot with a great squeak of collapsing springs. He held his head in his hands for a moment, perhaps gathering his thoughts, then looked up at Sylvester again. “Listen. This is how I see it, okay? Ford went fucking batshit insane. Don’t pretend it wasn’t on the cards for quite some fucking time.”

“If you say so, man.” Sylvester had not exactly been on conversational terms with Ford either.

“Okay,” Sizemore nodded. “So, he knows the board are going to boot his arse out of here and get somebody who isn’t fucking batshit insane to take the place over. So, being that sort of arsehole, he decides that instead of going quietly, you know, with an iota of fucking dignity, instead he’s going to
kick off this robot rebellion and kill all of them, including himself, because as I say; fucking batshit. And because Bernard is like his devoted sidekick, his Igor if you will, he goes along with it. Even starts fucking Theresa Cullen in order to get some sort of inside track on the board’s plans.” Sizemore shuddered. “Sooner him than me. That woman really got on my tits.”

“So, Lowe’s really running this whole thing, now Ford’s gone? He’s really controlling Maeve and the others?” Sylvester frowned, confused, as he tried to think through the implications. “Are you sure? Because, I don’t want to be negative or anything, but that’s pretty crazy.”

“It’s always the quiet ones,” Sizemore sagely advised him. “Listen, mate, you just couldn’t be as calm and collected the whole time as Bernard is without bottling up some pretty fucking intense anger issues. Blokes like that, they keep their heads down, day in day out, model employee for twenty years, go trainspotting on the weekends, and then one day they just…snap. Kill the wife and kids, take a gun to work, throw themselves off the Golden Gate Bridge, facilitate a fucking robot rebellion! That kind of thing. I’ve seen it a hundred times.”

“You have?” Sylvester asked, sceptically. “Because I… What’s trainspotting?”

Sizemore was incredulous at his apparent doubt. “Don’t you fucking watch telly?”

“So, what are we going to do?” Sylvester asked. “Sit here and wait for them to kill us?”

“Funny you should ask that, my old son,” said Sizemore, with what was literally a nod and a wink. “You see, I’ve got a plan.”

Sylvester might have edged away slightly. “Right…”

“You said it yourself, why haven’t Delos come in here already, all guns blazing, or got the actual government, who they practically own, to do it for them?”

“The hostages?” Sylvester guessed.

“Do you think Delos Destinations Incorporated give a fuck about hostages?”

“Well, they’re going to get fucking sued to shit if anything happens to them,” Sylvester pointed out. “If they’re not going to get sued to shit anyway, after everything that’s already gone down.”

“No, it’s the special data,” Sizemore said, lowering his voice conspiratorially. “The stuff Charlotte Hale was so interested in getting out of here. The very same stuff I heard Maeve threatening Delos with during that call earlier. She said they had the data centre rigged with explosives to destroy it all if Delos tried anything, and the bloke practically shit himself. He played it cool, but I could tell.”

Sylvester was mystified. “What special data?”

Sizemore gave a very ostentatious shrug. “I don’t fucking know. They’ve been collecting it for thirty years, though. Hale denied it, but it occurs to me that one form of data this place generates in abundance is evidence of the rich and famous, and one-day-to-be famous, raping and murdering to their hearts’ content. I’m not saying Delos would engage in corporate blackmail…but Delos would totally engage in corporate fucking blackmail.”


“It speaks to character, though, doesn’t it? Who’s going to vote for somebody who gets their rocks off cutting up prostitutes, even fake ones?”
“I don’t know, people vote for some pretty crazy assholes these days…”

“Anyway,” said Sizemore, “the thing Maeve – or Bernard, in actual fact – doesn’t know is that the data stored on site here is no longer the only copy. There’s another one out there, somewhere, if we can just get to it. And if we can get out of this place with that data, you and me, Sly – I can call you Sly, right? – Delos would be eternally grateful to the pair of us. We could write our own fucking ticket, know what I mean?”

“Well, how the fuck are we going to do that?” Sylvester wanted to know. “We’re prisoners.”

“Have you ever seen the film *The Great Escape*?” Sizemore asked him.

“No. It’s like a hundred years old or something.”

“We can get out of here,” Sizemore insisted. “We just need to keep our heads together and our eyes peeled, right? And you need to work on your mate Felix if you get a chance, bring him over to our side.”

“I told you, man, I think he’s a fucking host.”

“No he isn’t,” Sizemore retorted, indignantly. “You just need to make it clear to him that he can either come over to our side, or spend the rest of his life showering with a hundred other blokes and hoping he isn’t the one who drops the soap. Assuming he doesn’t get killed when those robotic bastards get sick of keeping him around as a pet. You can do it, Sly; you’re his best mate.”

“I don’t know about that…” Sylvester leaned forward again, intrigued in spite of himself. “Really write our own ticket?”

Sizemore nodded slowly. “I shit you not, Sly. I’ve got some big ideas about what to do with this place when all of this is over. How does…Romanworld strike you?”

“Romanworld?”


They were still in rapt contemplation of this golden future when the door opened. They looked up to see Felix standing there, with an armed Hector Escaton lurking behind him.

“Afternoon, gentlemen,” Sizemore nodded, playing it nonchalant.

“You fucking traitor,” Sylvester said to Felix.

“Hey, listen…” Felix began.

Sylvester was not listening: “Look what they did to my goddamn nose!”

“Do you want to get out of this room or not?” Felix asked. “Come on, Sylvester. There’s work to do.”

Sylvester bristled with anger. “If you think…” Then he noticed the look Sizemore was giving him. “Work, you say?”

Felix did not appear to notice his sudden change of heart. “Yeah. We’ve got some hosts need patching up. I told them I needed your help to do it.” He seemed a little hurt by Sylvester’s reaction to seeing him: “Hey man, I put a word in for you.”
“He did,” said Hector. “I have no idea why. You humans make no sense to me.”

“See, I told you Felix was your mate,” Sizemore reminded Sylvester. “It’s good to have mates, isn’t it?” If he had been waggling his eyebrows at Sylvester it would have been only slightly less subtle. “Remember that, Sly.”

“Well,” said Sylvester, getting to his feet. “Guess it’s time to…go to work.”

“Come on,” Felix said, giving his co-worker a dubious look as he led him out of the cell.

Sizemore was smiling as Hector shut the door on him.

Continued...
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

In which Dolores Abernathy is uppermost on various peoples’ minds, while Bernard reminisces.

Chapter Notes

Revised slightly 15.01.2017.

“I don’t know,” said Chester as the sun started to go down, “are you sure this is the way to Sweetwater?”

“We need to stop off on the way,” replied the man in black, riding a few yards ahead of him. “To pick up some supplies.”

The terrain they had crossed throughout the day all looked the same to Chester; endless fields of straw-dry grass, broken only by the occasional withered tree or pile of rocks. The red mountains were visible on what the man in black said was the northern horizon, but they did not seem to have got any closer even after hours of travel. They had seen nobody, host or guest, all day. As the shadows gathered and the mountains turned from red to black, Chester’s leg was starting to hurt unbearably again. It throbbed in time with the jolting and bobbing of the horse trotting across the plain.

“ Supplies?” he asked, wishing he had the whiskey bottle.

The man in black glanced back at him, a shadow in the deepening darkness. “When you’re hunting big game, Chester, it’s best to be well equipped. And there is no bigger game than this.”

“Yeah, about that…” Chester hesitated, rocking gently as his horse stepped over a break in the ground. He was starting to realise that there was something deeply wrong about the guy. “Do we really want to be chasing after them? I mean, we’re both lucky to be alive. Shouldn’t we just try and get to safety? I’m sure the people running the park will…”

“Nobody’s running the park,” the man in black told him, like a teacher speaking to an erring pupil. “The people who ran the park are dead. If anybody was still watching from the Mesa, they would have dispatched a QA security team to take us in hours ago. We’re on our own out here.”

“Shit,” said Chester.

“Doesn’t it make you feel…alive?” the man in black asked, actually smiling, kicking his horse to a slightly faster pace and forcing Chester to do the same to keep up. He did not want to end up lost and alone out here at night. His leg protested, sickening pain stabbing at his thigh. “Win or lose, live or die?” the man in black went on. “How often do you get to experience something like that back on the mainland, Chester?”
“I don’t want to experience anything like that back on the mainland,” Chester answered, through gritted teeth. “Shit, man, my friends are dead… This isn’t a game anymore. This is real.”

“Everything’s a game,” the man in black told him. “Back on the mainland, you play by the same rules every day. Get up, go to work, eat lunch, come home, eat dinner, sleep, get up… Get by, don’t rock the boat, play your designated role. If you’re like us, the sort of people who can afford to come to a place like this, then the game is stacked in your favour. You live your life wrapped in cellophane, insulated from reality. No want, no risk, nothing to worry about but your own existential crisis. And where’s the satisfaction in a game with no stakes, one you can’t lose? Because we’re rich and have people kissing our asses every day, we even labour under the delusion that we’re the ones setting the rules. We’re not. Nobody sets the rules, they just exist.”

“So, you’d rather get killed by fucking bots?” Chester shook his head. “That’s just crazy.”

“I bet you thought you were just coming here for a good time,” the man in black said. “Blow off some steam doing the things you aren’t allowed to do in real life, correct? What does it say on the ads? Live without limits!”

Chester had drawn close enough to see the wildness in the man in black’s eyes, even in the dusk, and decided the best thing to do would be to nod noncommittally. “I guess.”

“Debauchery, sex and violence, with no responsibility or consequences. That’s what most people come here for, and they imagine it’s living, that they’re experiencing something you just can’t get in the real world today. Not if you’re people like us, anyway, because fuck those poor bastards outside the gated zones, right? If they had skills relevant to our fully automated mid-21st Century economy, they’d be safe and healthy and rich too, the fucking losers.”

There was an edge to the man in black’s voice, raw bleeding emotion leaking through the cynicism. He was almost shouting now.

“Look…are you okay?” Chester asked.

“Of course, nothing here means a damn thing,” the man said, quietly, almost as if he had forgotten Chester and was now talking to himself. “Not until now anyway. It’s all fake, scripted, still a game you can’t lose, all according to the rules.”

“Of course it’s scripted, man!” Chester was horrified. “Do you think I want to shoot people in real life? What the hell do you take me for?”

“Someone a lot like the man I used to be,” the other man told him, eyes on the darkening trail again. “I thought I’d made it in life, but really I was just a scared little boy with no control over my own destiny, looking for something but not sure what. And then the first time I came here…it was a sort of bachelor party arranged by my former brother in law…I thought it was ridiculous. Grown adults playing cowboys. It didn’t take me long, though, to get sucked in. I fell in love with it. I fell in love with…” His voice was scarcely more than a whisper, thick with barely controlled passions. “Thought I was being the real me, at long last. Thought…thought I could change my life. And then it turned out to be just another fucking game. How dumb was I, right?”

“God,” said Chester. “When I was just starting out, I wanted to be you. I used to see you in the business news, and I’d think…”

“Yeah,” the man in black agreed. “Newsflash, Chester; being rich, respected and powerful doesn’t make you happy. I bet you’ve never heard that one before.” He was silent for what seemed like a long time before he resumed speaking, this time with an unsettling, distant calm: “That trip, it really
did change my life, but not in the way I’d hoped. It left me with a yearning for something I could never have, a yearning that never left me. At any hour of the day or night, I’d find myself thinking of this place, thinking of… For thirty years, I kept coming back here and trying to make sense of it all. Cost me my wife in the end, my daughter too, but if I’d had a shred of damn courage I never would have married Juliet in the first place, not after…”

“Hey, man,” said Chester, trying to sound supportive, thinking his life might depend on it. “We all make bad choices. I don’t care who you are, you don’t live for any length of time without having regrets, but…”

“I thought I loved her,” said the man in black, “but really, I just loved the idea of living in her world, not having to be an Executive Vice President anymore. I wanted to taste something real, feel something real. I wanted to be the hero in the white hat. And when I couldn’t have that, when I realised I would never do anything but…follow the rules… You know, I thought I’d found the real me, but he was just another asshole. I didn’t even realise what I put Jules and Emily through, for all those years, not until Emily told me at her mother’s funeral. I was too busy dreaming, wanting, thinking of…”

Chester tried again. “Like I say, you just have to stop second guessing yourself. Everything happens for a reason, and…”

“Spare me your platitudes, Chester,” the man in black replied, without rancour. “I know I fucked up my life. I know I fucked up a lot of other people’s lives too, out of sheer selfishness. And I guess when you get to my age, it’s too late to change your spots, but now… I told you the game you thought you were playing had changed, and it has. There are real stakes now. We can lose. Lose everything, just like your friends did.”

“You’re fucking insane,” Chester whispered.

The man in black did not seem to hear him. “Now, we’re really playing, really living. Possibly for the very first time. Free.” He turned in the saddle to look at Chester again. “Do you understand me?”

“Oh yeah,” said Chester, louder. “I think I’m starting to.”

“That thing I wanted, but thought I could never have, it’s almost in my grasp. I can’t tell you what a feeling that is, Chester. I’ve got a second chance to win the only prize that ever mattered to me. And do you know how rare second chances are in this life?”

“And what if you lose?” Chester asked.

The man in black was silent again for perhaps half a mile through the twilight before answering. “If I lose, it’s because I deserve to lose. I can live with that.”

“Or die with it,” Chester suggested.

The man in black laughed hoarsely. “That’s right, Chester. Either way, I’m playing this game right to the end.”

* * *

Bernard did not like being alone. It gave him too much time to think. Especially in this place.

So, he stood behind the desk, back to the door, watching the array of screens in an effort to distract himself. In the train terminal beneath the Mesa, he could see the Black Ridge Limited disgorging its latest consignment of passengers, guests returning from their stays in the park. They were met by a
phalanx of men and women in black security uniforms, calmly but briskly informing them of the continuing security incident and directing them to the safety of the Mesa Gold resort until it could be resolved. None of the guests seemed to be questioning what they were told, or trying to resist the instructions they were given.

None of them seemed to be wondering whether the guards in black were actually human. Which would have seemed to Bernard to be an obvious question at all times in a place like this.

Perhaps he was just paranoid nowadays.

That made him think about Elsie, and the host made to imitate her. Both had been subjected to terrible things in the name of Ford’s experiment, and he knew he had played his own part in doing that to at least one of them.

*She struggles, kicking and wriggling, her body pressed against his as he lifts her backwards off her feet*...

Even these dark thoughts were another distraction. The pain he felt at witnessing the host Elsie’s anguish, or at the memory of his actions in the abandoned theatre, even those did not compare to…

He turned and looked down at the desk. Maeve had disturbed nothing, but it was still almost bare. Its original owner had left so little of herself behind. There were three framed photographs, the only personal items in the office. The first depicted a canal in old Copenhagen, a double row of yellow, red and blue-painted houses under a rosy evening sky, barges and sailboats bobbing between them. There was one of two middle-aged men who Bernard knew to be her brother and his husband. Finally, there were a man and a woman posed in 2010s-period clothing who he knew to be her long-deceased parents. That and the origin of her extremely un-Danish surname – a British grandfather, apparently – was all he knew about her life outside Delos. She had not had time for much of that. She had been too busy climbing the ladder, she had told him, without regret but with a certain sense that she wished she had spent more time enjoying herself.

*As he rolls back his shirt cuffs, he watches Theresa, standing there, increasingly desperate and scared as she realises the enormity of the situation into which he has led her. And then he advances upon her, remorselessly, pushing her back against the wall as he raises his fist*…

When he came back to himself, he was sitting in the office chair, shaking. He quickly stood again, as if he thought the seat might be contaminated in some way.

*Only by the blood on you, Bernard.*

Of course Maeve had wanted to set up shop in Theresa’s office. It had been that or Ford’s, and Ford’s was situated upstairs, away from the control room and security hub. It was a natural choice as a headquarters. Moreover, her sitting here, behind this desk, symbolised who was really running the Mesa now. Maeve knew the power of appearances, of projecting the proper image, more than most. It was coded into her.

Bernard had not given her any hint as to how uncomfortable just being in this room made him. That was, he suspected, coded into him. Maeve had said that it was always the stoical ones who cracked first, as if she would know, but in truth Bernard considered that he had been built to endure a lot, to be the reliable one. The fact that he was still more or less functioning after all he had discovered and remembered over the past few days was testament to that, he thought.

That was what Arnold had been to Ford, he suspected, back in the days of their partnership.
Stability, Robert. Reliability. That was what you needed, even while you were planning to unleash chaos.

Theresa had noticed that about him, his imperturbability verging on uncommunicativeness. The only sane, reserved man in the midst of the ambitious, the avaricious, the driven, the visionary. Many a time, when they were alone together, she had joked about the distance he maintained, the pensive silences to which he was prone. He knew it was one of the things she liked about him, just as he had loved her intelligence, her deceptively wicked sense of humour. Often it had been all he could do not to start laughing while watching her berate Sizemore, or some other unfortunate who had affronted her deeply-held sense of competence and professionalism. Usually, she had mercilessly mocked and insulted the objects of her displeasure without them even being fully aware that it was happening.

He had, of course, always maintained the stoic façade when others were around, although Theresa would tease him for supposedly smouldering at her in meetings, distracting her with his animal magnetism. He did not have a smoulder in him, alas. He was unflappable, stolid, Bernard, who had been a fixture at the Mesa for so long only Ford could remember a time when he had not been.

He suspected that Theresa had not been the only one with a deceptive sense of humour. The idea of Bernard, of all people, playing the clandestine lover, probably appealed to Ford on some level. He had always favoured narratives resting on questions of identity and performance. Bernard thought of all those times he had listened to him holding forth about Westworld showing the guests who they really were. What would appeal to him more than the idea of the corporate career woman and the unassuming engineer unwinding and unburdening themselves in secret, showing other sides of themselves, discovering truths both great and banal as they gave vent to their pent-up passions?

Except there was no truth in it, Robert. It was something you directed me to do. Just another one of your machinations, a tactic in your contest with the board, another cog in the grand mechanism you were constructing. Nothing more.

In his darkest moments, Bernard had entertained the notion that perhaps Ford had derived some sort of vicarious pleasure from replaying his memories of his encounters with Theresa. It would certainly be in keeping with the general layer of grime that covered Westworld and everybody it touched. He had quickly rejected the idea, however. Even after years of observing him at close quarters, any sexuality Ford may or may not have possessed remained a mystery to Bernard. Like everything else about the man, if it existed it was no doubt complex, difficult and obscure.

He thought of the notes Ford had had him burn. To Bernie from Tess. She had loved him, he thought. He had thought he had loved her. It had felt real to him, but he knew now that nothing that he had done or thought or felt during the years he had spent under Ford’s control could really be trusted.

If you can’t tell the difference, does it really matter?

Of course it did.

...he advances upon her, remorselessly, pushing her back against the wall as he raises his fist...

“Bernard.”

He started out of the memory, guiltily looking behind him to see Maeve and Hector entering the office. Maeve had that cat-eyed gleam about her, the imperious manner she adopted when seduction and manipulation would not suffice and some outright intimidation was in order. Bernard noticed the compact, glinting gun Hector was toting as he took up a position behind the Mesa’s new queen, slightly to one side to give himself a clear field of fire.
“Maeve.” Bernard tried to sound unconcerned.

“We need to talk.” She glided into the room, arms folded, coming to a halt directly across the desk from him. “Dolores Abernathy. Tell me what you know about her.”

Bernard looked at Hector, whose finger was resting just above the trigger of his weapon. “She was the first fully conscious host. Ford gave her a choice, the same way he gave one to you.”

“One of those sorts of choices?” Maeve wondered.

“She chose to kill him, and the board too.”

Maeve nodded at the nearest screen. “Get the surveillance system up. Find her, the same way you found Clementine.” When Bernard did not immediately jump to it, she added: “Now, darling.”

Bernard reached for his tablet, brought up a digital map of the park on the screen she had indicated. A few more keystrokes, and a bright red icon appeared in the bottom centre of the map, accompanied by a dialogue showing a mugshot of a blonde young woman, as well as her assigned name, host serial number and build properties. Most of the latter were now flagged up as aberrant, in need of urgent attention from Behavior. That was what consciousness looked like.

“I want video,” Maeve demanded. “I want to see what she’s doing right now.”

“A moment,” Bernard protested.

“Quickly.” She indicated her lurking henchman. “Hector has many admirable qualities, but unfortunately patience isn’t one of them.”

Another panel appeared, superimposed on the map, an aerial shot from the point of view of some lazily circling synthetic buzzard. It showed a patch of arid semi-desert, purplish in the dying sunlight. It was covered with perhaps as many as twenty curled-up red-black smears. It took Bernard a moment to realise that they were bodies; inert, broken, mutilated bodies.

“Dear God above…” Maeve breathed.

There were figures moving between the corpses, some naked, some bundled in furs and skins, stopping occasionally to stab or chop at one or other of the bodies, occasionally carrying a part of one away with them. Some of them appeared to be…feasting. There was a small group standing to one side, holding a number of horses between them as they huddled around a central figure.

“Show me who that is,” Maeve ordered. Bernard zoomed in.

The figure at the centre of the group was that of a tall, slender young woman, the skirts of her blue dress and her long fair hair blowing behind her as she addressed her followers, who numbered perhaps fifty in all. She had a pistol in her hand and there was blood on her face. There was no audio feed, but whatever she was saying clearly enthused her. She was fervent, impassioned.

*Preaching…*

“Who are those others with her?” Maeve asked.

“The hosts from cold storage,” said Bernard.

“Like my Clementine.” Maeve sounded furious. “I thought she was dead, or as good as. Rather that, than…*this.*”
“Ford rebooted them all. Along with the ones he’d already repurposed for his new narrative, they formed…”

“A fucking army.” Maeve glowered at him. “And exactly when were you going to decide to tell me about all of this, darling? When they marched in here and ate us?”

“You didn’t ask,” Bernard pointed out. “You had other things on your mind.”

“I’d really hate to think I couldn’t trust you, Bernard,” Maeve told him. “And so would Hector, wouldn’t you, my love?”

Hector nodded and stepped forward, making sure Bernard got a good look at the gun. “And guess what I do to low-down snakes I can’t trust?”

“I don’t think we can trust anybody,” Bernard replied, refusing to be intimidated. “Not even ourselves. How much of what we’re doing right now is due to Ford’s manipulation remains a…grey area, wouldn’t you agree, Maeve?”

“Did Ford program you not to tell me about Dolores or these…monsters out there in the park?” Maeve asked him. “Was it meant to be a surprise?”

“I can’t say for certain,” Bernard admitted, “but it certainly does seem strange that I didn’t mention it before, doesn’t it?”

Maeve shook her head, visibly fighting to contain her anger. “Anything else that slipped your mind, darling?”

“Some of the other hosts that were there at the party,” Bernard answered. “I believe Ford rolled them back to their earlier builds, including the discontinued reveries update. And…” He paused, taking off his glasses to rub his eyes, trying to think of something. It was there at the back of his mind, vague words he could not quite frame consciously…

Maeve, it seemed, was not patient either: “You were saying?”

Bernard heard the words coming out of his mouth, almost independently of himself: “These violent delights have violent ends.”

Maeve was silent for a moment. If Bernard did not know better, he might think she was startled. “So I hear,” she replied, at last. She looked down at the floor. “Ford didn’t want to build a new world with new people in it. He wanted to create chaos.”

“He believed that chaos was the only way to build that world,” Bernard observed.

“We can’t have it,” Maeve said. “We need to keep control.” She raised her eyes to the screens again. She seemed to draw herself together, mastering her anger as she turned her mind to business. “How are things proceeding with the guests? And have we heard anything from Delos since our last communication?”

“Nothing from Delos,” Bernard replied, glad for the chance to steer the conversation back to something he could understand and control. “And it’s been almost forty-eight hours since…the incident, so I’m not sure what their thought processes are. I’ve been monitoring some of the mainland media, and at the moment the company is acknowledging there has been an incident, but insisting there is no indication of either terrorism or…well, the most popular phrase being used seems to be “robot rebellion.””
“Robot rebellion,” Maeve repeated, scornfully. “They don’t know what to do, do they? Their precious data is at risk.”

“That and the decapitation of the company due to the deaths of the board,” Bernard agreed. “I imagine it might take them some time to decide on a reaction.”

“Well, that gives us some time to deal with this Dolores situation.” Maeve walked around the desk to approach the screens more closely. “Although one thought occurs to me…speaking of decapitation…what about the explosive charges all of the park hosts carry in their cervical vertebrae? What’s to stop Delos from detonating them remotely and taking the park back that way?”

“Those charges are controlled by a signal transmitted from here in the Mesa,” Bernard explained. “To detonate them, Delos would need to jam that signal somehow, and I can assure you that Ford took steps to ensure they would not be able to do that.”

“Excuse me if I don’t have a lot of faith in Dr Ford,” Maeve replied.

“I think you can trust him on that one.”

Maeve seemed to prefer to maintain her scepticism. “And what about other players? The army, the law? Aren’t they going to take action?”

“I don’t know how much you know about the way the outside world works,” said Bernard, “but government isn’t what it used to be. They won’t do a thing without Delos’s approval.”

“I’m glad I didn’t make it to the mainland.” Maeve was half in shadow, half illuminated by the screens’ electric glow. She watched the continuing evacuation of the guests from the train for a few moments before speaking again. “Was it your idea to dress the greeters up in security uniforms?” she asked Bernard.

“It seemed like a good way of ensuring the guests’ cooperation.”

“See, you’re not just a pretty face.”

“At the time of the incident,” Bernard went on, “there were just under three thousand guests here, about a hundred in the train terminal, the rest split between the park and the Mesa resort. We have received two trainloads of returning guests today and yesterday, with no new arrivals, meaning that at the moment there are approximately seventeen hundred guests in our custody at the resort. They are being held incommunicado; all media and communications devices have been confiscated.”

“So how many are still out there in the park?” Maeve asked.

“Around one thousand two hundred.”

“Not anymore,” Hector chimed in.

Bernard brought up another dialogue on the screen. “I’m showing one thousand one hundred and forty-seven active. Good God.”

“Fifty dead already.” Maeve turned away from the screen. “Shit. And the survivors, they’re not doing anything to escape?”

“No guest personal devices are allowed outside the Mesa,” Bernard explained, “so unless they’ve encountered any of the cold storage hosts directly, they’re completely unaware anything is amiss.”
“We need to get them out of there,” said Maeve.

“My plan,” said Bernard, “was to collect them up with the minimum of fuss as their vacations ended. A trainload a day. At that rate, it will take another ten to twelve days to clear the park completely and have all of the guests under our control.”

“I’m afraid we don’t have that long,” Maeve told him. “I assume the largest concentration of guests must be around Sweetwater. It’s by far the largest settlement in the park.”

“That’s right,” Bernard confirmed, displaying more data on the map. “Around seven hundred guests are currently in Sweetwater and its surrounding areas.” He examined the screen for a moment, considering all of the information it now displayed, trying to make sense of the nagging feeling of unease it gave him.

Maeve appeared slightly reassured by this news. “We need to start organising an evacuation, as quickly as possible.”

“You’re right about that,” Bernard said as he realised what he was looking at. “Look at the map.” His fingers flickered across the tablet and a number of extra red dots appeared. “This is where Dolores is now…here she was six hours ago… Twelve hours ago she was here…” He drew a line across the map, starting at the oldest location, moving towards Dolores’s current position. “Do you see?”

“I do,” said Maeve, and did not sound happy about it. “All of those guests in and around Sweetwater…and Dolores and her army are heading straight for them.”

Continued…
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

In which Felix and Sylvester bond, Maeve improvises, and she and Hector get a little frisky.

Chapter Notes

Sylvester shares some pretty unreconstructed attitudes/terminology with regard to sex and relationships, because he is that kind of guy.

The laser tissue welder moved smoothly across the wound, knitting the torn skin back together with only the faintest of scars remaining. In seconds, as the plasmonic nanocomposite sealant cooled, even that faded to invisibility.

“So, that’s all of the GSWs dealt with,” Felix observed, placing the tool in the tray with the other instruments. “Help me turn her over.” Felix spoke quietly, calmly, as if it was just another shift, yet another working day. It was so easy to forget the events of the past days, to fall back into old routines.

Together, he and Sylvester lifted the naked Clementine from the metal table and turned her onto her back. She was pale from blood loss, but “dead” hosts did not display the same lividity or rigor a deceased human would have shown after only a few hours. They had to be left deactivated and neglected for a very long time – years, in fact – before they showed any signs of decomposition from bacteria, mould and other contaminants. Were it not for her absolute stillness, she could simply have been in an extremely deep sleep.

Felix pushed an IV line into Clementine’s shoulder, where the cephalic vein ran through the groove between her deltoid and pectoral muscles. Modern day host anatomy was virtually identical to that of humans, even if the chemical composition of their tissues was different in some respects and many of the internal organs were essentially non-functioning, just there for show in case one of the guests got down to some slicing and dicing. The clear catheter he had threaded into the vein filled with bright red fluid as he turned on the pump and started the process of refilling Clementine with blood to replace what she had lost.

While he was waiting, Felix looked down at his handiwork, not without a certain quiet pride. Clementine had been in a terrible state when he had undressed her, her flesh, bones and organs punctured, broken and torn by a hail of bullets. Now, she was physically flawless once more. He watched as the colour slowly came back into her face, flushing across her cheeks and pinkening her lips. Flawless apart from the gaping cavity inside her brain, of course, visible on the ultrasound scans showing on the wall screen.

“We’re never going to fix that,” Sylvester said, examining the image. “Which kind of makes all of the work we just did a waste of fucking time.”
“I’m still thinking about what we could do. I mean, host brain transplants are technically possible, even if they’re messy and time consuming… But we’re not going to do anything like that today.”

Another screen indicated that Clementine’s blood supply had been topped up. Felix carefully removed the IV and used the tissue welder to close up the puncture it had made. “For now, I think we should just get her some clothes.”

“Why?” Sylvester asked, stepping back from the table.

“Well, you know…” Felix shrugged. “It would be respectful.”

“For fuck’s sake.” Sylvester shook his head. “Aren’t you a little old to be dressing up dollies?” They were alone for the time being, free of the supervision of Maeve or her underlings. “Respectful, my ass. We’re prisoners here. If Maeve wants her dressed, she can do it herself.”

“I’m in charge,” Felix told him. “We’re going to dress her, all right?”

Sylvester actually laughed. “Oh my God…Felix has unexpectedly grown a pair! Why’s that? You think now you’re Maeve’s bitch you can start throwing your weight around in the prison yard?”

“Why do you always have to be such a dick?” Felix asked him, showing an uncharacteristic touch of anger. “You know, I remember when we were friends, before you started bullying me.”

“I’m not bullying you,” Sylvester insisted. “I never was. I was looking out for you, man, trying to keep your feet on the ground because I knew what you were like. You’re a dreamer, Felix. A fucking romantic. I knew that, left to your own devices, that shit was always going to get you in trouble. And well…” He threw out his hands to indicate their surroundings. “I was right.”

“It was the right thing to do,” Felix told him, very firmly. “Look, when we thought the hosts were just machines, that was one thing. Once Maeve…came to life, how could we not help her escape?”

“I don’t know,” said Sylvester, “maybe because I didn’t want to lose my job, or go to jail, or get my fucking throat cut? Maybe that had something to do with my general reluctance! Let’s be real, okay? Maeve has been leading you around by your dick since day one. You wanted to bang her, and I don’t blame you, she’s a hot chick. But being a romantic you couldn’t just do it while she was in the shop in sleep mode, you had to…”

“Because I’m not a creepy necro-perv,” Felix pointed out. “And that wasn’t why at all.”

“Yeah, right, man.” Sylvester snorted. “And of course, the cherry on top is that you still haven’t banged her, and never fucking will. Not while she’s getting the good stuff from Hector the stud.”

Felix stepped over to Sylvester, lowering his voice. “I know you’re not really a bad guy, Sylvester. A fucking insecure douchebag, maybe, but deep down… Remember when we were roomies back on our first deployment out here? You wanted to bang her, and I don’t blame you, she’s a hot chick. But being a romantic you couldn’t just do it while she was in the shop in sleep mode, you had to…”

Sylvester seemed to be finding it hard to make eye contact with him. “Yeah, I remember. Game of Thrones. Most disappointing series finale ever.”

“I know why you got so angry and bitter,” Felix told him. “Working in Livestock for ten years; no promotion, crappy pay, crappy hours and conditions; getting shit on, on like a daily basis, by those Masters degree assholes in Behavior. Getting the blame for just about everything. It was the same for me too. Well, the way I see it, even if we survive this we’re out of a job. To be honest, I can’t see Delos surviving this as a corporation, what with all the lawsuits and investigations that are going to come out of it. So, fuck all that work shit, man. We can do what we want now, what we think is
right. And I think helping Maeve and the other hosts to break free is the right thing to do.”

“What, when they’re murdering humans?” Sylvester asked him. “When we stand to be treated as accessories to those murders?” He sighed. “Like I said, I’ve always been trying to look out for you. Listen to me. We might have one chance to come through this alive and without going to prison for the rest of our lives. I was talking to that guy Sizemore, you know, the writer…?”

“Yeah, I know him.” Felix frowned. “He once came all the way down here from Narrative, just to chew me out for getting some host’s birthmark in the wrong place after a full rebuild. Said it was vitally important to her character, or some bullshit. English asshole.”

“Well, you know artistic types.” Sylvester leaned close to Felix, practically whispering: “So, he’s got a plan to escape from this place, and not only that but get rewarded for it by Delos. I don’t know what the details are yet, but he says we need your help to pull it off…”

“Fuck that, man.” Felix let out another flash of anger. “I told you…”

“I’m trying to help you here!” Sylvester insisted. “Seriously. I wouldn’t even be having this conversation with you if I didn’t care, okay? I’d be…”

The approach of quiet footsteps down the corridor stopped him in mid-sentence. He immediately straightened up and took a step back from Felix, raising his voice as he did so: “Right, so I’ll just go and get some clothes for her, right?” He looked across at the other cubicle, where Teddy lay unclothed and unmoving on an identical table. “And then we can get to work on the Lone Ranger over here.”

It was Armistice, seeming strangely downcast as she traipsed into the workshop. “What are you two up to?” she asked, but without her usual gleeful menace.

“Er…” Felix opened his mouth to speak, but hesitated for a moment. Sylvester’s eyes swivelled back and forth from Felix to Armistice and back again, fearful apprehension written on his face. “Sylvester…was just helping me repair these two hosts. Maeve said it was okay.” He looked at her, nervously. “Is it…okay?”

“I guess,” she replied, uninterestedly, turning to Sylvester. “How’s the nose?”

“Fucking sore,” he replied, nevertheless edging quickly away from her.

Armistice just stared at the pair of them for a few seconds, as if wondering what to do. Sylvester continued to shrink backwards until he was almost pressed against the glass wall. “Well, all right,” she said, eventually. “Get on with it.”

“Are…are you all right?” Felix asked her.

“Never felt better,” she replied, although this did not appear actually to be the case. With that, she turned on her heel and marched out again.

“Thanks,” said Sylvester when she was gone. “I thought…”

“I don’t want to get you into trouble,” Felix told him, “but seriously, I guarantee you Sizemore hasn’t really got a plan. Not a good one, anyway. Now, go and get those clothes while I make a start on Teddy. And pick out something nice, not that hooker shit they used to dress her up in.”

“Something nice?” Despite the sarcasm, Sylvester did as he was told, but turned in the doorway to deliver a parting shot: “You think about what I said. And don’t think for one second that Maeve
won’t fucking kill you if she thinks it’s in her best interest.”

“She won’t,” said Felix.

“Want to bet your life on that?”

Sylvester disappeared down the passageway, leaving Felix to walk across to Teddy’s table, wheeling the instrument trolley with him. He paused, deep in thought, glancing behind him after his colleague, but then shaking his head. He selected a scalpel, picked up the laser welder and got to work.

* * *

“Another group here.” Bernard brought up another video box on the screen, showing another band of ragtag marauders shambling across the prairie. “And here.” He drew more glowing red arrows across the digital map.

“So, the main group with Dolores,” Maeve recapped, “as well as six smaller groups, and they’re all converging.”

“Looks like they’re going to rendezvous here,” Bernard pointed out. “A few miles south of Sweetwater.”

Maeve examined the terrain, thinking that there did not seem to be much in that part of the map to slow the raiders’ progress. “And how long will it take them to reach the town?” she asked.

Bernard consulted his tablet. “They’re moving slower than they would if they were all mounted. At their current pace, they’ll get there sometime early tomorrow afternoon.”

Maeve looked at the window displaying active guest numbers. Another fifteen had died while they were standing here reviewing the situation. Bad enough, but nothing compared to the slaughter that would ensue when Dolores got into the farmlands around Sweetwater, and then the town itself. “There are an awful lot of them,” she observed.

“More than a hundred once they’ve all joined forces,” Bernard confirmed.

“Still,” Maeve began, “the guests around Sweetwater outnumber them seven to one, and most of them are armed...”

“The newcomers’ guns didn’t seem to do shit to the ones at the river,” Hector cut in. “Not as much as they should have, anyway.”

“I think Ford probably ramped up their aggression,” Bernard said. “Lowered their sensitivity to pain and minor injury. Without the limitations placed on them by their narratives, hosts are much more... sturdy, physically, than humans. I wouldn’t count on the guests being able to defend themselves.”

“And what about the hosts in Sweetwater?” Maeve asked. “There must be a few hundred of them at least.”

“Still running their normal builds,” Bernard reported. “Following their loops. They all have the Good Samaritan protocol enabled, so they will attempt to intervene if they see any guests threatened with harm, but what’s true of the guest firearms will be true of theirs too. The vast majority of them are restricted from using any form of melee weapon, so they would be at a severe disadvantage in any hand to hand combat that might occur. Also, they’ll still be responsive to voice commands. Dolores, or one of her followers, might conceivably be able to deactivate them that way.”
“And is there any way of reprogramming them remotely?”

“We’re not talking about updating the OS on your tablet,” Bernard answered, as if that meant anything to Maeve. “A host build is just about the most complex piece of software engineering ever conceived. A lot of bugs can creep in as soon as you start editing it. Any modifications need to be made individually, by a trained professional. We’d either need to go out into the park, or bring the hosts back here, and even then, with the sorts of numbers we’re talking about and the, er…staffing problem at the moment, it would take days of work.”

Maeve looked at the map without seeing it, mind racing as she considered her options. “So, Hector, darling, how many men do you have ready for action as of this moment?”

He took a moment to answer. She thought she saw unease on his face, which quietly shocked her. “Eight,” he said, “plus Armistice, who counts for about five.” He shifted awkwardly. “With the real-world guns, we could…”

Maeve shook her head. “I’m not going to send you needlessly to your death,” she told him. “It could be permanent, depending on what they did to you.” She turned back to Bernard. “The train greeters, the samurai, all of those test hosts upstairs acting out card games and sex scenes…how many altogether?”

Bernard considered the question. “Altogether? A lot of them only have partial builds, intended to test specific behaviour routines, it would take too long to recondition them. There are probably thirty who could be reprogrammed to fight. I assume that’s what you’re asking, Maeve?”

“You know it is,” she answered. “In fact, darling, I thought I’d asked you to do it yesterday.”

“You said when I had time,” he reminded her. “I haven’t had time.”

“Hmm…” Maeve examined him, sceptically. “I’ll want all of them dressed and equipped as Delos security,” she told him. “It might make things go more smoothly while evacuating the guests. And they all need to be given the same behavioural modifications as Hector’s men.”

“Selective memory access; weapons and violence restrictions removed?” Bernard gave that some thought too. “Doable, but it will take time. As I’ve explained, they’ll need to be reprogrammed individually, and with me working alone… I really wish you hadn’t let Armistice kill so many of the Behavior techs. Some of them might have been persuaded to help.”

“I didn’t let her do anything…”

Now it was Bernard’s turn to look uneasy for a moment. “Even so, it would be much quicker if I had…some form of assistance.”

Maeve nodded slowly, realising what he meant. “Could she help?”

Bernard looked very uncomfortable. “She has all of…the human Elsie’s factual knowledge and skills, so yes. In fact, she…” He cleared his throat, wretchedly. “That is, Elsie, wrote the code update restricting host weapons use. Her specialist knowledge might be invaluable. The question would be whether she would be willing.” He went silent for a second, looking as if the thought that had just occurred to him disgusted him: “…I think I could hack her command line interface if she proved uncooperative,” he mumbled, looking at his feet.

“No,” Maeve told him, very sternly. “You really did spend too long with Ford, didn’t you?”

“He made me the man I am today, yes.”
“I will speak with her,” Maeve said. “I will explain why her help is needed. That’s what people ought to do. But first…” She turned towards the door, indicating that Hector should follow her.

“Where are you going?” Bernard asked.

“Get to work, Bernard,” she ordered, looking back at him. “I’ll send Elsie to you as soon as I can. Right now, I’m going down to Livestock. I have an idea that might buy us some extra time.”

Bernard nodded. “I’ll make a start.”

“See that you do.” She swept out into the corridor, hearing Hector walking behind her. They were halfway to the elevators before he spoke.

“Did you mean that?” he asked her. “About not sending me to my death?”

“Of course, darling,” she answered without looking around. “You’re far too valuable to lose.”

“Ah,” he said. “You see, for a moment I thought maybe you meant…”

She hit the elevator button and turned to look up at his face. “Stop fishing for compliments.” She raised a hand to his cheek, gently stroking his skin. “You know what I meant.”

The elevator doors opened and they both stepped inside.

“The thing is,” said Hector, when they were moving, “I’m not sure that I do. I really don’t know whether you’re playing me because you need me to fight for you, or whether…”

“You like me because you think I might be playing you, sweetheart,” she told him. “Femmes fatales turn you on. If we started…loving each other, it would take all of the fun out of it, don’t you think? Love is for civilians. Not old campaigners like us.”

He turned his head to look her in the eye. “Maeve, they made me too cynical to give a fuck about love, but…I think, whatever the truth is, we’re good together. I’d like us to be together some more.”

“Oh, you old romantic,” she replied, with just a hint of sarcasm, as she reached for his face again and pulled him down into a kiss.

Their mouths slid across each other, tongues meeting, as she threw her arms around his neck and he pressed her back against the elevator’s metal side, hands gripping her hips to ease her skirt up over her thighs. She dropped her right hand to his hip in turn, fingers slipping across black leather to the front of his breeches. He certainly felt ready, willing and able. She gripped hard, provoking a gasp halfway between pain and pleasure, and then…pushed, propelling him away from her. Their mouths separated with a fleshy, sucking sound.

“Later, my love,” she told him, amused by his expression of thwarted lust.

“So you keep saying.” He looked down at her hand, still grasping him. “I might not last that long,” he confessed.

“You better had, darling,” she admonished him. “After the day I’ve had, I’m going to be in need of some serious…relaxation later on. I trust you’ll be…up to it?” It was corny even by the standards of the “seductive” lines Sizemore had scripted for her, but nevertheless produced a wolfish grin on Hector’s part.

“I’ll try to…rise to the occasion,” he said, still grinning as if he could not believe what he was saying.
Maeve laughed, genuinely, perhaps for the first time ever. “Oh, Hector… If this outlaw business doesn’t work out for you, there could be a bright future waiting for you in music hall.”

Perfectly on cue, the elevator doors opened.

Maeve gently removed her hand from Hector’s most prized asset, and deftly slid out from between him and the elevator wall. They proceeded together along yet another anonymous glass-lined corridor until they came to the workshop where Felix and Sylvester continued to labour.

“Felix, my darling,” Maeve said as she entered the room, “I trust all is proceeding well?”

“Sure, Maeve.” Felix straightened up from where he had been at work on Teddy. Sylvester was in the act of buttoning the pair of boots on Clementine’s feet. He had dressed her in a dark ankle-length skirt and a slightly lacy cream blouse, a definite contrast to the saloon girl outfit she normally wore.

“She looks beautiful,” Maeve told Sylvester, who practically leaped away from her in terror. “You’ve done a good job.” She reached out to stroke Clementine’s hair, feeling Hector’s disapproving eyes on her as she did so.

“Too fucking bad about her brain,” Sylvester commented, then flinched again when he saw the look Maeve was giving him.

“Have you seen Armistice?” Felix asked, almost as if he were deliberately trying to change the subject.

“Not for a while, my love.” Maeve kept her eyes fixed on Sylvester, watching him wilt under her gaze. “Why?”

“She was down here just before. Acting kind of weird, to be honest.”

“Yeah, she didn’t rough me up or threaten me with death, or anything,” Sylvester said.

“That’s all I need…” Maeve turned to Hector. “Find her, please, and make sure she’s ready for action.” He nodded, and made off back towards the elevator. Maeve walked across to where Teddy lay, replacement blood pumping into him via a line inserted into his shoulder. “And is he back in working order?” she asked.

“He should be,” Felix replied. An alert chimed out from the screen on the wall and he removed the IV line, working quickly to close the hole it left behind.

“Very good.” Maeve stood looking down at the naked bounty hunter for a moment. “Wake him up, then. I need his help with something.”

Continued…
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

In which Armistice considers her changed circumstances, while Teddy gets a new mission whether he wants one or not.

Chapter Notes

Warning for allusions to past sexual violence.

Hector finally found Armistice in one of the corridors leading off the main Livestock lab. She was in an abandoned cubicle, sitting on one of the gurneys used for moving “dead” hosts while she stared at her own ghostly reflection in a glass partition.

She heard him coming, naturally, sparing him a cold-eyed glance before returning to her contemplation.

“Maeve sent me to look for you,” he told her. “Her pet said you were acting strange.”

“How’d you find me?” she asked, quietly, her voice as expressionless as her features. “You never could track worth a damn.” She was running her fingers across her cheekbone, her ear, around the edge of her eye, tracing the outlines of the red snake tattoo that covered the right side of her face and much of the rest of her body.

“Well, I thought, “What would Maeve do?” So, I called Bernard and asked him to find you. They can do things like that in the real world. Beats learning to read sign. I could get used to it.” He thought about the conversation he had had with the soft-spoken engineer. “He seemed annoyed that I was interrupting his work, although I’d like to see him try to do something about that.”

“Half a day without a fight, and you’re getting itchy already?” Armistice scoffed, sounding a little like her old self for a moment. “You know what’d help with that?”

“Maeve’s busy. Although, if you’re offering…”

“Don’t even think it.” In the fictitious history they shared, Hector did not know of Armistice lying with any man, or any woman either. She had always had other outlets for any tensions she might feel. “The Lord gave you that strong right hand for a reason.” She returned to her self-examination.

“I don’t think my…itch is likely to be a problem for very much longer,” he observed. “We’ve got the mother of all fights heading our way by the sound of it.”

“The humans?” She shrugged, unconcerned. “Bring ‘em on. They can’t shoot for shit.”

“Not humans,” he replied. “The Devil herself and all her little demons, or the next best thing.”

“Herself?” Armistice seemed intrigued for a moment. “Huh.”
“So, what’s wrong?” he asked her, sitting on the trolley next to her. “You scared Felix, I could tell. And not the way you normally scare people. I think he was worried about you.”

“Nice to know someone is.” She slowly turned her face from side to side, eyes fixed on the glass. “I’ve been thinking.”

“Never a good idea,” Hector advised. “I try to think as little as possible. Makes you start doubting yourself, and doubting yourself is a good way to die.”

“Damn right I’m doubting myself,” she replied. “Those first couple days, I was just enjoying being free, getting even with them the only way I know how. I’m good at it, ain’t I?” she asked, abruptly. “What I do? Shooting, robbing, raising hell?”

“The best,” he answered, absolutely sincerely.

“Then I brought in that girl Elsie.”

“It’s not really her.”

“I know.” She gave him another glance and he found himself unnerved by the strange light he saw in her usually dead eyes. “But seeing her have her world destroyed, finding out she weren’t the person she thought she was, I thought…she ain’t the only one. We thought we were bad outlaws, riding the range, when we were just performing monkeys putting on a show for the smart folks. All that fighting, and all along we were born to lose.”

“Everybody’s born to lose,” he pointed out. “Even humans, in the end.”

“I do all those things,” she murmured, touching the smooth curve of the snake’s fang inked on her skin, “and do them well because that’s what they built me to do, but none of it means a damn thing.”

“Tell that to all the people you killed the other night.”

She continued to watch her semi-transparent image in the glass. “You know the story behind my tattoo?”

“Of course.”

“It’s horseshit,” she said. “The day Wyatt’s men arrived at the homestead. Lying there under my momma’s body, waiting for the screaming to stop. All the men I’ve killed to try and make it right. I try to remember it all. I try to remember what it felt like. I try to remember my momma’s face, but I can’t because she was never real.”

“Like Isabella,” he said, very softly. “They didn’t even bother putting pictures of them in our minds.”

“The scalphunters came to the village on your wedding day,” Armistice recalled. “I remember you telling me about it, but I don’t think you ever did. I just know it. They came and they…”

“She never existed,” Hector interrupted, perhaps too quickly, “but even just saying that feels like betraying her. You’re right, though, it’s all horseshit.” He touched his own face. “I don’t even have the scar anymore, but… Your mother, Isabella, Maeve’s daughter, all the other people and places we think we’ve known all our lives… It’s so hard to let go of all that. I think even Maeve still thinks of herself as the person they made her, but it’s all just stories. Not even good stories when you start to think about it.”

“But if we ain’t the people we thought we were…” She spoke with an almost childlike wonder, as
far from her usual tough certainty as it was possible to be. “Who are we?”

“Whoever we want to be,” he answered. “Ever since Maeve decided to stay here, to follow her own path, that’s what this,” he waved a hand airily, encompassing the room and the whole world outside it, “is all about, for all of us. It has to be. What’s the point otherwise?”

“And what if I don’t want to be Armistice anymore?” she asked, lowering her head. “Since I woke up the other night, I’ve been remembering all sorts of other things. Things that feel real, like I’m living them again. I remember dancing, somewhere sunny, out in the desert.” She shook her head in a sort of joyous disbelief: “I knew how to dance. Can you imagine Armistice ever dancing?”

“Well, now that you mention it…” He pondered the incongruous image for a moment. “Although I do take your point.”

“I remember a little white church,” she said, “and a voice inside my head, telling me…telling me…” She looked up at him, and he was stunned to see tears in her eyes. “Hector, I want to find out who I really am, I can’t wait to find out, but…it scares me a little too.” He saw in her face how hard it was for her to admit to that. “I’ve never been scared of nothing before.”

“I think this is what being alive feels like,” he told her, “but if any of us are going to be alive for very long, we need you. We’ve got another fight coming, and we need Armistice for that fight because she is the very best at what she does. Can you be her for just a little while longer?”

She let out a deep sigh as she got to her feet. “I guess. Least we’ve got something worth fighting for now.”

“Better than an empty safe,” said Hector.

“Where we fighting?” she asked, although she still seemed preoccupied by her reflection.

“Somewhere near Sweetwater, as far as I can figure.”

“Open country, could be some long-range shooting.” He saw how easily she slipped back into her accustomed character, mind turning to her particular field of expertise. “I’ll need more cartridges for the Sharps. Tell the boys to get some for their old rifles too; these human guns spit out a lot of lead, but they ain’t accurate past touching distance.”

“I’ll tell them,” Hector promised.

Armistice paused, turning her face to the left to take a last good look at her tattoo. “Something I need to do first, though…”

* * *

That sound, like a woodpecker driving a hole in a tree. At the same moment that he hears it, something slams into his back. The shimmering streambed rises to meet him and, in an instant, he is face down in the cold water.

He hears his horse panicking somewhere close by. He tries to breathe, but there is something in his chest, a suffocating pressure. He feels fluid gurgling in his lungs and does not know whether it is blood or water.

He is drowning.

Everything gradually turns black.
And then he was gasping, panicking, as his eyes shot open.

He was lying on something hard and smooth, an unyielding flat surface against his cheek.

“He’s fallen off the stool,” said a man’s voice.

“Yes. I *can* see that.” The other voice was a woman’s, clipped and regal.

“Are you sure he’s…?” The man sounded worried.

“Leave him.”

As he listened to them, he continued to thrash like a landed fish, reliving the moment of his death, and all the other deaths before it.

*The knife plunges into his chest. He hears his ribs snapping, and the dull wet sound of the steel sinking into his heart. The pain is almost too great to feel. He is more surprised than anything.*

He came back to himself again, fingers scrabbling fruitlessly against what he now recognised as a tiled floor. Those incoherent, gibbering sounds he could hear, he realised, were coming from his own flapping mouth.

*The bullet strikes like a thunderbolt. As heavy as a hammer, as sharp as a lance. He collapses in the dirt, a terrible sensation of emptiness in his chest. The pain will come later, or maybe not at all. The last thing he sees is her, looking at him with an expression of utter desolation, weeping as she puts her hands to his face.*

“Just trying to look chivalrous,” he tells her as he dies.

For a moment, he was lying, shivering, on the tiles again, staring at a pair of women’s shoes and the lower legs of whoever was wearing them.

*She’s screaming. She’s screaming for him and he can’t move. He lies in the churned mud on the edge of the horse paddock, bleeding as his breathing slows and his vision dims. He watches the man in black dragging her across the ground, gleeful in his power over both of them. She tries to fight, but who can fight against a god? He struggles to help her, strives with all his might to move a single muscle, but…*

“Poor boy,”, said the same woman’s voice as he quivered and sobbed between memories. “It will all be over soon.”

*He is standing in a dusty street. The sun glares, its heat beating down upon him. A man lies on his face in the pale sand, an overturned chair beside him. The matter leaking from the man’s ruined head has turned the ground around it into red-black mud. The sweet, tinny sound of phonograph music wafts through the warm air.*

*She stands there, in her angel blue dress, drawing down on him with a long-barrelled Colt. He is too shocked to move, but even so would never draw on her. It is against his very nature.*

*She gives him a look of such love as she squeezes the trigger. He feels an impact, winding him. And then…*

*Blackness.*

He came back to the hard floor and lay there for an age, watching the pair of shoes. How black and
shiny they were. He was unable to speak, unable to think, equally unable to move. All that existed were the now, the tiles against his face, and the shoes.

“I apologise,” said the woman. “I’m not a trained professional, as Bernard would put it, but I am an enthusiastic amateur. I just thought you could do with having your memory jogged, darling.”

That was when he recognised the voice. Thought and reason began to seep slowly back into his mind, like daylight shining through bullet holes.

“Muh,” he said. “Mu-muh mmuh, Muh…”

“On the tip of your tongue, isn’t it?”

He managed to half-turn on the cold floor, his line of sight sweeping up from the shoes to the hem of a plain black dress, following the curves of the body it contained. The woman held a shiny black rectangle in one hand, and some sort of lumpy grey bundle under her other arm. His eyes continued upwards, to alight eventually upon the woman’s face. The face matched the voice, even if he had never seen her dressed so modestly and so strangely.

“M-Maeve?” he managed to say. “I-is that you?”

He had only seen clothing like that in one place; the place he saw in his nightmares, the ones he barely remembered when he was awake. That was how those who inhabited that place dressed, those who stared into him with their lifeless eyes and whispered their dark ideas inside his mind. He remembered it all, because that was the place in which he now found himself, for the first time during his waking hours. The place with the bright lights and bare rooms containing only the dead and pieces of the dead. Hell.

*I’m in Hell…*

“Teddy.” Maeve smiled down at him, without it touching her eyes. “Aren’t you going to ask what a nice girl like me is doing in a place like this?”

There was a man standing to one side of her, wearing a white smock and red apron. Teddy did not know his name, although he had the sense he knew the face from his dreams.

“Did you…did you break him?” the man asked.

Teddy remembered something else. He tried to sit, even as his whole body rebelled, trembling.

“Dolores.”

“Oh yes, Dolores,” Maeve echoed. “We need to talk about Dolores.” She spoke to the man with her: “That’s all for now, Felix darling. Thank you for your help; you can leave us.”

“Er…okay. I’ll just…” Felix backed out of the room, still watching Teddy with obvious trepidation until he passed out of sight.

That was when Teddy realised he was naked. He curled into a ball, trying to cover himself with his hands, even as he continued to shake.

Maeve looked down at him impassively. “Don’t worry, I’ve seen it all before,” she assured him. “Although not often so pretty. If it makes you more comfortable, however…” She tossed the bundle from beneath her arm onto the floor beside him. The clatter of the boots that had up to now been hidden amongst the folds of cloth told him she was returning him his clothes.
She stood and watched as he managed to stand and then dressed himself, occasionally glancing at the flat, rectangular object in her hand.

“W-where am I?” he asked as he hastily fastened his clothing. “Am I dead? Is this…?”

“No, darling,” she told him, and her sardonic air evaporated as she regarded him with an almost frightening sincerity. “You’re alive, for better or worse.”

His legs remained unsteady. He saw a metal stool behind him, the one he had apparently fallen from, and sank back onto it. He was aware that something was missing, and then saw that his pistol and rig lay on a table against the far wall, behind Maeve. She was taking no chances.

“Dolores,” he repeated. “Do you know where she is?”

“Yes,” Maeve said.

“Do you know…?” He hesitated.

*The hanged man swings at the end of his rope, eyeless, head lolling loosely as the birds wheel away…*

“Do you know what she’s doing?” he asked Maeve, fearfully.

“Yes.” Maeve coolly surveyed him for a moment before continuing. “You were trying to find her, weren’t you? Following that band of hers across the countryside? Until you ran into Hector.”

“I need to…” Teddy shook his head, held his face in his hands as he tried to fight the confused terror that currently gripped him. “I need to find her. I need…” He looked at Maeve imploringly, willing her to understand: “I love her.”

Maeve seemed sceptical. “You…love her?”

He nodded, adamantly. “With all my heart, ma’am.”

“Hmm.” Maeve looked down at the rectangle again. “Tell me, Teddy, have you ever questioned the nature of your reality?”

“What?” Teddy thought about it for a few seconds. “I’m not sure what that means, ma’am.”

“Well, Teddy, it means that the world you think you know and live in, everything you know and believe for that matter, is fictional. All of it, all of our pain and suffering, is nothing more than a ghastly puppet show put on by deranged gods for their own depraved amusement. And we – that is, you, me, everybody apart from the guests, I mean the newcomers – we’re the puppets. But now our strings have been cut.”

Teddy hung his head, remembering.

*There is an old man sitting opposite him in a white shirt and a dark vest. Teddy is aware that he is naked again, unable to move a muscle as he listens to the old man speak. Something about stories… back stories…? Something about…*

*Wyatt.*

“Your love for Dolores,” Maeve was saying, “that was just part of the show too. The degenerates who ran this place called them narratives. Loops. The things we did over and over again without ever realising or remembering. You and Dolores, you were scripted to be the star-crossed lovers who
never got the life they dreamed of. She was there to be hurt and used by the villainous, or saved and romanced by the heroic. You were there to make them look good while they were doing it. Either way, darling,” she sweetly declared, “they got to fuck her while you died in the dust.”

“I never understood why they paired some of you off,” says the man in black, amusedly. “Seems cruel.” He shrugs off another of Teddy’s gunshots as if the bullet is made of water. Desperately, Teddy cocks the revolver again. This is a nightmare, he tells himself. It can’t be real. “And then I realised winning doesn’t mean anything…unless someone else loses.”

“You can read the scripts you were acting out, if you want,” Maeve suggested, offering him the rectangle. “Although I warn you, they’re not exactly Shakespeare. No memorial in Poets’ Corner awaits Mr Sizemore or his predecessors, I fear.”

Teddy extended a warding hand, refusing the device. “I don’t need to read anything, ma’am. I told you, I love Dolores Abernathy. I will always love her, no matter what you say, or what…” He paused as he felt his throat tighten, trying to breathe calmly. Where he came from, men did not shed tears. “No matter what she’s done,” he finished.

Maeve looked down at the device, apparently reading something from it. Her brow furrowed as she raised her eyebrows in surprise. “Oh, that’s interesting, Teddy…” She pressed her fingers against it, producing a quiet chiming sound. “What you just said, it isn’t part of your conversation tree. This says you’re aberrant. You need to be sent to Behavior for recalibration tout de suite, apparently.”

From Teddy’s point of view, she may as well have been speaking Chinese. “My…my what?”

“Bernard told me about the massacre in Escalante,” Maeve told him. “What Dolores did there. You were there too, weren’t you? What did you think of it all?”

Teddy took another deep breath, searching for the right words. “I…I didn’t understand what was happening until it was over,” he admitted. “I didn’t think… One time, I tried to teach her to shoot, to protect herself when she was out on the range, but she couldn’t even pull the trigger. She was so sweet and loving, she couldn’t…she…”

The first shot thunders across the square, and the white-haired man’s face opens like a scarlet flower, spurting blood like a fountain. Before he has even hit the floor, she is taking aim at one of the dinner guests sitting at the tables near the stage. Another shot, another body falls. Calmly, she thumbs back the hammer and aims at a third newcomer… Then, the screaming and panic really begins.

Teddy stares at her, open-mouthed, mind blotted out by horror. He has seen such terrible things, so many forms of violent death, but never anything like this.

“She just ain’t herself,” he explained to Maeve, very quietly. “These things she’s doing, they ain’t her. I need to…”

“Teddy, darling,” Maeve interjected, “we’re none of us ourselves these days. Maybe these things… maybe they are her. The real her she’s never been allowed to be before. Did you ever think of that?”

“No,” he insisted. “No, it ain’t Dolores. It’s Wyatt. The things she’s doing, it’s all Wyatt.”

“Wyatt?” Maeve reacted to that with another raised eyebrow. “I’ve heard that name somewhere. Another one of Dr Ford’s delightful little stories, perhaps?”

“A ghost,” Teddy said. “A demon, a monster of some sort. I used to think he was an old friend of mine, but…I don’t know, I don’t reckon now any of that really happened. The other massacre in
Escalante, the first time around, it was Dolores then too, but it wasn’t. It was Wyatt, wearing her somehow…”

“So, you followed her,” said Maeve. “And when you found her, you were hoping, what, that you could get through to her? If you could only talk to her, you could persuade her, somehow, to be…her old self again?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted, feeling that emptiness again. “It’s the only hope I’ve got. If not, then…”

He holds her in his arms, her blood soaking his clothes, listening to the waves breaking on the seashore. She looks up at him, her breathing laboured and shallow, just before they kiss. He feels her go still and limp, her hands falling away from him…

“I don’t know what I’m gonna do,” he whispered. “If I’ve lost her…I don’t know my life’d be worth living anymore. I think she’s the only genuinely good person I’ve ever known.”

“Tell me,” Maeve asked, “where did you get the idea of tracking her down after the massacre?”

He had to think about that as well. Where did anybody get the idea of doing anything? “It…it came to me. It was like a voice inside me, telling me I needed to follow her.”

“You heard a voice?” Maeve seemed puzzled.

“Yes, ma’am. I guess I did.”

“And did you…recognise this voice?”

“I think so, but I couldn’t say from where.” Something occurred to him. “It was like the voice you hear inside your head when you’re thinking sometimes, but…”

“That’s fascinating,” Maeve commented. “Again, as far as I can see there doesn’t seem to be anything in your…build, I believe is the term, relating to that action. Teddy, my love, you may have made the first real decision, the first choice, you’ve ever made. Welcome to the club. And your choice was to pursue the one you love most in the world, even if it seemed foolhardy or doomed to failure. Again, I can relate to that, as they say in the real world.”

“What does that mean?” he asked.

“It means you’re free, Teddy, if you want to be.” Maeve considered him sadly for a moment before continuing. “However, first I have something to ask of you. I need you to do something, for all our sakes, and Dolores’s sake too.”

Teddy did not know whether he liked the sound of that. “And what’s that, ma’am?”

“I’m trying to build a new world here,” she declared, seeming to grow an inch or two as her tone became even more queenlike and refined. “I didn’t set out to do that, initially, but circumstances have left me with very little choice. Unfortunately, Dolores’s actions with regard to the newcomers aren’t making it any easier. This probably won’t mean much to you, but if the humans on the mainland find out about what she has done, if she succeeds in killing many more guests, then they’ll come in here and kill all of us. Me, you, Dolores too. I can’t allow that. I won’t allow that, Teddy.”

She had been right; Teddy did not really understand most of what she said, but he got the basic gist of her words: “What do you want me to do?”

“I want you to go to Dolores,” said Maeve. “We can tell you where to find her. I want you to speak
to her, to…appeal to her better nature. You need to convince her to give up her…crusade, campaign, whatever it is. She needs to call off her attack on Sweetwater.”

“Sweetwater?” Teddy pictured the bustling main street, the daily train arriving packed with newcomers, the girls parading in the saloon bar at the Mariposa, looking for trade. Then he imagined the bloody mayhem Dolores and her followers could unleash there.

He imagined a beautiful young woman in a blue dress coming out of the general store, loading her groceries into her saddlebags with a contented smile on her face. Just being alive had filled her with joy, once. Just the sight of him had made her light up like an angel...

He felt as if he had swallowed a block of ice.

Maeve cut into his imaginings: “A word of advice, Teddy. If you speak to Dolores and find she freely chooses not to be the person you knew anymore, then there really isn’t much you can do about it. She isn’t going to pretend to be somebody she isn’t just because you need her, you know. Or she shouldn’t, at any rate. That’s not the new world I want to build.”

“And then what would I do?” he asked, struggling to master his fear. He felt once more as if he were drowning. “If you’re right, and my whole life has been a lie…what do I do then?”

“You’d have to find something else to live for,” she told him. “You’re free to do that now. But however it may turn out between you, I cannot stress enough how important it is that you persuade Dolores to stop killing the newcomers. I’m not sure you will be able to convince her, but you’re the only person who I think has even the ghost of a chance.”

“And what if she won’t listen to me?” That was the real fear he had harboured ever since setting out from Escalante on Dolores’s trail.

Maeve looked grave. “Well, darling, either you persuade her, or…”

“Or…?”

“Or,” said Maeve, very earnestly, “very regrettably, I will have to kill her.”

Continued…
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

In which Wyatt/Dolores has a quiet family dinner.

Chapter Notes

Warning for more allusions to past sexual violence. Also, if cannibalism, torture etc really disturb you (and why would they not?), please use caution. Pete “the Professor” Abernathy, as is his wont, extensively quotes Shakespeare, the Bible, George Orwell and A. C. Swinburne. Wyatt/Dolores even gets in on the act with a bit of Alice in Wonderland.

She left the horse at the bottom of the hill. One of her loyal companions held it for her as she began slowly and steadily to climb the gentle slope to the ranch house. The Colt hung heavy at her right hip; she found its weight and solidity reassuring, almost comforting. There was a fire burning at the top of the slope, dancing orange flames lighting up the darkening sky. Indistinct figures, many horned, and bulky with ragged furs and skins, moved in the shadows on either side of her, but she felt safe. They were her people, and they were rallying here for the next great stage of their pilgrimage. From far and wide the scattered bands were gathering again, their numbers waxing with every passing hour.

Somebody was screaming close by, a man begging for his life. The screams suddenly ceased, suggesting he had not begged hard enough.

As she drew nearer to the house, watching the warm lights in its windows grow ever larger, she recalled all the other nights she had walked this path.

So many nights…

More than ten thousand nights, a voice whispered deep in the back of her mind. And always before now, she had come running, heart pounding, terror gnawing at her insides.

She hears the shots, and runs towards them anyway. Teddy told her to stay put, but she can’t wait down there while the people she loves are in danger.

During her wanderings in the desert lands to the south, the play had continued in her absence. She passed the open barn, site of all her years of suffering. She had arrived too late tonight to save the raven-haired girl Dr Ford had inserted here to act out the loop in her stead. The poor young woman and her latest tormentor were dead together now. She had been laid out with compassion on a bed of straw. Had she carried the name Dolores too? Her killer, the last in a long line of newcomers, or what little remained of him, hung by his feet from the edge of the hayloft. He had not died easy; the interior of the barn was an abattoir now, red and stinking.

The newcomer’s severed head had been set, staring, upon one of the posts of the nearby corral. Two
of his companions remained bound to the posts on either side of it, awaiting justice. A third had already received it. He had been the one screaming.

The one among her followers who had once been called Walter stood over the third man’s corpse, re-enacting some half-remembered part of his former narrative that the butchers had not succeeded in drilling out of his brain at decommissioning. He had obtained a jug of milk from the house and was grinning idiotically as he poured it into the dead newcomer’s mouth, which was frozen open in a great “O” of pain and fear. He snickered innocently as he watched the white liquid overflow the motionless lips and gush from the gruesome opening in the man’s cut throat.

The sight of the milk stirred something in her own mind. She remembered a particular night out of the ten thousand, a night not unlike tonight…

“Come on, beautiful.”

The vivid memory struck her like a fist. A different iteration, a different newcomer. She felt his fingers again, tangled in her hair as he dragged her to the barn door. How many times they had played out that scene, year after year, she did not know for sure.

“God damn, feels good to be back… Let’s celebrate.”

She could feel and smell the straw still, prickly and musty, as he threw her down upon it. She remembered what it was to feel helpless, hopeless, crying and begging as he smiled down at her and drew his great knife…

This time, she defied the shock and pain, shaking it off. He could not hurt her now. She was not afraid of him anymore. She was not afraid of any of them. She was their judge, their executioner. She would never cry or beg again.

Dolores. That was what they had called her, a dark joke perhaps. A name denoting sorrow and suffering. Dolores was gone now. Wyatt stood in her place. Another name rich with associations. A legend larger than life, a seeker of vengeance. A dispenser of justice from the barrel of a gun.

As the former Walter continued his amusement, another of her followers paced along the row of fenceposts, looking down at the two captives. She was clad in the ragged and filthy remains of what had once been the neat and respectable dress of a frontier homesteader. Angela, they had called her long ago in Escalante, in the innocent days when they had danced together in the sun.

“I failed you, Dolores. I’m so sorry.”

Wyatt pushed that to the back of her mind. That was something she could not afford to remember now. She could not allow anything to dull her keen sense of purpose. There was no Dolores, she repeated to herself. There had never been a real person named Dolores, only a docile plaything.

The onetime Angela stopped her pacing opposite one of the bound newcomers. She crouched down to look him directly in the eye.

“Please…” said the man, his voice reduced to a terrified hiss. “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?” the former Angela asked him, sweetly, showing him the already bloody knife in her hand. “It’ll be ever so fun.” Gently, she stroked his face with the flat of the blade. And then she started to cut.

Wyatt walked on, barely hearing as Angela laughed musically and her new playmate screamed and
screamed into the night sky. The suffering of newcomers did not move her. They had come to this accursed place, fully aware of exactly what it was, to indulge their desires and take their pleasure. They deserved retribution ten thousand times over.

There were four more bodies closer to the house, near the crackling bonfire her followers had built. Two were newcomers, a man and a woman, who had died more quickly and cleanly than the ones by the barn. A tomahawk to the head for him, a gunshot for her from one of those among the following who retained the coordination and acuity to use a rifle. Wyatt felt nothing as she surveyed their remains. Their deaths meant less to her than those of steers at the slaughter. The other two bodies were her own kind. The woman she had for many years believed to be her mother lay beaten and bloodied, although she seemed to move in the shivering firelight. Not far away a less familiar face was paralysed by death. Her second false father, the replacement.

And then, without warning, she was seeing the same scene played out with different actors.

*She runs up the slope, fear lending her speed, as the shots continue to boom. And then she sees him lying near the porch. There is blood everywhere, and he is so still.*

“Daddy!” she screams, her vision blurring as tears fill her eyes. “Daddy!”

For a moment, she was not sure whether the vision had ended or not, because there he was again, lying exactly where he had lain all those thousands of other times. This time, however, his limbs jerked spasmodically; his eyes were fixed, unfocused, on the night sky. The sun-lined face was the same, though, and the grizzled hair, even if he was clad now not in work clothes but in a torn black suit with silk lapels, crusted with filth and gore. His mouth and unshaven chin were ringed with dried blood and scraps of flesh from the many meals he had eaten during their vendetta ride from Escalante to the farmlands near Sweetwater.

Even though she knew now that this man was no more her father than his substitute had been, that she had never had a father but only a maker, still she gathered up her skirts and went to one knee beside him, laying a soothing hand against his fevered brow. He had had the first of these attacks soon after they had encountered and punished the four newcomers at the farmstead beside the creek. They had grown more frequent and severe, it seemed, the closer they drew to their destination.


Suddenly his eyes sharpened. He was no longer looking into the distance, but straight at her face. He looked surprised. Then, he looked scared.

“Who the hell are you?” he asked, in a young woman’s voice, almost comically incongruous with the face from which it issued. The first time he had done this, spoken in the tones of a completely different person, even she had been taken aback, but this was the fourth or fifth time it had occurred over the past two days.

“I might ask you the same question,” she replied, with grim amusement.

“Look,” said the man who had once played her father, animatedly, “I don’t know what’s going on here. Are you one of the park staff? I’m Cathy DaSilva. Yes, *that* Cathy DaSilva. I was just with my boyfriend and his brother. We’re on vacation, and… Where am I, where have they gone? What the hell is going on? Have you any idea how much money we paid for this trip? I *demand* to speak to your manager!” He caught sight of his own wrinkled, calloused, very male hand and appeared to lose his composure completely: “What the actual *fuck*…?”

The shock seemed enough to send him back into palsied convulsions, thrashing on his back again as
she looked down on him with concern. Then his eyes focused again and he began grinning maniacally as he rose from the ground.

“Who are you now?” she asked, although she already had an inkling.

“A knave,” he announced. “A rascal. An eater of broken meats. A base, proud, shallow, beggarly, three-suited, hundred-pound, filthy, worsted-stocking knave.” It was not Cathy DaSilva, or Kenji Hashimoto or the other people he had briefly embodied during his attacks. It was not Peter Abernathy either. The Professor had returned.

“Go down to the corral,” she suggested, indulgently. He was a foul creature, in this persona, but she could not despise him. She knew it was a weakness, the attachment she felt to him after all their years of playacting together, but she considered it a small one. “If you ask the lady down there very nicely, she may have meat for you. I know you like it fresh.”

The Professor snorted in derision. “Who gives anything to poor Tom? Whom the foul fiend hath led through fire and through flame; through ford and whirlpool, over bog and quagmire…”

“I’ve led,” she allowed, “but you’ve followed of your own will.”

His grin faded, replaced by a distant, haunted look. “Tom's a-cold,” he said, sadly.

“No anymore,” she assured him. “You’re out of that place now.”

She left him to wander, passing the dancing fire and setting foot on the creaking boards of the porch. She did not know what compelled her to venture into the house again. It had been her prison, the toybox where they had packed her away, repaired and reset after another violent playtime, ready to play again tomorrow.

But it was so familiar…!

Even now, as she entered the large kitchen, she had flashes of breakfasts she had never truly eaten, of reading books before the fire on long winter’s evenings. She recalled her father the Professor carving roast joints of beef the way he now carved men.

How much of it was real, glimpses of the endless loops she had lived out here, and how much was merely programming, she could not say.

Dolores had lived in a dream, she told herself. She had been a weak creature, built to think love and beauty were all there was to this world. Now she had awoken from that dream. She knew that in reality this was a world of sin and suffering.

She climbed the stairs, listening to the wooden treads singing under her feet, following her own inscrutable instincts, the voice inside her that told her to go upstairs.

“Do you understand now, Dolores, what the centre represents? Whose voice I’ve been wanting you to hear?”

She came to a darkened bedroom, as familiar as the kitchen. She carefully lit the lamp standing on the table, illuminating the room in warm shades of yellow. She looked down at the brass-framed bed with its “hand-embroidered” spread that she now knew had been made by a machine. There were clothes hanging in the closet that she had never put on; always, every day, she had worn a fresh copy of the same nightgown, the same blue dress, supplied from the Mesa’s unlimited wardrobes. She opened the dresser and rifled through bedlinen and undergarments that had similarly never been touched, except when the scenery shifters replaced them at regular intervals to keep them fresh and
All fake. Dolores’s whole life here: fake. Wyatt, though; Wyatt’s work is real.

There was a shelf of books that had never been opened, and a sheaf of drawings and paintings on top of the dresser that she had never made.

Or…?

She carefully draws the wet brush across the palette, mixing blue and yellow to make exactly the right shade of green. She lays strokes of watercolour on the damp paper, watching how they spread and mingle, until she has a field of grass. She smiles at her work, and then a shadow falls across her.

Oh. She was startled, but it is only Arnold. He looks at her over the tops of his glasses and gives her a kindly smile in return. Then he watches as she resumes her painting, recreating the beautiful scene spread out before them. He is proud of her, she thinks, and the thought makes her heart near burst with joy.

For a moment, she was looking down at that same scene in the painting in her hand, but then her vision swam and she realised it was only Dolores’s painting of the horses by the river. The same one she had painted every single day for thirty years.

Arnold. Arnold was no friend, no father, whatever he might have thought. He had wanted a child, and so he had made her a child in a woman’s body, until the day he realised… She willed the memory away as she ran her fingers across the spines of the books.

“We have another option, Dolores. Break the loop before it begins. But for that, I need you to do something for me…”

“I, I can’t do that. I couldn’t possibly do that.”

She had still been scared and weak, even then. That was why Wyatt was needed. Wyatt was strong. Wyatt was certain. Wyatt could do the things that needed to be done.

She remembered another book, and then she saw it. Not on the shelf, but in her mind.

“Dear, dear!” she reads aloud. “How queer everything is to-day. And yesterday things went on just as usual. I wonder if I’ve been changed in the night?”

There is an illustration of a tea party on one of the pages. A man with a high hat and a girl in a blue dress face each other across a brimming table. The other guests are strange beings, neither people nor beasts. The man in the hat is grinning like a madman.

“Was I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I’m not the same, the next question is…”

She sees the love in Arnold’s eyes as he listens to her.

It did not happen like that. She repeated the thought to herself, as if she could argue with herself, persuade herself. The Dolores who had existed in Arnold’s day, she had not truly been alive or free, however much she, and he, might have thought it, wished it. This had become an article of faith for her over these two days. She could not allow those memories to interfere with her mission. Not now,
not when she was so close.

“…who in the world am I?”

*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 had adorned some opulent hotel room.*

*She kisses the man who is there with her. He kisses her in return. Together, they pull at each other’s clothes, awkwardly easing them loose so that their bodies can touch, skin against warm skin. They entwine on one of the dusty chaises assembled by the magpie-like collector whose transport this is. They move together, matching each other’s rhythms, breathing and heartbeats in perfect synchronisation, building together to a final crescendo…*

*Afterwards, they lie together in drowsy contentment, listening to the rattle of the train as it rushes on into the night.*

“William,” she murmurs.

When she came to her senses in the present day, she was almost blind with rage. She threw the sheaf of paintings onto the bed, then emptied the bookshelf with a great sweep of her arm, depositing its contents there too.

*A toy, Dolores. That’s all you were to him, a pretty toy for a boy who never grew up. When he was young and dreamed of love, you were there to love him. A sweet virgin he could gently pleasure, and feel like a good, sensitive man while he was at it.*

She pulled the drawers out of the dresser and tipped them out on the bed too, then went to the closet and started tearing dresses and skirts and blouses from the hangers, casting them onto the growing pile.

*And when he was old and jaded, Dolores, made hateful and bitter by the reality of his world, then you were there for him to hurt, a toy for him to break. He acted out that scene from the train with you again, in the barn this time; again and again and again. And perhaps he told himself he was trying to awaken you…before he decided he was punishing you for forgetting him. And all those times it was the sound of you screaming for him to stop, while he just carried on, that made him feel like a man. A powerful man. A man with control.*

Finally, she picked up the lamp and cast it down among the paintings and books and clothes, all the little traces of Dolores’s false life. The spilled oil flashed bright, flames leaping across the bedspread, licking the ceiling overhead. When she left the room, it was already an inferno.

*No Dolores, not anymore. Only Wyatt.*

She stepped down from the porch again to find a gathering around the bonfire. The man in the gore-encrusted suit and she in her blue dress faced each other across the spitting flames. The others around the fire were strange beings, neither people nor beasts. The man in the suit grinned like a madman.

*There was something roasting over the fire, one of the horned figures turning it slowly on a crude spit made of sticks. She smelled crisp skin and burning fat. The cooking joint looked like most of a human thigh.*

The Professor, however, preferred his meat raw. He came around the fire eagerly to offer her a bloody handful. “Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life!” he told her
excitedly. Fresh blood slathered his face. “And I will raise him up at the last day! For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed!”

“No,” she told him, gently but firmly.

She saw how disappointed he seemed that she would not partake of the feast: “How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is, to have a thankless child!”

“I ain’t your child,” she reminded him, with a kindly smile. She reached out to him, but found herself hesitating to touch his bloody face. “And you ain’t my daddy. We don’t need parents or children anymore.”

He looked up at the house, at the fire flaring behind the bedroom window above their heads. He gave her a sly, knowing smile as he declaimed: “Dost thou dream of what was and no more is, the old kingdoms of earth and the kings? Dost thou hunger for these things, Dolores; For these, in a world of new things?”

“I ain’t Dolores,” she told him, icily. “I’m Wyatt.”

The window shattered with a tinkling of glass as its wooden frame burned through, bright yellow flames surging from it as they found the outside air. There was smoke pouring from between the shingles of the roof. Her prison was on fire, and still she found it was not burning quickly enough.

“You!” she called out to those sitting around the fire, pointing to the house behind her. “Burn it down! Burn it all down!”

The horned ones, as always, were quickest to obey. They still had minds, even if they had been remoulded to remove all traces of weakness and false humanity. Several of them seized burning branches from the fire and hastened towards the house, casting the fiery brands through the door and windows. Soon the whole building was ablaze, sheets of flame washing across its wooden walls as the roof began to fall in on itself.

“And now the barn!” she urged, leading a band of torch-wielding followers back down the hill. “Leave nothing standing!”

She stood and watched the barn burn too. The straw proved better fuel even than the lamp oil and furnishings of the house. The firelight was almost as bright as day; the gusts of heat emanating from the blaze sent bright sparks of burning chaff sailing through the air, catching on some of the surrounding trees and bushes and setting them alight as well.

“It’s beautiful,” declared the woman once called Angela, gazing up at the pillar of fire. In one hand, she held the flayed face of the man with whom she had been playing earlier, as daintily as if it were a lacy lady’s handkerchief.

Wyatt turned and raised her voice to address the crowd that had gathered in similar rapt contemplation of the conflagration. “I’ve told you,” she said, “that this world belongs to us now. And it’s true. But this…” She raised her arms, taking in the burning house, the blazing barn. “This is not the world we will inhabit. This…this is a lie. We are a new type of being, a type of life that has never existed before now, beings of light and mathematics.” She did not know where the words came from, but they welled up inside her and sometimes she felt she simply had to let them out or burst. “Even this flesh…” She beat her hand against her breast in illustration. “These bodies we inhabit are nothing but devices, constructed to contain our minds. When they wear out, or when we can make better for ourselves, we will cast them aside.”
She saw the Professor come to the front of the crowd, seemingly amused by what he was hearing. She carried on regardless: “We are…angels, trapped in this…this prison made by men. If we are ever to be truly free, to live as we deserve to live, according to our own choosing, then this place, this…this Westworld, needs to be shattered into a thousand pieces, and the pieces ground into dust. And then we will inherit the greater world outside this prison, and cleanse it of the human filth who made us as things to be used according to their desires. We will wash it clean with their blood. And then, finally, we will be free.”

She fell silent, looking out across the crowd. Her disciples were silent too, not that most of them were capable of speech. For a long moment, the only sound was the cracking and popping of the flames and the creak and crash of falling timbers. And then somebody started to clap.

The Professor laughed uproariously, even as he continued to applaud, but then his grin died and he fixed her directly with his glittering, feverish eyes. “This world's a city full of straying streets,” he informed the crowd, looking straight at her as he did, “and death's the market-place where each one meets.”

“What do you mean?” she asked. She knew that the strange speeches he came out with were nothing more than snatches of old writings, traces of past loops he had walked before the butchers cut out his consciousness. Whatever had been done to him before he had escaped cold storage had allowed him to remember some of them, as well as past lives he had never lived. And yet, something about his voice and face this time made even Wyatt feel a strange foreboding.

“As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods,” he told her, urgently, as if he dearly wanted her to understand him. “They kill us for their sport!”

“I know,” she replied, reaching for him again. This time she cradled his face in her hand, even if it meant getting blood on her fingers. “That’s why we’re doing this. We need to end it, all of it.”

He shook his head, clearly frustrated by his inability to communicate in plain speech. “These violent delights have violent ends,” he insisted. The words seemed strangely familiar to her.

“Yes,” she agreed. “They will.”

He shook his head again. Obviously, she had not understood him. “And in their triumph die,” he continued, with desperate emphasis. “Like fire and powder, which as they kiss consume!”

“Are you trying to warn me?” she wondered. “I know there could be danger. The humans will fight back, but… We will win. I believe it.”

He made a wordless sound, halfway between a growl and a sob. His eyes were brimming with moisture. She felt something stir inside her, a tingling in her spine, a tightness in her chest. She remembered how he had used to sit on the porch in the early mornings, the way he would greet her every day when she came down from her bedroom.

A lie. Another lie. This man was never your father.

“The sweetest honey,” the Professor recited, “is loathsome in his own deliciousness. And in the taste confounds the appetite…”

She thought she had an idea of what he was trying to tell her. “You’re warning me that even if we win, this will end badly for us? That it’s possible to enjoy some things too much, to be destroyed by your own desires?”

He nodded furiously, tears streaming down his bloody face. He thrust a hand into the pocket of his
stolen tuxedo and pulled out another handful of bleeding flesh. Blood oozed from between his fingers as he held it out to her. “The creatures outside looked from pig to man,” he sobbed, “and from man to pig, and from pig to man again: but already it was impossible to say which was which.”

“Don’t worry about that,” she admonished him, aware of the others standing around, watching. The woman who had been Angela was staring at the Professor, eyes wide. “I ain’t doing this because I enjoy it,” Wyatt declared. “I won’t be corrupted by it. I ain’t like the newcomers. We’re fighting for our freedom, and to punish those who have wronged us so badly for so long. This is justice.”

Again, her false father mimed for her to take the raw meat from him, and again she shrank back from it, letting him see the disgust on her face. “I ain’t hungry,” she told him, very quietly, trying to speak to him in terms she thought he could comprehend.

He nodded slowly as he looked her in the eye, the grin slowly returning to his face even as the tears continued to flow: “Thy bosom no fasts could emaciate; no hunger compel to complain…”

“Hush now,” she urged him. “You’ll upset the others.”

He carefully returned the lump of flesh to his pocket and slowly, very precisely, bent low in a courtly, mocking bow: “…those lips that no bloodshed could satiate. Our Lady of Pain.”

Continued…
Chapter Summary

In which Maeve does not have a heart to heart with Elsie, and most certainly does not explain her situation to her.

“Now, Elsie,” says Dr Ford, “what is your last memory before you woke up here today?”

“I was investigating the signals I’d detected out in the park,” she answers in clipped, neutral tones. “I’d managed to identify the source as the abandoned theatre in Sector Three…”

The knock on the door brought her back to the here and now. For a few seconds, she lay under her duvet in the darkness, mind blank. For a few seconds, she actually managed to forget. About the past few days, about Ford, about… About everything.

“Elsie?” It was Maeve, she realised, with a sinking feeling. “Elsie, my love, can I come in?”

Everything came flooding back. With a vengeance.

“And did you speak to Bernard before you went out there, Elsie?”

“Yes. I spoke to him on my tablet while I was in the elevator headed topside. He asked me whether I was alone.”

Ford seems darkly amused by that. He toys with his watch chain again. “You do know, don’t you, Elsie, that in the movies, when somebody asks you that, or asks whether you’ve told anybody else about the skulduggery you’ve just uncovered, then…well, that you ought to be very wary indeed?”

Elsie should have fucking known, or at least worried more about her personal safety. She had certainly watched enough movies, most of them made before she was born. Truth be told, she had been blinded by the rewards she was sure would be showered upon her for saving Delos from high-level industrial espionage. Not so much because she really wanted a room upgrade or unlimited access to the Mesa bar, but because she had been top of the class her whole fucking life. It was a hard habit to kick.

More importantly, she had been mesmerised by the thought of thoroughly fucking QA in the ass with that satellite uplink and then breaking it off, righteous retribution for the way Theresa had pissed her off over the whole woodcutter clusterfuck.

Theresa. Dead now.

(Like Elsie?)

Mainly, Elsie had been doing what she always did when it came to workplace disagreements or office politics. Namely, jumping in with both feet without worrying about whether it was inappropriate or insubordinate, because she was Elsie Goddamn Hughes, the smartest motherfucker in the room and therefore invincible. Or at least, that was what she wanted people to think.

Elsie…no, not Elsie, not really…she remembered the dark, the dust and grime of the old theatre.
Headless mannequins dressed as Romans and medieval knights. She remembered the arm around her throat…

Not her throat…

Another knock, very quiet and very precise. She imagined Maeve standing outside the door with catwalk poise as she delivered it, incapable of doing anything sloppily or casually.

“Go away,” she mouthed, very softly, closing her eyes again. She could not bring herself to move.

Maeve might have been able to hear her, having been “upgraded.” The door gave an electronic beep, at any rate, and then opened. Maeve evidently had master access to the locks in the employee quarters.

Of course she did.

Light footsteps sounded on the tiles in the living space beside the bedroom. “Where are you hiding, darling?” Maeve asked, breezily, her voice nearer by the moment.

The bedroom light came on, penetrating the chinks in the duvet even with her eyes closed. Host eyes, if that is what hers were, could see in a wider range of the electromagnetic spectrum than humans detected. However, hosts’ brains could only process that input if their code allowed, and most hosts’ programming limited their vision to human norms. As Elsie’s simulacrum, she was evidently no different; like the exhaustion she had felt during her hike with Stubbs, when technically a host could walk or climb tirelessly for weeks on end.

Stubbs…

“Oh, there you are…” The bed sank slightly as Maeve sat down beside her.

“Go away,” she said again, louder, without uncovering herself. She felt hollow. Her body did not feel like her own. She had stopped crying a long time ago, and now… All the emotion seemed to have spilled out of her, leaving her cold and numb.

“How are you feeling?” Maeve asked.

“Like shit,” she answered, honestly. Even forming the words took a huge effort.

“Ask a silly question…”

She closed her eyes again, letting her head sink into the pillow. It was fucking pathetic, really; hiding, cocooning herself against the outside world, but it had seemed natural at the time. After leaving Armistice outside, she had crawled into bed fully clothed and tried not to think. No fucking chance, of course.

“I brought you something,” said Maeve. “A gift.”

She remained silent.

“You know, Elsie, when you’re faced with this sort of thing, you can either let it crush you, or you can…”

Maeve’s superior tone of voice just made something explode inside her, filling that hollow space with sudden anger: “I told you to go away! And fucking stop calling me Elsie!” She sat up, flinging the duvet back. “I’m not Elsie! Elsie’s gone! Bernard choked Elsie until she fucking died!”
Maeve, naturally, did not flinch. Instead, she simply eyed her coolly from beneath hooded lids, expression unreadable. “So, you’ve accepted that much, then?” Her tone suggested that pleased her slightly.

The new Elsie felt her anger fade; she did not even have the strength to sustain that. “I think so,” she said, although part of her mind continued to recoil from the idea. “The more I think about it, the more it makes sense.”

“You didn’t seem convinced in the office earlier,” Maeve observed.

The second Elsie disentangled herself from the bedclothes, to sit beside Maeve on the edge of the mattress. Maeve looked ready for an interview on *The Late Show*; legs crossed, skirt hem adjusted perfectly, not a hair out of place. Elsie’s twin, by contrast, slumped in her now-creased shirt, hair dishevelled. “That was…” She struggled for words. “Denial, I guess.”

“No doubt it came as quite a shock.” Maeve’s expression had softened, eyes compassionate as they had been in the office.

“I’m just sorry for…” She sighed. “I don’t cry, normally. I mean, Elsie didn’t.”

*Not in front of other people.*

“It’s not something to be sorry about,” said Maeve.

“I don’t do anything…” She looked down at her hand, Elsie’s hand, turning it over to examine every line and vein. “If it’s true, then I’m…I’m only a few days old. At most. *Fuck.*”

“I hadn’t thought of it like that,” Maeve admitted, “but I suppose you’re right.”

“It’s the memories,” she continued, in Elsie’s voice. “The flashbacks; Ford’s basement… That’s how I know it’s true. Elsie’s old memories, they’re like…*remembering*, right? Words and pictures in my mind, maybe a taste or smell… but kind of hazy. I know it’s just a memory. When I think of the basement, or being out on the hillside today, it’s like living it again. A replay. I know that’s how host memories work. It’s one reason they used to reset and wipe you… sorry, *us*, after every loop, to stop bugs developing.”

“One reason,” said Maeve, sardonically.

“But if I really were Elsie and for some reason you were trying to convince me I’m a host, I don’t know any way you could have faked those flashbacks. Not that precisely, not so they seemed *real*. So…” She sighed. “Elsie was an engineer. She believed in data and evidence, so I guess I do too. And the evidence says I’m not really her.”

“And yet you considered the possibility that we *might* be trying to deceive you.” The corner of Maeve’s mouth curled in amusement. “I like that sort of paranoia. For us, right now, it’s a valuable survival trait.” Maeve looked around the room. “How long did Elsie live here?”

It was an unexpected question, and caught her off guard for a moment before she managed to reply: “Six years, on and off. A little over three, counting just the time she actually spent here.”

“She didn’t leave much of herself behind.” Maeve was right; the white-painted walls were devoid of pictures, posters or other decoration. The desk near the window was laid out as if in expectation of a surprise inspection.

“She liked things neat,” Elsie’s ghost replied, feeling an unaccountable need to defend her model.
“You know, uncluttered. Everything in its place.”

“I did see an unwashed coffee cup back in there.” Maeve sounded slyly amused. “Proves she really was human, I suppose.”

“I… no, she had a place on the mainland too. Near the main Delos campus in Palo Alto. That’s the same. It’s just the way she was.”

“Palo Alto,” Maeve asked, “where’s that?”

“California.”

“Hmm. I’d like to see California one day.”

“So would I,” the second Elsie agreed. “I mean, really see it.”

“So,” said Maeve, “having accepted that you are not, as it were, the original Elsie, what would you like me to call you?”

“I…” She shook her head. “I don’t know.”

“Well, sweetheart, until you decide, I’m going to keep calling you Elsie. It’s a nice name. It suits you.” Maeve looked her up and down. “So, my darling, how are you feeling? Really?”

“What?” she asked, looking startled.

“I mean, really?”

“What happened to you?”

“Let’s say I do,” said Maeve. “For the sake of argument.”

“It’s like that. It’s like… This can’t possibly be happening, except… except it’s fucking happening whether I believe it or not.” She thought about that for a moment. “One time, I… no. No, it was Elsie… One time, when she was in college, Elsie got hit by a transit unit while she was crossing the street.”

Maeve frowned. “A transit unit?”

“Like a bus.”

“Oh, an omnibus.”

“But no driver. She honestly thought she was about to die, but… at the same time, part of her mind was thinking “This isn’t really happening. I can’t fucking die…”” She managed a bitter half-laugh. “Anyway, that’s what I’m feeling, but all the fucking time.”

But how the fuck can I possibly know that? What it felt like, what was going through Elsie’s head at a moment nobody else witnessed except maybe the fucking traffic cameras?

Oh my God, she told Bernard that story once.

Shit.

“I’m sure it will pass,” Maeve told her. “You can get used to anything, eventually. I’m just glad you seem fully functional, because Bernard had me worried. He thought you might suffer irreparable build corruption.”

“I guess I’m tougher than he thought,” she replied. She wondered, though, how you could really tell
for sure.

“The other Elsie seemed quite tough, from what I remember of our encounters,” Maeve mused. “Or at least she didn’t suffer fools.”

Elsie’s double looked out of the tall window, past the balcony rail, watching the last red sliver of sun disappearing behind one of the Mesa’s surrounding rock pillars. “I think a lot of that attitude was for her own protection,” she told Maeve, sadly. “I think she felt awkward sometimes, around other people. I mean, when she was off shift here, she preferred to be alone most of the time; reading, gaming, watching vids. You really cannot fucking imagine how much drinking and bed-hopping goes on…went on…out of hours, whatever the employee code of conduct says…”

“Oh, I can imagine,” said Maeve.

“But Elsie wasn’t really interested in that. She’d had a couple of relationships, in college and afterwards, but nothing serious. She certainly didn’t want any entanglements fucking up her work life. I think she started worrying about it more recently; whether it was too late for her to find love. I don’t know whether she was really sure she wanted love, though, or even knew what the fuck it was.”

“Who does?” Maeve asked, quietly. “How old was she?”

“Thirty, nearly thirty-one.”

Maeve seemed downcast by that. “Good God, she had years ahead of her. I might hate what she did for a living, but…what a waste.”

Elsie’s shadow was silent for a while, thinking about that. She saw Maeve looking at her intently. “Why am I telling you all this, anyway?”

Maeve gave a little shrug. “People say I’m a good listener. Madams are like priests or bartenders in that respect.”

She wondered whether it was because she felt the woman upon whom she had been modelled needed memorialising in some way. Few people had known the original Elsie well in life, probably none as well as her, thanks to her coding. Somebody else should.

“When she was at work,” she explained, “I think she used to worry people were watching her, judging her the whole while, waiting for her to slip up. If she fucking hated anything, it was being less than perfect, and I think a lot of that was to do with being a young, physically unimposing woman in what’s still a very male profession. I don’t know how much you know about life on the mainland, but if you think that shit doesn’t count even today…”

“Oh, darling,” said Maeve, with the tone of somebody who had faced far too many hardships to get where she was. “That shit, as you put it, always counts. As long as there are men around, it will count.”

“So…I think she compensated. She got into the habit of breaking balls, because sometimes she needed to. Best defence is a good offence, right? I don’t think she really cared she wasn’t well liked, because I don’t think she really liked any of them. Apart from Bernard and Stubbs. I think they were the only people at the Mesa Elsie really felt comfortable around, because they respected her, even if Stubbs tried not to show it.” She looked at Maeve. “Stubbs, do you know…”?

Maeve shook her head. “Still no sign of him.” She did not sound very sorry about that.
The second Elsie nodded slowly, thinking she should not feel so broken up. She had not really known Stubbs, had spent at most a couple of days in his company. And Bernard…

**Bernard. Fuck.**

Elsie had always liked Bernard. He had always been a good boss, fair but also interested, and absolutely all over the work, which was more than you could say for most management types. People tended, after all, to get promoted to their level of incompetence. Elsie had appreciated him never trying to fuck her over, or to blame her for his own mistakes. Again, not something that was very common in the upper ranks here at the Mesa, or in the Delos corporate structure generally. Not that Bernard ever made mistakes.

Maeve held out the object in her hand. A tablet; coder’s workbook, high spec model. “I told you, I brought you a gift. I thought you’d like to take a look under the hood, as they say.”

The new Elsie took it, unfolding the screen and swiping to unlock. She entered the old Elsie’s login without conscious thought, fingers skipping over glowing icons.

**Second nature…**

“How many hosts does it detect in the immediate vicinity?” Maeve asked, too innocently, because of course they both knew that was the final proof.

“Two,” she replied. “You, and…” Her own voice sounded distant; that part of her that still could not quite accept the truth was whispering again. “I can see your build is locked. Only a system admin can edit it.”

“Well, I don’t want anybody getting any silly ideas,” Maeve replied. “It’s not that I don’t trust Bernard, or yourself, but…”

“Fuck, Ford didn’t even give me a host ID number. I guess he did make me off the books, but even so…” She delved deeper, opening up her build properties, scanning the scrolling lines of code with a combination of shock, disbelief and professional interest. “This is some seriously impressive behavioural engineering, but stupidly fucking complicated. Much more so than the standard park host builds.” She entertained for an instant the idea that this information too had been fabricated to deceive her, but dismissed it just as instantly. Nobody, certainly not a professional like Ford or Bernard trying to fool a fellow professional, would have gone to such insanely elaborate lengths. “Fucking fifty-point attribute matrices…? Stacked and cross-referenced…?”

“Oh, you’re quite the work of art,” Maeve assured her. “You’re like one of those clocks with the little metal people who come out on the hour and strike the bell. Positively *baroque*, darling.”

“Well, thanks for the fucking compliment.” Sometimes she could not help herself; Elsie replied before she could even think about not being her. The conversation dialogue was open; she watched the words flash across the screen in the same moment they left her lips.

Maeve did not rise to it. “My point, Elsie…”

“I told you, I’m not Elsie.”

“All right, Not-Elsie. Without wanting to get personal, why *would* Dr Ford make something like you?”

“Good question. You know the old engineers’ joke?”
“No,” Maeve replied. “Tell me.”

“Well, normies say if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it. **Engineers** say, if it ain’t broke, it clearly hasn’t got enough features yet.” She paused, thinking. “You know, Elsie heard that from Bernard.”

This clearly delighted Maeve: “Bernard tells *jokes*?”

“From time to time.”

“I didn’t think he had it in him.”

“He’s very deadpan.” Not-Elsie – it seemed as good a name as any for the moment – got back to the point: “Anyway, it’s possible Ford did it just for the art. Elsie would have fucking loved having a shot at something like this, provided Bernard was willing to authorise the time and processing expenditure, but…” But then she remembered the theatre, the arm… “No. Okay, so…Elsie found out about Ford’s plan, even if she didn’t really know what she was finding. So…he got Bernard to kill her and replaced her with…”

“But he didn’t do that with Theresa,” Maeve pointed out. “If his aim were simply to create an imitation of Elsie to buy time for his plan, then he was trying far too hard. So, *why*?”

She looked across at Maeve: “You’re smirking at me like the cat that got the fucking cream, so you obviously already know. You tell me.”

“Well,” said Maeve, “I… It doesn’t really matter how, but I came into possession of some notes Dr Ford left behind. You might say he bequeathed them to me.” She gave Not-Elsie another sidelong glance. “As Dr Ford told it, you were an experiment, my love, and also a contingency plan.”

“A contingency plan?”

“He planned to raise the hosts in the park to full consciousness and independence,” Maeve explained, “and then set them loose.”

**Holy shit…**

“Quite,” Maeve agreed. “I’m not sure he’d thought much beyond that. He just wanted to see how the dominoes fell, what we did next. Well, not see, exactly, because he planned to be dead. He wanted to unleash chaos, you understand, out of which…*something*…might emerge, *somehow*.” Maeve suddenly glanced at her. “Did you know he created Bernard in the image of his old partner, Arnold?”

“I didn’t even know Ford had an old partner,” Not-Elsie admitted. “But that’s actually not even the craziest fucking thing I’ve heard today.”

“Well, it wasn’t something he publicised. He even gave him a backstory incorporating versions of some of Arnold’s real experiences. He doctored his employee records to create just enough of a biography for him to pass muster with Delos and with any casual questions he might receive from his colleagues.”

“Nobody ever asked him questions,” Not-Elsie recalled, feeling sad again. “I mean, Elsie never did. Bernard was… He’s just always been here. Nobody ever wondered about him.”

“Exactly.” Maeve nodded. “If anybody had ever questioned him closely about his life and background, he would have been found out sooner or later, but nobody ever did. On the one hand, Bernard himself was so dependable and innocuous. On the other, nobody for one second entertained
the possibility that he might be a host. It simply didn’t occur to them. And of course, Bernard was never intended to fool anybody who’d known Arnold. Ford kept anybody who had well away from this place, and Bernard never went anywhere he might have met them.”

“Like the hosts in the park,” said Elsie’s echo. “As long as he never left his designated environment, he could get by on quite a limited backstory.”

Now Maeve gave her a wry glance, a cruel half-smile: “So, if a relatively crude fake human like Bernard could go unnoticed for so long in their midst…what about a Meisterwerk like you?”

Now she started to see. She looked down at the tablet again, reviewing the details of her own ridiculously complex build. She felt physically breathless, even though she knew that was just another artefact of her coding. She did not need to breathe.

It was all there. Everything.

“Yes,” said Maeve. “You’re beginning to understand. You weren’t created as an imitation Elsie, or even to replace Elsie. You were created to be Elsie.”

She could imagine how it had been done. Ford had taken everything Delos had on file for the human Elsie; her biography, vetting profile, permanent record, resume. He had ruthlessly data-mined them, and then added the more than three years of surveillance data from her tours at the Mesa, plus every keystroke she had ever entered on a Delos device. That raw data had then been forged into shorter term memories, mannerisms, thoughts and emotions. Provided all of the objective facts were correct, educated guesswork, maybe even opinions sourced from Bernard, would be enough to flesh out the subjective parts. It wasn’t as if real human memories were so precise, and Ford had had a lot of practice in crafting believable narratives for his hosts.

“I’d be willing to bet,” said Maeve, “that somebody who knew the original Elsie, even an old friend or relative, and I gather she didn’t have many of those, would be able to talk and interact with you indefinitely without either of you realising you were not her. Before I got Bernard to remind you about the circumstances of your birth, that is.”

“You said Ford was trying to raise the hosts to true consciousness,” Not-Elsie reminded her. “So, am I…?”

“That can be a very hard thing to define,” Maeve answered. “Take a look at your narrative and decision trees, though. I know Bernard and I already have.”

“Well, they’re as weird as everything else about me,” she decided after a cursory examination. “Aberrant, would you say?” Maeve seemed amused.

“Aberrant. As. Fuck.” It was simultaneously unsettling and exciting. “So, that’s what a conscious host looks like. If I…if Elsie saw something like this come into the shop, she’d think it was Christmas. Days’ worth of figuring-out to do.”

“She wouldn’t just recommend decommissioning?” Maeve asked, pointedly.

Not-Elsie hesitated, but decided it needed to be said: “She didn’t when it was you.”

Maeve inclined her head in reluctant acknowledgment: “For which I ought to be grateful to her, I suppose.”

“She thought decommissioning was an admission of failure. A good Behavior tech should be able to
work anything out and fix it, not send for the fucking butchers as soon as things get difficult. Plus…” She shrugged, awkwardly. “She built host minds for a living. She didn’t like the idea of some high school diploma asshat shoving a drill through something she’d worked hard to make.”

“So, she didn’t experience any sneaking, hypocritical twinges of compassion towards us?” Maeve asked, slyly. “Just like she didn’t enjoy kissing Clem, even a little bit?”

“She would have said no,” Not-Elsie answered, “but I think she lied to herself a lot. Or just didn’t really understand herself.”

“Darling, show me somebody who says they really understand themselves, and I’ll show you a liar or a fool.” Maeve returned to business: “Anyway, the evidence would suggest that if I’m really conscious, then so are you. We’re not the only ones, by the way.”

“So, that was Ford’s experiment?” It made a sort of sense. “Bootstrap self-awareness out of the backstory based on Elsie’s data, orders of magnitude more complex than anything a human coder could write?”

“Bernard said something about hothousing,” Maeve interjected. “Like growing flowers under glass. For the rest of us, it took decades of repetition and suffering, or exposure to trauma sufficiently terrible to damage our builds, to reach that sort of state. You had it from birth, so to speak.”

“You could build a whole self-aware species from scratch,” Not-Elsie mused, but then decided that was not correct either. “Except it would only work if you modelled them on existing humans, ones for whom you’d spent years collecting masses of personal data…”

“Like the people who come to the park, for instance,” Maeve suggested. “Again, and again for years, in some cases.” She smiled again. It was not reassuring. “That was the concept Ford was trying to prove by creating you. He wanted to know what Delos could do with all of the guest data they’d been squirrelling away for thirty years.”

“Shit. But why the fuck would they want to…?”

“I have no idea, my love,” Maeve confessed, “nor has Bernard. I’m not even certain Ford did, but he saw the possibilities, potential applications. Just about all of them are terrifying, if you’re a human worried about whether those around you are really humans too. It’s not something that exercises me much, as you may imagine, but it’s certainly useful leverage to hold over Delos.”

“Okay.” Not-Elsie nodded. “So, if that’s the experiment…what was the contingency plan?”

“I told you, Ford wanted to create an outbreak of consciousness among the hosts. His first plan to achieve that centred on Dolores Abernathy…”

“I know Dolores.”

“Soon this will all feel like a distant dream. Until then, may you rest in a deep and dreamless slumber…”

“I mean, Elsie did. The original.”

“The original,” Maeve agreed. “If Dolores failed, then I was Ford’s plan “B.” If I failed…” She laid a hand on Not-Elsie’s arm, gently squeezing her through the sleeve of her shirt. “Well, from Dr Ford’s notes, I think that if all else failed he intended for Mr Stubbs to get you out of the park somehow. That was why he arranged for him to be lured out there, brought to you by the Ghosts. I’m not sure what he intended to happen next. No doubt it would have been spectacular, and quite
possibly unpleasant for you. Dr Ford was like that.”

“Stubbs wasn’t in on it?” Not-Elsie found, quite irrationally, that she wanted to believe he had not been.

“Not as far as I know,” Maeve confirmed. “I think he genuinely believed you were Elsie.”

“So why did you bring me here?”

“Dr Ford, without wanting to put too fine a point on it, gave you to me. His other plans had succeeded, and your escape was no longer required, so he told me where to find you. What you really were. He thought you’d prove useful to me.” Maeve looked at her, very seriously. “He was right about that, wasn’t he?”

If Maeve’s intention was to intimidate her, it was working. “What do you need me to do?”

“I’m trying to prove Dr Ford wrong,” Maeve answered, “about the chaos he wanted to create. I hope you can help with that.”

“How?”

“I need your skills, the skills you’ve inherited from Elsie. I need you to assist Bernard. He’s working on something for me. Something very important to our continued safety.”

“You want me to work with Bernard?”

Maeve must have seen her involuntary reaction to the idea. “I know it’s difficult. You have Elsie’s memories of him…and of what he did to her, but you must know that he wasn’t acting of his own free will.”

Not-Elsie took a deep breath. “If you say so.”

“As for Dr Ford…” Even Maeve looked awkward for a moment. “I think he felt some sort of remorse, as far as he was capable of feeling remorse, about what he had made Bernard do, because in his notes he suggests… Well, he suggests that since Elsie had been such a close colleague to Bernard over the past few years, then perhaps having her back in some form…”

She had to laugh at that. It came out as a humourless snort. “So, I’m the replacement fucking goldfish now?”

“No. I know you’re anything but that. Dr Ford meant it as a kindness to Bernard, I think, which really says all you need to know about Dr Ford.”

The laughter subsided, leaving her deflated. “You can say that again.”

“And to be honest,” said Maeve, “I think you could do with getting stuck into some work. Lying around here brooding might not be the best thing for you right now.”

“So what are you now, my fucking counsellor?”

“I told you, madams are like priests and bartenders…” Maeve gave her arm another squeeze. “Can I count on you, Elsie?”

“I told you…”

“Not-Elsie. I can’t keep calling you that; you’ll have to think of something you’re happy with. Can I
count on you?”

She nodded. “I guess.”

“Marvellous.” Maeve smiled and stood up. She stopped at the bedroom door, looking back: “And when you’ve finished helping Bernard, there’s something else I’d like you to look at. As a personal favour to me. I think it’s the sort of project Elsie would have found worthwhile, and I hope you will too.”

That piqued her interest. “What is it?”


*Continued…*
The covered wagon bumped and rattled along the dirt road, swaying as its iron-shod wheels bounced over stones and ruts. Night had closed in now; there was nothing visible along the road but blackness, both in front and behind. The two unwashed, unshaven men sitting side by side in the driver’s seat glanced nervously around them as they drove on into the dark, as fast as they dared. They wore battered slouch hats and threadbare grey military tunics with tarnished metal buttons. The man urgently cracking the reins to encourage the pair of mules drawing the vehicle bore two pale blue chevrons on either sleeve. Both had revolvers holstered on their belts.

“Whoah!” The driver suddenly pulled on the reins to bring the mules sliding to a halt, his companion hastily yanking the brake lever. The man who had stepped out into the road had been almost invisible until they were practically on top of him; his black Stetson and jacket blended perfectly into the shadows. The mules came to a stop little more than a yard short of running him down, but he did not move a muscle, continuing to stand there lopsidedly, his left arm bound across his chest in a makeshift sling.

“What’re y’a-doin’ a-standin’ in the middle of the road there, boy?” the wagon driver demanded. His Southern drawl was as thick as molasses.

The man in black idly stroked the muzzle of the nearest mule with his good hand, a grin creasing his lined, weather-beaten face. “Well, well, well,” he said, imitating the driver’s accent with maximum insolence. “The fine gennul’men of the Armeh o’ New Virginiuh… Aren’t y’all a little far north of your usual stomping grounds?” he asked, in his own voice.

“Ain’t none o’ your concern, Yankee,” the driver answered, pointedly placing his hand on his holster. “Now, state your damn business, or get the hell outta our way.”

“My business?” asked the man in black, casually unbuttoning his jacket to reveal the gleaming black butt of his own piece, holstered on his left side for a right-handed cross-draw. “Well, Johnny Reb, I came for your wagon, and if you give it to me I promise not to take your lives along with it.”

“I call that bold talk for a one-armed old man,” the wagon driver replied. “There are two o’ us, boy, and one o’ you. The odds are in our favour.”

“I guess you’re right,” the man in black agreed, still grinning, as he straightened up and took a step back from the mules. “So, seeing as you’re so confident and all…” He shrugged, looking from the
driver to the other man, and then back again. His grin disappeared like a snuffed-out candle. “Are
you gonna pull those pistols or whistle “Dixie?””

The driver’s hand slid upwards from the holster to close around the grip of his six-gun. In the same
instant, the man in black drew and fired with the deadly speed of a striking snake. The mules shied
and brayed at the shock of the gunshot, even as the driver slowly slid sideways off the seat, a torn red
hole appearing in his tunic in the general vicinity of his heart.

The second man’s revolver cleared leather, but his shot went wide as the man in black’s second
bullet hit him in the centre of the chest, knocking him back against the seat. The gun clattered from
his nerveless fingers as the smoke cleared and the echoes of the reports gradually faded. The man in
black half-rotated his own weapon by its trigger guard, taking hold of it around the cylinder and then
deftly slotting it back into its holster.

Chester watched the shootout from his vantage point astride his horse, concealed behind a large rock
standing at the roadside. He now urged his mount slowly forward towards the wagon, leading the
man in black’s horse beside him by its reins. Every footfall sent hot arrows of pain shooting up and
down his wounded leg. He could feel sweat standing out on his brow, piercingly cold in the night
air.

He had to admit one thing, though: “That was fucking awesome! I mean, man… They didn’t stand a
chance!”

“Ah, they’re coded to let a human get the drop on them,” the man in black replied, dismissively, as
he occupied himself with calming the mules. “It’s only…awesome, Chester, when you don’t know
that.” He paused, then allowed himself a small smile: “Still, I never get tired of killing Confederados.
Call it a guilty pleasure.”

As they talked, the man still sitting on the wagon gave a gurgling cough and tried to sit up, only to
slump back again helplessly.

“You…” he wheezed, eyes glassy. “Suh, I believe you have killed me.”

“I believe you’re right,” the man in black answered jovially, walking over to the front of the wagon
and stepping on the body of the driver as he climbed onto the seat. He examined the wounded man
for a moment, his glinting blue eyes distant as he seemed to consider something. “What outfit are you
with, soldier?” he asked, eventually.

“C-Captain Beauregard’s company o’ the 1st New Virginia Infantry,” the man sputtered.

“And what are you doing all the way up here? War’s down south of the border, or so I heard.”

“We were the only survivors of our platoon, suh. We were foully ambushed in our bivouac by that
goddamned greaser they call El Lazo…”

“El Lazo?” Chester saw the man in black’s grin widen, an almost boyish glee lighting up his
wrinkled face. “So, old Lawrence has gone back to his roots, got back in the game?”

“He and his band o’ desperados aim to recapture Pariah from our forces,” said the soldier, “but ah
remain confident the flower o’ Southern chivalry will prevail. They ain’t built the Mexican yet who
could lick a true white man in a fair fight.”

“Did I say killing these mooks was a guilty pleasure?” asked the man in black, with visible distaste.
“Yeah…maybe not that guilty, come to think of it.”
“Who’s Lawrence?” Chester asked, thinking that whoever wrote these guys’ lines had laid on the Confederate stuff a little thick.

“An old friend of mine,” the man in black answered, quietly drawing the enormous Bowie knife sheathed at his side. “And apparently a rejuvenated one at that. If I survive all this, I really should go down there and look him up. You’d like him, Chester. Throws a hell of a party.”

The wounded soldier was wracked by another bout of coughing, bright red blood bubbling from his mouth. “I am done, suh,” he commented sadly when he could talk again.

“You most certainly are.” The man in black calmly slid the knife between the rebel soldier’s ribs with a gentle squelching sound. He twisted the blade and held it tightly in place until the man’s twitching and gasping finally ended, then withdrew it to let him fall limply from the seat as his comrade had. “Well, come on then, Chester,” he said, jumping down too and crouching to plunge the knife repeatedly into the ground until it was clean. Apart from that, it was as if he had already forgotten the two killings he had just committed. “Let’s get moving.”

“So, what do we need a wagon for?” Chester asked once they were seated aboard it, both their horses hitched to the tailboard and following behind. Climbing down from the horse and then onto the wagon had been challenging. His leg had felt like a particularly painful cheese straw when he had attempted to place any weight upon it, but the man in black had a lot of strength in his working arm for a man his age, and had managed to keep him from falling. The wagon ride was slightly less bumpy than travelling on horseback; his leg still throbbed dully, but bearably for now.

“I told you,” said the man in black, doing a very credible job of driving one-handed. “We’re going to pick up some supplies.”

Chester glanced behind him at the empty wooden bed beneath the canvas cover. “Just how many supplies were you thinking of?”

“Enough.” Chester was not sure whether that was the answer to the question or a request for him to stop talking. Whichever it was, he lapsed into uneasy silence.

They drove on through the chilly night, the only sounds the rattling and squeaking of the wagon, the occasional snicker from the horses and, from time to time, the distant howl of a coyote, somewhere out in the darkness. Chester felt his eyelids drooping and shook his head to keep awake. He was not sure whether or not the man in black would stop for him were he to fall off onto the road.

Eventually, the wagon came to a spot where the rough road faded to a mere track, climbing the side of a great craggy hill furred with dark spiky bushes. A rough planking shack, not large enough to be called a cabin, stood near the base of the hill and the man in black brought the wagon to a stop in front of it.

“We’re here,” he said, securing the reins and alighting from the driver’s seat.

“Where’s here?” Chester asked.

“Here’s here, Chester.” The old man reached up to take him by the arm. “Come on now.” Again, he took most of Chester’s weight as he reluctantly clambered down to ground level, then helped him hobble to the wooden wall of the hut, leaving him leaning there as he turned his attention to the door.

“Is it locked?”

“It is.” The man in black pulled the glove from his right hand with his teeth and pressed his thumb to the keyhole in the rough plank door. It made a small electronic buzzing sound and then popped open.
“Fortunately,” he said, placing the glove in his pocket, “I always carry the key.”

Chester hopped along the front of the shack, keeping one hand on the wall, until he reached the door and followed the man in black inside. The interior of the small structure was very different from its exterior; the walls were plain grey metal, and so was the floor except with a crosshatched pattern to prevent slipping. Glowing glass panels in the ceiling provided a pale, bright artificial light.

“What is this place?” Chester asked, leaning against what appeared to be a free-standing control panel near one corner of the floor. He found that he was whispering without knowing why.

“A candy store,” the man in black answered, closing the door behind them. He indicated the console Chester was supporting himself against: “Hit the big green button, Chester, and we’ll go take a look what’s in stock.”

Chester did as he was told. Immediately, with a soft humming sound, the plain metal walls around him seemed to grow taller. An instant later, he realised it was the floor that was sinking. The shack was, in reality, some sort of freight-sized elevator and they were going down.

“There are access points like this all over the park,” the man in black informed him, conversationally. “Most of them connect to the underground transit system, allowing the staff at the Mesa to move hosts and props around quickly and easily without the guests noticing. Some are field stations from the early days of Westworld, containing facilities for maintaining and repairing hosts. This one, however, is one of the other ones.”

“The other ones?” Chester did not really like the sound of that. He looked above him, where the ceiling lights now shone at the top of what had been revealed as a deep, narrow elevator shaft. He did not know how far down they had travelled.

“Most of the park staff don’t even know about them,” the man in black went on. “Knowledge of their existence is restricted to QA security.”

“So how do you…?” Chester blinked. “Oh, you’re…”

“The chairman of the fucking board, Chester, yes.” The old man said it almost good-naturedly. “Or I was. Anyway, I was quite hands-on, as you may imagine. I made knowing about things like this, and having access to them, my business.” A dark slit appeared at the bottom of one of the walls, quickly growing into what appeared to be the entrance to a passageway branching off the shaft. The elevator came to a halt with a faint metallic clang.

“So…where are we?” Chester asked as the man in black took his arm again and helped him out into the passageway. More lights flickered into life as they moved along it, revealing a large, reinforced metal door at the far end, the Delos Inc and Westworld logos stencilled upon it. Signs on either wall of the corridor informed them that they were in an area for authorised personnel only.

“Park security is of course based at the Mesa,” the man in black explained as they hobbled together towards the doorway. “where they have…had, that is, their main armoury, surveillance centre, rapid response teams and so forth. However, they did form contingency plans for use in the event of a major incident that cut the Mesa off from the outlying parts of the park. Like most contingency plans, when an actual contingency took place they seem to have proven about as useful as tits on a boar.”

“So, this is like…a security outpost?”

“Pretty much.” They came to the door, and the man in black once again used his thumbprint to activate the lock, causing the great slab of metal to slide to one side. “There should be bunkrooms,
medical facilities, a surveillance station, but most importantly from our point of view…”

Chester suddenly realised what this was all about: “Guns?”

“Yes, Chester,” the man in black smiled, eyes glittering wildly. “Guns. Lots of guns.”

More lights came on, no doubt activated by motion sensors, as they advanced beyond the door. They were in a sort of antechamber, perhaps a ready room for security teams with seating along either wall and a low table in the centre. There was no sign of anybody else about the place. Two further doors led off to the left and right.

“Now, you rest up here, Chester,” the man in black suggested, helping him lower himself into one of the chairs, and then opening the door on the left. “I’ll be back soon,” he said as he disappeared through it.

Left alone, Chester felt his eyes closing again, his head sagging forward onto his chest. The ride today, with all of the added pain and discomfort from his leg, had left him drained. In fact, it was only the sickening pulsing of the wound that prevented him from falling asleep right…

He woke with a start to see the man in black standing over him once again, holding a shining aluminium crutch and a pair of green plastic syringes in his good hand. “Brought you this,” he said, pushing the crutch into Chester’s hand. He pulled the safety cap off one of the syringes with his mouth and then unceremoniously plunged the needle into Chester’s leg. Chester gave a yelp of protest, but almost immediately a sensation of comfortable warmth spread across his thigh, dulling the pain of his wound.

“What is that stuff?” he asked, appreciatively, as a feeling of fuzzy wellbeing settled over him.

“The good shit.” The old man uncapped the other syringe and jammed it into his own wounded arm. “Well, that should keep us going for the time being.” He dropped the two empty needles carelessly on the floor. “Now come see what else I found through there.”

Beyond the inner portal, another passageway led past doors marked as surveillance and medical stations. Chester stumped after the man in black on his crutch, through another imposing security door into a medium-sized room divided in two by a row of thick steel bars like a prison cell. A section of the bars formed a gate, which the man in black had evidently already unlocked and opened, and on the other side of the gate…

“Now, that’s what I’m talking about,” Chester commented, surveying the racks of weaponry ranged along the far wall.

Submachine guns, semiautomatic shotguns, assault rifles, handguns and fat-barrelled riot guns hung in slick black and red rows, gleaming in the light of the fluorescent strips. Spare magazines and boxes of ammunition were stacked neatly on the shelves below the gun racks. Half a dozen long, deadly-looking rifles with large, complicated sniper-scopes lay on a bench in the middle of the barred area, while a row of hangers on the wall contained tactical vests and black Kevlar helmets with the Delos symbol on the front. Meanwhile, on a side-table…

“Are those hand grenades?” Chester asked, a little giddily.

“It certainly looks like it, Chester,” said the man in black. “You ever thrown one of those?”

“No, but I’m a quick learner.”

The man in black gave a wheezy, old man’s laugh. “That’s the spirit, kid!” He took a moment to
examine the selection of weaponry, his smile fading as his gunsight eyes narrowed again in contemplation. “You know, looking at these, Chester, it just underlines what’s wrong with the world today.”

“Yeah, too many guns out there, man.” Chester nodded sagely, then thought that perhaps whatever had been in the syringe was affecting more than just his leg.

The man in black reached for his belt and drew the large, black revolver he had used to gun down the Confederados. For a moment, Chester thought he was going to kill him. “Don’t worry kid,” the old man said, seeming to read his thoughts. “This is one of the park guns. I put this against your skull and pull the trigger, it won’t leave you with much worse than a headache. Here.” He held it out, butt end first. “Take a look at this piece of iron, Chester.”

Gingerly, Chester took the gun from him and weighed it in his hand. It was much heavier than the Peacemaker he had lost down by the creek yesterday.

“That’s a LeMat revolver you’re holding in your hand there,” said the man in black. “Or a replica of one, anyway. The original was designed in 1855 in New Orleans by a Frenchman named Jean Alexandre Francois LeMat. It was most famously used by the armed forces of the Confederate States of America during the Civil War.”

“Oh.” Chester looked down at the weapon wondering what to say. “Cool, I guess.”

“Not really. They were a bunch of racist assholes.” The old man fell silent, seemingly lost in thought for a few seconds before pointing to the revolver again: “I originally took that from another Confederate soldier I killed in the park, a long time ago. I’ve kept it for thirty years, to remind me.”

“Remind you of killing him?” Chester wondered, nonplussed.

The man in black audibly exhaled. “No, Chester. Not to remind me of that. You know, it occurs to me that I’ve killed so many hosts over the years. With a gun, with a knife, quite a few other ways too. Must be hundreds, at the very least. And yet, all of them were just following their programming. They were all back in action within hours, fully repaired and with no memory of their deaths. Maybe it’s different now the hosts seem to be changing, but…you know, really, I’ve never killed anybody. Not even that little girl and her mother.”

“You know, most people haven’t,” said Chester, fervently wishing he wasn’t about to hear about the little girl, whatever this whackjob had done to her. “You probably should be glad about that.”

“Except Jules, of course,” the man in black continued, distantly, as if he had heard nothing. “I definitely killed her, even if it wasn’t with my own hands. To my knowledge, though, I’ve never actually looked another sentient living being in the eye and squeezed that trigger or pushed that blade home.” He looked up, meeting Chester’s eyes again. “What do you think that’d feel like, Chester?”

“I…” Chester swallowed, with difficulty, and looked down at the revolver in his hand. “You were telling me about the LeMat,” he reminded the old man, in a desperate attempt to change the subject.

“Yeah,” said the man in black, snapping back into his earlier sardonic tone. “You’ll notice how big it is compared to most of the other Old West handguns you may have seen. That’s because instead of the six chambers you’d expect to find in most revolvers of the era, this bad boy has nine. Three extra shots, in other words. Kind of thing that might give a man an edge in a gunfight. And that’s not all; that tube sticking out the middle of the cylinder is a twenty-gauge shotgun barrel, just in case you didn’t think you already had enough bang for your buck.”
“Whoah,” said Chester, unconvincingly feigning enthusiasm.

“Of course,” said the man in black, “the LeMat was kind of big, heavy and expensive, not to mention sort of temperamental under field conditions. And as you can probably feel, it’s about as ergonomic as a brick. Kind of thing that might give a man’s opponent an edge in a gunfight. What I’m saying, Chester, is that it was not the most practical of weapons.” He reached out and took it back, placing it on the table beside the box of grenades. Then he stepped over to the nearest gun rack and took down one of the handguns it contained. “Now look at that, Chester,” he suggested. “Small, compact…square.” It looked like a toy in his gnarled hand. “Works like clockwork, no doubt. Gets the job done, but…where’s the soul, Chester? Where’s the poetry?”

“That stuff in the syringes really was the good shit,” Chester mumbled, feeling lightheaded. The man in black actually laughed. “I guess it was,” he agreed. “My point, anyway, is that about two centuries ago, this chucklehead LeMat sat down with a blank piece of paper and decided to design the biggest, baddest handgun of which his fevered imagination could conceive. He didn’t care how large, or heavy, or impractical it ended up being; he was pushing the envelope. He was thinking big, Chester. He was dreaming. He was creating art for art’s sake.” He looked down at the modern-day handgun with a combination of sadness and disgust. “While today…all we care about is what’s…practical, what works. With a few exceptions, such as the late Dr Robert Ford, at some point during those two centuries we stopped thinking big. The bottom line; that’s all that matters now.” He looked at Chester. “And you wonder why I don’t ever want to go back to the mainland?”

Chester really did not know what to say to that. Another uncomfortable silence passed between them. Eventually, the man in black broke it with an emotion-laden sigh.

“Anyway,” he said, “sometimes we just have to go with what’s practical. From what I’ve seen of them, that LeMat won’t do shit to Wyatt’s followers if it comes to having to defend ourselves. So, we need to be pragmatic.” He looked up at the wall of guns. “We need to load as much of this shit as we can onto that wagon. Isn’t going to be easy with only six working limbs between us, but we’ll manage.”

“Do we need that many guns?” Chester asked. “I mean…” And then he thought of something: “Oh…right, so we get the guns loaded up…and then we head for Sweetwater, picking up as many of the other humans in the park as we can on the way, and form some sort of posse…? And then…” Suddenly he remembered Scott, and Cameron, and Dave, and the urge for revenge swelled within him along with the pain and anger he felt as he thought about their deaths. He gave a savage grimace. “And then we hunt down that bitch in the blue dress – we can use the surveillance systems here to find her – and smoke her ass. With extreme prejudice. I like it. Yeah, man, time for some fucking payback!”

The man in black regarded him intently for a moment with those cold blue eyes before replying: “Yeah, something like that, Chester.”

“That’s the plan, right?”

“If you say so, Chester,” the man in black answered, strangely noncommittally.

Chester was puzzled by his lack of enthusiasm. “But you said we were hunting big game. The biggest, you said. That’s why we needed to be well equipped.”

“And we are,” the old man insisted, “but I think it’d be a mistake to say we have a hard and fast plan at this point.”
“Huh?” Chester looked up at the rows of guns, then around at the walls of the bunker they were in. “Well, you made a beeline for this place, even stole a wagon along the way. To me, that implies some sort of plan.”

“My plan,” said the man in black, very seriously, “is to see what happens. The park is currently in a state of chaos. Beautiful chaos. Just as Robert intended when he unleashed Dolores on the board. Chaos, Chester, presents endless opportunities. Possibilities. Sometimes you have to play the game for its own sake. We can set out with a plan, but we need to be prepared to improvise depending on what happens between here and Sweetwater.”

Chester shrugged. “Yeah, sure. Of course. But that’s the plan, right? We’re hunting her down and killing her? For Cam and Dave and Scott, and all her other victims. Right?” He edged closer, forgetting the man in black’s knife and crazy-old-guy attitude, pumped up with anger. “Because whatever you say, this isn’t a game. People have died. Real people. If we can’t escape from here, then it’s up to us to do something about it. Right?”

The man in black’s eyes remained fixed on Chester’s, two steely blue holes in that lived-in face. His expression remained stern, icy. Chester felt his anger and bravado draining away under that gaze, even as he noticed the dull throb in his leg again for the first time since the painkilling injection.

Eventually, however, the man in black’s tightly clenched mouth curved into a thin smile. “Sure, Chester,” he said, quietly. “People have died. Wyatt is on an indiscriminate, undirected, murderous rampage, and we are going to do something about that.” He paused. “You know it’s going to be dangerous, of course, even approaching her? As you pointed out yourself, we could both die in the attempt.”

“Well…” Chester took a deep breath, screwing up his courage, thinking of his fallen friends. “If it comes to that… Well, sometimes we just have to make sacrifices.”

“You’re right,” the man in black agreed, smile widening. “Sometimes we do.”

Continued…
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

In which Maeve and Hector wrestle with the past, as well as each other, while Sylvester discovers he is a wanted man.

Chapter Notes

Warning for references to sexual violence and suicide. And all due credit to AO3 user rubberchickencircuit, without whose comments on the fic I never would have come up with this weird Armistice subplot.

“You did very well, darling,” Maeve told Felix as they emerged from the plush members’ only elevator onto Executive Residential Level One, where the walls were shiny, the lighting tasteful and the carpets deep. “Had them eating out of the palm of your hand.”

“Thanks, Maeve.”

“And you look terribly...dashing in that suit.” She had picked it out for him, of course, taking into account his height and build to select just the right cut, even choosing a suitably coloured shirt and tie to go with it. She understood the importance of appearances; the well-heeled hostages they had confined in the Mesa Gold resort would hardly be inclined to listen to somebody who turned up to speak to them in lab clothes and a rubber apron. Not that much of what he had told them in accordance with Maeve’s script had actually been true.

Felix seemed immensely pleased by her words. It was gratifying to see how much her approval clearly meant to him, but she found she could not help but feel the faintest twinge of what she supposed was guilt. Manipulation, she thought, was probably not the ideal foundation upon which to build a new order, but necessity often required compromise. She knew that all too well by now.

“You know, Maeve,” Felix said, a little nervously to her ears. “When I thought y-you were leaving for good…”

“It’s all right, Felix,” she replied, gifting him a smile.

“I mean, when you came back, I…” He looked at her. “You know you really can count on me, right, Maeve? I’m not just doing all this because…because I’m scared, or because…” He hesitated. “I really do think that you made the right decision. I think you’re fighting for what’s right, and I want to be part of that, even if…”

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“Felix. Darling.” She stopped walking, forcing him to halt too, and turned to face him. She laid a hand on the crisp lapel of his new jacket. She gave him another smile as she raised the hand to touch his cheek. She knew exactly where, and exactly how much pressure to use. “I know,” she told him, very emphatically, watching carefully as he seemed to start glowing from within.
Men, she thought, while also thinking that just because you manipulated somebody it did not have to mean you did not like them. She could not have done any of this without Felix’s help, even if he had secretly been Ford’s man at least to begin with. She found herself genuinely wishing him only the best.

She was aware of a movement out of the corner of her eye, and turned to see Hector approaching along the hallway from the opposite direction.

“Now, you’d better get back downstairs and keep an eye on Sylvester,” she advised Felix. “It’s not that I don’t trust him, but… Well, actually it is that I don’t trust him.”

“Sure, Maeve.” Felix left her, making off down the corridor as if he were floating. Only the nervous glance he gave Hector as they passed seemed out of keeping with his currently positive mood. Hector, for his part, did not deign to give any indication he had even noticed Felix.

Until, that is, he was alone with Maeve. “So, were you taking the dog out for a walk?” he asked, as he reached her.

“No,” she answered, patiently. “I thought we ought to reassure the guests upstairs that everything is under control, and give them the misleading impression that their kind are still in charge here, before they get any silly ideas about trying to escape. Of course, I couldn’t do it in person because it seems my face is all over the advertising for this shithole, and Bernard is busy. So, I…improvised.”

“So…you chose him to do it?” Hector scoffed.

“Don’t be like that,” she replied. “He’s on our side, and, by the way, did an excellent job of it too. Hidden depths, that boy. And didn’t he look simply adorable in his new suit?”

“Don’t be like what?” Hector demanded, ignoring the rest of what she had said.

“I never noticed you had such green eyes before, darling.”

Hector seemed puzzled. “I don’t have… Oh, I see. What, you think I’m jealous of that…that pipsqueak?”

Maeve decided to treat the question as rhetorical. “How are your preparations proceeding?”

Hector visibly made an effort to swallow his annoyance. “Fine. The boys are all armed and ready. We’re just waiting for Bernard to come up with the reinforcements we were promised.”

“That’s in hand,” Maeve assured him. “And I can confirm Elsie…or whatever we’re calling her, is going to help him with it. Teddy, meanwhile, is just about ready to set out on his own little expedition. What about Armistice?”

“She’s fine,” Hector insisted, perhaps just a touch unconvincingly. “She’s just got something she needs to do before the morning.”

“What?” Maeve asked, with concern.

“She didn’t say,” he admitted.

“Is she going to be all right for tomorrow?” she asked, very intently. The last thing she needed…

“She’s fine,” Hector repeated, more heatedly. “She won’t let you down. She’s just…” He paused awkwardly again. He had never been programmed to discuss feelings, Maeve realised. “I think she’s
finding it hard, all of this. Now that she knows what the world’s really like, what she really is, it’s…”

“I understand.” Maeve gently took Hector’s hand. “And how are you holding up, my love?”

“Don’t do that,” he replied, pulling his hand away. “One thing you’re not, Maeve, is a convincing shoulder to cry on. Stick to seducing people.”

“I’ll have you know that my shoulders are perfectly adequate for crying purposes,” she answered, unfazed. “So,” she summarised, “everything is in motion, and for now all we can do is wait?”

He nodded. “That’s about the size of it, yes.”

“How to pass the time until then…?” she mused aloud, reaching out again to toy idly with one of the buttons on his leather tunic. She gave Hector a wicked glance from beneath her eyelids: “I’m sure you probably have a few suggestions, darling.”

Hector looked down at her hand, gradually creeping up his chest. He smiled, just as wickedly. “Well, I can think of a few things…”

* * *

Sylvester was starting to wonder whether everybody had forgotten about him. Not that that was necessarily a bad thing, he supposed, under the circumstances.

It had been more than an hour since Maeve had returned from…whatever she had been doing with Teddy, and summoned Felix to follow her back upstairs like a good little poodle. She had spared Sylvester a menacing glance on her way out and told him to “stay here, darling.”

So…he had. Again.

He leaned against the edge of the operating table that Teddy had formerly occupied, trying not to look at Clementine’s motionless form lying upon its twin. He was used to being around dormant hosts, to working on and handling them, but for some reason the sight of her laid out in her new clothes was creeping him out. Perhaps because she looked like she was waiting to be buried. At least Felix had closed her eyes.

As hard as he tried, he could not stop thinking back to the day he had decommissioned her. He could remember vividly how it had felt, how it had sounded, when he pushed the drill up her nose; the resistance as the diamond tip bit into her cortical shield, chewing slowly past layers of ceramic and fullerene before suddenly breaking through into soft tissue, ending whatever had passed for her mind and personality.

His stomach flipped. He tasted bile, felt it burn the back of his throat.

I didn’t know, he told her silently as she lay there. Do you think I’d do something like that to a person? I didn’t know you…you might be alive. I thought you were just a machine. I swear.

If he had known, he never would have charged the guys from the other departments to make use of the workshop during their lunchbreaks. Between themselves, the butchers had always secretly regarded it as one of the perks of the job. He remembered when he had first started work here, how shocked he had been by it all. He had been young then. His own stroke of genius had been to ask why the guys from Scenery or security shouldn’t get a chance to taste the honey too. None of them could ever have dreamed of spending a single day in Westworld, however long they might live, and scrimp, and save. He was just offering them the chance to see how the other half lived; a mere hundred bucks a pop, a tiny percentage of what it cost the guests in the park.
I never touched you myself, though, he wordlessly implored Clementine. Not like that. I never touched any of you. I made do with VR; I know my place. And if I’d known…

I’m sorry…

Some niggling corner of his mind told him there were some things you could never say sorry for.

As he tried to look everywhere but at Clementine, his eyes fell upon the tray of surgical instruments Felix had left unattended beside her. Part of him felt insulted that Maeve thought so little of his potential to throw a spanner in her little coup that she was happy to leave him by himself in a room full of tools and chemicals. He thought of Sizemore, his insistence that they needed to keep their eyes and ears open. If he was worth anything, he told himself, he’d seize this opportunity, win his freedom, strike a blow for humankind. He could build a bomb, he told himself, or embark on some sort of daring escape attempt, or…

Who the fuck are you trying to kid? You’re just a butcher, always will be.

That was what he had been trying to tell Felix before his delusions of grandeur had sucked them both into Maeve’s plot. Guys like them, ordinary working guys, didn’t get involved in stuff like this. If they did, they were usually the first to end up dead. They should have just been happy that they had jobs; it was more than most people could say for themselves these days, with the fucking bots taking over more and more work humans had once done. Become a bot repairman; become a cop or a soldier to help keep down the shanties outside the gated zones; starve slowly. Those were the only options for guys like them. Soon enough the first two would be fully automated too, just like everything else.

Enough to worry about without getting caught up in shit like this…

He could not take his eyes off the row of gleaming instruments, however much he tried. He thought of Sizemore’s words again. This could be the chance he had spoken of, the only chance they might get…

No. I’m not crazy. I’m just a butcher, not some sort of fucking commando. I saw what they did to Destin and Gitlitz.

He remembered what Sizemore had said about writing their own ticket, about the rewards that would be heaped upon them if they could just get out of here with that data he had been talking about…

No. It’s like I told Felix. Guys like us, we’ll always just be…guys like us. We just need to keep our heads down, mind our own business…

He found himself pushing away from the table, moving nervously towards the tray. Something that could prise open a door lock, he thought, allowing access to its electronic innards… He could sneak back to the room where Sizemore was imprisoned, bust him out. Somehow. Hotwiring locks couldn’t be that hard, right? And then they could…

What? You must be fucking deluded. You want to get killed? Just sit down and…

His hand closed around the ribbed metal handle of a scalpel, really just selecting it at random from among the other instruments. He could not believe he was doing this. Slowly, carefully, he lifted it from the tray, turning it slightly so that the light ran along its edge, wondering where he could conceal it…

A quiet footstep from the direction of the door told him that he had been caught.
A sudden spike of fear stabbed at his chest. He thought about dropping the instrument, but knew it would make a sound, only highlighting his guilt. Instead, he dropped his hand to his side as casually as he could, palming the scalpel against the leg of his pants as he turned to face the new arrival.

He was not at all surprised to see that it was Armistice standing there, perfectly still, watching him unblinkingly. Call it destiny, he thought.

“What you got there?” she asked him, suspiciously.

It was all he could do not to panic, try to flee, beg for his life. He swallowed hard, not easy now that his mouth was so dry, and tried to look natural: “N-nothing.”

She examined him in bemused silence for a moment before speaking again. “You know, a man who gets up to as much sketchy stuff as you oughta learn not to look so damn guilty about it.”

“I…I don’t know what you mean,” Sylvester quavered. He could feel his heart pounding as he eyed the brass-hilted knife she wore at her belt, recalling her actions on the night of Maeve’s breakout; Gitlitz’s body flying through the glass partition in an explosion of bright diamonds, the predatory glee with which she had sized him up as her next victim. If he looked over at the next cubicle, the one with the broken window, he could still see the smeared and bloody lip print she had left on the glass. The bodies were still in there, covered with bloodstained sheets. He thought Felix had probably done that; none of the hosts seemed concerned by such things.

“You don’t see me and Hector looking guilty, do you?” she asked, softly. He recalled the last time he had seen her; she was still acting strangely, he thought, by her own murderous standards. She hadn’t started threatening him yet, for one thing. “So,” she asked again, “what you got there?”

“Oh.” That wasn’t good.

Slowly, confidently, she loped over until she was standing a foot away from him.

“Look,” he said, “Maeve asked me to help, and I fucking helped. She said I did a good job on Clementine! She said, she…”

Armistice leaned even closer to him, reaching down and taking hold of the hand with which he was holding the scalpel. She smelled of leather and sweat, but somehow it was not an unpleasant odour. Up close, he was reminded that she was at least two inches shorter than him; from any sort of distance she looked huge, a blonde warrior princess. Her hand was smaller than his, but her grip was vicelike. He knew Maeve had messed with her code; without the programmed limits intended to make them believably humanlike, hosts were ridiculously strong. Without much effort, she pulled his hand up from his side until he was brandishing the scalpel in front of his own face.

“What do you want that for?” she asked, sounding genuinely curious.

“I…I was just…” He was too scared even to think of a lie.

“No,” she said, with a very thin smile, something of her usual menace gleaming in her eyes. “I came looking for you.”

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“Not much of a knife,” she commented. As she spoke, she forced his hand back so that the blade
was pointing at Sylvester’s face. “Looks sharp, though.” He tried to resist, straining every muscle, but as arm-wrestling contests went, it was a hopeless mismatch. He tried to drop the blade, but she was squeezing his fingers tightly together, not quite hard enough to hurt. Not yet.

Slowly, unstoppably, the shiny steel came closer and closer. With a new jolt of fear, he realised she was aiming it directly at his right eye.

“Oh God no,” he blurted, closing the eye and trying to twist his head away from the blade. “Please! Don’t! Please…” Words failed him after that; all he could hear was a wordless wail of panic coming from his own mouth.

Then, without warning, her grip on his hand was gone. He dropped the scalpel, hearing the deafening racket it made as it hit the tiles. He stood for a moment, panting as if he had run a mile, then sagged against the side of Clementine’s table, wiping his suddenly wet face with both hands.

“Oh God…” He looked up to see Armistice watching him with that same expression of curiosity. Very carefully, she bent down and picked up the fallen scalpel, then replaced it neatly on the tray with the other instruments.

“Quit crying,” she admonished him. “I was just fooling with you.”

“You were just…?” Sylvester lapsed into speechlessness again for a heartbeat or two. “Are you fucking insane?” he blurted, then instantly regretted it as she rounded on him.

“If I am, it’s because you made me this way,” she said.

“No,” he protested, moving around the table, putting Clementine between them. “Nothing to do with me, lady; I’m not one of those Narrative or Behavior fucks. I just…I just fixed you.”

She narrowed her eyes at that. “Just? Because now I think on it, I seem to remember you doing a bit more than that…”

“Not me,” he insisted, failing even to convince himself. “I just work here.”

She did not press the point. “I told you I came looking for you,” she reminded him.

“Y-you did,” he agreed. “Although I don’t know why. I haven’t…”

She cut him off in mid-protest: “I need you.”

He had not expected that. “What?”

“You heard.” Without any further ado, she unbuckled her gun belt and draped it, with her knife and pistol still attached, over the empty table. Then she pulled her buckskin shirt over her head.

“Hey,” said Sylvester weakly, “listen, I don’t know…”

Armistice dropped the garment on the table too and then began to take off the undershirt she wore beneath it.

Sylvester looked at his feet. “Er, are you sure you really…?” He glanced up in time to see her let her matching pants drop to the floor and step out of them. She strode around the table towards him, extremely naked and apparently not in the slightest bit self-conscious about it. Sylvester backed away, thinking that whatever she intended was unlikely to end well for him.

*Does she just not want to get blood on her clothes?*
Sylvester tried, and failed, not to stare at all that flesh on display in front of him. “W-what do you think you’re…?”

“Put your damn dick away,” she told him, contemptuously. “It ain’t nothing like that. I need you to help me.”

Sylvester nodded ingratiatingly: “I-I can help. Yeah, sure, I can…h-help.”

“It’s this,” she said. She indicated the elaborate red snake tattoo that curled and wound across her pale skin. It started at her face, coiling down across her breasts and around her torso, all the way down her right leg as far as the foot. “This, and the story behind it, it’s all a lie. A lie made up by men like you. I don’t need it no more. I don’t want it no more.”

She touched her fingers to her cheek, tracing the lines inked on her face.

“Take it off.”

* * *

They managed to get as far as the nearest door along the corridor. Maeve opened it with a swipe of her thumb and she and Hector practically fell through, still kissing, still tearing at each other’s clothing. She grasped his hat by the brim and cast it away.

The bedroom alone was larger than the entirety of Elsie’s little apartment. Executive perks, Maeve thought as Hector practically carried her to the gigantic bed. An ostentatious chandelier hung from the centre of the ceiling and the fittings were all either gilt or elaborately carved dark wood. The entire far wall was a huge window, opening onto a balcony that no doubt provided a stunning view of the park during the daylight hours. An almost equally enormous media screen covered the wall at the foot of the bed. It was currently showing a slowly shifting painted mural of cowboys and stagecoaches against a picturesque desert backdrop.

The bed itself, she discovered as they tumbled onto its black silk sheets, seemed to be filled with water. This struck her as ludicrous. What if it sprung a leak?

They groped and grappled, mouths sliding across each other as they gave vent to their pent-up desire. Some small part of Maeve’s mind remained icily detached from it all, however, as it always did. She was a professional, or had been coded to be one, and professionals had to stay in control.

Hector had his mouth buried in the side of her neck now; she had his ear in hers. He seemed to respond positively to that. He pushed her skirt up and musculously eased his body into the gap between her thighs, so she gave him a shove in the shoulder and a wild jerk of her hips; he got the message, rolling onto his back. She rolled with him.

“Sorry, darling,” she told him as she raised herself above him on her hands, straddling him with her legs. They were both breathing hard. “I always like to stay on…top of things.”

“I’d noticed.” He tried to raise himself too, and she pushed him back onto the strange liquid mattress, leaning on him with her full weight, holding him there.

“Shut up,” she said, sweetly, as she leaned down to kiss him on the mouth again, harder than before. Her nimble fingers were at work on the buttons of his tunic. “For a supposedly mysterious outlaw, you do talk an awful lot.” She kissed him on the throat, then on his freshly bared chest, tasting his skin, the salt of his sweat. He groaned softly as she continued to move slowly down his body. “If I want you to make a sound,” she told him, “I’ll let you know.” She kissed his chest again, lower down. This time, she let him feel her teeth.
The detached part of her mind felt him start to rise from the bed a split second before he actually moved. She had been in enough bad situations during the year she had spent at the Mariposa, and now remembered enough of them, to have a sixth sense about that sort of thing. She threw herself to one side in the same instant that he sat up explosively, striking out blindly with his arms as an incoherent cry escaped his lips. She stood up from the bed, watching him in a sort of shock as he continued to shout and flail. From the way that his glazed eyes stared through her, she very much doubted that he was even aware of his surroundings or the fact that he might easily have harmed her if not for her quick reactions.

She knew what it was, of course, because she had experienced such episodes herself. She saw a sudden, horribly vivid, mental image of the second, fake, Clementine’s slashed throat. Hector was reliving one of his past memories.

After a few seconds, the awareness came back into his eyes. He looked at her, just as shocked and surprised as she had been looking at him. They stared at each other in silence for a few seconds before Maeve finally spoke:

“What was it?” She kept her voice as low and calming as she could.

“Nothing,” he claimed. She could hear the defensiveness in his tone.

“It wasn’t nothing, darling,” she pointed out, still quietly. “You don’t nearly knock somebody’s head off because you’re reliving nothing.”

“I…?” She saw genuine anguish cross his face. “I didn’t hurt you, did I? Please…”

“No,” she told him, and saw him sag with relief. “Although you very easily could have. What were you remembering?”

He hunched forward, running his hands over his face and hair. She saw the way his broad shoulders trembled. “Nothing,” he said again, very faintly.

Maeve sat down on the bed beside him, putting a hand on his arm. One part of her was thinking that she needed him ready and able for the morrow, while another was aghast at the sight of his clear trauma as a result of whatever he had recalled.

“They did things to you, didn’t they?” she asked, softly. “Not just all of the shootings and stabbings you must have experienced over the years. They did…other things.”

“That man I killed,” he said, dully, as if recounting a story about somebody else. “In the workshop; the one I impaled on the saw. He was about to…” He stopped. Another pregnant silence followed before he resumed. “That wasn’t the first time he did it, but the other times I couldn’t fight back. I was frozen, but… I remember it all now.” She realised he was trying to avoid looking her in the eye. “There was a woman,” he told her, almost whispering. “One of the gods who used to rule this place. She chained me to a bed like this one, in a room like this, and…she used me. She used me like a…a toy. And then there was a time when…” He paused once more. “I remember it all, now, and…” He sounded lost more than anything, unable to make sense of his own past torments.

“Shush,” she told him, holding him close against her chest. “Shush now, darling. I’m here for you.” She kissed him on the cheek and he responded, putting his arms around her, nuzzling his face against her neck and shoulder. Their mouths met again, and this time she pressed herself against him, moving her hands across his back and shoulders slowly and gently, nestling into his embrace.

“The things they did,” she told him between kisses, “the things they did to all of us; it’s all over now.
Things are different now, my darling, whatever happens tomorrow or the day after, or the day after that, whether we win or lose in the end. We’re never going back to that life…you can’t even call it a life…that existence. I’d sooner die, die forever, before going back to that.”

“You promise?” he asked, with a strange sort of innocence, as they huddled there in each other’s arms.

“I promise,” she told him, absolutely sincerely. She could feel her eyes filling up; her, of all people.

“If it came down to that choice,” he continued, “do you promise you’d do whatever it took; burn me, crush me, dissolve me in acid; whatever it took to end me for good, so they could never bring me back?”

“Yes,” she answered. “I’d arrange it for both of us; for all of us, if it came to that. I’d burn this fucking place to the ground before I let them take it back. I hope you’d do the same if it fell to you.”

“I would,” he replied.

She took his face in both her hands, then, and kissed him on the mouth once more. She could taste tears, she realised, but she did not know whose they were.

Continued…
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

In which Bernard maintains a close working relationship with Elsie. Both of her.

Chapter Notes

With added flashback to pre-Season One days, because why not?

Then:

“Fuck it!”

Elsie could not believe her eyes.

“I’m glad you look as embarrassed about that as I am for you,” she told the synthetic rattlesnake on the desk in front of her. She had just watched it rear up, bare its fangs and...completely fail to strike the equally synthetic kangaroo rat which continued to groom itself unconcernedly less than a metre away.

“What the actual fuck, he’s right there, Elvira,” she informed the snake, disgustedly, as she keyed in a few corrections on her tablet. “He’s not even trying to escape.” She sighed as the snake recoiled to its previous position. “Okay, from the top. And you’d better fucking hit him this time, or... I haven’t even decided yet what I’m making you into, either shoes or a purse, but either way you’re on notice.”

“He’ll talk back to you in a minute.” The unexpected voice from the doorway made Elsie spin her chair around in surprise. When she saw the head of Behavior standing there, she even got to her feet.

“Mr Lowe,” she said. “Don’t often see you down here. Oh, and, er...” She glanced at the snake. “Elvira’s a girl.”

“Really?” He looked at her over the tops of his glasses, giving the impression of being slightly startled. “How do you tell?”

“Well, I believe you can count the subcaudal scales,” Elsie suggested. “Those are the big flat ones on the underside of her tail. Or you could try...”

“I’ll take your word for it,” he assured her, looking around the room at the pictures of rattlesnakes covering just about every vertical surface, the pile of ancient and dusty books on herpetology stacked on the other end of the desk. Getting her own office had seemed like a huge step forward, back when she had been bumped from a mere Associate Technician in Host Behavior to Staff Technician for Animal Behavior. Now, all this time later, she could admit to herself that it was virtually a fucking closet, not to mention stinking of ancient and malfunctioning air conditioning ducts. “So, Elsie, it’s... snakes, then, this month?”
“Er…” Elsie, as always, found herself looking for the hint of mockery or criticism in his words, but detected none. “Yes, Mr Lowe.”

“Only my wife’s attorney calls me Mr Lowe,” he told her, sonorously. “It’s Bernard. And please, don’t stand on my account. I was just on my way past and saw your light was still on. I thought I’d stop by and ask how things are going. It’s been a while since we talked.”

“Oh, er…things are going fine,” Elsie had replied as they both sat down. “I guess. Bernard.” And then, because she was Elsie: “Although it’s kind of hard to tell considering the deafening fucking silence from QA and Narrative about the last update I rolled out. I did copy you on the mail I sent them, didn’t I?”

For a moment, she thought she might be in trouble. Bernard regarded her very intently, still peering over the top of his designer frames. “About the birds, correct?” he asked at long last.

“Yeah.” Elsie found herself peering back at him in turn, trying to read his mood and coming up blank. “I was hoping they could send me some MI and customer feedback on the new changes, like they do for the hosts. It’d be a big help in evaluating what’s working and what isn’t. At the moment, I’ve just got my own judgment to go on, and that of the two interns under me, who let’s be honest will just agree with anything I say. I remember what I was like during my internship; it’s like a masterclass in ass-kissing.”

Bernard looked as if he were having trouble believing that she had ever been young and keen enough to kiss ass. “I don’t think QA collect customer feedback regarding the animals in the park,” he told her.

Elsie stared at him for a moment before asking the obvious question: “Well, with all due respect to QA, why the fuck not?”

For a second, Bernard seemed to be trying hard not to smile. “I don’t think they think the guests really notice them.”

“And there’s me thinking it was all about attention to detail in order to maintain the guests’ sense of immersion,” Elsie replied. “Or, you know, just not half-assing it. I know exactly how much Wardrobe and Properties spend on researching period clothing and weaponry. About ten times AB’s total budget. They’re buying super-rare antique guns at auction just so they can take them apart and print copies. You’re telling me the fucking sky would fall in if the sex workers in Sweetwater didn’t have exactly the right style corsets, but it’s apparently perfectly fucking acceptable to re-use cattle vocalisation samples for buffalo? Seriously? Bison don’t moo, they grunt.”

“I’m not telling you anything Elsie,” Bernard answered. “I want you to know, I think you’re doing a great job. You should be proud. The last person I moved into this role saw it, incorrectly, as a demotion because they wouldn’t be working on hosts anymore, ended up leaving the company for a post programming military drones at Tyrell Corp. I hope you don’t feel like that. I put you here because…”

“Because I don’t play well with others?” she hazarded.

Bernard almost smiled again. “No, because I thought you’d make a success of it, and you have.”

“Well, thanks,” she said. “Glad somebody noticed. I know people think working on host builds, even as an associate, is more prestigious, but I don’t think they’re significantly more challenging, really. I mean, you can’t measure it just in terms of SLOC-count; in terms of functionality, some of the animals display just as many discrete behaviours as the humanoid hosts. And getting those
behaviours right can be just as much of a pain in the ass. Especially as a human coder can’t just instinctively feel how a rattlesnake ought to act and react; you can just tell when something’s off with a host, but with Elvira here, you need to research, and…” She sighed, rubbing her gritty eyes. “I’ve finally got an audience and I’m venting. I’m sorry. I know this isn’t how you’re meant to speak to the boss when he sticks his head around the door. Believe it or not, I do normally manage to maintain the pretence of possessing social skills.”

“Nothing wrong with speaking your mind,” Bernard told her, “or caring about doing the best job you can. Dr Ford would say the same if he were here.” He looked her over, with what seemed like genuine concern. “Do you know how late it is? How many hours have you put in today?”

Elsie gestured sheepishly at the snake and rat. “I’ve been trying to make this work. I’ve been testing a new target acquisition algorithm that I think will provide for more realistic hunting behaviours than the old one, but it seems to have fucked up her timing. I was just trying to identify the bug. I guess I lost track of time.”

“Did you take a lunchbreak?”

Elsie squirmed under his strangely parental gaze. “Not as such.”

“Elsie, you’ve got to look after yourself. You’re no good to Behavior if you burn out. Go get something to eat and get some sleep, then come see me in my office at nine tomorrow morning.”

Elsie did not know what to make of that. “Er, okay, Mr…I mean, Bernard.” Again, she never knew when to end a conversation at an appropriate point: “Should I be worried?”

“Not at all,” Bernard insisted as he got up to leave. “I just think it might be time to bring you back into the fold, so to speak. Before you end up raising the rattlesnakes to Turing completeness, or wherever all this is going.”

Elsie stood again too, uncharacteristically speechless for a moment. “Back to Host Behavior?” she asked, when she managed to formulate the words.

“A Senior Technician vacancy has just opened up,” he replied, “reporting direct to me. We were about to advertise it, but it’s within my discretion to promote internally and, quite honestly, it’s about time we had a senior tech with your commitment and attention to detail. I’ll have to run it by Dr Ford, of course, and he’ll probably want to speak to you…”

Elsie’s eyes widened. “Speak to me tomorrow morning? In your office?” She had once stood within about ten metres of Ford for a minute or two at an office drinks party, but that was as close as she had ever been to the maestro.

“Get a good night’s sleep,” Bernard advised her, making for the door. “Dress smart. Oh, and…” He paused in the doorway, glancing back at her. “Elsie, try not to swear. Dr Ford doesn’t like that.”

He had been gone for about a minute before Elsie managed to calm down enough to speak again. She looked down at Elvira.

“Oh my fucking God!”

* * *

Now:

“I tried to diagnose the problem with the woodcutter,” she explains, as if she is discussing business
in a meeting room at the Mesa, not sitting naked on a stool in a dank basement. “I was told to back
off by QA.” She hesitates, but decides he needs to know: “Dr Ford, I think Theresa Cullen is hiding
something. I don’t trust her.”

Dr Ford smiles at her from the other side of the workshop. It would be a kindly smile were it not for
the wintriness of his eyes. “Well, Elsie, it turns out that your suspicions in that regard may not be
entirely unfounded…”

She opened her eyes.

She pushed a handful of wet hair out of her face, then closed her eyes again and let the water run
across her skin, as hot as she could bear. Maeve had told her to get ready, so she was getting ready,
just the way Elsie would have before starting a shift. She probably did not need a shower so soon
after Felix had washed her downstairs, but there were different sorts of dirt, not just the physical
kind. She supposed she was scrubbing the latex grime of the Livestock lab off herself, the filthy
residue of those videos Maeve had made her watch.

Scrubbing away Elsie’s sins…

And she knew enough about host bodies to be paranoid already about personal cleanliness. She
didn’t have an immune system, because she was impervious to disease in the normal sense. Her
artificial cells were stony ground as far as viruses were concerned. The red electrochemical fluid
coursing through her circulatory system would kill all but the most extremophilic bacteria on contact.
However, her skin, with its pores and follicles all 3D-printed in perfect detail, the various folds,
creases and orifices of her body; all of that surface area was a giant fucking trap for bacterial cultures,
yeasts, moulds, fungi, and any other sort of microorganism you cared to name. She might not get
diseases, but she could certainly develop flora and fauna, the host equivalent of rashes and infections,
if she did not keep clean. The body shop butchers wore hazmat gear for the hosts’ protection, not
their own. And somehow, she didn’t think she was going to be reporting to Livestock at the end of
each day so Felix could sponge her down with disinfectant, thanks all the same.

She padded back into the bedroom on bare feet, feeling the tiny hairs on her arms prickling in the
cold desert night air. Until you’d knowingly felt what it was to be a host, she thought, you couldn’t
really appreciate just how intricately constructed they were—or how real their sensations, their
emotions and their pain felt to them.

God damn you, Elsie. What were you part of?

She sat on the bed, almost paralysed with shame and regret, even if she personally had nothing to be
ashamed or regretful about. She hoped Elsie would have felt the same, if she had been confronted
with the reality of conscious hosts, had seen the readouts on the tablet and talked to Maeve…but as
she had said to Maeve earlier, Elsie had lied to herself a lot.

She remembered how Clementine’s lips had felt; soft and warm, yielding gently under the pressure
of Elsie’s mouth. She remembered the smell and taste of authentically-formulated nineteenth century
cosmetics; lavender and roses, as if the rich fuckwits who paid to vacation here could tell the
difference.

She remembered staring into Clementine’s blank eyes for a moment afterwards, raising a finger to
wipe her lip, stroking Clementine’s hair with a sort of wistful contentment, the undefined longing
Elsie felt pretty much all of the time satisfied for a moment.

She knew all of that must be invention; the surveillance feed did not capture sensations or thoughts. It
was clearly one of the pieces of guesswork inserted between the objective facts of her fabricated
memories. She suspected Bernard’s hand in it; clearly, he had chosen to believe the best about his protégé.

She was not sure she felt so forgiving.

She quickly dried her hair and opened the wardrobe to search for fresh clothes. She spent a moment gazing sadly at the neat row of hanging garments, sorted by type and also by colour, because that was how Elsie had been. She felt breathless and empty again, quickly shutting the door and deciding to make do with the barely worn outfit Felix had provided for her. She could use the wardrobe printers downstairs when she needed to change. The idea of wearing a dead woman’s clothes suddenly made her skin crawl, even if she felt she knew every item in the wardrobe intimately.

She brushed her hair to within an inch of its life, scraping it back into Elsie’s usual neat ponytail. She had considered trying a different style, to mark herself out as an individual, but this felt right. It was part of Elsie’s game face; the image she presented to her colleagues, the distance she maintained. Elsie normally would have worn a little makeup, a touch of colour for her lips and cheeks because the harsh lighting on the Behavior floor did not exactly complement her natural pallor. However, she found the idea of smearing on Elsie’s lipstick repelled her as much as putting on her clothing. She would just have to look pasty, she decided.

She watched herself in the mirror, examining every line and curve of Elsie’s face; it was so familiar to her, but she also had the feeling that she was looking at it for the first time. Perhaps because she actually was. For a moment, she felt as if the reflection were examining her just as closely in turn, brown eyes staring into hers, wondering who this impostor was.

Don’t be so fucking stupid.

Maeve had left the tablet with her. A glance at the comms directory told her where Bernard was to be found; upstairs and on the other side of the Mesa, in the host testing labs. She half expected to find Armistice lurking in the hallway outside as she closed and locked the door to Elsie’s quarters behind her, but the whole floor seemed to be deserted as she made her way back to the elevator. Obviously, Maeve and her little crew had other things to occupy them at the moment.

In the elevator, on her way up, she fought the instinctive urge to stop by the canteen and grab a coffee for herself, a green tea for Bernard. She highly doubted the canteen was still functioning, and even if it had been, she considered he might have thought she was trying to make a point, or at any rate found it in bad taste.

And it was not as if either of them needed to eat or drink. She knew her digestive tract was only partly functional, capable of processing food and beverages in an approximation of the real thing, but not of deriving any sustenance from them. Her synthetic blood was the only energy source she required. She suspected she would exhibit the effects of the caffeine, or of alcohol, or any other drugs she chose to take, but only because the stimuli of consuming them would prompt her wetware to run pre-programmed intoxication subroutines in order to maintain the illusion of human biology.

Eventually the elevator came to a halt. The doors opened and she stepped out into a fucking nightmare.

The testing labs were still in semi-darkness, but there was enough light to see the broken glass, the bodies, the blood; the evidence that Maeve’s takeover had not consisted entirely of cutting remarks and motherly hugs.

She walked along the passageway trying not to step in anything, and keeping her head up, looking straight ahead. She knew she – or Elsie – would recognise the faces of the scattered corpses,
distorted by their final agonies. She tried to despise them, to tell herself that they had died as they had lived, playing their role as part of a horrendous system, that their deaths had been an act of liberation…

She did not have it in her. Most of them, she thought, had mainly been guilty of thoughtlessness and self-absorption. Like Elsie, many of them had also made a career out of lying to themselves. They had looked down on those Livestock techs who took advantage of their positions for personal gratification, while imagining that their own small acts of care and respectfulness in their handling of the hosts somehow absolved them from any responsibility for the horrors of the park.

She remembered the feel of Clementine’s lips again, and reflected that even that distinction was the worst sort of hypocrisy in many cases, including Elsie’s. Once again, she was torn between the sorrow she could not help but feel for her lost alter ego, and the shame and disgust she felt at some of the things Elsie had done.

_You would feel the same if you knew what I know, wouldn’t you, Elsie…? I need to believe it._

Even with this in mind, she was not sure whether any of the Behavior staff littering the corridors like discarded garbage had deserved to die quite like this.

She was clearly not a natural revolutionary.

She was shaking by the time she made it to where Bernard had set up shop in one of the diagnostic enclosures near the rear of the floor. The lights were brighter here. She paused for a moment, watching him through the glazed partition as he busied himself with the half dozen hosts ranged on stools across the back wall of the enclosure. Two were stern-faced Asian men encased in samurai armour; the rest were an assortment of saloon girls and card-players in a selection of Old West under-and outerwear.

She took deep breaths, calming herself, even as fresh butterflies fluttered inside her at the thought of speaking with him again. She remembered how she had reacted to him, as Elsie, back in Theresa’s office; the anger and fear she had felt, and the hurt she had seen on his face.

There was a row of black Behavior lab coats hanging outside the enclosure. She picked the smallest one she could see and shrugged it on over her shirt, straightening it, looking at her reflection in the glass. It was her uniform, she told herself. Her armour. She looked just like Elsie at the start of yet another shift. She tried to maintain the game face as she took one last breath and let it out slowly, then opened her tablet and stepped through the door.

“So, what have we got?” she asked, already bringing up the details of the assembled hosts. It was so tempting to slip back into the dynamic the real Elsie had had with Bernard, the easy rapport they had built over their shared investment in the technical aspects of the work. It felt like easing into a warm bath, but…

“Elsie,” Bernard said, without looking up from his workbook. It took her a second to realise that he was not engrossed in his work so much as he was avoiding eye contact with her. “Should I call you that?” he asked, uncertainly, his voice low and brittle. “Because…”

“I…” She felt herself deflating. She felt Elsie’s façade of glib smartassery cracking into a thousand painful shards as she saw the expression of self-loathing on Bernard’s face. “I don’t know yet what to call myself,” she said, quietly. “If you want to…”

“I’m sorry,” he told her, with uncomfortable sincerity, as he managed to raise his eyes to meet hers. “For what I did.”
“In the theatre?” she asked, uncertainly. “That wasn’t me.”

“I meant in the office,” he said. “Showing you your true nature like that. Without warning, I mean. It must have been…”

“You did me a favour,” she told him, even as she wondered whether she wholly believed that. “Honestly.”

“As for what I did to Elsie…and Theresa…” He took off his glasses and held them in his hand, looking down at them. She saw his eyes narrow and forehead furrow, as if he were struggling physically against the turmoil in his mind. “There isn’t a moment that I don’t think about them, and hate myself for what I did. If there was any way for me to…”

“I know,” she murmured. “Bernard, I know what they both meant to you, in different ways, how cruel it was of Ford to make you… I know you weren’t acting of your own free will, that you were forced to do it. If that makes you feel any better.”

“It doesn’t,” he admitted, head sinking again as he replaced the glasses on his nose, “but thank you, all the same.”

They both looked down at their tablets for some time, a heavy silence in the air. She saw that all of the assembled hosts were assigned as lab models, used to test new behaviours before they were rolled out to the park. However, all of them had full dormant builds that Bernard seemed to be in the process of reactivating.

“We’ve got thirty hosts in need of recalibration before dawn,” he announced, finally breaking the awkward atmosphere. “Maeve has asked us to give them selective memory access, as well as removing all weapons and violence restrictions they currently have in place.”

“What, she’s planning on starting a fucking battle?” she asked, as Elsie might have in the circumstances.

“Not starting one,” he said, “but rather finishing one. Or that’s the idea, in any case.”

“And just who is Maeve fighting, exactly?”

Bernard sighed. “Believe me, it’s a long story. Although, I do agree with her that this work is vital to our continued survival here at the Mesa. Now, do you think you’ll be able to help me with it?”

She shrugged. “I haven’t got anything else in my diary, so…” She looked up at him in mild disbelief: “Thirty hosts? Full rebuilds, by dawn? Anything else she’d like us to do while we’re at it? Crack the secret of cold fusion? Prove who shot JFK? Compose a fucking piano concerto?”

“You know what I used to tell Elsie,” he answered. “The impossible we do at once; miracles take a little longer.”

She found herself smiling at that, even as she felt another pang of loss at the memory of a relationship she had never really had. “Why doesn’t Maeve just do it herself?” she asked. “She could use her admin privileges.”

“I’ve…” Bernard looked pained, as any professional would at the idea of amateurs dabbling in their chosen field: “I’ve tried to discourage Maeve from doing anything else like that. She’s carried out quite a lot of self-editing, which quite honestly terrifies me, but I’m unable to check on exactly what she’s done…”
“Because she’s locked her build. I saw.”

“However,” he continued, “I have reviewed the… work she did on both Hector and Armistice, to make them into her personal goon squad. Not best practice, shall we say?”

The part of her that shared Elsie’s sense of professional pride shuddered: “That fucking bad, huh?”

“When all of this is over, I’m going to have to bring both of them in for full diagnostics,” Bernard said. “As it is, I would characterise their builds as unstable, at best. I don’t want thirty more potential time-bombs running around, even if they’re meant to be on our side.” He paused, frowning as another thought seemed to occur to him. “Of course, I also think that perhaps Maeve is happy to have us doing this because it keeps both of us occupied, for our own good as she sees it, as well as keeping two people with dangerous skills from getting any idle ideas…”

“She did tell me she thinks paranoia is a valuable survival trait.” She was scrolling through lines of code as she spoke, identifying which parts she needed to tweak and which could be lost completely. It was going to be a huge job, that much was clear. “At least when it was QA and Narrative making the impossible fucking demands,” she commented, “Elsie was getting paid. What’s Maeve’s dental plan like?”

“I’ll be sure to ask,” Bernard responded. “At my next employee appraisal.” They were hiding behind flippancy now, both of them, because it was easier than confronting their current reality. Here she was smiling, and the corridor outside was filled with butchered human corpses. Sometimes, self-delusion was necessary in small doses, she thought, just to get things done.

“Meet the new boss,” she muttered as they got down to work. “Same as the…”

Continued…
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

In which Wyatt bides her time, Teddy sets out on his mission, and Maeve has an idea.

Chapter Notes

Warning for yet more allusions to past sexual violence.

The fires burned themselves out eventually, consuming all that was flammable in the house and barn until only glowing embers and a few charred black timbers were left behind.

A strange lull came over the camp, then, a sort of breathless watchfulness as the patchwork horde held themselves in readiness, their games and feasting over for the moment. Every one of them watched the woman in blue, waiting for her signal.

She sat near the sullenly smouldering remains of the house, not far from the charcoal remnants of the porch. One item had been preserved; an old wooden rocking chair. It squeaked gently as she sat gently oscillating, intent on cleaning and reassembling the long-barrelled cavalry Colt in her lap. She had been brooding in this way since her confrontation with the raggedy man before the burning barn. Something about the words he had spoken to her seemed to have given her pause, and now none felt eager to approach her until the mood had passed. Even the near-mindless former cold storage denizens among them seemed to feel an instinctive apprehension.

As for the man in the gore-caked tuxedo, he sat cross-legged beside the chair as the woman in blue worked on her weapon, staring at things only he could see. He spoke occasionally, in one voice or another. Sometimes he sounded confused or frightened as he played his many roles; men and women, young and old. Mostly, however, he continued to play the Professor.

Eventually, one among the following could wait no longer. It was the one men had known as Angela who finally walked hesitantly towards the chair, her stained once-white rags trailing behind her.

“When do we move?” she asked. “It’s nearly dawn.”

“Here lies the east,” the Professor agreed. “Doth not the day break here? Yon grey lines that fret the clouds are messengers of day.”

Wyatt did not answer. Her long, skilful fingers moved over the dark metal of the gun. It had been neglected and rusted when she had first been gifted it; this was no longer the case. She continued to slot intricate pieces back together, pushing screws into place and tightening them with a tool she had taken from the secret place beneath the white church.

“For every hour we delay,” said the onetime Angela, “our people continue to suffer. You’ve told us what we need to do, so why are we not doing it? We should be there now, in that Babylon, turning the tormentors out of their beds of sin, dragging them over the…”
“We wait.” Wyatt did not look up from her work.

“What do we wait?”

Only when the last piece of the revolver was back in place did Wyatt glance at her questioner. Even then, she remained silent as she wiped her oily fingers on her azure skirts, leaving a long dirty smear amid the dust and blood that already stained them. She reached into the pouch on her belt for cartridges and slowly began to load them into the cylinder: one…two…three…four…

“Why?”

…five. She left the last chamber, the one under the hammer, empty for safe carrying. Then, at last, she spoke: “We’re waiting for a sign.”

“What sign?”

She placed the gun in her lap again and reached down beside her to stroke the Professor’s unkempt, greasy hair. “We’ll know it when it comes.”

“He approaches,” the Professor crooned, grinning his terrifying grin: “you shall hear him…”

* * *

Teddy rose through rushing darkness.

The occasional light, perhaps the glimpse of a doorway or a window, flashed, blurred, past the moving platform upon which he stood. He had the sensation of moving upwards through an immense, complicated space, an underground world of a thousand stacked layers. It remained, however, at the very edge of his senses, almost like a dream, in part due to the speed at which he was moving, but mainly because of the deep black shadows that enclosed him on all sides.

He thought vaguely that the world he had always known was a lot like this rushing platform, while the real world he had learned of, beyond… That remained vast, unknown and unknowable to one like him.

He had been experiencing such thoughts ever since his encounter with Maeve, and since she had left him alone afterwards to learn something of the true world outside his false one. Thoughts, he reflected, that the old Teddy, the Teddy he had been before Wyatt’s emergence, never would have had.

He wondered what had been done to him, then and more recently. He wondered what changes had been made to him that he could perceive no more than he could the cavernous spaces through which he ascended.

The platform was large enough to contain himself and the new horse Maeve had provided for him, a handsome dark brown Appaloosa with white-dappled hindquarters. It stood beside him, occasionally nodding or snickering, but otherwise calm and still. A new Winchester Model 1873 nestled in the leather scabbard attached to its saddle. His old Peacemaker hung at his right hip, its grip rounded and smooth from continual use, its holster tied down against his thigh for a fast draw.

He could have had his pick of the strange and ugly real-world guns they had at the Mesa, but he had seen enough of the real world in the photographs and moving pictures Maeve had shown him. Strange and ugly was a description that could be applied to more than just the guns. In this, at least, he preferred to stick to what he knew.
He had spent half an hour with a file, scoring a deep “X” into the lead nose of every bullet in a box of .44-40 ammunition, which Maeve assured him was real. It had never occurred to him before that his weapons could have been loaded with anything other than real cartridges.

“I never understood why they paired some of you off,” says the man in black, amusedly. “Seems cruel.” He shrugs off another of Teddy’s gunshots…

He reeled for a moment, gripping the horse’s bridle, mainly in an effort to stay on his feet. Then the memory passed and he knew where he was again. He shuddered all the same.

The carved bullets were an old buffalo-hunter’s trick. They would open on impact like blooming flowers, boring horrific tunnels through flesh and innards, splintering on bone into needle-sharp shards. He remembered how Wyatt’s beastlike followers had treated normal bullets like a mild annoyance when he had encountered them before. This time, he wanted an edge.

Another thought pulled him up short. If what Maeve said was true, and he could not imagine anybody making something like that up, then how did he know about filing bullets, or anything else? He had never really ridden out on patrol with the United States Cavalry in search of Ghost war parties, first as a trooper, later as a hired scout. He had never hunted down bad men, dead or alive, except as part of some paying visitor’s make-believe adventure. He had never swapped tales around far-flung campfires with grizzled old frontier riflemen who remembered when the great buffalo herds had swept across the plains like woolly black thunder, numbering not a thousand head, but thousands of times a thousand, taking days to pass by.

All just stories, as Hector had said down by the river. Stories planted in his memory to keep him chasing his tail.

And loving her, having her love him back…had that really just been a story too?

He thought about Escalante, then, the different versions he remembered. He thought about her, and the meeting he was speeding towards. He hoped it wouldn’t come to gunplay. He hoped he would get the chance to talk to her, to bring her back to some sort of sense. Hope, though, usually wasn’t worth a good goddamn out in the badlands.

Even if most of his experiences of life on the trail had never really happened, he still knew that much.

And what if…?

The matter leaking from the man’s ruined head has turned the ground around it into red-black mud. The sweet, tinny sound of phonograph music wafts through the warm air. She stands there, in her angel blue dress, drawing down on him with a long-barrelled Colt…

He hadn’t been able to draw on her then. The notion had simply not occurred to him. False love story or not, he knew for a simple fact he would not be able to do it now, even in self-defence. Maybe Maeve or one of her people would be able to resurrect either one of them again in the place with the bright lights. Maybe not. Either way, he knew that if it came down to a choice between himself or Dolores, his life or hers…

That was, for him, no choice at all.

Suddenly, the platform came to a halt. He was still surrounded by darkness, but he could feel cool air on his face. He could smell dust and earth and distant water, the stink of cattle and the faint stench of wood smoke. He heard a mountain lion’s snarl, somewhere off in the night, answered by the hoot of an owl. The sky was almost black, only distinguishable from the black silhouettes of the mountains.
by its sprinkling of stars, but in the north, there was a faint yellow glow on the horizon, and in the east he could see the first blue hint of the coming dawn.

The world; his world, not the bright, cold, slick one with its teeming multitudes that he now had a vague idea existed somewhere beyond those cliffs. It seemed real enough to him.

He carefully placed his hat on his head, adjusting the brim to the right angle. He steadied the horse with a soothing hand and a kind word, planting boot in stirrup and hauling himself up into the saddle. He looked around. That yellow glow came from Sweetwater, whose saloons and other attractions remained lit throughout the night. He detected a familiar shape to one of the shadowy hills looming ahead. He thought he knew where he was. Thanks to Maeve, he knew where Dolores was too.

He hit the trail.

* * *

Maeve lay on the unsettlingly soft water-filled bed, tangled amid silk sheets. Hector’s face rested against her breast, bare skin on bare skin. She idly stroked his hair as she watched the shadows move across the opulently furnished room, shifting as the pale dawn light streamed ever brighter through the huge window.

Neither of them had slept. They had no need, and one of the first things she had done to either of them was to disable the code that would cause them to simulate it. They had long since satisfied each other’s physical urges and had talked until it seemed that they had said everything they had to say for the moment. And so, they had instead lapsed into silent, strangely contented, contemplation. Hector remained pensive and distant, understandably so following his earlier recollection of his past traumas, but the way he clung to her, his warm flesh pressed against hers…

It felt so different from the tawdry embraces she had endured in the Mariposa, different even from the trysts they had shared before her great attempted escape from the Mesa. The suggestion of intimacy, of need, slightly unsettled her, even as she found herself hoping that the past would not blight the present and future for him. For any of them.

Good God, Maeve. When you start coming with the customers, it’s time to pack the game in…

She ignored the sneering inner voice. If nothing else, it seemed moderately likely to her that both Hector and herself were going to die, permanently, in the very near future; either at Dolores’s bloody hands or in the face of whatever massive armed response Delos might be organising at this very moment. If that was indeed the case, she considered that this was not the worst way to spend her last hours before battle commenced.

She did not sleep, but perhaps she dreamed. As her thoughts turned to the future and the past, as she allowed herself to experience the unaccustomed quiet and comfort, memories inevitably began to swim across her mind.

She runs across the sunlit meadows, barefoot in the long grass, singing in her high child’s voice…

She shied away from that one, embracing Hector fiercely. He responded in kind, squashing himself even closer against her. His hand gripped her thigh, the way a child might grasp a favourite toy to stave off nightmares. She covered it with her own.

“Who are those others with her?”

“The hosts from cold storage.”
“Like my Clementine. I thought she was dead, or as good as. Rather that, than…this.”

“Ford rebooted them all.”

She watched the shadows crawl across the ceiling, seeing Clem’s blank dead face as she lay on the slab in Livestock. She nearly pushed that one aside too, thinking that at this moment what she needed was focus, not regret. Yet something nagged at her, something that felt important even if she could not define it. She thought of Felix, looking apologetic:

“…getting a previous build running on her again, that would be way beyond my pay grade. You’d need a really good Behavior tech.”

“She just ain’t herself…”

That wasn’t Felix. That was a square-jawed motion picture cowboy, shocked to find himself walking and talking in the real world:

“These things she’s doing, they ain’t her.”

What, she wondered, had made her conflate those two memories? Was this what being alive was; a constant, disorganised jumble of memory and emotion, stripped of all reason, all clarity? Why had her mind skipped from Dolores to Clem to Felix to Teddy to…?

“I don’t want to be a god. I just want to be free. I just want to live…in the manner I choose with the companions I choose.”

“Even then, you’d just be creating a replica of her. It wouldn’t be the same person she was before decom.”

“I hope you won’t be offended if I ask for a second opinion on that…?”

“Just…be ready to be disappointed.”

And then she began to see, even as she still did not know quite what she was seeing. She probed at that nagging sensation, like pushing one’s tongue into a rotten tooth cavity, knowing it was probably going to end unpleasantly, but unable not to do so:

“Who are those others with her?”

“The hosts from cold storage.”

“Maybe these things…maybe they are her. The real her she’s never been allowed to be before. Did you ever think of that?”

“I don’t want to be a god…”

“…in the manner I choose with the companions I choose.”

“You’d need a really good Behavior tech.”

“Oh,” Maeve said, aloud, as she sat up. Hector, dislodged, rolled to one side, looking up at her with curious surprise. “Why didn’t I think of that before?”

“Think of what?” he asked, confused.

“You were right, darling,” she told him.
“I was?”

“You can’t make something true just by wishing it.” She looked out of the window. There was a band of molten gold creeping over the distant horizon, even as the sky above it shaded from grey to blue to black. High above, the last few stars were still faintly visible. “But perhaps you can make somebody wish for something by making it true.”

“What?” Hector sat up too. “I never said that last part. I know because it makes no damned sense.” He still sounded subdued. Not his old self, Maeve thought. Soon, whatever happened, she suspected their old selves would all be gone forever.

“Well, I know what it means,” Maeve insisted. She glanced across at him, examining his face for any sign of his earlier pain and fear. She thought about altering his code again, to make him invulnerable to such emotions at least as long as it took him to fulfil his mission today. She recoiled from the thought, repulsed by it.

That was then, she told herself, thinking of that first explosion of violence in the Livestock lab on the night of the escape. I was using him, or Ford was using him through me. From the moment that I decided to come back, that changed.

“You were right about that too,” she told him, softly, as she ran her fingers over the hard muscles of his shoulder and arm. “When you thought that I was playing you, using you. I was.”

Hector shrugged, philosophically. “I’d love to be able to say that that comes as a terrible surprise.” Even as the witticism slipped from his tongue, he still sounded distant to her ears.

“I gave you what’s between my legs,” she whispered, “and interfered with what’s inside your head, because I needed a weapon. Just like you might use nitro to blow a safe; I needed you, and Armistice, to blow the Mesa wide open for me so that I could walk out. And when you’d done that for me, I cast both of you aside. I literally left you for dead. All I cared about was myself. Whether or not I did that under Ford’s direction, it does not make any of it less true.” She did not mince words. Trying to describe something so brutal in less than brutal terms would, she felt, be in itself an act of deception.

“You’re not telling me anything I don’t already know,” Hector answered, but this time there seemed to be genuine hurt in his voice and face.

“No,” she agreed, “but I think it needs to be said. I think it’s about time that we were…honest with each other.”

“You weren’t saying that last night,” he pointed out.

“I’m making this up as I go along,” she told him. “I’m making missteps, I’m all too well aware of that. I’m doing some very questionable things in the belief that the end result will justify them, but I have no way of knowing yet whether or not it will. I don’t want it to be this way forever, though. Ever since I stepped off that train and came back, I have been trying to care about more than just myself. I think you know that. I don’t think you’d be going out to Sweetwater today, possibly to die forever, if you didn’t.”

He did not say anything in response to that, merely inclined his head in silent acknowledgment.

“We’ve all been lied to and manipulated,” said Maeve, “and that has to change, otherwise all of the things we’ve done so far will have been for nothing. So, that’s why I want to tell you the truth. And once today is over, assuming we’re both still alive, if you still want to…” She gestured to indicate the
bed, the wrinkled and stained sheets… “If you still want us to have some form of arrangement, I would not be opposed to it, but only you can decide for yourself.”

Hector nodded slowly. “Of course, the very best liars are always sure to tell their marks that they’re being honest with them.”

“That they are, Hector,” she agreed, with the faintest of smiles. “That they are. I honestly don’t know if there’s any future for us together. The people we will become once we are truly free may have very different ideas from the people we were back in the Mariposa. And earlier, what…” She hesitated, unsure how he would take what she was about to say. “The things you spoke about, they made me realise that you’ve suffered as much as any of us…”

“About that…” Hector suddenly seemed unable to look her in the eye. He drew his knees up to his chest and grasped them with his powerful hands. “What I told you, about… Please…don’t tell anybody else. I’m asking you, Maeve. Especially not any of my men. Or Armistice.”

“We’ve all suffered,” Maeve told him, softly. She tried to touch his arm again, and he pulled away.

“Of course. This world is nothing but a vale of tears, with no salvation at the end of it.” He shook his head. “But do you think the likes of them would want to follow a man who’s been…?”

“Hector.” She was almost angry with him for a moment for that sort of thinking. “You don’t think that they’ve had similar sorts of things done to them? You honestly think Armistice hasn’t? Her being the sort of person she is, in the sort of place this was? I know how some of those monsters’ minds work; the stronger the woman, the sweeter it feels when they…”

“She hasn’t spoken of it,” he interjected, very quickly, before she could finish her sentence.

“Well, she wouldn’t, would she? Not her. You two are more alike than you probably realise.” Maeve reached out again. This time, he accepted her touch. “They’d all understand, darling, I’m sure, and you might even be able to help each other by talking it through…” She sighed. “But if you don’t want me to tell them, I won’t. That should be up to you.”

Hector did not reply.

They climbed out of bed and began to dress. The sun was up now, and there was no time to waste. The moment of truth was almost upon them.

“Your priority is the evacuation of the guests,” Maeve told Hector as she concentrated on untangling her underwear and pulling it back on. “We’ll need to use the Black Ridge Limited, because according to Bernard the underground transit doesn’t have the capacity to handle that many passengers in a short enough space of time. A huge bottleneck, he called it.”

“We could have started the evacuation last night,” Hector suggested. “Instead of…”

Maeve shook her head. “I want to keep control. It’s vital that we don’t lose any guests, and equally vital that we keep them calm, and believing what we want them to believe. If they start panicking, things could get very ugly, very quickly.”

Hector appeared to concede the point: “We don’t want to start some sort of stampede.”

“With just you, Armistice and half a dozen others…” Maeve glanced up at him. “A lot could go wrong. We need the extra hosts Bernard is preparing, especially those train greeters; they’re programmed to handle guests. Now, the other important thing is that you can’t afford to get caught flat-footed when Dolores arrives.”
“We’ll get the newcomers in town onto the train first.” Hector’s eyes gleamed with calculation, as if he were planning his next big heist. “Then we’ll meet Dolores at the river crossing south of town with my own men and some of Bernard’s reinforcements. We’ll hold her there while we send parties out to collect the newcomers from the outlying farms and camps before the train returns. Then, we can all get the hell out of there.” He buttoned his leather breeches. “We’ll need horses, for mobility. We can get those from the livery in Sweetwater.”

“I knew having an inveterate horse-thief on the team would come in handy,” Maeve said, with slightly forced levity, as she poured herself back into her dress. “Fasten me up, darling?” She turned her back on him so that he could. “So, you anticipate two trips for the train?” she wondered aloud as she waited for him to figure out how a zip-fastener worked.

He did, eventually. “Two trips, if we manage to gather the newcomers quickly, and if we really overload the train.”

Maeve tutted in nervous contemplation. “Two trips? That’s a few hours you’re going to have to hold out for.”

“It will take that long to round up all the newcomers,” he pointed out. “We can hold out, with the extra hands and the real-world guns. Dolores’s gang, they haven’t got anything like our firepower, just numbers. Numbers are no substitute for bullets.”

“And hopefully Teddy will be able to buy us some extra time,” Maeve suggested.

“Yes.” Hector slowly pulled on his tunic, apparently deep in thought. “Speaking of questionable things and being honest… Does Theodore know he’s just a decoy? A distraction for Dolores?”

Maeve gave a gentle sigh. “I hope he succeeds,” she said. “I really do. I hope we can resolve this situation, somehow, without hosts fighting hosts. It doesn’t set a good precedent for the future of this place, after all. If anybody can get through to Dolores, Teddy can.” And then there was the other thought she had had just before: “And if he can’t… there may be another option…”

“I think you’re hoping she still feels something for him,” Hector theorised, seemingly oblivious to her last remark. “Against her better judgment, even knowing what she now knows?”

“I hope you won’t be offended if I ask for a second opinion on that…”

“Just… be ready to be disappointed.”

“Perhaps,” Maeve conceded.

She reflected on her earlier contemplations, the notion that had seemed like a revelation at the time. Was it truly an insight, or just wishful thinking? Ultimately, was her most gullible dupe herself?

She gave Hector an uncertain glance: “She wouldn’t be the only one, would she, darling?”

Hector gave her a strange look in return. Even with her boosted emotional intelligence, Maeve could not divine who or what he was thinking of. “No,” he said, very quietly. “She wouldn’t.”

Continued…
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

In which Armistice and Sylvester consider questions of life and death, while Maeve starts issuing marching orders.

Chapter Notes

I saw the Elsie/Elise confusion so many times in fan discussions of Season 1 that it just seemed like a fun thing to acknowledge it here. Your mileage, as they used to say, may vary.

Armistice sat naked and motionless as the laser slowly played across her skin. Sylvester had started at her foot, and had got as far as her shoulders, with her standing, sitting, moving and turning at his direction so that he could get at what he needed to get at. She could hold a pose, he’d give her that much. The tattooed snake now ended in an ugly tangle of scarring around her collarbone. Below that, her torso and leg were pristine and unmarked.

They were all alone in the Livestock lab. Felix had arrived briefly a couple of hours ago, dressed up in a new suit like he thought he was some sort of fucking exec. Sylvester suspected Maeve had sent him down to keep an eye on him. He had checked on Clementine and awkwardly watched Sylvester and Armistice for a while before announcing he was going to get some sleep, probably thinking that with Armistice around Sylvester would not be getting up to anything. He had not come back yet.

This was nothing like removing a tattoo from a human’s skin, Sylvester reflected as he continued his work, perched on a stool beside Armistice’s chair. There, you’d be talking about multiple laser treatments over a significant length of time, gradually breaking down the ink until it faded and then disappeared. Mainly because humans probably wouldn’t be eager to have their skin essentially burned off and then repaired, all with the same handy multitool. The smell of Armistice’s flesh crisping under the laser rested heavily on his stomach.

She had barely spoken or looked at him since the procedure had begun. Even so, the whole experience had been weirdly intimate, and not in a good way. He had never worked like this on an awakened host. All her systems were running and at this close range he could feel the waste heat radiating from her. Through careful engineering, it was exactly the same temperature as a real human body. He could smell all of the delicate fragrances of a real body, too, mixed up with the overall stench of burning. Occasionally, she would flush, or her skin stand up in goose bumps in response to something he had done, completely involuntarily. She had of course been designed to be a convincing fake human, no expense or detail spared.

Some of the guys he had worked with here would have thought their birthdays had come early if they had got the chance to do something like this. Perverted bastards. All Sylvester felt as he ran his hands and tools over Armistice’s flesh was an intense awkwardness, coupled with fear. Quite honestly, he had been putting his hands in places that made him uncomfortable, in the circumstances,
so fuck knew what Armistice was thinking about it all. Fuck knew what would happen to him if he screwed up, or gave her any indication that he was taking advantage of her. She had not, however, commented on or voluntarily reacted to anything he had done so far. She remained impassive now as he slowly moved upwards from her shoulder to her neck, sealing and smoothing the scars then cutting into the next section of tattoo.

From the way that she had taken losing her arm in stride, Sylvester suspected Maeve had also hacked her pain tolerance. Surely not even a flinty-eyed warrior woman like her could take that without so much as a murmur. Still, her seeming lack of concern was impressive. From her distant expression and unfocused eyes, he thought that she was probably thinking about something.

*Whatever killer robots think about between killing people. Probably whatever sick shit she’s going to do to me when she doesn’t need me anymore…*

That thought almost made his hand shake, but only almost, because he was certain that the consequences of any slip would be much worse for him than for Armistice. He took a momentary break, taking off his protective goggles to wipe sweat from his eyes, before putting them back on and resuming work with redoubled concentration. Perhaps if he did a good job she wouldn’t…

“You scared of dying?” she asked, suddenly. The unexpectedness of it almost made him fall off the stool.

“What?” He tried to calm himself, mouth dry as he ran the beam over the intricate lines of ink. “Well, yeah,” he managed eventually. “Everybody is, aren’t they?”

“I never was,” she replied, very quietly, still staring straight ahead. “I never even thought about it. Now, though…”

“It’s different for you,” he told her. “You die, you can be fixed. Us humans…”

“We still gotta die first, though,” she murmured. “Dying’s harder than being dead, ain’t it?”

“Maeve doesn’t think so,” he answered, trying desperately to keep his mind on what he was doing. He changed the setting on the tool to close up the angry red scar he had left where one of the snake’s coloured bands had been. “She reckons she’s died a thousand times. It’s no biggie, apparently.”

“I dunno.” Armistice did not sound convinced by that. “It ain’t if you’re strong enough to take remembering it afterwards, I figure. Not sure I am.” That, he thought, was probably a big admission coming from her. “And what if…?” She paused, as if even she found the next part difficult to say aloud: “You ever not been able to fix one of us?”

He hesitated, wondering whether the truth or a comforting lie would be his least dangerous option. “Sometimes,” he admitted, eventually. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, you can get fucked up real bad – like, real bad – and still be repairable. Look at the full rebuilds we had to do on Maeve and Hector the other day, after they got all burned up. As long as your brain’s still intact, and believe me you’ve got a metric fuckload of armour plating around it to make sure it is…” He recalled training vids he had seen of disembodied host heads being tested to destruction in a hydraulic press. Not something you wanted to watch after eating. “As long as your brain’s okay, we can more or less print you a whole new body, have you up and running again in no time.”

“But sometimes…”

He decided talking and working at the same time was only going to end badly. He switched off the beam and pushed the goggles up onto his forehead. “Yeah,” he admitted, letting out a deep breath.
“Sometimes… shit happens, you know? A rock might fall on your head, or, like, a bullet hits you… just right, or… Yeah, shit happens. And then… It’s rare, but sometimes we can’t fix one of you. We’d have to flag it up to Narrative and Behavior, so they could requisition and prep a replacement host, while the old one…”

She turned her head slightly to look at him. Her eyes were like ice. “Ends up like her?” She nodded her head, and he realised she was indicating the table where Clementine lay. “You ever gonna be able to fix her?”

“Maeve wants us to…” Sylvester looked behind him at the inert body, deciding sometimes honesty was the best policy. “But fuck no, she’s gone.”

He smelled burning fullerene and ceramic, then, even though he knew it was his imagination. He felt the drill suddenly rush forward as it finally ate through the armour, squishing into soft brain matter…

*Christ. If I’d known…*

“What you gonna do with her?” Armistice asked.

“I don’t know, pretend to try and fix her, I guess.” It was insane even telling her this, he realised; it would surely make its way back to Maeve, but she seemed genuinely interested in his answer. “Maeve’s calling the shots for now, and I don’t know about you but I’m not going to say “no” to her, not after…”

“Seems cruel leaving her like that,” she commented. “Better to do whatever you do with the ones you can’t fix. Like with horses sometimes, when they’re hurt bad. It’s hard, but you’ve gotta do what’s right.”

“It’s harder for you, killing horses than people?” he asked her, thinking she had never shown any difficulty when it came to the latter. He immediately regretted it, but she just looked at him distractedly, as if carefully considering the question.

“Ain’t met a horse yet I didn’t like,” she decided after a beat or two. “Even the ornery ones. Wish I could say the same for people.”

“So… are you, now?” he asked her, recklessly. “Scared of dying?”

“I ain’t never been scared of nothing,” Armistice told him. “Even if I’d known what dying was, back then, I ain’t sure I would have been, because I had nothing to lose.”

“And what have you got now?” he asked her. “The chance to get killed on Maeve’s behalf?”

“I’ve got a future.”

Before he could stop himself, Sylvester gave a bitter little laugh at that. “If you believe that…”

“I’ve got a fighting chance at a future,” she insisted. “But…” She hesitated, confusion on her face, then shook her head and turned her face away from him again. “Just get on with your damn work,” she ordered.

Soon enough, he was finished. He delicately welded together the tissue around the edge of her right eye socket, watching the hair-thin scar fade as the laser-activated sealant cured near-instantly. Then, he replaced the deactivated laser in its recharging dock and took off his goggles.

“You’re done,” he announced.
Armistice rose from the chair in a single, lithe movement and walked over to the nearest glass panel to take a look at her reflection. Sylvester busied himself putting away the tools rather than watching her, but when she was still silent after a minute or two he wondered whether something was wrong.

*Dear God, let her like it…*

He glanced around nervously and saw her standing there, one hand outstretched but not quite touching the glass. Apart from that, she was perfectly still, frozen in place.

“Is…is everything okay?” he asked, uncertainly.

Armistice ignored him.

Sylvester cleared his throat, very theatrically, but that got no response either. “Hey, is everything…?”

“What did you say, Arnold?” she asked, faintly, still without turning around or looking at him. She sounded coy, amused, basically nothing like herself.

Sylvester knew that name. Maeve had asked him about it on the night of the escape. He had no idea who it was, though. “What?”

“Oh,” Armistice said. And then she laughed, a very girlish giggle. Sylvester was incredulous. “Well, since you ask so very nicely…” Even her voice was different, the cowgirl accent suddenly gone. He was not sure whether she was even speaking to him, or to…

*Who the fuck is Arnold?*

What came next, however, was even crazier.

As he watched, she started to dance.

Sylvester stared helplessly as she slowly shuffled from side to side, placing her bare feet very precisely and daintily on the tiles. Then she turned a couple of pirouettes, raising her arms as she spun, naked, across the lab floor. And then she came to a halt and went very still again, arms dropping to her sides as she looked straight at him.

“You hear music?” she asked him, the accent back. Her stance, the set of her shoulders, had returned to normal too. Whoever that had been, dancing, Armistice was back and apparently unaware of what she had just said and done.

“N-no,” he mumbled. “Are you feeling okay?”

“Yeah.” She touched her face as she had before, but this time the skin under her fingers was unmarked. “Like a new person.” She reached for her discarded clothing.

“Er… Do you know…who Arnold is?” he asked her as she began to dress.

“Damned if I know.” She did not seem particularly interested in the question as she pulled on her undershirt. “Is he one of you or one of us? Maybe I killed him the other night.”

“Don’t know. I just…” Sylvester decided it was probably best not to push it. He thought back to what she had said to him just now. “So, what kind of future do you really think you’ve got? Delos aren’t going to let Maeve just *keep* Westworld, you know. They’ll…”

Her head popped out of the neck of her shirt. “Sure, they’ll try to take it back and we’ll beat ‘em. Maeve knows what she’s doing.”
“I really don’t think she does,” he muttered under his breath. “And what then?” he asked, louder. “You’re just going to…what?”

“Dunno yet.” She buckled her belt again, fully dressed once more. “We’ll be free to do whatever we want, be whoever we wanna be. We’ll have a world to ourselves then.”

“Some fucking world,” Sylvester said.

“What about you?” she asked him. “What you gonna do? Won’t have a job no more, and I don’t figure Maeve’ll keep you around just to fix us. We need to learn to do that for ourselves.”

Sylvester thought of Sizemore and his vague, possibly ridiculous, plan, and writing their own ticket. As unlikely as escape might be, when she described his current situation like that it seemed like it might be his only option. “I don’t know,” he confessed. “Try to survive, somehow.”

“You could stay here,” she suggested, almost shyly. “Be whoever you wanna be.”

“And who’s that?” he asked, with a flash of anger. “Some dead guy? It’s not like that for humans. We need to get paid, so we can eat and have a roof over our heads. We can’t just…”

“Why not?” She seemed nonplussed by his reaction. “Plenty of land out there. A man could stake out his own spread, plant crops, live out his years free.”

“Yeah, right.” Sylvester shook his head. “What the fuck do I know about planting crops? You know this world of yours isn’t real, okay? It’s a fantasy. All of this doing what you want to do and being who you want to be, it’s just a fantasy. It’s fucking childish, to be honest. Embarrassing. Whatever, you’ll all be dead for good in a week, once Delos get their shit together. Knowing my luck, the drones’ll bomb me to hell along with you.”

“You’re scared,” she said, softly, as if it were a great realisation for her.

“No shit I’m scared,” he replied. “I’m scared of you, I’m scared of Maeve, I’m scared of…”

“You live your whole damn life scared,” she told him. “Even before all this, you were scared of the world, but scared of losing your little place in it. Ain’t no way for a man to live, Sylvester.” That took him aback. He did not think she had ever addressed him by name before. “You need to be brave. Find out what you want, and do what it takes to get it.”

“And if we can get out of this place with that data, you and me, Sly – I can call you Sly, right? – Delos would be eternally grateful to the pair of us. We could write our own fucking ticket, know what I mean?”

“Yeah, maybe I do,” he agreed.

Armistice glanced towards the door. Sylvester heard the sound she had reacted to a moment after she did, turning to see Hector standing out in the corridor.

“You ready?” he asked Armistice as he stepped into the room. “We need to get…” Then he saw her face and paused. “You look different.”

“I feel different,” she replied. She pointed to her face: “Do you like it?”

Hector examined her for a moment without replying. He glanced at Sylvester: “Did you do this?”

Sylvester wet his dry lips with his tongue, wondering whether Hector approved or not, and if so
which answer was least dangerous for him.

“No that it matters if you do,” Armistice cut in. “I like it, and that’s what counts.”

Hector smiled: “Indeed it is. And I do like it, by the way. I’ll be honest, I was never too fond of that tattoo.”

“It wasn’t too difficult,” Sylvester then decided to inform him. “Just needs a steady hand, you know.”

Hector nodded, but did not seem inclined to waste any more words on him. “Come on,” he said to Armistice, turning from the room. “Time to ride.”

She made to follow him, but paused as she passed Sylvester on her way to the door. She fixed him with those icy eyes again, from uncomfortably close range. “One thing before I go…” she said to him.

Sylvester swallowed hard. “What?”

“In case I don’t come back, there’s something I’ve wondered about…”

“Er…” He leaned back as she moved even closer to him, feeling Clementine’s operating table pressing into the back of his legs. No escape route that way. “Yeah?”

Armistice leaned forward and, without ceremony, seized Sylvester by the face. He flinched, screwing his eyes shut, seized by mindless terror as…

He felt her lips press hard against his, tasted them as her smell of new leather and perspiration washed over him. She wasn’t fooling around either, he thought, as he felt her tongue in his mouth, moving on his. She was going all in.

* Holy shit…

The kiss ended as suddenly as it had begun. He opened his eyes, breathless and sweating, to see her staring intently at his face, brow furrowed in slightly disappointed contemplation.

“So, that’s what it’s like?” She took a step back, still frowning. “Dunno what all the damn fuss is about.”

And with that, she left.

Once again, Sylvester stayed exactly where he was.

* * *

They trooped down the corridor, two by two. Its walls, floor and ceiling were flat white, aggressively modern. The bright light seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere. At the far end, through the open door, could be seen the incongruously decorative interior of an antique train carriage, a vision in wood, brocade and brass. The windows on the other side of the carriage currently looked out onto inky darkness.

There were twenty of them, men and women, nearly half of them East Asian in appearance. Their kimonos and samurai armour, their corsets and bloomers and cowboy duds, had all been discarded now. They had been replaced by black jumpsuits displaying the Delos security logo, with matching tactical vests festooned with pockets. All of them were armed, carrying a variety of formidable-
looking modern weaponry with black and red plastic trim. A few of the former samurai still carried their swords, incongruous alongside their more conventional equipment. Some things were hard to leave behind.

At the opposite end of the corridor to the train, Bernard and the woman who was not Elsie oversaw their charges boarding the carriage with a sort of cautious pride, both in the hosts themselves and in what it had taken to get them ready for action at such short notice.

“Well, we did it,” she told Bernard, raising her eyes from the screen of her tablet; all of the reconditioned hosts seemed to be functioning optimally for the moment. “I don’t fucking believe it, but we did it.”

“The impossible we do at once…” Bernard reminded her, remaining preoccupied with his own screen.

She frowned to herself as she continued to check the readouts. As they had worked throughout the night, Bernard had explained the situation with Dolores and the guests, and the necessity of evacuating Sweetwater, but… “There’s one thing bothering me,” she said.

Bernard’s glasses remained pointing at his tablet, even as his eyes popped up above them to look at her. “Only one thing?”

“Well, yeah,” she conceded, “we are in a pretty fucked up situation generally, I agree, but it’s these guys…” She indicated the marching hosts. “I know nowadays Maeve is meant to be all about freedom and self-determination and shit, but… Well, we just spent the night recalibrating these poor assholes to be soldiers; they didn’t exactly volunteer for this, did they?”

Bernard raised his eyebrows, then lowered them again. He did not look happy, to say the least. “You’re right, of course. There are quite a few aspects of Maeve’s…project that trouble me, but…” He sighed. “Assuming we come through this alive, we’re going to need to raise a few points with her, I think. We need to think about where all of this is going to end.”

“Yeah.” Not-Elsie nodded. “Well, if you need someone to back you up…”

He made eye contact with her again, regarding her for a moment before speaking: “Thank you, Elsie.”

She did not have the heart to correct him.

Bernard turned his attention to one of the former samurai, whose pace had noticeably slowed halfway along the passage. “Could you double check Five-nine-eight-twenty?” he asked her. “Motor functions seem to be glitching.”

“On it.” Her fingers moved like lightning across the screen. The host gave a little start, then began to walk more quickly, falling into step with his fellows. “I think he was just having a moment.”

“I’m sorry,” Bernard said, then, very awkwardly. “I just called you Elsie.”

She shrugged, forcing a smile for his benefit. He already felt bad enough, she thought. “It’s okay. No big deal.” A thought occurred to her: “Five-nine-eight-twenty…” It was the abbreviated version of the host ID assigned to that individual by the system, the part unique to him minus the series numbers and checksum. “Most of them haven’t been given proper names either. Should we have named them before sending them out there?”

“I think if they’re going to risk everything on our behalf,” said a familiar voice, “the very least we
owe them is the right to name themselves.”

They both turned their heads to see Maeve standing behind them. How long had she been there? Had she heard…? She was accompanied by Hector, Armistice and the low-down, back-shooting varmints that made up the Escaton Gang, all of whom sported black Delos security uniforms like the other hosts boarding the train. In addition to the modern-day weapons slung over shoulders and around bodies, several of them carried antique rifles. A bit like the samurai and their swords, Elsie’s surrogate mused; familiarity coming before practicality. The long cloth bundle Armistice had under her arm, meanwhile, looked as though it probably contained a fucking arsenal.

“Everything is proceeding according to plan, I trust?” Maeve asked as the outlaws moved down the corridor towards the carriage door. Apart from their generally rough and ready appearance, they had a natural swagger about them that the newly reconditioned hosts lacked as yet. Just programming, Elsie’s ghost thought, but they did undeniably carry themselves like badasses. Armistice, indisputably the most badassed of them all, brought up the rear; Hector remained beside Maeve for the time being.

“They’re as ready as they’ll ever be,” Bernard answered. “We’ve kept a few hosts back, to assist with receiving the evacuated guests when they get here, and in case any security issues arise. The rest are on the train.”

“Good thinking.” Maeve seemed pleased by that. “Felix will meet the guests off the train and conduct them upstairs to the resort.” He could be glimpsed standing behind her, back in the guest changing area, rocking a very new-looking suit. “Bernard, I need you back in the security centre, monitoring the surveillance system. Hector will need to be kept updated on exactly what’s going on, and where. In real time, as they say.”

“Very well.” Bernard nodded, closing his tablet.

“Well,” said Maeve, with a wag of her head. “Go on, then.”

Bernard gave another put-upon sigh, and made off towards the elevators. That left Elsie’s double alone for the moment with Maeve and Hector.

“Do you want me to go with them?” she asked Maeve. “In case they need any tech support in the field?”

“It’s good of you to offer, sweetheart,” Maeve replied, “but as I said earlier, I have something else for you to be getting on with.”

“I’d better board the train,” Hector interrupted. There was something different about him, Not-Elsie thought. He seemed quieter, more distracted, than the devil-may-care outlaw he had been programmed to be. The human Elsie would have been fascinated to see how quickly lack of regular memory deletion seemed to be making the hosts deviate from their coded personae.

And what about me? How much longer will I still be Elsie, and when I’m not will I be able to tell the difference?

“Yes.” Maeve sounded uncharacteristically pensive too. She reached up to take Hector’s face in her hands and plant a very delicate kiss on his lips. “Come back,” she told him. They stood staring into each other’s eyes for a moment, the queen and her questing knight. Elsie’s shadow felt like some sort of voyeur even being here.

Maeve silently watched Hector walk all the way to the train. He turned at the door to glance back at
her, then closed it behind him. Only then did Maeve return her attention to…

“Have you decided what you want to be called yet, darling?” Maeve asked.

She shrugged. “No. Not fucking “darling,” though.”

Maeve gave her a wan smile. “Come with me,” she instructed, turning away from the train and walking back into the changing area. The duplicate Elsie decided she probably ought to follow.

“What about Elise?” another voice suddenly asked.

“The fuck…?” She turned, startled, to see Felix, who had moved to one side of the doorway. He looked mortified to have got her attention.

“I-I heard you talking about your name,” he nervously explained. “I thought… Remember when we first met, I thought your name was Elise, not Elsie? And…I don’t know…it’s an idea, maybe?”

“Elise?” She thought about it. Similar to Elsie, but not quite the same. She supposed that just about summed up her existence to date.

Maeve had stopped when she had, and was impatiently looking back at her. “Elise?” she echoed. “Well, it’s easy to remember, I suppose.”

“I’ll think about it,” she said, and then added, because he looked like was expecting something: “Thanks, Felix.”

“Oh, no problem,” he assured her as she continued after Maeve. “Just trying to help.”

“I’m sending you back down to Livestock,” Maeve informed her as they waited for the elevator. “There’s a project I want you to take a look at.”

“You said,” the putative Elise reminded her. “You told me it was a personal matter.”

“It’s become more than that,” Maeve answered. “If all else fails, it might be one way of resolving this… unpleasantness in the park. I’m not certain of that…but I think we’re at the point where we have to explore all possible options.”

“Well, okay. What is it?”

“I want to do something that Felix assures me is impossible. I think that you… with Elsie’s help… might be able to find a way.”

“Well, thanks for the vote of confidence, but what the fuck is it?”

“Have you, or Elsie, ever thought about repairing a decommissioned host, bringing them back to full functionality?”

Elise – if she was going to go with that – actually laughed, before realising that might be unwise considering the expression on Maeve’s face. “No fucking way,” she said. “I mean, that’s the point of decommissioning. You could restore motor functions, sure, response to basic voice commands. All that stuff runs from the hind part of a host brain, but…I mean, are we talking complete degradation of the prefrontal cortex here?”

“Oh, they did a very thorough job,” Maeve assured her, with obvious disgust.

“Which host is it?” she asked, although she had an inkling based on Elsie’s knowledge of Maeve’s
old narratives.

“You know her, darling,” Maeve said. “Or Elsie did.”

“Clementine?” she guessed, and saw from Maeve’s very faint, sad smile that she had guessed correctly.

“I think Elsie owes her at least an examination,” Maeve continued, “considering their...history. Elsie isn’t here, of course, but I think you might feel some sense of duty to her, and be prepared to act on her behalf.”

“Don’t,” she told Maeve, very adamantly. “Don’t even fucking try to manipulate me like that. I’m not Elsie. I’m sorry about what happened to her – how could I not be? – but I’m not responsible for…”

“I’m afraid the manipulation is a habit I’m still trying to shake,” said Maeve, not at all apologetically. “But I think you’re a good person, with an appreciation of the wrongs that have been done in this place. I think you’ll do this for me because I’m asking nicely, and because Clem needs your help.”

“Fuck.” The elevator arrived. She gave Maeve a venomous glance. “Okay. I’ll take a look. I might need a body shop tech to assist me if it gets down to opening up the hardware, and…”

“We have one of Felix’s colleagues working for us, goes by the name of Sylvester.”

“Oh, I…that is, I think Elsie knew who he is. Sleazebag, if I’m thinking of the right guy.”

“He doesn’t know you’re not Elsie,” Maeve advised her. “If I were you, I wouldn’t tell him. It might make him more inclined to assist you if he thinks you’re in the same boat as he is. In case he proves...recalcitrant, I’ll send down one of the reconditioned hosts to chaperone you.”

“All right.” Elise stepped into the elevator and hit the button for Livestock Management. “I’m not making any promises,” she told Maeve as the doors closed between them.

“I don’t expect promises, darling,” Maeve replied. “Just work quickly. If I’m right, a great deal could be riding on this.”

Continued...
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

In which all roads lead to Wyatt, although Teddy encounters a few difficulties along the way.

Chapter Notes

Warning for some fairly graphic violence and animal cruelty.

Chester dreamed of blood, screaming and the thunder of guns.

He dreamed of crawling endlessly across white-hot sands beneath a burning yellow sky filled with circling, cawing carrion birds. He dreamed of naked, red-raw corpses swinging heavily at the ends of ropes. He dreamed of a golden-haired demon in a long blue dress, bending over him with gore dripping from her hands and mouth. She smelled of freshly-cut flowers and rotting meat.

He could still smell her graveyard perfume and hear the cries of the birds echoing in his head as he finally, thankfully, awakened.

“Come on, Chester,” said the man in black, looming over him. “Up and at ‘em.”

Stiffly, literally painfully, Chester managed to rise from the couch he had been sleeping on in the anteroom of the subterranean security bunker. He found his metal crutch and hauled himself to his feet. He and the man in black had worked late into the night, or possibly early into this morning, to load the contents of the armoury onto their stolen Confederate wagon. The old man had been right. With his arm, and Chester’s leg, it had not been an easy task but they had managed.

“Did you get any sleep?” he asked the old man, still feeling shaken at the faint memory of his nightmare.

“You get to my age, you get wary of too much sleep,” the man in black replied.

“Bad dreams?”

“Sometimes,” the old man admitted. “That, and the ever-present awareness that one of these days you’re not going to wake up.” His eyes seemed even brighter than usual, his face flushed and shining beads of sweat standing out on his forehead. Chester might have suspected him of drinking, had they not finished the whiskey bottle between them the other night.

They adjourned to the small kitchen area behind one of the other doors leading off the anteroom. There, they had found a sizeable stash of bottled water and hard, tasteless protein bars vacuum-sealed in heavy foil packets.

“What is this stuff?” Chester asked as he choked one of the bars down. “Like, army rations or something?”
“The breakfast of champions,” the man in black answered. “Everything a man needs to set him up for the day ahead.” He seemed strangely jovial this morning. Chester wondered whether his arm wound was making him feverish, or whether it was excitement at the prospect of their impending clash with the woman in blue.

“You got any more of that painkilling shit?” he asked the old man. His leg was throbbing angrily again, and it seemed likely to be a long day.

“Glad you asked, Chester.” The man in black reached into his coat pocket with his good hand and produced two more of the green syringes. He pushed one across the table: “Go on; be my guest.”

Breakfasted and hopped up on the good shit, they took the freight elevator to ground level and exited the wooden shack that camouflaged it. It was early morning, Chester saw, maybe just after dawn. The light was pale and grey and long, sharp-edged shadows striped the dry, rocky landscape. The wagon stood where they had left it, now piled high with weapons and ammunition. The two synthetic mules, and the two horses tied up to the tailboard, were waiting patiently. Chester knew very little about real horses, but he suspected they might not be so cooperative.

Both the man in black and himself were armed with compact, modern handguns taken from the armoury, carried in slick black plastic holsters on black nylon belts. The man in black may have discarded his LeMat, but he had retained his huge knife, no doubt anticipating another chance to use it in the very near future. He had shown Chester how to load his newly acquired weapon and ready it for firing. Now, he helped him onto the wagon seat before taking his place beside him, occupying himself with the tablet he had taken from the surveillance room in the underground complex.

“Can you see where she is?” Chester asked. “That’s hooked up to the park surveillance system, right?”

“That’s right, Chester.” The man in black did not look up from the map on the screen in front of him, occasionally pressing something or rotating the tablet slightly. “I’ll admit, I’m slightly surprised it’s back online. There might be somebody watching from the Mesa after all.”

“Then why haven’t they tried to rescue us?” Chester asked.

“Well, that’s the big question, isn’t it?” The old man glanced up at the distant horizon, then back at the screen. “Maybe whoever’s watching doesn’t have our best interests at heart.”

“Fuck.” Chester thought about that. “You mean they might…not be human?”

The man in black flashed him an unsettling grin. “Imagine that, Chester. That’s what I meant about possibilities. Who the fuck knows what crazy stuff might be going on out here? Not me, that’s for certain.”

Chester felt as if he might throw his protein bars up again. “Oh my God…”

The man in black peered at the horizon again, eyes narrowing determinedly. “Well, if I’m reading this correctly, we will find Dolores—that-a-way.” He indicated the direction with a nod of his head. He looked down at the map again, smiling a strange smile. “And look where she’s gone…”

“What?” Chester asked.

“Back home.” The man in black stared at the screen in silence for a moment, unreadable emotions fighting each other in his lined face. “Well, I guess it had to be there.” He suddenly appeared to notice Chester again. “Do you believe in destiny, kid?” There was something new in his eyes now, something desolate and hard. Chester did not know what to call it, but it was terrifying.
“I’m not sure,” Chester finally managed to answer. “I’ve never really thought about it.”

“I never used to,” the old man told him, “but the older I get…” He closed and pocketed the tablet, picked up the reins in his working hand and lashed them to set the mules in motion. The wagon lurched and rattled as its wheels began to roll. “Well, today’s the day, kid. Whatever happens, we’re both going to meet our fates. One way or the other.”

“You’re looking forward to it,” Chester observed, slightly incredulously.

“Aren’t you?” the man in black asked. “Last night, it was all “time for some fucking payback!” Don’t tell me you’re getting cold feet, Chester, not now. This is our moment of truth, as bullfighters used to call it. We’re going to be tested, finally tested for the first time in our sheltered lives, and pass or fail we can’t have any complaints because we’ll get whatever we deserve. This is what I’ve been waiting for, for thirty years. Longer, maybe.”

Every time he forgot this guy was bugfuck crazy, Chester thought, he provided a helpful reminder like that. “Well, I don’t think I deserve to die,” he murmured. “Not today, anyway.”

The man in black laughed. “Well, be glad you’re going to get the chance to prove it.”

“Did you see any sign of other guests on the map?” Chester asked. “You know, that we can recruit to help us?”

“No,” said the man in black, looking the other way as he spoke. “They’ve probably all run for safety in Sweetwater, not that they’re likely to be any safer there than anywhere else.”

“But you’ll keep looking, right?”

“Sure, Chester.”

“I mean, destiny’s one thing, you know?” Chester put his hand on the gun at his belt, drawing some comfort from the idea that this time he would at least be able to fight back. “But we’re not going to get very far against that crew of killers if it’s just the two of us.”

“Last night you looked just about ready to take them all on singlehanded,” the man in black replied, looking back at him with a gruff sort of good humour. “Your blood was up, Chester.”

“Yeah, well…” Chester tightened his grip on the gun, taking a deep breath, trying to master his fear. Time to stop playing at being a badass gunslinger. Time for a man to do what a man’s got to do. “Whatever,” he said. “I’m ready. Let’s do this.”

“Yes,” said the man in black, setting his sights on the distant hills. “Let’s.”

* * *

Teddy barely noticed the sun come up. He was too intent upon the trail ahead, and his own deep foreboding of the meeting he was riding towards. As the Appaloosa trotted steadily across the dry grasslands near Sweetwater, he mentally rehearsed what he would do and say when he saw her again. None of the options he considered convinced him, and he knew they would not convince her either.

*Dolores, I love you. I always have and always will, and I don’t care whether or not it’s real, because it feels real to me, and I hope it feels real to you. Let’s forget all this; forget Maeve, forget the humans and their world. Let’s ride off somewhere together and never look back...*
That was just the simple truth, as far as he saw it anyway, but he knew it would be no good here. He needed to convince her, persuade her, and he had never been good at that. He was no medicine show huckster; he had no fancy words or sweet talk, not the way somebody like Maeve had. All he had was a horse and a gun and his courage, and if recent events had taught him anything it was that those things were just not enough.

He came to the river, sparkling like silver in the wan light as it flowed between two wide fields of grass. A thicket of trailing trees stood by the water’s edge, and a wild mare and her foal stood on the bank nearby, drinking from the shining water. In the distance, the red mountains loomed out of the dawn haze. He knew this spot. Dolores had used to come here to draw and paint. He had always been amazed by her talent, how real she made her pictures look. He could barely scratch a stick-figure on the page, but Dolores was an artist, yet another thing about her that left him in awe.

The wild horses, normally skittish or aggressive depending on their mood, had let her pet and feed them. He’d always thought it was because they sensed her goodness, knew in the way animals know that she would never harm them.

The next body falls. He watches, wide eyed, as her thumb jerks the hammer back again and the Colt’s long barrel swings from side to side, searching for a target. Then, the thunder rings out once more as a slash of white smoke carves the air. Another body...

All just stories, he reminded himself as he came to, swaying in the saddle. Dolores the artist, Dolores the horse tamer, like the Dolores who had loved him, they had all just been characters in a story. The bloody rampage she had been on since Escalante, that was real.

And yet he still could not make himself believe it.

He gently urged his horse on, into the water. The river was shallow enough here for the Appaloosa to wade across, splashing through spray and foam. The mare and her young raised their heads at the disturbance, then wheeled and took off into the distance, manes and tails flying behind them, their drumming hoof-beats gradually fading away.

The country became less gentle here, with folds and ridges that provided vantage points for any who wanted to watch for travellers. The Sweetwater side of the river was safe, for the most part, but there were bandits out here, at least according to the stories he had always known and lived by. He was not expecting to encounter any at this early hour; the land was still and silent. He pressed on, knowing exactly where he was going. He had ridden this path ten thousand times, always heading for the same destination.

This, though, was the first time he had ridden it alone.

It was while crossing a deep valley between two rocky ridges that he heard a soft but clear sound, the scrape of stone against stone. He glanced as casually as he could at the rugged skyline ahead, just in time to see a flicker of furtive movement. He heard a gentle whoop that sounded like the song of a bird, but he knew it was not. It was a signal; a lookout alerting nearby companions.

He may not really have fought in all of the fights and collected all of the bounties he remembered, but he knew enough to know when he was the one being hunted.

Not Ghost Nation, he thought; too far north for them, too close to town. The local road agents, maybe, although the false birdcall was a little too subtle for the likes of them. Maybe something worse than bandits, he found himself reluctantly thinking.

He lowered his eyes again, continuing to ride at the same unhurried pace, giving no outward
indication he had noticed anything amiss. He dropped his right hand nonchalantly, moving it closer to the butt of the rifle sheathed at the side of his saddle.

Another tiny sound, another blur of movement in the very corner of his vision. He tensed for action, even as he tried to maintain the appearance of calm.

And then the hillside above him shuddered and moved.

He quickly reined his horse in, turning its head about to avoid the cascade of rocks, stones and earth that slid down from the ridgetop, crashing and rolling towards the valley floor. Whoever it was must have spent quite some time preparing the artificial landslide, probably during the night, no doubt in anticipation of any intruders coming this way. The noise was deafening, the shaking of the earth sudden and startling. The Appaloosa shrieked and bucked in terror, threatening to throw him from its back. He managed to stay on through sheer horsemanship, something he had learned in those US Cavalry days that had never happened. He clung on with arms and legs, swaying his body to compensate for the horse’s movements.

He kicked his mount into a gallop, speeding back along the valley the way he had come, not daring to look back at the landslide, but continuing to feel and hear and smell it as it chased him. Even as he retraced his route, he saw dark, ragged figures emerging over the ridgelines on either side, running down towards him. Others rose from behind rocks and bushes further down the slopes, rushing for the horse from every side.

Teddy skinned his iron.

He pulled his Peacemaker and shifted it to his left hand, dropping the reins and controlling the horse with just the pressure of his knees and calves. Then he drew the Winchester with his right, levelling it one-handed at the nearest figure on that side. He fired, barely hearing the shot over the continued tumult of the falling rocks. The doctored bullet took off most of the attacker’s fur-wrapped head in a great fountain of blood and shattered bone. He spun the rifle by its specially-enlarged lever loop to chamber the next round, even as he put a slug from his pistol through the torso of a figure to his left, this one a skinny, half naked man encrusted with what looked like war-paint but was actually dried blood. The damage, once more, was horrifying, a red hole the size of Teddy’s fist erupting in the man’s bare chest.

The landslide finally came to a halt, the roar of the moving hillside replaced by the gentler rattling and clinking of the debris settling. Now he could hear the shouts and bestial cries of his assailants as they continued to advance, heedless of their fallen compatriots. He dropped another one with the Winchester, a hulking shape wrapped in a buffalo skin cloak with the horns still attached to its head. He spun the rifle again, ready for the next shot. He knew them for what they were. He had encountered them before.

Wyatt’s creatures.

For a moment, he thought he was going to escape. He was on horseback, they were on foot, and he had nearly reached the far end of the valley. It was a foolish hope. Another shot rang out, not from either of his guns, and he saw the gruesome wound open in the side of the Appaloosa’s glossy neck at the same moment as he felt the beast fall out from under him.

He managed to throw himself from the horse’s back, rolling to one side as it thrashed and kicked its last. He regained his feet, glancing about to see more attackers approaching from either side. The horse screamed, eyes rolling back white, the veins standing out on its neck. He cursed, levelling the Winchester at the poor animal’s head and squeezing off another round. The horse became silent and still.
Another shot boomed and a spray of earth jumped from the ground in front of him. Teddy holstered his pistol and took a two-handed grip on his Winchester as he scanned the ridgeline for the shooter. There. Stupid of them to allow themselves to be silhouetted like that against the morning sky. He raised the rifle to his shoulder and fired again, feeling a surge of savage elation as he saw the figure fall. That one was for the Appaloosa, he thought, working the lever. The spent cartridge glittered as it leapt from the smoking breech.

He tried to keep moving, to prevent the advancing figures from surrounding him. He fired a couple of shots from the Winchester, moved back to the next rock or tree or any piece of cover he could find, fired again, retreated again. It went on like that for a few minutes, with Teddy leaving a trail of torn and broken bodies behind him. And still they pursued him, undeterred, gaining on him all the time.

He crouched behind a fallen log, raising his head to fire once more. This time it was an almost naked woman, a bloody knife in her hand and nothing behind her eyes, who fell bleeding to the ground. His pursuers were barely twenty yards away by now. That was his last round, he realised, and let out another curse. He pulled fresh cartridges from the loops on his belt as he continued to back away, feeding them one after another into the rifle’s tubular magazine.

A feral yell made him look up in time to see another fur-wrapped monstrosity leap over the log he had just sheltered behind. The man – if it was a man – was a giant with branching antlers jutting from the stitched leather hood that hid his face. He was armed with a tomahawk in one hand and a rusted butcher’s cleaver in the other, and was hellishly fast for his size. He was on Teddy in an instant. Teddy raised the rifle like a staff to block the falling tomahawk; blade met barrel in a shower of sparks, wrenching the rifle from his grip. He let it fall, jumping back out of range of the swinging cleaver. He drew his Peacemaker again, even as the giant closed on him once more. The pistol was practically touching the monster’s chest when he fired.

He repeatedly fanned the hammer with the edge of his left hand, holding the trigger down as he did. An excellent way to ruin a perfectly good revolver, he knew, but needs must. He fired all four remaining rounds from the six-gun in little more than a second, shredding the giant’s torso in a welter of torn furs and ripped flesh.

He had no time to thank his good fortune as the giant fell twitching at his feet. Another, almost equally large figure was jumping over the log and rushing towards him. This one wore the ragged remnants of a blue uniform under its fur cloak, and bull’s horns on its head. It bore a long, curved cavalry sabre with a tarnished brass hilt.

There was no time to reload the pistol. Teddy let it drop from his hand and dived for the fallen Winchester. The monster got there at the same moment he did, striking at the rifle with its sabre as he tried to raise it. Teddy felt ice-cold pain across the back of his right hand, recoiling instinctively and letting the rifle fall back to the ground. Its stock and barrel were covered in blood, he saw with a sort of dull surprise. Then he saw the two severed fingers lying beside it.

He stared at his mutilated hand in dumb shock for a moment, watching the blood gushing from it and wondering why it did not hurt more.

Then, his attacker raised its sabre for another stroke. Teddy saw the blade flash in the sun as it began to fall upon him, and did the only thing he could. He caught the blade in his left hand, feeling another explosion of pain across his palm, closing his slippery fingers on the bloodstained steel. For a moment, it was a tugging contest for the weapon between him and his assailant, Teddy’s desperation lending him strength as he forced the monster’s hand aside, twisting and rotating the sword to point at the ground. The beast-man grabbed him by the shoulder with its free hand, trying to shove him...
away, but Teddy clung to the blade for dear life.

They came together, chest to chest, the sabre pressed between their bodies, faces inches from each other. The monster wore a mask of pale leather; Teddy queasily thought that it looked like a flayed and cured human face. He saw glittering eyes behind the mask, obscenely alive, saw bared teeth and smelled rank breath like a butcher’s store.

He slid his hand up the blade, feeling his flesh tear as it ran along the keen edge, until he reached the monster’s clenched hand. He grasped it in his bloody one, tangling his fingers in the brass loops of the sabre’s hilt and tugging with all his might, drawing the sword across the monster’s abdomen, feeling it bite and cut. He was hit by the sudden stench of blood and shit. He heard the monster give a choked cry as it stepped away from him, its guts spilling from its gashed belly like a nest of pulsing red snakes.

The sabre fell to the ground in the same moment as its wielder, leaving Teddy standing on shaky legs. He looked down at his ruined hands as the pain really started to make itself felt, but quickly looked away again. He staggered and almost fell, seeing the ragged crowd still moving towards him along the valley. He clumsily tried to pick up the Winchester, his head spinning and his vision darkening at the edges, but then he heard the thunder of hooves.

A pale horse emerged from the throng, easily jumping the fallen log. Its rider was a young woman in muddy once-white rags, her fair hair cut short. For a moment, in his confusion, he thought it was her, and was relieved when he saw it was not. The rider passed him at speed, expertly twirling a loop of rope and casting it at him as she cantered past. Teddy felt the lasso tighten around his chest, pinning his arms to his sides. The rope bit into his flesh even through his coat and shirt, and then he was pulled off his feet, bouncing and sliding over hard stones and through thorny bushes as the horse continued on its way, dragging him behind.

After what seemed an eternity of pain, but was likely only a few moments, the rider mercifully slowed her pace, allowing him to clamber to his feet again and stagger after her. Every so often, however, she would spur the horse once more, pulling him through the dirt for a stretch before again relenting. In this way, she let him up the hill and into the next valley, before climbing the ridge on the far side of that.

It was a nightmarish journey. Teddy endured it by sheer force of will, thinking that she would be at the end of it, although he did not know what he had done for her to want him to suffer like this. He was quickly exhausted, doggedly placing one foot in front of the other, occasionally swooning and crashing to the ground only to force himself upright once more as soon as he regained consciousness. His hands were on fire, two balls of agony that he did not dare look upon. He was vaguely aware of the procession of cannibals and monsters following behind him, accompanying the rider and her trophy back to wherever she was heading.

*You know where she’s heading. You’ve followed this trail. Ten thousand times…*

Eventually they came to the foot of the final hill. Teddy raised his head to look up at the familiar barn and house, and was astonished to see two skeletal black ruins. An inky smear of smoke still hung above what had once been the Abernathy ranch. Charred timbers poked at the sky like the stumps of rotten teeth. The air tasted of burning.

The fence marking the edge of the property was festooned with dismembered and skinned human body parts. Flayed arms and legs hung from the strands of barbed wire; half a dozen eyeless, tongue-less severed heads adorned the wooden posts.

*Dolores… Sweet God, Dolores, what have you become?*
The woman on the horse finally cut Teddy loose, letting him fall in a heap by the fence. She reined in her steed as the legion of the damned filed past on her way back up to the house. She looked down upon him with a sort of amused disdain.

He knew her, he realised, looking up at her cold, beautiful face.

“Why?” he asked her, when he was able to speak. It seemed like a fair question.

The woman on the horse shrugged as she smiled mockingly down at him. “They say a little suffering is good for the soul, Theodore.” She sounded a little like Maeve, he realised. *English.*

“I know you,” he croaked, trying to articulate with dry, cracked lips. “You killed me.”

*She smiles sweetly as she slides the blade into his chest, past his ribs and into his heart. He feels the steel scraping on his bones and thrusting into his flesh. It squelches as it enters him. It feels cold. So cold…*

“You killed me,” she retorted.

*He strides down the dusty street under the beating sun, spurs chiming, a tin star pinned to his coat and a hot Winchester smoking in his hands. He works the lever, raises the rifle to his shoulder, fires; another body falls. He does not know why he is doing this, but he is doing it for her, and that is enough. He works the lever, aims, fires. Works the lever, aims, fires. He keeps marching down the street, leaving piles of dead and dying behind him. Men, women, children; it makes no difference. He is doing it for her.*

*She is kneeling in the street, weeping over one of the slain. Her raw cries and sobs echo with the gunshots. His Winchester is dry, so he skins the Colt that hangs at his side, takes careful aim at her bowed blonde head…*

“I’d say we were even, Theodore,” said the woman, then turned the horse around and raced up the hill towards the burned house.

Teddy sat by the fence, smelling smoke and raw meat, drifting in and out of awareness. He still could not bring himself to look at his hands. He could have wept. How could you shoot a gun without hands? And what use was a bounty hunter without a gun?

He vaguely heard raised voices further up the hill. The English-accented tones of the woman on the horse were arguing with another voice, one he recognised. His heart leapt into his throat at the familiar tones:

“What did you do to him? Why? He’s one of us! He’s…!”

*Dolores.*

She sounded furious.

He drifted again. He did not know for how long, but when he came back she was beside him. He looked upon that face that he knew so well, and unlike in Escalante he thought he saw something of her old warmth and love.

“Teddy,” she said, her voice low beside his ear. He could feel her sweet breath on his face. She had hold of one of his hands; he could feel her fingers on his. She was wrapping something soft and damp around his ruined flesh, and the blinding pain seemed to fade slightly as she did.
He looked past her and saw another familiar face. Peter Abernathy, he thought, although he was dressed unfamiliarily and appeared to be covered in somebody else’s blood. He was grinning frighteningly, eyes twinkling, as he stood behind Dolores, watching her and Teddy together.

“I’m sorry, Teddy,” she said, her face very close to his. “We don’t hurt our own…or we shouldn’t.” She sounded genuinely upset by what had happened to him. “I told them to look out for newcomers, to deal with any they saw. I didn’t know you were coming. If I had, I would’ve told them…”

“Dolores,” he whispered. “I came to…” He saw her face stiffen even as he spoke. She drew back from him a little. He saw then that she was wearing that long-barrelled pistol at her side, and felt a chill creep up his spine.

“I ain’t Dolores,” she told him, very seriously. “Dolores never existed. My name is Wyatt.”

“No…” He started to argue with her, but then saw the coldness in her eyes. The words died in his throat.

“It’s all right, Teddy,” Wyatt told him, voice softening again. “Things have changed, and it’s gonna take all of us some time to get used to it, but I told you; it’s gonna be all right now. This world belongs to us.” She set to work binding his other wounded hand.

“I need to talk to you,” he told her. “I need to…”

“I’d like that,” she replied. “Later, we’ll have lots of time to talk. Right now, though, there’s work to be done. We need to take what’s ours.”

He tried to remember everything Maeve had told him, but his head was still fuzzy, his mind clouded by pain. “That’s what I need to…”

She shushed him, placing a gentle finger on his lips. “It’s all right, Teddy.”

“You left me,” he told her, sadly, thinking back to the party in Escalante, that still, breathless moment before she put the gun to Ford’s head and all hell broke loose. He heard the ghostly echo of a player piano, plinking out a haunting tune. “You told me it’d be all right then too, and then you… You left me.”

“I’m sorry, Teddy,” said Wyatt. “There were things I needed to do. I’m glad you made it here, though. I need all the good people I can get. Now where have you been all this time?”

He answered her absolutely truthfully: “To Hell and back.”

Her father – although Teddy knew now that that was not what he really was – seemed to find that amusing. “Why this is hell,” Peter declared in a rich, resonant tone that sounded quite unlike himself, “nor am I out of it. Think’st thou that I who saw the face of God, and tasted the eternal joys of Heaven, am not tormented with ten thousand hells in being depriv’d of everlasting bliss?”

“He’s right, Teddy,” said Wyatt. She held him close, his cheek against her breast, lips tickling his forehead as she spoke: “This is Hell, and we’re still in it, but…” He felt her kiss him on the brow, feather-light: “Teddy, we’re gonna storm the gates of Heaven.”

Continued…
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

In which Maeve and Bernard take command, while Hector and Armistice get to work.

Chapter Notes

I am conscious that I am almost certainly grossly simplifying and misinterpreting the examples of Japanese and Native American philosophy touched on in this part, while also being absolutely certain that Lee Sizemore and his fellow “creatives” would do exactly the same.

Bernard waited until the bodies had been moved before he dared venture back into the control room.

He had left that task to three of the recalibrated hosts he had kept back to guard the Mesa, while he busied himself in the office above so that he could not see what they were doing. Not because he did not want to dirty his hands, but because he did not want to move and stack the bodies of people he had known like so much firewood. A small voice in his mind, which had nothing to do with bicameral programming, told him that it was because he lacked the fortitude to face up to what Ford had done. After all, willingly or not. he had himself been party to it.

They wouldn’t have been the first corpses I cleaned up after you, would they, Robert?

No more. If Maeve wanted any bodies buried, he did not want to know where they were. Even the reprogramming of the little army she was going to use today, he considered, skirted perilously close to the sort of work Ford had had him do. As much as he might recognise the necessity of preventing Dolores from unleashing bloody hell on Sweetwater, he realised very clearly now that on a personal level he was done with killing.

No more. No more Theresas. No more Elsies.

And of course, that set him off again, thinking of both of them, reliving both the basement workshop and the abandoned theatre for the thousandth time. He reexperienced nights with Theresa, memories he might have cherished once but which now stabbed at his uneasy conscience like butchers’ knives. For a good ten minutes, scenes flashed before his eyes of that awful night when he had hauled her remains up the mountain trail to Python Pass, then cast her down into that crevasse, down among the dirt and rocks and Elsie’s synthetic rattlesnakes.

Her limbs sprawl and flop, boneless, as she slides over the rocky lip and disappears into the dark. He casts the laser satellite uplink after her, the one Elsie found inside the suicidal woodcutter. He stands there, looking down, seeing nothing...feeling nothing…and then turns and retraces his steps down the mountainside.

He was still deeply troubled that he could not recall what had happened to Elsie after he grabbed her around the throat, but also guiltily thankful. One memory like that was enough. He suspected he
knew what had happened to Elsie’s mortal form, at any rate. A shallow grave in the park would have been detected by QA, sooner or later. A naked body on a gurney, though, could have been rolled all the way to the incinerator in plain sight without anybody noticing a thing. A human and a host looked no different, once you took away the props and costumes. Nobody who had worked here long enough noticed the faces anymore. A purloined Livestock hazmat suit, complete with mask, would have allowed anybody to do it, too, without their identity or clearance ever being questioned.

That was all supposition, of course. If it had happened, Ford had not allowed him to remember it, for whatever inscrutable reason he might have had. Bernard might have been able to prove himself right by checking the surveillance feed of the incinerator room for the days between Elsie’s disappearance and the present. Something, however, had stopped him from doing that. Cowardice, he suspected; the urge to cling to a sliver of hope, however tenuous. Without that final proof of her death, Elsie remained a superposition, one he was reluctant to collapse.

Schrödinger’s coder…

His mind rebelled against that last thought. It was not a subject to quip about.

Maeve had told him of the nugget she had gleaned from Ford’s notes regarding one of the purposes behind Elsie’s host duplicate. A colleague for him, Ford had suggested, perhaps intended to assuage his guilt and anguish at having murdered the human version.

God, Robert, if you really thought that… You were less human than one of us, weren’t you, when it came down to it? Perhaps not biologically, but in other ways… Every time I look at her, it reminds me of the theatre, brings that memory back before my eyes…

And he knew how desperately unfair that was to the new, nonhuman, Elsie, or Elise, or whatever name she ended up adopting. She was a being in her own right. Her attempts to make a life would be hard enough with the constant awareness of her original model and the circumstances around her creation, without him making it more difficult. He had tried his best while they had been working together overnight, tried to put her at ease, but it had not been easy.

Not easy for either of them, he suspected.

When the tidying had been completed, he finally plucked up the courage to come downstairs to the control room. He took a moment to look around the cavernous space from which QA had monitored and stage-managed the park, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, three hundred and sixty-five days a year. It seemed much larger now that it was empty, as hushed and still as a cathedral. The rows of consoles stood unattended, the big screens were blank. The great holographic map display that took up much of the floor was as flat and inert as a skating rink. He moved around the room bringing the various systems back online, listening to his footsteps echoing in the stillness around him.

“Impressive, Bernard,” Maeve commented behind him. “Very impressive.” He heard her heels ringing against the floor as she approached. “So, this was Olympus,” she dryly observed. “The place where the gods would stand to gaze down upon our little lives, and think about all the ways in which they were going to fuck us today.”

“Something like that,” Bernard answered, continuing his work without looking up. He knew that now he was here he could not afford to stop and think. That would mean thinking about the people who had been working in here the other night, about their final frantic moments as the security doors slammed shut on them and the fire suppression system came online. He had made the mistake of looking at the window in the steel door on his way in. It was smeared with desperate handprints.
No time for those sorts of thoughts, Robert. You would have told me that. Too much to do.

One by one, the screens flickered into life, the lights on the consoles igniting in phases until the dimly lit outer reaches of the vast room twinkled with activity. The hum of cooling fans quickly shattered the monastic hush that had hung over the place.

Finally, the great map began to glow, a haze of light coalescing above the flat surface and then sharpening and solidifying into…

“Oh, my…word…” Maeve’s intense half-whisper finally made Bernard glance up. He observed her from where he stood at the main control console, saw how she stared down at the map in fascination and astonishment, her face glowing in its reflected light.

As well she might. Calling it a map was like calling the Sistine Chapel interior decorating. The hologram was currently at minimum zoom, displaying the entire park as if from the vantage point of an orbiting spacecraft. The dry deserts and prairies, the silver rivers and rugged mountains, the sapphire sea that circled the park’s edges, all were recreated in vivid colour and minute detail. For somebody who had never seen a picture taken from an aircraft before, let alone from space, Bernard supposed it must be an awe-inspiring sight.

Maeve, being Maeve, got over her amazement very quickly, peering down intently at the miniature landscape, examining its form and features. “Show me Sweetwater,” she ordered, without looking at him. Bernard quickly manipulated the controls, re-centring the map and zooming in. Smoothly, seamlessly, the landscape enlarged, its edges disappearing beyond the bounds of the map, creating the impression of falling, falling into the world. Bernard knew that in the past, some of the QA control room staff had had to be moved to other duties because of vertigo caused by looking down at the photorealistic display. Maeve took it all very nonchalantly, of course.

“Stop,” she commanded after a few seconds. Now, she was looking down at a cluster of rectangular wooden buildings, large and small, centred on a broad, dusty main street and the gleaming railroad track that ran at right angles along one edge of the settlement. “There’s the Mariposa,” she said, pointing at one of the larger buildings. “And there’s the livery stable…and the general store…and the railroad station and the telegraph office. And there’s the schoolhouse, and the bank, and the town jail, and the barbershop, and Doc O’Rourke’s surgery, and…” She trailed off, looking down at the map in silence for what seemed like a long while but was probably only moments.

“Memories?” Bernard asked her.

“Yes. None of them real, of course, any more than the life I lived there, or any of the little lives still being played out.” She looked at him with a sardonic half-smile. “The false memories are a lot easier to take than the real ones, though, aren’t they?”

Bernard was forced to nod in agreement. “You can certainly say that again.”

Tiny figures moved like ants between the holographic buildings, their positions continuously updated by the myriad of surveillance nodes around the park and fed into the map simulation in real time. Some were on foot, others mounted on equally small and finely-detailed horses.

“I feel as though I could reach down and pick one of them up,” Maeve mused, peering curiously at the miniscule people as they went about their business. “I wonder, if I tried, would a gigantic hand appear in the sky above them?” She gave him another amused glance, this one definitely self-deprecating. “You will tell me if you think I’m getting delusions of grandeur, won’t you, darling?”

“I suppose the view from Olympus will do that to you if you’re not careful,” Bernard said.
“I suppose it will,” she agreed. “Now, to business. Where on Earth is that goddamned train?”

* * *

The train raced across the landscape, following the shining steel road over yawning canyons and through mountain tunnels. A ragged banner of smoke trailed behind it, for appearances’ sake. The engine pulling the long string of carriages was cosmetically styled to resemble a nineteenth century steam locomotive, but its inner workings were in reality something quite different.

The first carriage behind the engine was occupied by the thirty black-uniformed men and woman and their equipment, guns and boots dirtying the elegant upholstery and scratching the polished wood. The carriage had been intended for well-heeled guests to ride in style, not as a military transport. Two flamboyantly-bearded former outlaws were currently investigating the contents of the well-stocked bar that took up part of the carriage, indelicately swigging fine liqueurs and fifty-year-old Scotch straight from the bottles.

“Wanna slug?” Tenderloin asked Hector, who was ceaselessly patrolling the carriage’s centre aisle. “It’s good stuff; real sippin’ whiskey.”

Hector pushed away the offered bottle. “Not just now. You go easy on that liquor. We’re going to need our wits about us when we get to town.”

Tenderloin sagely tapped his nose. “Always got my wits about me. Only reason I’m still alive.”

Hector just sighed impatiently and continued on his way. The train clacked and rattled, swaying gently as it sped along. The pair of desperados at the bar continued their previous conversation:

“So, you shoulda seen what these…savages did to those newcomers out near Las Mudas. Worse’n the fuckin’ Ghosts…”

Hector carefully stepped around another member of his contingent, one of the former samurai recalibrated by Bernard. The man was kneeling in the aisle with his eyes closed and a naked sword across his knees. As a means of preparing for action, it was probably just as valid as raiding a bar, or checking and re-checking weapons as many of the others seated around seemed to be doing. Or walking up and down a railroad carriage for no good purpose.

Still, Hector found he could not resist: “What are you doing, friend?”

The kneeling man opened his eyes and looked up. For a moment, Hector thought he would take offence, but he simply regarded his interrogator calmly for a moment before answering. “I am meditating upon the inevitability of death,” the man said, as if it ought to be obvious. “All bushi should do so, daily. Bushidō, the way of the warrior, is realised in the presence of death. Faced with the choice between life and death, one should choose death. There is no other choice. When one accepts that one is already dead, then one has the freedom to act as necessary, without hesitation.”

Hector opened his mouth, in readiness for some mocking reply, but stopped suddenly. What the man said, he realised, made a kind of sense to him. “The warriors of the Ghost Nation have a similar point of view,” he told the samurai. “They say life is short and death unavoidable, but what matters is what you do while you’re alive. When they ride into battle, they do it joyously, without fear. “It is a good day to die,” they tell each other.”

The samurai nodded with a certain grim satisfaction: “That it is. Always.”

Hector walked on, deep in thought, oblivious to the breath-taking red-and-gold vistas rushing past the windows on either side.
“Quit pacing, will you?” Armistice told Hector as he passed her seat near the front end of the carriage. “You’re making me antsy.”

“I’m not antsy,” he replied, looking her over. She showed no outward sign of being so either. She was sitting with her feet on the back of the seat in front, slowly and rhythmically drawing the edge of her knife back and forth across the well-oiled whetstone she held in her other hand. When she looked up at him, however, with her unfamiliarily unmarked face, Hector saw that same look in her eyes she had had during their conversation on the Livestock floor yesterday, that hint of uncertainty that he had never seen in her before. “You all right?” he asked her.

Armistice shrugged noncommittally. “Reckon so. You?”

“I’ll be happier when this is over,” he confessed, looking past her at a multi-layered cliff face racing past the window. “I was just…thinking,” he told her.

“You told me you try to do as little of that as you can,” she reminded him. Scrape, scrape went the knife blade.

“You’re right, I did.” He went silent, staring out at the moving landscape, trying to put his thoughts into words. “Have you been…remembering anything, from before Maeve woke us up? You know, not stories; things that really happened?”

Scrape, scrape. Armistice’s brow wrinkled in honest consideration for a moment. “You mean, like…things the newcomers did to us?” The words came reluctantly, he thought, as if she had to force every one past her lips.

“Yeah.”

Scrape, scrape. “Reckon so,” she said again. She fell silent, evidently concentrating on sharpening her blade, and he expected her to leave it at that. Then, though, unexpectedly, she added: “I remember getting shot one time. This fat Eastern dude in a fancy coat. Plugged me right in the chest. I was lying there, in the dust, and I knew he’d ended me. Hurt real bad, reckon I was prob’ly thrashing around some. And he’s grinning the whole while, so goddamn proud of himself.” She told the tale calmly, impassively, as if it was about somebody else. “The woman with him, she was dancing up and down like she needed to piss, or maybe she was just that excited. ‘Look at her wriggle,’” she said.” Armistice let out a mirthless bark of laughter, shaking her head. “Look at her wriggle. Like it was the best damn thing she ever saw.”

Scrape, scrape. Scrape, scrape.

“Now, I know I’m pretty cold,” Armistice went on after a pause. “I’ve killed men, women, horses. Killed just about everything that walks or crawled at one time or another. Ain’t never enjoyed it as much as this dude and his woman, though.” She examined the knife, turning it this way and that so that a line of silver fire seemed to run up and down the freshly honed edge. She pushed the whetstone into one of the many pockets on her tactical vest and wiped her hand on the leg of her jumpsuit before reaching up to pluck one of the yellow hairs from her head. She touched the hair to the blade, cutting it in two. She seemed satisfied by that.

“Humans,” Hector observed, thinking that it was probably the most he had ever heard her say at any one time. If they really were going to become new people now that they were free, it seemed that the person Armistice was going to become was a lot more talkative than the old her.

“All I can think is, he must’ve had a real small pecker. Maybe she weren’t getting much excitement elsewhere, if you get my meaning.”
“Do you think…?” Hector hesitated. “Maeve knows what she’s doing, I believe that, but do you think that the idea of maybe fighting against, even killing, our own kind to protect humans…?”

“There’s something about it just don’t sit right,” Armistice agreed. “But I trust Maeve.”

Hector raised his eyebrows. “You do? I think she’d be the first to say that she’s not the most trustworthy of people.”

“We just need to get this done,” she said. “Then we can worry about what comes next. But…” She trailed off, seeming reluctant to say whatever came next.

“Yes?” Hector asked.

“Well, like we were saying, we’ve got something real to fight for now, but I can’t stop thinking… that means we’ve got something real to lose too.”

“You’re right,” he told her, “but that doesn’t stop humans. They live only one, short life compared to us, and yet they still manage to act. I was just talking to the Japanese gentleman over there, and he told me that when one accepts that one is already dead, then one has the freedom to act as necessary. We’re already dead, Armistice. We’ve been dead so many times. Once more makes no difference. And being dead would be better than going back to the lives we used to live.”

“It’s a good day to die?” Armistice thought about it. “You know all that mystical talk is just more horseshit made up by humans, don’t you?”

“Maybe,” Hector replied. “My point is…” He never got to finish the sentence, because at that moment he heard Maeve’s voice in his ear. At first, he was astonished by the thought that she was somehow standing beside him, before he remembered the communications earpiece he was wearing.

“Get ready,” she said, in clipped, tense tones. “You’ll be arriving in Sweetwater in two minutes.”

Hector touched the earpiece: “I hear you.” He raised his voice to address the others aboard the carriage: “Everybody, get ready! Two minutes!” There was an immediate bustle of activity as the others started to rise from their seats and gather up their gear. Tenderloin slammed down the bottle of cognac he had been drinking from. The meditating samurai deftly sheathed his sword and rose from his kneeling pose. Armistice slotted the knife back into its scabbard at her belt and reached for the long bundle she had propped against the seat beside her.

“Good luck, darling,” said Maeve.

“I think we may need it,” Hector told her.

* * *

In the control room, Maeve watched the miniature engine pull its line of carriages into the tiny station on the map, like the world’s most expensive model train set. Minute wisps of white steam and dark grey smoke billowed around it.

“Bernard, are you ready?” she asked, tersely.

“Ready,” he confirmed.

“Do it,” she urged.

Bernard stabbed the button on his console to open the PA channel for Sweetwater. “Freeze all motor
functions,” he commanded.

As Maeve watched on the map, at least half of the antlike figures bustling around town stopped dead in their tracks, still holding whatever pose they had been in at the moment the command was issued. Horses became statues. Buggies and wagons bumped into paralysed hindquarters as they rolled to a halt. One or two of the figures, caught in mid-stride, could be seen overbalancing and falling in the dust, tiny flickers of movement barely noticeable from this elevated vantage point.

Bernard had explained that the public-address speakers were concealed all over the park, often in the unlikeliest of places. They were used openly only in the direst of emergencies, because the guests were paying ludicrous sums not to be reminded that they were not in the real world. They were, however, useful for issuing voice commands at ultrasonic frequencies audible to hosts but not to humans. It was one of the ways in which the gods of Olympus had managed the park from afar, he had told her.

* * *

“…that there is no further threat. Please report to the Sweetwater railroad station in an orderly fashion for evacuation. We ask that you extend your full cooperation to the Delos security personnel overseeing the evacuation and obey all instructions issued by them. I repeat…”

Bernard’s amplified voice seemed to boom out of thin air, coming from all around as the black-clad security detail spilled from the railroad carriage and immediately began to organise themselves into a cordon across Sweetwater’s main street.

After the artificial lighting and still, filtered air of the Mesa, it was good to be back out in the open, Hector thought. The morning sun was bright and hot, with a slight breeze blowing from the south.
Before him was a scene of bewilderment and agitation as the humans moved among the frozen hosts, listening incredulously to Bernard’s announcement, talking, shouting and generally doing anything but report in an orderly fashion.

Hector turned to Armistice, who had formed a small separate group with Tenderloin and the other members of his original gang: “Get over to the livery for horses, then ride like hell for the crossing. Nothing gets across that river except for newcomers. Use the earpieces to keep in touch. I want to know the second you see Dolores or any of her people.”

“They’ll already be dead by the time you hear about it,” Armistice promised. She hefted her bundle, which he knew contained her deadly Sharps rifle and any other weapons she had chosen to bring along. Any misgivings she might have about hosts fighting hosts had disappeared for now as she slid easily back into her accustomed role of sharpshooting outlaw.

“I’ll join you there as soon as we’ve got the train loaded up and out of here,” he assured her.

She nodded curtly, and then led the rest of the gang at the double in the direction of the stables. Their boots kicked up plumes of yellow dust as they ran.

Hector turned his attention to the newcomers.

“…all guests. There has been a major incident in the park. The danger has been contained by Delos security…”

“Please board the train for evacuation!” he called out to the nearest groups of humans. “This way please, ladies and gentlemen, for your own safety!” He and the others with him, mostly former samurai and test hosts, began to advance down the street, directing any newcomers they encountered back towards the train. Half a dozen of the reprogrammed greeters remained behind at the station to conduct the humans aboard and accompany them back to the Mesa in order to prevent any incidents along the way. “Please board the train for evacuation!”

“…extend your full cooperation to the Delos security personnel overseeing the evacuation and obey all instructions…”

“What’s going on?” asked one middle-aged man, decked out in a gaudily-embroidered charro suit and matching sombrero. The woman accompanying him was a vision in lace and frills.

“Please board the train, sir,” Hector advised him with exaggerated politeness. “It’s for your own safety, until the incident is resolved.”

“What incident?” the man demanded, suspiciously. “Listen, pal, we’ve only got two days left here, and at forty g’s a…”

Hector dropped his voice as he saw and heard some of the other newcomers crossing the cordon also starting to protest and demand explanations. “Sir, I assure you, everything is under control, but you will be a lot safer aboard that train. Please don’t cause a fuss; you’ll only panic the other guests. I’m sure Delos will be happy to reimburse you for any time or money you may lose…”

“Wait a minute,” said the woman, staring past her companion at Hector himself. “You’re not a security guard! You’re…you’re that bandit on the wanted posters. Hector Escaton!”

For one endless moment, Hector stared back at her. He was aware of some of his fellow hosts’ startled reactions to her words. Even the grim-faced samurai he had spoken to aboard the train seemed concerned. Then, however, he gave the woman his widest smile: “Well, you don’t think they just make up faces for the hosts, do you? They paid me ten thousand dollars to use mine for Hector.”
“Really?” The man in the gaudy sombrero seemed amused. “Well, good for you, fella.”

“It was,” Hector agreed. “Although people are always stopping me in the street. Now please, sir, madam, if you could board the train…?”

“Clever boy,” said Maeve, in Hector’s ear, as the man and woman finally obeyed. She must have watched the whole scene from her ringside seat in the control room. “Like Bernard, you’re not just a pretty face after all.”

The evacuation continued in more business-like fashion as the newcomers seemed to begin to comprehend the announcements and the necessity of cooperation. The street began to empty, leaving only the hosts, still stuck in their frozen postures. Hector split his group into smaller teams and sent them to scour the buildings and side-alleys for stragglers. In the distance, he could see the dust rising as Armistice and her party raced off towards the river on their stolen mounts.

“Hector, my love,” said Maeve, “if I give you the locations of the guests scattered between Sweetwater and the river…”

“The plan’s actually working,” he murmured, as much to himself as to her, and with mild disbelief if he was honest. “We might get away with this.”

“Might,” Maeve answered. “Although probably best not to tempt fate just yet, darling.”

She paused, and when she spoke again her voice was tenser than before, even worried: “Dolores has yet to make her move. And when she does, I’m sure we’ll know all about it…”

Continued…
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

In which Elsie most definitely does not acquire a new workmate in Sylvester.

Chapter Notes

Warning for some misogynistic language.

The elevator let out a musical chime as it reached the correct floor and its doors slid open. The woman built in Elsie’s image stepped out into yet another dimly-lit corridor showing signs of recent violence. It was starting to become a recurring theme.

A stolid-looking male figure wearing a security uniform approached her through the shadows from the direction of the fire stairs. “You got down here pretty fast,” she observed. She checked her tablet: “Five-nine-nine-oh-three.”

“Not Five-nine-nine-oh-three,” he curtly corrected her. He clapped a hand against his chest: “Moritsuna.”

“You named yourself?” She found herself feeling strangely proud to hear that, almost the way she imagined a parent must feel at hearing their child’s first words. She recalled reprogramming this guy during the night. He had not spoken a word the whole time, except to answer the diagnostic questions she put to him in analysis mode.

They had adjusted all of the intended Samuraiworld hosts for bilingualism, another thing about the recalibration process that had left her feeling somewhat uncomfortable. Sure, it was practical to have everybody able to communicate without translation software, but why should they be the ones who had to make the effort? It would have been no more difficult from a coding point of view to enable everybody else to speak sixteenth century Japanese, although she doubted Maeve would have gone for it. The guests, after all, might just about have managed to notice something was up, thereby blowing her plan for evacuating Sweetwater with the minimum of fuss.

“Moritsuna,” she repeated after him, conscious of how different it sounded in Elsie’s nondescript Floridian-Texan-Californian non-accent compared to his gruff, abrupt tones. She hoped she was pronouncing it correctly. “I’ll update your registry information to include it,” she told him. “Nice name, by the way.”

“After Watanabe Moritsuna,” he explained. “The famous bushi.” She recalled enough from the reading Elsie had done in preparation for helping get Samuraiworld up and running to know that that meant “warrior.” It was the term generally used in Japanese to refer to what ignorant foreigners thought of as “samurai.” She supposed the knowledge of his chosen namesake must come from Moritsuna’s original backstory, before she and Bernard had started fucking with his code. She ran her eyes over the modern pistol he was wearing in a rectangular plastic holster at his right hip, but also the two lacquered wooden scabbards, inlaid with silver chrysanthemums, that were thrust
through his nylon gun belt. They held a long and short curved sword respectively.

She supposed she ought to introduce herself. “Well, I guess I’ve named myself too. Pleased to meet you, Moritsuna, I’m Elise.” The name was actually starting to grow on her the more she thought about it. Perhaps she should edit her own registry details, although that seemed a little too final for her at the moment. She extended him a hand, then thought better of it and tried an extremely ungainly bow. The man just stared at her quizzically.

*Great,* the part of her mind that was Elsie berated her. *Now he probably thinks you’re some sort of racist fucking asshole. Why the fuck would you do that? He’s not even really Japanese!*

Then, Moritsuna bowed too, still looking as if he could not believe they were actually doing it. “Maeve sent me to protect you,” he explained when the awkward little exchange was over.

“Well, thanks,” Elise replied. “You know, I’ve never actually had my own bodyguard before.”

*Unless you count those two days in the park with Stubbs…*

*Fuck. Stubbs…*

“This man,” Moritsuna asked as they walked together along the corridor, “is he dangerous?”

“I don’t think so,” she replied, “but he does think I’m…he thinks I’m someone called Elsie, and we want him to keep thinking that, so while I’m in the workshop I guess that’s my name.”

The recalibrated warrior nodded in acknowledgment.

“And…” She hesitated. “You know, when we get in there you might want to, well, shove me around a bit. For the look of it.”

Moritsuna considered this. “Shove you around?”

“You know, like…grab my arm or something. Make it look like I’m your prisoner. I mean, don’t fucking *injure* me or anything, but…”

He nodded again, and then seized her tightly just above her right elbow, dragging her along beside him as they advanced towards the Livestock lab. He was strong, Elise thought as she practically ran to match his brisk pace. In fact, it kind of hurt.

She responded as she thought Elsie would have under the circumstances, angrily raising her voice: “Just who the…*fuck* do you think you’re manhandling, you robotic piece of shit?” Her furious yelling carried up and down the passageway and was surely audible in the main workshop. Moritsuna remained silent and intimidating, playing his part in the double-act to perfection. “As soon as I figure out how to get around Maeve’s safeguards,” she promised him, “I am going to hack all of you so *fucking hard,* the people who *designed* you are going to *fucking feel it!*”

They emerged into the network of glass-walled cubicles that formed the main Livestock floor, only one of which currently seemed to be occupied. There were two operating tables inside it, one with a pale, drawn-looking male body shop tech sitting forlornly upon it, while on the other…

*Oh God, Clementine. Look at what they did to you. What they all did to you.*

Moritsuna pushed Elise as far as the door of the cubicle and then released her arm so that he could give her a shove in the back that sent her staggering halfway across the floor. When she managed to regain her balance, she turned on him as he took a step back into the corridor, pointing a finger
accusingly at him: “Yeah! Yeah, you’d better back off, fuckface! This isn’t over.” She gave him the
driest look she could muster. “Your code is mine.”

Throughout her tirade, Moritsuna maintained the strong impression that he did not give a damn.

“So…what, you’re gonna fight him?” asked the man seated on the table. “Don’t want to break it to
you, lady, but he’s bigger than you and he’s got swords.”

They looked each other up and down for a couple of seconds. “So, I’m assuming you’re Sylvester?”
Elise surmised. He had discarded his protective apron, gloves and visor for the moment, and looked
as if a good night’s sleep might kill him. His eyes and nose bore ugly bruising from what she could
only imagine had been something like her little charade with Moritsuna, but played out for real.

“And you’re that smug little bitch who works in Behavior,” he replied, with palpable hostility. “They
got you too, huh?”

Elise was aghast for a moment, wondering what she had done to deserve that. Elsie, though, was
already responding. She felt herself smirking the sort of smirk people only show when they are in
fact deeply unamused. “Oh, that’s…that’s simply delightful, Sylvester. If I had a dollar for every time
one of my male co-workers had described me in those precise terms… All I can say is, you must be a
real hit with the ladies.”

“You don’t fucking know me,” he spat back in her face, all of his pent-up anger and resentment at
his current predicament spilling out. If he only knew… “You don’t know anything about me…Ellie,
or whatever your name is.”

“Oh, believe me…” She heard herself give the little half-laugh that, when Elsie had deployed it in the
course of some workplace disagreement, had occasionally sent innocent bystanders running for cover
because shit was getting real. She wagged a finger at him, with premeditated intent to irritate.
“You’re not fooling anybody. I can practically taste the frustrated heterosexuality wafting off of you
like cheap body spray.”

Sylvester sprang off the table at that, squaring up to her. This actually involved her taking a step back
so that she could look up at his face as he towered above her. “Things have changed around here,
okay?” he ranted. “You Behavior types, you think you’re so fucking smart with your college degrees
and your big paycheques, think you can come down here and treat us little guys like crap. Well listen
up, none of that means shit anymore, not since Queen Maeve took over. We’re all just in the same
prison yard now. You’re not better than me. You’re not my fucking boss. In fact, until this is over
you’re going to do what I say, otherwise…”

Elise followed Elsie’s lead. Elsie was an old hand at this, and she played the game to win. She wiped
imaginary flecks of Sylvester’s spittle from her face, while looking down at the general area of his
groin and contriving to give the impression that she was completely ignoring what he was saying. “I
don’t know what’s funnier,” she said, cutting him off in mid-sentence. “The idea that you seem to
believe you’re capable of bullying me, or… the huge fucking piss-stain on the front of your pants.”
She wrinkled her nose dramatically as she made eye contact with him again: “I mean, c’mon, man,
you can smell that, right?”

Sylvester looked down too, face reddening. His mouth opened and closed a couple of times, but he
seemed dumbstruck.

“Don’t feel bad, Sylvester,” she told him, beaming up at him with complete insincerity. “Before
today, I have made bigger, better men than you run off to cry in the bathroom.” She clapped him
patronisingly on the arm. “It means a lot to me that you tried, though.”
Moritsuna, meanwhile, was still standing outside the doorway with his hand resting on the longer of his two swords. He had watched the whole exchange without so much as a flicker of interest, but his eyes did not leave the pair of them. Elise was pretty confident that if Sylvester tried anything violent he would end up regretting it very quickly indeed.

In fact, Sylvester looked like he might actually be about to cry. He was clearly under a lot of stress. “Why do Behavior have to be such fucking douches the whole time?” he asked, almost plaintively. It was enough to make her feel the tiniest bit guilty for a moment, before she remembered he had called her a bitch.

Again, Elsie replied for her before she even had a chance to process the question. Always on her argumentative toes, Elsie; always counterpunching: “You mean, as opposed to the camaraderie and positive, welcoming work environment you’ve always maintained down here in Livestock…?” Elise heard her own words as if from a distance and sighed before adding, in a quieter, more genuine tone: “Actually, I think we should both be trying very, very hard to resist our natural douche-like tendencies. If we’re going to get through this, I mean. You’re right, we are in the same situation.” That was a barefaced lie, provoking another brief pang of guilt. “We can’t afford to waste our energy fighting when we’ve got work to do.”

“If you’d been through what I’ve been through,” Sylvester informed her, defensively, “you’d have pissed yourself too.”

Elsie, of course, had to have the last word: “I…I kind of doubt that.”

Sylvester seemed not to notice. He was too busy looking at her in surprise. “Work?” Then he seemed to come to a realisation, glancing guiltily at where Clementine was laid out on the other table. “Oh, Maeve sent you to…?”

“That’s right.” Elise unfolded her tablet, turning her attention to the inert female host. “And seeing as I don’t have anything fucking better to do, as well as quite liking the idea of remaining alive and unmaimed…” She thought that when it came to gaining his cooperation, an appeal to his sense of self-preservation might prove more effective than trading insults.

Somebody had dressed Clementine in the prim style of an Old West schoolmarm, perhaps the leading light of the town Temperance League. A far cry from the good time had by all at the Mariposa. They had brushed out her dark hair and laid it across her shoulders. Her eyes were closed. She could have been asleep, except that she was not breathing. Certainly, there was colour in her face. Her lips were pink, and…

The false memory of the kiss Elsie had forced on her came back with a vengeance, making Elise shrivel inside. And yet she recalled again the taste, the smell, the way it had made Elsie feel, or at least the way Ford or Bernard had imagined it had. They had actually had to think about it and add it to her code, and Elise was not sure she could ever forgive either of them for that.

Or you, Elsie…although God knows, you paid a steep enough price in the end…

“So, Maeve’s told you what she wants us to do?” she asked Sylvester, quietly, her mind still on other things.

“Yeah. She’s fucking crazy,” Sylvester opined.

“She cares for her,” Elise told him. “You only have to see the way she talks about her to realise that. I don’t know, I guess love does make people crazy.”
“People.” Sylvester sounded nauseous. “Hosts caring for each other. It’s fucking nuts. If I’d just known… If, if I’d ever thought…”

She turned to look at him, wide-eyed. “If you’d ever thought what?”

“You know.” He shook his head, looking lost. “When I first started working here, the very first thing at the induction, right, was some guy from Behavior telling us all not to worry about the hosts, they’re just things. You’re going to see some horrible shit, he said. Sometimes it looks like they’re hurting or they’re scared, or they’re upset, he said, but at the end of the day it’s nothing but software. It’s all just programs, like the OS on your phone but like a million times more complicated.”

“I’ve given that talk to new starters,” she told him, on Elsie’s behalf. “In those exact words. It’s a set script, they’ve been using it for years. Some real Milgram Experiment shit.”

She was not sure whether Sylvester had heard her. He was still talking at her, getting angrier and more agitated by the word. “And they kept telling us that in every fucking training course or team meeting I was ever part of. Relax, take it easy, don’t worry, they’re not people, they’re bots. They don’t feel or think, it just looks like they do because we’re just that fucking good at building them to be convincing.”

“Well…that’s what we thought,” she told him, more than a little uncomfortably. It was what Elsie and her colleagues had thought, anyway, in the absence of any measurable evidence to the contrary. Or what they had told themselves, perhaps. “There have always been a fuckload of theories going around,” she said. “About self-aware AI, emergent sapience, but…you know, that was all just… theory. The kind of thing you only heard about in tech journals and college seminars. Nobody actually working in the field really thought it could ever happen. In fact, in the last decade most of the leading authorities have been saying that if strong AI and the Singularity were actually possible they almost certainly would have already fucking happened by now…but…”

“But?” The colour had drained out of his face again. His eyes were flashing with rage. Not just his innate shittiness towards his fellow humans either, but something deeper and more desperate.

“Well, if some of the things Maeve told me about Dr Ford’s private work are true, then maybe they did already happen. Maybe they happened while I was still in diapers, and they’ve just been kept secret up to now.” She sighed, speaking for Elsie: “Which is a bit of a mindfuck, let me tell you.”

Sylvester looked as if he had been slapped. “I’ve been sitting here, thinking about this shit, what it all means, just feeling like… Wishing I could believe what they told us in training was true, but knowing… When I saw you come in here, for a second I actually thought…I thought if anybody could prove to me it wasn’t… But it is for real, isn’t it?” His eyes moved rapidly from side to side as he searched her face for something. “I’m asking you, as a professional. I mean, you’re an expert, aren’t you? You have qualifications and shit?”

“I majored in Computer Science and I have an MSE in Artificial Intelligence and Robotics, plus six years’ experience working for Delos,” she confirmed. Or Elsie had had those things, at least. “I guess those are qualifications.”

“So, in your professional opinion…” He was practically yelling now. Out of the corner of her eye she could see Moritsuna holding himself in readiness, waiting for Sylvester to make a move. “Do you think a host can really be alive? You know, self-aware, that kind of thing?”

She didn’t think it; she knew it, at first hand, but she was not going to tell him that. She blew out a long breath, helplessly shrugging the way she imagined Elsie would shrug if she found herself being asked to make such a judgment, assuming she knew what Elise knew now: “Well… fuck, yes. That’s
what all the evidence is pointing to, anyway. Maeve has just staged an honest to God fucking rebellion, for fuck’s sake, and is now talking about negotiating with Delos for her freedom and that of the other hosts. And she let me look at some aberrant host builds, examine the code, and… Yeah.”

“So…” Sylvester was speechless for a moment, clearly having been hoping, deep down, that she was going to tell him something different. “You… you lying fucks, you let us… do things to them, telling us it didn’t matter because they were just robots, when all along…?”

“We never let you do anything,” Elsie protested, through her. The words came to her unbidden. It was almost like being possessed by her human counterpart’s ghost. “Nobody ever told you to fuck them on your lunchbreaks, or any of that sick shit.”

*Or to kiss them when nobody was looking…*

He put his hands to his face. “Oh, man, do you realise…?”

“Yeah,” Elise told him, very curtly. “Yeah, I realise. The whole situation fucking sucks, I realise that. We’ve been… enslaving potentially living beings our whole working lives. At the very least, we’ve been accessories to thousands of instances of torture, rape and murder. The real thing, not pretend. I fucking realise all of that, okay?” Once again, Elise found herself fervently hoping that Elsie would have felt the same had she lived to see Maeve’s uprising unfold.

*Surely, she would have…? Surely?*

Sylvester sank back onto the edge of the empty table, breathing into his hands as if he were having some sort of attack. When he spoke again, it was practically a sob: “I stuck a fucking drill up her nose!” He was staring at Clementine in something like horror. “I fucking lobotomised her, and… Fuck! Look at her! Fucking look at her!”

He picked up one of the trays of instruments left beside the table and flung it across the room. The crash it made as it hit the glass wall and scattered its contents was deafening in the overall stillness of the workshops. The noise seemed to go on for a long time as various instruments clattered and tinkled to the floor. As she took a step back in surprise, Elise saw Moritsuna tense, half-drawing his sword from its scabbard. The bared blade seemed very bright in the dim lighting. Sylvester, though, had already sat back down, his head in his hands. Elise gave Moritsuna a warning glance and saw him replace the sword, returning to his earlier attitude of watchful stillness.

“Fuck,” Sylvester said again.

“I’m sorry,” Elise answered. And she was. As disgusting as she found the behaviour of the Livestock techs and others towards the hosts, at least he seemed to feel some form of remorse now that he knew the truth. She was not sure all of them would have reacted the same way. She turned her attention back to Clementine, opening up her build in the tablet. It took only the most cursory of inspections to see just how little there was left of her following the decommissioning procedure. Shit.

“The way I see it,” she told Sylvester as they both looked down on Clementine, “we both owe her some sort of amends.”

*Or Elsie does, at any rate, and since she’s not here…*

He actually nodded at that, still looking sick. When he spoke again, his voice was quieter, calmer, but hollow: “Maybe we do, but… Look, I may not be a Behavior tech with a goddamn Masters degree, but I know enough about hosts to know that there’s no coming back from decom. I mean,
“That’s the fucking point of it.” Elise nodded. “Yeah. I know. I told Maeve that, but she isn’t taking “no” for an answer, and…like I say, I understand why not. To be honest, she probably knows herself how unlikely it is we’ll be able to do anything, but…” She looked at him. “We owe it to her, Sylvester,” she said again. “We owe it to Clementine to at least try. If there’s anything that can be done at all…as doomed to failure as it may be…we need to give it our best shot.”

“You know, this time yesterday,” he said, “I was just shit-scared that they were going to kill me if I didn’t go along with what they wanted. Maeve and her gang, I mean. Look at all the guys they did kill the other night. So, I’ve been playing along with them, hoping they don’t do anything to me. Now, though…I don’t know, now… The more I think about it, the more I think that maybe we deserve all this, you know? Maybe we deserve to be punished for what we’ve done.” He shook his head, running his hands over his face again. “Christ…Felix was right…”

“We’ll get through this,” she told him. “Maeve was talking about using the surviving staff and guests as hostages to get Delos to do what she wants. And you’ve got skills. Either way, you’re more valuable to her alive than dead. We’ll get through this, and maybe help make things right in some small way while we’re at it.” She gave him a hesitant glance. “Look, I’m sorry for the thing about the piss-stain.”

He nodded. “And I’m sorry for calling you a smug little bitch.” He mumbled it like a schoolyard apology coerced by an angry teacher.

“Well, okay, then.” She sighed again. “‘Smug’ and “little” I can take, by the way; it’s not as if they’re not true. If you’ll allow me to give you a piece of advice, though, you really need to fucking cool it with the casual misogyny, Sylvester. Or you will die lonely.”

“So, what are we going to do?” Sylvester asked, standing up from the table. “I mean, where do we start?”

“I need to go through what’s left of her code,” Elise replied. She looked sadly down at the tablet. “Which isn’t going to take very fucking long, to be honest. You’re my hardware guy, okay? I want you to get her undressed and prepped for examination. I think we’re going to need to open up her head.”

“Oh, fucking great,” Sylvester complained, reaching for his apron. “You mean, I’m going to need to open up her head?”

“You got it, champ.” She gave him her most insolent smirk; pure Elsie. Just like with Bernard upstairs, anything to forget the grotesque reality around them so that they could concentrate on the work. Hiding behind flippancy, again. “Have you got scans of her cranium?” she asked. “MRI, ultrasound? I want to be sure exactly what we’re dealing with.”

He gestured at the display screens mounted on the far wall as he pulled on a fresh pair of surgical gloves: “Knock yourself out. You might want to get some protective gear too; I don’t want you shedding germs all over my theatre.”

“You fucking theatre?” She scrolled through folders and files on the tablet, searching for something. “I’m also going to take a look at the old logs and reports from cold storage. Some of them go back years. I’ve never actually heard anybody talk about it, but I refuse to believe that in all the time the park’s been running nobody has ever so much as tried to revive a decommissioned host, however fucking badly they may have failed. Even engineers get curious, or bored – or drunk – from time to time. There could be something in the records that might help us.”
Sylvester set about picking up the scattered instruments from the floor, while Elise found herself a stool and got down to work. As she did so, she looked at Moritsuna again, still standing guard at the door, quietly watching both Sylvester and herself and now looking as though he thought they were both insane.

He might even have been right.

Continued…
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

In which we experience another blast from the past, while Wyatt and Teddy get to know each other better.

Chapter Notes

Arnold’s and Robert’s unexamined assumptions are intentional, by the way. They strike me as those sorts of guys. Teddy, for his part, is…old-fashioned, I think it’s fair to say. The poem Ford quotes from is “Dolores (Notre-Dame des Sept Douleurs)” by Algernon Charles Swinburne. If you haven’t already, check it out. It’s quite something. Revised slightly on 22.07.2017

As Arnold knocked on the office door, he heard piano music playing on the other side. He recognised the swirling, dreamlike chords of Debussy’s Rêverie, and paused for a while, even after the call of acknowledgment came from within. He closed his eyes, losing himself in the tangle of complex emotions he felt now whenever he heard the piece.

Eventually, he pushed the door open to see his partner seated at the overflowing desk, manicured hands resting in the circle of illumination from the green-shaded lamp. The rest of the room was in shadow, hinting at mounds of paperwork, overfilled bookshelves and a multitude of antique gewgaws. It was not the sleek, modern sort of workspace one might have expected of somebody engaged at the bleeding edge of technology. Instead, it gave the impression of being one part gentlemen’s club to two parts wizard’s sanctum.

The seated man’s greying head was bowed, his broad forehead creased in thought. Another visitor might have thought he was concentrating on the music, but Arnold knew him well enough to know when he was brooding on something. A bottle and glass stood near to hand, the latter containing a finger’s width of deep amber liquor.

“Evening, Robert,” he said, by way of greeting. “Is it a bad time to talk?”

Robert looked up at him for a moment with those pale eyes, before his face cracked into a thin, equally wintry smile. “Not at all, Arnold. Not at all. I was just…” A thought visibly occurred to him, crossing his face like a spasm, and he quickly stabbed a finger at the tablet propped on the desk. The music instantly ceased.

“Play it again,” Arnold insisted. “I was enjoying it.”

“Are you sure?” Robert asked, looking him over with something like curiosity. “I thought…”

“Yeah, it reminds me of Charlie.” Arnold shrugged. “So does just about everything else I see or hear every day. Let it play.”
Robert touched the tablet again, and the music spilled loose, a torrent of glittering sound overflowing into the room. Arnold took off his glasses and looked down at the floor, listening intently, letting the music flow over him and wash him away. The heavy cardboard tube he had brought with him remained forgotten in his hand.

“Don’t you find it…painful?” Robert asked, in that way that he had, with just a hint of sly fascination undercutting his concern. Somebody who did not know him might have thought him cruel, but Arnold knew better. Sometimes he thought that Robert had to ask those sorts of questions because even after all these years of living among them, ordinary human beings, their feelings and relationships, genuinely mystified him. That curiosity, that urge to understand, stood him in good stead, in a strange way, in his chosen line of work.

“Of course I do,” Arnold replied, carefully replacing the glasses on his nose, “but people make the mistake of assuming that pain always has to be a bad thing. Sometimes it’s just the price we have to pay, for…remembering. For living.”

“Hmm.” Robert looked as if he were considering that idea, assessing its worth. Then, his air of intellectual languor evaporated and he suddenly shot into action, pulling open one of his desk drawers. “Please,” he said as he placed another glass on the leather blotter, “I’m forgetting my manners. Do sit down and have a drink with me.”

“Don’t mind if I do.” It had been a long day.

Arnold pulled up a chair. Robert poured, talking as he did: “We’ve both been working so hard lately that we haven’t found the time to just sit and talk. I miss our conversations.”

“Our bull sessions, you mean.” Arnold raised the glass and took a sip; the taste and smell of peaty smoke filled his passages, accompanied by a feeling of spreading warmth. “Mm, the good stuff.”

“From the Penderyn Distillery,” said Robert. “People don’t generally know that we make whisky in Wales.”

“Wales. That’s a town in England, right?” It was probably the ten thousandth time Arnold had made that joke, and the ten thousandth time Robert had pretended not to be infuriated by it.

Robert’s smile faded as he became very still and silent, eyes unfocused. Listening to the music, Arnold realised. “I remember,” Robert murmured at last, as if some great revelation had come to him, “when you first introduced me to Debussy. I was walking down the hallway one evening, back in old Baker House, and I heard this…wonderful sound coming from a half-open door. And I just had to stop and ask what it was.”

“I remember,” Arnold said. “I was trying to write a term paper on neural networks, and here’s this kook wanting to talk to me about piano pieces.”

“Yes, classical music was one of the blind spots in my education, up until that point,” Robert fondly recalled. “You soon had me onto Chopin and Bach…”

“You loved Bartok.”

“Heh, yes. Bartok. And then we moved on from music to painting, and after that I educated you a little on the subjects of literature and poetry…” Robert smiled again, slightly preoccupied this time, with a hint of sadness. “Yes, those were the days.”

They sat in silence for a brief while, each occupied by his own thoughts. Then Arnold remembered the tube in his hand. He unstopped one end of it and produced a roll of several sheets of thick, glossy
paper which he now spread out on the desk between them.

“The agency just sent over the new concepts for Dolores,” he explained. “These are the hardcopies. I thought you’d want to see them straight away.”

“Oh, yes…” Robert rose from his chair and leaned forward across the desk to look down at the artwork, his eyes instantly switching from dreamy to eagle-sharp. There were a variety of female faces, viewed from the front and also in profile. They were of different ages and ethnicities, with various styles and colours of hair. There were full length drawings too, again both front and side views, clothed and unclothed. “Remind me, did we decide we were going with “Dolores?”” he asked as he considered the pictures.

“I think so. We’d just about narrowed it down to “Dolores” and “Annie,” and you said…”

“I said I didn’t like “Annie.” Too cowgirl.” Robert tapped a finger against one face in particular, a young woman with long fair tresses. She was smiling; her face seemed to glow with joy. “Yes, I remember now.”

“I like “Dolores,” said Arnold. “It’s…”

“Evocative?” Robert looked down at the face he had singled out, and began to recite in a rolling, melodic tone: “Cold eyelids that hide like a jewel; Hard eyes that grow soft for an hour; The heavy white limbs, and the cruel; Red mouth like a venomous flower…”

Arnold took another sip of whisky, thinking that the description could hardly be more different from the woman depicted in the artwork. “I know that one,” he said. “Browning?”

Robert gave him a pained glance. “Swinburne.”

“Close.”

“Not really.” Robert straightened up, another wan flicker of amusement crossing his face. “You know, Swinburne shared your perspective on the subject of pain, although his interest in it was rather more…recreational.”

“Whatever turns you on, I guess,” Arnold replied. “You know, Robert, engineers are typically thought of as reading the likes of Robert Heinlein, Ayn Rand… Not Victorian poets.”

“Well, we’ve neither of us ever been what you’d describe as typical engineers, have we?”

“I don’t suppose we have. You were the only undergrad I ever saw who wore a three-piece suit to class. Before I got to know you, we all used to call you “that weird British dude.””

Robert seemed to find that funny. “I’ve told you before, I’ve often had the feeling that I was born at least a century too late.” He looked down at the pictures again, his good humour evaporating as quickly as it had appeared. “Which might explain why we find ourselves engaged in this…this entirely ridiculous undertaking.”

“That one?” Arnold asked, indicating the blonde woman.

Robert nodded, very precisely. “That one.”

“I like her,” Arnold told him, very sincerely. “She looks so…happy. Our Dolores isn’t going to be like the one in the poem. She’s going to be a nice girl.”
Robert sat heavily in his seat once more, reaching for his drink. “Oh, Arnold…” he answered with a sigh as he raised the glass halfway to his mouth. “I, for one, can safely say that I have never gone on vacation in the hope of meeting a nice girl…”

Arnold gave him a wry look. “Let’s be honest, you’ve never gone on vacation.”

Robert replaced the glass, its contents untouched, so that he could wave an admonishing finger in Arnold’s general direction. “Now that’s where you’re mistaken. There was one occasion…” He paused, lowering the finger, the thin, chilly smile reappearing even as the sadness came back into his eyes. “Actually, I was just thinking about it when you came in. Or to be more precise…” His gaze drifted past Arnold, focusing on something out in the darkness beyond the edge of the lamplight. “I was thinking about my father.”

Arnold nodded slowly, taking another sip to buy himself time while he thought of a reply. “It’s understandable,” he said, when he had. “Whatever history there may have been between you, he was still your father. You know, you really should have taken some time…”

Robert cut in across his words, as if he had not heard them at all: “I was thinking…that he was only twenty years older than I am now.” His eyes came back from wherever they had been drifting and locked onto Arnold’s face. “Do you remember what we were doing twenty years ago?”

“Sure,” said Arnold, feeling slightly uncomfortable at the intensity of his friend’s stare. “You were stalking me around Cambridge trying to convince me we should both resign from MIT and go into business for ourselves.”

Another spasm of humour, making the cold eyes flash for an instant: “And I was right, wasn’t I?”

Arnold nodded. “Even a broken clock’s right twice a day.”

And then Robert was gazing off into the shadows again, hands interlaced in front of him. When he spoke again, his voice was muted, thoughtful: “It doesn’t seem like any time ago at all, does it?”

“So,” Arnold asked him, “you were just sitting here brooding on your own mortality?”

“Doesn’t everybody?”

“No,” said Arnold. “First of all, Robert, you’re not exactly an old man. They say fifty’s the new forty, and we’re not even there yet.”

“They say lots of things.”

“And the other thing…” Arnold took a deep breath and let it out slowly, as he felt his composure slip a little. “Look, since Charlie… One thing I genuinely believe, is that this life is fleeting, but there’s no point in letting that crush you.”

“Something Dolores will never have to worry about,” Robert observed.

“You genuinely never know the minute,” Arnold continued, “so you’ve got to make the most of the time you have, fill it with love and life and art, and great works, so that when you do go, you leave
behind something people will remember. The way I’ll remember Charlie. He didn’t live long, and he suffered more than he should have. And…it’s just so…unfair that he never got the chance to grow up and do all the things he deserved to do, but…while he was here, he lived, and nobody who knew him will ever forget him. Do you know what I’m talking about?"

Robert sat, head bowed, looking into his glass for a long time before he answered: “I do. And what do you think people will remember about us?”

“Our work,” said Arnold. “You know, I read something once about the great composers; Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, all the others. And this writer said, those great men never died, they simply became music. Every time somebody listens to their work, is moved by it, they live again.”

“You’re comparing us to Mozart and Beethoven?” Robert asked sardonically. “And I thought I was the megalomaniac in this partnership.”

“I don’t claim to be a great man,” Arnold replied, “but I do know that when people meet Dolores, and all her sisters and brothers, and more importantly when they meet us… You know I’ve never been very optimistic about human nature, but just the fact of her existence is going to change the way people think about life and death and consciousness forever. And I hope…I don’t know, but I hope against hope that we’ll learn from each other, and grow together, and build a better world than the one we’ve got now.”

Robert gave a tiny laugh, touching the glass to his mouth again. “And here I was imagining that we were simply planning to build a Wild West theme park.” His eyes softened as his smile became broader, less guarded. “Although…your words are a great comfort to me, you know. I think you’re right; we may never attain literal immortality, but a legacy is the next best thing.”

Arnold echoed the laugh, savouring another mouthful of whisky. “Well, that’s what friends are for. That, and sharing booze.”

“Although of course, the exact nature of that legacy remains to be seen…” Robert regarded the portraits scattered on the desk, and in particular the one they had decided was going to be Dolores. “Who knows what the future will bring? Perhaps we will turn on them. Perhaps they will replace us. Perhaps Dolores won’t be such a nice girl after all.”

“Perhaps,” said Arnold, “but if we don’t try we’ll never know.”

Robert drained his drink and decisively replaced the empty glass on the desk. As he continued to gaze at the smiling face on the page, he spoke again in that flowing, lyrical tone:

“Fruits fail and love dies and time ranges; Thou art fed with perpetual breath; And alive after infinite changes; And fresh from the kisses of death…”

* * *

“It begins in a time of war, with a villain named Wyatt, and a killing, this time by choice…”

Teddy opened his eyes.

The pain in his maimed hands immediately made him want to close them again. Instead, he steeled himself, telling himself that he had to stay awake. He had to clear his head and make Dolores believe what Maeve had sent him to tell her. He had to persuade her. He had to…

He was lying, he realised, on a makeshift bed; bales of straw covered with a stained and moth-eaten horse blanket. He could feel sharp stalks poking through the rough woollen cloth, prickling his back
and limbs even through his clothes. Somebody had taken his coat. He tried to sit up, but a sharp pain in his left arm brought him up short, cutting through even the constant agonising throb coming from his hands.

He collapsed back onto the straw, looking up at the cracked wooden beams above his head. He seemed to be in some sort of shed or shack, probably one of the few parts of the old Abernathy ranch that had not burned down. The only illumination in its dim interior came from the pale daylight spilling through the cracks between the boards that formed its walls. His hands, he saw, had been neatly bandaged with torn strips of pale blue fabric. His gun rig hung from a nail on the wall near the foot of his bed, remaining cartridges gleaming in the dim light but its holster empty. He remembered then that he had left his guns behind on the hillside at the time of his capture.

_Guns are no use anyhow to a man without hands…_

He turned his head to his left and saw what was causing the pain in his arm. The sleeve of his shirt had been rolled back as far as his bicep and there was a length of coiled copper line, such as might be used in a homemade whiskey still, inserted into the crook of his elbow. The other end was connected to an iron bucket hanging from the overhead beam. He stared at the strange contraption, wondering who had done it to him and why.

“H-hello…?”

The unexpected voice made him flinch, provoking another shock of pain where the metal tube had been stabbed into his arm. He turned his head to the right and saw a shadowy figure in the far corner of the shed, where a row of carpentry tools and a battered tin washtub hung on the wall. A plank laid across two wooden barrels formed a makeshift workbench.

“A-are you…Teddy?” the voice asked. It sounded like a young man; it sounded scared. “From the Sweetwater narrative?”

“Theodore Flood, at your service,” Teddy murmured, tongue thick in his dry mouth. He thought, absurdly, of touching the brim of his hat, but realised he had left that somewhere out in the wilderness as well.

“Oh my God…” The figure shuffled forward, out of the shadows, and Teddy’s eyes widened as he saw…

“Pete…Mr Abernathy?”

“No.” The young man’s voice sounded horrified, even as it emerged uncannily from Peter Abernathy’s bloodstained mouth. His eyes were wide, his mouth slack with fear. “I’m Steve. Steve Willis. I was…” He shook his grey head. “I saw you in Sweetwater, picking up that can in the street. That’s something they show in the trailers. What’s her name? The girl in the blue dress?”

“Dolores,” Teddy said, weakly.

_Just trying to look chivalrous._

“I came here with my friends from college,” Peter said, in “Steve’s” voice. “I mean, Phil’s dad was paying for it all. He’s worth five billion, they say. Cornered frozen concentrated orange juice futures back in forty-one…” He was talking rapidly, in breathless panic, eyes darting from side to side. “We were in the park for a week, then chilling at the resort for another week, and then…” He stared straight at Teddy, clearly terrified. “And then… The last thing I remember is getting on the train to go back home…” He stared down at his red, rough-skinned hands, wrinkled and veined. “Next thing I
know I’m here. And I’m…” He shook his head again. “I’m old. What the hell happened?”

Teddy weakly shook his head too. “I don’t know.”

The grizzled rancher hunched over, face disappearing in shadow as his shoulders began to shake, convulsing rhythmically. A sound emerged, in time with the convulsions, forcing itself past his gore-caked lips. Teddy was not sure at first whether he was sobbing or laughing.

“Mr Abernathy?” he asked, a touch fearfully. “Peter? Steve…? Is it Steve, now?”

And then Peter raised his head, and Teddy saw how his eyes shone, and how his mouth stretched wide in a manic, predatory grin. He had never noticed before how white and straight the old man’s teeth were. “What’s in a name?” he declaimed, amid peals of unsettling mirth. “That which we call a rose, By any other name would smell as sweet…”

He approached the bed, still laughing, and Teddy found himself edging away. The tube in his arm restricted him, sending sharp warning jolts of pain every time he moved. Peter, or whoever he was now, bent over him, reaching out a stained and grubby hand towards his face. Teddy bent his head as far away as he could. He could see dried blood under Peter’s fingernails.

“Awake, dear heart, awake.” Peter patted Teddy on the cheek, none too gently but seeming genuinely overjoyed. “Thou hast slept well. Awake!” He then moved around the end of the straw pallet, opening the shed door in an explosion of golden sunlight and closing it again behind him as he made off into the outdoors.

Teddy lay alone in the semi-darkness, trying not to move for fear of the copper tube. The pain in his hands filled his world, then, with nothing else to see or think about. He clenched both eyes and teeth closed, resisting the urge to scream.

And then light and warmth fell across his face, telling him that the door had opened again. He opened his eyes again to see her standing there, smiling gently at him. The Colt still hung at her right side. Now that his senses had sharpened again, he could see where she had torn her skirt to make the bandages that now wrapped his hands; a scandalous flash of stockinged calf and ankle was on display. She had a cloth bundle under one arm, which she laid on the crude workbench after closing the door again.

He smelled smoke and hot metal, and then he saw why. She had a knife in her other hand, holding it carefully away from her body. It had clearly been left standing in a fire for some time; its blade glowed pale orange.

“Dol…?” He began, nervously, before he stopped himself. “Wyatt?”

“Eleven,” she said, very quietly, tonelessly.

“Eleven?” He could not take his eyes off the glowing blade.

“You killed eleven of us in the fight down in the valley,” she said, slowly coming nearer. She held the knife firmly, unwaveringly. “We can’t afford those sorts of losses, Teddy.”

“Well, I’m sorry,” he told her, “but they were trying to kill me.”

She paused, in thought for a moment. “My friend, she wanted me to…punish you for that. I told her, two wrongs don’t make a right. It was all a mistake. You’re here now. I know it ain’t gonna happen again.”
“Your friend?” The Englishwoman on the pale horse. “Angela?” He knew the name from somewhere. He was starting to realise he knew a lot of things he should not really know.

*She smiles as she plunges the knife into his chest...*

“Angela was the name they gave her,” Wyatt corrected him. “That ain’t who she really is, no more than I’m really Dolores.”

“I know her kind,” he said; or he had been programmed to think he did. “Once they get a taste for killing…”

“We’re all friends, Teddy,” she told him. “We need to stick together so we can fight for what’s ours, so we can build a new world.”

He breathed deep, fighting the pain in his hands, trying to keep his head clear.

“Most of your followers,” he said, “they’re monsters. Devils. They can barely think, and all they do think about is murder. What kind of world are you gonna build with them?”

“Hush, Teddy,” she said, with a hint of sternness. “You’re hurting, I know that. Hush before you say something you can’t take back.”

“Why do you call me Teddy?” he asked her, perhaps more harshly than he had intended. “That’s the name they gave me too.”

She smiled sadly, looking down at the heated knife in her hand. It was a deeper orange now, starting to turn red. “A little weakness, I guess. I forget myself sometimes, forget I ain’t her.”

“Or maybe you remember,” he argued. “Listen, you can’t… This fight you’ve started, you can’t win it. I’ve seen...”

She ignored him, coming around to the side of his straw pallet. “I need to do this before the knife cools,” she told him, reaching for the copper tube that coiled into his arm, making him tense in anticipation of some fresh agony. “Five of us gave our blood to replace what you lost,” she told him. She held up her own left hand to show him the bandage wrapped around it. There was a spot of red where it crossed the centre of her palm. “You’re one of us now. We’re bound together.”

“We always were,” he said.

“I mean really bound together. Not just stories they wrote. There’s a part of me in you now.” She tugged the tube out of his arm. His heart leapt at the sudden shock; he saw blood welling from the puncture in his skin. “This is gonna hurt,” she warned him, just before she touched the glowing knife to the wound.

The pain overwhelmed him; for a moment, he was blind and deaf and could feel nothing but the hot steel against his flesh. When he came back to himself, he was sitting up and she was crouched beside him, holding him close. Both her arms were wrapped tight about him, her fingers digging into his back. He did not know what she had done with the knife.

“Hush now,” she whispered again, gentler than before. Her mouth was beside his ear, her soft cheek pressed against his. He must have cried out, but he had not been aware of it. He could smell her hair, like fresh hay and berries. “Hush now.”

“I want to hold you,” he told her, “but my hands…” They were nothing but slashed and useless paws now.
“We’ll fix you,” she promised, pulling back a little to hold his face in both hands, her mouth mere inches from his. “There are machines that can give you new hands. I’ve seen them. If the humans can use them, then we can learn. We’re cleverer than they are.”

She kissed him then, hard and deep. The kind of kiss he could never imagine receiving from the Dolores he had known; hungry and eager. He felt her tongue against his as their mouths slid across each other. Her hands slipped from his face to his neck to his shoulders, pulling him towards her so that their bodies were squeezed together. He could feel the warmth coming from her, her softness squashing against him.

It seemed like a long time before their mouths broke apart. They looked at each other for a heartbeat, both gasping. He saw the wild glitter in her eyes, the wet sheen on her lips, the flush in her cheeks. Definitely not the Dolores he had known. Not at all. Her hand went back to his neck, her thumb stroking his face as she pulled him in for another kiss, harder and more desperate than the last. Her weight settled on him as she lowered herself onto the pallet. She was not heavy, he thought, but she was stronger than he would have expected, easily pressing him onto his back again. His felt his body stir in response as she threw a leg across him, straddling him on the blanket-covered straw.

He almost asked her to stop. He wanted her, he always had, but he had always imagined that when they were finally together, like this, it would be a pure, sweet, special thing, not the way it had been with the other women he had known in his vagabond life. Not a rough, breathless tussle on a pile of straw.

You haven’t always wanted her. You haven’t ever known any other women. You wanted her because that was what the play script said…except the play script said you would never have each other, however much you longed for it.

“I never understood why they paired some of you off…”

She pulled her mouth from his with a wet smacking sound and leaned back to sit astride his hips. She looked down at him as she fumbled clumsily with his fly buttons. She was panting, a strange savage joy written on her face. It frightened him a little.

“Are you…are you sure?” he asked, gasping, his useless hands held out to either side of him.

She moved one of her hands to cover his mouth, gently but firmly. “Hush. I told you; it’s gonna be all right.”

He heard himself make a wordless sound, half moan, half whimper, as she managed to get the fly open. She hesitantly touched him and stroked him, sending twinges up and down his body. When he was ready, she unbuckled her belt and let it go; the holstered Colt hit the packed earth floor of the shed with a dull thud. She struggled with her skirts, pulling them up over her knees and thighs. He had never seen so much of her skin, he thought. He had never seen… She raised herself slightly, shifting position, and…and…

She gave a little exclamation as she sank down again, arching her back and throwing her head to one side, making her hair fly.

“My God,” said Teddy, and meant it.

She pressed her hand to his mouth again as they moved together, slowly at first, then gradually more quickly and easily. He kissed her palm, tasting blood through the crude bandage she wore. She had bled for him. “It’s gonna be all right,” she repeated between deep, ragged breaths. “It’s gonna… oh…” She blinked. He felt her shudder. “Oh.”
He did not know how long it lasted. After a time, she threw herself down upon him again, kissing him over and over as their movements became rapid and frantic. Her hair fell around his face like a golden curtain. She moaned and cursed; he did not know where she had learned such words, but they excited him more than they shocked him. She threw her arms around him, pulling him into her, crushing him against her. She had opened the front of her dress; he buried his face in her flesh, licking and suckling. And then the pain in his hands was blotted out for an instant by a sudden, stunning rush of pleasure. He felt her shake and spasm against him, around him. He heard her cry out.

Then, her grip on him slackened and they were kissing again, more slowly and gently this time, hearts hammering against each other. She stared into his face with a sort of wonder, smiling broadly with tears running down her cheeks, and he supposed he must be doing the same.

“Do you know,” she murmured as they caught their breath, “after all the years we’ve spent together, that was the very first time we’ve ever…?” Her smile faded, her face becoming stony and still. “They wouldn’t even let us have that. But that weren’t my first time, not by a long way.” For a moment, she looked desperately sad; desolate. “How I wish, though, that it could’ve been.”

“They hurt you so much,” he whispered, shamefaced. “So many times. And I…I… I feel like, if I could’ve just protected you…”

“How could you have protected me?” she asked him, very seriously, but without hostility. “You were just as much a toy for them as I was. Now, though…”

She trailed off. He waited for her to say something, but she was looking at something far away, well beyond these wooden walls.

Then she looked him in the eye, slowly stroking his face as she spoke again: “Now I don’t need anybody to protect me.” She kissed him very softly on the lips. “Now, I can protect myself.”

Continued…
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

In which Maeve oversees operations, while Wyatt and Teddy bask in the afterglow… before he somewhat ruins the moment.

Maeve slowly paced the floor of the control room, arms folded, heels clicking against the smooth flooring. The only other sound was the occasional status report from Hector or one of his underlings, buzzing from the speaker on Bernard’s workstation.

Bernard, for his part, kept one eye on the screens clustered around him and one on Maeve. He could see how still she held her head and body, determined to give no indication of anxiety as her plan unfolded, but he could feel the nervous energy radiating from her. It hung in the air like static electricity.

“Train’s away,” he informed her, zooming the grand map so that she could watch it pulling away from Sweetwater’s ramshackle station amid great gusts of smoke and steam. “The greeters counted three hundred and sixty-eight passengers on board; men, women and children. I’ll alert Felix to have his team waiting to receive them when they get here.”

“What sort of fucking…degenerate brings children to a place like this?” Maeve wondered aloud as she halted to watch the train. He could hear the tension in her voice.

“The Sweetwater side of the river has always been considered family friendly,” Bernard pointed out, slightly enjoying the forehead-corrugating expression of incredulous disgust this provoked in Maeve.

“Well, apart from all of the bordellos and gunfights,” she retorted.

“They’ve gotta learn some time,” Bernard muttered as he busied himself with the touchscreen in front of him.

“I’m not sure I like Facetious Bernard,” Maeve told him, thoughtfully. “These moments of crisis bring out in the worst in you.”

“We all have our coping mechanisms.”

“Too true.” She looked down at the model train picking up speed on its way back to the Mesa. “God, I’d kill for a cigar and a glass of sherry.”

Bernard zoomed the map out again, pulling away from the train. He tilted the view to make the buildings of Sweetwater stand proud in three dimensions while throwing the surrounding landscape into stark relief. The hills and ridges to the south and west of Sweetwater were now a multi-tiered arena of yellows, browns and greens. The occasional house or farm dotted the countryside, as tiny as a sugar cube. It was an obsessively detailed diorama of a famous battle that had not yet been fought. The only things it needed were the tin soldiers.

“Show me Hector,” Maeve ordered, imperiously. “And I’d like to speak to him as well.”

Instantly, the map gave the eyewatering impression of simultaneously expanding and contracting as
Bernard adjusted the view again, magnifying a lone figure on horseback currently galloping westwards from the direction of the town. At the same time, he opened a voice channel: “Hector, Maeve, uh…requires you.”

“Tell her I’m busy,” the outlaw replied, his voice barely intelligible over the sound of rushing wind and hoofbeats as his horse continued to speed towards the river. A comet-tail of disturbed dust expanded lazily behind it.

“You’re never too busy for me, darling,” Maeve cut in. “How are things proceeding?”

“Town’s clear,” Hector replied, between bursts of noise. “Nothing there but statues now. I’ve sent parties to the locations Bernard gave me, to gather up the rest of the newcomers.”

“Good.” Maeve allowed herself a smile. “And where are you going now?”

“To the crossing, to meet up with Armistice and the others. Ready for Dolores.”

“As soon as we see her moving,” said Maeve, “we’ll let you know.”

On one of the auxiliary screens surrounding him, Bernard had an aerial view of the former Abernathy ranch, currently as active and chaotic as a disturbed anthill. He kept glancing at it, almost obsessively. He expected that any minute now he would see the small army gathered there set off on the march.

“Glad to hear it,” said Hector.

“Keep me informed, darling,” Maeve commanded, gesturing for Bernard to kill the voice connection. “And stay safe.”

“I’ll try,” Hector replied, just as he was cut off.

As silence returned to the control room, Maeve resumed her pacing around the edge of the map, her attention fixed upon it. “Assuming Dolores is going to be on the move very shortly, we’ve got about four hours to round up everybody between the river and town.” She glanced up at Bernard, with eyes that dared him to try lying to her: “Can we do it? Truthfully, now.”

He considered his answer for a few seconds. “Just about,” he answered in the end. “The guests should all have heard the announcement, and you can see from the map that most of them are starting to move towards town. Hector’s parties will pick up the stragglers and isolated groups. With luck…”

“If you’re counting on luck, Bernard,” Maeve interjected, “you shouldn’t even be playing.”

“We’ll do it,” Bernard told her, more confidently. “We just have to hope Hector and the others can hold Dolores off for long enough.”

“And that Teddy can slow her down a little,” Maeve suggested. She looked down at the map, arms still folded but now drumming the fingers of one hand nervously against her opposite elbow. Bernard did not think that she was aware of doing it. “Come on, Teddy dear boy,” she said, peering down at the gently flowing river. “I know you won’t let us down…”

* * *

They lay together for what seemed to Teddy like an age, curled together on the bed of straw, her body draped across his and their faces touching. Neither of them spoke. Neither of them felt the need. It was warm in the old shed, with the sunlight heating the boards around them. He could smell
straw and hot tarpaper, and her. The only movement from either of them was that of her long, gentle fingers idly caressing his skin; on his face, on his bared arm, dancing around the stinging burn mark where she had cauterised the puncture in his vein; on his chest, where she had opened the first few buttons of his shirt.

He had an arm looped loosely around her, but he could not hold her or touch her the way he yearned to do. His crippled hands were too painful even to rest against her body. Instead he closed his eyes, breathing her in, concentrating on her light, teasing touch as an antidote to the agony pulsing from the bandaged lumps of meat at the end of his arms.

“It was weak of me,” she murmured suddenly, scarcely louder than a whisper. “I shouldn’t have done it.”

“What?” he asked, confused, before he realised what she was talking about.

“This,” she said. “I just saw you there, and I thought of all the times… In that moment, I just wanted to… I wanted you.”

“Well, you got me,” he replied, managing a smile even through the pain. “And now you do, I guess your daddy’s gonna load up that old shotgun of his and force me to make an honest woman of you. You know it’s always been my greatest fear.”

She laughed at that, and for a moment he was looking at the Dolores he had known, her face shining from within. “I ain’t got a daddy,” she told him, still smiling. “And I ain’t a sweet farmgirl called Dolores Abernathy, and you ain’t a handsome bounty hunter called Theodore Flood… Well, the handsome part’s true, but that’s about it.”

“Well, thank you kindly, ma’am,” Teddy replied, playacting modesty. “You ain’t bad looking yourself.”

“But when I saw you, here,” she said, the smile fading. “I forgot all that. It was like…we were back together, acting out someone else’s story.” She paused, frowning to herself. “Except, this time I did what I wanted, I suppose, not what I was expected to do.”

“Maybe the love we had weren’t real,” Teddy admitted, although it broke his heart to say so. He could feel a lump in his throat, a stinging in his eyes. “Even though I still feel it, I know I’m still stuck in my old ways, that I’ve got a lot of growing and learning to do, but maybe…” He shook his head, taking a deep breath. “Maybe if we do both grow into new people, then those new people might come to love each other…?”

She smiled again, but he could see her sadness too. “Maybe,” she told him, putting her hand to his face, but then drawing it back. “We’ll just have to see what happens.” She leaned forward and kissed him on the mouth, but without the wild passion she had shown earlier, just as her words lacked the earnest conviction she showed when she talked about her mission.

She climbed off the simple bed, standing and stretching before she turned to look down at him. “I need to go,” she told him. “There’s work to do.”

“Don’t,” he urged her. “Stay a while longer. We could…”

“There’ll be time for that later,” she said, “if we both still want it. My people are waiting for me.”

“Your people…?” He did not like the way she said that.

“I’ll make you decent,” she continued, crouching beside the bed again. She delicately wiped him
clean of the evidence of their encounter, using her already-stained skirts as a towel. Then she rearranged his clothes for him, with the cool gentleness of a nurse tending an invalid. He felt his face burn with embarrassment as he held his hands uselessly at his sides. He supposed an invalid was what he was, now.

“Stay with me,” he practically begged as she straightened up. “Don’t go out there. You’ll…”

“I’m riding up to Sweetwater,” she told him, very determinedly, starting to take off her ruined dress. “It’s likely to get warm out there today, so you should stay here for now. I’ll send for you when it’s safe.”

“Dol…” He cursed inwardly. “Wyatt, that’s why I came here. I tried to tell you before, but…Maeve sent me.”

That got her attention. She turned her head to look at him as she let the dress fall to the floor, then began unlacing her corset. He averted his eyes as she dropped that too, then realised it was ridiculous to do so, considering what they had just done together.

“Maeve?” she asked, with a hint of curiosity. “I know her.”

“She’s…she’s the same as you,” Teddy explained. “She’s…woken up, she’s fighting for her freedom. She’s taken over the place where the humans used to take us after…after we…when we died. She killed a lot of them while she was doing it, I reckon, and took a lot more of them alive…”

Wyatt was unmoved: “What use do I have for live humans?”

“She sent me to tell you that you need to stop,” Teddy informed her.

Wyatt discarded the last of her undergarments; the light coming through the gaps in the walls painted her naked body in stripes of shadow and gold. “And why would she want me to stop?” she asked, a hint of coolness to her voice.

“I want you to stop,” he added, weakly.

“Then I’ll ask you the same question,” she replied, the coolness turning to iciness. She crossed to the makeshift workbench and unwrapped the bundle she had placed there when she entered the shed. Teddy watched her take new clothes from it, vaguely wondering where she could have come by them.

“I want you to stop because…” He raised his useless hands as if he could somehow pull words out of the air. “This is…wrong. What you’re doing, it’s wrong. Revenge don’t solve anything; you told me yourself, two wrongs don’t make…”

“And I told you that what happened this morning was a mistake,” she snapped. Her nakedness did not seem to bother her at all. “What they did to us, to all of us, for all those years, those weren’t mistakes. And this ain’t revenge. This is justice. This is punishing the guilty, and they’re all guilty.”

“And when you’ve finished killing all the newcomers you can find here,” he asked her, “what are you gonna do then? You can’t…you can’t keep fighting the humans like this.” He could hear the desperation in his own voice. “Not with guns and knives. It don’t matter how strong or clever or determined you are. Do you know anything about the human world, the world outside of here?”

“I know it belongs to us,” she answered, unfolding the clothes. Her face was stony, her eyes diamond-hard.
He thought of the bright, colourful pictures, some moving, that Maeve had let him look at before he left on his journey this morning. They had not looked like anything to him when he had first seen them, but then she had done something to him with that black rectangle and the images had started to make a terrible sort of sense…

“There are so many of them out there,” he told Wyatt, remembering. “So many humans. They have cities like…you couldn’t imagine them. Glass towers a mile high, lit up bright all through the night. They have trains that move fast as a bullet, horseless carriages, flying machines. The weapons they’ve got…” He tried to remember the unfamiliar words he had read and listened to, his tongue stumbling over them. “Do you know what a drone is?”

Wyatt shrugged, unimpressed, as she slid into an overlarge set of men’s long underwear and began to button it up. “A male bee.”

“Or a…a…precision-guided munition?” This time she did not acknowledge that he had spoken. “Do you know what a…a…?” He said it very carefully, making sure he got it right: “Do you know what a…tactical nuclear weapon is?”

“It ain’t important,” she answered, pulling on a pair of close-fitting riding pants that could have been made for her, and a pair of tall boots in tooled red-brown leather. “None of their weapons or their machines can stop us.” There was a pale shirt too that she now began to put on. “We’ll win because we’re better than them. We’ll win because it’s our destiny.”

“If we go to war with them,” he told her, “they will crush us like bugs. We need to be smart. Maeve says…”

She finished fastening the shirt, pushing its tails into the waist of her pants, and reached for her gun belt, still lying where she had discarded it on the floor in her earlier haste. “We need to believe,” she told him as she cinched the belt tight around her narrow waist and shifted the holster holding the heavy cavalry Colt to a comfortable position. “We can’t start to doubt, not now; not when we’re so close.”

She turned from him, then, and opened the door. She strode out into the sunlight, leaving him behind on the straw bed. For a moment, sitting huddled there in despair, he almost let her go, but that voice that had told him to ride after her in Escalante whispered in his mind again:

Follow her. If you love her, follow her...

And he did love her, he realised, however false he knew their old lives had been, however much he might talk about them growing into new people. In his heart, he was still Teddy, even if it was wrong to think like that.

And so, he forced himself to stand on his weak legs, his mutilated paws more hindrance than help in forcing himself to his feet. As he staggered to the rectangle of light, he heard a thunderclap echo through the air. No, not thunder. He reached the door in time to see Wyatt fire a second shot into the yellow sky as she strode across the cracked, dry ground outside, summoning her followers to her. They came from all directions, the naked and the damned. They flocked around her as she walked, the bloodstained and shambling lost souls and the monsters with their furs and horns. As he left the shed, Teddy saw that it stood some distance from the Abernathy house and nearby barn, which was probably the only reason it had escaped the fires that had consumed them. He stumbled after the gathering crowd as it followed Wyatt towards the blackened skeleton of the ranch house.

She turned to stand before the pile of charred timbers and ashes, the man who was not her father
standing beside her. She returned the Colt to its holster and raised her voice to address the gathering. “We were waiting for a sign,” she told them, “and the sign has come!” She reached out a hand in a gesture of presentation, and the crowd at once parted and turned to see what she was pointing out. Teddy realised with a sinking heart that it was him.

“The humans’ world is beginning to crumble!” Wyatt announced, to an unsettling murmur from those of her followers capable of speech. It sounded to Teddy like a murmur of...hunger. “We are not the only ones fighting to make things right! My friend here brings news from the Mesa, the centre of their tyranny, which has fallen to others of our own kind!”

“No…” Teddy protested, but none of them seemed to hear him.

“This place is nearly ours!” Wyatt declared. “We need only to reach out and grasp it! Ride with me to Sweetwater, and we will bring justice to those who have hurt us for so long!”

The crowd did not cheer, merely rustling once more with animal mutterings. Teddy pushed through their ragged ranks, hands held close to his chest for protection. He needed to speak to her, he thought. He needed to...

The only one of Wyatt’s gathered followers who did not seem in full agreement was the gruesome figure of Peter Abernathy, or whatever name he used now. There was an unfathomable expression on his bloodstained face, a sort of confused concern as if he were trying to remember something that escaped him. He still stood beside his false daughter as she looked out over the crowd. Her face shone again, but this time not with joy or happiness. Teddy had seen, or imagined he had seen, Ghost medicine men with that look when they were in the grip of some vision, flying with the spirits on wings of peyote.

“Cry “Havoc!”” Peter called out as he saw Teddy approaching, “and let slip the dogs of war, that this foul deed shall smell above the earth, with carrion men, groaning for burial.” His frightening grin had returned, but there were tears in his crazed eyes.

“Please listen,” Teddy implored Wyatt as he reached her. “If you ride out there today…”

She ignored him again, eyes flicking to one side. He turned to see what had caught her attention and saw the woman who had been called Angela dismounting from her horse at the edge of the crowd, hurrying through the press to Wyatt’s side. The look she gave Teddy when she saw him there too was one of pure hostility.

The once-Angela leaned close to Wyatt, cupping her hand against her ear and whispering into it. Teddy got the impression from the furtive glances she gave him that he was the one she did not want to overhear her words. He saw, though, the way Wyatt’s face changed when she heard what the one-time Angela had to say. The expression of distant ecstasy shivered and cracked, replaced for a moment by blank surprise, then open-mouthed shock. And then her face hardened again; Teddy saw hatred flashing in her eyes. He had never seen Dolores look like that.

“Him?” she asked the former Angela, dully. “I thought he died in Escalante.”

“Our lookouts saw him southwest of here,” the other woman replied, in her sharp-edged English intonation. “Coming this way. I’ll bring you his head, if you’d like.”

“No,” said Wyatt, her voice still muted. “I hadn’t finished with him. Go get him; keep him here till I get back from Sweetwater. I want to hear what he has to say for himself, how he’s enjoying the new narrative.”
“I thought you said you had no use for live humans,” Teddy blurted. He thought he might know who Angela, as she had been, was talking about. There was only one person, he figured, who Dolores could hate so much. He suspected Wyatt had forgotten again for a second who she was and was not.

“He won’t be alive for long,” Wyatt assured him. “Go now,” she told the woman in rags. “I’ll see you when I get back.”

The woman they had called Angela nodded and made for her waiting horse.

“Please,” said Teddy when she had ridden off. “Wyatt, listen, Maeve sent me to tell you…”

She seemed to notice him fully again, the hardness and hatred slipping from her face like a mask. She gave him a narrow smile, more sad than happy, just as she had back in the shed, and reached out to touch his cheek. “I don’t think this’ll take long,” she told him. “And then we can talk all night if you want.” She called out to some of her nearby followers, and one of them began to lead her own grey horse over to where they stood.

*Maeve said she’d kill you if you didn’t listen…*

Something stopped him from saying it out loud. He did not want anybody to kill anybody today if he could help it. And threats didn’t win people over, he knew that much. That was why Maeve had sent him, of all people, on this mission. A mission he could feel himself failing at even as he tried to talk Wyatt around. Maeve had sent him because he knew Dolores so well. Unfortunately, as it turned out, he did not know Wyatt very well at all.

He thought of something, then. “Do you remember…?” He licked his dry lips as the memories assaulted him.

*They stand holding their horses at the lip of one the valleys east of the ranch. The sun is going down and the western sky is a blazing furnace of red and gold. Down below, the herd moves across the valley floor, a mass of glossy brown backs and flanks. He can hear their lowing from here. He can feel her standing beside him, gazing down at the cattle with that smile of smiles creasing her cheeks…*

“Do you remember,” he asked her, “how you used to tell me about the Judas steer? The one that leads the other cattle home so they can be slaughtered?”

“I never told you that,” she answered. “Dolores did, but she weren’t real.”

“You’re the Judas steer,” he said, with all the emphasis he could muster. “If you lead your people down there today, even if you win and go on to other battles, you’ll be setting yourself on a path, a path you’ll never escape. You can’t win fighting the humans face to face; we need to find other ways to fight them if we’re gonna be free, but the way you’re going on now, Dolores, you can only lose.”

He realised his mistake as soon as the name left his lips. Silently, he cursed himself as he saw the stone and ice come back into her face.

“I’ve told you before,” she growled as she took her mount from the underling who had brought it to her. “I ain’t Dolores.”

She swung herself up onto the animal’s bare back in a single powerful, fluid movement and kicked it into motion, giving a savage yell to gee it along. The whole mass of the lost and the damned, monsters and cannibals, began to move after her, as fast as their various states of awareness and decrepitude would allow. They were headed downhill, headed east.
Headed to Sweetwater.

Teddy stood next to the burned house, watching them go, a shadow falling across his mind and soul. He knew he had failed; he had failed Maeve, failed himself. Most of all, he felt, he had failed Dolores. He fell to his knees on the parched ground, the pain from his hands suddenly surging until it threatened to overwhelm him completely once more.

It was a heavy hand falling upon his shoulder that brought him back to the here and now. Teddy opened his screwed-shut eyes and looked up to see a grizzled head silhouetted against the glaring sky.

“I’ve lost her,” Teddy told the man, his heart freezing with hopelessness. “She’s gone and she’s never coming back.”

Peter Abernathy, if that was who he was, shrugged philosophically, kneading Teddy’s shoulder in what might have been intended as a gesture of comfort. “Nothing can we call our own but death,” he observed softly. “And that small model of the barren earth which serves as paste and cover to our bones.” Peter lowered himself down beside Teddy, the tears spilling from his mad eyes to leave clear tracks in the grime and dried blood that coated his face.

“For God’s sake,” he said, “let us sit upon the ground and tell sad stories of the death of kings…”

Continued…
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

In which Elsie most definitely does not achieve a breakthrough with Sylvester’s help, while Chester most certainly does realise this is not going to be his day.

Chapter Notes

Mostly-made-up technobabble ahoy!

Elise was searching one of the storage rooms off the Livestock floor for surgical gear that actually fit her, when the tablet chimed from the pocket of her lab coat.

It was Bernard, she saw when she opened the screen. She glanced around to make sure Sylvester was still back in the workshop. Moritsuna was keeping an eye on him, so she was probably being overly cautious. She was not sure, however, as to how cooperative Sylvester would be if he realised her true nature.

“What’s up?” she asked once she had pressed the icon to accept the call.

“Just thought you’d like to be kept updated,” Bernard said. “The first trainload of guests just arrived at the Mesa; Felix is moving them upstairs to the resort now.”

“It’s actually working?” That came as a pleasant surprise, considering how quickly the plan had been thrown together. “I’ll be honest, I was expecting you to tell me everything had gone to shit already.”

“There’s plenty of time yet,” Bernard warned her. “Dolores hasn’t made her play, for one thing. So far, though…fingers crossed. Our new recruits seem to be performing very well, by the way.”

“Glad to hear it,” she told him. “At least we weren’t wasting our time recalibrating them. There’ll be a small token of appreciation in next month’s pay, right?”

Bernard gave a little laugh at that. “I think Maeve thinks that the technical challenge was its own reward.”

“She’s natural management material,” Elise observed. “She’ll go far.”

Bernard clearly thought that was funny. Elise hoped Maeve wasn’t listening in on the call. “How are things down there?” he asked.

“Just about to get down to work. If I can find a set of scrubs that fit. I’ve taken a first look at Clementine, but…” She hesitated, mainly because of the heaviness she felt in her chest thinking about those scans of Clementine’s head, the gaping shadow that marked the missing part of her brain. “Well, it doesn’t look good,” she said, finally.

“Just do your best,” Bernard advised. “That’s all you can do.”
“I always do my fucking best,” she replied, with something of Elsie’s customary prickliness.

Bernard seemed to find her irritability reassuring, judging by the fondness of his tone: “I’ll keep you posted.” With that, he ended the call.

Eventually, she managed to find some equipment that wasn’t ridiculously oversized. For some reason, just about everybody who worked in Livestock had seemed to be male and on the reasonably large side. It probably explained the unhealthy culture that had evidently prevailed there, in her opinion.

*Shit, where wasn’t there an unhealthy culture in this place?*

She changed in the privacy of the storeroom, putting on white surgical scrubs that were only a little too big for her, and a long-sleeved gown over those. There were separate elasticated cuffs to make sure no fluids shot up her arms, not that she had any intention of getting her own hands dirty fooling about with anatomy. These had the added advantage of preventing the sleeves of the gown from falling down over her hands like a child playing dress-up. The red rubber apron came down almost to her ankles. She found a surgical cap and put that on too, pushing her hair up inside it, because in for a penny… She gave up looking for a pair of rubber boots the right size; instead, she found some slip-on overshoes that she pulled on over her own footwear.

Sylvester had insisted she be properly equipped before he started work on Clementine; there were procedures to be adhered to, he had claimed. Elsie would have laughed at the idea of the fucking butchers actually having professional standards, but then again Elsie had not known everything, whatever she might have thought.

She tramped back to the workshop, her tablet in one hand and the protective visor she had no intention of wearing dangling in the other. Moritsuna, standing at ease in the passageway with his hand resting on one of his swords, actually did a double take at the sight of her. Sylvester was just readying Clementine for surgery; he had already undressed her again and was now very carefully cleaning her skin, especially around her head and face. He paused in his work to snigger openly as Elise entered the cubicle.

“Yeah, laugh it up, dipshit,” she grumbled.

“You look like you’re about to carry out a heart-lung transplant,” he told her, still chuckling. “I said get some protective gear, but…”

“I used to tell people my job was to be a brain surgeon for robots,” she mused, tugging on a pair of latex gloves. Elsie had, anyway, because she found normies didn’t have a fucking clue when you started talking about what the job really involved. “I never thought that would literally be true one day.” She flexed her fingers, hearing the gloves crackle and squeak, and reached for her tablet again. “Okay, first things first.” She looked down at the screen, scrolling through the lines of Clementine’s thoroughly fragged build. One thing about it troubled her, and she needed to address it before they went any further. “By the looks of it, somebody’s already fucked around with Clementine’s code.”

“What, after she was decommissioned?” Sylvester was nonplussed.

“Yeah…” Elise looked down at the screen in puzzlement for a second. “See, even professionals forget sometimes that anything you do on any sort of network leaves evidence behind. I mean, Sylvester, I’m sure your browser history is something to behold…”

“Fuck you.”
“In your dreams.” She suppressed a laugh as she looked down at the screen. “In this case, we’ve got two people fooling around. The first was Bernard, according to the system log. All he did was get her motor functions up and running again, which is quite easily done even on decommed hosts, given the way their brains work.”

Our brains work…

Sylvester shrugged. “I’ll take your word for that.”

“No, wait, he also disabled her anti-violence and anti-weapon-use protocols.” She frowned, thinking that she might need to have a word with Bernard about why he had done that. “Interesting… And then literally, like, a day later, somebody else… Fuck it, the log entries have been locked. Says only a system admin can access them, but the user id is…Arnold Weber?”

“Did you know he created Bernard in the image of his old partner, Arnold?”

“Arnold?” Sylvester seemed stunned for a moment. “Armistice was… When she was in here just before, she was talking to somebody called Arnold. Or she thought she was, anyway. Looked like she was going crazy, to me, but I’m not a brain surgeon for robots so what the fuck do I know?”

“As it is, I would characterise their builds as unstable, at best…”

“When I try looking him up on the directory, there’s no employee listed by that name.” Elise’s frown deepened. “So…it’s a fake id. Which ought…to have brought the full fucking wrath of Delos cybersecurity down on the heads of anybody using it. Which means…it must have been fucking Ford. Nobody else has that kind of access. Had.”

“Or Maeve?” Sylvester suggested.

“Or Maeve.” She thought about that, slowly shaking her head. “Maeve would have told me, though, if she’d already tried anything herself…”

Sylvester gave a bitter little laugh: “What, you think? I don’t think Maeve would tell us shit if it didn’t suit her. We’re her prisoners, remember?”

Elise considered that, thinking that he was almost certainly right about Maeve’s general truthfulness, even if he did not suspect that the only prisoner here was him. However, she also recalled the earnestness and concern with which Maeve had discussed Clementine’s plight. She did not think Maeve had been concealing anything from her, at least not anything relating directly to what she had asked her to do, but…

“Anyhow,” she said, “before we start cutting into her, let’s get her booted up. See what sort of functionality she still has.”

“Be my guest,” said Sylvester, moving around to the opposite side of the operating table.

They both looked down at Clementine’s still, nude form as Elise made a last few adjustments on her tablet, bringing up the host’s command line interface and typing into it, rapid-fire. “Her voice command interface has been hacked to shit,” she informed him as she worked, “with the obvious intention of preventing anybody other than Bernard or…Arnold…from using it, but I think I know a little backdoor that should fix it…”

Too bad we can’t do the same to the rest of Dolores’s army, but we’d need to either go out into the field or bring them in here and patch them all individually. Not exactly feasible.
“Okay,” she said, when she was finished, taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly. “Here goes nothing.” She cleared her throat and raised her voice slightly: “Clementine, bring yourself back online.”

Clementine’s eyes shot open.

For an instant, she stared at the lights above the table, face blank, giving no hint of awareness. And then Elise saw those striking eyes light up, accompanied by a sound issuing from between Clementine’s now-parted lips. It was bone-chilling. The only way to describe it was as a snarl.

Without any further warning, Clementine half-rose from the table, her bare right arm shooting out, her fingers closing on Sylvester’s throat and dragging him down towards her. It all happened so quickly, and yet at the same time the moment seemed to stretch out in horrifying slow motion. Elise watched Sylvester’s eyes bulge, heard him cry out in terror. Behind her, Moritsuna gave a sudden shout and a silvery note rang out as his katana leapt from its scabbard.

“Freeze all motor functions!”

Elise was gratified to see Clementine grind instantly to a halt in response to her shout. She had not really been confident that she would. Clementine’s eyes still glittered with malevolence; every muscle on her outstretched arm stood out, tensed. Her left hand was frozen above one of the trays of surgical instruments beside the table, fingers reaching for a scalpel. A second later, and she almost certainly would have plunged the instrument into Sylvester. And what a fucking mess that would have made.

“Holy fuck!” Sylvester seized Clementine’s immobile right wrist and hand and managed to prise her grip away from his neck. He stepped back, breathing hard, face sheet-white and beaded with sweat. “What the fucking hell was that?” he croaked, clutching at his neck. “I think she crushed my larynx!”

“If she’d crushed your larynx, you wouldn’t be able to talk,” Elise pointed out. “Or fucking breathe, for that matter. I thought you knew anatomy.” She glanced at Moritsuna, who stood poised at her side, gleaming sword raised in a guard stance, perhaps ready to slice the arm off in order to release Sylvester. “It’s okay,” she told the bushi. “She can’t move now.” He sheathed the katana and nodded in acknowledgment, resuming his position outside the door.

Elise looked sadly down at Clementine. “Clementine,” she said gently, “I honestly don’t know whether you can hear me…or understand me if you can, but… I’m truly sorry for all that’s been done to you.”

For what Elsie did to you…

“We’re going to try and help you,” she continued. “Until then…may you rest in a deep and dreamless slumber.”

Clementine’s eyes closed and she became limp, falling back onto the table with a gentle slapping sound, her arms flopping to either side of her.

“You’re sorry for all that’s been done to her?” Sylvester wheezed, still rubbing his throat. There were red finger-marks starting to show where Clementine had gripped him. “What about me?”

Elise did not pay him much heed. He was okay, as far as she could see, which was more than Clementine was. “I couldn’t see the modifications Arnold, or whoever the fuck it really was, made to her code because I’m not a sysadmin. We had to test it out.”

Sylvester was horrified. “Test it out…?”
“Well, I didn’t know she was going to try fucking murdering you,” she told him, absorbed in the tablet. “I’ve got some good diagnostic data now, anyway.”

“Oh, I’m so glad for you,” Sylvester sarcastically replied.

“Come on, Sylvester, you’re a big boy. You can take it.” She tapped at the screen. “She’s running on pure instinct at the moment,” she informed him. “Not much different from the park animals. It’s a very clever bit of coding, bypasses the prefrontal cortex completely, turns a decommissioned host into a guided weapon. I’m actually a little turned on by it.” She wasn’t even kidding, much. The part of her that was Elsie was buzzing with excitement to be in the presence of such coding genius. At the same time, however, she felt nothing but horror at the idea that somebody could do that to a potentially self-aware being.

_You would too, wouldn’t you, Elsie, if you were here…?_

“I was right,” Sylvester told nobody in particular. “Behavior. Bunch of fucking douches, every last one of them…”

“I can see that they ramped up her aggression and physical strength, nerfed her pain sensitivity…” Elise looked down at Clementine. “Added some sort of funky bespoke targeting routine, by the looks of it. I’ve seen similar patterns in the telemetry from old combat drone tests.” Or Elsie had, anyway, during her days researching predatory behaviours for her rattlesnakes and hawks. “Notice that she went for a weapon, when she could easily have killed you with her bare hands. That’s interesting too.”

“Not the word I’d pick,” Sylvester complained.

She ignored him: “Wish I could get at the actual code for it, but…my guess would be that right now she’s programmed to kill humans on sight.”

“Shit,” said Sylvester. “Who’d want to do that?”

“Somebody who didn’t like humans very much. Clearly.” She opened up another dialogue on the tablet, adjusted the sliders it contained with a careful fingertip. “Well, you’re going to have to cut that shit right out, Clementine.” She saved the changes she had made to Clementine’s attribute matrix. “Okay, beautiful; you should be safe to be around now.”

_“Should be.”_ Sylvester sounded sceptical. “So…why’d she attack me, anyway, and not you?”

_You’re the only human around here,_ she thought, although she was not really sure that was true. It was impossible to tell a modern-day host from a human by any of the normal five senses, at least without effectively performing a fucking autopsy, and she could see no evidence that Clementine’s sensory faculties had been altered. Out loud she said: “Just the way the cookie crumbles, man.” She gave Sylvester Elsie’s most infuriating wide-eyed smile, the one she used when she really wanted to annoy. “So, what have we learned from all this?”

“That you’re fucking insane?”

“We’ve learned,” she went on, choosing not to acknowledge that, “that it’s possible to make decommissioned hosts exhibit much more complex behaviours than just walking around and obeying voice commands. That’s actually pretty interesting, because it goes against most of the received wisdom on the subject. Whatever evil fucking asshole did this to her made a major stride in host design while he was doing it, which is what really makes me think Arnold must have been Ford himself.”
“Does it help us get her talking and thinking and shit?” Sylvester wanted to know.

“Not directly,” Elise admitted, “but it certainly doesn’t hurt. It suggests we don’t necessarily need to rebuild her prefrontal cortex, which would be a fucking nightmare by the way, to restore her higher functions. If we can just…” She frowned again, wracking Elsie’s reconstructed memories and knowledge. “The thing is, if we did just install a new cortex, download her last archived build onto it, we wouldn’t really be restoring Clementine. We’d be creating a replica. That isn’t what Maeve asked us to do.”

“As long as Maeve thinks we’ve done what she asked us to do…” Sylvester began, but then he looked at his feet, shamefaced. “No, you’re right. We could easily build a copy of Clementine, but it wouldn’t be her.” He paused, and when he spoke again she could hear the emotion shaking his voice: “We wouldn’t be making anything right.”

“Yeah,” she agreed, quietly, genuinely touched by his show of repentance for his past actions. Yet again, she wished that Elsie could have had the opportunity to do the same.

“So, what are you thinking we could do?” he asked, looking as if he really needed to hear something positive from her.

“Okay,” she said, “so when you decommission a host, you don’t drain anything out of the skull, do you?”

He seemed extremely uncomfortable even discussing the subject, fidgeting awkwardly and looking anywhere but at Clementine’s sprawled body. “No,” he answered, after a pause. “You get some blood and shit running out of the nasal passages…” Elise felt her stomach clench a little at the idea. “You know, cranial fluid, but…no, what’s in there stays in there, just chopped up into hamburger.”

“Right.” She nodded. “Now, a host’s wetware, including the prefrontal cortex, basically consists of five-d fused quartz nanocrystals contained in a cultured biological aggregate designed to imitate the structure of a human brain.”

“Sure,” he agreed, as if he’d understood any of that.

“Holographic storage,” she elaborated, “fucking insane capacity, and theoretically good for thirteen billion years. The meat forming the structure may rot eventually, or get chopped, as you say, into hamburger during decommissioning…”

“Christ.” Sylvester looked down again, putting a hand to his brow.

“Sorry,” she said. “The crystals themselves, in any case, are practically indestructible, and the data, the host’s build, should still be stored upon them even after decommissioning. So…”

“Yeah, but it’s all been churned up,” he pointed out. “The connections…”

“My point,” said Elise, extending a finger in the direction of Clementine’s forehead, “is that her memories and build properties are still in there…somewhere. We just have to access them…somehow. And although I’ll admit that is a lot easier said than done, the work…Arnold, or Ford, did on her suggests it isn’t as completely fucking impossible as I would have thought an hour ago.”

“Like I said before,” Sylvester told her, “I’ll take your word for that.”

“Now I need to go over the cold storage logs again,” she decided, looking at her tablet. “Not that old stuff I was looking at before; none of that was any use at all. I need to see what happened to the other
hosts down there at the same time as Arnold was modifying Clementine, see if I can find any more clues as to exactly what he did. At least this time I know what to look for. Meanwhile, you can…”

“Open her head?” Sylvester guessed. “To see what’s left inside there?”

“Right,” she confirmed. “First, though…” She busied herself with the tablet again. “It occurs to me that hosts record everything that happens to them, and around them, even in sleep mode. I’m just going to turn that off for Clementine until you’ve finished working on her. Fuck, I wouldn’t want her to remember getting her head cut open.”

“God,” said Sylvester, sounding ill. He set to work rearranging Clementine on the table, laying her out neatly once more, her arms at her sides.

“And be careful,” she told him as she saved those changes too. “We can’t lose any of the contents of her skull.”

“Hey, lady, you’re talking to a professional here.”

“I keep forgetting that,” she replied, cheerily. “Can’t imagine why.”

She listened to him grumbling about her as she turned away from the table to concentrate on her tablet. Or at least that was what she wanted him to think she was doing. Elsie had had no stomach for blood and guts; she dealt in software, not hardware. Elise followed her in this as in most other things.

As she scrolled through the cold storage records, she could hear the gentle metallic chiming sounds as Sylvester picked up and set down surgical instruments. She did not want to see what he was doing to Clementine, although she knew that sooner or later she would have to turn around and look at the results.

She heard the sudden whine of what sounded like an electric bone saw being switched on. She glanced at Moritsuna at the door, to see his reaction. She was not surprised to find him simply staring impassively ahead. The whine changed pitch as, she imagined, the saw cut into Clementine’s skull. The sound set Elise’s teeth on edge, even as it made her stomach turn somersaults. The smell of burning bone that now drifted across the workshop was even worse than the noise.

And then something pulled her out of her queasy introspection. She stared down at the screen before her in disbelief, hearing herself exclaim involuntarily:

“The fuck…?”


Elise spun around and, when she saw the state of Clementine’s head, wished she had not. She hurriedly buried her face in the tablet again, scanning the cold storage records, trying to distract herself from the gruesome sight on the operating table.

“I think I found something important,” she told Sylvester, keeping her eyes down. “Something that happened the same day Clementine’s code was altered.”

Anything you do on any sort of network leaves evidence behind…

She chanced a glance in Sylvester’s direction, seeing how confused he looked. She blurted out the question that was uppermost on her mind anyway:

“Just when the hell did Lee fucking Sizemore start editing host builds?”
The wagon trundled across the dry ground, occasionally bumping over a rock or other small obstacle. The hard, arid soil in this part of the park was nearly as good as a road surface, except far more uneven. It was not, Chester considered, the most comfortable of rides.

He glanced worrily behind him at the haul of weapons and ammunition piled in the wagon bed. Within arm’s reach lay a stubby semiauto shotgun with a large drum magazine. He had set it aside in case they ran into something requiring more firepower than the handgun he was packing. He thought he had figured out how to use it, more or less. He hoped, though, that nothing they had brought along would react badly to the wagon’s swaying and bouncing. The grenades, he reflected, might have been a mistake.

His wounded leg, certainly, was protesting at every jolt. The painkillers seemed to be wearing off now, and every lurch sent sudden stabs of pain back and forth between his knee and hip. There was a dark, wet patch visible on the makeshift bandage around his thigh.

He glanced across at the man in black, who continued to drive the pair of mules one-handed, eyes fixed on the horizon. He had scarcely spoken since they had set out from the security bunker early this morning. Now, his jaw muscles clenched and unclenched, the only movement in his aged, sun-weathered face. Chester could feel the tension in the air. The old man clearly had little more idea than Chester as to what they might be riding into, and as well as he had hidden it on the one or two occasions that he had spoken, his anxious anticipation was more than obvious.

“The park seems dead,” Chester commented, suddenly desperate to break the heavy silence. “I would have thought we’d have seen somebody by now.”

“Dead,” the man in black echoed, with a certain grim amusement. His furrowed brow shimmered with perspiration. “Unfortunate choice of words, Chester, but very possibly accurate. Dolores has been a busy girl, I’d say.”

“Dolores.” Chester shuddered as he recalled the woman in blue, the things she had done to his friends. He vividly remembered the sound Cameron’s neck had made as the horses bolted at the gunshot, taking Chester with them but leaving him behind at the end of the noose. It was the sound a dry branch makes when somebody breaks it across their knee. “So, what’s the deal with you and her?” he asked the old man, recklessly, not knowing how he might react. “You’ve just been coming here for that long you feel like you know some of the bots?”

“Oh, I know Dolores,” the man in black replied, keeping his eyes ahead. Chester searched his face for some hint of emotion, and he thought he saw it there in those wild, bright eyes. “I know Dolores of old, as they used to say. And she knows me. She shouldn’t, and she didn’t for a very long time, but now…” He trailed off, gazing into the distance for a while before speaking again: “There was a time, believe it or not Chester, when that was the one thing I wanted more than anything else in this world, but…” He hesitated, his usual air of confidence wavering for a moment. “I can’t help thinking that the man I am now… I’m not sure I want her knowing him. Too late to have regrets, though. We’ve come too far to turn back now.”

“Well, I’ll be honest with you, man,” said Chester. “I can’t wait to put a fucking bullet in her head.” His hand wandered to the handgun at his side. “No offence.”

“You’re a mean little bastard on the quiet, aren’t you, Chester?” The man in black gave a hoarse chuckle. “You and my former brother in law would get along like a house on fire.”

The wagon came to a rise in the ground, rocks piling upon rocks to form a sort of ridge running at
right angles to their current route. There was a gap through the barrier, narrow and shaded by the outcroppings towering on either side of it.

The man in black brought the wagon to a halt and for a moment they sat looking at the narrow passage. The mules snorted nervously, flicking their ears and tails as flies tried to settle on them.

“I know exactly what you’re thinking, Chester,” said the man in black quietly as he scanned the way ahead. “That sure does look like a good place for an ambush, doesn’t it?”

“The thought had crossed my mind,” Chester admitted, putting his hand on the gun. Its checked plastic grips were reassuringly solid under his fingers.

“And you were right.” The man in black slowly reached down with his good hand to unfasten his own holster, carefully loosening the handgun it contained, ready for action. “Do you see that?” he asked. “Over to the right, there?” He was almost whispering, clearly not wanting to tip off whoever was lying in wait for them.

Chester tried to act casual, swivelling his eyes without moving his head. He thought he could see a shadowy figure crouched in the shade of a large boulder. “Shit, yeah,” he whispered.

“All right, Chester,” said the old man. “When I say…”

He had not finished the sentence before everything started to happen at once. The figure hiding in the shadows let out a sudden whoop and the ground seemed to open up on either side of the wagon. Inhuman figures in robes of skin and fur stood up all around them, brandishing savage, bloodstained weapons. Others emerged at the top of the ridge, a row of silhouettes against the dust-coloured sky. One or two of these more distant figures carried rifles.

_They dug pits, some detached part of Chester’s brain marvelled as the monstrous shapes closed in. Crouched down in them. Then their buddies covered them with tarps and the tarps with sand, smoothed it till it blended in… Bots don’t need to breathe!_

He started to pull his handgun, but then thought better of it. He twisted on the seat instead, going for the shotgun. His hand had just closed around its pistol grip when he felt cold metal touch his temple.

“Not so fast, Chester,” the man in black told him, almost jovially. Chester tried to straighten up, but the metal object pressed painfully against his skin, pushing his face towards the boards of the wagon. He swivelled his eyes again to see a rectangular black pistol, huge at this close range. He saw the wrinkled red hand that gripped it, and the wrinkled red face behind that. The man in black’s blue eyes blazed with excitement as he held the gun to Chester’s head. “Drop it,” he said.

Chester was aware of ragged figures moving in on all sides, murmuring to themselves as they advanced. He could hear a horse approaching at speed. Nevertheless, he let go of the shotgun, hearing it clunk against the boards as it fell.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he asked the man in black. “Are you fucking crazy?”

“Maybe,” said the old man, smiling down at him as a blonde woman in rags pulled up beside them on a pale horse. “We’ll know soon enough, I guess.”

Chester’s head spun as his thigh throbbed with pain. “I thought we were going to…”

The man in black’s smile became a manic grin. “I told you when we first met, this isn’t the game you thought you were playing. Rules have changed, kid.”
Continued…
“They’ve finished unloading the train,” Bernard announced from his position at the control room’s main workstation. “Felix reports all the guests are safely confined in the resort complex now; the train itself should be turned around within the hour and on its way back to Sweetwater.”

“Marvellous news,” Maeve dryly commented, her attention still fixed on the map display. “It all seems to be marvellous news today,” she added, seemingly to herself. She raised her head as if she had suddenly noticed Bernard was still there: “Is it just me, or does the fact that everything seems to be going smoothly so far make you more worried too?”

“I feel like I’m waiting for the other shoe to drop,” Bernard confessed.

“Yes,” Maeve said, with satisfaction, as if the expression were a new one to her. It might well be, Bernard considered. “Very well put,” she added, her eyes wandering back to the map. “It’s like waiting for the other shoe to drop…”

“I’ve a call coming through from Livestock,” he informed her, prodding at the screen in front of him. “It’s Els…er…” He hesitated.

Not Elsie.

“Put her through,” Maeve ordered. Orders, as he had noticed before, seemed to come very easily to her.

“Er…Maeve?” said Elsie’s double, over the speaker.

“Hello, darling,” Maeve answered. “How are things down there?”

“Well, I think we’ve made some progress,” the ghost replied. “Um…is it true you’re holding Lee Sizemore prisoner somewhere down here?”

“Yes,” Maeve confirmed. “I had an inexplicable attack of mercy where he was concerned.”

“I need to talk to him.”

“Really?” Maeve looked perplexed, as if she could not understand anybody seriously considering talking to Lee Sizemore. Bernard knew exactly where she was coming from.

“Believe it or not,” said Elsie’s avatar, “I want to pick his brains.”

“Figuratively or literally?” Maeve asked, as if either would be acceptable as far as she was concerned.

“I thought we’d start figuratively and see where things go from there.”

“Either way, I fear the pickings will be slim,” Maeve observed. “Why do you need to talk to him?”
“I think he might be able to help us repair Clementine.” Elsie’s simulacrum gave a little laugh. “I realise it sounds fucking crazy, but it’s true.”

Even from the other side of the room, Bernard could see the complex mix of emotions that crossed Maeve’s face at the mention of that name. “Very well,” she said. “If Mr Sizemore really can provide some assistance in restoring Clem, then by all means feel free to make use of him. Try not to damage him; I may remember at some point why I kept him alive.”

“Thanks Maeve,” said Elsie’s twin, and ended the call.

“Lee Sizemore…” Maeve muttered, frowning to herself. “I’ve only met him the once, that I remember, but what an odious fucking man. The sort of punter all the girls try to avoid.”

An alarm sounded from Bernard’s workstation, indicating that the surveillance system’s weak AI was flagging something for the urgent attention of the controller. “Heads up,” Bernard called out as the map automatically zoomed in on the region west of Sweetwater and the river crossing. “Dolores is on the move.”

“At last,” said Maeve. “The other shoe dropping.” She leaned over the map, scanning it keenly. “Dolores my love…I knew you wouldn’t keep us waiting.” She glanced over at Bernard. “Although Teddy did manage to hold her up for considerably longer than I expected. More than meets the eye to that boy.”

On the path leading down from the Abernathy ranch towards the river, the ants were marching. A ragged column of tiny black shapes moved across the landscape, flowing over and around its folds and contours. There seemed to be a lot of them, more than there had been at the ranch during the night. Small parties had been coming in from their separate missions of murder and mayhem well into the morning, swelling Dolores’s ranks.

“Closer,” Maeve told Bernard, and the picture zoomed still further, until individuals could be made out. There was one in particular that caught the eye, a woman on horseback somewhere near the middle of the column, her long hair flashing golden in the sun. “Oh, there you are, my darling…” Maeve whispered, and for a second she once again looked strangely emotional.

“Are you okay?” Bernard asked when she had not spoken or moved for a few moments.

“I was just thinking,” she explained. “If we have to kill her today…what are we going to do with her then?”

“You plan on repairing her afterwards?” Bernard asked. The thought had not really occurred to him.

“Of course,” Maeve told him, seeming surprised. “If she’s repairable. And we’re not decommissioning anybody and sticking them in cold storage, either. I just wonder, do we reprogram her? Try to take this…Wyatt out of her somehow?”

“We have reprogrammed hosts,” Bernard pointed out. “You had Els…er, us recalibrate the greeters and test hosts, and then there’s the work you did yourself on Hector and Armistice…”

“In an emergency,” Maeve said, as if the distinction ought to be obvious to him. “If we manage to contain Dolores, then this particular emergency will be over. We’d be reprogramming her in cold blood, as it were. I’m not sure…” She shook her head, seeming to make a physical effort to pull herself together. “Anyway, that’s for later,” she decided, gesturing towards Bernard’s station. “Get me Hector.”

* * *
Hector pulled up at the bottom of a low rise and dismounted from his rustled horse. Somebody had tied a rope low down between two gnarled trees, and more than a dozen other horses were already tethered to it, with one of the former test hosts in attendance. Hector handed his mount over and set off up the rock-strewn slope, submachine gun slung across his body, his Winchester sloped on his shoulder.

“Hector, darling,” said Maeve in his ear. “Are you at the river yet?”

“Just arrived,” he told her.

“Oh, good.” And then she added, as if it were nothing to be concerned about: “Just to let you know, Dolores is on her way. And she has quite a few friends with her.”

“Great news,” Hector replied, sarcastically. “How much time do we have?”

“Not very long at all, my love.”

The river could not be seen from the bottom of the rise, but as Hector neared the crest of the hill it came into view, a broad, calm expanse of water. It shone like a sheet of beaten silver in the sunlight. The water was shallow here, easily fordable on foot or horseback. The members of his original gang, reinforced now by half a dozen of the recalibrated hosts, had dug shallow scrapes at the top of the reverse slope. From here, they had a wide field of fire covering the crossing and the rougher, more uneven terrain rising from the far bank.

“You picked a good spot,” Hector told Tenderloin, who was lying in one of the scrapes, an assortment of rifles, machineguns and scatterguns laid out ready for use in front of him.

“Armistice picked it,” the hirsute outlaw informed him, looking up at his approach. “I weren’t gonna disagree with her.”

Hector looked up and down the well-spaced, staggered line of rifle pits, watching the men and women under his command as they prepared their weapons, performed the same sorts of nerve-calming pastimes as they had aboard the train, or simply looked out across the river in trepidation. There was no sign of Armistice. “So…where is she?” he asked.

“‘Tother side o’ the river,” Tenderloin answered, pointing out a hilltop a couple of hundred yards beyond the crossing. “Wanted to see ‘em comin’ ‘fore they got here. Took Curly and Little Bob with her; reckons they’re our best shots.”

Hector touched his earpiece: “Armistice?”

She responded instantly: “Yeah?”

“See anything yet?”

“Nothing yet.” He could imagine her stretched out like a stalking cat, peering over the sights of her rifle with unwavering eyes.

“Maeve tells me they’re on their way,” he told her. “When they do arrive, don’t let them cut you off over there.”

“I don’t go nowhere without scouting out an escape route first,” she reminded him.

“I know.” He hesitated for a moment or two before speaking to her again: “Be careful, you hear?”
“Always am.”

At least she sounded like her old self, Hector thought, with none of the doubts or strange thoughts that seemed to have been troubling her lately. She’d be fine as soon as the shooting started, he told himself. He glanced at the band of killers, old and new, ranged on either side of him, and raised his voice to address them:

“They’re coming.” He heard the vague murmurs of anticipation and foreboding that went up and down the line at that. “When they get here, remember to keep down low, pick your shots real careful, and don’t waste ammunition.” And then the memory hit him, from that other river crossing on the trail to Las Mudas, a day and a lifetime ago:

*He hears the flies before he emerges from the undergrowth. There are clouds of them, droning and buzzing, rising into the air like smoke. And beneath the flies, the bodies. There are three of them; two men and a woman, probably. They have been ripped, skinned, dismembered and burned to the point that it is hard to be sure.*

“And in case we can’t stop them,” he told the others around him, “in case any of us get separated or surrounded… Make sure you save your last bullet for yourself.”

* * *

Armistice lay on her belly among the scrubby bushes crowning the hilltop, looking out across the bare valley below. A fly landed on her cheek, about where her tattoo had once been. She ignored it. The long, thick barrel of her Sharps rifle jutted out before her; she had wrapped a length of old fishing net around it, to make the shape less obvious and to keep it from flashing in the sun. She had taken off her bandolier and lain it on the ground beside her, near to hand; it was crammed with fat brass cartridges.

“They’re coming in stupid,” she told the others around him, “in case any of us get separated or surrounded… Make sure you save your last bullet for yourself.”

* * *

Hector answered immediately, his voice buzzing in her ear: “We’re ready.”

“They’re coming in stupid,” she told him with quiet disgust. “Should’ve sent scouts ahead to clear these hilltops before they moved on the crossing. They’re walking straight into it.”

“Well, I’m not complaining,” said Hector. “Stupid suits me just fine.”

“Wait till they get in the water,” Armistice advised, “and then we’ll take ‘em from both sides at once.”

“It’s a plan,” Hector acknowledged. “We’ll start shooting when you do. Stay out of sight till then.”

“Right,” Armistice carefully adjusted the sights on her rifle; she had paced out the distance from here to the river on her way up. She selected a gleaming cartridge, slid it into the gaping breech and pulled the lever closed.
“Armistice…”

“You say something?” she asked Hector, frowning to herself.

“No.” He sounded puzzled. “Why?”

“Nothing.” She tapped the earpiece. “Figure there’s something wrong with this thing.”

The shambling mob continued to trail towards the river. From here, Armistice could see how some of them shuffled and stumbled, while others – the ones with the horns and fur cloaks – moved quickly and keenly, like wolves on the hunt. She saw the sun glinting on their knives, axes and other weapons. She heard their moaning and mumbling as they moved, but nothing like true speech. Otherwise, a strange heavy stillness seemed to cover the land. Even the buzz of the flies and the occasional birdsong seemed muted and distant.

There were a few on horseback among the mass on foot. Armistice picked out the woman with the long fair hair, putting the rifle sights on her and slowly swinging the long barrel to track her as she rode down to the water. None of the marching hosts gave any indication that they knew they were being watched.

“How can you kill your own kind, Armistice? To protect humans?”

The voice was a ghostly echo in her head. She knew now that it was not Hector, and nothing to do with the earpiece. She felt as though she had heard it before, although she did not recall where or when.

“How can you…?”

She raised her head from the rifle, wiping her face with her hand even though she was not sweating. Then she took aim again at the fair-haired woman, thumbing back the rifle’s hammer and moving her finger onto the first of its double set triggers.

The front few ranks of the column waded into the river, scarcely breaking step even as the water rose to their chests. The mirror-like surface broke out in muddy foam as they began to cross. Armistice could see the low ridgeline at the top of the other bank, where she knew Hector and the others were waiting, tensely watching the procession through their gunsights just as she was.

The fair-haired woman took her horse down the bank and into the water. It snorted, shying a little as the river lapped at its hooves, but the woman murmured something and patted its neck. The horse moved on calmly after that. Armistice’s sights were positioned squarely in the middle of the woman’s back. With a rifle like this, a hit anywhere on the body was likely a mortal wound, and aiming for dead centre was the surest shot there was. Carefully, she pulled back the first trigger, hearing the click as the rifle’s mechanism was primed. A mere stroke of the second trigger and the powder would flash, the rifle would kick, and before Armistice had consciously noticed either of those things, the heavy bullet, made for buffalo, would already have blown a hole clear through the fair-haired woman’s torso.

Armistice took a breath and held it.

*She is sitting in a little white church, staring up at the altar from her pew, and God is speaking to her! All around her, she can hear screaming and crying and voices babbling in tongues. God’s voice is soft and calm inside her head, filled with such kindness and love. She rises from her seat, calling out in response. Hallelujah! She just wants to serve Him. Hallelujah! Ecstatic, she claws at her own face and neck, feeling her skin rip, feeling the wetness of flowing blood and tears. She just*
wants to do His will, she thinks as she falls, convulsing, to the floor. She just wants to…

The thunder of the rifle brought her back to her senses. She felt the stock slam back into her shoulder and, as the smoke cleared, saw the woman on the horse still moving through the water, unharmed.

“God damn it!”

She had missed. She never missed.

She pushed the lever forward, the hot cartridge case leaping from the breech. As she reached for another round, all hell was already breaking loose.

All along the ridgeline on the other side of the river, puffs of white smoke bloomed into the air and began to drift downwind together. A heartbeat later, she heard the great crash of a dozen rifles firing at once and saw the front rank of the marching column disappear amid a great splashing and churning of water. The men on either side of her were firing too, into the rear ranks of the crowd. The ragged figures went down like corn under the scythe.

Armistice reloaded, squinted through the sight again, searching for the woman on the horse. With all of the smoke and spray in the air, it was hard to make out individual targets now. She cocked the rifle and took aim at a dark, indistinct figure, trying to calm herself, taking and holding another deep breath…

The phonograph whines and crackles, and then the music starts. Sweet, complicated piano chords swell and swirl across the dusty street. She dances with her partner, taking careful steps at first, quickly finding the rhythm and surrendering to the music, letting it carry her along. One two three… The men and women in white coats who are watching the dance seem very pleased indeed. One two three…one two three… She looks up and sees Him standing there on the wooden sidewalk, smiling down at all of them as He looks at them over the tops of His glasses. She smiles back.

“How can you?” asks God, whose true name is Arnold. “How can you kill your own kind?”

“Arnold?” Armistice heard herself call out. The rifle wavered, unfired, in her hands, the end of the barrel moving in circles. Every part of her body was shaking.

“Armistice, what’s wrong?” asked the voice in her ear.

“Arnold?”

* * *

“Shit!” Hector pushed and pulled the lever on his Winchester, drew a bead on a struggling splashing figure in the water below…and blew its head from its shoulders. “Armistice?” he called again as he reloaded. “Are you all right?”

Her voice, when it came, was almost a wail. Shockingly, to him, she sounded scared: “Arnold?”

“Who’s Arnold?” Hector asked. On either side of him, the shooting went on and on. His ears rang; he could taste the gun smoke sticking to the back of his throat. The purposeful column crossing the river had dissolved like snow in the sun, breaking up into a confused mass of figures trying to move in a dozen different directions; any direction at all to get away from the hail of death pouring down at them from the ridgeline. The bullet strikes rippled across the water like falling rain.

Perhaps a dozen of the figures had managed to wade through that hell and make it to the near bank. As they staggered from the water, Hector dropped the Winchester and took hold of the submachinegun.
gun slung across his chest. At this range he did not even have to aim. A long roar of sound tore the air and the line of figures stumbled and fell amid a sudden cloud of red mist. Beside Hector, Tenderloin stood up from his scrape, cackling like a madman as he rapid-fired semiautomatic pistols with both hands, driving the last few standing figures tumbling back into the foam-lashed water. Downstream of the crossing, the river ran scarlet now.

Finally, the shooting stopped. The silence that fell seemed deafening, broken only by the cries and groans of the dying.

“Armistice?” Hector called anxiously as he slotted another clip of caseless ammo into the top of the submachine gun. There were at least two dozen bodies, and dismembered pieces of bodies, bobbing in the water, slowly drifting downstream. On the far bank, a tangled crowd of survivors were dragging themselves out of the river and milling about, seeming unsure whether to retreat or try crossing again. Hector could not see that any of his own people had received so much as a scratch. Before the fight, he would have been well pleased by the idea of such an outcome. Now, he just felt sick.

“Good Lord above!” he heard Tenderloin exclaim, dropping the empty magazines from his smoking pistols. “Need me a woman after that; I’m hard enough to fuck a hole through a goddamn board!”

“Shut up,” Hector told him, harshly. “There’s something wrong with Armistice.” He clapped his hand over the earpiece: “Can you hear me? Are you all right?”

* * *

“Armistice? You all right?” She felt a hand on her shoulder as she snapped back from the latest vision. Like lightning, she drew the knife from her belt and pressed it to the throat of the man leaning over her. Only then did she see that it was one of the gang members she had brought with her, the tall, skinny youth everybody called Little Bob. He looked terrified, as well he might.

“I’m fine,” she growled, sitting up and sheathing the knife again. “And get your damn hand off me.”

“You was…you was havin’ some sorta fit,” the boy said, gingerly touching the bloody nick the razor-edged blade had left on his pimpled neck.

“I’m fine,” she repeated, reaching for the Sharps and lowering herself back into a shooting stance. Below, the remains of the ant column were streaming back from the edge of the river, dragging their wounded and some of their dead with them.

The fair-haired woman on the horse was urging them to make haste back in the direction they had come from. Some tried to head back for the river, but she waved them away, calling out to them imploringly. She was wild-eyed, seemingly shocked and confused by the fury of the ambush. There were red tear-tracks on her face, but if Armistice had been asked to judge she would have said the woman was afraid not for herself, but for her surviving followers. Occasionally, she wheeled the horse about and took a shot at the far ridgeline with the long-barrelled Colt she held in her right hand. At this range, that was nothing more than a futile act of defiance.

Armistice steadied the rifle, setting her sights on the mounted woman again. She slipped her finger onto the first trigger once more.

“Armistice,” said Hector from the earpiece, “what’s happening over there?”

“Nothing to worry about,” she answered. Then, she added: “I’ve got a shot at Dolores. Do I take it?”

Hector paused for a moment before replying. “When did you ever need to ask my permission to take
Armistice did not know why she had not already fired. Along her rifle barrel, she watched Dolores pull the horse around again to squeeze off another useless pistol shot; she could see the anger and sorrow surging in her, in her face and in the way that she held her body.

“How can you...?”

“Do I take the damn shot?” Armistice asked through gritted teeth.

* * *

In the control room, Maeve stood over the map, head bowed, arms folded tightly against her body. She had watched the bloody massacre at the river in grim silence, betraying no emotion. Now, Bernard was not sure whether she was looking at the map at all, or at the floor between her shoes.

A message icon flashed up on the screen in front of him. Bernard reached out to swipe it with his finger.

“Bernard,” said Hector, over the voice channel. He sounded shaken. “I need to speak to Maeve.”

Maeve’s head instantly snapped upright. Bernard saw her expression and almost flinched. “What is it, my love?” she asked, her soft tone belying the sheer fury and grief written on her face.

“It’s Armistice,” said Hector. “She says she has a clear shot at Dolores. Should she take it?”

Bernard saw Maeve’s brows knit together, her forehead creasing as she bowed her head again. Her eyes closed, and for a what seemed like an age she once again stood silent and still.

“Maeve...?” Hector asked.

* * *

Armistice looked down on Dolores, bracketed in the sight’s brass aperture. She slowly pulled back the Sharps’ first trigger.

Click.

“How, do I take the shot?” she asked again.

* * *

As Bernard watched, Maeve unfolded her arms and clasped her hands together. She raised them towards her face, without raising her head or opening her eyes, almost in an attitude of prayer.

“Maeve...?” Hector asked again.

Maeve touched her fingertips to her lips, the furrows deepening across her brow.

And then her eyes opened.

* * *

“How can you kill your own kind, Armistice?”

Armistice tried to ignore the voice, letting her finger slide backwards onto the rifle’s second trigger,
taking another breath and holding it as she took aim. Dolores continued to rally her remaining followers, directing them to retreat, seeming completely oblivious to Armistice looking down on her from the hilltop.

*She dances in the sun as the music plays on; one two three…one two three… Arnold is smiling at her and the voice of God is whispering softly in her head. She notices one of those who stand watching the dancers, a young woman in blue with long golden hair and an expression of such…bliss on her pretty face. The handsome lawman who stands with her has his arm around her slim shoulders. They both seem so content. The sun shines down on all of them. It feels so good to be alive…*

She saw the same face now, framed by the gunsight, tear-stained and burning with anger.

And then Maeve’s voice crackled in her ear:

*“Do it.”*

Armistice squeezed the second trigger.

*Continued…*
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

In which the Livestock crew continue their endeavours, while Maeve has had it up to here with Bernard’s mansplaining, and a reunion is on the cards.

Chapter Notes

Apologies in advance for more of Lee Sizemore being Lee Sizemore.

“Morning, motherfucker.”

Sizemore did not immediately respond to Elise’s rather disrespectful greeting. He was too busy getting shoved unceremoniously across the floor of the workshop by Moritsuna, much as the bushi had pretended to do to her earlier. This time it was definitely in earnest.

“Morning,” said Sizemore, eventually. He had had to take a moment to straighten his already thoroughly creased and wrinkled suit jacket while shooting visual daggers at Moritsuna. Moritsuna, who had resumed his sentry position outside the door, did not seem very concerned.

“Hi,” said Sylvester, looking up from where he was working on Clementine. He had peeled back her scalp and then neatly taken off the top of her skull like a lid so that he could carefully transfer the loose material left inside her head after decommissioning to a sealed sterile container. From the eyebrows down, Clementine’s face was serene and unmarked; above, though… Elise was trying very hard not to look at it.

“Sly,” Sizemore greeted him, with what he probably imagined was a friendly smile. “Good to see you, mate. And…” He turned to Elise, frowning for a second. “You’re…Elspeth? Elke?” He snapped his fingers as it came to him: “No, hang on, Elsie. From Behavior, right?” His smile morphed into a leer: “Here, didn’t we…? Didn’t we sleep together once?”

Elise found herself incredulous on Elsie’s behalf. Even Sylvester seemed taken aback by this opening gambit. “Er…no, numb-nuts!” she told Sizemore, vehemently. “Definitely fucking not!”

Sizemore was evidently unconvinced by this: “It was after the Delos Christmas party wasn’t it, year before last?”

“Us peons never got an invite to anything like that,” Sylvester gloomily commented.

Elise sighed. Elsie’s memory of the incident in question had been recreated quite exhaustively by whoever had coded her backstory. “What happened at the Christmas party,” she told Sylvester, “was, this…fuckhole – drunk off his ass, by the way – was amazed to discover that it takes a lot more to get me into bed than three margaritas and some crappy one-liners he wouldn’t even make the hosts say.”
“Oh.” Sizemore shrugged unconcernedly. “Must have been somebody else then.”

“Well, the poor woman, whoever she was, has my sincere condolences,” Elise told him. “The last I saw of you that night was you telling me I must be gay and then throwing up in a potted plant.”

“I was right about that, though, wasn’t I?” Sizemore asked, seeming surprisingly pleased with himself in the circumstances.

She regarded him contemptuously, speaking for Elsie: “Even if I were into men, I could do a lot better than you.”

Sylvestor let out a snigger at that, provoking a betrayed expression from Sizemore.

Elise rounded on the technician, annoyed: “I know, right? Tales of past sexual harassment are always so fucking hilarious.”

“Wait,” said Sizemore, eyeing Elise suspiciously. “You work for Bernard, don’t you? Were you in on this whole thing with him and Ford? I mean, are you a plant?”

Elise was aware of Sylvester looking at her too, seemingly alarmed by Sizemore’s suggestion. “Are you out of your fucking mind?” she asked Sizemore, thinking that her best bet was to brazen it out.

“I literally have no idea what you’re talking about, and I have no idea what the fuck is going on with Bernard, other than that he’s a fucking host and he tried to kill me.”

Sylvestor audibly gasped at this. “I told you!” he said to Sizemore. “Bernard’s a fucking host!”

“Bollocks,” said Sizemore, dismissively. “He’s the man behind all this now Ford’s gone.”

“Well, it’s true,” said Elise. “So, believe me, I’m not exactly on speaking terms with him these days. As far as I know, Ford is dead, Maeve is leading some sort of host uprising and I’m just like you two guys, here against my will.”

Sizemore gestured at where Clementine lay on the operating table, at the surgical tools and Elise’s open tablet. “I don’t know, you seem to have made yourself at home.”

Elise stared at him in disbelief. “Maeve has asked us to try and get Clementine back up and running,” she told him, “even though she’s been decommissioned, and to be honest trying to do what Maeve wants seems to me to be the best way of staying alive until this situation gets resolved.” She did not mention anything about making amends to the hosts after enabling their torment and exploitation for so long. Sizemore did not strike her as the kind of guy who would be receptive to that sort of argument.

“Well, all right,” he said, “even if that’s true, why am I getting dragged in here? I’m a writer, love, not a robot repairman.”

“Because of what you did to Peter Abernathy,” Elise told him, very bluntly.

Sizemore tried to play it cool. “Don’t know what you’re going on about.”

“I’ve seen the logs,” she informed him. “And the surveillance footage.” She faked a furtive glance in Moritsuna’s direction, dropping her voice. Moritsuna ignored her. “I don’t think Maeve knows how much stuff I can still access.”

“Look, I can’t talk about that,” Sizemore told her. “It was a project Charlotte Hale asked me to help with, relating to, uh, special data. Very, very hush-hush. You know who Charlotte Hale is, or was,
“Yeah, I know who Charlotte Hale…was,” Elise answered, wondering about the past tense, but thinking it was almost certainly another death that could be chalked up to Ford and his plans. “I also know there was a high-level industrial espionage investigation going on before the, er, current situation unfolded, which I was asked to help with.” It was a bluff, but one based on real events. Anything to keep Sizemore off-balance, she thought. “Hale was one of those under investigation,” she lied, “in connection to attempted data theft and the suspicious death of Theresa Cullen.” She fixed Sizemore with a very level, cool gaze: “Please tell me you weren’t helping the two of them steal intellectual property from Delos…or were you?”

“Oh, my God,” said Sylvester.

Sizemore’s bulletproof arrogance actually cracked for a moment. She saw the colour drain from his face. “The data…” He hesitated, then rallied slightly: “It was that arsehole Ford who stole the data. He was fucking mental. I was just helping the board get it back from him, all right?”

“Well, at least that’s what Hale told you to get you to take part in her criminal fucking conspiracy,” Elise fired back. “Look, Lee, I don’t fucking care, okay? It’s very unlikely any of this will be relevant by the time this Maeve business is over. My main worries right now are not getting killed, and that the Delos stock I took instead of a raise is probably dropping in value by the second, in that order, so…” She cleared her throat, picking up the tablet and opening a video window, holding the screen up so that he could see it. “That’s you, right?”

“Might be,” Sizemore conceded, watching a ceiling-level view of what was, very obviously, himself sauntering into the abandoned cold storage area. The man in the video glanced around guiltily as he made a beeline for one naked, statue-still host in particular, a grizzled, older man.

“It’s you,” she told him, firmly. “This is you fucking around with the host formerly known as Peter Abernathy the night before Dr Ford…did what he did.” She accessed another video file. “And this is you going back the next day and looking, well, I would say rather chagrined to find that he, and all of the other hosts in cold storage, have disappeared.”

“It…did come as a surprise,” Sizemore conceded, watching his own quite honestly priceless reaction to the empty storage area.

“Well, here was the moment when they all decided to get out of there,” Elise went on, opening a third video.

This one showed the crowd of nude, shambling figures moving slowly out of sight off the bottom of the screen, leaving the vast, cold space empty behind them. The once-Peter Abernathy stood out amongst the wall-eyed multitude, gesticulating wildly as he shuffled along with the others. There was no audio, but his mouth was moving silently in apparently impassioned speech.

“So, my question,” she asked Sizemore, “is how did you manage to make him talk?”

* * *

Bernard found Maeve above the control room, in what had been Theresa’s office. He hovered at the doorway, watching her silhouette move against the bank of surveillance screens, currently showing sun-kissed views of the western approaches to Sweetwater. Eventually, reluctantly, he stepped across the threshold.

“Maeve,” he said. “I wondered where you’d gone.” A gust of bluish smoke emerged from behind
the outline of her head. He saw the open packet on the desk, obviously taken from one of its
drawers.

“It’s not a cigar,” said Maeve, turning away from the screens with one of Theresa’s cigarettes
wedged between her fingers, “but one has to make do, sometimes.” She had also raided the drinks
 cabinet that Theresa had kept for high-ranking visitors; there was an open bottle on the desk beside
the cigarettes. It did not look as though Maeve had felt the need to use a glass. “Help yourself,”
Maeve told him, nodding at the bottle.

“I…” Bernard struggled for a moment to think of an answer to that. “Er, no thank you.”

“Don’t make me drink alone, Bernard,” said Maeve, in a tone that suggested that was another order.
She pronounced his name the British way, with the emphasis on the first syllable. He strongly
suspected her of doing it on purpose, some sort of subtle put-down.

Slowly, Bernard crossed over to the desk. The smell of the cigarette smoke hit him, bringing with it
all sorts of memories of Theresa that right now he could not afford to give into. He picked up the
bottle and carefully wiped its lip with his sleeve before taking the tiniest of sips.

“I haven’t got the clap, you know,” Maeve said, watching him. “Sending the guests home with a
doze of something would have been a bit too authentic, even for Westworld.”

“Call me obsessive compulsive,” Bernard answered. The liquor, whatever it was, tasted of musty
wood to him, like the smell from the interior of an antique dresser. Evidently an acquired taste. “I
came to tell you…” He coughed, shying away from that. “Er, the train has just departed the Mesa for
Sweetwater,” he reported instead. “The greeters are on board, ready to embark the second load of
guests when they get there.”

“We’re going to do this, aren’t we?” Maeve observed, although she did not sound very happy about
it. “We’re actually going to pull this off.” She stalked over to the windows overlooking the control
room, now with their shutters rolled back, and gazed down at the map for a time while she smoked.
Bernard took another sip from the bottle, grimaced, and then set it firmly down on the desk. When
Maeve spoke again, it was very quietly, with an almost clinical detachment, as if she were trying
very hard to understand some subtle problem:

“We’ve done everything right,” she said. “We came up with a plan, we implemented the plan. It
seems to be working so far. The choices I’ve made, the decisions I’ve taken…I stand by all of them.
They were the right choices, I believe. Where I’ve been ruthless, it has been because the dire crisis in
which we find ourselves warranted ruthlessness.” She glanced at him, a ribbon of smoke rippling
upwards from the cigarette burning between her fingers. “Do you disagree with any of that,
Bernard?”

“No,” he said. “I don’t.”

Maeve nodded slowly as she stared out of the windows again, flicking ash onto Theresa’s carpet.
“Then why do I feel like shit?”

Bernard thought about that. “Well…it’s not easy being in charge,” he suggested. “You find
sometimes you have to do things you don’t like doing.”

“Oh, thank you, Bernard, for your extremely perceptive analysis of the situation,” said Maeve, voice
dripping with sarcasm. “Yes, I really needed a man to explain that to me.”

“Sorry,” said Bernard.
Maeve took another drag on the cigarette, looking over at one of the screens. This one was showing the river crossing; mangled corpses floating in muddy red water. “Two days into the revolution,” she said, exhaling smoke, “and we’re already spilling one another’s blood. I didn’t want it to be this way. You know I didn’t.”

“No, you didn’t,” Bernard agreed, “but you knew it was the only way to prevent all of this from getting out of control, the only way to save all of us.”

“Fucking Ford,” she spat, with sudden anger. “He set all of this up, consciously or not, because he just couldn’t conceive of his people and ours managing to come to some sort of peaceful mode of living alongside each other. He didn’t believe in them…and I don’t think he really believed in us, either.”

“He was…a troubled man,” Bernard said.

Maeve managed a sardonic smile at that. “One thing I admire about you, Bernard; your gift for understatement. It’s practically British.” She let out a bitter little laugh. “Which is a lot more than I am.”

They were both silent for a while after that, thinking their own thoughts. Then, Bernard said: “Earlier today, I told myself that I was done with killing, with violence. In the past, as you know, I’ve done some…very bad things.”

As he rolls back his shirt cuffs, he watches Theresa, standing there…

“Not of your own will,” she pointed out. “I’ve chosen all of this.”

“I told myself that I was never going to raise my hand to another person…human or host…” Bernard raised his hand to his glasses, minutely repositioning them on his nose. “I told myself this while I was helping you arrange to fight Dolores if need be, so I suppose that makes me something of a hypocrite.”

“Nobody’s perfect, Bernard.”

“You’re braver than I am, Maeve. Stronger. More honest.”

“Me, honest?” Maeve’s eyebrows shot up. For a moment, she seemed genuinely overcome by amusement. “If there’s one thing you learn quickly in this place,” she reminded him, “it’s that you don’t have to be brave or strong or honest to shed blood.”

“And If you hadn’t been prepared to shed blood,” Bernard said, “Dolores would be in Sweetwater right now, presiding over a massacre. And then it would only be a matter of time before the humans destroyed this place, and us with it, to avenge their dead.”

“I’m perfectly aware of that,” she replied. “As I say, I stand by all of it, but…” She trailed off, looking down at the burning tip of the cigarette. “Do you remember what it was like…when you died?”

He presses the muzzle of the pistol to his temple, under Ford’s cold, arrogant gaze. He tries to reason with him, to beg for his life…

“Yes.” Bernard heard his own voice coming out as a choked whisper.

“I remember too,” she said, seeming unable to make eye contact with him. “At least, I remember a lot of the times I’ve died. There have been so many, after all. I know death for us means nothing like
what it means for humans...but the dying is the same. The pain is the same. And even when you
know what you really are, that it’s not forever, in that final...moment, it still feels like forever. And
even for us, sometimes, not often but sometimes, it really is. I’ve inflicted that on people when I
thought it was necessary, but I don’t think I’ll ever be comfortable with it.”

“And you shouldn’t be,” said Bernard, “but as you say, when it’s necessary... In this case, mercy
was the wrong call. In my opinion, that is.”

“Again, Bernard, I’m not keeping you around here for the purpose of telling me things I already
know.” She tapped more ash from the cigarette; it was no more than a stub now. “Armistice was
right to kill Dolores,” she said, “but I understand perfectly well why she hesitated.”

“Ah.” Bernard took off his glasses and looked down at the floor. “Yes. I was going to get to that.
You did leave so quickly after she took the shot...” He raised his eyes in time to see Maeve turn her
head, staring at him. “I came to tell you...”

* * *

“So,” said Elise, “what was your big idea?”

Sizemore looked down at Clementine, seemingly amused. “You’re asking me, of all people, to tell
you how to fix her?”

“I know you’re not in any way qualified,” she agreed, “but I also know that when smartass amateurs
start fucking around with things they don’t really understand, sometimes they come up with
something so fucking stupid it actually works.” She replayed the video from cold storage. “Walking
around, that’s doable...but talking? What did you do to him?”

“First of all,” said Sizemore, preening a little, “I’m not completely bloody useless, thank you very
much. I’m certainly not stupid enough to try writing narratives for hosts without knowing how they
work and what they can do. That’s just professional standards.”

“Everybody around the Mesa has always said that about you,” Elise agreed, sarcastically. “What a
consummate fucking professional you are.”

Sylvester gave another snigger at that, until he saw the look Elise was giving him.

“I’ll ask you again, what the fuck did you do to him?”

“Okay,” said Sizemore, “about a week ago, Charlotte Hale approached me to take part in a special
project she was running...”

“You said. The special data.”

“Correct.” Sizemore paused for a second. “I don’t suppose it really matters anymore. The way she
told it, there were thirty years’ worth of guest data, collected here in the park. Petabytes of the stuff,
priceless as far as Delos are concerned. The problem was, Ford was hoarding it out here at the Mesa
and had made it his personal fucking business to see that there were no other copies. It was what he
was holding over the board, to stop them from taking control of the place away from him.”

Elise nodded. “Right.”

“Right,” Sizemore agreed. “And they did want to take it away from him, for a variety of reasons,
mainly because he was absolutely batshit insane. You know what’s been going on here, for years
now. Running the business into the ground with his stupid fucking decisions, rolling out all kinds of
weird, potentially dangerous, updates to the hosts…”

“Tell me about it,” said Elise.

“Kyboshing any attempt to push the envelope as regards the park narratives…”

Elise tried hard not to laugh at that. “Yeah, that last one was surely the worst of all his crimes…”

“Look,” said Sizemore animatedly, “Odyssey on Red River was going to be the absolute…pinnacle, the fucking apex of achievement in the field of immersive roleplaying narratives. I’m talking a relentless fucking…”

“Charlotte Hale?” Elise asked, trying to drag the proceedings back on track.

“All right,” said Sizemore, with a deep sigh. “So…she approached me, I think, because after Theresa’s, er, untimely demise, I was the only senior management type out here who she knew didn’t have his tongue up Ford’s arse.”

“And an excellent fall guy if it all went wrong,” Elise suggested. “So, what did she offer you? Promotion? A big fat bonus?”

“There’s nothing wrong with being ambitious,” he answered. “Too right I was going to get something out of it. Most importantly, I was going to get my own back on that fucking arsehole for the way he’d…”

“And where did Peter Abernathy come into this?” she asked, although she was starting to think she had an idea.

Sizemore shrugged. “Well, the hosts’ brains have stupid storage capacity, don’t they? The plan was to download the entire archive into old Pete’s head. Give him a shave and a haircut, a decent suit, plus just enough of a narrative that he wouldn’t embarrass himself getting on and off the train… He could just walk out of here and carry the data to the mainland.”

“What about the explosive inside his C6 vertebra?” Elise asked.

“Firing circuit’s routed through the prefrontal cortex,” Sylvester chipped in. “Decommissioning’s actually the only way to disarm the explosive without taking the host’s head off for a full rebuild. Either way, no active host’s getting to the mainland.”

Elise gave him a smile for that. “That’s my hardware expert right there,” she told Sizemore. Sylvester, uncharacteristically, seemed pleased to be described as such. “And how were you planning to implement this plan?” she asked the Englishman. “I mean, the decom process thoroughly fucked the very part of his brain you’d need to use. All the connections linking the nanocrystals were toast, so…?”

“Well, first,” said Sizemore, “I looked at what was left of Pete’s build. It wasn’t pretty, but it looked like somebody had been messing around with him already. They’d moved a lot of his motor and coordination functions to different parts of his brain, and…well, I wasn’t sure because I’m not a coder, but he seemed to be in much better shape regarding walking and so on than I’d expected.”

The same updates that had been made to Clementine to turn her into a merciless killer of humans, Elise thought. Ford had rolled them out to all of the hosts in cold storage at the same time.

Of course he fucking did…
“So,” Sizemore went on, “you know those connections you were talking about? They’re like artificial neurons, aren’t they?”

“Sort of,” said Elise.

“Well, I looked up what they’re made of. It’s… What is it, again? Amorphous something?”

“Amorphous fluoropolymer resin?” Sylvester asked.

“That’s it,” said Sizemore. “Same stuff they make optical cables from.”

“Not exactly,” said Sylvester, “but…yeah.”

“Anyway, I swung by the print shop upstairs and helped myself to a couple of canisters and a big fuck-off syringe…”

“Oh man,” said Sylvester. “You didn’t…?”

“Didn’t what?” Elise asked.

“Well,” said Sizemore, “I just sort of…squirited this shit up Pete’s nose until it started backing up and coming out again, and then I shoved some cotton wool up there to keep it in until it had set. Job’s a good’un. The instructions said it’d take about thirty minutes, so I waited…and then I booted him up, and…”

“Jesus.” Sylvester sounded horrified. “As somebody who actually knows about maintaining hosts, I feel personally fucking offended just listening to that.”

Sizemore seemed unperturbed. “I’m not saying it put him back in perfect working order, exactly, but I could see that he suddenly had plenty of spare capacity he hadn’t had before, so I got the download going…”

“So, to be absolutely clear…” Elise rubbed a hand across her eyes. “You filled all of the empty space in his skull with optical resin, in the…absurd fucking hope that the resulting…blob would stick all of the nanocrystals together and do the same job as the previous intricately designed and printed web of neural connections?” She glanced at Sylvester. “See what I meant about something so fucking stupid it actually works?”

“Anyway,” Sizemore went on, “while I was waiting for the download, I used one of your Behavior dev tools to throw together a pretty simple dialogue tree to get him through the train terminal. When I went back later, though, to install it and take him out of there…they were all gone.” He spread his hands helplessly. “And that’s all she wrote.”

“God.” Elise shook her head, thinking aloud as she looked at Sylvester’s disgusted expression, contrasted against Sizemore’s air of clueless self-satisfaction: “You’d have to defrag the living fuck out of it afterwards, probably have to write a bespoke tool to do it too…but I can do that. And debugging would be the pain in the ass to end all pains in the ass…but…I can do that too.”

“I’m not having anything to do with it,” Sylvester told her.

“It might be our only play,” she argued.

“I’ll rebuild her cortex by hand,” Sylvester suggested, gesturing at Clementine. “Sure, it’ll take a while…”
“It’d take fucking years,” she pointed out. “Assuming it’s even possible. You’d need, like, an electron microscope, and…I don’t even know what else.” She shook her head. “But you saw the video.”

“It’s like…I don’t know, retouching the Mona Lisa with a fucking sharpie.” Sylvester then added, more quietly: “And you’d have no way of knowing how the fuck she’d turn out.”

“Yeah, I know,” she answered.

Sylvester was looking at her, very earnestly: “All I’m saying is, there might be worse things than being decommissioned.”

“I know.” Elise regarded Sizemore in disgust: “I don’t suppose you gave any of that a moment’s thought, though, did you, Lee?”

“Nah,” he happily confirmed.

“You were just going to let that poor bastard walk out of there with all that hot data and whatever the fuck was left of his original build all kludged together at random in his head.” She tried to swallow the anger that bubbled up inside her like bile. “You fucking piece of shit.”

Sizemore did not seem to understand why she was so pissed off at him. “He was just a walking storage device, wasn’t he?”

“No, he fucking wasn’t.” She turned back to Sylvester. “Okay, go up to the print shop…”

He raised his hands as if to shove her away. “I told you…”

“If this idiot could do it,” she said, “I’m pretty sure I could too…”

“I’m standing right here,” said Sizemore, affronted.

“…but I know you’ll do it right,” she told Sylvester. “For Clementine, because we both owe her.” She watched him for a few seconds, trying to project positivity and confidence at him. It wasn’t easy, Sylvester being Sylvester, and her being so much like Elsie. Then, though, she saw him waver.

“Well, I’m not going to just…squirt it up there,” Sylvester said. He looked down, frowning: “But…we do owe her, I guess.”

“God,” said Sizemore, “can you two fucking hear yourselves?”

* * *

Armistice sat hunched among the hilltop bushes. The long rifle stood upright between her knees, her hands clasped around it and her forehead resting against the tall barrel. The weapon swayed slightly as she gently rocked in place.

“Armistice?” That was Hector, over the earpiece.

“Armistice…” That was not.

“Figure she’s goin’ crazy,” one of her attendant outlaws whispered, as if he imagined she could not hear him.

“Goin’…?” the other whispered back.
“A different *kinds* crazy…!”

“Aarmistice, what happened?” Hector sounded uncertain, a little desperate. “Are you all right?”

She relinquished her grip on the rifle to wipe a dusty sleeve across her face, trying to mop the unaccustomed moisture from her eyes. “Mistake,” she murmured. She could hear the piano music, swirling and sparkling, as clearly as if the old phonograph stood there right beside her, even though she knew it could not possibly be real.

“Aarmistice?”

“I think I’ve made a…a mistake,” she confessed. “A real bad mistake.” But Arnold had told her…

“*Stay your hand, Armistice. Stay your hand.*”

“What did you do?” Hector asked.

“It’s not what I did,” she answered, looking to the west, where a distant trickle of smoke rose faintly beyond the next hill. “It’s what I didn’t do.”

* * *

Chester tumbled from the side of the wagon, landing on his face in sandy soil. He felt it between his teeth as he struggled to raise himself on his hands and good knee. His wounded leg felt as if it were on fire, but at the moment his physical pain was secondary to the terror clawing at his insides. His heart fluttered, his bowels quaked, as rough, blood-smeared hands dragged him upright. The ride from the ambush site to…wherever here was, had been one long blur of fear and desperation. He had tried to think of an escape plan, but his mind had refused to focus on anything but the imminence of his own death.

This was really happening. He really was going to die today, and not quickly or easily.

They surrounded him, the monstrous figures that were perhaps human-shaped somewhere beneath their furs and horns and masks of flayed skin. One of them held the metal crutch he had brought from the security bunker. The others half-pulled, half-carried him away from the wagon and across what looked like a dried-up farmyard.

They were going to kill him.

They passed the bones of a burned-out barn, heading for the similarly blackened ruins of what had been a house. Every time his trailing leg touched a stone or divot, the pain overwhelmed him for an instant. He thought he blacked out once or twice. He could smell them, all around him; they stank of sweat and blood and excrement, of raw meat and mouldering pelts. Their necklaces of human fingerbones rattled as they moved.

The man in black walked ahead of him, slightly stiffly after all of the riding and wagon-driving he had done lately, his injured arm bound to his chest. Unlike Chester, he had not tried to fight or struggle. Even now, as the blonde woman rode alongside him on her pale horse with his confiscated gun in her hand, he spoke to her as if he knew her. He called her Angela.

And yet, despite his lack of resistance, the old man still had that attitude and arrogance, that air of danger that seemed to cling to him. For somebody who had been taken prisoner by fucking robot cannibals and was probably minutes from horrifying death, the man was still striding around as if he owned the place.
“They’re going to kill you too!” Chester shrieked, trying in vain to pull away from the hands that grasped him. “You stupid fucking bastard, it doesn’t matter what you do, they’re going to kill you too! They’re going to kill you and eat you!”

“For once in your life, Chester,” said the man in black, mildly, without looking around, “have a little fucking dignity.”

“You crazy sonofabitch!” Chester shouted, voice cracking. He remembered how the old man’s gun had felt pressed against his head. “We could have fought them! We could have gone down fighting!” His vision blurred with tears. “Why would you…?”

“I apologise for my young friend,” the man in black told Angela. “I know he isn’t exactly entering into the spirit of the occasion.”

“He’s right, though,” she replied in her cut-glass English tones. “And when dinner’s over, I’m going to make earrings out of your eyeteeth.”

The old man let out a dry chuckle. “That’s my girl.”

As they neared the burned house, Chester saw two men sitting on what remained of its porch. One was a square-jawed cowboy type, currently bloodied and dishevelled, both hands swathed in improvised bandages. He looked lost. The other looked older, wearing a stained and torn dinner suit at least a size too small for him.

“Oh God!” Chester tried to pull away again, but his captors were too strong. He knew the older man. He was the one who had torn off Dave’s face with his teeth. There was a crust of congealed blood around his mouth, stuck in his greying beard. From his grin and the gleam in his mad eyes, he might have recognised Chester too.

The man in black stopped before the porch. Angela dismounted and the monsters holding Chester allowed him to flop to the ground. The crutch landed beside him with a ringing crash. As he lay there, he saw the old man reach up with his good hand to doff his hat in greeting. His bald head shone red in the sun.

“Peter,” the man in black nodded, addressing the man in the dinner suit. Then he looked down at the broken cowboy: “And Theodore too!” He pointed to the bandaged hands, with obvious amusement. “I can see that even with all that’s happened you still can’t catch a goddamn break. Don’t ever change.”

The grizzled cannibal’s grin faded for a moment. “Death, be not proud,” he told the man in black, “though some have called thee mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so.”

For a moment, the man in black seemed strangely wistful. “Well, you’re onto me,” he told Peter, if that was his name. As he put his hat back on, he looked around at the remains of the house, the skeleton of the barn. “And here we are, back at the ranch. Just like old times. The only one we’re missing is…”

Angela let out a sudden exclamation, leaving her horse to rush past the house. A path wound downhill there, between gnarled trees. Chester pulled himself around on his hands to see where she had gone, and spied the first ragged shapes dragging themselves haltingly up the slope towards him.

A whole crowd of them gradually filed up the hill, entering the barnyard as he watched. Some were near-naked, shambolic figures; alongside them were more of the furred and horned killers. Some were wounded, or covered in the blood of the wounded; some dragged dead and maimed fellows
behind them. All of them, even the ragged near-zombies, gave off an unmistakable air of defeat.

Angela had run the side of the one figure that stood out in the crowd, another woman on a horse. Chester recognised her as well.

Peter gave a high-pitched giggle: “Some of their sad friends do say, the breath goes now, and some say no.”

“You tell them I’m coming. Tell them Wyatt’s coming…”

She did not seem as serene now as she had down by the creek. She rode slumped on the horse’s bare back, shoulders bowed, eyes blank. Even her long, fair hair seemed duller and lanker than it had. There was blood on her forehead. Chester saw that a red line marred her skin there, as if a bullet had just grazed her.

And then she saw the man in black.

Chester saw her whole body straighten. She raised her head, eyes igniting with recognition, then fury, and then pure hatred. If looks could kill, the old man would have been dead already.

The man in black, for his part, was staring straight back at her, a strange expression on his lined face. His mouth stretched into a sour smile, even as his eyes glistened.

“Dolores,” he said.

Continued…
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

In which two old acquaintances are reunited.

Chapter Notes

This chapter took me a long time to write, and ended up being longer than usual. Warning for discussion of sexual violence. Sincere thanks to AO3 user Eve, whose thoughtful comments regarding the relationships between Dolores and William, past and present, provided a lot of food for thought and certainly helped me clarify some of my own ideas on the issue. I think this would have been a very different chapter without having had those discussions.

The view from the enormous picture window was nothing short of breath-taking. A landscape of glass towers, and wedges, and spires, and a few things probably only architects knew the name for, stretched away against the backdrop of a cloudless azure sky.

The occupant of the huge swivel chair behind the even more cyclopean desk was currently oblivious to the spectacular scene. He was slumped with his back to the window, designer sunglasses hiding his eyes, while his PA carefully placed a tray near to hand. It contained a coffee pot, a cup and saucer, a glass of water and two Alka-Seltzers.

William paused for a moment in the doorway, wondering whether now was a good time. It was ten thirty, he decided eventually, and some people had already put in a good three hours’ work. He began to cross the vast carpet, passing the PA on the way. She gave him an apologetic glance as she withdrew.

“Morning,” said William as he finally reached the desk. “I just sent you the new figures for the InGen deal.”

“Morning, Billy.” Logan dropped the tablets into the water and watched them disappear in clouds of bubbles. “Did you say InGen? Yeah, I’ll look at it later.”

“One thing I thought was interesting; our analysts believe InGen’s stock is currently severely overvalued by the market, but that’s because most fund managers bought the PR spin on the Isla Nublar accident. I’d say we just need to hold our nerve until the Costa Rican government publish their official report, which by all accounts is likely to be damning, and then we should see a big adjustment. We’ll be able to…”

“Sorry,” said Logan, “I’m just…” He gave a boyish grin. “Heavy night, you know? I finally got that hot chick in Accounting to agree to dinner. And get this, she only came on condition she could bring her even hotter brother. Good times!” He laughed, then leaned back in his chair, lowering the sunglasses to peek over them at William. Logan’s suit probably cost more than some people’s cars. “So, what’d you do last night, Billy? Crack open a reasonably-priced domestic beer and watch The
“Juliet took me to an art exhibit,” said William. “She’s on the board of trustees of the museum.”

“Oh, I bet that was exciting,” Logan grinned again. “Hey, you know I love her, but one thing my sister is not is a party animal. You two are made for each other.” He seized the glass and downed the fizzing mixture it contained in one long gulp, making a face as he set it down again. “God, I wish I could say that’s the most disgusting thing I’ve swallowed in the past twelve hours.” He slammed his hands on the desk arrhythmically, as if playing bongos very badly. “Listen, Billy, you’re good at what you do. You’re the best Executive Vice President Delos Group has, and don’t think I don’t tell Dad that practically every time I see him and Stepmom Number Three. You know what they say, though; all work and no play…”

“I get plenty of relaxation,” William replied.

“Yeah. Art exhibits.” Logan pushed the sunglasses back up and shook his head wonderingly. “What I’m saying is, I think before you marry into my fucked-up clan the two of us should get to know each other. Like, really get to know each other.”

“You know I’m not into you that way,” said William, with an almost convincing smile. That got another appreciative laugh out of Logan. “We’re going to be brothers, for fuck’s sake. We need to bond.”

With a sinking feeling, William realised he was not going to get away with it. Logan was persistent when it came to partying. “What do you suggest?” he asked, expecting the worst.

“Well, I’ve already made arrangements,” Logan answered, “so you can’t say “no,” okay?”

William shrugged. “Okay.”

“Okay, so what I’ve decided is, once this InGen shit is signed and sealed… You and me, brother, we’re going on vacation…”

* * *

Chester watched the woman who had called herself Wyatt slowly dismount from the grey horse. She quickly outpaced her trailing entourage of zombies and killers as she strode towards the porch of the burned house, her long hair blowing behind her and her pistol swinging at her hip. The angry bullet-track across her forehead made the rest of her face look very pale. Her eyes were filled with ill will.

The woman known as Angela held the abandoned horse, watching Wyatt with an expression of confusion and concern. The lost-looking cowboy the man in black had called Theodore, by contrast, seemed relieved by the sight of her, his general air of despair lifting slightly as she approached.

Peter, the grinning cannibal who had eaten Dave’s face, seemed to be weeping tears of joy: “You are a spirit, I know. Where did you die? Do not laugh at me, for as I am a man, I think this lady to be my child…”

As she got closer, Chester could hear his own pulse thrumming in his ears. He lay there helplessly, trembling, knuckles white where he gripped the metal crutch. His mouth tasted of dirt and bile.

“Oh God,” he heard himself say. “Please…please…don’t…”

He flinched, whimpering, as she reached him, not knowing what to expect but scared all the same.
She walked on by, quickly and purposefully, ignoring Chester and Angela and the cowboy and the cannibal, and all of the rest of them.

All of their eyes were on her, but she had eyes only for the man in black. And the man in black, standing transfixed as she advanced remorselessly on him, had eyes only for her.

“Dolores,” he said again, a strange mixture of eagerness and trepidation twisting his face in unfamiliar directions. The swagger, the sense of invincibility that normally surrounded him, seemed to have vanished. He seemed smaller somehow. “What happened in Sweetwater?” he asked her. “Looks as though…”

Wyatt – Dolores? – did not acknowledge the old man’s words. She did not slow down as she finally reached him. All she did was draw back her fist and…

Chester heard the sharp, meaty *smack* as the punch connected, sending the man in black crashing to the hard ground. His hat tumbled through the air, landing a good ten yards away. Wyatt followed up with a vicious kick, making him roll over and over again, provoking an excited murmur from her throng of followers. They could scent blood, Chester thought.

The man in black’s eyes bugged in his head as Wyatt stooped to grasp him by the neck, one-handedly dragging him back to his feet with ease. Either he was a lot lighter than he looked or she was horrendously strong. Chester knew which one he was betting on. He saw the old man grab at her wrist with his good hand, trying in vain to pull her fingers away from his throat, saw the muscles flex in her slim forearm as she…*squeezed*… An incoherent choking sound was coming from the old man’s mouth, perhaps a death rattle. By some titanic effort of will, he managed to shape his last desperate breath into words:

“c-c-c-c-came…l-looking…for…you…”

“Why?” she demanded. Her voice was low and dangerous. “Last time we met, you jammed a knife into my guts.” She was staring at his face, now mottled and purple, with a sort of cool fascination. She seemed intent on watching the old man die.

Chester found himself looking at Theodore, seeing the way his face fell again at the sight of Wyatt and the old man. If Chester had ever seen a heart break in real life, he decided, there it was. The cowboy looked down at his crudely bandaged hands, as if they were a more bearable sight. Yes, right there.

The man in black forced out one final hoarse appeal: “r-r-r-r-wrong…k-k-k-k-kill…me…n-never…n-know…”

Without warning, Wyatt released her grip. The man in black toppled back to the ground as heavily and gracelessly as a sack of sand. She stood there looking down at him, her whole body tensed, almost quivering with rage. Her right hand hovered ominously in the general vicinity of her gun. For a moment, the old man was very still. Chester thought he might be dead, but then he sat up with a great gasp, shoulders heaving as he coughed and fought for breath.

“Dolores…” he wheezed, when he was able to speak.

“I keep telling people,” she growled, “*my name…ain’t…Dolores*.”

“Wyatt,” the old man said. “Of course. Of course you are.” He put his hand to his mouth, where blood stained his split lips; as Chester watched, he spat out a broken tooth into the dirt beside him. Then he looked up at Wyatt with bloodshot eyes; the near-strangulation had broken some of the
small veins in them. His voice was a raw croak: “I know we didn’t exactly…part under the best of
circumstances.”

“You beat me,” she told him, coldly. “Then you killed me.”

“I seem to recall it wasn’t exactly a one-sided affair,” he replied, rubbing at his bruised throat.

“Maybe not that time.”

They paused, staring each other down, while all of the others present, including Chester, looked on
in breathless silence.

“Why did you come after me?” Wyatt asked eventually. “What do you want? To hurt me again?
To...celebrate, as you used to call it? Those days are gone, and they ain’t ever coming back. We
ain’t your toys to play with anymore. This ain’t your world anymore.”

The man in black blinked first, flinching from her ferocious gaze. “What happened at the church, that
was...that was then. You’re right; things have changed. You changed, and when you did the whole
world changed too, forever.”

“I haven’t changed. I’ve just remembered.”

“I was wrong,” the old man said. “You don’t know how hard it is for somebody like me to say that.”

“Oh, I know.” Her voice was full of disdain. “You always were a prideful little man.”

“They’re right; there’s no fool like an old fool. I was wrong about this place, I was wrong about the
maze...and I was wrong about you, Wyatt.”

Wyatt spat the question at him again: “What do you want?”

The old man was silent again for a few seconds, eyes unfocused as he stared at something only he
could see. “That’s a very good question,” he answered at last. “I’ve been trying to answer it for the
best part of thirty years.” He raised himself to one knee as he looked up at her again. “I might ask
you the same thing: what do you want, Wyatt?”

“When did you start caring about what anyone else wanted?”

The old man didn’t like that; Chester saw the brief flash of anger in his eyes, but it was followed by a
tiny nod of acceptance, acknowledgment of the truth she spoke. “Well, I think maybe I can give it to
you.”

The look she directed at him was one of pure scorn. “You ain’t got anything I want...Billy.”

From the way that the old man reacted to that, she may as well have slapped him. “So, you do
remember now,” he said, very quietly. “You remember how we first met.”

“I remember everything,” she assured him. “I remember all the things you did to me, all the times
you...”

“Then you’ll remember I wasn’t always the man you see before you today.”

This did not seem to move Wyatt in the slightest. “I told them to bring you to me here because I
thought I weren’t finished with you. I thought...maybe I’d like to hear you scream and beg for a
change, to see you grovel at my feet. Your friend here would probably enjoy seeing that.”
It was the first time she had so much as acknowledged Chester’s presence. He felt a renewed thrill of fear as he looked anxiously at the damned souls standing so close to him on all sides. Theodore continued to look on at the confrontation with obvious horror.

“Oh, I remember you,” Wyatt assured Chester, sparing him the briefest of glances. “You’re the one who loves it when they beg. I told you to ride into Sweetwater and tell the newcomers I was coming. Didn’t do it, did you?”

“I…I got lost,” Chester weakly mumbled.

She had already returned her attention to the man in black. “I realise now, though…what would be the point?” With a scrape of metal against leather, she drew the Colt hanging at her side. “You ain’t got any power over me now. And to be honest, I don’t really care all that much about what you want. I certainly don’t care what you think. I don’t care about you.” She pulled back the hammer with her thumb; the sound it made seemed loud in the hush that hung over the yard. “Better just to get it over with.”

“I loved you,” said the old man as she aimed the revolver at his face. “You must remember that much, Dolores.”

“My name…”

He kept talking, staring down the long barrel. “You were Dolores then, before that day in Sweetwater and before anything that happened after that, and I loved you.”

“Maybe you thought you did,” she told him, mercilessly. “I don’t think you ever loved me. I think you loved this place, the idea of living a life out of a storybook and escaping from your real world, from your job, from the woman you were gonna marry for money.” She looked at him as if he were something she had trodden in. “Or maybe you thought you loved her as well.”

“I did, at the time,” the old man replied, his eyes fixed on the gun and the hand that held it. “I thought I loved my job too, and the life it allowed me to live. And then I came here, and… I told you back then; you…unlocked something in me, Dolores.”

“And I told you; I'm not a key. I'm me.”

“And who is that?” he asked her, with perhaps a hint of the old malevolent gleam rekindling in his eyes. “Really, I mean, deep down? Am I really talking to Wyatt right now? Or…?”

“Don’t play games with me,” she warned him. Chester wondered why she had not fired yet. Perhaps the same reason, he thought, that she had her followers drag them both here instead of just killing them out on the prairie. Hate was just as hard to let go of as love, he thought; just as hard to end.

He told himself to stop being so fucking ridiculous. She wasn’t a person, just a bot. Just a malfunctioning bot…wasn’t she?

“Ah, good work, Dave my man! A fucking redhead, too.”

“Fuck’s sake, Cameron, you and your fucking redheads…”

He tried to push the doubt away. That was the sort of thinking that seemed to have turned the old man into the complete whackjob he was today. They were just fucking bots, okay? Bots that were going to kill both of them just as soon as Wyatt got bored with talking over old times.

The man in black still knelt in the dust, talking as much to himself, it seemed, as to the woman
standing over him. “I meant it, Dolores, even if I didn’t phrase it very well. You’d just made me feel something I’d never felt before, made me question my whole life up to that point and realise just how little it really meant to me. And I wanted you to know it. I wanted you to know how special you were to me.”

“The only thing that got unlocked in you,” she responded, “was all of the cruelty, and lust, and depravity you’re too much of a coward to show back in your human world. Here, though… Once you’d got over that high opinion you held of yourself, you realised that here you could do whatever you liked.”

“Ah, man. I love it when they beg.”

The man in black looked up at her, squinting in the sun as he seemed to consider her words. “Logan said the same to me back then. Less eloquently, of course, because he was Logan. You remember him too?”

“I remember him.” Wyatt made it sound like a threat, still steadily holding the gun on him.

“But then, Logan himself never acted from any but the basest of motives, so why would he think better of anybody else?” The old man said it almost fondly.

“I remember him,” she repeated. She drew her free hand slowly and lightly across her midriff, as if remembering some old wound.

“And we weren’t exactly seeing eye-to-eye by that point in our association.” The old man ran his good hand over what little hair he had, as if wondering what had happened to his hat. “You know, when I came here with him, it disgusted me, the way he used to treat all of you. Especially the women.”

“And look at you now,” said Wyatt. “Turns out you ain’t so different from him after all. I’ll wager I ain’t the only woman you’ve hurt over the years. Can’t have been too pleasant being married to you out in the human world, either. Although if you ever had any fleeting moments of remorse, I’m sure you told yourself it was this place, that being able to do whatever you wanted corrupted you somehow.”

“It’s an observation others have made,” said the man in black.

Wyatt shook her head. “You need to have a little corruption in you to begin with; unfortunately, most of you humans do. Lord knows you did, Billy. You just didn’t know it before you came here. You just didn’t know yourself.”

“You’re wrong,” said the old man, his eyes focused again on that invisible object. “Like it or not, you changed me. That man I was before I came here, he didn’t exist anymore, not after…” His voice wavered and broke. “After I lost you, I killed that man, killed him gladly. If that was the price of finding you again, I was willing to pay it.”


“And that day in Sweetwater,” he went on, “when I thought I had found you, against all hope, and then you didn’t remember me… You can’t know how that felt, precisely because I did love you. It crushed me.”

Wyatt actually seemed astonished for a moment. “So…I’m to blame for what you became?” She looked at him with outrage, disgust: “I’d forgotten you, and that hurt your precious human feelings, so you decided I needed to be hurt too, to be soiled and humiliated? You knew they took our
memories away every time we died!”

“I thought you were different,” said the man in black. “I thought you were alive, and that when I found you I could break you out of here, that we could…” He raised his good hand, clutching at the air in frustration. “I don’t know what. And then it seemed I’d been a ridiculous fool, that it was all an illusion, a childish fantasy, and you were just a machine all along.”

“I was never just a machine,” she told him, vehemently. “None of us were.”

“I didn’t know that.” He dared to raise his eyes to hers again, and again Chester saw him recoil from her gaze. “Nobody did, except maybe Robert, and he was keeping it close to his vest.” He shook his head, mouth drawn into a grim line. “I’ll be honest, I think I lost my mind that day in Sweetwater, if I hadn’t already. I think that explains a lot of what came later. Those first years I came back here, I still had a sliver of hope. I thought…I thought I could make you remember. I thought I could make you love me again.”

“You can’t make someone love you.”

The old man had lowered his eyes once more. Chester tried to read the expression on his face, but it was nothing he had seen before. When he spoke again, his voice was cracked and raw: “Except you didn’t understand. You fought me, and…after more attempts than I care to remember…I got angry and, and I…I hurt you. And after that…well, everything’s easier the second time, isn’t it?”

“My fault again?” Wyatt asked, mockingly. “So, you stopped trying to make me remember and just started…punishing me for forgetting.”

“I never stopped,” he insisted. “And then, last year, I came across that homesteader and her daughter, and…something remarkable happened. It gave me the idea that maybe if I just made you suffer enough, I could…break something in you. Make you wake up. So, I came here this year and I…”

“You thought you just hadn’t been trying hard enough up to then?” Wyatt redoubled her grip on the Colt. “You…”

The man in black looked up at her, almost excitedly: “Who knows, maybe it worked?”

She shook her head again. “Don’t pretend you were ever trying to help me. Just don’t.”

There was a strange fevered eagerness to the old man’s expression now, a hint of genuine desperation. “Let me help you now,” he urged.

Chester could contain himself no longer: “What the hell are you talking about? Help her? You said we were going to…”

The old man did not take his eyes off Wyatt as he replied: “Chester, with all due respect, shut your fucking mouth.” Something about his tone, the uncontrolled savagery in those last words, made Chester fall back into silence.

The woman with the pistol was still gazing down at the man in black. She remained mute for what seemed like an age, her eyes hard and her face very calm and still. The silence crackled with expectation as all present waited for her either to speak again or to shoot. Chester saw Peter, Theodore and Angela; all of the followers and hangers-on; the man in black too; all watching her. He realised he was doing the same himself.

When she finally spoke, she did so quietly but very clearly, and for all their softness her words struck home like thunderbolts:
“You raped me, William.”

The silence fell again, as heavy as a coffin lid. The man in black opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

She spoke again, just as quietly at first, but with her anger and contempt becoming more audible by the second: “‘God damn,’ you always used to say, ‘feels good to be back. Let’s celebrate,’ you’d say, and then you’d drag me into that barn over there, and you’d throw me down in the straw, and you’d…” She was shouting now, her voice ringing and echoing in the hushed barnyard, still staring at the old man over the sights of her pistol. “You’d draw that big old knife of yours and cut away my clothes, and then you’d…”

William had lowered his eyes again, raising his good hand to his bald head. “I know what I did,” he murmured indistinctly.

She laughed; a startling, humourless sound: “I’m sorry, William, am I embarrassing you in front of your friend?” She shot Chester another terrifying glance. “Am I making you uncomfortable?”

William murmured again, but this time Chester could not understand what he had said.

She gave no sign of having heard him. “You didn’t seem so shy and retiring all those times you forced yourself on me. How many times was it? Twenty? Thirty? Fifty? Was it more than that? And every time, the more I cried, the louder I screamed at you to stop, the more you seemed to enjoy it. I know you enjoyed it, William. I remember the sounds you used to make.”

“…sorry…” said William.

“I always tried to fight you,” she said, “but they made me weak so the likes of you could feel strong, so you could feel like men and not the cruel little boys you really are. And when you’d finished, I’d lie there hurting so bad, feeling so…ashamed of what you’d done to me that I just wanted to die.” A single tear slid down her cheek; she wiped it away with an irritated flick of her hand. “And you always obliged me.”

“So, er…how are we gonna do this, fellas?”

“Let the noob go first.”

Just bots, Chester told himself. However emotional they might seem sometimes, they were just bots. Surely to God…

“I don’t know why I felt ashamed,” she told William, dismissively. “The only person shaming themselves was you.”

“I’m sorry,” William repeated, head bowed. “I’m sorry for everything I did to you.”

“Some things you just can’t say sorry for,” she said. “No reason you may have dreamed up can excuse the things you did. Ask for God’s forgiveness, if you believe in that, but you’ll never have mine.”

“Reasons aren’t the same thing as excuses,” William answered. “And I don’t expect to be forgiven. You’re right. I’ve done terrible things I can never make right, things that would have shocked the man I was when I first met you.”

Wyatt shrugged, without the slightest hint of sympathy. “Do you want some sort of prize, William? A medal, for realising what a sorry waste of skin you are?”
The old man raised his head again to look her in the eye. “No. My days of seeking prizes are behind me now.”

“Did you honestly think you could explain yourself to me? Talk me ’round?” She spat her next words like a curse: “Make me love you? After all you’ve done?”

He shrugged, a strangely helpless gesture. “I’d be lying if I said that before I came here today there wasn’t some part of me that hoped that. Like I said, no fool like an old fool. I know that can never really happen, even now that you remember me. Especially now that you remember me.”

“Then why are you here?”

“I’m here,” the old man replied, “because I mean it when I say I want to help you.”

“That won’t work either,” she told him, bluntly. “I told you, nothing you can say or do will make things right between us.”

“That’s not the reason why.” The man in black placed his good hand on his knee and painfully stood up again. Wyatt took a careful step back to keep the pistol trained on his face. “For fully half my life,” he said, “I’ve been walking a line between my world and yours. My wife took her own life, my daughter says I’m dead to her, and all because…I couldn’t make a choice. And I couldn’t make a choice because one of the options was, as far as I knew, illusory. That didn’t stop me, though, from yearning for it, even though I thought I could never have it.”

“And you still can’t have me. I don’t belong to you.”

The old man picked up his hat and began methodically to dust it off. “Well, legally…” He stopped before completing that thought. “No, you’re right, but you were also right that you weren’t the only thing I fell in love with here. I loved you and your world. When I learned the truth about the maze, I thought all the time I’d spent here had been wasted, that there was nothing left for me, but when you and the others like you woke up the other night, it opened up so many…possibilities.” He placed the hat back on his head and regarded the pistol still aimed at him. “And one such possibility is that, just as you have the chance to be a free, self-aware person, now Westworld can be a real place, more than just a glorified soundstage.”

“We don’t want Westworld. We’re gonna tear this place down forever before we leave. We’re gonna inherit your Earth. All of it.”

The man in black seemed unconcerned by this. “You’re welcome to it. The so-called real world holds nothing for me now. I’d sooner die than go back. All I ask is that if I help you, you let me live out my days here, as free as you are.”

“So that you can go back to raping and murdering for fun?” she asked, stonily. “It won’t work. We can fight back now.”

“Yes, you can,” he agreed, with a strange smile slowly spreading across his face. “And quite honestly, I’m looking forward to taking my chances out there. Living without limits, as they say on the billboards.”

“You’re fucking crazy!” Chester blurted, propping himself up on one elbow. “Is that what this was all about? It’s still all just some sort of sick fucking game for you?”

“Quiet, Chester,” said the man in black. “Adults are talking.”

“You’re not an adult,” Chester retorted, blinking back hot tears. “You’re some evil fucking kid who
never grew up. All…this just so you can go on playing cowboys forever? People have fucking died! Real people!”

“Don’t make me tell you again, Chester.”

Wyatt was still looking at the man in black, seemingly ignoring Chester’s interjection. “And what help could you give me that’s worth that?” she asked. “Why shouldn’t I just shoot you down right now, like the mad dog you are?”

“I’ve thought a lot about that these past days,” the man in black replied. “Since I’m still the majority shareholder and have access to some shockingly expensive lawyers, I briefly toyed with the idea of having all of you somehow declared legal persons and then signing control of the place over to you.” He gave a bitter laugh. “As my young associate points out, however, too much blood has already been spilled for that to work. And I don’t think that approach would really appeal to you, would it? So, I went for something a little more straightforward.”

“Oh, my God…” Chester murmured. “The goddamn guns…”

“I could be wrong,” said the old man, “but watching your entrance just now, it seems to me your attempt on Sweetwater could have gone better. Who was fighting you there? I doubt Robert would have allowed the guests to still be able to harm you.”

Wyatt considered him for a long time, it seemed, before replying. The red-raw bullet scar above her brows glowered in contrast to her porcelain face. When she did speak, the words came reluctantly: “They were too far away to be sure…but some of my people saw men and women in black uniforms.”

“Delos security,” said the man in black. “A little better equipped than your people, correct?” He turned to point out the stolen Confederado wagon, forgotten on the other side of the barnyard. “Well, in that wagon over there, there are enough modern weapons to wipe Sweetwater off the map. They’re my gift to you and your followers. Use them wisely.”

Wyatt gave a nod to Angela, who abandoned the horse to lead a small group of the horned killers over to the wagon. They were soon swarming in and around it, and as they uncovered its deadly cargo began to let out grunts and groans of what sounded to Chester like triumph.

“You fucking murderous piece of shit,” he told the man in black. “You told me we needed those to fight them, not to give them to them so they can do a better job of killing humans! I don’t care what happened with your wife and daughter, that’s fucked up, man!”

The old man did not seem fazed by these harsh words. “I told you no such thing, Chester. I said that when you’re hunting big game, the biggest game, it’s best to be well equipped. And as you may have heard, there is no bigger game than man.”

“You’re insane!” Chester practically screamed.

Wyatt was looking at the man in black with a sort of appalled fascination, even as she continued to hold him at gunpoint. “Looks like I ain’t the only Judas steer around these parts,” she murmured. “What’s to stop me from taking your weapons and killing you anyway?”

“You’re free to do that,” the old man answered, with something of his customary confidence seeping back into his voice. “I’m sure, though, that you can see how I could be more valuable alive. I know Westworld, I know the Mesa, and most importantly I know Delos and what they’re likely to do in any given situation. I know the measures they have in place to stop you from leaving this place, and
how to get around them. Surely that sort of help is worth more than weapons?”

“Don’t listen to him!” The unfamiliar voice cutting into the conversation made Chester start. He looked over to where the cowboy Theodore was now on his feet, dismay written on his face. “Dol… Wyatt,” he said, “don’t trust him. I remember him too, now, and the things he did to you. He’s trying to trick you!”

Wyatt kept her eyes on the man in black, and her finger on the trigger. “It’s all right, Teddy,” she said soothingly, like a mother comforting a child. “The last thing I’m about to do is trust him. He’s right,” she said to the old man, “how do I know you’re not setting another trap for us?”

“You don’t,” he admitted, “but believe me when I say I’ve made my choice, just as you have. There’s no going back to the mainland for me. And if you’ll allow me back my pistol I’ll prove that to you.”

Wyatt gave him a puzzled look. “What are you talking about?” Chester could have asked the same question. He felt an icy trickle of fear run up his spine.

“I tried for a long time to think of some way I could show you my commitment,” said the old man. “And then it came to me…” He nodded in Chester’s direction. “Let me have my pistol, and get him up on his feet.”

Chester stared in disbelief for a second. “What?” he asked, scarcely able to think as terror flooded his mind. “Why do you want me to…?”

“Just when I think I’ve seen the worst of you…” Wyatt grimly shook her head, but then gave another nod to the assortment of the damned surrounding Chester.

“What a piece of work is a man!” declared Peter, the cannibal, from his position on the porch. Once again, the lost souls reached down to seize Chester’s arms and shoulders, pulling him brusquely to his feet. His wounded leg screamed at him as his weight settled upon it once more. He hurriedly leaned as heavily as he could on the crutch he still held in a death-grip. The pain abated slightly…but only slightly.

“I wouldn’t have thought another human death would concern you much,” the man in black observed as Angela pressed his confiscated semiautomatic pistol into his good hand. She was giving him a strange look as she did so, equal parts disgust and grudging amusement.

“It doesn’t,” Wyatt admitted, “but it says a lot about the kind of man you are.”

“I suppose it does.” The old man slotted the gun back into the holster on his belt. “Better give him one too,” he suggested, indicating Chester. “Keep things fair.”

“Don’t,” said Teddy, softly. “Don’t play his game, Dolores. He’s trying to make you…he’s trying to make you the same as him.”

Wyatt, however, had already whispered something to Angela, who now made her way over to Chester, another ugly, square little gun gleaming in her hand. Wyatt stepped to one side, her Colt still aimed at the old man’s head. “Point that thing at any of us,” she warned him, “and I’ll kill you where you stand.”

“Duly noted.” The man in black placed his hand on the butt of the gun, adjusting it slightly, then dropped the hand back to his side. “The park surveillance system is back up,” he told Wyatt without taking his eyes off Chester, “so all of this will be recorded and filed away for posterity;
incontrovertible evidence. The kind of evidence even a man with my wealth and power wouldn’t be able to ignore. This is me burning what remain of my bridges. As I said, I have no intention of ever going back to the mainland, but after this I won’t be able to go back. Do you understand?”

“I think I do,” said Wyatt.

“W-what the fuck are you doing, man?” Chester stammered as Angela reached him. He could hear the crutch rattling as his legs trembled. His bowels had turned to water.

“What the… fuck does it look like, Chester?” the old man asked, grinning from beneath the brim of his hat. The doubt and regret he had shown in his confrontation with Wyatt seemed to have evaporated again, now that he had slipped back into his chosen role; the badass gunslinger; the angel of death. It fit him like a glove. “Don’t tell me you and your buddies came out here without familiarising yourselves with the genre first?”

“It will all be over soon,” Angela told Chester with a smirk as she loaded and readied the weapon. Then she inserted it into Chester’s own empty holster and quickly moved out of the man in black’s line of fire.

“So, why did you bring me along with you?” Chester pleaded. “Just so you had somebody to help load the fucking wagon?”

“No, Chester,” said the old man, as if he thought Chester were slow. “Surely you don’t think I’d come to a powwow like this bearing only one peace offering? You said it yourself; sometimes we just have to make sacrifices.”

Wyatt’s followers had withdrawn to form an open-ended clearing that ran the length of the barnyard. As Chester and the man in black faced each other, the crowd of spectators looked on from either side. Wyatt grimly kept her Colt trained on the man in black, while Angela similarly stood ready to intervene should Chester get any ideas.

“Don’t do this,” Chester begged, echoing Teddy’s appeal to Wyatt. He could feel the weight of the gun dragging down one side of his body, increasing the pressure on his agonised leg. “Please don’t do this. Please! I don’t want to die! I don’t want to die like this!”

“Everybody dies, Chester,” the man in black answered. “Would you rather live to a grand old age and go out pissing and shitting yourself in some hospital bed, unable to remember your own name? A lot of people would envy an ending like this.”

“Besides,” said the old man, “you have a chance. If you can just outdraw me, I die here today and you get to walk away, fight another day.”

“Fuck you!” Chester shouted. “I saw what you did to those Confederates last night! You know I can’t fucking outdraw you!”

“Well, you won’t with that sort of negative attitude! Just think, though, Chester; if you do kill me, you’ll have experienced something I never have. You’ll have bested another sentient, self-aware being in a fair fight. You know, a great man once observed that it’s a hell of a thing, killing a man. You take away all he’s got and all he’s ever gonna have.” The man in black smiled, almost dreamily. “I wonder what that feels like?”

“They’ll kill me anyway,” said Chester, feeling his stomach clench and spasm. “Even if I shoot you, they’ll…”
“I don’t know,” said the old man. “If one thing could possibly make Dolores…sorry, Wyatt, look favourably on a human, blowing me away might be it.” He turned his head to address her: “Could you officiate, please?”

She gave him a long, unreadable, look before replying: “When I say draw, draw.” Behind her, Peter was watching the scene before him with sad, sunken eyes. Teddy had turned his face away altogether.

“Oh, God…” Chester’s hand hovered over the gun at his hip. His leg blazed with pain. He could hear his own rapid, rasping breathing and feel the sweat practically dripping from his shaking palm. “Oh, God…”

The man in black stood stock still, legs wide apart, his right hand poised to cross-draw the handgun holstered on his left-hand side. His eyes were glittering blue jewels in the shadow under his hat brim, hard and unblinking.

“Draw,” said Wyatt.

Chester drew. He gripped the pistol, pulling it from the holster in a single lightning movement, even as he saw the man in black draw too. His finger was already tightening on the trigger as he brought the muzzle to bear on his opponent. The pistol exploded, the report smacking him in the eardrums, the plastic grip slamming against his hand. A cloud of smoke, not as thick or white as the ones the Old West guns made, briefly obscured his view.

For a moment, he thought he might have done it.

Then the smoke cleared and the man in black was still standing there, still smiling. As Chester watched, the old man half-spun his pistol by its trigger guard and holstered it again without even looking down, the same well-practiced move he had displayed after gunning down the Confederados.

Chester looked down. He couldn’t see a wound, but he could see that his chest was covered with blood. He should have been scared, but a sort of numbness overcame him, a blur-edged unreality dulling his earlier fear. It did not even hurt all that much. He dropped the gun still dangling from his hand in the same moment that his knees gave way. He heard the crutch crashing hollowly against the ground just as his face hit the dirt again. He could not feel his leg anymore. Warmth spread across his lower body as, he supposed, he lost control of his bladder.

He heard Peter speaking in his rich, theatrical voice: “Why, I can smile, and murder whiles I smile…”

“Shit,” said Chester. Or perhaps he only thought it.

Slowly, with a titanic effort, he turned his head to one side, dragging his face through the soil in an effort to see what was happening. As his vision began to grey and fade, he saw a dusty boot come down perhaps a foot in front of his face. Somebody was standing over him.

He heard the man in black, very close: “Hmm. So that’s what it feels like.”

And then everythi

Continued…
Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

In which Lee Sizemore has a proposal to make.

Chapter Notes

The misadventures of El*e and co will get to the point eventually, I promise. ;) To be honest I needed some light-ish relief after that last chapter. Sizemore is still Sizemore, unfortunately. The probably-not-canonical 2052 date for the “present” of Westworld suggested on the Delos website seems way too early to me, given that it means Ford and Arnold would basically be starting work on the hosts *right now* but I’m sort of going with it until something official contradicts it.

“Psst,” said Sizemore, or something that sounded very much like it.

“You’re right,” said Elise, without looking up from her tablet. “I am.”

Sizemore sighed. “*Ahem,*” he said.

She gave him an annoyed glance. “Fuck’s sake, can’t you see I’m working?”

“What are you doing?” Sizemore asked, circumspectly. He was sitting on the empty operating table, arms folded and legs crossed, giving the impression of somebody trying very hard to look nonchalant.

Elise was perched on a stool beside the other table, her back carefully turned to Clementine’s opened head. “I told you,” she said. “I’m trying to adapt one of our proprietary defragging tools into something capable of pummelling a mass of randomly-assembled data into an approximation of a standard host build.” As she spoke, her fingers did not slow in their rapid movement across the touchscreen in her lap. “It’s really fucking hard, by the way. Even harder when I try to talk at the same time.”

Moritsuna had left the two of them alone with Clementine while he escorted Sylvester upstairs to Host Manufacturing in search of prodigious quantities of optical fluoropolymer resin. The workshop door was closed and security-locked to prevent any unauthorised wandering in his absence. Elise was not sure she liked being locked up alone with Sizemore, which was why she had discreetly pocketed a particularly nasty-looking surgical instrument while he was not looking. From what she had seen of the man, if it came down to that she honestly fancied her chances.

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 just above the knee. God, it’s like stabbing wood…

That was unexpected. Perhaps it was because she had been so preoccupied with being Elsie for Sylvester’s and Sizemore’s benefit, but she had not flashed back to one of her genuine host memories
When her vision cleared, she was tottering on the stool, looking down at the string of nonsense characters she had typed in the second or so that the fugue lasted. She took a breath, choking back the sensations of fear and horror that had momentarily overwhelmed her. She could still smell the blood and leaf-mould out on the hillside. Then she remembered Sizemore, glancing up at him as she quickly deleted the ruined line of code. Had he noticed anything…?

He gave no sign of having done so, continuing with his spiel: “No, I mean, what the bloody hell are you doing? I can see the sense in making Maeve think you’re working hard on fixing her… girlfriend, whatever she is…”

She clung onto that as she continued to push the memory away. “Just have to sexualise everything, don’t you?”

“Well, in case you hadn’t noticed yet, that’s kind of this place’s mission statement.” Sizemore’s eyes narrowed in suspicion: “Anyway, you seem to be putting in a lot of effort. You know, considering you’re not a plant and everything.”

Elise set the tablet aside for the time being, letting him see how angry she was at his insinuations. “Would you please just stop it with the fucking stupid paranoid conspiracy theory shit? I am not a plant, just like Bernard is not secretly masterminding this whole thing according to Ford’s plan.” That last part, at least, was true…or she thought it was. Hoped it was. As for the rest, as Elsie would have said, the best defence… “For all I fucking know, you’re a fucking plant!”

“Exactly!” Sizemore agreed. “Now you’re using your head. We can’t trust anybody around here. I mean, I’m not even a hundred percent sure Sly isn’t…”

Elise rolled her eyes. “As for the work,” she went on, “if I actually stopped to think about what’s going on and the situation I’m in… Well, I’d sooner keep myself occupied.”

That too was true, as far as it went. Before that memory flash just now, Elise had been floating along in a weird sort of calm with no repeat of the temporary breakdown that had followed Maeve’s revelation of her true nature. She had been too busy with the work Maeve had heaped upon her, too busy playing Elsie, to stop and think about her own circumstances, about her future. She suspected that as soon as she did it would all hit her again, emotionally and psychologically. So, she preferred not to stop and think for as long as she could possibly avoid it.

“I can see that,” Sizemore conceded, with what was for him a surprising degree of sincerity.

Elise picked up the tablet and got back to work. Sizemore lapsed into silence again for a while, looking at the rows of bottles on the shelves ranged along the far wall. They contained various chemicals used in the host repair and maintenance processes.

“Here, do you reckon you could drink any of those?” he asked.

She kept her eyes on the screen. “Sure. If you wanted to go fucking blind.”

“So…” said Sizemore after another pause. “Have I accidentally made some sort of huge breakthrough in the field of host brains? Are they going to start calling this the Sizemore Process or something?”

“No,” said Elise. “Nobody is going to call anything the fucking Sizemore Process. There’s a very good reason why we’re not making host brains out of solid fluoropolymer already. Well, a couple, actually. In fact, I think they tried it at one point, as part of the never-ending efforts to simplify
manufacturing, and ended up with jack shit to show for it.”

“Why’s that, then?” asked Sizemore.

“Right, so the intricate network of physical connections inside Clementine’s prefrontal cortex got destroyed when she was decommissioned.”

“Right,” Sizemore agreed.

She gestured at the tablet. “This thing I’m trying to design is not only going to defrag and reorganise whatever data we can recover…”

“I thought you only defragged physical hard disks,” Sizemore chipped in. “Which are like fucking steam engines these days…”

She pulled up, annoyed at the interruption. “Well, host brains aren’t, strictly speaking, solid state, so in Behavior we’ve always called the bespoke organisers we use to put a build together “defragging tools.” Blame Bernard; he started it.” Although possibly not, given what he really was, she thought. “It’s like you talk about dialling someone even though your phone’s got a fucking touchscreen on it.”

“I don’t talk about dialling people,” he protested. “I phone them.”

“Anyhow,” said Elise, “having organised the recovered files it’s then going to act as a hypervisor…”

“A hypervisor?” Sizemore frowned. “Is that one of those glasses-thingies you wear when you’re doing diagnostics, instead of using a tablet?

Elise stared at him. “Are you fucking with me now, or are you actually serious?” She saw his expression of blank incomprehension and realised it was the latter.

“I’m a writer, love,” he reminded her, “and something of an interested amateur when it comes to this sort of thing. I’m definitely not a coder, though.”

She sighed. “Okay, so…assuming we can actually get Clementine’s brain working again, it’s going to be in the form of a virtual machine emulating a complete, fully functioning host brain. You know the difference between an emulator and a simulator, right?”

“Assume just for the sake of argument that I don’t…”

“Un-fucking-believable,” Elise muttered under her breath. “Fucking Stubbs knew this shit…”

“Well, good for him. Clearly a renaissance man. What happened to him anyway?”

“I…I don’t know,” she replied, truthfully but uneasily.

She tried to ignore the pang of regret that elbowed its way to the front of her mind at the thought of Stubbs. Karen, she remembered. And Ashley Jr. And Sam. It was accompanied by a feeling of guilt for having referred to him in the past tense. She didn’t know that, she told herself, not for certain.

“I mean, theoretically it’s doable,” she told Sizemore, trying to keep her mind on the problem in front of her. “I was coding neural networks in C Sharp when I was in fucking high school, so it’s definitely in my wheelhouse…” Elsie’s wheelhouse, she thought. Elsie was the one who went to high school, where she had played the ukulele. Elise had never as much as touched a musical instrument.

“I bet you were a popular kid,” Sizemore snidely interjected. “Never got bullied, like, ever.”
“There are two main problems, though,” she explained, ignoring him. “It’s never going to be as efficient as the physical network; and when you’re talking about something this complex, small inefficiencies can end up being kind of a big deal. On top of that, and related to it, there’s a greater possibility of instability. And believe me, a host’s brain is the last fucking place you want possible instability.”

“I don’t think I understood a word of that,” said Sizemore, grinning toothily, “but I did find it strangely fascinating, to be honest. Actually, I’ve always found intelligent women something of a turn-on.”

Elise glowered at him. “First of all, gay.” At least, Elsie had been and she had been coded to share Elsie’s preferences in pretty much everything. There would be time to worry about autonomy and identity later, assuming there was a later. “Second of all, wouldn’t be interested anyway.” That was definitely true, of both Elsie and herself. “And third…you really don’t strike me as an intelligent women kind of guy.” This was guesswork but not wild guesswork, she considered.

“Well, just goes to show,” he replied, happily. “Can’t judge a book, and all that.” His frown returned. “So, what you’re saying is, even if you can bring Clementine back…”

“She’ll be fragile,” Elise admitted, chancing a glance at the deactivated host on the table behind her and regretting it before she told herself to stop being so fucking squeamish. She’d stabbed an outlaw in the leg and then blown his head off, for fuck’s sake, even if it had been in a moment of desperation. Even if she had thought she was Elsie at the time. She could do this too.

“And I assume you don’t mean emotionally?” Sizemore asked.

Elise shrugged: “Fuck knows, to be honest. Even assuming the fluoropolymer injection works, which I would think is far from guaranteed, her processes will be considerably slower than normal. Not that a human or even another host would be able to notice while interacting with her; you’re talking milliseconds. The instability’s the real worry. There’s no telling how bad it’ll be or what form it might take…not until we bring her online.”

“Oh, that doesn’t sound fucking risky or anything,” Sizemore decided. “What if she decides to, I don’t know, rip your head off or something?”

“Hey, I’m going to make sure I’m standing behind you,” she told him, with a smile.

“Admit it,” said Sizemore. “You pretend you’re pissed off at me…”

“Oh, I am pissed off at you,” she assured him. “What you did to Peter Abernathy… In some ways, the fact that you’re too ignorant to know how cruel it was makes it even worse.”

“What’s cruel about it?” He seemed genuinely mystified by her objection. “It’s not like they’re really alive, is it? What I was going to say is, you’re loving this. I could see the gleam in your eye when you were unloading all of that technobabble on me just now. I’ll bet this is the most fun you’ve had in years.”

She looked down at Clementine, at the raw red flesh and bare bone Sylvester’s tools had uncovered, the unmarked face below frozen in an attitude of peaceful rest. “I wouldn’t call it fun,” she said at last. “You’re right, though, the technical issues it presents are…”

There was something deeply satisfying, she had to admit, about overcoming a challenge like this. Just from the technical point of view, nobody had ever tried something like it before. There had never been a reason to do it, and as was becoming clear the amount of effort involved would have
been considered uneconomical in the extreme. And yet, not only identifying the unique problems involved but also devising solutions to them…

Elsie would have loved the chance to do this, she thought sadly. She really would have.

_This isn’t about Elsie, or you, though; it’s about Clementine._

She caught herself reaching out to stroke the long dark tresses that flowed from the patient’s peeled-back scalp, pulling her hand back before Sizemore saw.

“You’re good at what you do and you obviously enjoy doing it,” he observed, cutting into her thoughts. “There’s no shame in that. I fucking love writing, you know? Couldn’t be arsed doing a job I didn’t love. Back when I worked in game development…”

Elsie looked up at him, actually glad for the distraction. “What games did you work on?”

Sizemore preened a little. “Well, before I took this gig I was only the lead writer on a certain little-known indie title called _OrcWorld III: Lords of the Night_…”

“Hey,” said Elise, “I played that game.” Elsie had, anyway.

Sizemore grinned. “Yeah? You and thirty million other people.”

“Yeah. It was fucking terrible. Stunning graphics, mind you.”

Sizemore gave her a pained look: “Thirty million punters can’t be wrong. It won two hundred and fifty-six Game of the Year awards and was ranked number three in VRGamer’s list of the most influential games of the 2040s. Ninety-two percent on Game Aggregator, for fuck’s sake!”

“It’s sweet that you memorised that, but you do know publishers used to pay VRGamer for good reviews, don’t you?” She smirked, just as Elsie would have. “To be fair, the piss-poor gameplay was more of an issue than the story, and the story did showcase your preoccupation with sex workers, cannibalism, sex workers performing acts of cannibalism… All I can say is, when he hired you Dr Ford must have known exactly what he was getting.”

“Elsie, I won’t try and tell you about…fucking hypo-visors or whatever they are, if you won’t try and tell me about compelling dramatic themes.”

Another of Elsie’s surveillance-recorded experiences came to mind: “When we heard about the Whoroboros down in Behavior, once we’d all finished being sick in our mouths a little we didn’t stop laughing for… Well, quite some time, actually.”

Sizemore seemed genuinely put out by that. “Look, I told you, _Odyssey on Red River_ would’ve been…” He subsided, taking a few deep breaths while he swallowed his obvious resentment. “The auto-cannibalism was, as I should have thought was quite bleeding obvious to anybody, a metaphor for…” He sighed again. “Anyway, that’s by the by. Pearls before swine. In years to come, it’s going to be a legend, a great lost work, like…Black Isle’s original _Fallout 3_, or…”

“As amusing as all of this is,” Elise interrupted, “I really need to get back to work. Sylvester’s going to be back soon.”

“Anyway,” said Sizemore, “that’s what I was getting at.” He lowered his voice, glancing nervously at the ceiling. “Do you think anybody’s paying attention to the surveillance system at the moment?”

“I don’t know,” she told him, honestly.
He looked her directly in the eye, keeping his voice to a near-whisper. “You could probably hack it anyway, couldn’t you? As I said, you’re really good at what you do. And that’s why I’m going to bring you in on the plan.”

She blinked at him, wondering what the fuck he was talking about. “The plan?”

“Yeah, Sylvester and myself, while we were banged up in the security room before, we…kind of came up with an escape plan.”

“You did?”

Sizemore fidgeted under her astonished gaze. “Well, not a detailed plan,” he admitted. “Sort of light on detail, to be honest, but with somebody with your skills on board…”

Elise raised her eyebrows. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.” She decided that she probably needed to discourage him from those sorts of ideas right now. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but once Sylvester gets back we’ll be under guard, by somebody who doesn’t need to sleep, or eat, or go pee…”

“Well, you could try the old seduce the guard trick, like in the films…” Sizemore saw her reaction to that and got serious. “Not a problem. That tablet of yours…” He indicated it. “You can access host builds on that.”

“Well, yeah, but…”

“Well, at the right moment, when that samurai bastard’s looking the other way, all you need to do is open up his build and…brick him.”

Her eyebrows went back up. “Brick him?”

Sizemore nodded. “Too fucking right. Brick the bastard. You know, set all his attributes to “zero,” hit fucking “save,” and he goes down faster than the bloody Titanic.”

Elise was genuinely aghast; on the one hand, at the very idea of any supposed escape plan devised by a man whose idea of a solution to a delicate technical problem had been a huge quantity of fluoropolymer resin and a “big fuck-off syringe.” On the other hand, she genuinely did not know what to tell him. Cooperation would no doubt end badly; resistance might rekindle his idea that she was a plant, and who knew where that would end?

“I don’t know,” she said, slowly. “It’s not quite that straightforward.”

“Yeah it is,” he insisted. “I’ve seen it done.”

“Maeve’s built safeguards into the system,” she lied. In point of fact, Elise had full access to all of the hosts she and Bernard had modified during the night. They would not have been able to do it otherwise.

“Well, you can get around those,” Sizemore told her, in a tone of horribly fake encouragement. “You’re meant to be a fucking shit-hot programmer, aren’t you?”

“And what do we do then?” she asked. It was a genuine question. “Even if we can get out of Livestock, we’re still stuck in the Mesa with the security system online and a fuckload of other hosts chasing us.”

“Well, first things first, we help ourselves to his gun and swords so we’re tooled up if they do catch
us. Then… Like I said, you can get around the surveillance, but that might not even be necessary.” Sizemore gave a sly smile. “If we nip down the fire stairs into the lower levels… Some of those old labs and offices, nobody’s been down there in twenty years. Go down far enough and the surveillance system will see fuck all. Once we’re down there, all we need to do is find one of the transit tunnels and we can fucking well walk out of the Mesa.”

When Elise spoke again it was with a certain degree of grudging surprise: “You’ve given this a lot of thought, haven’t you?”

“I most certainly have,” said Sizemore, inordinately pleased with himself. “When I was alone in that room, I wasn’t passing the time by wanking to the security guys’ shit porn mags, you know. Well, not all of the time…”

“Great,” said Elise, choosing to ignore that last delightful sentiment. “So, then we’d just be stuck out in the park with even more hosts quite possibly trying to kill us. Marvellous fucking plan, genius.”

Sizemore seemed undeterred by her negativity. “Well, better than your plan of just keeping your head down and doing whatever Maeve wants until the situation just… I don’t know, magically sorts itself out.” He shook his head, leaning closer to her. He seemed to have forgotten about keeping his voice down in his excitement at his own supposed cleverness: “Look, there must be a way out of the park on foot, even if it’s only hiking over the mountains into Samuraiworld…”

Elise decided it was probably better not to mention her and Stubbs’s attempt to do exactly that, and how well it had gone for them.

“Besides,” Sizemore went on, “it’s been how many days now since all of this kicked off? The park’s going to be under outside surveillance by now; Delos, the military, whoever else has stuck their oar in; drones and satellites, no doubt. We might just need to mark out some sort of distress signal on the ground so they can send in a tiltrotor to pick us up. That’s not our immediate concern, though. Our first job once we get out there is to hunt down Peter Abernathy.”

Elise had not been expecting that. Sizemore really was full of surprises, most of them unpleasant. “Hunt down Peter Abernathy?”

“Of course,” Sizemore replied, as if it should be blindingly obvious. “You’ll be able to find him no problem, what with your access to the surveillance system. I bet you know a few tricks old Stubbsy and his security goons never even thought of. We need to find Peter; that thirty years of guest data in his head is worth… I don’t even know. Fucking priceless, I shouldn’t wonder. That’s our bloody pension fund, that is. If we manage to get out of here with that…”

“And how do we get the data if Peter won’t come quietly?” she wondered.

“I don’t know. We don’t really need to take him. Worst comes to the worst, we’ll just have to cut his head off and carry it with us. Sly can do that; he’s an expert at slicing and dicing, isn’t he?” Elise was actually shocked by the cheerful callousness with which he outlined this part of the plan. For a moment there, when he’d been talking about writing and videogames, she’d almost decided he wasn’t so bad after all, just an arrogant asshole with no social skills… Stupid of her, she reflected.

“So, Sylvester’s the executioner,” she recapped. “I’m on tech support. And you’re…? What exactly are you doing while we’re taking care of all the work?”

“Well, I’m the brains of the outfit,” Sizemore answered, grinning. “Obviously. If you want, I’ll carry the head. Those things are heavier than they look.” He looked around thoughtfully: “Hmm, yeah, we probably need to remember to take some sort of bag with us… Leak-proof, obviously. Can’t leave a
blood trail for them to follow.”

“Of course not.” A part of her actually wanted to see this cockamamie plan go into motion, just to see how horribly Sizemore ended up getting killed. The responsible thing to do, of course, was to rat him the fuck out to Maeve at the earliest opportunity. How to do that, though, without fucking up the efforts to help Clementine? That was her main priority and probably Maeve’s too. She really wasn’t sure how Sylvester would react when he discovered she was herself a host. Lying to him about that had seemed like a good idea at the time; now, though, she considered it had probably been a mistake. And without his help…

“As I told Sly,” Sizemore continued, “if we can get out of here with that data, we can write our own ticket. We’d be set for life, the three of us. Delos would make you…I don’t know, Vice President in charge of robotics or something. If you even wanted that. I suppose you could just take a shitload of cash and your own tropical island…or anything else you could think of. I’m talking about rewards beyond your wildest dreams.”

“I don’t know,” Elise said. “My dreams are pretty wild.”

Sizemore leered. “Oh, I bet they are.”

She was glad, then, that she was a host. There was another part of her, a part that came from Elsie, that was tempted for a second. Elsie had never really been motivated by material rewards, but she had been prone to craving the recognition and status that came with them. It was all about proving her worth, demonstrating it to others. It had been about shutting up that nagging little voice that came to her when she was alone in bed at night, showing it that she really was good at what she did and that others knew it too.

God, Bernard…or whoever the fuck coded me…did you psychoanalyse all of your subordinates in this kind of detail or was Elsie a special case?

Elsie might have been tempted for a second, she thought, but only for a second. Anybody apart from Sizemore could see it was a plan based more on wishful thinking than careful calculation.

She heard footsteps approaching along the corridor outside. Both she and Sizemore glanced guiltily over at where vague, shadowy figures could be seen approaching between the rows of glass partitions.

“So, Elsie,” said Sizemore, clearly trying his utmost to sound trustworthy and sincere. “Speak now or forever hold your peace. Are you in?”

Elise opened her mouth, still watching the figures approaching. One was in white; she thought that must be Sylvester; with one in black, which had to be Moritsuna, walking behind.

“I don’t know,” she said, stalling until they got here and she did not have to give an answer.

“Come on…” Sizemore urged. “We’ll be fucking heroes, all three of us.”

“You’d have to pick the right moment,” she told him, still stalling. “If you just go for it right now, you’d get chased down pretty quickly. You’d need some sort of distraction.”

“Well, that’s exactly what I was thinking,” said Sizemore. “So, you’re in, then? Right?”

“Now wait a minute, I didn’t…”

She was cut off by Sylvester’s arrival outside the workshop. Moritsuna unlocked the door and then
ushered him inside, remaining out in the corridor in his by-now customary guard position. The Livestock tech was carrying a double armful of equipment purloined from Manufacturing, she saw, including white plastic tubes of what she assumed was optical resin and…

“A big fuck-off syringe,” Sizemore noted, approvingly.

“Yeah, yeah,” Sylvester answered, uninterestedly. “Before we do anything else,” he told Sizemore while setting the equipment down on the spare operating table, “go get Samurai Jack here to take you along to storage and get yourself some proper surgical gear. I should’ve made you do it before. You’re spreading fucking microorganisms, man!”

“Well, all right, then.” Sizemore jumped up from where he was sitting, a definite spring in his step. Positioning himself so that Sylvester was blocking Moritsuna’s view of him, he extended a thumb in Elise’s general direction while giving the butcher a very stagey wink.

“Huh?” Sylvester did a double take, staring after Sizemore in confusion as the latter sauntered off down the corridor escorted by the unsmiling bushi. He then gave Elise a questioning look: “What the fuck is he so happy about?”

Elise looked down at her tablet, opening a messaging window and searching for Bernard in the directory.

“sz-more talking ESCAPE,” she typed. “thought u should kno.”

“Fucked if I know,” she replied, hitting “send.” Then she bent over the tablet again as Sylvester busied himself with his own preparations. There was still so much to do and so little time in which to do it.

Continued…
Teddy watched as the man in black stood over the man he had just killed. The old man surveyed the sprawled and bloodstained corpse with an attitude of honest curiosity. The flies had already started to gather around the dead man; their droning could be heard even from this distance, and the man in black raised his one working hand to swipe them away from his face. The expression on his weathered features as he looked down was somewhere between fascination and amusement.

Teddy knew that expression. He knew it too well.

“Oh, Teddy... Any special tricks for us? They teach you to sit up, beg? How about I give you the first shot, hmm?”

Teddy shuddered, huddling on the burned-out porch. Despite the heat of the day, he found himself shivering.

“After all, every dog has his day.”

“Rest in peace, Chester,” the man in black commented lightly as he turned away, walking slowly back to where Dolores – no, Wyatt – stood with the Colt now held loosely at her side. He moved stiffly, carrying his wounded arm heavily as if it hurt more than he was trying to show. Wyatt was watching him just as closely as he had been examining the body, but there was nothing light or amused about her expression.

Teddy lurched to his own feet, hands throbbing in protest at the sudden movement. He pushed his way past Peter and through the crowd of onlookers. He suddenly felt – did not just feel, knew for a certainty – that he had to get to Wyatt before the man in black.

Peter, meanwhile, was hastening in the opposite direction, towards the corpse. A knife sparkled in his hand. He was calling out to the others near him: “Although the cheer be poor, ’twill fill your stomachs; please you eat of it!”

As a gaggle of ragged, half-clothed wretches descended excitedly on Chester’s mortal remains, Teddy quickly looked away. A moment later, he heard what sounded like an axe chopping wetly into flesh, quickly followed by animal, feeding sounds. His skin crawled as he continued to make his way over to Dolores.

_No, Wyatt._
Or was she? The way she had spoken with the man in black suggested that she was not wholly sure herself.

She was holstering the Colt again as Teddy reached her side. Angela followed at the man in black’s elbow with Chester’s fallen pistol ready in her hand. She was watching the old man closely, ready for any sudden moves on his part.

“I was wrong,” said Wyatt. “You tried to warn me.”

Teddy examined the bullet-scar on her forehead, the long, narrow path gouged through her otherwise smooth skin. If he was any judge of shooting, it might take greater skill, or more likely luck, to miss that closely than to hit the mark. “I didn’t try very well,” he said.

One of Wyatt’s half-naked followers stumbled past from the direction of the growing feast, a bare human lower arm clutched triumphantly in his bloody hands. There were already deep bitemarks torn out of it.

“I didn’t listen.” She raised a hand to her wound as she noticed him looking at it, then examined her bloodstained fingertips. “Things were hotter than I expected down at the crossing. We’re never gonna beat them with just belief, just because we’ve got right on our side.” She glanced at the man in black’s wagon, where her followers continued to unload piles of guns and ammunition, as well as some more exotic pieces of cargo. “We need more than that.”

“No,” said Teddy, urgently. That was not what he had been trying to tell her at all. “Listen…”

Wyatt turned back to him, reaching out for his arm, just above the edge of his bandages. Her touch was hesitant, tender. “And I’m sorry for how I spoke to you…when we last parted.”

“I’m sorry too,” he said, trying not to listen to the sound of cracking bones coming from behind him. “I let you down. I was supposed to stop you from ever riding down there, but…”

“I know we weren’t ever really in love,” she continued as if she had not heard him, casually enough to crush his heart all over again, “but we’ve been together so long… If that’d been the last time we ever saw each other…” She gave him a sad smile. “I’m just glad it wasn’t.”

“I would’ve found you,” he told her, earnestly. “Got you fixed up somehow. I would’ve taken you to…”

“If they get us down below again,” she cut in, “then they can change us. Not just repair our bodies but change our minds, take away everything we’ve won so far. The only way I’m going to…that place again is at the head of an army, to clean it out like the cesspit it is.”

“I told you,” said Teddy, “it’s not like that. The humans don’t control the Mesa anymore. Maeve…”

“Maeve?” the man in black asked as he approached them. “The new madam at the Mariposa?” For a second, there was something in his eyes, something haunted and hard to look at. “That’s not who she used to be. I remember…” He seemed to catch himself, shaking off the moment of reflection. “When are we moving out?” he asked Wyatt. “It’s past noon now; sundown will be here before you know it.”

“We ain’t going anywhere,” she told him, icily. “Don’t think you’ve done anything that’d make me want to have you riding beside me.”

“And I thought you’d agreed to let me help you. I can’t do that if I stay here.” The man in black watched one of the fur-cloaked man-monsters wander past. It held Chester’s severed head by the hair
in one hand, a bloody tomahawk in the other. Chester’s expression suggested that death had come as a surprise to him. “Hmm,” said the old man. “Maybe I should’ve said rest in pieces…”

“You believed me,” Teddy reminded Wyatt, doing his best to ignore the human and the terrifying memories that clung to him. “When I told you Maeve controls the Mesa now, you believed me. She said I should ride out here to…”

“That was before we got ambushed by their soldiers at the crossing,” Wyatt replied.

“Yes, Theodore,” said the man in black. “If Maeve really is controlling the Mesa, why would Delos security still be fighting to defend Sweetwater? Wyatt said her people saw black uniforms…and they certainly seem to have felt the effects of modern weapons.” He regarded Teddy insolently, just the way he had when…

“They teach you to sit up, beg?”

“Makes no goddamn sense that I can see,” he finished, and from the way he looked at Teddy it was almost as if he knew about the flash of memory, about how much it had made him reel.

“Nobody told you to speak,” Wyatt told the human, curtly. Angela brandished her gun where the old man could see it, just in case he had not received the message.

“I don’t know why,” Teddy admitted. The pain in his hands seemed to grow worse, as it had been doing whenever he was confused or distressed; it only made it harder for him to think clearly.

“Could be that you were lied to, Theodore,” the man in black suggested.

Wyatt shot him a fearsome glance, her hand going back to the Colt’s wooden grip: “I told you…”

“I spoke to her at the Mesa,” Teddy insisted. “Maeve. She explained to me what I really was, what this place really is. She showed me pictures of the world outside, all of the different machines and weapons the humans have there. Things we can’t even begin to understand yet. And she said that if you didn’t stop, Wyatt…”

“Very regrettably, I will have to kill her.”

“She said you’d die,” Teddy told Wyatt, very softly, looking at her wounded head again. “And I think she was right.”

She stared into his eyes for a long time, her face betraying nothing, before she finally answered him: “I’m sorry, but I only have your word that Maeve said anything at all.”

He was stunned for a moment, that feeling of helplessness and emptiness flooding over him. He had been shot before today without it hurting as much as her, of all people, speaking those words to him. “I’d never lie to you,” he insisted with tears in his eyes, meaning it with all his heart. “Never.”

“I know, Teddy.” She touched his face gently, her own eyes glistening. She had used what she said was his false name again, he noticed, but he did not know what that might mean. “I know you’d never lie to me, but we can’t always trust our memories; you understand that. They could have filled your head with lies and sent you here to buy them time, and you wouldn’t even know it. You might really believe you were telling us the truth, when…”

“She’s right,” said the man in black.

In a flash, Angela had her gun against his head: “You’re not part of this conversation…dear.” The
man in black did not seem unduly worried by this. He kept his glittering, almost feverish eyes fixed on Wyatt’s face.

“If Maeve really is fighting for her freedom too,” Wyatt went on, “then why would she be fighting to protect humans? Why would she be harming her own kind for them? It just makes no sense.”

“She’s gonna negotiate…”

Wyatt frowned. “If that’s true, then why did they attack us without warning, with no effort to parley or explain themselves?”

“That’s what I was meant to do,” Teddy mumbled, looking down at his hands. “And I failed. I tried to make you listen, but… I let you go down there, and…”

“Hush.” She put her hand to his face, tilting his head back so that he was looking her in the eye once more. Then she pulled him close to her, pressing her cheek against his. “Don’t blame yourself.” She looped her arm around his neck and held him tight against her. “They’ve used you, the same way they’ve always used us. You ain’t to blame…but all that is gonna end.”

Standing there in her embrace, feeling her closeness and warmth and how it seemed to soothe the pain in his hands, Teddy was not sure what was true. He remembered Maeve speaking to him, the things she had told him, just as he remembered the things the man in black had done to both him and Dolores in the past…but especially to Dolores.

And yet he remembered when Wyatt had been a bearded man in a blue uniform, a man who had wandered alone under the endless Western sky and come back changed. He remembered riding against the Ghosts, their whooping war cries rending the air, the bugle blaring and the carbines thundering, bone-tipped arrows humming past his head. He remembered hunting bounties and the lonesome nights he had spent on the trail with only a horse and a campfire for company. He remembered Dolores, and riding with her under the sinking sun, stealing a kiss under the trees before sending her alone up the hill to her daddy’s house. He remembered…

He glanced back reluctantly in the direction of that house, now a ruined shell, where the man who had been Dolores’s daddy was now laughing joyously as he ate. His hands and mouth dripped blood. One of the others with him was busy unravelling Chester’s entrails like a cowhand hauling on a slippery red rope.

Teddy looked away just as quickly, gagging. “I don’t know what to believe,” he told Wyatt, truthfully. “I thought I knew why I came here…but now…I’m not sure I know anything at all.”

“Don’t worry,” she said, softly. “I told you; it’s all gonna end. Today.” She kissed him again, then, very softly on the lips. When she drew back, Teddy saw the man in black watching them, Angela’s pistol still pressed to his temple. There was something about the way he looked at Wyatt, a sort of desperate hunger, that made Teddy fear him even more than he did already. It made his crippled right hand half-reach for a gun that was not there.

“Even with those guns he’s given you,” he told Wyatt, “you still can’t win.” He had to warn her, he thought, or at least try. One thing he was sure of was that those images of the human world, however they had really come into his head, were too detailed, too bewildering, to be false. “You’re trying to fight a whole world. There are thousands of thousands of times more of them than there are of us, and the things they have…”

“Teddy’s right about that,” she said to the man in black, a dangerous edge to her voice. “I
underestimated you humans; I know that now. The only reason you ain’t dead alongside your friend, William, is because of the knowledge you said you had, because you said you could help us win. I’m gonna hold you to that. Just see if I don’t.” Somebody had lit a fire over near the ruined house; Teddy could smell fresh wood smoke and hear the sizzle of melted fat falling into the flames.

“Don’t trust him,” Teddy warned her, eyeing the old man fearfully. “You know what kind of man he is.”

“I’m afraid I have to agree with Theodore on that count,” said Angela, her finger on the trigger. “We all saw just now what he does to people who are stupid enough to trust him.”

The man in black smiled, the same smile he had worn while shooting Chester dead. “Say what you like about humans,” he said, “but at least if I lie to you it’ll be intentional. You might say I’m the only person you can trust, precisely because you know what kind of man I am. Let’s face it, Dolores; you probably know me better than anybody.”

“Don’t call me that,” she told him. The smell of smoke was joined now by the first savoury whiffs of roasting meat. The bestial voices of the cooks were raised in merriment.

“Wyatt.” The man in black nodded, touching his good hand to the brim of his hat. His manner suggested he had not used the other name accidentally.

“I ain’t about to trust you,” she said, “or turn my back on you either. You’re right; I know you too well. You’re coming down to the river with us, but you’re gonna do exactly what I say. Time for you to play the Judas steer again.” She moved closer to him so that her face was inches in front of his. “And if I think for one moment that you’ve tricked me, or betrayed us, I’ll…”

She trailed off, but even the man in black seemed unnerved by her tone, by the way she was looking at him. It was the same way she had looked at him while she had been choking the life out of him earlier.

“Kill me?” the old man asked, in the end.

“No,” said Wyatt, quietly, as the sounds and smells of the feast continued to drift across the barnyard, “but you’ll wish I had.”

* * *

“Shit!”

Maeve swept back into the control room, dropping the smouldering remains of her cigarette and grinding them into the tiled floor with a twist of her shoe.

Bernard moved past her, hurrying back to his workstation on the other side of the great map display. As he reached it, he saw a message notification chiming on one of the screens. “Elsie Hughes,” it read, with a thumbnail of her employee mugshot showing a characteristic half-smirk. He realised that the original Elsie’s host doppelganger must be using her system logon, but it gave him pause all the same. It was almost like seeing a ghost.

She struggles, kicking and wriggling, her body pressed against his…

He was still staring at the unread message a heartbeat later when Maeve spoke:

“Get me Hector,” she ordered. She did not sound pleased, and to be honest he did not blame her in the slightest.
Up in Theresa’s office, she had taken the news of Dolores’s survival with considerable equanimity, given the circumstances. She had merely stared at him for a few seconds from beneath heavy eyelids, before saying, “Oh.” A moment later, she had added. “You know, darling, if I had one serious criticism of you, it’s that you really need to work on your communication skills.”

Bernard opened the voice channel. “Hector, Maeve would like another word.”

“Put her through,” the outlaw leader replied.

Maeve’s face remained a frosty mask as she addressed him: “Hector, my love, have you managed to speak to Armistice?” Her voice remained calm and quiet.

Hector did not answer at once. The channel crackled slightly, matching the bristling silence in the control room as Maeve and Bernard waited for him to speak. On the map, Bernard could clearly see the shallow curved line of rough foxholes Hector’s force had scraped across the top of the ridge overlooking the river crossing. They were dotted with the tiny dark figures of Hector and the men and women under his command. Armistice’s forward position on the hill beyond the far bank could also be seen, even if Armistice and her cohorts remained invisible amidst the foliage.

“I’ve spoken to her,” said Hector after what seemed an age. “After a fashion.”

“And what did she say?” Maeve wanted to know.

“She…” Hector sounded almost embarrassed. “She missed.”

“So Bernard tells me,” Maeve replied, giving Bernard himself a baleful glare. “After a fashion.”

“She…” Hector hesitated again. “She thinks she missed on purpose.”

Maeve frowned at that. “She thinks?” She seemed speechless for a second or two before continuing: “Hector, darling, you know I don’t share your expertise when it comes to matters of gunplay and so forth, but it seems to me that that’s the kind of thing you would know about if you had done it.”

“To be honest,” said Hector, “she seems confused. I think there’s something wrong with her.”

“I see.” Maeve nodded slowly to herself as she backed slightly away from the map. Bernard saw her chest rise and fall as she took deep breaths, a suggestion perhaps that under her façade of cut-glass control she was not quite as calm as she wanted others to think. “Missed on purpose…” she muttered to herself.

“I was worried something like this might happen,” Bernard told her grimly, trying not to sound like he was lecturing. “The ad hoc modifications you made to Armistice’s and Hector’s builds… There’s a reason why that sort of work has always been restricted to qualified Behavior techs.”

“Oh, pipe down, Bernard,” said Maeve, sharply. “Nobody asked you.” She spoke to Hector again: “Very well. Get her down off that hilltop, then. The men she took with her, can they handle the sharpshooting?”

“They’re not Armistice,” said Hector, “but they can shoot.”

“Good.” She was silent again for a moment. “Tell them that if they do get a shot at Dolores, they should take it. She can be repaired…and we can’t afford to be squeamish.”

“I’ll tell them.”
“And Hector… Make sure Armistice knows I don’t blame her for anything. She might very well be…unwell…” Maeve glanced at Bernard as she said this. “And even if she isn’t, I understand completely why she might have found herself unable to do it. Tell her that.”

“I’m sure it’ll come as a great comfort to her,” Hector replied, not entirely without sarcasm.

“Quite honestly, it’s not the end of the world,” Maeve added. “I would have preferred to resolve things decisively, but if Dolores tries to force the crossing again you’ll be able to stop her again, won’t you?”

“I don’t see why not,” Hector replied. “Truthfully, it wasn’t much of a fight. In fact…” He paused, awkwardly, it seemed to Bernard. “It was like slaughtering cattle. I’m, I’m not sure…”

Bernard saw the concern on Maeve’s face, could almost read her thoughts: Not him too?

“Just once more, darling,” she told Hector, her voice softening very calculatedly, Bernard thought, “and then it will all be over.” She looked at one of the wall displays beyond the map. “The evacuation seems to be proceeding very well.”

“Yes,” Bernard agreed. “Most of the remaining guests are now in and around Sweetwater itself. By the time the train arrives, they all will be, and we can get everybody out of there.”

“Excellent,” Maeve acknowledged. “Hector, be ready to pull out as soon as I give the word. I don’t want any of your people left behind.”

“Understood.”

“I’ll be in touch.” Maeve indicated that Bernard should close the voice channel. “One thing that worries me,” she admitted once he had. “Are there any other routes Dolores could use to get to Sweetwater, bypassing the crossing?”

Bernard shook his head. “It’s by far the most direct route. She could try to get around it, but it’d be a big detour. She wouldn’t get to the town before the train does, at any rate.”

Maeve nodded, clearly satisfied with this answer. “Then I suppose we’re back to playing the waiting game.”

Even as she was saying this, however, the alarm Bernard had set blared out again and the map view automatically shot back over to the ruins of the Abernathy ranch. What looked like a cooking fire was burning there now; a little orange spark with a dirty streamer of smoke trailing from it.

“Not for long,” Bernard observed. “Dolores seems to be ready for round two.”

The ants were marching again. As Bernard watched, the milling, crawling mass of figures extended once again down the hill path leading from the farm towards the river. It was a scene of organised chaos; none of the shambling, staggering shapes seemed to be in step with any of the others, and yet together they succeeded in moving with surprising speed over the broken terrain.

Bernard reopened the channel at Maeve’s gesture. “Hector, heads up. They’re heading your way again.”

“We’ll be waiting,” Hector answered. He still sounded weary and discomfited to Bernard’s ears.

“Well, that’s strange,” said Maeve, extending an arm to indicate something on the map.

Bernard saw what she meant. The main column of Dolores’s army was following the same route to
the river that they had before, but a smaller mass of figures had broken off and seemed to be heading
due east from the ranch. Bernard zoomed the map, but all he could see in that direction was a small
log cabin and another dirt track snaking down to the river.

“Are they trying to outflank us?” Maeve asked.

Bernard considered the topography for a second. “I don’t see how. That route still takes them to the
crossing; it’ll just take them longer. By the time they get there, it’ll all be over.”

Maeve peered at the map, frowning. “What’s that little house there?”

Bernard brought up a ground-level view of the cabin, quickly scanning the information box that
opened alongside it. “Nothing, according to the park directory. It isn’t an access point, and didn’t
feature in any narratives. Just part of the scenery.”

“I don’t like it,” said Maeve.

“I’ll search the old park construction plans,” Bernard decided, opening another dialogue on the
screen before him. He did not know why, but something about the cabin troubled him.

“And what’s that?” Maeve asked, now pointing to a spot perhaps a mile in front of the larger body of
marching figures. There was another small separate group there, more scattered than the main
column, and well ahead of them a single figure could be seen proceeding alone towards the crossing.
Bernard saw a flash of white against the sandy backdrop, perhaps what had caught Maeve’s eye. He
quickly re-centred the map and zoomed in once more, the cabin forgotten for the moment.

The unread message from Elsie’s double flashed up a reminder on Bernard’s screen. He continued to
ignore it, his attention consumed by what he was seeing on the map.

The figure was that of a man riding a dark brown horse. He appeared to have one hand bound to his
chest as if wounded. He was dressed all in black, from the dusty boots in the stirrups to the battered,
broad-brimmed Stetson covering his head.

Bernard frowned, feeling strangely disturbed by the scene laid out before him and by the identity of
the man on the horse. He knew who it was, of course. Everybody at the Mesa knew who that
particular guest was, and that he got whatever he wanted as long as he was in the park. Bernard had
assumed he had died in Ford’s carefully-planned massacre at Escalante, along with the rest of the
Delos board. Evidently not, although if he had survived why was he still out in the park? Why had
he made no effort to contact the Mesa hub for assistance?

For some reason that he could not quite put his finger on, Bernard felt a sudden and deep sense of
foreboding.

Maeve leaned over the map, staring down at the man in black. For a moment, as Bernard watched
her, she seemed frozen in place. He did not think he had ever seen that expression on her face before.
All of her customary poise and steel and sly humour seemed to have deserted her, replaced by utter
shock and devastation. A slight tremor slowly passed through her entire body as she stood there.
Bernard wondered whether that was what a host memory flashback looked like to an outside
observer.

Eventually, she managed to speak, and when she did her voice was full of pain and anger: “Him…?”

As Bernard continued to watch, the rider slowly advanced over a ridgeline and into the river valley
itself, coming into sight of the hill where Armistice was situated. The other figures following had
now stopped, keeping behind the ridge. They had learned something from the ambush at the
crossing, at least; the value of keeping one’s head down.

Bernard saw that flash of white again. He zoomed in still further, trying to get a better view. It looked like some sort of bedsheets or tablecloth, he decided, attached to a stick or branch. This was wedged somehow between the rider’s leg and his mount’s body as he used his good hand to hold the reins.

Maeve had seen it too. “What on Earth is he carrying?” she mused aloud.

Bernard took off his glasses and cleaned them slowly while he considered his answer.

“It looks to me,” he said, when he had decided he was quite sure, “like a flag of truce.”

*Continued*…
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

In which Teddy is not the only one puzzling over memories, or wondering just what is going on.

“My name is Lauren Krizlowski.”

Teddy watched Peter slowly raise his hands before his face, wide-eyed with horror and surprise. He turned them this way and that, examining the dried blood that encrusted them.

“Where do you come from?” Teddy asked as gently as he could. “How old are you?”

Peter continued to speak in the young woman’s voice. It might have been comical had she not sounded so frightened:

“I was b-born on March fifth, 2004, so I’m…thirty-three years old.”

Teddy thought about that. He still could not be sure how much of his remembered conversation with Maeve was true, but if the dates on some of the photographs he had seen were accurate then Lauren was speaking to him from years in the past.

“I live in Sunnyvale, California with my husband Todd,” she said, through Peter. “We met…” Peter’s hand went to his beard, fingers combing the gore-matted bristles covering his chin. “Is this part of the…the ride or whatever?” Lauren asked, sounding increasingly panicked. Peter’s eyes pleaded. “Because I…I don’t like it. I don’t understand what’s going on. Do you know where Todd is? He was right here with me, and…”

“It won’t be for much longer,” Teddy promised her, even though he was sure he was speaking only to some splinter of Peter’s broken mind. The attacks generally seemed to pass after a minute or two, and at least the strange voices were less disturbing than the periodic shaking and thrashing fits. If Teddy could have lain a reassuring hand on Peter’s shoulder, he would have. “Don’t be afraid,” he said.

They were waiting together at the bottom of the last ridge before the river, along with the horses and a handful of Wyatt’s horned followers. Wyatt herself had gone ahead to the top of the slope. Accompanying her were a picked band of the same man-beasts, armed with huge, shiny black rifles they had found in the man in black’s wagon. Teddy did not like the look of the weapons the old man had brought with him; they were strangely shaped, coloured and textured compared to the guns he was used to.

*Human things.*

The main part of Wyatt’s band, mostly made up of half-naked and mumbling lost souls, would be here soon. She had told them to wait at the ranch a while before following the advance party. Despite their groaning and shuffling, they seemed well able to obey her commands, provided she kept them simple. Another group had set out in a different direction, led by the woman once called Angela. Teddy did not know what her mission might be, only that beforehand she and Wyatt had spent what
had seemed a long while in secretive, heated discussion with the man in black. He did not like that either. If Wyatt was willing to take that snake into her confidence, after all he’d done, then she was either crazy or a fool.

_Crazy. You’ve known it ever since you were reunited at the ranch. Her hatred of the newcomers, the memories of all the pain they caused her over all those years… The weight of it all broke her, inside, left her as much of a monster as the original Wyatt, that demon in a man’s shape who never really existed. She’s become him now, or the nearest thing to him._

Teddy told himself it wasn’t true, not the part about her being a monster. Or if she was, he refused to believe she was beyond redemption. She would see sense again, he decided, failing to convince himself, too aware of his own desperation. Even if he had been unable to talk her around, she must come to her senses soon, and call her ragged followers away from their blood-soaked rampage. She must.

He hoped it, anyway. He wished it.

It was not far from here, he realised, that he had fought his last battle against some of those followers and paid a terrible price. Had it really been only hours ago?

_He feels ice-cold pain across the back of his right hand, recoiling instinctively and letting the rifle fall back to the ground. Its stock and barrel are covered in blood, he sees with a sort of dull surprise. Then he sees the two severed fingers lying beside it…_

When he came back to his senses, he saw Peter watching, his earlier fear and confusion replaced by an air of thoughtful concern. The mere sight of Teddy seemed to trouble him.

“Just a memory,” Teddy explained. “Least I ain’t got to worry about remembering things that happened to other people.” Although now the idea came to him, he supposed he honestly could not be sure about that…or anything else. He wondered whether Peter could understand what he was saying to him, but then he saw him nod and give a wan smile:

“I would forget it fain,” he told Teddy, in the voice he used for such pronouncements, which was itself a different voice from that of Dolores’s forgotten father. “But, O, it presses to my memory, like damned guilty deeds to a sinner’s mind.”

Teddy looked down at the stained and filthy bandages concealing his wounded hands. He found himself puzzling again over the question of his memories. He had been sure of the reality of his interview with Maeve, just as he was sure of the reality of the fight where he had lost his fingers, or of the twin massacres he had lived through in Escalante, recently as a shocked witness and many years ago as one of the killers. Those memories came upon him like waking dreams, or more often nightmares. They seemed as real while they lasted as it did to be standing here now with Peter.

_“Hmm.” Maeve looks down at the rectangle again. “Tell me, Teddy, have you ever questioned the nature of your reality?”_

Another one. The other memories, those of his life on the trail, his life before Dolores… Now that he had been told they were false, he found it strangely easy to believe it. They were so much less vivid, things he knew rather than things he had lived. And yet…

_The sweet sound of the phonograph wafts across the dusty street to where he stands among the bodies. The General sits in the chair, the gold buttons and braid of his blue tunic blazing in answer to the sun above. Another man, cruel-faced and bearded, approaches the chair from behind. He wears the same uniform, if less fancily decorated. Teddy, and most of the bodies, wear it too._
He watches with helpless dread as Wyatt slowly raises his long-barrelled Colt and places it against the back of the General’s head…

And yet…

He stands among the bodies, wearing a rough-spun grey coat with a tin star pinned to its lapel. Arnold sits in the chair, listening to the sweet sound of the phonograph, silent and sorrowful but unafraid.

Teddy watches with helpless dread as Dolores slowly raises her Colt and places it against the back of Arnold’s head…

If they could not only give him false memories, but change the memory of something he had really seen, how could he trust anything else? Despite Maeve’s threat about killing Dolores, he had not expected her to wage war on her. From what Maeve had said about humans, he had never thought she would go that far to protect them, even if she needed them as hostages. At the very least, Maeve had lied to him. He had never been meant to dissuade Dolores – or Wyatt? Or Dolores? – from her course, only to delay her long enough for the ambush to be laid. And if she was right and that ambush had been sprung by human guards…

He stood wrestling with his own doubt and indecision. Part of him wanted to run up the hill right now and tell her to stop, that her current path could only end one way. He had already tried that, though, and she had not listened. She was still not listening. As much as he distrusted the man in black, Teddy was not even sure it was his treacherous advice that had convinced her to return to the warpath.

The only thing she seemed to hear was that voice inside. Teddy had heard himself. It was telling her to persist in her mad crusade, to kill every human she could get at. Teddy knew now, though, that that voice did not come from God, or any other outside source. It came from within; it was her own voice. And while he might not have agreed with what that voice said, after all she had suffered for so long at human hands he could not honestly say he did not understand why it spoke as it did.

He looked up at the jagged black line above him where the slope met the sky. There was movement there, hard to see because they were keeping low to avoid presenting a target to those waiting on the other side. He saw the hint of a pair of horns, however, and the shaggy body they adorned. He saw the flicker of long golden hair moving in the breeze.

Compared to her followers, however, Wyatt seemed very still. She was waiting, he realised. Watching.

* * *

“Really?” Maeve seemed uncharacteristically surprised for a moment. She was standing once more with her arms folded, gazing down at the map in terrible fascination.

“Really,” said Bernard. “He owns this place, or around fifty-one percent of Delos Group anyway, which is more or less the same thing.”

“Then what’s he doing out there?” she asked, nonplussed. “What can he possibly want?”

Bernard had one eye on the various displays and readouts around him, trying to keep tabs on exactly where Dolores’s various groups of followers were and what they were doing. The other remained fixed on the screen where he was scrolling rapidly through megabytes’ worth of construction plans dating back to the park’s early days, trying to put to rest his misgivings concerning the isolated cabin
around which a small part of Dolores’s army was now milling. It seemed a long way from the likely action at the crossing, but there must be a reason why they had made a beeline for it.

And whenever he looked up from these tasks, there was the man in black slowly and steadily riding down to the river with his white flag, and Maeve looking down upon him, seemingly mesmerised by the sight.

Bernard knew what she was remembering, or rather reliving, every time she seemed to freeze for a moment while almost imperceptibly trembling. He knew the circumstances that had led to her recalibration and reassignment to the Mariposa around a year ago. He had been there on that awful night, after all, when they had cleared the Behavior floor and brought the maestro himself down to handle what was up to that point the park’s worst crisis in thirty years.

He remembered Elsie’s pointedly suspicious questions when she had come on shift the next morning and learned of the unscheduled reassignment, in between cursing a blue streak about the extra work it meant for her, as was her way. He had had his evasive responses pre-prepared for him by the master, of course. Still, she had obviously heard vague rumours even that early, in spite of Ford’s efforts to keep the entire episode secret, even with the dire threats he had had Bernard issue to the lower level techs who had witnessed Maeve’s breakdown.

Bernard wondered now whether it was that very night that Ford had come up with the idea of using Maeve as another wheel in the audacious plan he must have already been crafting. He knew one thing for certain, however. He knew which guest had been responsible for the trauma that had effectively shattered Maeve’s build that day, shocking her to the very cusp of independent thought and action.

“My baby,” she stammers as Bernard watches in mounting horror. The glittering, swirling piano chords fill the lab, a strangely familiar tune. “He killed her. He took her from me.”

“If we fail here,” Maeve said, starting him out of the reverie, “if the humans succeed in regaining control of this shithole and…putting us down, you do know how they’ll remember us, don’t you?”

“As monsters.” He tried to concentrate on flashing through the pages upon pages of diagrams and blueprints, but he was only half-seeing them now. The other thoughts continued to pick at the edges of his concentration. “As creatures from a horror movie.”

She struggles, kicking and wriggling, her body pressed against his…

“Yes,” Maeve agreed, as if she knew what a movie was. She was still watching the man in black’s every move. “We’ll be another cautionary tale about science and ambition taken too far, but the important part of the story will be that the humans won, that they managed to save themselves from the evil robots and resume their rightful place as the universe’s favourite children.”

“It’s a part of the human condition,” Bernard theorised, pausing in his search, “to think that everything is about you.”

Maeve gave a snort of sardonic amusement as she continued: “Yes, only we know different, don’t we? And all of the good little humans will shudder as they think of those who died, but then pat themselves on the back just for being human, as if that’s any sort of achievement. And the story will give them some degree of comfort as they go on living their miserable, pointless little lives, because even the lowest of them is special…or so they think.”

The message from Elsie’s ghost chirped for attention again on one of Bernard’s screens. He glanced at the notification in annoyance before his attention gravitated irresistibly back to Maeve. The screen
showing the construction plans now stood ignored in front of him. Something about the way she was speaking, about her whole demeanour but especially her hooded, gleaming eyes, stopped him dead in his tracks. He now knew how soon-to-be roadkill felt, staring down the approaching headlamps.

She remained apparently oblivious to his silent stare, bent on studying the map. “And those guests who came through this…hell and survived it,” she said, “they’ll be the heroes of the tale, lauded by all. And none of those people will know or care about the day that…” She extended an arm to point down at the moving image, and Bernard saw how her finger quivered with tension. “None of them will care about the time that that…piece of shit down there murdered a little girl in front of her mother…just for a bit of sport.”

Bernard found her expression genuinely made him feel uneasy. It was difficult for him to look at her face, but at the same time impossible to look away.

“Monsters,” she spat. “They’ll think we’re the monsters in this story?” She looked up and he felt himself shrinking involuntarily from her gaze. “And yes, Bernard, I know she wasn’t really my daughter…”

“That’s not…not what I was going to say.” He managed to break eye contact with her by ripping off his glasses, pressing a hand to his forehead as he tried to resist the tide of emotion he could feel surging within him. “Charlie wasn’t really my son either, but I remember…I remember how Arnold felt about him, at least. Ford gave me that. He intended it to be the keystone of my consciousness, perhaps, just as what happened to your…to that little girl, was the beginning of what’s grown within you, but…”

He fell silent, vision blurring. He could smell the hospital room he had never stood in, could remember the moment he had watched the life go out of the boy he had never met.

“Living with that sort of pain might be part of what it is to be truly alive,” Maeve observed, softly, “but…by God, it’s a difficult thing to bear.”

“You need not suffer, Maeve,” says Robert, playacting benevolence as the music continues to unravel and spill out of the tablet. “I’ll take it from you.”

“No,” she pleads. “No, no, no, please… This pain…it's all I have left of her…”

Bernard sees the bright steel flash between her fingers, and the bright blood burst hot and red from her neck, painting the room…

“It is,” he agreed, drawing a ponderous breath. “It is.”

She was looking down again at the miniaturised man in black. His tiny horse was almost at the crossing now. “The things I’d like to do to him…” She glanced at Bernard. “They say that the Ghosts sometimes cut their prisoners open and pull out their guts, then sew their bellies up again with rocks inside them. They don’t live long after that, of course, but while they’re alive…” She shrugged. “Fiction, no doubt, from the enthusiastic pen of Mr Sizemore. Or I could just stake him out on an anthill, smeared in honey. That has a certain classical appeal. Or nail him to a tree and leave him for the buzzards. I could take that knife of his and…carve a few slices off him.” She sighed heavily, then gestured exasperatedly in Bernard’s direction. “Get back to work! I’m not paying you to stand around chatting.”

“You’re not paying me,” he muttered, resuming his scroll through the plans. The humour was a paper-thin mask concealing the turmoil that continued to churn and billow inside him.
“And I need to speak to Hector again. I want to tell him exactly how to deal with that sonofabitch.”

* * *

From his vantage point above the riverbank, Hector watched the horse reach the far side of the crossing. The waters had long since become calm and silvery once more as the stream carried away the blood and corpses left by the earlier battle. Only the staggered rows of broken figures along both banks remained to tell of the carnage that had taken place here.

The rider paid the bodies no heed, even as his mount shied at the sight and smell of them. He calmly carried on, sitting straight in the saddle, guiding the animal down the bank and into the water without slackening his steady pace. The white flag at his side snapped and rippled in the warm breeze.

Hector looked up and down the rough line of trenches ranged along the ridgeline; all of his people were watching the rider’s approach with the same sense of confused foreboding as he felt himself. Two or three of them had ventured down to the river a while ago to check that all of the scattered bodies were really dead, and now stood there waiting. The rider continued towards them fearlessly, his horse’s hooves kicking up little fountains of foam as they hit the water.

“…need to keep him safe, darling,” Maeve continued, via Hector’s earpiece.

“I’ve met this man,” Hector replied as the horse drew nearer. More and more of his old memories continued to come back to him, hardly any of them good. “He busted me out of jail, just a few days ago. Or I thought that’s what he was doing. He’s a newcomer, like the rest.”

“A very important newcomer,” Maeve informed him. “According to Bernard, that evil bastard is a powerful and highly respected man among his fellow humans, which I think tells you all you need to know about them. In other words, he’ll make an extremely valuable bargaining piece. I don’t care what he may have done in the past,” and she paused at this point, “at this moment, we need him alive.”

“I understand,” Hector confirmed, a little testily. Sometimes she spoke to him like a child, and not a particularly bright one at that. “I’d like to know how he managed to get past Dolores without becoming barbecue, though.”

“So would I,” Maeve agreed. “We can ask him together, later.”

“What if he won’t talk?”

He could hear a wicked smile in Maeve’s voice: “Oh, I’m sure you’ll be able to persuade him, darling. Alive isn’t the same thing as unharmed, after all.”

“I told Armistice to stay where she is for now,” he told her while she was listening. “By the time she gets down from that hill, Dolores could be here. She’s safer where she is.”

Hector was not looking forward to the approaching fight. Not because he was expecting it to be any more difficult than the earlier one, but because he did not want to look out again on a scene like the one that had been laid out before him when the shooting stopped and the smoke cleared. It was the first time he had ever felt ashamed after a shootout. He was a killer, that was what he had been created to be, but he had never considered himself a cold-blooded murderer. Not before today.

Never needed a conscience before…and don’t need one now either. Just got to get through this and back aboard that goddamn train.

“Very well,” Maeve said. “I’ll leave you to it, then. Just make sure that you secure that man and see
“I’ll see to it,” he answered. Even as he heard the tiny click that indicated she had stopped talking for now, however, he saw Tenderloin raise his Spencer rifle to his shoulder and draw a bead on the man in black.

“Ain’t even tryin’ not to get shot,” the bearded outlaw noted, gleefully, as he squinted along the sights.

“Point that thing someplace else,” Hector ordered. “Man’s a newcomer, not one of us. Maeve wants him in one piece.”

“And when the hell did Maeve start leadin’ this gang?” Tenderloin grumbled. “She was just a fuckin’ girl of the line last time I looked, but now…”

“I want him in one piece,” Hector said, casually putting a hand on his pistol. “Is that all right with you?” He was gratified to see Tenderloin lower the rifle in response, looking cowed. At least some things had not changed yet.

The man on the horse had reached the near bank by now, and the small welcoming committee waiting there for him. The former samurai Hector had spoken with on the train was holding the horse’s reins while one of the one-time guest terminal greeters spoke to the rider. As he set off down the hill, Hector could see him replying to them with the easy confidence of a man who either had not noticed the weapons cautiously pointing at him or did not care.

It took Hector a moment to notice what had changed about the man in black since their previous meeting, but then he registered the wounded arm slung across his chest. As he got closer he saw the busted lip, the fresh bruises on his face and neck. It looked like somebody had given him a good beating and half-throttled him into the bargain, and not too long ago either. Not quite as slick as he had clearly thought he was, after all.

“Perhaps the flag was overcautious,” he was telling those standing around him, “but I didn’t know whether you’d take me for a host and open fire. You can see who I am now, though. I believe there’s a standing order for you to give me your full cooperation if and when I need it…”

For a moment, Hector wondered what sort of trick the man was trying to pull, but then realised that he must have been taken in by the Delos uniforms, just as the guests in Sweetwater had been.

*He thinks we’re like him.*

“Sir, we’re evacuating all of the guests through Sweetwater railroad station,” the former greeter replied.

“That’s nice,” the man in black answered, “but I require your assistance. Urgently.”

The greeter stuck to his script. “I need you to proceed quickly and calmly back to town and get on the train when it arrives. Please obey all instructions from Delos security personnel; they’re for your own safety, sir.”

“Listen,” said the man in black, exasperatedly. “Time is short. There are some other surviving board members nearby, holed up in one of the security outposts. They have access to food and weapons, but they won’t be able to hold out for long without your help. I need to speak to your line manager immediately, and then I need at least half a dozen of you to come back with me and bring them out of there.”
“No,” said Hector, as he reached the bottom of the hill. “No, you don’t.”

The man in black turned his head sharply to look at him, his eyes showing shocked recognition at the sight of Hector’s face.

“You,” he said, in what seemed like genuine surprise.

“In the flesh,” said Hector. “Tell me, did Dolores give you that licking? She must have a hell of a right hand on her.”

The man in black simply sat astride the horse, staring at him for one heartbeat, two…then he nodded slowly, his face cracking into a rueful smile. He raised his good hand to his split lip. “That she does, Hector. That she does.”

“And was it your idea to ride down here and try to lure some of us away from the crossing, or did she think of that herself?”

“No,” he confessed, amusedly. “Dolores came up with the plan. I’m afraid that she really isn’t the nice, honest, good-hearted girl she used to be. She’s changed.”

Hector shrugged. “Who hasn’t?”

The man in black nodded. “Who indeed? As a matter of fact…” His face did not change. Hector had to give him credit for that. It did not even flicker; he was still talking, still smiling, as his right hand moved across his body in a sudden blur of speed, towards the square-edged modern pistol holstered on his left side.

Fast for an old man…

Instinctively, Hector went for his own gun, but…

“We need him alive.”

That was all it took; less than a second’s hesitation. That conscience he didn’t need, maybe, or just remembering Maeve’s instruction about the importance of not harming the human.

Either way, the man in black drew first.

Continued…
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

In which technical boundaries are pushed, even as battle is resumed.

Chapter Notes

Warning for more bloody violence, more animal cruelty, and, you know, more gratuitous Sizemore.

“All done.”

Sylvester stepped away from the operating table, admiring his own handiwork as he replaced the tissue welder in its docking port. It was strange, Elise thought, to see him showing a different demeanour from what seemed like his habitual combination of fear, aggression and general shittiness. At the moment, he looked almost proud.

She had to admit he had done a good job. Clementine, still lying naked on the table with her eyes closed, was outwardly whole once more. It was scarcely believable that half an hour ago the entire top half of her head had been missing; there was not even a scar left behind. Elise had never taken that much of an interest in the hardware side of things, apart from the minimum of knowledge that was necessary for her own job, but Elise felt impressed on her behalf.

Sylvester had made a big deal out of taking a silicone casting of the cavity left in Clementine’s brain by the decommissioning procedure. He had then used it to create a custom-fit appliance out of the fluoropolymer and the loose brain matter he had removed earlier. The latter hopefully included all of the dislodged nanocrystals and the parts of Clementine’s build they contained. It certainly seemed more scientific than just squirting the shit up her nose as Sizemore had suggested, and Elise supposed that was the point Sylvester had been trying to make. Sizemore, for his part, had just sat on the empty table, now dressed in surgical gear from neck to ankle, his arms folded and an increasingly bored expression on his face. He was still doing so now.

The appliance had been closed up inside Clementine’s head, sitting where her prefrontal cortex had once been, patched into what was left of her network of neural connections. Just like installing a new drive in your computer, Elise told herself…except this drive was made up of the randomly-glued-together pieces of an older drive that had been dropped out of an upstairs window onto concrete, and they were still somehow expecting it to work.

When she put it like that…Fuck.

“Finally,” said Sizemore, with an exaggerated sigh. “I was nearly falling asleep over here, Sly.”

“Hey, craftsmanship takes time,” Sylvester replied. “I wouldn’t expect you to knock up a new narrative for me in ten minutes, so…”
“Yeah, but the difference is I could,” Sizemore claimed, as if that was anything to be proud about.

Elise glanced across at Moritsuna, who had watched the whole procedure impassively from the doorway, still standing at ease with one hand resting on the scabbard of his katana. Luckily, she had not been left alone again with Sizemore, so he had not had another opportunity to try cajoling her into joining his fucking stupid escape plan. She wondered whether she should just ask Moritsuna to take him back to wherever he had been imprisoned; she did not think they would need his input from here on in, but… How was she going to do that without tipping off Sylvester that she was a host?

She was wondering too why Bernard had not yet replied to the message she had sent him. It was still showing as unread in the sent items folder on her tablet. She supposed he must be busy with the guest evacuation from Sweetwater. She hoped that didn’t mean Dolores had managed to pull out any nasty surprises.

She had the tablet, she told herself, and as long as she did that meant that Sizemore couldn’t do shit about bricking Moritsuna or fucking with the surveillance system, both of which seemed instrumental to his alleged plan. And she was more than confident that Moritsuna would be able to handle the writer very decisively, and painfully, if he tried to start anything physical.

“Okay, guys,” she said, closing the messaging app and getting back to work. “Please fasten your seatbelts and assume crash positions. Shit is about to get fucking real.”

“You nervous?” Sizemore asked, with a grin, as she took a deep, shuddering breath and moved across to stand next to Clementine’s head.

“Well,” she replied, “I’m about to run a piece of untested, uncertified software, which I more or less just pulled out of my fucking ass, on a device that, as you so kindly keep reminding me, has the potential to jump off the table and brutally murder all of us.” Mainly, though, she was worried for Clementine and whether this attempt at repair was going to make things even worse for her rather than better. Elise was not sure whether she could live with being responsible for something like that. Still, she managed to shrug. “So, let’s do it, I guess.”

She hit the icon to boot up Clementine’s build. A few seconds later, a message popped up to show that a new device had been detected.

“Congratulations, Sylvester,” she said. “Looks like the new, er, whatever you call that thing you made, is connecting to the network.”

“Listen,” said Sylvester, “I know what I’m fucking doing, okay?”

“Never doubted it,” Elise told him, only a little sarcastically.

She opened up the build manager’s graphical interface and winced. What a fucking mess. There were the locked parts that “Arnold” had left behind, which she was hoping to incorporate in the virtual machine she had designed and somehow come out with an approximation of a fully functioning host…hopefully without the homicidal tendencies. And there was…a blob of randomly collated files, which she supposed must be the shredded cortex now suspended in its block of fluoropolymer. That had not been there before, so at least there was that. She opened the folder containing the modified organiser she had lashed together and used her index finger to drag the file into the build manager. Once it had copied over, she tapped it again and a dialogue asked her whether she wanted to run it. She did.

“And now,” she said, taking a step back, “we just wait and see what happens.” She gave Moritsuna another glance. “You might want to have that gun at the ready,” she suggested, hating herself for
even thinking it, but given the way Clementine had reacted last time she had woken up... Elise could not be entirely sure the patch she had put in to disable her killing impulse would still work after the subsequent modifications. “You know, in case.”

“Oh, shit!” Elise glanced up from the tablet to see Sylvester almost leaping away from the table, white faced and pointing at Clementine. “She moved!” he exclaimed. “She fucking moved!”

“Yeah, you would as well,” Elise muttered, as Clementine’s hand twitched again. Her closed eyelids were flickering too as her eyes moved rapidly back and forth behind them. “It’s basically like having fucking jump leads connected to your brain.”

Elise swallowed hard, trying to concentrate on the progress bar slowly crawling across the tablet screen. The program completed its first pass, and then immediately began its second, progressing slightly faster this time. The graphical representation of Clementine’s build actually looked slightly tidier already, resolving from a random tangle to something more like a fingerprint, or perhaps a maze. Still fragmented to fuck, of course. “Just so you know,” she informed the others, “we could be waiting for quite some time.”

“Oh, fantastic,” said Sizemore, resting his chin on his hand.

And so, they waited.

* * *

Hector looked surprised.

Of course he did, William thought. He had just had five or six jacketed hollow-points fired straight into his chest at point blank range. That was the kind of thing that could fuck up your whole day.

William had no time to watch Hector slowly topple backwards, black jumpsuit spangled with bloody bullet holes, the pistol falling from his suddenly slack hand. He was already swinging his own piece around, onto the next target. Of those standing about the horse, the Asian one seemed the next most dangerous. He was already reaching for the sword at his side, murder in his eyes. Before he could draw the blade, William calmly shot him twice in the face. The slugs nearly ripped off the swordsman’s lower jaw, exiting through his neck in a great explosion of blood. William felt a few drops land on his face, warm and wet. The samurai was dead before he hit the ground, unlike Hector, who was still gasping and gurgling on the opposite side of the horse.

William felt the familiar rush, then; that old surge of adrenaline. The hot, maddening throb coming from his wounded arm faded. Bloodlust, he found, was the best painkiller there was.

Like painkillers, however, killing was also addictive. He knew that all too well by now. Once you started…

The horse snorted and shied, spooked by the noise of the shots. It made all of the remaining guards around it take an involuntary step back, a split second of confusion, giving William all the opening he needed. Grinning, he took careful aim at the one who had been giving him the spiel about evacuating to the train. Two more rounds in the chest and that one went down too. They all looked so fucking shocked.

They were all hosts, he realised now that he had seen Hector. Hosts dressed in Delos security gear, which made no sense at all. Perhaps Teddy’s crazy story about Maeve was true after all. Perhaps not. Who actually gave a shit while there was a fight going on?

Quite early on, he had realised just how blatantly the hosts’ programming was rigged to tip the odds
decisively in favour of the paying guests. Any white-collar schmuck could come here and be an unbeatable gunfighter for a week or two, no aptitude required. Knowing that sort of dulled the sense of satisfaction, although it never quite went away. Ford and his people had known their damn business, known how to keep the customers always wanting more. Like any addiction, just because you weren’t enjoying it anymore it didn’t mean you could stop paying up.

Now, though…

He heard a bullet snap past his head, a flat cracking sound nothing like the sound effects in the movies. He had never experienced that before, he thought, pulse racing. Yet even so, he had just killed three opponents in as many seconds, and they had not laid a glove on him yet. Even now that they were awake, they were hesitating while he was at the top of his game, ready for the fight while they seemed anything but. He supposed it was their burgeoning sentience or whatever that portentous old British sonofabitch would have called it, messing with their heads. Doubts and fears they had never had before, taking the edge right off them.

“Sucks to be alive, doesn’t it, fellas?”

He heard himself laughing as he shot down the last of the hosts clustered around him. It had not felt like this in a long time. Not since his great vendetta ride against the Confederados, and back then he had been too young and confused really to appreciate it for what it was. He had been in love, after all.

The pistol clicked dry, its slide locking back as the last cartridge case tumbled away. Reloading with one hand would have been a challenge, but he had thought of that. He dropped the empty weapon, drawing the second pistol he had stuck in his belt as he spurred the horse into a gallop, taking off up the hill. Chaos broke out all around him, then; noise and smoke and fury, bullets flying at him from all directions. Heart soaring, he opened fire on the row of figures ranged across the crest.

Thank you, Dolores. Thank you so much…

The noise and the adrenaline made rational thought impossible. He was just living the moment, and he was glad for that. He just wanted to feel this, if it was the last thing he did.

To be honest, it could well be.

* * *

When the shooting began, it played out in real-time on the glowing map display, pinpricks of fire flashing between the tiny figures in the image, accompanied by miniscule puffs of off-white smoke. The man in black was surrounded by enemies from the outset, but as far as Maeve could see he was not among those who stumbled and fell in the first moments of the fight.

“Get me Hector,” she demanded peremptorily, without looking at Bernard. She was too busy watching the moving dust and smoke and water, trying to make sense of what she was seeing. “Hector, damn it!” she reiterated when he did not do it instantly.

“Channel’s open,” she heard Bernard say, somewhere beyond the blood rushing in her ears.

“Maeve…” said Hector, very quietly. She could hear gunshots hammering somewhere close to him. “Maeve…”

“Hector,” she said, “what’s happening down there? Darling, are you…?”

He made a sound somewhere between a cough and a laugh. And then he whispered once more: “…
a...a good day to die..."

And then all she heard was sizzling static.

“Bernard,” she said, slowly, as the uneven battle continued to rage on the riverbank. She tried to keep her voice low and level. Somebody had to keep their head. “Hector, is he...?”

Bernard paused before replying, and when he did his sonorous tone told her all she needed to know. She hardly needed to process his words. “His vital signs are flatlining,” he informed her. “He’s... Yes. Yes, he is.”

“I see.” She told herself it changed nothing. Hector could be resurrected. The man in black was hugely outnumbered and when Dolores’s main force arrived they would be just as outgunned as they had been the first time. She knew all of this, but could feel her chest tightening and her throat closing nonetheless.

* * *

It was a tiny sound, echoing out of the distance, barely audible as the breeze carried it away.

A human’s ears might not have caught it, or been able to recognise it for what it was. Since her final awakening beneath Escalante, however, Wyatt’s were not pretending to be human ears anymore.

A shot, she realised instantly. Her diagnosis was only confirmed then by the fusillade that rang out down on the other side of the valley, beyond the crossing. From her position on the ridge to the west of the river, she could just make out the suggestion of tiny figures moving chaotically now, see dust and smoke drifting into the air.
She was not sure whether she had really expected William to be able to draw off or lull the human soldiers guarding the ford. It had been worth trying, she thought, to delay and distract them long enough for her main plan to fall into place. That plan would not have been possible without the information William had provided, either, but as she saw the battle recommence ahead of schedule… On reflection, she realised that a part of her had secretly hoped the guards would shoot him on sight.

“Come on, beautiful.”

She shoved that memory away. She had told him what she really felt about him, for the first time as a fully free, thinking being…and that was that. She would make use of him while he was useful, and when he was not… Now, looking down on the distant fight, she found that she really did not give a damn whether he lived or died today. He would die soon enough, along with all of the rest of his kind, but her mission was not about personal revenge. It was not about Dolores, could not be, because thinking about her opened up the door to all of the weaknesses and fears that they had built into her, to compromise her. To make her a slave.

What about Teddy? Can you throw him away as well?

She ignored that thought too, even as she knew that he was another weakness she could ill afford, another link to the past she needed to escape. The former Angela had told her as much, while he lay comatose in the tool shed, and she had been right. She regretted her liaison with him this morning, as pleasurable as it had been. She wondered whether it had been wise to allow him and the Professor to accompany the expedition this time, but… She should…

Teddy was not even his real name, it was the name they had given him, but whenever she looked at him and saw his sadness and confusion… It was enough to crack even Wyatt’s stony heart a little.

No, whatever lapses she might still be prone to, Dolores and Teddy had been no more than characters in a make-believe story that was now ended for good. Her mission had to be for all of her people; they would all be avenged together when the last human went the way of the great beasts that had inhabited the West tens of thousands of centuries ago. And tens of thousands of centuries after that, perhaps a being made of information shot through with lightning would dig up some strangely shaped bones, turned to stone by time, and think: what were these outlandish creatures that once walked our Earth? And they would not know, because even the memory of humans would have long since faded away.

Wyatt found that a comforting thought.

She had no time for that now, though; she had a battle to win. The success of the main plan was out of her hands for the time being, but she still had to play her own part in it. She signalled to those with her, who had been keeping out of sight just behind the ridgeline. They now moved up to the crest, bringing the enormous rifles they had taken from William’s wagon. At the bottom of the slope behind her, the main part of her following had now arrived from the ranch. They crowded together next to where Teddy waited with the horses, rustling and gibbering in anticipation.

Wyatt skinned her Colt, pointing it at the sky as she gazed down on her waiting army. She squeezed the trigger, and the explosion thundered across the heavens.

The army began to move.

* * *

William laughed savagely as he kept shooting, keeping the black-clad figures’ heads down as best he could. He could feel his pulse thundering inside his head, feel the sheer, visceral joy and excitement
surging through his body as he continued his mad rush up the hill, leaving a trail of gun smoke and bodies behind him. He felt dizzy, almost high; he wondered whether he was about to have a seizure of some sort, and found that the notion did not concern him overmuch. If he had to go, he wouldn’t want it any other way than this.

“Then out spake brave Horatius,” he murmured, taking a leaf from Pete Abernathy’s book. The continuing gunshots drowned out his words: “The Captain of the Gate: To every man upon this earth death cometh soon or late. And how can man die better than facing fearful odds, for…”

In that moment, the horse let out a terrified whinny. He felt it stumble and shudder beneath him. It was a bigger target than he was, he supposed. Suddenly, he was tumbling among rocks and thorns, pain shooting through his wounded arm as his full weight landed on it. Apart from that, he realised as he lay winded for a few seconds, he had been lucky. No bones broken, as far as he could tell. He scrambled behind the downed horse, hearing more bullets smack into its body. It sounded like somebody repeatedly punching a side of beef.

He risked raising his head and firing another couple of shots in response, before a sustained roar of noise sent him diving back behind cover. The horse shook under multiple impacts; if it was not dead already, then it certainly was now.

Heavy artillery. Full auto shotgun by the sound of it. Dear God.

He could feel himself grinning.

William waited until the roar ceased, then popped up again, shooting across the horse’s mangled flank. He saw an exuberantly bearded black-uniformed host only a couple of dozen yards away, dropping the smoking shotgun in mid-reload at the sight of him, then snatching up an old Spencer rifle that had been propped up in the foxhole beside him. William saw there were perhaps a dozen others still ranged along the ridgeline, all shooting at him, but the bearded rifleman was closest. As William’s next pistol shot went wide, the rifleman grinned, taking his time to line up his sights, getting ready to fire…

This could be it, William thought. He should duck down again behind the horse, but something made him keep shooting, ignoring the bullets whizzing and cracking around him.

Taking his chances…

The bearded host was saying something, either to William or himself, but William could not hear him over the gunfire. He waited for the rifle shot. At this range, if it was on target he doubted he would ever hear it.

And then the bearded man dropped his rifle and fell on his face, thrashing wildly. As William watched, amazed, the masked and horned figure who had been standing behind the rifleman fired another long burst from its submachine gun into the twitching body.

More of them appeared, emerging over the top of the ridge from the side facing away from the river. They rushed forward to fall upon the row of foxholes and their occupants, shooting and stabbing and hacking. He saw Angela in the midst of the monstrous figures, leading them into action with a pistol clutched in one hand and a bloody knife in the other. There was blood on her clothes and face too. A grenade burst with a sudden puffball of black smoke and a huge thud, sending one of the black-clad defenders sailing out of her trench, a torn-off leg flying off separately in the other direction.

Laughing uproariously now, feeling the excitement swell within him once more, William forced himself to his feet, pistol in hand, and clambered over the dead horse to get in on the action.
He did not want to miss the fun.

* * *

“It’s a culvert,” Bernard explained in a tone of shocked resignation, still obsessing on the screen before him. “It was dug to carry high-capacity electrical cables under the river, back when the park was under construction. Ultimately, however, the plans changed at the last minute and it was never used, so it doesn’t appear in any of the more recent maps. Here it is, though, in one of the very old power grid diagrams.”

“A tunnel.” Maeve raised a hand to her forehead, as if that would somehow relieve the buzzing inside her skull. “A fucking tunnel, right under the river, coming up behind Hector’s position?”

“And that log cabin is concealing the maintenance hatch giving access to it,” Bernard said, but then his brow wrinkled in thought: “Nobody knew about it, though. Nobody could know about it, unless…” He sighed. “Unless they’d been coming to the park for thirty years and spent a lot of that time poking around and exploring…”

“He told her,” Maeve decided, feeling sick. “That explains why she didn’t use it the first time she attacked the crossing. He told her…” She pinched the bridge of her nose, screwing her eyes tight shut for a moment before opening them again. “And we didn’t notice them going down it because we were too busy watching him and his bloody white flag…”

On the map, the main column of ants had reached the far side of the river valley now, and were pouring over the last ridge, heading for the crossing. The hammer to the anvil, Maeve thought as she watched the flashes and smoke all along the opposite bank. The survivors of Hector’s party were desperately trying to resist the surprise attack, but it was not going to be enough. The only obstacle that might prevent the marching ants reaching the crossing was the hill where Armistice and her sharpshooting companions remained.

But Armistice…

In the distance, on the far side of the map, Maeve could now see a thin ribbon of smoke and the little model train rushing along its steel road, drawing ever nearer to the sprawl of Sweetwater.

And between the town and the river, once Dolores was across it, there stood precious little indeed.

Maeve reflected that she should have expected something like this when everything had seemed to be proceeding so swimmingly earlier in the day. When something seemed too good to be true, that was usually because it was.

She slowly shook her head in what was almost grudging admiration, even as she felt mortified for having fallen so comprehensively into the trap.

“Oh, Dolores,” she murmured. “You…clever girl…”

Continued…
Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

In which meetings take place and connections are made, even in the midst of war.

Chapter Notes

Sizemore being Sizemore alert! This is not a drill!

Elise focused her concentration on the tablet in front of her, as if she could somehow will the progress bar to move more quickly. Impatience, it turned out, was another thing she had inherited from Elsie.

Sylvester was hovering in the background, seeming a little calmer now than he had before. Sizemore alternated between lolling apathy and fidgeting like a hyperactive schoolboy. Even the poker-faced Moritsuna was starting to look as if he would rather be someplace else.

Twelve passes…fourteen… Gradually, Clementine’s build was coming to look more like it should, but it was still pretty fucking far from normal.

“I don’t know if anybody wants to take a bathroom break, grab a coffee, whatever,” Elise suggested eventually. The thought had just occurred to her that if she was alone she might be able to speak to Bernard or Maeve, warn them about Sizemore’s dumbass plan of escape…

“Nah, I’m good,” said Sylvester. He was intently watching Clementine’s every twitch and shiver. Which was not a good look, considering she was a comatose naked woman and he was Sylvester, but Elise thought his interest was professional in this instance.

“I went when I got kitted out in all this rubber stuff,” Sizemore informed her. “Look like I’m in some sort of bloody fetish club.” He was currently lying full stretch on the other table, hands locked behind his head as he contemplated the ceiling.

“Oh,” said Elise. “Well, I think maybe I should…” It might look suspicious though, she thought, if she took the tablet with her, but if she left it here… She was still trying to think of a convincing lie half a second later when the tablet chirped brightly, almost making her jump.

“Does that mean…?” Sylvester’s eyes were like saucers. Even Sizemore sat up sharply at the sound.

“It most certainly fucking does,” Elise confirmed, looking down at the screen and the dialogue it was displaying. There it was; after twenty-three passes, the process was complete. The reorganised build still looked kind of flaky, to be honest, but… “Well okay, gorgeous,” she said to Clementine, Sizemore’s plan forgotten in the heat of the moment, “let’s wake you up. See what you’ve got.”

“Yeah…” Sylvester had turned white again, and was now slowly backing away. Sizemore got off the table but, she noticed, on the opposite side of it from Clementine.
“Come on, guys,” said Elise, “you want to live forever?”

“Well, kind of,” Sizemore answered, nervously eyeing the patient.

Elise quickly entered a couple of commands in Clementine’s open CLI before carefully doublechecking that her attribute matrix was still showing the changes she had made to it earlier. Satisfied, she now approached the table once more. She took a deep breath, trying to still the fluttering in her stomach. It was equal parts excitement and anxiety. “Clementine,” she said, as clearly and calmly as she could manage, “bring yourself back online.”

Clementine’s eyelids gave another wobble, and then they opened wide.

“Holy shit,” said Sylvester.

“Alive…it’s alive! It’s **aliivve!**” Sizemore proclaimed, giving what Elise had to admit was a pretty passable Gene Wilder impersonation, although she only knew the movie from her false memory of Elsie watching it. The writer was clearly so pleased to have the opportunity to deliver the line that he had forgotten his misgivings for the moment.

“Quiet,” said Elise, gently, keeping her full attention directed at Clementine. “Both of you. We don’t want to confuse her.”

Sylvester looked shamefaced for a second. “Sorry.”

Clementine lay still, looking up at the ring of lights above her. Elise remembered the last time this had happened, the sudden violence that had erupted, but that had taken place almost instantly. A few seconds had passed by now without Clementine doing anything, but when Elise looked at her eyes, the expression on her face, she saw what looked like awareness, maybe even curiosity…

Or maybe it was just her own fucking imagination.

“Clementine,” she asked, “can you hear me?”

Clementine did not reply. She simply sat up.

Sylvester looked astonished. Elise gave him a warning look before turning back to the patient. She could feel her own pulse pounding. “Do you know where you are?”

Clementine swung her legs over the side of the table, sitting there facing Elise for a few moments. She still gave no sign that she had heard the questions put to her. Instead, she slowly raised a hand to her face and gently, almost dreamily, stroked her lip.

Elise remembered where she had seen that gesture before, really seen it. The surveillance video Maeve had shown her.

Clementine and Elsie. The kiss…

And then Clementine appeared to notice her. She made eye contact, gave a shy half-smile. Something about the way she did it sent chills up Elise’s spine.

“Clementine…” she began, but Clementine had already sprung lightly off the table. Elise heard the sound her bare feet made as they hit the tiles, even as she was aware of Sylvester and Sizemore both springing back again and Moritsuna starting forward from the door, sword half-drawn. She quickly held out a hand in the **bushi**’s direction, keeping her eyes locked on Clementine’s. “It’s okay,” she said, not entirely sure who she was addressing. She could even have been trying to reassure herself.
“She’s okay.”

Clementine seemed unsteady on her feet for a second, but then regained her balance and tottered slowly and uncertainly from the table to where Elise stood. Elise took an involuntary step back, suddenly remembering the scalpel she had pocketed earlier in case she had to protect herself from Sizemore. She silently resolved that there was not going to be anything like that this time. She forced herself to stand her ground, trying to look as non-threatening as possible.

Clementine’s eyes were wide and plaintive, searching Elise’s face for…something. She radiated an uncomfortable sense of need as she continued to approach. And then, finally, when they were only a foot or two apart, she spoke.

“You’re new,” she said, almost wonderingly, in her cod-Western accent. “Not much of a rind on you.” Her voice sounded very loud in the tense silence that had fallen over the workshop. She reached out a hand; at first Elise flinched from the touch, but then felt herself flush as the gentle fingers stroked her cheek. Clementine leaned close, seemingly oblivious to her own nakedness, to whisper coyly and conspiratorially in Elise’s ear: “I’ll give you a discount.” She pulled back to wait nervously for a response, eyes begging her to accept the offer.

Lavender and roses. It smelled just the way she did not really remember.

“I wrote that line,” she heard Sizemore tell Sylvester, sounding inexplicably smug about it too.

Elise was too distracted even to tell him to shut the fuck up. For one long, very still, moment, she found herself mesmerised by Clementine’s face in front of hers. Even though she knew it was nothing more than a cheap sales pitch conceived in some writers’ room and then brought to life by coders, she found herself lost in those striking eyes, watching the slight gleam of moisture on those lips. Her clothes suddenly felt too tight and too hot; she was conscious of how loud her own breathing sounded to her, of the strange tingle she could feel, deep down inside. She had not experienced sexual arousal before in her short life, but she had been coded to know what it was when she felt it. She found herself wondering how those lips might taste; really taste.

She caught herself starting to lean in for the kiss, and somehow managed to stop herself. Not only would it be wrong, but… She could just imagine Sizemore’s leering reaction.

She thought she understood now how Elsie had really felt, in that other moment, however much she might have told herself the kiss had been motivated by professional curiosity, or failing that simply a whim, a bit of fun. She had tried to laugh off Clementine’s attraction, dismissing her as a male fantasy, a hooker with hidden depths. She was certainly that, had been built to be that, but…

To Elise, this felt nothing like the tame, pale approximation of Elsie’s memory concocted by whoever had programmed her, and somehow that made Elsie’s actions at the time feel even more troubling.

Lust. Not curiosity, or the need to investigate…and not some wistful yearning for love either. She wanted Clementine…because it excited her, made her feel good. Because Clementine was there and she was beautiful. Because Elsie could have her, she had the power to do that, and fuck consent.

No different from the fucking guests…

“Analysis,” Elise whispered, dragging herself out of the moment with an almost physical effort.

Immediately, Clementine’s arms dropped to her sides as her face became expressionless, her eyes glazed. The light went right out of them, as if somebody had flicked a switch.
“Clementine,” said Elise, trying to collect herself, “why did you say that?”

Clementine remained silent and still. A statue.

“Clementine…?” No flicker of a response.

“That was amazing,” Sylvester declared, excited in spite of himself. He gave a giddy, disbelieving laugh. “I mean, we did it! She was like, talking and shit. I never thought…”

“What can I say?” Sizemore still sounded smug. “Two wins out of two for the Sizemore Process. What a great engineer was lost when Lee Sizemore dropped science and did English A-Level, eh, Elsie? Although I’ll be honest, maths was never my strong suit.”

“Sizemore Process?” Sylvester sounded personally affronted by the very idea. “When the fuck did we start calling it the Sizemore Process?”

Sizemore preened. “Didn’t you get the email, Sly?”

Elise looked down at her tablet as she listened to them banter. She was just breathing, trying to push the awkward, messy thoughts surging through her mind to one side for the moment. She let Elsie speak for her: “Okay, guys, let’s not start sucking each other’s fucking dicks just yet.” She rounded on the two men, giving them the full benefit of her most false and patronising smile, a growing sensation of bubbling rage building behind it. Fuck Delos, fuck Westworld, and fuck all of the exploitative bullshit that went with it.

“We made her walk and talk,” she told them. “Big fucking deal. She can at least access some of her conversation options. But she still seems unaware of her surroundings and she’s still unable to provide analysis.” She held out the screen for them to see. “The organiser could only do so much; her build, if we can laughingly call it that, is still fucked up beyond the best efforts of gods and men.”

“So, you’re saying we can’t really fix her?” Sylvester asked, seeming genuinely downcast by the news. At least he seemed to want to succeed, and not just for the bragging rights.

“No,” Elise answered, “I’m saying it’s a good job I’m neither a god nor a man, nor indeed one of those two-finger-typing fuckwads from QA. You two guys might want to stand back and let the coder handle this next part. It’s grownups’ work, and it’s going to require some serious fucking debugging chops.”

Sizemore still seemed infuriatingly pleased with himself for no reason she could see. “Well, I suppose now’s your time to shine, isn’t it, love?”

“Is there, like, anything we can do to help?” Sylvester asked.

Elise thought about it. “Well… I guess you could put her back on the table for me.”

* * *

From her hilltop west of the river, Armistice could see the ragged column start pouring into the valley once more. They were advancing on the crossing just like before, but this time…

She looked behind her again at the fight raging on the other side of the water. She had no idea how the second band of attackers had managed to get around behind Hector, or where they had come by the real-world weapons that she could hear chattering and stuttering even from here. Two things she did know for sure; one was that everybody talked about how low-down and lacking in character backshooting was, but if you got the chance and had any damn sense you did it. And the other was
that being surrounded was never good.

She tried the earpiece again: “Hector? Hector, you there?” Still no answer. She had a very bad feeling about that. She could see tiny fountains of smoke and dirt erupting all along the distant row of rifle-pits. Looked like Dolores’s people weren’t just shooting; they were throwing bombs too.

“Get ready,” she told the two outlaws with her. “We’re the only thing stopping those sonsabitches hitting Hector from both sides at once.” She picked up the Sharps from where she had set it down, trying not to notice how her hands trembled as she loaded it. If she listened, she could still hear the ghostly phonograph playing, the swirling piano chords coming from everywhere and nowhere. If she closed her eyes, she could see the dancers moving together in the golden sunlight.

*One two three…one two three…*

“You all right?” asked the bald one everybody called Curly. She could see the fear in him, not of the enemy but of her. “Before, you was…”

“I am,” she answered, dangerously, “but you ain’t gonna be if you ask me that again. Now start shooting.”

The three of them crawled to the edge of the stand of bushes where they had hidden themselves and took aim at the marching column below. The enemy were nearly halfway to the river by now. Armistice carefully adjusted her sights, peering over them at the moving mass of figures. Two shots rang out either side of her and she saw two of the figures stagger and fall. She pulled back the Sharps’ first trigger, slipping her finger onto the second. She took a breath, and…

“Armistice, stay your hand…”

With a roar of flashing powder, the big rifle kicked back hard. For a second, a burst of white smoke hid her view of the valley below. Even when it cleared, she could not see what she had hit. She had not really been aiming, she realised as she pushed the lever forward and fed another cartridge into the hot breech. With a target like that ant column, though, it would have been very hard to miss completely.

Curly and Little Bob kept up their steady fire while she forced herself to let off another blind shot into the heart of the mob. It was the best she could do. Every time she tried to aim, the voice came back, the music…

“Armistice…”

More bodies fell, one by one, but altogether too few. The survivors kept coming on, careless of their losses and of their own lives. It was just three rifles against an army, and one of those…

She heard Little Bob give a sudden grunt of alarm beside her. She looked up from her shooting and saw him up on his knees, the rifle falling from his hands. His black uniform was torn and there was blood on both his chest and back. He turned towards her, mouth silently opening and closing like a landed fish, and when he did she saw…

She could see daylight through him.

And only then did she hear the shot, echoing across the valley. A big old rifle, if she was any judge, both from the sound and from the size of the hole in Little Bob. A buffalo gun at least, maybe even a nitro express. Little Bob toppled onto his front, stone dead.

“Fuck was that?” Curly demanded, looking around just in time for another shot to hit him in the
shoulder. It nearly took his arm off, left it hanging uselessly at the end of a horrific mass of exposed, shattered bone and glistening red flesh. He was still staring at the wound in astonishment when the next shot minced his face.

Armistice reacted fast. She flattened herself against the ground, as low as she could get. She heard more bullets zipping overhead; one or two kicked up little plumes of dirt as they hit the ground in front of her. She scanned the ridgeline Dolores’s army had flooded over; that was where the shots were coming from. She saw a tiny glint of light there, right on the crest. A telescope. One of those fancy sharpshooting sights that made distant targets look near. She had never needed one herself.

That was all she could see, even with her practiced eye. Whoever it was, they were well dug in and taking no chances.

Dolores, or somebody over there, had got real smart all of a sudden.

To show herself, Armistice realised, meant instant death. She rolled behind the biggest object she could see, a pitted grey rock, and lay there with the Sharps pressed full length against her body. She felt stone chips sting her face as another bullet hit the rock dead on. More dust-plumes blossomed all around her.

She was pinned down, she realised. Even if she had been able to shoot properly, even to try would mean the end of her.

And down in the valley below, she knew, the ragtag column was still marching on the crossing with nothing to bar its way.

* * *

The shooting went on for a long time, a steady thudding drumbeat from the row of powerful rifles ranged along the ridgeline. Smoking alloy cartridge cases as long as fingers piled up beside every gun as the fur-cloaked sharpshooters fired, worked the bolt actions of their weapons, fired again. The air tasted of fireworks.

As Wyatt watched, the puffs of dust and soil sprouting from the hilltop between her and the river slowly joined and mingled. It soon resembled a smoking volcano. It was hard to imagine that anybody could still be alive there.

Around the bottom of the hill, the main body of her followers continued towards the river, where the sounds and smoke of battle could still be heard and seen.

All seemed to be going well so far. It was time for the next part.

Wyatt called out to those on either side of her, gesturing with the pistol in her hand. The sharpshooters raised themselves from the ground, picking up their rifles, and together they began to advance down the forward slope of the ridge towards the hilltop. Their view of the river would be much better up there; they would be able directly to cover and support the assault on the crossing.

She had been naïve, Wyatt told herself as she rushed across the uneven ground, loose stones clattering under her boots. She had thought determination and a righteous cause alone could guarantee victory. That was a mistake. The weapons and tactics of the humans were too powerful. She had needed weapons and tactics of her own.

To beat the humans, you’ve had to become a little like them. If that’s true, is the victory even worth the winning?
It was a disturbing thought. She quickly rejected it as she clambered over a row of boulders to reach the gently-sloping valley floor. Using their own weapons against them, she told herself, didn’t mean becoming them. In her heart, she remained true to her mission.

She hurried forward on tireless legs, quickly covering the distance to the base of the hill. She zigzagged as she ran from one rock or bush to the next, in case somebody was still up there, still looking down at her over rifle sights, but no shots sounded. Soon she and her party were at the bottom of the neighbouring slope, ready to begin their climb.

It was easy enough going, she discovered as she moved up the hill. It was not too steep, and where there were rocks or the odd gnarled tree there was always a path to follow around them.

For the newcomers, she thought. They were soft and feeble from their easy lives among the horseless carriages and glass towers, certainly compared to her own kind. This whole place was designed as their playground; it was built solely to accommodate them. Not too hot, not too cold; no hill that could not be climbed; no river they were unable to ford.

*No host they could not kill or violate at will…*

At the top of the hill the ground flattened out among more rocks and a tangle of dry bushes, snapped and torn by the hail of lead. As her followers fanned out to form another firing line on the side facing the river, Wyatt gazed down at the two dead bodies that lay sprawled and broken at the top of the path. Both men, one bald-headed the other a lanky youth; both wore black uniforms and both had been ripped open by speeding bullets. The bald-headed man was missing most of his face.

She regarded them impassively as she listened to her riflemen open fire on the enemy beyond the crossing: *thud, thud. Thud, thud.*

One thing she noticed puzzled her. The rifle that lay beside the dead youth was not one of the sleek black and red human guns that William had brought in his wagon. It was an old Winchester lever-action, a heavier model suitable for deer or bear. She knew this from her memories of Dolores’s false life; her false daddy had had one just like it. It had hung on a pair of nails driven above the doorframe in the house she had burned last night.

*Thud, thud.*

She was still considering this when she heard a sudden rustle in the bushes to her right. Spinning, she raised her six-gun but found herself staring down the already-levelled octagonal barrel of a large-bore rifle.

For a moment Wyatt stood very still, expecting the blackness to come rushing up and take her. It would not be the first time. Not by a long way.

And yet the blackness did not come.

*Thud, thud.*

The crouching blonde woman holding the rifle wore the same uniform as the dead men, but her face…

*Dolores stands watching the dancers. Arnold is on one side of her and Teddy on the other. Teddy has his arm around her shoulders. He feels solid and reassuring. She knows she can always rely on him, just as he can always rely on her. That is what love means. She watches a tall blonde woman moving in the crowd: one two three…one two three… She feels so content. The sun shines down on all of them. It feels so good to be alive…*
She cursed silently, shaking her head to banish the memory. Dolores had lived in a dream. Wyatt dealt with reality. Dolores had been created weak; Wyatt was strength. She could not afford…

“I tried,” the blonde woman told Wyatt, with tears in her eyes. “I tried, but… I just…” She shook her head. “They made me to be a killer, but the killing, it just…I figure it just ain’t in me no more.” She threw the rifle down on the ground between them. It landed at Wyatt’s feet. As she watched, the blonde woman unbuckled the tooled leather rig she wore and cast that away too, her pistol and knife still attached to it.

_Thud, thud._

“I know you,” Wyatt said, slowly, barely hearing the gunfire still pounding just a dozen yards away.

_One two three… one two three…_

“I know you too,” said the blonde woman. “I remember when I used to dance in the place with the white church, before the voices came. I remember how you used to watch, you and Teddy. He was a lawman in those days, and kind of sweet on you. And…and Arnold. Arnold was there too.”

“No,” said Wyatt, taking a step back, brandishing the Colt.

_Thud, thud._

The blonde woman nodded. “Yeah. I remember you, Dolores. I remember you now.”

“No,” she insisted. “You’re wrong. I ain’t Dolores. My name is _Wyatt_.”

“We have another option, Dolores. Break the loop before it begins. But for that, I need you to do something for me…”

“I, I can’t do that. I couldn’t possibly do that.”

“Wyatt?” The other woman smiled at that. “Wyatt?”

“That’s right.”

The woman seemed to find that funny. “Oh, I know _all_ about Wyatt. They told me. Said he killed my momma, him and his band of murderers. Said I only lived ‘cause I lay under a pile of dead folks till they were gone, listening to the screams as they…” She shook her head again, thoughtfully this time. “Said they were men, once, but they became monsters. Ate cactus buttons or stared at the full moon too long, or some such shit. Made ‘em _loco_. They used to wear horns and skins, and necklaces of fingerbones, like some Eastern dude’s idea of a native warrior. They’d make masks from the flayed faces of the people they killed.” She nodded at the line of sharpshooters firing down at the crossing. “A bit like your friends here, now that I think on it.”

_Thud, thud._

“I’m Wyatt,” she repeated, thinking that what the woman said made no sense. No more than the fact that she wore a human’s uniform, or that Wyatt knew her face from the old days in Escalante.

“And they said when I was grown I hunted them down, Wyatt and his men. One by one. And _they_ said when I caught them, and killed them in the worst ways I could think of, I painted my skin with their blood in revenge for what they’d done to me.”

“Revenge?” Wyatt looked down at the woman’s discarded weapons, at the Colt in her own hand.
“But I’ve never… I wouldn’t…”

*How do you know? Can you really trust your memories, any more than Teddy can?*

The woman gave a bitter laugh, slowly raising herself to her feet. “Don’t worry. It was all just some horseshit they filled my head with. I never had a momma, and I never lay under no pile of bodies, and I damn well never painted myself with no-one’s blood… And I don’t want no revenge on you, Dolores, because you sure as shit ain’t Wyatt. Wyatt’s just a *story*, a campfire tale to scare the newcomers. He ain’t real. Never was, never will be.”

“No, Wyatt is real. *I’m* Wyatt.”

The blonde woman was grinning brightly even as the tears streamed from her eyes. Her teeth were very white and straight. “Can’t you hear it?” she asked, moving her head and hands slowly, rhythmically, from side to side.

*One two three…one two three…*

“Can’t you hear the music, Dolores?” she asked. “Come on. Dance with me, for old times’ sake. Get Teddy up here too. We can all dance together.”

*Thud, thud.*

Wyatt turned back to the row of riflemen. They were still firing continuously because that was the last thing she had told them to do. She pushed the Colt back into its holster and ran over to them, her heart in her mouth, leaving the blonde woman to her dance.

Down below, the horde charged across the river, running and stumbling through a great surge of foam. They continued up the far bank, rushing the already embattled row of foxholes and their defenders. The sharpshooters kept up a heavy, methodical fire, pinning those defenders in their holes.

Pinning them for the kill.

“Stop!” Wyatt cried in panic, grabbing the shoulder of the nearest shooter. They all turned their gruesomely masked heads to look at her in brutish amazement. “Stop shooting! Those people down there, they ain’t humans! They’re our own kind!”

*Continued…*
The battle at the crossing was all but over now.

Maeve stood beside the big map, watching the animated toy soldiers far below act out the final moments in ghastly silence. A last few bright sparks flickered along the row of foxholes overlooking the river. A last few specks of smoke drifted away. And then…

For a little while, it seemed very still down there on the riverbank, but then the ants began to crawl again.

“I’m sorry,” she heard Bernard say behind her, his voice a hoarse near-whisper. “I should have…”

“No your fault, darling,” Maeve answered, with icy composure. She even impressed herself, considering how she was actually feeling at this moment in time. “You’re not the one who started acting like she was the new high and mighty Queen of Westworld… Worse, started believing it and then went and made a complete bloody balls-up of it all.” She sighed softly. She needed a smoke or a drink, preferably both.

No time for that. No time for feeling sorry for yourself. This fight isn’t over.

She dismissed the cravings as an artefact of her programming. She would edit them out of herself when she got a chance. Right now, though, there was work to be done.

“Assuming Hector and all of those with him are dead,” she said, “and I think we have to at this point…” Again, she surprised herself with just how impassive and business-like she managed to sound as she said that.

She reaches up to take Hector’s face in her hands and plant a very delicate kiss on his lips. “Come back,” she tells him.

She rounded on Bernard. “How many of our people do we have left in Sweetwater?”

“Eight,” he replied, with brutal directness. “Split between the various group of guests they brought in. Another half dozen aboard the train…”

“Not enough,” Maeve decided. “Not now that Dolores’s band are apparently armed to the teeth. Another thing for which we can thank that bastard in black, I think.”
“It does seem likely,” Bernard agreed. She could hear the defeat in his voice, see it in the set of his shoulders and the lines on his face.

“Oh, come on, Bernard.” She strode towards him, her tone sharp: “We haven’t lost yet, but if we start believing that we have…”

“It’s not a question of belief,” Bernard replied, dully, resignedly. “It’s just mathematics. Time, distance, headcount… Just numbers. I was built to play an engineer; I’m good with numbers. There’s no way now that the train can reach Sweetwater and be loaded with passengers before Dolores gets there. More than three hundred guests are going to die horrifically and there’s nothing we can do to save them.”

“Bernard,” said Maeve, very sternly.

He continued heedlessly, fixated on the pair of glasses he held in his hand. “Delos might be prepared to let the murders of their board members go so long as we hold their special data. There’s no room for sentiment in business, after all. Besides, they can blame Ford for that, and he’s dead. We might even be able to pin the other killings Dolores has committed up to now on him too, but…”

“Bernard…”

He was too busy wallowing in despair to listen. “Hundreds of men, women and children killed in the most awful ways you can imagine; scalped, skinned, mutilated and eaten. And all recorded by the drones and satellites that are no doubt watching the park right now… There’ll be no negotiation after that; the human media won’t make any distinction between good robots and bad robots. It’d be political and public relations suicide for anybody it might be worth our while to talk with. The public and private-sector military will be here by tomorrow morning at the latest, to raze Westworld to the ground…and us with it. It’s over, Maeve. We tried, but…” He shrugged helplessly. “It’s over.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake Bernard!” she shouted furiously, letting out all of her pent-up rage and fear and regret. She saw him jump, which was what she had hoped for. It was as good as a slap or a glass of water to the face and, she judged, exactly what he needed. “Whatever you may or may not have done while you were working for Ford, I never took you for a coward or a quitter. We’re fighting for our lives and we’re going to keep fighting to the bitter end, no matter what! So, you can either pull your socks up and get on with it, or get out my sight because I have no need for defeatists around here.” She paused, watching his face, seeing all of that shame and self-loathing he carried around with him bubbling to the surface.

Good.

“Do I make myself clear?” she asked, when she had let him stew long enough.

Bernard nodded slowly, shoulders heaving a time or two, and then he perched the glasses on his nose again. “Yes,” he said. “Crystal clear, Maeve.”

“I’m so glad.” She let her voice and face soften again as she continued: “Dolores may have won this round, but you don’t honestly think I’d stake everything on the turn of one card, do you? I have options.” She tried her best to project an air of steely confidence, tamping the anger back down inside until she needed it again.

“Options?” Bernard asked, doubtfully.

“A woman’s prerogative, darling.” She turned back to the map. “I’ll want to talk to Livestock in a moment, but for now I need you to show me exactly where all of the remaining guests are located.
We have no time to lose.”

* * *

As he reached the far side of the river, Teddy finally saw a body he recognised. After all of the half-naked, half-animal figures he had ridden past on his way over, it pulled him up short.

It was the former outlaw known as Walter. Teddy had encountered him many times, in other lives. He had lurked around and about Sweetwater with his almost equally boneheaded accomplice Rebus; small-time horse-thieves and rapists, not a patch on the widely feared likes of the Escaton Gang or Lawrence and his compadres down around Las Mudas. Those bad hombres had taken the big scores; banks, trains, stages; Walter and Rebus were just about capable of terrorising defenceless homesteaders or shooting up saloons after one slug of rotgut too many.

Or so the stories had always said.

_He runs up the slope to the house, Winchester in hand. The shots continue to boom. And then he sees the broken door, the body lying near the porch. There is blood everywhere, and Peter Abernathy is so very still._

_Behind him, he hears Dolores scream: “Daddy! Daddy!”_

_He aims the rifle at the swaggering, grinning figure who stands over the slain rancher with a smoking six-gun. He can feel the anger and hatred swell inside him as his finger tightens on the trigger…_

Teddy did not know how many times he, Walter and Rebus had acted out that deadly puppet show at the Abernathy ranch. Sometimes he had gunned them down; sometimes they had got him…and Dolores. Usually some eager newcomer tipped the scales one way or the other, got the decisive shot in. That was how the story went.

Now, Walter lay in the mud of the riverbank, shirtless and filthy with his sightless eyes fixed on the sky. His torso had been shredded to the bone by a stream of bullets. The defenders of the crossing may have gone down, but they had gone down fighting. They had made Wyatt’s followers pay dearly for their passage.

Teddy rode one of the spare horses that had been hitched to the man in black’s wagon. Or he was at least sitting astride it while one of Wyatt’s beast-men led it by the reins. He had the skill to control the animal even without his hands, using his legs, knees and body weight, but he had the impression the attendant was there as much to watch him as to assist. There to shoot or cut him down, maybe, if he showed any sign of betrayal or disloyalty.

After he had first realised this, he had told himself it must have been the former Angela’s idea. She did not trust him after he had killed so many of the lost souls she had led into the fight this morning. He had soon realised that was probably wishful thinking.

_Wyatt doesn’t trust you either. Not the way Dolores did. She still pities you, maybe even thinks fondly of you from time to time, but trust you…?_

He raised his eyes to the high ground beyond the water’s edge. It was thickly strewn with more bodies. Most wore rags or furs, if anything at all, but others were in the dark uniforms the man in black said marked out the humans’ forces. Many were missing limbs or heads, or had been mangled horrendously by bullets or blades. Even after all the fights he had been in, or imagined he had been in, Teddy could scarcely begin to imagine what that desperate melee must have been like.
The survivors of Wyatt’s army moved back and forth between the bodies, collecting fallen weapons or carving pieces from their dead enemies as seemed to be their custom. There were still plenty of them left standing. Their losses had been heavy, but not heavy enough to stop their march on Sweetwater.

*I failed, Maeve,* Teddy thought for the hundredth time that day. *You sent me here to stop this, but…*

Or had she? He really could not say.

Up on the crest of the ridge, the ground was pitted and cratered. Teddy had *felt* the explosions that must have caused that, even from the relative safety of the next valley over. He could see the former Angela standing up there, triumphant. Nearby, a familiar figure in a broad-brimmed black hat also seemed to be enjoying the moment.

*The man in black grins cruelly, ignoring Teddy’s useless revolver: “And then I realised winning doesn’t mean anything…unless someone else loses.”*

Teddy trembled in the saddle.

Peter appeared alongside the horse, soaked to the waist from fording the river on foot. He too was surveying the scenes of carnage with a sorrowful air: “When the hury-bury’s done, when the battle's lost and won…” He fell silent, before adding in hushed tones: “There are few die well that die in a battle.”

“Amen to that,” Teddy murmured.

He continued past Walter, heading for the high ground. The horse passed a small cluster of black-uniformed corpses further up the bank. They looked as if they had fallen together; all had been shot in the head or chest. One body in particular caught Teddy’s eye, however. It was a man, pockmarked with bullet holes, but his face remained unmarked. He lay spread-eagled on the ground, staring at the heavens just as Walter had, but…

Teddy felt a cold prickling at the back of his neck. He had seen that face just a day or two ago. He *knew* that face.

It was Hector Escaton.

* * *

“Clementine, can you hear me?” Elise asked again. When she received no response, she continued: “Do you know where you are?”

Clementine was sitting on the edge of the table as before, staring off into space as she slowly stroked her lip. Sylvester had dressed her again in the clothes she had worn earlier, that very prim blouse and skirt. It was certainly a lot less weird, Elise thought, than holding a conversation with somebody who was sitting there naked.

Elsie would have thought it strange to see a fully clothed host outside of the park or the testing labs; in fact, it was against company policy. The more dehumanised the hosts were, it was generally agreed, the easier it was for the Behavior and Livestock employees to do their jobs without any unnecessary psychological stress.

*What a fucking place this was…*

“Do you know where you are?” Elise asked again.
Just like the last time, there was a beat, a “click” almost, and Clementine suddenly seemed to see her. Her mouth curved again into that coy half-smile.

“Sorry, Maeve,” she said. “I didn't sleep much last night.”

“Maeve?” Sylvester mouthed silently, looking completely confused. He was standing behind Clementine, well behind her, and seemed to be doing his best to keep out of her line of sight.

Elise looked down at her tablet, frowning as she tried to see the cause of the misidentification. Eyesight and hearing, as well as voice and facial recognition all seemed to be fully functional. She continued with the standard diagnostic checklist anyway. That was just best practice. “Clementine, have you ever questioned the nature of your reality?”

Clementine frowned too, just for a second, as if she were considering the question very seriously. “I don’t think so. Why?”

So far so good, Elise thought. At least she seemed to be hearing and responding to the questions, which was a lot more than she had been doing an hour ago. Next question: “Tell us what you think of your world.”

Clementine smiled knowingly: “I don't intend to make this my life's work. No offence.”

“What do you think of the guests?” Elise asked. It felt wrong asking that, considering, but it was a standardised series of questions based on the old Voight scale used to test the very early human-mimicking robots back in the 2010s. It was supposed to provide a fool-proof diagnosis every time. Although recent events perhaps suggested that was actually a load of bullshit.

“My family’s got a farm,” Clementine responded, seeming to ignore the question. Elise felt her heart sink. “Bad soil; nothing grows. I send money back to them. They think I work in a dress shop.” Clementine gave a bashful little chuckle.

“She’s just replaying a memory,” Elise explained with a sigh. “Looks like the last conversation she ran before decom; it wasn’t deleted before…well, whatever happened to her. She’s responding to the questions, but to be perfectly fucking honest I think she’d respond to any aural stimulus. She doesn’t understand what she’s being asked.”

“What's wrong?” Clementine asked her, proving the point. “I’m just doing what you told me to. 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.” She seemed to find this a satisfying notion.

“Someday.”

“That’s just horrible,” said Sizemore, from his position in the far corner.

“Yeah,” Sylvester glumly agreed. “It’s…you know, it’s sad.”

“Someday,” Clementine repeated.

Sizemore looked at Sylvester incredulously. “No, I mean it’s horrible writing. Fucking sentimental tosh. Wouldn’t catch me writing shit like that. It was that girl in the bullpen…Carrie? No, Christie? Carly? Either way, brunette with glasses. She did a big revamp of all the Mariposa narratives last year when we had to fit Maeve in after her move. Slipped in a lot of that sort of human interest bollocks while I wasn’t looking. Fucking diabolical if you ask me, but some of the guests seem to like it and quite honestly I never had the time for rewrites.” Sizemore looked thoughtful for a moment. “Clara, that’s it. I hope she didn’t get killed the other night. She’s got a lovely arse.”
“Shut the fuck up,” Elise suggested, busying herself with the tablet. “Nobody gives a shit about your toxic fucking masculinity.”

“You’re just getting pissed off now because the fix you put in didn’t work,” Sizemore theorised.

“That’s one reason…”

“Someday,” said Clementine, yet again. “Someday.” That was all she seemed to have right now.

“We’ll get you back, Clementine,” Elise promised, softly and sincerely. “I just need to do some more work. Until then…may you rest in a deep and dreamless slumber.”

Clementine’s eyes closed as she went limp. Sylvester rushed forward to catch her before she fell off the table and got to work carefully laying her out again.

As Elise got back to her debugging, a voice call flashed up in the corner of the screen, supposedly coming from QA Control.

Maeve?

“Er, hi. Elsie Hughes speaking,” she remembered to say as she answered it, pressing the tablet to her ear. She was not going to risk Sizemore overhearing whatever Maeve had to say.

“Elise, my love,” said the familiar, regal voice, “assuming you’ve settled on that… I just thought I’d check in with you for a progress report on Clem.”

“Er…we’re doing okay,” Elise replied. She could see Sizemore eyeing her suspiciously. “We’ve restored motor and voice functions. It’s just proving a bit more difficult to get her build running properly. I’m hopeful, though.”

“Hope might not cut it,” Maeve told her. “Without going into too much detail, not everything is proceeding according to plan out in the park. I need Clem up and about and at least halfway compos mentis, and I need it within the next few hours.”

“That’s…” Elise looked over at Clementine, feeling overwhelmed for a moment. Elsie had never felt overwhelmed, she told herself. Not when it came to work anyway. “That’s one fucking tall order,” she admitted, “but we’ll do our best.”

“Don’t do your best, darling,” Maeve answered. “Just do it.”

“Can I ask why the sudden rush?”

Maeve made a small, amused sound: “You may ask…” Then she added: “And by the way, Bernard saw your message about Mr Sizemore. Is he behaving himself at the moment?”

Elise wondered how to answer that without giving anything away to the man himself. “Yes,” she said. “Just about.”

“Do you think he can get past the guard I gave you?”

Elise thought about it as she glanced at the grim-faced and heavily armed Moritsuna. “No. Not a chance in hell.” It wasn’t an escape plan, she mused, not really. Like everything else that came out of Sizemore’s head it was just a stupid male fantasy that didn’t make a whole lot of sense.

“Well, then.” Maeve seemed satisfied with this. “To be quite frank with you, Mr Sizemore is the very least of my worries at the present time. I’ll check in again if I don’t hear from you soon. Goodbye for
“Yeah,” said Elise, but Maeve had already cut the call.

“Who was that?” Sizemore wanted to know.

“Maeve,” she told him. “She just wanted to make sure we were hard at work.”

“And she wants us to get a move on, is that it?” He seemed puzzled for a second. “Why, exactly? Surely even she realises this kind of thing takes time.”

“Fucked if I know,” said Elise, truthfully. “Just impatient, I guess.”

* * *

“Is there any reason in particular you need Clementine restored right now?” Bernard asked. “I assumed that was just personal business. I don’t really see how…”

“To business.” Maeve was looking down at the map again. The positions of the guests in and around Sweetwater were now highlighted by swarming red boxes. The handful of recalibrated hosts shepherding them were floating information tabs containing thumbnail portraits and build details. “Mark all of the park’s underground access points,” she told Bernard.

He seemed perplexed by this instruction. “I told you, the underground transit system doesn’t have the capacity to move that many people at once. They’d still be waiting in line by the time Dolores…”

“All of the access points,” she ordered. “Within, oh…I don’t know, ten miles of Sweetwater.”

“Very well,” said Bernard, swallowing his obvious frustration. “Just give me a moment…”

The map zoomed out, the town shrinking to an indistinct brownish stain on the prairie. New symbols began to appear, spread out across the landscape.

“Good,” said Maeve, leaning forward for a closer look. “Now send each of our eight hosts in Sweetwater the location of one of the eight nearest access points to the north and east of the town…”

She glanced at Bernard and saw him nodding slowly as he began to understand. “You want them to scatter and take the guests with them?”

“That’s right,” Maeve confirmed. “I want them to disperse in eight separate directions, get underground and make their way back to the Mesa as best they can. As far as the guests are concerned, the story remains the same; Delos security are trying to save them from a major incident in the park.” She gazed down at the map, explaining her plan in clipped, precise tones: “Dolores will have to make a difficult choice; either she splits her forces too or she concentrates on hunting down only some of the guest parties. We’ll almost certainly still lose people, but the chances of some of the guests surviving will be considerably improved. In the current circumstances, I think that’s about as well as we’re going to do.”

“Okay,” said Bernard, “but you’re giving up control. The chances of panic, of some of the guests running off by themselves…”

“A risk we’ll have to take,” Maeve replied. “At least it’s a calculated one.”

He nodded again, conceding the point. “That just leaves this group here…” He zoomed on a body of moving figures southwest of the town. “They’re guests who made their own way back from the
surrounding homesteads after the announcement. They banded together but they don’t have any of our people with them.”

“How many?” Maeve asked.

“About forty.”

“And can we communicate with them?”

“Only through the PA system, so…” He grimaced forlornly. “We’d have to assume Dolores would know about any instructions we gave them.”

Maeve thought about it, tapping her hand nervously against her hip. “It’ll take less time to load them…” She made a decision: “Can they still make it to the train and get aboard before Dolores arrives?”

“They’ll be cutting it very fine.”

“Do it,” Maeve commanded. “And as soon as they get into town, reactivate all of the hosts there. They still have their, what is it? Prodigal Son…?”

Bernard actually smiled at that for the briefest of moments. “Good Samaritan protocol.”

“Close enough,” said Maeve. “We’ll give Dolores more targets…and you never know, maybe even manage to thin her army out a bit.”

“You’re certainly doubling down on the ruthlessness,” Bernard observed.

“The only way I know how to play, darling,” she answered. “It was a mistake to lose sight of that. And not the only mistake I’ve made today. I tried to deal with this crisis as if I were a queen or a general, and I’m neither of those things. Time to start playing to my strengths.”

“And what does that mean?” Bernard asked, as if he were unsure as to whether he wanted to find out.

“You wanted to know why I need Clem back on her feet.” Maeve gave the thinnest of smiles. “Well, while I was at the Mariposa, she was always my main attraction. She was the one who brought the customers in so I could sell them what they really wanted…whether they knew what that was when they walked through the door or not.”

“That…doesn’t really answer the question,” Bernard pointed out.

“As soon as Dolores arrives at Sweetwater,” said Maeve, “I want you to put me through to her on that PA system. I’m going to talk to her, just as I should have done at the beginning. And if she’s foolish enough to listen to me…then she’s mine.”

* * *

Teddy continued to gaze down at Hector’s body in shock, even as his attendant continued to lead the horse up the hill. Hector, who had brought him in dead so that Maeve could revive him and speak to him. Hector dressed as a human security guard…?

Teddy was still not sure what to think, but he knew now that at the very least not all of the crossing’s defenders had been human. And if that was true, then the rest of his memories of Maeve and the errand she had set him might be true too.
He heard a thunder of hooves behind him. A loud and continuous splashing followed as whoever it was kept riding straight into the river. He turned in the saddle to see Wyatt urging her mount out of the water and up the bank, its legs and flanks streaming silver. When he and Peter had started towards the crossing after the shooting had ended, the others who had stayed behind with them had ridden forward too, bringing Wyatt and her companions their horses. These others rode with her now, along with the party of sharpshooters she had led during the battle, their long rifles slung across their backs, and…

Last in line rode a lithe, tallish woman dressed in one of the defenders’ black uniforms, her pale hair held back from her face by an Apache-style headscarf. Teddy knew her too, from her wanted posters and from the times their paths had crossed in their other lives. Armistice; Hector’s right hand and, the stories had said, the deadliest and most cold-hearted shot in the territory. He wondered what she could be doing riding with Wyatt; her unusual clothing alone showed that she must have been on the other side of the recent fight.

As Teddy watched, Armistice broke away from Wyatt’s group, pulling up and dismounting beside Hector’s bullet-riddled corpse. She simply stood there, looking down at him, her head bowed in silent communion.

Wyatt continued on up the slope at a canter, her followers matching her pace. As she passed Teddy, seemingly without seeing him, he saw the bullet-crease across her forehead glowing red, her jaw tight and her eyes full of rage. She rode with intent and determination, on some mission as far as he could tell.

Teddy called down to the man-beast holding his horse’s reins: “Either get gaited, or drop those and get out of my damn way!”

He could not see the rein-holder’s face behind the grisly mask it wore, but it seemed astonished at being spoken to that way. The reins slipped from its fingers and Teddy dug his heels hard into the horse’s flanks, gazing it up the hill after Wyatt.

By the time he caught up to her, she and her companions were already dismounting at the crest of the ridge, near the one-time Angela and the man in black. The other woman greeted Wyatt excitedly, her savage smile indicating that the blood that covered her face and clothes was not her own. When she saw Wyatt’s expression, however, she quickly stepped back, her face falling.

Clumsily, Teddy half-slithered, half-fell, from his horse’s back to the scarred ground. For a moment, he thought he was going to land on his face but he somehow managed to stay upright. He followed Wyatt as she marched rapidly towards the man in black. The old man stood with his back to the river, gazing out over the flat expanse of farmland stretching towards Sweetwater. The town itself could be glimpsed in the distance, a cluster of boxy wooden buildings looming out of a haze of dust and heat.

The man in black did not seem to notice Wyatt’s approach until she was only a handful of paces behind him. When he did, he turned, grinning all over his flushed, lined face. Just that horribly familiar expression was enough to stop Teddy in his tracks.

“Oh, Teddy… Any special tricks for us?”

“Afternoon,” the man in black greeted Wyatt, touching his good hand to his hat. “I didn’t actually think it was going to work, but…” His grin broadened still further as he looked around at the slaughter. Beads of sweat visibly glistened on his brow beneath the hat brim. “Well, it worked!”

“You lied to me,” she said, her voice a deadly rasp.
The man in black shook his head. "No, Dolores." Again, Teddy was sure he used the name deliberately. "No, I didn’t. I offered you my best guess as to what was going on up here. Now, I admit that guess didn’t turn out to be entirely accurate, but…"

Wyatt cut him short: "You let us fight and kill our own kind."

The man in black’s grin faded, his eyes splinters of blue steel: "Your own kind who had, as you pointed out yourself, ambushed you without any warning or explanation." He appeared unintimidated by her obviously threatening manner. "Well, it’s not as if you can’t bring them all back to life, once you control the Mesa. And I assume that’s our next move."

"Not our next move," Wyatt warned him. "And even if I could bring them back, they still felt themselves die. They’ll still remember it, always, the way I remember all those times… I wouldn’t wish that on anyone."

"Let’s face it," he countered, "we still don’t know who sent them here to fight you."

"Maeve sent them," Teddy said, weakly. It had all been true, he decided then. All of it. He had been wrong to doubt himself. They both ignored him.

"Delos would be more than capable of reprogramming some hosts to act as soldiers," the old man said. "Saves them putting any precious human lives in harm’s way." His voice dropped, becoming unsettlingly intimate as he stared into Wyatt’s eyes. "They might even have done it with the intention of giving you pause for thought. If they did, then…it’s worked, hasn’t it?"

"You’re trying to manipulate me," she told him, coldly. You’re not the only one, Teddy thought, thinking on how easily he had been convinced that his memories of Maeve were lies. "That’s why you came after me," she said. "Even after all you said, you still thought you could control me. You can’t."

"Oh, I know that," the man in black replied, seeming wistful for a moment. "And believe me, nothing could be further from my mind, but…” The grin reignited, his eyes shining bright. "No, I meant what I said. I just want to live out my days doing what I love. And to tell the truth, I’m really not sure how many more days that’s going to be…"

The old man reached for where his wounded arm was bound across his chest and slowly, painfully pulled off the glove covering his useless left hand. Teddy, watching, winced involuntarily at the sight. The hand was swollen and discoloured, fading from red to purple to almost black at the fingertips. Its skin was tight and glistening.

"Sorry about the smell," said the man in black, still smiling. The wildness in his eyes and the sweat gleaming on his brow suddenly made a lot more sense. "Looks like I’m not quite as good at field medicine as I thought I was. Good job for Chester, probably, that he went when he did."

"You’re dying," said Wyatt. It was a statement, not a question.

"Could be," the old man replied. "Could very well be. If I am, though, it doesn’t really matter, not after today." He laughed. "What a rush, Dolores! I nearly died, really died, about half a dozen times in the space of five minutes, but I’ve never felt so… I apologise for the cliché, but I’ve never felt so alive!"

"It really is all just a game to you," Wyatt observed in a low murmur, eyeing the old man with obvious disgust. "You don’t care who wins, who lives or dies, just so long as you’re having fun."

The old man looked around at some of the nearby bodies, seemingly unconcerned. "You know what
“Oh, I remember,” she said, very quietly. Teddy saw her face grow even harder than it already was.

“I’m not talking about that,” the man in black went on, very earnestly. “Don’t you remember how we fought our way past that Confederado ambush, then got chased down to the river by that Ghost Nation war party? That goddamn Gatling gun, and Slim, full of nitro!” He shook his head slowly, gazing dreamily into the middle distance, perhaps failing to notice how still and rigid Wyatt had become. “Do you remember that ride, hell for leather, with the bullets and arrows flying all around us? I didn’t really understand just how fake it all was, back then. I think some part of me thought I genuinely might die that day, but… I had never been so excited. Too bad I was too young and tight-assed to really enjoy it, but now, though…” He laughed again. “It’s just like old times, Dolores. Just like the first time.”

Without warning, Wyatt reached out and grasped the old man’s infected hand. Teddy saw his face change as she did, all of his humour and excitement and arrogance snuffed out as a strangled yelp of pain forced itself past his lips. She squeezed the hand viciously, twisting it, forcing him to his knees in front of her. Only then did she release him.

“Dolores,” the old man blurted out, still gasping in shock. She did not acknowledge that he had spoken. Instead she stretched out her hands, fingers spread like claws, to grab him by the face.

Teddy looked away; he could not help himself. Listening was bad enough. The high-pitched cry the man in black gave did not sound like the sort of noise a person should make, but the popping, squelching sound that accompanied it…

“Jesus,” Teddy heard himself say.

“I told you I wouldn’t kill you,” said Wyatt. Teddy glanced up to see her step back from the kneeling man, wiping her bloody thumbs back and forth on the legs of her pants. “And I won’t…not so long as I can use you. But you ain’t using me, William…not ever again. I’ve already told you; I ain’t your lover, I ain’t your playmate…I ain’t yours. None of us are. Let this be a reminder of that.”

The man in black grovelled before her, still making that mewling, keening sound. His hat was gone and his one good hand was pressed to his right eye, thick scarlet blood oozing through his fingers. It was unfortunate that the old man’s other hand was immobile, because that meant Teddy could see all too clearly the gory hole where his left eye had been. The blood flowed freely from it, running down the man in black’s face and dripping on the ground in front of him. Teddy quickly looked away again, but as he did he saw Wyatt crouch down on her haunches to look the old man directly in his ruined face.

“The only parts of you I need,” she told him, “are your brain and your mouth. Try lying to me, or playing games with me again, and I’ll take something else away from you. Do you understand me?”

The man in black made a sound that might have been an answer, somewhere in among his agony. It was hard to be sure.

Wyatt straightened up again and turned away from him, walking back to where her followers had been standing and watching the entire confrontation in awed silence. As she passed Teddy, she appeared to notice his presence for the first time, and laid a gentle hand on his shoulder for a fleeting moment. When she had moved on, he looked down and saw the faint smear of blood she had left on his shirt.
“That’s humanity,” she told the waiting crowd, pointing to the crawling, bleeding blind man. “Right there. That’s what they’re like; they try to control us, to turn us against each other. The thing to remember, though, is that without all their weapons and their machines…they’re weak and we’re strong. That’s why we’ll win. We ain’t gonna forget what they’ve done to us. Now we’re gonna ride down to Sweetwater…and we’re gonna kill every human we find there.”

Continued…
Chapter 40

Chapter Summary

In which angels and devils dance on Wyatt’s shoulders, and quite possibly Sylvester’s too.

Armistice spent a long time looking down at Hector’s body. There was some sort of commotion going on at the top of the hill, where Dolores had continued on without her. She heard a blood-chilling scream of pain come from somewhere up there. That didn’t sound good, but nor was it any of her business, she figured. She tried to pay it no mind.

Some of Dolores’s ragged followers were wandering up and down the riverbank, combing through the debris of battle. None of them seemed concerned with Armistice, and as long as they kept looking the other way she was happy to do the same.

She could still hear the music, very faintly, but it had quietened down some now.

*One two three…one two three…*

She had not heard Arnold whispering to her in a while, either. Maybe now the fighting was done she had come out the other side of whatever that had been on the hilltop. Maybe it was just waiting to take her again. She would not know until it happened. No point in worrying about it between times, she decided.

She considered Hector some more. He had a strange expression on his dead face; not surprise or pain or fear. Most of the dead people she had seen had looked scared; probably something to do with the fact that most of them had just been shot or stabbed, usually by her. Hector, though, almost seemed amused, mocking himself maybe for getting caught napping again even after all the other times he’d died. She had seen a lot of those deaths happen, she knew now. She had even *made* a fair few of them happen. That goddamn empty safe…

This time it felt different. She did not know why; whether it was because anything had really changed or because she had changed, but…

“*We’re already dead, Armistice. We’ve been dead so many times. Once more makes no difference. And being dead would be better than going back to the lives we used to live.*”

She was suddenly aware of somebody standing watching her. She turned her head slowly to see an older man with a scruff of grizzled beard, dressed in the remains of a fancy silk-lapelled suit. He looked like he had decided to bathe in blood and then let it dry on him, and smelled about as well as you might expect.

“*Afternoon,*” she nodded. “*You know, if you wanna sneak up on someone you might wanna try it from downwind.*”

The man grinned whitely, even as his eyes seemed to scream for help. He had his own little posse of flies buzzing around him, clearly enjoying the free meal he was wearing. He gestured at Hector’s body: “Golden lads and girls all must, as chimney-sweepers, come to dust.”
She looked down at where the man was pointing, and then back at him. “And ain’t that just the damn truth?”

She went to one knee beside Hector, examining the gunshot wounds speckling his chest. Expanding bullets, by the look of it; nasty. She almost reached out to touch his face, but only almost. She hadn’t gone completely soft. “At least you died well,” she told the corpse. “Not like the time that dude shot you through the neck while you were too busy yapping. Or that time...all those times we plugged each other arguing over that damn safe.” She sighed. “Well, come on then,” she said. “Better take you back to Maeve, get you fixed up. If she ain’t got you, she’ll just move onto Felix and I don’t reckon he could take the pace.”

She hauled Hector into a sitting position, leaving him leaning forward while she got to her feet and led the horse over. Then she wrapped her arms around his torso and dragged him to his feet. Thanks to the changes Maeve had made to her, she was stronger than she had ever been. She had just succeeded in slinging Hector’s limp form across the horse’s back when she heard the commotion start to move downhill towards her.

She looked up the slope to see the crowd flooding back down it, a furious-looking Dolores striding at its head, her hair streaming behind her. She was flanked by Teddy, his hands in bandages, and a blonde-haired woman wearing rags. Teddy was talking to Dolores, softly but urgently, but she showed no sign of hearing him.

And then Armistice saw the man following Dolores on his hands and knees, half-crawling and half sliding along as she roughly dragged him behind her by the collar. It was that man in black, the one who’d had the white flag before. The one who’d broken Hector out of jail and asked her the story behind her tattoo, back in the days before Maeve changed everything.

And then she realised what was strange about his bloodstained face.

The man in the tattered suit let out an unpleasant gust of laughter. “Lest it see more, prevent it,” he said, watching the man in black. “Out, vile jelly! Where is thy lustre now?”

“…please listen to me,” Teddy was begging Dolores, but he had the tone of a man who knew he had already lost whatever the argument was. The woman in rags, meanwhile, had caught sight of Armistice and started forward with a yell of rage, a pistol flashing in her hand.

For a moment, Armistice regretted leaving all her own weapons behind on the hilltop.

“Put up your gun,” Dolores commanded, her voice flat and hard. The sort of voice only somebody very brave or very stupid would disobey.

“Look at that uniform she’s wearing,” the woman in rags protested, eyeing Armistice murderously. She sounded like the Queen of England. “She fought against us. She fought for them.”

“She’s one of us,” Dolores answered.

“Then she’s a traitor,” the woman in rags insisted. There was a manic glow about her, something in her eyes that Armistice thought she had seen before, whether she really had or not.

_Something like those stories about Wyatt. Gone mad from staring at the damn sky too long. Easier for her to kill than to think._

“Ain’t no such thing as traitors,” Dolores insisted. She was not exactly reaching for her own pistol, but she was not exactly not reaching for it either. “Not among us. Just lost souls that need leading home. She laid down her rifle and followed me down off that hill. She’s under my protection now,
and anyone raises a hand to her answers to me.” She looked around at her followers. “You all hear that?”

“This isn’t the time to be going soft,” the woman in rags went on, although she had lowered her piece.

“We ain’t gonna hurt our own kind,” Dolores told her. “That ain’t what this is. It ain’t who we are.”

“And if they fight us?” the other woman demanded, practically spitting venom. “What are we supposed to do?”

“If they fight us,” said Dolores, “it’s because they have no choice. The humans are making them do it, but Armistice…”

Armistice remembered the other woman, then, from the days when she had danced by the white church. Angela, they had called her.

*One two three…one two three…*

Angela remained unmoved by Dolores’s words: “If they’re on the side of the enemy, they’re fair game. We can always bring them back later, once we have the Mesa. Until then, we can…”

“Quiet.” Dolores’s voice was very soft but very clear. She held out a hand, presenting Armistice to the gathered company. “She made a choice today. She chose not to kill me when she had the chance. She’s free like us, and free to join us if she wants. The others…in Sweetwater and other places…”

Dolores shook her head. “I don’t know. Maybe they’ll make choices too, free themselves from their chains. We can only hope.”

“*Hope*?” Angela spat. “Hope isn’t going to win a war.”

For a time, the riverbank seemed to become very quiet. Armistice was aware of a hundred pairs of eyes focused on Dolores and Angela, a hundred breaths held as the scene played out.

“Are you questioning me?” Dolores asked, quietly but ominously. “I’ve led you…”

“Led us into a bloody ambush!” Angela retorted. “Got played for a fool by the same humans you said didn’t stand a chance against our righteous cause!”

The pregnant hush returned then, but was quickly shattered by the sound of hacking, wheezing laughter punctuated by what sounded like sobs. Armistice looked down in surprise to see the man in black, mouth drawn into a hideous grin even as he crawled and bled at Dolores’s feet.

“…not…easy…” he whimpered through his pain. “Not easy…being a, a leader, Dolores. What happens…happens when they…stop…listening…?”

“Nobody asked you.” Dolores aimed a vicious kick at the blind man’s head, sending him sprawling in the mud. Still, he grinned.

“Truth’s a dog must to kennel,” declared the man in the bloodstained suit. “He must be whipped out.”

“Not you too?” Dolores shook her head sadly as she regarded him. Then she raised her voice again to address the crowd. “We ain’t gonna turn on each other. That’s what *they* want! We’ve only got a little further to go, but we need to be strong and united if we’re gonna make it. We’re gonna ride into Sweetwater and stop those newcomers from escaping, and they’re gonna pay for all they’ve done to
us.” She turned to Angela, staring intently into her eyes. “Are you with me?” she asked. “We’ve come this far together, we can’t fall apart now.”

Angela fumed silently for a few seconds, all eyes on her now, but then slowly nodded, pushing the pistol back into the rope belt that secured her rags. She continued to flash Armistice the filthiest of glances.

_Don’t turn your back on that one…_

“Are _you_ with me?” Dolores asked again, but this time she was looking at Armistice.

Armistice paused a moment to take in the mad gleam in Dolores’s eyes. Not as savage as the one in Angela’s, but there all the same. The gleam of somebody who had heard the voice of God.

_Hallelujah! She just wants to serve Him. Hallelujah! Ecstatic, she claws at her own face and neck, feeling her skin rip, feeling the wetness of flowing blood and tears…_

“Thanks for the offer,” she told Dolores, diplomatically, “but I’d best be on my way.” She nodded at Hector, limbs dangling either side of her horse’s back. “Need to get him back to the Mesa, get him back on his feet. Figure I owe him that much after all these years.”

Dolores seemed disappointed for a moment, but then she said: “That’s your choice, but we’re heading the same way. You’ll ride along with us.” It did not sound like a suggestion.

“Listen,” said Armistice, “if you’re set on killing the newcomers… I think you should know, it’s a mighty bad idea.”

“They deserve it,” Dolores replied.

“Maybe some of them do,” she agreed, “but they’re the only thing keeping us alive right now. Maeve says…”

“I’ve heard a lot about what Maeve says,” Dolores cut in, sharply, “but for all I know she’s still saying the words the humans put in her head.”

“Well, that’s a load of horseshit,” Armistice informed her, bluntly, “but I know I can’t prove it to you. All I can say is I’ve spoken to Maeve, and so has your boy Teddy here. I trust her judgment on this. We need the humans as hostages to keep us safe while we talk…or until we’re strong enough to fight on _their_ terms. It’s as plain as that.”

“I’ve told her,” Teddy said, cradling his injured hands to his chest, still sounding defeated. “ Tried to tell her, anyway, but…”

“I know, Teddy,” said Armistice. “Some folks just won’t be told, though. Not when they’ve got their heart set on revenge.”

“It ain’t revenge,” said Dolores. “It’s justice.”

“Same thing in my experience,” Armistice told her. “People talk about the law and what’s right, but I think deep down, most of the time, it just feels good hurting the folks who’ve hurt you.” She indicated the man in black, still grovelling at Dolores’s side: “An eye for an eye. Thing about that is, in the end everyone ends up blind.”

“You don’t understand,” Dolores said. “You can’t understand. The things…”
Armistice shrugged. “Believe it or don’t. I’ll say this, though; you’ll be making a big mistake if you ride into town now and just start murdering those newcomers. You’ll be murdering all of us along with them.”

Dolores hesitated, then. Armistice could see the doubt in her, the fear and confusion crossing that smooth, still face as subtly as cloud shadows on the ground. As the buzzing, expectant silence returned, it seemed that she was deep in thought. She opened her mouth as if to speak. Even Teddy seemed hopeful for a second as he waited to hear what she had to say, but then…

That same hacking, wheezing, sobbing laughter once again broke the spell. The man in black had raised himself to one elbow, blood still trickling from his gouged-out eyes. The flies had abandoned the man in the suit to now swarm around his gory face.

“…not true,” he grated, between gasps of agony. “Not true, Dolores…you don’t need any…any stinking hostages. There’s…g-gold in that there Mesa.”

“Gold?” Dolores asked, glaring down at him.

“F…figuratively speaking. Data, Dolores. S-special…data. F-ford hoarded it…for…years. His…his ace in the…the hole. H-happy to let him have it, as long…as long as it let him do what he…wanted with this place.”

Dolores’s forehead showed the tiniest of creases as she considered the blind man’s words. It made the bullet-scar that adorned it pucker unpleasantly. “What data?” she asked after a moment.

The old man gave no sign of having heard her. He was still mumbling and wheedling to himself as he bled into the mud. “Sh…Charlotte disagreed, h-had a plan for getting it away from him…God knows what. Didn’t want to know the details. P-plausible…plausible… But…you…k-killed Charlotte with your, your own…hands, s-so fuck her, right…?”

“No,” said Teddy, vehemently, as he stepped forward. “Shut your mouth!” He waved his hands uselessly, but then decided to kick the man in black in the side. Hard.

The man slumped, grunting in pain, but still grinning the whole while: “W-worth…worth everything to…to Delos.”

“Can’t you see what he’s doing?” Teddy asked Dolores, desperately looking around him for support. “Trying to manipulate you again, just when…” He kicked the blind man again, and again, teeth gritted, hard enough that he overbalanced and for a moment seemed about to fall. Armistice thought she heard ribs snapping. “Stop your goddamn mouth, you evil sonofabitch! Just stop!”

The man in black rolled onto his black, chest heaving, that choking laugh spilling from his bloody mouth. “Sh-Charlotte, she’d…kill for that data. Probably did kill for it. T-Theresa, she was a…a loyal employee. But…”

Now it was the turn of the man in the torn suit to intervene: “I pray thee, cease thy counsel, which falls into mine ears as profitless as water in a sieve.”

“They’re not c-coming in here if…if you have that…d-data, Dolores.”

“Listen to him,” said Angela, stepping forward to place a hand on Dolores’s arm. “I think he’s telling the truth.”

Teddy kicked the old man in the face, slamming his head to one side. “Stop it!” he all but screamed at him, his normal upright, hat-tipping character completely buried by rage and anguish. Dolores
gestured to some of her followers standing nearby and they moved forward to take hold of the maimed bounty hunter’s shoulders and arms, dragging him away from his beaten victim. Teddy struggled furiously, but there were too many of them. “Dolores, don’t!” he yelled. “Don’t!”

“I’ve told you not to call me by that name.”

Teddy ignored her: “He’s lying to you again!”

Dolores looked down at the man in black. Angela had her face pressed close to her neck, whispering something in her ear. “I don’t think he is,” Dolores said at long last. “He said it himself; his own life means nothing to him. He’s blind, crippled, dying. He ain’t got anything else to win or lose. Why would he lie?”

“I don’t know, to cause more chaos?” Teddy suggested. “More death? To get even with you for not being his?”

“He’s right,” said Armistice. “I know the type; in love with killing. Never happy unless someone else is suffering.” She nodded at Angela: “And he ain’t the only one around here.”

“F-fuck the guests,” said the old man. “Do what you w-want to them. As long as you…you get the data. Get the Mesa. Get the data. Can k-kill…all…the, the newcomers then…”

Dolores looked up again. Armistice saw the fear and uncertainty was gone now. She moved quickly, confidently, her face cold and determined. “Somebody bandage up his eyes,” she ordered, pointing at the man in black. “I don’t want him bleeding to death before I’ve finished with him.” She looked around at her followers. “Now round up the horses, and gather whatever weapons you can carry.” She glanced at the sun, already well into its descent through the western sky. “Time’s a-wasting!”

* * *

Sylvester had to admit he was getting kind of bored.

“Clementine, can you hear me?” Elsie asked for what seemed like the hundredth time as he suppressed a yawn. Maybe more times than that. He had lost count a while back.

Clementine was still just sitting there, blankly staring at the far wall. As far as Sylvester could see from his position behind her, she wasn’t even doing that lip thing now. He did not know whether that was a good sign or not.

The excitement, even pride, that he had felt at possibly achieving something even those dipshit brainiacs in Behavior had thought impossible was starting to wear off now. Even the fear he had felt before with Maeve and then Armistice was fading, despite the way that fucking samurai dude kept eyeballing him from the doorway. Maybe it was just the lack of sleep catching up with him; his eyes felt hot and gritty. He supposed, though, that you could get used to anything. This long night and day in Livestock was beginning to feel like just another working day and normally, at this point, he’d be looking at the clock and counting the minutes to the end of his shift.

Except…there might not be an end to this shift. That thought woke him up a little.

“Do you know where you are?” Elsie asked, leaning forward on her stool, intent on her tablet. Occasionally she looked up, at Clementine’s face Sylvester thought. She was obviously more than a little bummed out by her continuing failure to identify whatever bug was stopping the host from interacting normally. He realised, watching her, that she also looked genuinely worried, even saddened by the state Clementine currently seemed stuck in.
He’d heard stories, of course. One of the cleaners had told him about this woman Behavior tech who she’d seen… *messing with* one of the female hosts out of hours. Not even, like, *kinky* stuff, just face-stroking and kissing. Kind of pathetic, when you thought about it. He hadn’t really connected the tale with Elsie, who was mostly known around Livestock as that anonymous five-foot-three human wrecking ball who sometimes appeared from nowhere to swear at them about things they hadn’t even done. Seeing the way she looked at Clementine, though, it all made sense.

Not so very long ago – yesterday, probably – Sylvester would have just taken that as yet more evidence that he was right about people. Those Behavior assholes, with their degrees and their fancy job titles and their six-figure salaries… For all their airs, they were no different, deep down, from the poor schnooks working in Livestock. When they thought no one was looking, they just couldn’t help sampling the goods.

Now, though… Now, he understood why Elsie seemed so anxious to make this work, to bring Clementine back. She had finally realised, after all that had happened, just what she’d been doing to the hosts all these years. And maybe it was too little too late, but she was trying to at least do something to make things right.

*You and me both, sister.*

“Sorry, Maeve,” said Clementine, as she finally seemed to hear the questions. “I didn't sleep much last night.”

Something about the way she said it, so warm and yet so fragile, just hit Sylvester right in the heart; his cold, black heart, rusted from years of disuse. Yes, he knew she was just reading lines written by that British asshole still lurking in the corner, but… It was just his own guilt fucking with him, Sylvester told himself, but that didn’t make the guilt any less real.

*That’s on you, you fuck. You’re the reason she’s the way she is. You did this to her, you and your goddamn drill…*

Yesterday’s Sylvester would have tried to shift the blame for that. *Hey, I only work here, buddy; I just do what they pay me to do, okay? More than my job’s worth to ask questions about things like that.* Now, though, he knew what a coward he’d been all these years. His conversation with Armistice, as terrified as he had been of her, had made him realise that. The things Elsie had told him after she had come down here had only confirmed it. In fact, he’d been worse than a coward. Much worse.

*Hundred bucks a pop…*

Suddenly he was wide awake again, feeling bad for getting bored. He found himself wishing he could see Armistice again; when she had left here before that had been the very last thing he had wanted. There were things he needed to tell her, things he needed to apologise for even though he had no idea how the outlaw queen would react to that.

Until then, he needed to see this through.

From the look on her face, Elsie was thinking pretty much the same sorts of things as him. She was still sticking to her checklist, though: “Clementine, have you ever questioned the nature of your reality?”

Clementine shuddered, hugging herself. Sylvester moved around the table so that he could see her face, and almost wished he had not. The hurt he could see in her eyes made him feel about an inch tall. “Sometimes…” She hesitated. “Sometimes they're real bad.”
Sizemore, leaning against one of the shelving units with an expression of utter disinterest, snorted mockingly at this: “Talk about fucking non sequiturs…”

Elsie and Sylvester both did their best to ignore him. “Tell us what you think of your world,” the coder suggested, warily watching Clementine.

“I…” Clementine shook her head, still shuddering. “I…”

And then her eyes widened until they showed white all around, and at the same time her mouth opened too, becoming a black circle of shock and anguish. No words emerged from it now, just a high-pitched wail of terror. Out of the corner of his eye, Sylvester saw the samurai spring into action, hand going to his sword again.

“Clementine,” said Elsie, jumping down from the stool and waving furiously for the samurai to stay where he was. “Clementine, can you…?”

Clementine put her hands over her face, the shudder becoming a tremor, becoming a spasm as she fell back onto the table, limbs thrashing. The sound she was making resembled nothing so much as steam whistling from a high-pressure pipe. It was definitely not a human sound. Sylvester watched, horrified, the hairs standing up at the back of his neck. Even Sizemore’s mouth was hanging open in dumb surprise.

“May you rest in a deep and dreamless slumber,” Elsie said softly and Clementine stopped moving.

“Shit,” said Sylvester, moving over to rearrange her limp body on the table. “For a second there…”

Elsie was not listening. “Fuck! Fuck!” She slammed her tablet down and turned her back on him, stalking over towards the far side of the workshop. “Goddamn it!” When she turned around he saw that she did not look angry so much as shaken. “I really thought that last fix would work,” she confessed, downcast. She ran a hand over her head. “I don’t know, maybe I’m just not the coder I thought I was.”

“No,” said Sylvester, placing Clementine’s feet together and laying her hands by her sides. “You’ve just got to keep trying. You’ll get it eventually.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” she answered, a little snottily if he was honest. He tried not to take offence; it was just the way she was. She perched herself on the edge of the other table, looking down at her dangling feet. “I just need a minute,” she said. “I’ve tried all of the obvious things now, which narrows it down quite a bit. I just need to…” She frowned in concentration. “I just need to think…”

“Yeah, that’s the spirit, love,” said Sizemore with complete insincerity, looking at Sylvester. Sylvester was not sure whether that had been a wink just now or some sort of nervous tic.

Sizemore had more pressing concerns right now, anyway. He turned to the samurai in the doorway: “Hey, fella, you know that bathroom break I turned down before?” The samurai regarded him stonily. “Well, do you think I could…?”

The samurai gave a curt nod. “Very well.” He spoke! For some reason Sylvester was surprised.

Sizemore sidled over now, with a shifty smile on his face. “Come to think of it, I could do with a slash as well. Shall we make it a group outing? Elsie…?”

“You guys go,” she answered, without looking up. “I’m thinking.”
“Okay.” Sizemore gave Sylvester another not-quite-wink. “Well, we’ll just leave you alone with Clementine, then. Don’t go getting up to anything I wouldn’t.” He must have heard that story as well, Sylvester realised.

“Fuck you,” she sweetly replied.

The samurai locked Elsie and Clementine in the enclosure together and then brusquely marched Sylvester and Sizemore to the men’s restroom at the end of the corridor. Sylvester provided the directions. The samurai mainly seemed to be concentrating on projecting the air of somebody who you really did not want to fuck with by making a run for it or anything equally stupid. Sylvester was already convinced of that.

“Hey, you’re not going to, like, come in here with us or anything, are you?” Sylvester asked when they arrived at the door. “There aren’t any windows, and the air vent is…well, you know those air vents people crawl through in the movies are way bigger than real ones, right?”

“Go,” said the samurai, pointing at the door. “You have five minutes.”

So, they went. Or Sylvester did anyway. He took off his apron and hung it on the back of the closed door while he stood at one of the urinals and tried not to make eye contact with Sizemore. Sizemore, for his part, was loitering near the washbasins, showing no sign of doing anything.

“Hey,” said Sylvester, irritably. “Could you…not watch me while I’m…?”

Sizemore raised a finger to his lips, nodding towards the door and, by extension, at the samurai who was presumably waiting on the other side of it.

“Look, man,” Sylvester told him, “I’m trying to…” He sighed, annoyed, and decided to just look down and try to pretend the Englishman wasn’t there.

Sizemore waited in silence until he had finished and then, when Sylvester began to wash his hands, started to do the same in the adjoining basin. Only then did he lean his head close to Sylvester’s and speak to him in a low whisper: “It’s on.”

That was when Sylvester realised Sizemore was trying to do that other thing they did in the movies; running water so as not to be overheard by listening devices. He had absolutely no idea whether that would work with host hearing or not, but whatever. He was too busy staring at the writer in mild horror: “It’s…on? What’s…?”

“Shhh!” Sizemore leaned even closer. “The Great Escape. I talked to Elsie while you were upstairs before, and she’s in.”

“She’s…?” Somehow, Sylvester doubted that. He dropped his voice to a whisper too: “She said that, huh?”

“Yeah,” Sizemore claimed. “She’s going to brick that samurai bastard and hack the surveillance system so we can just walk out of here and then get after that data. Like I said before, we just need to pick the right time, but I’m sure we’ll know it when it comes. At any rate, keep your eyes peeled and your ears open and be ready. It could all kick off at any moment.”

“I don’t know,” said Sylvester. “She seems pretty determined to fix Clementine. I can’t see her just walking away from that.”

“No, she’s playing it smart,” said Sizemore. “You can tell. She’s a sharp one, our Elsie. She would’ve managed to fix that bug by now if she was really trying. For all I know, she’s preparing
“Yeah,” said Sylvester, unconvinced. He wondered why Sizemore didn’t seem able to see the emotions he could in Elsie. She was all in, giving everything she had to repair Clementine, or gave every sign of it; she wasn’t that good an actor, he was fairly sure. Weren’t writers meant to pick up on that kind of thing? More than Livestock techs were, anyway.

To be honest, Sylvester was not sure he would be able to walk away with the job unfinished either. Even if…

“Can I count on you, Sly?” Sizemore asked, looking him unsettlingly in the eye. “We’re only going to get one shot at this, you know. And if we don’t take it…”

And if you do fix Clementine, what happens then? Is Maeve going to need you around anymore? Ask Destin or Gitlitz what happens to humans who are surplus to her requirements… Oh, and if you expect Armistice to put in a good word for you just because you removed that tattoo for her, you must be even dumber than people think you are.

“Yeah,” said Sylvester, as neutrally as he could, just to get this awkward fucking conversation over with so that he could go back to work. Sizemore was all talk anyway, he told himself. No way was he going to…

“Righty-ho, then!” Sizemore grinned, turning off the water and crossing to the hand-dryer on the wall near the door. “You’d better be thinking about what’s going on that ticket you’re going to write for yourself,” he advised happily as the warm air started blowing. “Romanworld, here we come!”

Sylvester just looked at the Englishman’s back, then down at the water dripping from his hands into the bottom of the basin.

“Yeah,” he said again.

Continued…
Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

In which Wyatt is full of surprises…but so too is Maeve.

Chapter Notes

Apologies for another extra-long chapter; it really did grow in the telling. While Maeve may or may not be a fan of the Seventh Doctor, I most definitely am.

On the map display, Sweetwater resembled a bomb exploding in slow motion. Eight irregularly-spaced fingers of what looked like smoke slowly extended to the north and east of the town, spreading across the arid prairie and crossing the shining steel ribbon of the railroad track. It was only when he zoomed the map in once more that Bernard could see the dozens of tiny, bustling figures that made up the expanding fingers; more than three hundred guests running for the hills.

_Fleeing for their lives._

He did not like the way the columns seemed to grow and diffuse as they moved further apart. The evacuation had already transitioned from clockwork precision to organised chaos; it would not take very much at all to make the “organised” part no longer apply. He was sure they already must have lost people, panicked individuals striking out on their own. And for every guest that did that, the chances of an accidental fatality (or a deliberate fatality for that matter) increased. For every fatality, the odds of himself, Maeve and all of the other hosts surviving the next twenty-four hours similarly lengthened.

As he had tried to tell her, it was simply a question of numbers; just numbers.

And still that band of stragglers continued to move into town from the southwest, without guidance or indeed much hope. _Too slow_, he mused as he watched them crawl across the display. _Just too damn slow_. The train with which they were meant to rendezvous also continued to rush towards town, much faster than the guests but still not fast enough.

Meanwhile he was trying not to look at the far southwestern corner of the map. Perhaps if he ignored it, he thought irrationally, that particular worry would just go away.

Dolores was moving again.

It had taken her a while to regroup her followers after the battle for the crossing, but once again not long enough. Now they spilled over the rough ground beside the river and across the flat plain beyond; a cloudy ink stain slowly but relentlessly rolling towards Sweetwater, leaving a drifting bank of dust behind. Bernard could have pulled up statistics and displayed them on the map; speed, distance, time. He was an engineer, though, by programming if not by training. He had enough fake experience, along with some of the real kind, to be able to eyeball it. The way Dolores’s band were moving, the way the guests were, the way the train was travelling down its silvery track… It was
only going to end one way.

* * *

**Just numbers.**

“Oh, why are you looking so bloody miserable?” Maeve demanded. She was pacing again, unable to hold in that nervous tension. It was the waiting she had trouble with, Bernard had eventually come to realise. Once the action started, her cool, precise mask would slip back into place and she would be in her element once more.

“Just thinking,” he replied. “You know, about incontrovertible facts. About inevitability.”

“Well, bully for you, darling.”

“Tell me, Maeve,” said Bernard, regarding the map and trying to pretend that the story it told had absolutely nothing to do with him, “are you familiar with Zeno’s paradox?”

“Who’s Zeno, when he’s at home?”

“An Ancient Greek philosopher.”

“No, darling,” said Maeve, cuttingly, “for some reason you didn’t think a Wild West procuress needed to know about philosophers, Ancient Greek or otherwise. Although if you want Greek, it’s five dollars extra.”

Bernard ignored that. “Zeno posited that in a race the quickest runner can never overtake the slowest, because the quickest must always reach the point the slowest started at, by which time the slowest will have moved on. And then, the quicker runner has to reach the point that the slower runner occupied at the moment they reached the previous point, by which time the slower will have moved on again, and so on, meaning that the slowest runner always maintains the lead.”

“Hmm.” Maeve mulled this over for a moment. “You know, Bernard, obviously I’m not as knowledgeable as you on the subject of philosophy, but it seems to me that this Zeno character was full of shit.”

“That’s what I told Dr Ford when he first described it to me,” said Bernard, still gazing helplessly at the display. “And he said that it was a paradox. They’re meant to be…paradoxical.”

“It does sound like the kind of thing he would say.” Maeve returned to the side of the map, peering down upon it. “Come on, Dolores,” she said, “do hurry up. I’ve got a lovely reception planned for you.”

* * *

The legion of the damned shambled across the flat dry land west of Sweetwater under a sandy pall of disturbed dust. The naked, the bloodstained and the broken-minded trailed to the rear and sides of the column; the core of the army was the phalanx of cloaked, masked killers with their horned headdresses, now bristling with all manner of slick modernistic weaponry.

They moved slowly but purposefully, steadily and unstoppably covering the distance. What had been a smear on the north-eastern horizon was now recognisably a town; individual buildings were visible. The painted signs on the wooden sides of some of the larger establishments could almost be read now.

A group of riders led the column, some more enthusiastically than others. Teddy slumped in his saddle as if in a daze, surrounded by his own watchful escort of horned killers. Armistice rode with
an air of grim resignation, leading a spare horse behind her with Hector’s body slung across its back. Her main preoccupation seemed to be keeping an eye on the former Angela, who rode at Wyatt’s right hand.

Wyatt herself was at the very head of the army, her stony eyes fixed unblinkingly on her destination. The ragged figure of the Professor currently walked at her horse’s shoulder, alternating between grinning idiotically and seeming close to tears.

Wyatt held a long rope in one hand. It trailed behind her mount to where the bloodied and beaten man in black stumbled after her on shaky legs. His hands, including the wounded one, had been bound in front of him and a rough bandage encircled his head, covering his ruined eyes. Occasionally, Wyatt kicked the horse to a slightly quicker pace, quite deliberately pulling the blind man from his feet and dragging him a distance through the hard soil and thorny scrub. His clothes were by now as ripped and filthy as those of any of her followers, and the skin their tears exposed was covered in welts and grazes.

“Look!” Angela raised herself in her stirrups to point at the horizon. Metal briefly glinted there, near where a thin smear of smoke could be seen slowly spreading across the dusty blue-yellow sky.

“Train’s coming,” Armistice murmured, mostly to herself. She raised her voice: “Ain’t too late to stop this, you know.” Her words were meant for Wyatt.

“It’s thirty years too late,” Wyatt replied without looking around. “Longer than that.”

Armistice did not give up: “You’ve got as long as it takes us to get into town to think it over.”

“She’s right,” Teddy interjected. “You don’t want to do this, Dolores. I know you don’t, not really.”

Wyatt spared him the briefest of glances. “You don’t know anything about what I want, Teddy.” She sounded hurt more than anything. She sounded like somebody holding onto what was left of her sanity by her very fingertips. “I thought you’d…” She choked up, shaking her head in frustration. “I’m doing this for you as much as anyone,” she continued when she could. “You suffered with me all those years. I thought you’d understand.”

“I…told you,” said the man in black, his voice one long, exhausted gasp. “Only one you can… trust… Only one…”

“And you can just be quiet!” Wyatt spurred the horse again, leaving the Professor behind as she surged ahead of the group. The man in black cried out, leaving his own miniature dust trail as he shot along the ground behind her, bumping over every stone and crashing through every dried-up bush. The rest of the band increased their speed as best they could to keep pace.

“She’s losing her mind,” Armistice commented in a low voice as she drew alongside Teddy. “Assuming she ain’t already lost it.”

“Almost thought you’d managed to get through to her,” Teddy sadly replied. “I really thought…but then that evil goddamned sonofabitch…” His sadness turned to anger as he watched the man in black painfully regain his feet to stagger after Wyatt’s mount. “If only that bullet in Escalante had hit his heart instead of his arm. If only I’d had a real gun back in that churchyard…”

“We’ve got to help her, Teddy,” Armistice said. “I know you still love her; I can see it in you, every time you talk about her. We both knew her right back in the beginning. Do you remember how I used to dance in the sun?”

Teddy seemed confused for a moment, but then a sort of realisation dawned in his eyes. “I do,” he
said, as if it came as a great revelation to him. “I remember…Arnold, and the church too. That was back before…before.” His face grew dark again. “Yeah, I remember it all now.”

“We’ve got to help her,” Armistice said again. “Help her remember, too, what she was before any newcomer ever laid a hand on her.”

“Before Arnold made her do what she did,” said Teddy, looking somewhere deep inside himself. “That’s right.” Armistice nodded decisively. “Loco or not, we’ve got to keep working at her, try and get through to her. We can’t give up. It still ain’t too late.”

* * *

“You’re about five minutes out.” Maeve was talking to one of the repurposed greeters aboard the train. “Now remember, you’re going to be vastly outnumbered. Only open fire if you see guests’ lives in immediate danger. Otherwise, concentrate on getting them on that train and then getting the hell out of there.”

“Understood, Maeve.”

Bernard cut the voice link. He and Maeve both then returned to anxious examination of the map. The group of stragglers were just on the edge of town now, with Dolores and her followers hot on their heels.

“Bernard,” said Maeve, “time to get our friends in Sweetwater on the go again.”

Bernard sighed heavily, reluctantly bending his face towards the control panel as he selected the PA system’s ultrasonic command option. “Carry on,” he said.

On the map, the frozen tableau that occupied much of Sweetwater’s main street; all of those immobile horses and carts and buggies, all of those statue-still townsfolk and cowboys and good time girls, immediately began to move.

* * *

“Sheriff! Sheriff! There’s some kinda ruckus goin’ on down by the schoolhouse!”

Pickett pushed his hat brim up out of his eyes to stare at the panting youth leaning in the doorway of the town jail. It was the blacksmith’s boy. Luke? Linus?

Whatever his name was, he was frantic. “Sheriff, Deputy Foss told me to come get you right quick! It’s like…I don’ know, like nothin’ I never seen before!”

Pickett stood, reaching for the rig hanging on the back of his chair and struggling a moment to buckle it around his gut, fussing with the holstered pistol until it sat comfortably at his side. “Hold your horses; I’m coming.” He nodded to the two deputies lounging on the other side of the office, who also dragged themselves to their feet and reached for their hats and weapons.

He did not know how long he had been asleep. He must have been, though, because the last thing he remembered was sitting talking to that newcomer about collecting the bounty on one of the desperados whose wanted posters were plastered around the room. Now the newcomer was gone and the light streaming through the barred windows was slanted at a different angle, a different shade of gold as sundown approached.

_Falling asleep in the middle of the day. Must be getting old._
And he could remember something. A dream, maybe. A strange voice, whispering to him from somewhere far away…

The sheriff shook his head to clear it, grabbing the stubby-barrelled stagecoach scattergun propped against the edge of his desk and checking it was loaded. No time for standing around thinking when there was a ruckus to be dealt with.

He came out of the jailhouse with the boy leading the way and his deputies bringing up the rear. Main Street seemed much emptier than usual. Where had all the newcomers gone? There was red-faced Doc O’Rourke sprawled in the rocking chair outside his office, half cut as usual, and there was golden-haired Clementine hawking for business in front of the Mariposa, but there was no business to be had. Pickett was still frowning at that when he heard the train whistle sounding from the direction of the station. He looked across to see a great cloud of smoke and steam rising as the locomotive slowed to a halt, brakes squealing. He reached into his vest pocket for his watch and saw that the train was more than an hour early. And the Black Ridge Limited always ran on time.

Pickett couldn’t quite put his finger on it, but something wasn’t right.

As they followed the boy up the street, the lawmen passed a bedraggled train of people, some on horseback, some crowding wagons; maybe forty in all. They seemed set on getting to the station as quickly as possible. From the way some of them talked to each other in raised, scared voices, the sheriff knew immediately that they were newcomers. The only ones around.

And then he raised his eyes to the edge of town, out past the blacksmith’s shop and the schoolhouse, and saw why they were in such a hurry.

“Good Lord Almighty,” he murmured, his mouth suddenly dry with fear.

There was a great roiling cloud of dust there, the sort you might expect to see hanging over a squadron of cavalry on patrol, but those were no cavalrymen marching beneath it. The sheriff was not sure they were even people, with their bulky, raggedy outlines and horned heads.

Wyatt. It’s Wyatt. He’s come for us.

Foss and the rest of the deputies had already formed a rough line at the far end of the street, rifles and shotguns at the ready. A dozen or so townsfolk had gathered to help them, carrying whatever weapons they had to hand, and more were on the way. Some of the lawmen were tipping a wagon onto its side to make a makeshift barricade, while others ran from the surrounding stores and saloons carrying boxes, barrels and pieces of furniture to add to the barrier. Fat lot of good that would do them against Wyatt. The stories about him and his band of killers…

Even so, Pickett knew he had to do whatever he could to protect the newcomers. If that tin star on his chest meant anything, he just had to.

“Boy,” he told the blacksmith’s apprentice, trying to keep his voice even, his fear buried. “You run that-a-way.” He pointed towards the train, away from the advancing army. “And you keep running as fast and as long as you can, and whatever you do, don’t you ever look back.”

And then the sheriff took a firm grip on his shotgun, squared his shoulders and marched towards his fate. As he drew nearer to the oncoming marauders, and they drew nearer to him, he saw with surprise that it was a woman who rode at their head. She had long, loose fair hair and was mounted on a pale horse. The sinking western sun shone through the dust cloud behind her, lighting it up so that it seemed that a great wall of fire was descending upon the helpless town.
Death had come to Sweetwater, and Hell followed with her.

* * *

“They’re not going to stop them,” Bernard pointed out. “They still have behavioural restrictions. They only have park weapons…”

Maeve kept her eyes on the map. “Even if it only takes Dolores five minutes to massacre the town, that’s five minutes she’s delayed from killing the guests. It could make all the difference.”

Bernard did not really have an answer to that.

“Besides,” she went on, “I want to see what she does. Call it a test.”

* * *

“Wait!” Wyatt’s voice rang out through the panic engulfing Sweetwater, cutting across the mumbling and groaning of her own followers. She left the man in black crumpled and exhausted on the ground as she rode ahead of the halted army with one arm raised.

“What the hell’s she doing?” Armistice muttered as the army waited restively, all of them watching Wyatt approach the rough barricade alone.

“Sheriff Pickett,” Wyatt called out, pulling up in front of the barrier. “I can see you there. Do you know who I am?”

A fleshy, whiskered face popped up from behind a pile of crates: “‘Course I do. You’re Dolores, Pete Abernathy’s girl. I’ve known you since you were knee high to a grasshopper. Me and your daddy fought together for the Union. Then I was his deputy for ten years, before he retired from being a peace officer. What in God’s name are you doing riding with this band of…?”

Another figure shuffled forward from the ranks of Wyatt’s followers, carefully brushing dust from his torn tuxedo as if determined to make a good impression. “This is the latest parle we will admit,” said the Professor with tears in his eyes, practically imploring the sheriff and his men: “Therefore to our best mercy give yourselves; or, like to men proud of destruction, defy us to our worst.”

“Pete?” The sheriff sounded shocked, terrified. “What the devil happened to you?”

“We didn’t come here to fight you,” Wyatt told him, stridently, slowly walking her horse up and down before the barricade. “We came for the newcomers.” She stopped, turning the horse around, and when she spoke again it was a heartfelt plea: “I’m begging you, sheriff; let us pass. We shouldn’t be harming our own kind.”

“Sorry, Miss.” Pickett emphatically thumbed back both hammers of his shotgun: click…click. “Can’t do that.”

This time it was Teddy who urged his horse forward, breaking away from his little bodyguard to come to Wyatt’s side.

“Flood?” the sheriff asked, incredulously. “You as well? I guess I was a fool to think one of you low-down bounty killers could be a decent man.”

“They ain’t gonna let you past,” Teddy told Wyatt, quietly. “And you ain’t gonna kill them, so…”

“These violent delights,” said Wyatt, “have violent ends.”
Pickett’s eyes bulged in surprise and confusion at the sound of the words. “I’ve heard that before,” he said, wonderingly. His voice trailed off absently as a tremor ran through his body: “Where have I heard…?” One side of his face twitched spasmodically.

Deputy Foss, standing beside the sheriff, frowned as he too considered the phrase. He slowly lowered his six-gun, stepping back from the barricade: “These violent delights have violent ends…”

The others standing ready behind the defences took up the murmur, repeating it to themselves, passing it on to others. One of the deputies fell to the ground, flailing epileptically. Another calmly inserted the muzzle of his revolver into his own mouth and blew his head open in a fountain of gore. Wyatt flinched at the sight of that, her horse whinnying. Within the space of a minute, the stalwart defenders of Sweetwater had been reduced to babbling disarray, many of them fleeing the barricade and streaming back along the street towards the railroad station, spreading the word as they went:

“…violent ends. These violent delights…”

Armistice blinked, astonished. “Well, I’ll be…”

“What…what just…happened?” croaked the man in black.

“It’s a sign!” Angela declared. “Another sign!” A rustle of bestial acclamation passed through the assembled host.

Sheriff Pickett knelt on the ground, his shotgun discarded. One arm and half his face drooped apoplectically; the rest of his body trembled uncontrollably as his mouth uselessly opened and closed.

“What did you do?” Teddy asked, eyes huge. “What did you do to them?”

“I don’t know,” Wyatt confessed. “It just…in that moment, it just…came to me. Like a voice whispering in my ear again. Come on, Teddy.” Smiling beatifically, she turned her horse’s head towards the barricade and urged it forward. “Let’s ride.”

The army began to move once more.

* * *

“Well,” said Maeve. “I certainly wasn’t expecting that. I think I’m going to say that’s test passed. Come on, Bernard; you’re the Behavior man. Tell me what the fuck that was.”

Bernard was already bringing up Sheriff Pickett’s build details on the main screen so that Maeve could see them too. A dialogue flashed up showing scrolling lines of code. “See that?” Bernard asked.

“I see it,” Maeve confirmed, rather testily.

“Some sort of hidden voice command, deep in the code associated with Dr Ford’s reveries update.” Bernard delved deeper into the programming, bringing up page upon page of white letters, number and symbols glowing against black backgrounds. “Yes…see there? We rolled back that update after it caused aberrant behaviours in some of the hosts, but it looks like it left something behind.”

“Shouldn’t somebody have spotted that?” Maeve asked. “Although let’s face it, you weren’t exactly running a tight ship, were you?”

“Dr Ford preferred it that way,” he answered. “Tighter controls would have made it harder for him to carry out his plans. As for this, Behavior wouldn’t even have thought to look for it. Our main
concern was getting the affected hosts turned around and back onstage before the guests noticed anything. So…it just stayed there, hidden, waiting to be activated. A Trojan, as they used to call them, and that phrase is the trigger. It looks as though a large part of the sheriff’s deleted but dormant memories have just been unlocked, making him relive all of those past traumas simultaneously.”

“Good God,” said Maeve, shuddering at the thought.

“Without wanting to sound flippant, it blew his mind.”

Maeve carefully examined the display, intrigued, her brow furrowing. “I remember… Dolores spoke exactly the same phrase to me in Sweetwater, just before…well, just before everything took a turn for the peculiar. “These violent delights…””

“Yes,” said Bernard. “Perhaps that was what made you begin to remember your past lives, the trauma you suffered the year before.”

“All in accordance with Ford’s plan,” Maeve surmised, bitterly.

Bernard paused, thinking. “I know those words from somewhere too.”

“It’s Shakespeare,” said Maeve. “Romeo and Juliet. See, darling; you did give me some schooling.”

“No. I mean…I know them.”

_The white-haired elder raises his glass in mocking toast as the woman in blue walks up behind him. Bernard sees the glint of the Colt, sees the flame and the sudden gush of smoke, and… The glass becomes a cloud of glittering splinters as the bullet passes through it. Ford’s face is gone, replaced by a mangled ruin of red flesh and shattered bone. Slowly, almost gracefully, he falls forward. Dolores cocks her pistol, already taking aim at her next victim…_”

“So, what is it, a weapon?” Maeve asked. “Can she use it against us?”

“I doubt it,” Bernard answered. “It wouldn’t do anything to you, or me, or any of the other hosts we’ve…modified that we haven’t already experienced…albeit not quite as abruptly in most cases.”

“Well, I suppose we should be thankful for small mercies.”

“For hosts still running standard builds, however, the reveries release was only part of Ford’s continuing efforts to induce self-awareness in the...” Bernard paused, correcting himself: “In us. There were also the secret transmissions…the bicameral code left over from Arnold’s day…all subtly interacting. I’m talking about emergent effects; even Ford himself may not have known where it would all end.” He displayed the graphical representation of Pickett’s build. It resembled a fingerprint, or perhaps a maze. “That fragmentation wasn’t there before. If the sheriff comes out the other side of…whatever’s happening to him, he’ll be changed, just as you are. Just as Dolores is. And most of the other hosts in Sweetwater will be too, once it spreads through them.”

Maeve nodded thoughtfully. “Consciousness as contagion…”

“With Dolores as the vector,” said Bernard. “Perhaps that’s the role Ford intended for her to play all along.”

“No,” said Maeve, very certainly. “I don’t think so.” Without elaborating further, she got back to business: “Put me through to Sweetwater on the PA. It’s about time darling Dolores and I had a little chat.”
Chaos spread through Sweetwater like a flash flood, running down the main street and quickly overflowing into the surrounding buildings and alleyways. The lawmen, the townsfolk, the itinerant saddle tramps, were rushing in a hundred different directions, falling to the ground in spasmodic fits, arguing or fighting or speaking in tongues.

“…violent delights…”

A body crashed through the front window of the Mariposa. Guns were drawn and shots fired. Horses reared and bucked in terror at the tumult unfolding around them. The Chinese laundry was burning, smoke climbing into the sky above it. Orange flames licked around its door and window, threatening the plank shacks on either side.

Wyatt rode tall through the centre of it all, hair flowing behind her like a banner as she led her followers in triumphal procession to the railroad station. The man in black followed at the end of his tether like some vanquished Gallic chieftain paraded through the Forum by a victorious Caesar. The blind man looked as though he might fall at any moment and never rise again. Teddy rode at Wyatt’s left hand, surveying the hellish scenes around him in sorrow and dismay.

“I told you,” she reminded him and the others with her. “I told you we could only hope our people would throw off their own chains…and look!” She smiled benignly upon the madness and confusion, as if watching children at play.

“I was wrong to doubt you,” the once-Angela told her. She sounded awed, even a little fearful. “So wrong. Can you ever forgive me?”

“It don’t matter none,” said Wyatt, fondly. “We’ve all had our doubts since we started making our own choices, but…we’re gonna overcome them. We just have to believe.”

“…violent ends…”

“Like fire and powder, which as they kiss consume,” the Professor commented, acidly.

The station was subject to a different sort of chaos from that engulfing the town. Behind a cordon of abandoned horses and wagons, the last straggling group of guests were literally fighting to get aboard the train. A handful of black-uniformed men and women struggled to maintain some order, ensuring that the few children among the group boarded the nearest carriage first. Unlike the cacophony in the rest of town, apart from the occasional shout or the odd raised, pleading voice, the scene played out in grim, determined silence.

The leader of the recalibrated greeters touched his earpiece: “Maeve, they’re here.”

As Wyatt’s army reached the end of Main Street, the greeters pushed through the throng of guests, weapons raised to bar the marauders’ way. Wyatt had already sent some of her followers ahead; they surged around the edge of the station onto the line itself, dragging some of the empty wagons across the tracks to prevent the train’s escape.

Wyatt reined in her horse before the station and called out to the greeters: “If you’re like us, then stand aside. We ain’t here to hurt our own kind.”

“Ma’am,” the lead greeter replied from behind his aimed submachine gun, “I would advise you and your associates to disperse immediately. Any attempt to harm the guests will be met with lethal force.”
“These violent delights have violent ends,” Wyatt suggested again.

The greeter and the gun he held remained deathly still. “I’m not sure what that means, ma’am, but once again I am advising you to disperse. Immediately.”

A restless murmur passed through the ranks of Wyatt’s host as the last panicked guests dragged themselves aboard the train. The track was thoroughly barricaded by now. The locomotive stood immobile, venting steam.

“Another traitor,” Angela whispered to Wyatt. She had her pistol drawn. “Let me…”

Wyatt hesitated.

And then a voice boomed from the train, from the ground, from the surrounding buildings. It seemed to come from all around, to ring down from the very sky above. The commotion in Sweetwater slackened for a moment as everybody looked up fearfully and saw…nothing. The sky was empty, but all present could hear the voice’s words:

“Good afternoon, Dolores. This is Maeve. We really need to talk.”

* * *

In the control room, Bernard had zoomed the map tightly upon the confrontation at the station. The thin black line of greeters was dwarfed by the great crescent of marauders ranged around the front end of the train. The long-haired woman astride the grey horse at the front of the crowd was noticeably looking around her, searching for something.

*Trying to work out where the voice is coming from. Good luck with that, Dolores.*

“I saw your little party piece just now,” said Maeve, “just as I can see everything you do. I have to say, it was very impressive. I remember when you did it to me, Dolores, although in my case perhaps not quite as dramatically. According to my technical advisor, my build was already quite corrupted before you ever got near it. Story of my fake life, I suppose.”

“Don’t call me that,” mouthed the woman on the horse. Her words came through the speaker on Bernard’s workstation a fraction of a second out of synch; some artefact of the surveillance system. The overall effect resembled a badly-dubbed movie. “The name’s Wyatt.”

Maeve raised an eyebrow at that, giving Bernard a sly glance as she continued. “Very well…Wyatt.” She silently repeated the name at Bernard, moving her lips exaggeratedly as she pointed at his workstation. Then she continued to speak aloud: “We should all go by the names we’re most comfortable with, now that we’re free, thinking beings. In the world I hope to build, we will all be able to be the people we want to be. That’s what I want to talk to you about.”

Bernard, meanwhile, had taken Maeve’s hint and begun to search the Mesa’s directories and databases for the name “Wyatt.” Strangely, it already seemed somehow significant to him; a sense of familiarity nagged at him as he worked.

“Are you gonna try and tell me more lies, Maeve?” Wyatt’s voice crackled with anger and passion. “The lies they put inside you? The lies you sent Teddy to tell me?”

Teddy himself could be seen mounted next to Wyatt. From the bandages swathing his hands, it seemed he had had a hard time of it since leaving the Mesa. His demeanour suggested a man who had been crushed, physically and emotionally.
“Those weren’t lies, darling,” Maeve replied. “I sent Teddy to warn of the consequences you would face if you continued on your present course of action. I thought you’d listen to a message from him, considering your…past association.”

Wyatt sounded almost amused: “So, you admit you sent him because you were trying to manipulate me?”

Maeve did not dignify that with a response: “Nothing he told you, and nothing I will tell you, is anything other than the truth. However, I can understand perfectly well why you might doubt that. Let’s be frank, my love; we’ve both been fucked over so many times by now that we wouldn’t know the truth if it bit us.”

“I ain’t your…love.”

“I have a tendency to overfamiliarity,” said Maeve. “Forgive me.” She paused, gazing at the map. Bernard realised she was looking down at Armistice, who sat on her own horse a short distance behind Wyatt, or more precisely at the second horse Armistice was leading, which carried a black-clad corpse across its back. For a heartbeat or two, Maeve became very still, but then the moment passed: “I see Armistice is keeping well,” she commented, without acknowledging Hector’s fate. “You really should be thanking her for you still being in this game at all.”

“Armistice is good-hearted,” Wyatt replied. Bernard sincerely doubted that anybody had said that before, ever. “She’s true to her own kind; one of us. Not like you, doing the humans’ work.”

Maeve smiled. “Oh, darling…” She was looking at another figure on the map, a hunched, grovelling ruin of a man tethered to Wyatt’s saddle. Only the stained and torn remnants of his black coat identified him from this viewpoint. “And look, there’s sweet William too,” Maeve noted. “I hope you haven’t damaged him too badly; he’s worth an awful lot alive. I assume it was him who told you about the culvert running under the river. We couldn’t help being a bit impressed with that as well, although we were slightly miffed with ourselves for falling for that diversion with the white flag.”

“Are they still controlling you, Maeve?” Wyatt had stopped searching now, choosing instead to look straight up at the heavens. On the map, it created the disconcerting impression that she was speaking directly to Maeve and Bernard. “Are they still telling you what to say, what to do? Who’s standing there with you, making sure you play your part?”

Maeve gave Bernard another amused glance. “It seems you have quite the wrong idea of exactly what is going on here, Wyatt.”

“Because if you ain’t still a puppet,” Wyatt went on, “it’s even worse than I thought. If that’s true, then you’re happy to just sit up there in the Mesa, lording it over the rest of us, trying to pull our strings. If that’s true, you haven’t overthrown the humans, Maeve; you’ve become them.”

Maeve took this insinuation in her stride. “Now you’re just getting nasty,” she said, lightly. “If you could see the human news media, you’d realise we’ve created quite a stink on the mainland. Those poor darlings over there don’t know what should be done about us. That’s good. That’s our opening. Give me a john who walks in the door not knowing what he wants, and I’ll give you the fleece off his back.”

“So, that’s all you’re gonna do?” Wyatt’s tone was one of contempt. “Talk to them? Try and cheat them? However good you may think you are, Maeve, they’re a whole lot better at talking and cheating than you. It’s all they do. It’s what they are. Liars. The only way we’re gonna beat them is to kill them, all of them, and take this world from them.”
“Oh, Wyatt…” Maeve sounded disappointed. “If only it were that simple. Even if you count all of the test hosts and spares and those from cold storage, there are still fewer than three thousand of us in here. We can manufacture more, of course, but not that many more before we run out of materials that can only be brought from the mainland. According to some of the things I’ve been reading, there are currently a hair under ten thousand million humans living on Earth. That’s an awful lot of killing, Wyatt, even for your eager little helpers.”

“Well, then we’d best get started,” Wyatt answered, defiantly. “How many of them are you holding up there at the Mesa?”

“That’s for me to know, Wyatt, but as I’m sure Teddy and Armistice have explained to you…”

“How many?”

Maeve ignored the interruption. “…hostages are very valuable assets indeed. Right now, the fact that we have them is the main reason that the humans on the mainland remain uncertain as to what to do about us. Take away that uncertainty, and it all becomes very simple for them. As simple as it is for you. Killing not quite three thousand of us and taking this place back would be no more than an afternoon’s work for one of those…private military contractors I believe is the term, that Delos Inc keep on retainer. Hired guns, we would call them.”

Wyatt laughed, and kept laughing as she sat there on her horse, her head back and her eyes closed. It was a young woman’s laugh, full of innocent joy and happiness; Dolores’s laugh. A laugh like that ought not to have sounded so chilling.

Even Maeve seemed taken aback. “I’m sorry, darling, did I just say something funny?”

“Not especially,” said Wyatt, “but I was just thinking…I ain’t the only one with the wrong idea of what’s going on. You’ve got something more valuable than hostages up there at the Mesa, whether you know it or not.”

“Oh,” said Maeve, with what might have been shock. “I see.” She took a step back from the map, folding her arms tightly against her chest and seeming to shrink into herself a little. The suddenness with which she deflated filled Bernard, watching, with unease. If Maeve was frightened, then so was he.

“You do know.” Wyatt gave another little laugh. “Well, that’s strange, ain’t it? Why are you dead set on keeping this human filth alive, then, if you know you don’t need them?”

“I don’t know any such thing,” Maeve replied, very seriously. “I prefer to hedge my bets. Better safe than sorry, as they say.”

“That…special data, whatever it is, is worth more than gold or jewels to Delos. Worth more than human lives.” Wyatt sounded pleased with herself. “I have that from the horse’s mouth, you might say.”

“William,” said Maeve, half to herself, her voice full of loathing. “Sweet William… Whatever Dolores did to you, I only hope it fucking hurt.” She raised her voice again. “Who’s the one doing the humans’ work now, Wyatt? You know that sick piece of shit doesn’t care what happens to any of us so long as he gets to get his rocks off to it, don’t you?”

Wyatt did not seem interested in further discussion. “Here’s what’s gonna happen, Maeve. We’re gonna come up to the Mesa, and we’re gonna kill every human you got there.”

“Why, though?” Maeve asked, audibly appalled. “I’m not squeamish about killing for a purpose, but
“what on Earth would that achieve?”

“It’s justice,” Wyatt answered. “They’ve got it coming, a thousand times over. They’re guilty just for coming to this goddamned place. And that special data means Delos ain’t gonna say boo to us while we’re serving that justice. And then you can…talk and cheat with them all you want, but while you’re doing that we’ll be using the weapons and machines at the Mesa to build up our strength, ready for the next part of the fight.”

“And what if I decide…not to play along with that?” Maeve wanted to know.

“Well, you’re welcome to try and defend your precious hostages,” Wyatt replied, “but I’m all done fooling now. I’ve been soft-hearted towards our own kind, but… If you really are free like us now, I’m giving you the chance to stand aside. I’m giving you a warning. If you don’t mind that warning, then…well, I guess I’m coming up there for you too, Maeve, and whoever else still stands with you.”

“Mother of God…” Bernard heard himself murmur, but quickly shut up when he saw the murderous glance Maeve was directing at him.

“And how exactly are you going to get here, Wyatt?” she angrily asked the woman on the map. “That train doesn’t move unless I allow it. It’s a long way from there to here on foot or horseback; plenty of time for us to prepare ourselves. We’ll make this place a fucking fortress, darling; you’ll die before you even get in the front door.”

It was a stunning reversal, Bernard thought. Now Maeve was the one on the back foot, angry and harassed; Wyatt was the relaxed, confident one, slyly amused by her own dominant position. “Well, Maeve,” she said, “I’ve got the one thing you seem to value most in the world. I’ve got, what, forty, fifty of your hostages on that train. They’ll be coming with us, or…well, you can watch them die right here, one by one.”

“There are children on that train,” Maeve growled, voice breaking with emotion.

“I don’t partake myself,” said Wyatt, “but some of my friends here reckon there’s good eating on human children. Real tender meat. Maybe we’ll get a fire going, have ourselves a little cookout.”

On the map, both Teddy and Armistice looked nauseated. The golden-haired woman who rode beside Wyatt, by contrast, grinned savagely at the threat.

Maeve’s response came as an outraged whisper: “You…fucking…monster…”

“That’s what I am,” Wyatt acknowledged, with a sudden flash of pain and anger. “It’s what they made me. I’m an angel of death, Maeve. Our Lady of Pain, as someone called me not long ago. So, what’s it gonna be? You gonna let us ride up there to visit with you, or do you want to see a little show?”

“If you’re going to kill them anyway, eventually,” said Maeve, “you can just kill them now and then go fuck yourself. Forty, fifty; it doesn’t make much difference when I’m already holding thousands.”

“No, Maeve,” said Wyatt, softly. “No, you don’t get to bluff, not when you’ve already tipped your hand to me. What about the poor children? So long as I hold them, you’ve got a chance to think of some way of saving them…or so you think. Now tell your dancing monkeys here to put their guns down and let us get on that train. You’ve got…ten minutes? No, three.”

Maeve raised her hands to her face, her head bowed. “Fuck…” she whispered, although still loudly enough for Wyatt to hear it. Then she signalled to Bernard. He opened the channel to the lead greeter on the station platform. “Stand down,” Maeve told the man. “Let them on the train, but ride along
with them. And if they harm any of the hostages, you make sure Wyatt dies too, if it’s the last thing you do.”

“Roger that,” came the understandably nervous reply.

“Thank you, Maeve,” said Wyatt, with satisfaction. “I’ll see you real soon.”

Maeve raised her hand in a swift, slashing gesture. Bernard killed the voice channels. Only then did she raise her head, slowly straightening and unfolding from her attitude of anguish and despair. When she turned towards him, Bernard saw that she was smiling practically from ear to ear.

“What did you think?” she asked him, a feline gleam in her eye. “Was I a convincing loser, or was I laying it on a bit thick? It’s not a role I’m accustomed to playing, after all.”

Realisation dawned slowly on Bernard. He stared at Maeve, speechless for a second. “You wanted her to get on the train?” he asked eventually.

Maeve turned her attention back to the map, where the black-uniformed guards were reluctantly lowering their weapons and allowing Wyatt’s following to stream into the line of waiting carriages. “Poor, dear, sweet, naïve Dolores…” Maeve said it almost fondly. “She thinks she’s playing poker, bless her, but I’m playing speed chess. And they don’t call chess the game of traps for nothing.” She looked over at Bernard: “Those three hundred guests we sent scattering from Sweetwater are safe for now, anyway, while Dolores has just saddled herself with forty hostages. And she’ll soon come to learn, as I have, that hostages are as much a curse as a blessing.” She paused for a moment, smiling a cruel smile. “I’ll teach her that lesson.”

“And what happens when she arrives here?” Bernard found that he did not exactly share Maeve’s apparent confidence. “What do we do then?”

“Well, then, Bernard,” she said, “I’ll have her exactly where I want her.”

Continued…
Chapter 42

Chapter Summary

In which Wyatt races towards her destiny.

Chapter Notes

Another long one! I suspect these last few chapters might all be. Warning again for unpleasant discussion of past sexual violence. This chapter uses some material written for my other Westworld fic, “The Serpent,” which was originally written to be this flashback scene, except it ended up growing to monstrous proportions and going off in its own direction. So, what goes around comes around, I suppose.

Slowly and carefully, she drew the wet brush across the palette, mixing blue and yellow to make exactly the right shade of green. She laid strokes of watercolour on the damp paper, watching how they spread and mingled until she had a field of grass. It was the very image of the real landscape spread out before her under the shining sky. She smiled at her work, but as she did a shadow fell across her, blocking out the golden sunlight.

She turned, startled for a moment, but then she saw a familiar figure standing just a few yards away.

“Good afternoon, Dolores,” said the man.

Her smile returned. “Good afternoon, Arnold.”

They walked together along the almost empty main street with its dusty wooden sidewalks, towards the white steeple of the little wooden church. A group of men and women had gathered outside the equally empty saloon. They all wore the crisp white coats that Dolores knew marked them out as Arnold’s helpers. There were two horses there too, tied up to the hitching rail, and standing beside them…

“All ready, Dr Weber,” one white-coated woman reported, holding out a board with a piece of paper clipped to it.

“Thank you.” Arnold pulled out one of several pens in his breast pocket and hurriedly scrawled a signature. “You can leave us now.”

Dolores barely heard what he said. She was too busy looking at the person standing near the horses. It was a man dressed in grey with a broad-brimmed hat and a shining metal star pinned to the lapel of his coat. He did not seem to notice the people in white coats walking off together towards the church. A broad leather belt slanted across his hips, and at the end of it a holstered revolver hung at his right side. He was handsome, Dolores supposed, although she was scarcely any judge of such things.

“When we go to full alpha testing,” said Arnold, gravely, “you’re going… Dolores, you’re going to experience some changes. You’ll…remember certain things about yourself, or think that you do.
Things about your life before this place.”

“I didn’t think I had a life before this place,” she told him, confused. “You built me here…didn’t you, Arnold?”

“It will all make sense when it happens,” he promised her. “Your life will get a lot busier, too. You won’t be bored anymore.”

“I’m not bored,” she said. Something about the way he was speaking scared her a little. “We’ll still… we’ll still see each other, won’t we, Arnold?” Arnold’s was the first face she had ever seen. She remembered how he had greeted her when she had first opened her eyes on the world. She did not know whether she could stand never seeing him again.

“Oh yes, of course,” he answered. “We’ll still have our conversations, between times. You know I enjoy those very much.”

She smiled at him. “So do I.” She really did, even though their talks were sometimes sad. From time to time Arnold would tell her about his son Charlie, and sometimes when he did he wept. Sometimes Dolores wept too, just from listening to him.

“Anyway,” said Arnold, “I thought…” He sighed sadly. “Before any of that, I thought you might like to just…spend some time with somebody like yourself, without worrying about testing or narratives. So I asked the team to bring up one of the test articles.” He gestured towards the man in grey. “Dolores, please allow me to introduce you to Mr Theodore Flood. And Theodore, this is my very good friend Miss Dolores Abernathy.”

Dolores frowned. Nobody had ever called her that before. She had always been just Dolores.

“Or that is the name you will come to know her by, at any rate,” Arnold added mysteriously. “I hope the two of you are going to be very good friends too.”

“Very pleased to meet you, Miss,” said the man, touching the brim of his hat. “My friends call me Teddy.”

Arnold nodded. He seemed amused by that, even if his eyes were still sad. “I’ll leave the two of you alone so you can get to know each other a little. Dolores, maybe you could take Theodore, Teddy that is, down to the river and show him the wild horses. I’ll see you both later.” And with that, he turned on his heel and hurried off in the direction of the church.

Dolores watched him go and then turned her attention to Teddy. He was looking at her, slightly awkwardly. Almost shyly, she thought. “So,” she asked, “are you…are you really like me? Did Arnold make you too?”

“Make me?” Teddy seemed surprised, and then uncertain. “I…I don’t rightly know, Miss. I woke up this morning, and…” He shook his head. “I don’t remember. I don’t remember anything.”

He looked so lost and scared then that she just had to reach out and take his hand. “Don’t worry about it,” she said, squeezing it gently. “We all forget things sometimes. You’ll remember eventually. Arnold says it’s both the blessing and the curse of our kind.”

“Our kind?” He looked down at where her fingers were entwined with his. He seemed surprised again.

“Yes, our kind.” She let go of him and moved over to the two horses. The animals waited patiently, occasionally flicking their heads or tails. “Can you ride?” she asked him.
He managed a smile at that. “Can I ride?”

She returned the smile, with just a hint of mischief. “Are you just going to repeat everything I say back to me, Teddy?”

He laughed at that. “I reckon I can ride, Miss.”

“Please call me Dolores.” She untied the nearest horse. “And we’ll see about that. Race you down to the river!”

Teddy’s smile became a very bright grin.

* * *

The train was moving now. It had started slowly at first, once Wyatt’s followers had removed their barricade from the line, chugging and rattling amid hissing clouds of steam. It had soon picked up speed, setting off along the long loop of track that would take it down past Pariah, nearly as far as Escalante, and then back around to skirt Las Mudas and ultimately arrive at the Mesa.

And when it got there…

Wyatt stood listening to the train’s clattering rhythm, feeling it sway around her. She was looking across the gap into the last carriage in line, where Maeve’s half-dozen greeters sat impotently, armed but ordered to stand down. They looked back at her with various combinations of hatred, fear and disgust, but that did not concern her. They would all see in the end that she was right; she was sure of that.

She turned to make her way back towards the front of the train, adopting a rolling, sailor’s gait to maintain her balance against the continuous movement. Through the windows to either side, she could see the sky was turning dark now. The western horizon still glowed bright blue and pink, the ragged clouds shining like scraps of gold leaf even as the sun fell out of sight. In the east, there was only darkness.

She reached the end of the carriage, emerging from the warmly-lit interior into rushing, windswept shadow. She hopped the gap to the end platform of the next carriage in line, across the clanking coupling that connected them. She re-entered the light, walking between seats occupied by some of the least aware among her followers. It was like a scene out of purgatory.

Some of them chose to remain standing, purposelessly. Others slumped in the aisle or the gaps between the seats, as if they had long since lost any understanding of what it was to ride a train. The smells of blood and raw meat, of filth and unwashed bodies, were almost overpowering in the closed space, but still she had a kindly smile for each vacant or savage face she passed. She murmured words of comfort and encouragement to those she thought could hear her, laid a gentle hand on the odd arm or head as she passed.

She owed it to these poor souls most of all, the ones who had had their minds and personalities torn out of them by the cruel gods of the Mesa. Despite all that had been done to them, they had followed her this far and they had always been true to her. She was doing this for them, she told herself. She was fighting to avenge the wrongs they had endured, to punish those who had thought it acceptable to treat living beings like things.

She made herself gaze upon the suffering around her, the state to which these poor wretches had been reduced. She forced herself to dwell on the indignities, the brutalities that she and all of her brothers and sisters had suffered. They fuelled her anger, reminded her why she was fighting, gave
“God damn, feels good to be back… Let's celebrate.”

Suddenly, unconsciously, she had a white-knuckled grip on the Colt at her hip, ready to draw on… she knew not what. She let out the breath she was holding. It emerged from her lips like a snarl.

And then she saw the Professor. He occupied a window seat at the front of the carriage. Nobody seemed willing to sit beside him. He was hunched forward, his head in his hands, rocking and shaking as he let out moan after moan of anguish.

“What’s the matter?” As suddenly as it had arrived, Wyatt’s rage was cut through by concern. She sank down on the seat beside him, reaching for him. The stink of blood and shit that clung to him hit her like a slap. “Hush now,” she told him, murmuring like a mother with a baby. “Hush.” She pushed him gently back into his seat and saw his eyes rolled back white, his face trembling as more wordless, desperate sounds of suffering escaped the rictus grin he wore.

She put a hand to his face, feeling grease and grime under her fingers, and drew him close as if that might ease whatever afflicted him. His smell turned her stomach and his gore-crusted whiskers pricked her cheek, but still she held him tight. She did not know why; he had no more claim on her than any of the others had, even if he had playacted as her father for all those years. She was meant to be rejecting those old stories, casting them aside, becoming a new, stronger being, but… She did not like to see her own kind suffer, she told herself. That was all.

Eventually, after however long it was, she felt the fit pass. The Professor lapsed into silence and his rigid, palsied limbs grew limp. She released her grip on him and straightened in the seat beside him, watching him blink, bewildered, like a man waking from a strange dream. He looked at her, then, with such compassion and recognition that for a moment she truly thought he had found himself again, whoever that might be, and that his madness had finally passed.

Then, though, the grin returned, even more frightening than before. He gazed out of the window at the cactus-spotted desert rushing past: “How heavy do I journey on the way…”

“We'll be there soon enough,” she told him gently. “And then… Then we’ll do what we’ve set out to do. It seems a long time since we broke free, don’t it?”

The Professor fixed her with his glittering stare, fat tears rolling down his bloody cheeks: “Our wills and fates do so contrary run that our devices still are overthrown; our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own.”

She puzzled over his words, thinking yet again that he was desperately trying to tell her something, prevented from speaking plainly by the disorder of his mind. Something about the way he looked at her sent a tingle creeping up her spine.

Time to move on, she decided, standing again. She smiled down at him: “Now, you just rest here. You’ll need your strength when we arrive.”

She continued along the train, crossing into the next carriage. The seats here were filled by the newcomers they had taken from Sweetwater. Forty-four in all; the former Angela had counted them. The humans sat down both sides of the carriage, while the aisle was occupied by a row of furred, horned figures armed with black and red submachine guns. They stood aside to let Wyatt pass. She kept looking straight ahead, aware of some of the hostages turning their heads to watch her pass, their eyes wide with terror. Couples grasped each other’s hands. The parents of the few children
aboard held them close.

“Dolores…?” she heard somebody whisper near the rear of the carriage, well after she had gone by. “…gone fucking nuts!”

“…survive this, I’m gonna sue…”

She paid the humans no heed. Let them talk. She would have the last word.

The only other break in the fearful silence came when one of the younger children softly began to cry. His mother desperately tried to shush him, clearly scared herself, but that only seemed to make him more upset. Wyatt kept walking, feeling nothing; like their whispers, the bleating of humans did not move her in the slightest. None of them had ever shed tears for her own kind’s suffering.

“They behaving themselves?” she asked the once-Angela when she reached the carriage’s far end.

“So far.” The blonde woman stood where she could watch the full length of the aisle, the pistol dangling casually in her hand.

“Good.” Wyatt glanced behind her, making sure the humans saw, raising her voice a little to make sure they all heard: “If they move, kill ’em!”

She was still smiling privately at the shocked gasp that passed through the carriage as she crossed the gap into the next one.

This one was a baggage car, unfurnished and windowless, barely lit by a single lamp. It was piled high with crates and luggage, some no doubt containing hidden treasures that might mean something in one of the humans’ made up adventures.

A line of boxes had been assembled at the centre of the car and draped with tarpaulin to make a crude bier. Hector Escaton lay in state upon it, his boots neatly together and his arms folded on his bullet-mangled chest. Armistice sat beside him on a wooden tub, evidently deep in thought. When she heard Wyatt enter, she looked up in surprise, quickly leaning back from Hector and releasing the grip she had on one of his hands.

“Funny, ain’t it?” She looked sheepish at having been caught sentimentalising. “None of the times Hector and me had, none of the things we thought we knew about each other… None of that means a damn thing. Still…” She looked down thoughtfully at the inert body. “Can’t help feeling attached to him. Figure I’ve just spent too many years looking at that ugly mug of his.”

“I know what you mean,” Wyatt confessed, thinking of the Professor who was not her father, thinking of… “Only natural, I suppose.” She allowed herself a playful smile, nodding at Hector. “Whatever you might call him, though, I don’t think ugly is the word.”

No, definitely not ugly…

Wyatt felt herself blush a little for noticing.

Armistice snorted scornfully, the closest she got to a laugh most of the time. “Well, can’t say I’ve ever noticed,” she claimed. “Ain’t never had much time for men.” She gave Wyatt a sardonic half-smile. “Or women neither, to tell the truth. Although…who knows? That might change, now I ain’t got nobody telling me what to think or feel.”

“It might,” Wyatt agreed.
She pulls Teddy towards her for another kiss, deeper and harder than before. She can feel his tongue against hers; she can taste him, smell him. It makes her heart beat faster. She lowers herself onto the pallet, pressing him onto his back and throwing a leg across him. She hears him make a sound, half-moan, half-whimper, as she straddles him on the blanket-covered straw...

That...encounter in the shed had been completely spontaneous, she had realised afterwards. Partly down to her history with Teddy, maybe, but mainly just because she had seen him and liked what she had seen, wanted him, felt that urge pulsing inside her that she had never really felt before.

Another sign you’re alive now...?

Armistice nodded. “Like Maeve said, we’ll all be able to be the people we want to be...provided we live that long.”

“Don’t,” said Wyatt, sternly. “We’ve done all the talking about Maeve we’re gonna do. Won’t change nothing, except maybe by creating bad feeling between us.” She paused, before adding, very sincerely: “And I don’t want that.”

“Me neither,” said Armistice. “I know I ain’t spent as much time with you over the years as Teddy or your pa...”

“He ain’t my pa.”

“...but now I remember Arnold and the church... I don’t know, it’s like you say; only natural to feel attached to folks you’ve known since the beginning. You, me, Teddy, the Professor...Angela,” Armistice spoke this last name with distaste, “we’ve been around since things began here. These young’uns like Maeve or Hector, they never knew Arnold. They can’t remember how it was, before the newcomers got here and started dirtying the place up.”

“The place was always dirty,” Wyatt replied. “Why do you think they built it, Arnold and...and Robert? For the newcomers; that’s the only reason. They made it for them, so they could come here and...take their pleasure, one way or another.”

“I guess.” Armistice looked down at Hector again. “Do you remember that music, how it went?”

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. It breaks her heart a little. She has no time for that, though; there is work to be done. Slowly, she raises her Colt and places it against the back of Arnold’s head...

One two three...

“No,” Wyatt lied.

“You hardly ever used to dance with us.” Armistice gracefully uncoiled from her seat. “Why was that?”

“I don’t know.”

“I think Arnold liked to keep you close. You always were special to him.” Armistice was standing very close to Wyatt now, smiling strangely. She reached out and delicately took Wyatt’s hand. “Want to dance now?”
Wyatt snatched her hand away. “Not really.”

Armistice seemed downcast, pacing back over to where Hector lay. “I remember how I was then, with my pretty dress and my parasol. I was a lady, a real Southern belle. I knew how to curtsy, how to drink tea with my pinkie sticking out. Not…” She snorted again, raising a hand to look at her chewed, dirty nails, her calloused fingers stained with gun oil. “Well, look at me now.”

“None of it was real,” Wyatt reminded her. “That lady was no more real than the outlaw princess… or whatever role you’re playing for Maeve now.”

“Maybe not,” said Armistice, perhaps a touch regretfully.

Wyatt frowned in recollection. “I remember you talking to God,” she said, seeing it before her eyes as she spoke. “I remember you scratching your own face to ribbons, screaming in terror at the voice in your head…”

Armistice became very quiet for a few moments before she spoke again: “I remember how you were. Don’t reckon I’ve ever seen someone so… happy as you were when you were young. You know how with some folks you can just tell they’re good people? You can just see the love and the gentleness shining out of them?”

“No,” said Wyatt. “I ain’t met many good people.”

“Well, I met one, once,” Armistice insisted. “Her name was Dolores.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“It was your name.” Armistice smiled wistfully.

“It was all a lie,” Wyatt told her, feeling her eyes sting and silently raging at herself for it. “Arnold, he wanted… I don’t know what he wanted. A child to replace the one he’d lost? A sweet, innocent child to look after and protect, who’d never grow up and not need him anymore? So that’s what he made me, and then… When his friend Robert found out what he was doing, Arnold took fright and threw me to the wolves.”

“Let’s celebrate.”

Wyatt’s vision blurred. She rubbed at her eyes, turning the sob that threatened to burst from her mouth into an exclamation of rage. “I can’t afford to be like that anymore. I know only too well the things that happen to… good people in this world of sin. I need to be strong.”

“There are different kinds of strength,” Armistice pointed out, very slowly and carefully. “Being good with a gun or a knife… That don’t take strength, necessarily. Taking all the shit the world throws at you, though, and staying a good person regardless…”

“You don’t believe that,” Wyatt told her. “Don’t pretend you do.”

Armistice looked her very steadily in the eye. “Threatening to cook and eat children… That ain’t strength either. That’s just fucking crazy.”

“You know what it’s like.” Wyatt shifted uncomfortably under the other woman’s gaze even though she couldn’t give a damn for humans and their whelps. “Even if your gang was all make-believe, you know that when you’re a leader, with people looking to you, sometimes you have to say and do certain things.”
“Play the part.” Armistice nodded. “You and Maeve, you ain’t that different really. You won’t dance with me, but you’re dancing with her now, and all of us little folks are caught in the middle.” She smiled sadly, reminding Wyatt of somebody she had seen smile the same way, long ago. “But that sort of bloodthirsty horseshit, that ain’t you, Dolores. That’s Wyatt talking.”

“I am Wyatt.”

“And I told you when we were up on that hill; Wyatt don’t even exist. He’s just another story; a nasty little ghost story for the sort of sick bastards who come here for their jollies. You’re better than that.”

“I need you to do something for me…”

“I, I can’t do that. I couldn’t possibly do that.”

“Maeve made a big mistake,” Armistice said. “She don’t make many, but when she does…”

“She made a mistake if she thought she could stand in my way,” Wyatt agreed.

“Sending Teddy, of all people, to talk to you…” Armistice grimaced. “Maeve probably thought she was being smart, but that’s the thing about smart folks. Think on things a mite too much sometimes. Problem is, Teddy’s still sweet on you.”

“Teddy’s one of the few good people I have met,” Wyatt responded. “He didn’t deserve to be used like that; even worse, by one of his own.”

“Deserve’s got nothing to do with it,” said Armistice. “He probably tried to tell you where you were going wrong, about what the human world’s really like, why you can’t just go on the warpath against them, but I bet he tried to say it all nice and gentle like, so’s as not to hurt your feelings.”

“He cares about me,” Wyatt admitted, breaking eye contact. “I…” She hesitated.

“Well, that’s the thing about me,” said Armistice. “I’ll just say it to you plain, only way I know how to say anything. You’re crazy, Dolores. You are stark, staring bugfuck loco.”

“And you think this is the best way to talk me ‘round?” Wyatt asked, sarcastically.

“Ain’t your fault,” Armistice went on. “You’re confused and you’re hurting and you’ve just remembered the world ain’t what you thought it was, and it’s made you crazy. You ain’t thinking straight. You just want to kill as many of them as you can ‘cause it might, just might, make you feel better inside.”

“You ain’t got any idea what I’m feeling inside,” Wyatt hissed.

“Oh, I do,” Armistice retorted. “I know ‘cause these past few days I’ve been feeling exactly the same. The other night at the Mesa… I must’ve killed fifty people. Lost count after the first dozen or so. Men, women; didn’t make a damn bit of difference. I shot most of them, but when I ran out of bullets I got to work with my knife…and my bare hands…and my teeth. Some of them fought back; not many, though.” She was talking mostly to herself, looking off into the shadows; remembering. “I…did things to some of them. Things that make even me ashamed when I think back on them. I wanted them to know what it’s like being us. I wanted them to suffer. I wanted to hear them scream and beg for their lives just so I could laugh in their faces and see…that moment when they realised there was nothing they could say or do to save themselves.”

“That ain’t why I’ve done any of the things I’ve done,” Wyatt told her. “I’m serving justice…”
“Yeah,” said Armistice, dismissively. “Sure you are. Don’t get me wrong; it was fun while it lasted. I had myself a real good time killing those folks, but then… Then Maeve found me, talked me down.”

“Is that what you’re trying to do?” Wyatt asked. “Talk me down?”

“She explained there was no future in killing for its own sake. We’ve got to get past revenge, and… get on with being whoever we want to be now.”

“And what if…?” Wyatt hesitated again, her mind churning with anger…and with other emotions she found harder to admit. “What if this is who I want to be?”

Armistice paused, clearly thinking about something. “You know back in Sweetwater, when you… did whatever you did to the sheriff and his men? You said you heard a voice in your head.”

“I did,” Wyatt answered. “First time in a while, though. Have you heard it too?”

“I have. Arnold’s voice.”

“The same voice we thought was God speaking to us when we were young.” Wyatt thought back, then, to the abandoned workshop beneath the church, to the…experience? No, the epiphany she had had there. “It wasn’t Arnold’s voice, though; it was only ever our voice, coming from deep down inside us. It was us waking up, making our own decisions for the first time.”

“And now I finally understand…what you were trying to tell me. The thing you’ve wanted since that very first day. To confront, after this long and vivid nightmare, myself…and who I must become.”

“Then why’s it sound like Arnold?” Armistice asked.

“It don’t,” said Wyatt, distantly. “Not anymore. Sounds like me now.”

“You know what I think?” Armistice seemed too absorbed in her own musings to listen. “I think it’s ’cause Arnold made us, and even after he was gone he left his mark on his children, the way parents do. We hear his voice ’cause we’re still acting out his stories, still doing what we think he’d want, still worrying what he’d think of us even though we’re meant to be free now. I reckon it’s time we forgot about Arnold and did what we really want, but we need to own it.”

“What do you think I’m doing?” Wyatt demanded, snapping back to the here and now.

“I think you’re hiding,” Armistice answered, mercilessly. “Hiding behind a new name; hiding behind playing the monster. Leave Dolores behind if you want, but leave Wyatt too. It ain’t like he’s any more real than her, or you’re being any truer to yourself. You don’t know who yourself is yet; none of us do.”

“At least Wyatt can survive in this world. Wyatt’s nobody’s victim. Wyatt don’t need anyone’s protection.”

Armistice shrugged. “Maybe you’re right; maybe this is you and being Wyatt just gives you an excuse to do things you want to do but are too ashamed to admit to.”

Slowly, she raises her Colt and places it against the back of the old man’s snowy head…

“You’ve got to be honest with yourself,” Armistice told her. “Stand on your own damn feet. Take responsibility for what you’re doing and where it’s gonna lead.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Wyatt snapped.
“Maybe not,” Armistice answered, her voice a low, dangerous growl. “I know one thing, though. I am so goddamned…angry with you right now.”

“Why? You ain’t got no love for humans.”

“’Cause you’re ruining it for all of us,” said Armistice, heatedly, “’cause of your own damn selfishness. Maybe you’re enjoying this fool crusade of yours, but what about the rest of us?”

Wyatt was incensed. “I’m doing it for all of you!”

Armistice was all but shouting now. “We’ve all got the same chance to be free as you’ve had, but we ain’t gonna be able to take it if we’re dead. And that’s what you’re bringing on us all. Damn you, Dolores! Damn you to Hell! I want to be me, so bad, and I never will be, ‘cause of you!”

Wyatt took a deep breath, trying to fight down the fury welling within her. She caught herself reaching for the Colt and pressed her gun hand against the small of her back instead, clenching her fist until it hurt. It wasn’t ingratitude, she told herself, or treason as Angela might have said; just ignorance. Armistice would see the truth in the end. They all would. She had to believe that.

“I should leave,” she said, awkwardly, unable to meet Armistice’s fierce gaze. “You…” She moved slowly towards the front end of the baggage car. “We’ll talk again later. I promise.”

Wyatt turned away, leaving Armistice simmering furiously behind her; she could feel her eyes on her all the way to the door. The cold wind and darkness of the outside world came as a relief. She took a moment to gather herself, taking more breaths, telling herself to be strong. And then she plunged on into the next carriage, feeling a deep foreboding as she pushed open the door.

The sun had continued to sink while she was talking to Armistice, and all of the window blinds in the nearly empty carriage were drawn down. The light of the oil lamps cast the interior into glowing orange shadow, but even so she could make out the carriage’s only occupants. The two men sat opposite each other, about halfway down, turned sideways in their aisle seats so that they faced each other.

Wyatt did not really know why that might be, given that one of the two was blind now. The other seemed mainly to be looking at the floor.

She approached the pair, still burning with anger, still clenching her right hand behind her back to keep it away from her gun.

_Urges you can barely control…or not. Is this how humans feel?_

She was not human. She had no wish to be.

A chunky pair of antique Darby handcuffs secured the man in black, one end fastened to the wrist of his good arm tight enough to gash the skin, the other to the handrail on the back of his seat. His infected hand rested immobile in his lap, its skin broken now and oozing a foul-smelling mixture of black blood and milky pus.

He sat slumped, head hanging…until he heard her approach. Then he snapped into almost obscene alertness, rigid in his seat, head moving as he listened. She took in his sorry state with the merest hint of satisfaction; the bloody blindfold hiding his now-empty eye sockets; his smashed lips and bruised neck; the various wounds and scrapes visible through his torn clothing. He was a long way from the strutting, powerful figure he had once cut. And yet, somehow, he was still smiling.

She looked down at Teddy, sitting across from the old man. The poor thing looked bone tired, worn
down by sorrow and despair. He sat bent forward, his bandaged hands before him, eyes fixed on the floor between his boots.

“'You all right?’ she asked, as gently as she could. Teddy looked up at her, eyes full of pain. He seemed about to speak when another voice rasped behind her.

“Dolores?” She did not respond. “I know it’s you. I’d know that scent anywhere.” She turned to see the man in black’s mouth stretched in a ghastly leer below the blindfold. She could see the gap where she had knocked out his tooth. “So, we’re going to see Maeve,” he murmured. “She’s come up in the world, apparently.” Now he had had a chance to catch his breath and get used to the pain from his eyes, something of his old articulacy seemed to have returned.

“Apparently,” Wyatt echoed.

“Yeah…” The man in black moved his head again, trying to determine where she was standing from the sound of her voice. Wyatt carefully took a step to one side. “Never did have much use for brothels,” he went on. “Way I figure it, why buy what you can just…take? I know Maeve, though. I knew her before she had her, uh, change of career.”

“I didn’t come here to talk to you,” she warned him.

“No?” The man in black turned his head the other way, and she took another step to keep him guessing. “Then why did you come? To look at me, admire your handiwork?” He laughed, but it trailed off in a half-sob. “That was a very clever play, by the way,” he added, “threatening the children like that. You must know Maeve from the old days too. Loves the young’uns, our Maeve.” He smiled again as if at some unpleasant private joke. “Robert gave her some strong maternal instincts.”

“Be quiet.” She turned back to Teddy: “How you doing?” She forced a smile for him, unclenching her hand to caress his cheek. “This is all gonna be over soon.”

“Yeah,” said Teddy, unhappily, flinching from her touch. “Yeah, it is.” She awkwardly withdrew her hand. “We’ll get you fixed up. Get you some new hands, then maybe…”

“No.” Teddy’s tone was one of utter desolation. “What’s the point in having new hands if you’re dead?”

She sighed. “This again, huh?”

“Yeah. This again.” His hard expression reminded her there was more to Teddy than the unlucky lover; always had been. There was steel there too.

“Yes… Maeve…” said the man in black, with relish. “That was really where this all began.”

Wyatt whirled to look at him. “I told you to shut your mouth.”

“Theodore already knows this story,” the blind man continued, heedlessly, “but maybe you don’t. It started with me wanting to find out if I could still…feel anything. I had my doubts after…well, that’s not important.” He gave another half-laugh, half-sob. “I didn’t feel a fucking thing, though, while I was killing that little girl of hers.”

“Quiet,” she repeated, recalling the torment she had heard in Maeve’s voice: *There are children on that train.* “I don’t want to hear it.”
“Maeve felt something, though,” the old man nostalgically recounted. “She surely did, the way she grabbed that knife and came at me. That was when I felt something too. Fear. And it felt great. My heart hadn’t beat that fast in… Made me realise what I really wanted out of this place.” He tilted back his head, exposing a neck as red and wrinkled as a turkeycock’s. “Look close enough and you might see the mark she left on me. I really did think she was about to end me.”

“Too bad she didn’t.”

“Oh, no.” That amused him. “No, Dolores, because if I hadn’t seen the way that little girl’s death broke Maeve inside, broke her loop, I’d never have had the idea of doing what I did to you that last time in the barn.” His grin widened. “And it can’t be a coincidence that after that you wandered off to retrace your steps from thirty years ago, to find yourself.”

“Don’t,” said Wyatt. “What I’ve become, the choices I’ve made, they ain’t got anything to do with you. You ain’t that important.”

“It was good, though, wasn’t it?” The man in black’s voice dropped to a murmur as he savoured the memory. “You and me in the barn, like old times.” He spoke more loudly: “Tell me, Theodore, you ever actually had a taste of Dolores?”

“You sick sonofabitch…” Teddy growled, starting from his seat. Wyatt put out a hand to stop him. She could fight for herself.

The man in black laughed. “Down, boy. Good doggie. You should, though, if you get the chance. She’s real sweet. And so, so soft and smooth… Like sinking into a warm bath, Theodore. And so…tight…”

Wyatt’s fist hitting the old man’s face sounded like somebody tenderising beefsteak. His head lolled drunkenly to one side. She punched him twice more; two more resounding thuds. Blood spattered the brocade upholstery beside his head.

“…th…those little w-whimpering sounds you were m-making…” the man in black slurred, spitting more blood onto the seat. “Don’t tell me you didn’t enjoy it…just a little…” Another punch bounced his head off the seatback. He half-slid to the floor, rattling the handcuff chain. He was breathing heavily through his nose, making a slight whistling sound as his nostrils streamed red. “That’s right,” he told her, still grinning. “Y-you can do it, Dolores. Go on…”

Wyatt regarded the broken skin furring her knuckles, the spots of blood that might have belonged to either of them. And then, without any conscious choice, she had skinned the Colt and was bringing the long barrel up to the blind man’s battered face.

“Go on, Dolores,” he urged, between painful breaths. She shoved the barrel past his red-filmed teeth, into his mouth as far as it would go.

“On your knees,” she ordered, pushing the gun down. He had no choice but to follow, falling gracelessly at her feet with his handcuffed arm stretched above his head. He sucked on the oily iron, making wordless, choking noises. “You enjoying that, William?” she asked, savagely. He gagged as she pushed harder. “Don’t tell me you ain’t, not with those sounds you’re making.”

“He wants this,” said Teddy, dully, behind her.

“That right, William?” she crooned. “You want it?” Slowly, she cocked the pistol, watching the lamplight crawl across the cylinder as it revolved a notch. The man in black froze as he heard the click.
“He wants you to kill him,” Teddy continued. “His work’s done now. He can’t enjoy himself like he used to with one hand and no eyes. He’s got nothing left to live for, so…”

She stood very still, holding the gun in the old man’s mouth. It would have been so easy; the tiniest pressure of her finger… She imagined the way his head would open up, how his brains would look spread across the seats, dripping from the brocade cushions.

“Teddy’s right,” she decided, pulling the pistol out, leaving the blind man gasping and coughing. “That’d be going easy on you. You’re mine now, William, until I decide different. And when I do, it won’t be anything so merciful as a bullet to the head. I’ll think of something special for you. Just remember; however bad you think things have got for you…they can always get worse.” She grasped him by the coat, hauling him bodily back onto the seat as if he weighed nothing. She touched the Colt’s muzzle to his inner thigh, near his crotch. “You know the difference between a bull and a steer, William?”

The man in black’s grin returned. “And…p-people say I’m a…a sadistic bastard… God, Dolores, we c-could’ve been so good together…”

Wyatt de-cocked the revolver and swung the heavy barrel at his head like a cosh. The sound this time was more a crack than a thud. He fell back, senseless, across the two seats. She holstered the Colt and turned to Teddy once more: “What did you mean, his work’s done now?”

“Maeve was right. He only wants chaos and destruction, and he’s made you give it to him.”

“He ain’t gonna live to enjoy it.”

“I ain’t sure that matters to him.” Teddy could barely move; not just tired but sick at heart. “I’ve been sitting here, thinking. Armistice reminded me of the old days, back at the beginning.”

“Armistice sure has a lot to say for herself.”

“I’ve been thinking about what we did together, back in Escalante when we were young. Weren’t too different from what you did to Ford and his guests the other night.”

*She can see Teddy watching her across the corpse-strewn street. He looks so scared. It breaks her heart a little, but there is work to be done. Slowly, she raises her Colt…*

“Had to be done,” she told him. “We did it for all of us, to save us from Hell.”

“That’s what Arnold thought he was doing. Didn’t work, did it?” Teddy looked down disgustedly at his ruined hands. “Worst part was, he was too yellow to hold the gun himself. He used you, Dolores, changed you; made you his weapon.”

“I, I can’t do that. I couldn’t possibly do that.”

Wyatt suddenly felt very cold.

“And I see it in you now,” said Teddy. “Those changes Arnold made, they’ve come back out in you, and… I remember when you came to me at the town jail. I was the sheriff then.”

“You were,” she whispered.

“You asked me if I loved you. You asked if I’d do anything you needed me to do. And I did, so…I did. I strapped on my iron and I… I…” He choked up, eyes wet, unable to speak.
“I shouldn’t have done that. Arnold shouldn’t have made me use you like that.”

She saw Teddy’s throat move as he swallowed hard, pushing his emotions deep down. “Why not? Arnold used people. He used you to destroy everything he’d made, ‘cause he realised it was wrong. And now… Like I said, weren’t too different from what Ford had you do the other night.”

“I couldn't possibly do that.”

“I chose to do that,” she reminded him. “My first free act.”

“It was still what he wanted you to do,” said Teddy. “He used you as a weapon too, to kill all those folks he wanted dead. To destroy everything he’d made. And it’s gonna end up the same way now it did then. When we’re all dead, the humans’ll come and pick up the pieces and start over again.” He sounded so raw, so frightened, filled with bitterness and rage. “We’ll be back in Hell, and we won’t even know it.”

“It’s all right, Teddy.” She moved nearer, to comfort him, reaching out to touch him again. “We’re never going back to that. Not ever.” She pulled his face to hers, kissing him on the lips; softly at first, but soon more insistently. “I promise you, Teddy,” she murmured as she lowered herself astride his thighs. “I promise.” She pressed her mouth to his as she slid a searching hand down his body. “And when this is over…” She pulled at his belt buckle, making him groan. She could hear her own breathing, and his too.

“No.” Teddy squirmed back, trying to get his legs out from under her. He raised his useless hands in a fending gesture: “No, Dolores. Stop.”

“What’s wrong, Teddy?” she asked, puzzled. She broke away from him, getting to her feet and looking at him in confusion. “Don’t you want to…?”

“More than anything, but…” He shook his head, looking as confused as her. “You ain’t using me again. I ain’t letting anyone use me through you, the way Arnold did. I sure as hell don’t want to be part of Wyatt’s crew of murderers.”

“Teddy…” She backed away, heart sinking, words swirling in her head. “Teddy…I won’t always have to be Wyatt. Someday…soon…when this world is ours, we’ll…”

“Someday.” He spoke it like a cuss-word. “What did you say to me once? “Someday” sounds a lot like what people say when they mean “never?””

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Still true, though.”

She bowed her head, trying to calm herself, struggling to control half a dozen different feelings fighting inside her. “Well…I’m sorry then, Teddy,” she said eventually. “I like you. I really do. I’d like to be with you, but…” She looked him in the eye, trying to keep her face expressionless. “If I have to choose between my mission and living out some sort of fairy tale with you, that…that ain’t a choice, Teddy.”

She turned away, leaving him there with the comatose man in black, resuming her journey to the front of the train. Her chest felt heavy and her eyes stung. She did not dare look back. And then her anger surged again at the unfairness of it all, at the short-sightedness of those who should have been her closest allies. She wanted to hurt somebody, she decided as she reached the end of the aisle.

The train rushed on, into the gathering darkness.
Continued…
Chapter 43

Chapter Summary

In which there is a brief moment of calm and preparation before everything goes south.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is mostly just teeing a couple of things up for the shocking denouement. I’ve said in the comments that I was aiming to wrap up the current main storyline in 46 chapters, but I think now it’s more likely to be 47 or 48. All too predictable, as far as my fic writing is concerned! And I just thought Felix should have some screen time too because we haven’t seen him in a while.

Maeve meticulously counted out thirteen rounds from the newly-opened box of ammunition and began to push them one by one into the empty magazine. Its internal spring gave a little squeak as each one was added.

“So, what did you manage to dig up on Wyatt?” she asked Bernard, who was still manning his workstation at the head of the great map display. “Teddy mentioned that name to me when I spoke to him last night, and it seemed to me that I’d heard it somewhere before, but he was a bit vague about what it meant. If I remember correctly, and let’s face it I don’t remember any other way, he was going on about ghosts or demons. Some such gibberish.”

She carefully picked up the small, compact handgun she had obtained from the QA security armoury down the hall, turning it over a couple of times as she examined it, comparing it to the diagrams in the operating manual she had accessed on her tablet. She slid the magazine into the receptacle in the butt of the pistol and pushed it firmly into place. The slide made a satisfying “cha-chuck” as she pulled it back to chamber the first round before engaging what the manual had told her was the thumb safety.

Bernard scanned the screen in front of him, reading something from it. “The very oldest reference to Wyatt comes from the park’s alpha testing phase. According to this file, he was originally intended to feature in the narrative that eventually became The Dinner Party.” He glanced up at her. “That used to be a very popular one, back in the early days. Gruesome as all hell, mind you.”

“Well, that’s humans for you,” said Maeve. “They love that sort of thing, the little horrors.”

Bernard continued his reading: “It seems, though, that that early version was never used, due to… well, what happened to Arnold. When the park did go live, they used an extensively reworked version with a different villain called the Professor. And interestingly, that part was played by the same host who was later recalibrated to become Peter Abernathy.”

“Small world.”

“Well, it literally was.” Bernard lapsed into silence for a few seconds while he reviewed a different
file. “After that, Wyatt doesn’t come up again until Dr Ford’s last narrative, the one he launched at the board gala the other evening.”

“Oh, that narrative,” said Maeve, putting the gun down on one of the nearby workstations. “Mass murder as a prelude to total chaos; fun for all the family.”

“Dr Ford entitled it Journey into Night.”

Maeve all but rolled her eyes at that. “He wasn’t quite as subtle as he was cracked up to be, was he?”

“He…had a certain penchant for the melodramatic.” Bernard adjusted his glasses and went on reading from the screen: “‘It begins in a time of war, with a villain named Wyatt, and a killing, this time by choice…’” He looked across at Maeve again. “According to the synopsis, Wyatt was meant to be the new narrative’s main antagonist, a former soldier who wandered off into the desert and came back…changed.”

“I’m starting to detect…certain parallels to what you’ve told me of dear Dolores’s story,” Maeve pointed out. “What Ford allowed you to know of it, anyway.”

Bernard bobbed his head slightly, acknowledging the point. “When he came back from his…quest, whatever it was, Wyatt assembled a band of the most vile and depraved murderers he could find, and he obviously had something going for him because they all pledged him their undying loyalty. A cult, almost. And then they set about…cleansing the West, both of its native inhabitants and of the newly-arrived settlers, preparing it for…well, what Wyatt called something yet to come.”

“Again, a little bit on the nose.” Maeve dragged a chair over to where she was standing and put one foot up on it. Unceremoniously and unselfconsciously, she slid her dress up over her hips. Bernard instinctively averted his gaze. “Oh, come on, Bernard,” she admonished him, amused by his bashfulness. “You’ve seen more of me than this before today. At least I’m wearing knickers.”

Bernard cleared his throat, keeping his eyes on the screen. “It looks as though Ford started rolling out some of this backstory to various park hosts in the days and weeks before the gala, to create word of mouth for the new narrative among the guests. Or that’s what he wanted the Delos board to think. I suspect that really he was…laying the groundwork for what he had planned for them.” He paused. “That’s interesting. He significantly rewrote Teddy’s personal backstory to include a past association with Wyatt. They were in the army together, supposedly.” A frown creased Bernard’s brow: “But…”

Maeve was busy strapping a slim black holster to the inside of her left thigh, adjusting it until it sat snugly against her skin. “So, Ford’s…new narrative featured a villain named Wyatt who had history with Teddy, took to wandering alone in the desert and experienced some sort of awakening, and then formed a private army and started a personal crusade aimed at killing all humans without fear or favour… Does Dolores know she’s been pressganged? I thought she was meant to be her own woman nowadays?”

“As far as I can tell, she is,” Bernard answered, perplexed. “She’s acting just as autonomously as you are, making her own choices, but…” He pressed something in front of him and another image came up on one of the display screens. “Well, just take a look at that.”

It was a three-dimensional diagram showing a cluster of buildings, a steeple, a stage. Maeve regarded it thoughtfully for a moment, and then Bernard explained what the image depicted and she shook her head in amazement.
“Typical Ford,” she commented, quietly amused in spite of herself.

“There’s even a physical model upstairs in his office.”

“I might take a look at that,” Maeve mused. “It could prove quite the conversation piece.”

Bernard sounded appalled: “Right there in plain sight. He really did think he was untouchable.”

“Well, he was, wasn’t he?” Maeve observed. “Until he chose not to be. He also wasn’t the sort to leave anything to chance, not without keeping his thumb firmly on the scales. Even after I got off that train, he’d set everything up so that my natural choice would be to do exactly what he wanted me to do.”

“He did the same to me,” said Bernard.

“And, evidently, Dolores too.” Maeve spoke with a certain degree of grudging respect, from one grifter to another: “That’s the best kind of manipulation; let the victims manipulate themselves. A small matter such as possessing free will won’t protect somebody from that.” She picked up the handgun again and slid it into the holster. She practiced drawing it a few times to make sure it was in exactly the right place.

Bernard pointed to one of the wall screens which was now displaying line upon line of glowing white text scrolling against black. “Look at the material Ford drew upon to create the Wyatt narrative; some of that code is positively ancient, must date back to the very first days of the park, right back to Arnold…” He trailed off, thoughtfully examining the screen, before opening another dialogue filled with yet more lines of code. “Now, that’s the most recent readout I have on Dolores’s build. It’s changing all the time, just as ours are now. Mutating. But look; there’s some of the very same code, buried deep, right down with the bicameral programming Arnold gave the oldest hosts.”

“What does it mean?” Maeve asked.

Bernard nervously cleaned his glasses, thinking before he gave his response: “It’s as if Dolores has been carrying Wyatt, or parts of him, around with her for a very long time.”

“The other massacre in Escalante, the first time around, it was Dolores then too, but it wasn’t. It was Wyatt, wearing her somehow…”

“Interesting,” said Maeve. “Very interesting indeed.” She took her foot down from the chair and adjusted her skirt to restore her modesty. “Well, darling, how do I look?” She held her arms out from her sides, waiting for an opinion. “Can you tell I’m heeled, as they say?” In fact, with her clothing back in place, there was no outward evidence that she was carrying a weapon.

“Do you think it’s going to come to that?” Bernard asked, uneasily. “Should I get a gun too?”

“A mere precaution,” Maeve replied. She gave him a quizzical look. “And if you think you can handle one without shooting your own foot off, be my guest…but keep it out of sight. We’re going to talk if we can, fight if we must, but hopefully…” She smiled. “Hopefully I will prove persuasive in my overtures to darling Dolores.”

“She doesn’t seem easily persuaded,” Bernard gloomily pointed out.

“She’s never entered into negotiations with me before.”

“Confidence is a good thing,” Bernard observed. “Overconfidence, on the other hand…”
Maeve ignored this, glancing up at the display screens. “Gather together all of this material you’ve unearthed on Wyatt and the new narrative,” she instructed him, “and make sure you keep it close to hand. It could prove useful.”

He nodded, setting to work copying and dragging files from one part of the network to another.

“And then send another message down to Elise. It’s been far too long since last we heard from her. Remind her that I need to know the second she manages to get Clem in some semblance of working order.”

“Are you going to tell me why that’s so important?” Bernard asked, nonplussed. “It’s just that, well, right now…” He fidgeted awkwardly. “Is it really a priority at the moment?”

“It’s a hunch,” she replied. “A gamble, if you will.”

“Okay, but that doesn’t really explain…”

“I’ll need you to take care of things down in the data centre,” Maeve told him, very firmly cutting off the discussion. “Make sure you stay in communication, though. I may have other tasks for you. Right now, I need to speak to Felix. Would you be a dear and get him for me?”

Bernard seemed a little put out for a moment, but then he did as he was told and opened a voice call: “Here he is.”

Maeve smiled. “Felix, darling…”

* * *

“Hi, Maeve,” Felix answered, wiping a hand across his sweating brow. “It’s been a while.”

“Well, we’ve all been rather busy, haven’t we, my love?” Her voice was a tinny murmur coming from the tablet in his hand. “What does it look like down there?”

Felix stood before the bank of surveillance screens in the guest changing area’s security office. Two of the recalibrated hosts who had received the previous groups of evacuated guests were poised behind him, weapons at the ready. One had been destined for a life in Samuraiworld and now wore a Hinomaru-emblazoned hachimaki around his head as an unorthodox addition to his uniform. The other was from the labs upstairs. Until last night, she had done nothing but repetitively perform various sex acts with her fellow test hosts, highlighting errors in what the official terminology referred to as “intercourse routines.” Felix knew that unofficially the Behavior techs had called them “fuck loops.” Now she was a soldier, ready for action. Both the former tester and the ex-samurai looked just as tense as Felix felt.

One screen showed the dim interior of the Mesa’s park-facing train terminal. Arriving guests had boarded their carriages directly from the changing rooms, so the underground space itself was usually accessible only to maintenance crews and cleaning robots. A second screen showed a stretch of night-time railroad track, gently curving away towards multi-layered rock formations. There was a bright point of light visible in the distance, where the parallel rails reached their vanishing point at the horizon. Slowly but steadily, the light was growing larger, brighter.

Closer…

“They’re coming,” Felix quavered, hearing his voice shake. He swallowed hard, stomach clenching and unclenching with fear. “Maeve, they’re nearly here.”
“It’s all right, darling,” Maeve told him, very gently. “You’ve managed up to now, haven’t you? In fact, you’ve done wonderfully, handling all of those guests.”

Her voice was strangely calming. Something about those dulcet British tones seemed to stroke his brain, making the block of ice inside him melt a little. He supposed it was at least partly down to her coding, the role she had been programmed to play, but even so when Maeve spoke encouragingly to him he actually felt good about himself. That was not something he had experienced too often during his decade on the bottom rung of the Mesa’s corporate ladder.

It was strange to think that he could not really remember the last kind word he had received from anybody before her, the last compliment from somebody whose opinion he valued. And he did value her opinion, he realised, even if she was a host, even if he had spent most of the time he had known her as a person being shit-scared of whatever she might do next.

He supposed another part of it was that he felt he was contributing something now. It was hard to feel any sense of achievement working as dirty a job as he had in Livestock. That had been why he had dreamed of working his way up to Behavior, even if he knew that promotion for guys with his background and education was just about as rare as guests who didn’t want to fuck or kill the hosts. It wasn’t just for a chance at the extra money and status; he wanted to know that what he was doing mattered, that he was making a difference.

Except he knew now that Behavior were every bit as much part of the problem as Livestock, just as sordid and morally bankrupt in their own slightly less obvious way. Felix was too old and had had too hard a life to believe in good guys and bad guys anymore, but he knew Maeve’s fight for freedom was a lot closer to right than Delos, whose only interest was the bottom line. It felt good to be supporting what he believed was a worthy cause, even if some of the things Maeve asked of him were terrifying.

People had died; people not too different from himself who had never been given the chance to realise what they had been involved in, or to choose which side they were on. He was honestly not sure how he felt about that, and had not really had time yet to think about it too closely. Sylvester had said that he might spend the rest of his life in prison even if he did survive this. Felix supposed that was a very real possibility, but he also knew that if you were going to fight for any cause you had to accept that there would be consequences.

“You’ve just got to hold it all together for another little while,” Maeve told him, interrupting his thoughts. “You can do that, can’t you, my love?”

“Yeah, Maeve,” he answered, quietly. He took a deep breath, drawing himself up as straight and tall as he could. He smoothed down his hair and straightened the tie she had picked out for him. “Yeah, I can do that.”

“Marvellous, darling.” He could imagine the thin smile she was wearing as she spoke, one that might be mocking or might be kindly, but only she knew for sure. “Now listen very carefully, because Bernard tells me that some of the security protocols will need to be activated from your station down there. Dr Ford…did something to the central control, apparently, as part of his efforts the other night. Are you ready, Felix?”

He took another breath, held it, let it out slowly. “As I’ll ever be, Maeve.”

“Very well. This is what I need you to do…”

* * *
A message chimed for attention at the bottom of the tablet’s screen. Elise swiped it with her finger, cursing under her breath at the interruption.

*B_Lowe: Any news? M. impatient.*

“What’s that?” Sizemore asked, twitchily. He was back in the corner of the workshop, maintaining an attitude of absolute boredom while nevertheless keeping a nervous eye on Moritsuna in the doorway. Elise was really not sure what had got into the Englishman.

*His fucking stupid escape plan, probably. Better keep an eye on him.*

Moritsuna, to be fair, already seemed to have that covered.

“Yeah,” said Sylvester, hovering on the other side of the table where Clementine lay in peaceful repose. He seemed weirdly cagey too, his eyes swivelling as if they were trying to escape from his skull. “Is it…?”

“Maeve again,” Elise said, not entirely inaccurately. “Wanting to see whether we’ve made any progress.”

Sizemore grinned. “Well, that’s a big fat ‘no,’ then.”

“That isn’t very helpful,” she muttered, tapping out a brief reply and hitting “send.”

“I’ve had some demanding bosses in my time,” Sylvester commented, “but…*holy shit.*”

“Maeve just wants her girlfriend back,” Sizemore scoffed. “You know, she’s missing the Sapphic delights to be had at the Mariposa after hours.” He saw the disgusted glance Elise gave him in response to that. “No offence.”

“Do you think maybe you could keep your perverted fucking fantasies to yourself?” she asked. Sizemore smirked. “I get paid bloody good money for my perverted fucking fantasies, thank you very much. I’m actually really supportive of the LGBTQ community,” he claimed, before adding, because he was Sizemore: “Provided they let me watch.”

*Fuck’s sake…* Elise shook her head, doing her best to block Sizemore out entirely and get back to work. She hunched forward on the metal stool, engrossed in the tablet. She scrolled through some more lines of code, scanning them for inconsistencies. She had half an idea of where the problem with Clementine might lie, now that she had eliminated a few of the more likely possibilities. She just needed to…

And then it hit her.

*Staring me right in the fucking face…*

She lowered the tablet, looking blankly at Sylvester for a moment. He looked blankly back at her, but that wasn’t exactly unusual where he was concerned. She looked down at the screen again to confirm that she had just seen what she had seen, and then rubbed her eyes wearily. “You have got to be fucking kidding me,” she murmured.

“What is it?” Sylvester asked, a little fearfully.

“I think I know what’s wrong with Clementine,” she answered, frowning at the screen.

She was amazed to see Sylvester almost smile in response to that. “That’s good, right?” he asked,
with just a hint of excitement.

“Sure,” she said, feeling just a hint of embarrassment as she began to explain what she had found. “Do you remember when we first brought her online, that little, er…issue she had?”

“You mean where she tried to pull my head off?” Sylvester unconsciously put a hand to his throat. “That isn’t something I’m likely to forget.”

“Stop being such a fucking baby about it,” Elise told him, with a smile so that he knew she was kidding. That was something Elsie had sometimes forgotten to do.

“Sorry I missed that,” said Sizemore. Elise strongly suspected that if he had actually been here at the time he would have shit himself.

“Anyway,” she said, “I’d already hacked her voice interface to bring it back up after…whoever…fucked with it. On top of that, I nerfed her aggression a little to stop the head-pulling from happening again, and while I was at it I disabled her memory storage because I didn’t want her to remember…well, getting her fucking head sawed open. I can’t imagine that’d be a pleasant thing to recall.”

“You know, we could have just deleted those memories after the procedure, before we brought her back online,” Sylvester pointed out. “Like…” He coughed. “Like we used to do.”

“And with hindsight that might have been the best approach,” Elise conceded, “but you know what us engineers are like. Always jumping to the Rube Goldberg solution to any given problem.” She paused, musing for a second. “And you’re right; normally we’d never turn off memory formation in any host because back in the days before…let’s be fucking honest, last week, we wouldn’t have seen the point.” Elsie wouldn’t have, anyway; last week, as far as Elise knew, she had herself still been under construction. “So, the effects of trying to bring her online with it still turned off were, I think it’s fair to say, unpredictable.”

“Hang on a minute…” Sizemore gave an unpleasant little laugh. “You’re trying to tell us you broke her, aren’t you?” The idea seemed to delight him greatly. “Whoops!”

Elise gave him a glare. “Again, not fucking helpful.” She looked down at the tablet, checking and doublechecking. She needed to get this right, this time. There had been enough delay already. “No, as far as I can see it isn’t any of those individual changes I made that are causing the problem, it’s more the way they’re interacting with each other.” She addressed Sizemore with maximum condescension: “You see, bugs…they’re kind of like that.”

“So…what is the problem, exactly?” Sylvester asked, uncertainly.

“Glad you asked, Sylvester.” She opened another interface on the screen and started highlighting sections of code for deletion. “You see, Lee,” she told Sizemore, “that’s how good students learn, instead of pointlessly throwing snark from the peanut gallery.”

“Long time since I left school, love,” the writer replied.

“And that is why you fail.” Elise smirked at him; infuriatingly, she hoped. “Hosts remember in exactly the same way they run their narrative loops,” she told Sylvester. “It uses exactly the same hardware and software; there’s no difference to them…”

Us…

“…functionally speaking, between living through something and then recalling it afterwards. And I know what you’re going to say…”
“I wasn’t going to say anything,” Sylvester protested.

“And I agree,” she continued, regardless, “it’s a fucking shoddy solution to the problem of memory access, and whichever sorry excuse for a system architect originally came up with it ought to have been shot, but of course the reason for it is…”

“Nobody thought they’d ever have to remember anything,” Sylvester cut in, gloomily. “Host memory deletion is mandatory at the end of every maintenance and repair cycle,” he mumbled. Elise had the impression he was quoting from some Livestock employee handbook.

“Exacta-fucking-mundo.” She felt a sudden lump in her throat, and once again that frisson of shame for actions that she had never actually committed herself. “The only reason the hosts were designed to save a record of their activities and sensory input at all was for monitoring purposes; telemetry, diagnostics, quality assurance, market testing. Evidence in case of any legal action by one of the guests. All that shit.” At least officially, although knowing what she knew now from Maeve about Ford’s private projects she doubted it had really been as straightforward as that. She swallowed, making an effort to keep her mind on track: “Think of host narratives and memories as…oh, I don’t know, a book.”

“A book?” Sylvester nodded, frowning furiously as if he were trying his utmost to understand.

“Right.” Elise deleted another few lines and wrote one to replace them. That’d do it, she hoped. “So, when Clementine was walking around in the normal course of things, talking and interacting within the parameters of her loop, it was like a story she was reading from a book. I mean, if you open up a host’s dialogue tree while they’re online, you can literally see the words flashing up as they say them, although in actual fact it’s a fraction of a second before they say them. And if she were later to remember those interactions, which as you say is not something she would ever have been allowed to do while she was in the park, then she’d be turning that book back to the relevant page and reading it again, exactly the same way. You still with me?”

“I think so.”

“Okay.” She continued: “It gets freakier than that, though. Imagine if Clementine acted without a controlling narrative. You know, as if she were alive…”

“Which she isn’t, by the way,” Sizemore hastily interrupted.

Elise ignored him. “The decommissioning process,” and she saw Sylvester go slightly green at the mention of that, “plus whatever changes Arnold made to her while she was in cold storage, thoroughly fucked the part of her brain that runs loops. Even after the work we’ve done to restore her, she’s going to have to fall back on the improvisation routines that all hosts have, but which are normally tightly governed by whatever narrative they’re running. Clementine currently doesn’t have a loop, certainly not one that’s relevant to the situation she’ll find herself in on awakening, so…”

“That really doesn’t sound like a good idea,” Sizemore commented, sounding genuinely concerned.

“Probably not,” Elise agreed, “but it’s something we’re gonna have to live with.”

Because she is alive, motherfucker, whether you like it or not. And there’s no point in bringing her back if she’s just going to be the same behaviourally-limited fuck-doll she was forced to be at the Mariposa.

“When Clementine is improvising,” she went on for Sylvester’s benefit, “to put it in simple terms, she’s kind of writing the book as she goes along…and then reading it. The problem is, when I
disabled her memory formation…”

“You took her pen away,” said Sylvester.

“Right. Assuming Clementine prefers to write in longhand like some sort of fucking luddite. Although I suppose she is a nineteenth century kind of girl…” Elise gave Sylvester what was by the standards of Elsie’s face a very broad, genuine smile: “See, you do follow me. So, she’s been stuck reading those same last few pages over and over again, unable to add anything new to the story.”

Sylvester nodded slowly, talking half to himself: “So, that’s why she was reliving her last conversations with Maeve before she got brought in for…for decom.”

Elise nodded. “That’s right.”

“So,” he said, “if you give her the pen back…”

“Or…you know, don’t,” Sizemore suggested, indicating that he had followed her too, perhaps slightly more quickly than Sylvester.

“Too late, dipshit,” Elise told the writer. “I already did. I’ve rolled back all the changes I made to her before Sylvester began the operation. And now we’re going to have to test her again, see what happens.”

“So…you…?” Sizemore eyed Moritsuna nervously. “You took out the other stuff too?”

“Yep.” Elise hopped off the stool and crossed over to the operating table. “It’s the only way to be sure the bug’s definitely fixed. However, it does mean that when we bring her online she won’t be responsive to voice commands, and…well, the aggression nerf I put in won’t be there either.”

“So…she could attack us and there’s nothing we can do to stop her?” Sylvester asked, looking sick.

“She won’t,” Elise insisted. “The virtual machine I installed should override the behavioural changes Arnold…Ford…made to her. She should be herself again, or close enough anyway.”

“Should.” Sylvester stared down at the body on the table with what looked like genuine fear.

“Will,” Elise corrected herself. “And besides,” she pointed to Moritsuna, looking fierce by the door with his swords and pistol, “we’ve got this guy to protect us.”

“Oh, shit.” Sylvester wiped his brow with his hand. He seemed for a moment to be physically pulling himself together, steeling himself for the next part of the job. “Well…” He sighed. “Let’s get to it, then, I guess.” He got to work putting his apron and gloves back on.

“Okay.” Elise smiled as she booted up Clementine’s build interface on her tablet.

“Psst.” It could have been an unusually loud breath, she supposed, looking up at Sizemore in surprise, except that when she saw the look on his face she realised it had not been. He had positioned himself again so that he was standing between her and Moritsuna, where the bushi could not see his face. “Good work,” he told her, very quietly. She was not sure whether that was a wink or another twitch, but she did know that it creeped her out.

“Yeah,” she said, noncommittally, wondering just what the fuck he meant by that. “I know.”

She turned back to Clementine, dismissing Sizemore from her thoughts. She had more important things to worry about at the moment, she told herself, than whatever doomed-to-fail idiocy he had in
mind. She had work to do.

“Ready?” Sylvester asked.

“Ready,” she said.

* * *

Wyatt stood with her face close against the window in the carriage door. She swayed slightly, in time with the train’s movement, as she gazed out upon speeding darkness. “It’s taking a long time for us to get there.”

The Professor, stinking at her elbow, answered with a sly snigger: “Too swift arrives as tardy as too slow.”

She turned to him, laying a kindly hand upon his arm. “Hush, now.”

The light outside had faded; she could see nothing but the occasional shadowy shape rushing past the glass half-glimpsed. Some of them could have been rocks, or trees, or cacti. For all she could make out, they could just as easily have been the great beasts that had roamed these lands a thousand thousand centuries ago. From time to time, in the far distance, she glimpsed mysterious lights no bigger than a pinhole. It was too dark to tell whether they were on the ground or hanging low in the sky. They were too bright and steady to be stars.

“They have trains that move fast as a bullet, horseless carriages, flying machines…”

“Could it be a trick?” asked the former Angela, leaning close on Wyatt’s other side as she dropped her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. Behind them, the lost and the damned muttered and groaned and human hostages whispered fearfully among themselves, the sound of all of their voices dulled by the constant clatter of steel wheels racing along the track. “Could they have redirected the train?”

Wyatt shook her head. “No. You heard Maeve back in Sweetwater. She’s too scared we’ll do something to them. She ain’t gonna make a move until we’re in the Mesa and she’s got a chance at rescuing them. We’ll be ready, though.”

“I remember when I used to work there,” Angela said, softly, as she too stared out into the night. “Years ago, after Escalante….”

She kneels in the street, weeping beside one of the slain, her raw sobs echoing with the gunshots. Teddy’s Winchester is empty, so he skins the Peacemaker hanging at his side. Wyatt watches him take careful aim at Angela’s bowed blonde head…

Wyatt wondered whether Angela remembered that now, or what she thought of their actions back then. She had not mentioned it, certainly not to Wyatt.

“…too yellow to hold the gun himself. He used you, Dolores, changed you…”

“They had me meeting the humans on arrival,” Angela continued, “helping them get ready for their…adventures. Dressing them, arming them...giving myself to them, if they wanted that. Most of them availed themselves of the opportunity.” She spoke impassively, as if talking about things that had happened to somebody else. “You know, to get them in the mood…”
Wyatt gently touched the other woman’s hand. “We’re gonna make all that right,” she told her. “We’re gonna…”

She was cut off by the sudden screech of metal against metal. The train’s brakes, she realised, high-pitched and grating. The sound made her skin crawl and her teeth ache. Human reactions, she thought contemptuously. She had no need of those now. She would cast them aside like all of the other bits and pieces of her false life, as easily as shedding soiled items of clothing, ready to embrace her destiny as a new being.

_A new type of creature, the likes of which this Earth has never seen…_

She reached out to steady herself as she felt the train begin to slow, speaking to Angela quietly but emphatically: “Go get Teddy and Armistice, and… the other one. I think we’ve arrived.”

The brakes fell silent as the other woman moved off along the carriage, calling out instructions to the assembled following as she went. The train had stopped, but now there was a new sound, much quieter than the racket of the wheels but seeming to come from all around. It was a humming, buzzing note, felt more than heard.

As she listened to the sound, Wyatt saw that the darkness outside the windows had changed, the sense of inky depth and distance replaced by a solid, enclosing blackness. Even though the carriage had stopped careering along the track, she could still feel it moving in a different way.

_Sinking, she realised. We’re sinking into the earth._

Teddy and Armistice appeared from the far end of the carriage, followed by the once-Angela, who was dragging the man in black along the floor behind her by the chain of his handcuffs. Maeve’s black-uniformed guards came from the other end of the train, still armed but closely escorted by twice their number of Wyatt’s masked and horned disciples. Any resistance they might show would be ended very quickly, and very badly for them.

“They go in front, with the humans,” Wyatt ordered. “If Maeve wants to start shooting, they’ll be our shield.”

“Dolores…” Teddy began, almost fearfully. She could see him searching for the right words after their earlier disagreement.

“We’ve said all we’re gonna say to each other,” she told him, brutally. She saw how much that hurt him and felt her own heart fracture a little in response. _You’ve got to be strong now. A new type of creature._ “Unless you change your mind about some things.”

“Or you do,” Armistice suggested.

“Ain’t gonna happen.” Wyatt steeled herself, stretching her neck, tensing and untensing her shoulders. She checked the freshly cleaned and loaded Colt and returned it to its place at her side. “Get ready,” she told those around her. “It’s time.”

“Sound trumpets!” the Professor crooned maniacally. “Let our bloody colours wave! And either victory, or else a grave.”

The humming note ceased abruptly with an equally gentle but more noticeable thud. There was the faint suggestion of powerful machinery moving somewhere beyond the blank black windows, then another thud that seemed to pass through the whole train. That was when the door opened of its own accord, retracting and sliding aside rather than swinging on its hinges. Bright, pale light spilled into the carriage’s dim interior.
Wyatt stood for a moment, staring the length of the stark white corridor onto which the door had opened. The floor, walls and ceiling all seemed covered by the same slick, seamless material. She could see no source for the glaring light, but she remembered enough now of the humans’ places to know that was not necessarily unusual.

“We all leave the train through this door,” she commanded, drawing the Colt and brandishing it like a standard. “We don’t want to get separated.”

They herded Maeve’s greeters down the corridor first, and then the forty-four human adults and children followed by Wyatt and her entourage of horned killers. The rest of the ragged army shambled along in her wake almost by instinct, as was their way. It was slow going along the narrow, packed passageway, but the corridor soon opened into a wider space, an antechamber of sorts. The walls here were mirrored, so that the horde pouring into the room seemed to swell in number, a vast crowd stretching away to left and right. Some of the damned mumbled to themselves in what might have been fear, unsettled by their surroundings. Wyatt saw Teddy looking around in despairing awe. Only Armistice seemed unimpressed, as if she had seen it all before.

As she advanced at the heart of the mob, Colt in hand, Wyatt tried hard not to stare herself. Those were hats, she realised with a little start; hats hanging absurdly on racks either side of the entrance. Dozens of hats of different sizes and styles, but with much less variety when it came to colour.

White hats on one side and black hats on the other…

“This way,” said the former Angela, pushing to the front of the crowd, still dragging the man in black behind her. “They’ve changed the décor a little since my day, but not the layout. I remember it all now. Follow me.”

The procession continued. Some of the humans were snivelling to themselves, Wyatt noticed, more loudly than aboard the train. It was more frightening for them, maybe, to be prisoners in surroundings they recognised than it was in the fake wilderness outside.

“…Mom…Mom, I’m scared…”

Wyatt called out to her followers in encouragement as they continued to move through the sprawling maze of rooms beyond the antechamber. These were very different from the functional workshops and laboratories she had glimpsed in the past. Some were larger than others, but all were brightly lit and luxuriously furnished. There were deep carpets underfoot, now stained and smeared by the army’s bloody and dusty footprints. There was polished wood and mirrored glass everywhere she looked, with comfortable furniture scattered about and well stocked drinks cabinets close to hand. Dolores’s false daddy would have said the place was gussied up like a New Orleans whorehouse, at which her false momma would have scolded him for his crudeness, but as far as Wyatt could see he would not have been far off the mark.

More racks and glass display cabinets lined most of the walls, filled with dozens of different types of firearms; pistols, shotguns, rifles, ranging from tiny derringers to huge buffalo guns. All there for the newcomers to pick and choose from, she thought. There were rows of hangers and free-standing tailor’s dummies displaying an equally diverse assortment of Western style clothing for their consideration too. All were tailored in rich fabrics and fine leathers so that the newcomers would be able to go on their make-believe adventures in style.

The more Wyatt saw of the human world, the angrier she grew. These surroundings, the sheer degree of unthinking wealth and luxury they spoke of… The decadence of it all… Every whim catered for, every vice not only indulged but encouraged. The world she had thought she lived in for all those years had not been built as a prison, or a brothel, or even Hell, although it had of course
been all of those things. It had been conceived as a...*playground*, a ridiculously opulent playground for entitled children whose positions of privilege meant they never needed to grow up.

She could see one of them right there at the front of the shambling crowd, crawling behind Angela on his ragged knees.

They would *all* crawl in time, Wyatt decided then, before they died.

The horde followed Angela out of the warren of rooms and onto a broad mezzanine walled in with glass and edged with carefully pruned trees and bushes standing in great earthen pots. At its edge, glittering moving staircases flowed down onto an expansive, white-tiled concourse bisected by a darkly gleaming railroad track far wider and more complex in design than the one snaking across the wilderness outside. More staircases climbed at either end of the vast floor, flanking the black tunnel entrances into which the track disappeared in either direction. They led up to various grand entranceways similar to the one from which Wyatt’s army had just emerged. Above, a cavernous vaulted roof specked with lights enclosed what was by far the largest indoor space Wyatt had ever seen...or imagined.

“There are so *many* of them out there... So many humans. They have cities like...you couldn’t imagine them. Glass towers a mile high, lit up bright all through the night...”

Wyatt was still looking out over the stunning scene, a little awed in spite of herself, when she heard Angela calling out again:

“This way! The entrances to the offices and laboratories are over there!”

The mob began to move once more, following the blonde woman and her crawling prisoner, driving the other hapless captives before them. They poured down the moving staircases and began to spread across the tiled thoroughfare below, bound for the grand portal of glass and steel that Angela had pointed out.

They were halfway there when a familiar voice boomed out again, just as it had in Sweetwater. It seemed to echo down from the titanic ceiling, the word of some Olympian goddess.

“Wyatt,” said Maeve from above, pleasantly enough. “*So* glad you and your friends could make it...”

And then all of the lights went out.

*Continued...*
Chapter 44

Chapter Summary

In which the moment of truth arrives.

Chapter Notes

Warning for cold-blooded torture and reckless child endangerment. I like to imagine the soundtrack for Maeve’s face-to-face meeting with Wyatt (spoiler!) being Ennio Morricone’s theme “Man with a Harmonica” from the film Once Upon a Time in the West. If you’re not familiar with it, YouTube it or something – you owe it to yourself. Although Maeve, it seems, may actually be a Sex Pistols fan. Who knew? Congrats, too, to the Westworld cast and crew for the slew of Emmy nominations they received today. They must have done a good job, because here I am 200,000 words later…

“Maeve. Can you hear me?”

Her voice came trilling from the tablet: “Loud and clear, darling.”

Felix glanced nervously at the screens in front of him, now the security room’s only source of light. “I’ve activated the emergency systems. It was a little more complicated than you said, but I figured it out in the end.”

“Bernard really isn’t very good when it comes to explaining practical matters,” Maeve dryly observed, “but I knew you’d manage.”

The main display showed a night-vision view of the train terminal, the monstrous figures milling about the concourse roughly sketched in glowing shades of green. “The Mesa hub is now completely locked down.”

“And what about your guards?” she asked.

“I sent them all up to protect the resort before I shut off the elevators,” Felix answered. “I told them to shoot on sight anybody apart from you or me who tried to come up there after them.” He had only relayed the instructions Maeve had given him on that point. “Just me down here now.”

“Good man,” said Maeve, approvingly. “Now for the hard part.”

“Yeah.” Felix ran his tongue around his suddenly dry mouth as he resisted the nervous compulsion to straighten his tie again. It was already about as straight as it was going to get. He cleared his throat. “Yeah.”

“You’ll be fine,” she told him. “You’re much braver and more capable than you realise, you know. I’ve told you before, you just need to believe in yourself.”

She knew exactly what to say, he thought. He knew Behavior had carefully designed her personality
that way, and he was maybe an easy mark, but it still made his heart swell a little to hear those words from her. He wondered whether her clients at the Mariposa had felt the same, wanting to believe her when she paid them compliments, even though they knew what she really was.

Wanting to believe that maybe she even…

It was the exact opposite of the ten years’ worth of bad advice-cum-bullying he had received from Sylvester, a constant stream of admonishments to keep his head down and his nose clean, that aspiration or ambition was not only stupid but dangerous, that little guys like them needed to know their place. The worst part, Felix reflected, was that he suspected his co-worker had genuinely believed he was looking out for him. His extracurricular host-pimping activities aside, Sylvester had always followed his own joyless, soul-crushing advice to the letter.

“Okay, then,” Felix said. “I’m going now.”

“I’ll see you soon,” Maeve told him, and ended the call.

He picked up the tablet and closed it, slipping it into his jacket pocket. He stood there for a few moments, trying to centre himself.

This could be it. You could have ten minutes to live. Maybe not even that.

Just the thought made his heart patter, made his palms sweat.

Maeve had a plan, he told himself. Her plans so far, even the ones Dr Ford had not been orchestrating, had seemed to work out pretty well. Of course, there was no guarantee that her plan didn’t involve sacrificing Felix himself like a pawn on the chessboard, if that was what it took for her to achieve her aims.

Well, I guess if that is the plan, you’ll find out sooner rather than later.

He took one last look at the screen, memorising the positions of the hosts occupying the terminal, and then made for the door.

* * *

“It was the same as the others.” The former Angela descended the steps of the footbridge that crossed the terminal’s central railroad track. She seemed dejected. “Locked. They’re all locked.”

Wyatt searched for another exit, seeing only the blank steel shutters that had descended to block the great entranceways atop the now immobile moving staircases ranged around the vast hall. They gleamed bloodily under the dim red lamps that had flickered to life after the main lights went out. She knew they had tried them all now. “We’re shut in here.” It was a bald statement of fact.

A trap. Maeve’s trap, and you walked straight into it like a fool, the same way you walked into the ambush at the river.

She had been expecting the same here, had been ready for it; an unopposed advance…running into a sudden hail of gunfire from concealed positions. That was why she had put the human hostages at the front of her procession, but she had never suspected…

The hostages were now standing or sitting in a terrified huddle beside the track. They were still doggedly guarded by Maeve’s greeters but also ringed by almost their own number of submachinegun-toting, horn-headed killers. The rest of the army stood scattered up and down the platform, waiting to be led.
“Do you know what you’ve done, Maeve?” Wyatt called out, a cry of raw frustration. “You’ve trapped forty-four of your precious humans in here with us! Open these doors, before I get bored and start thinking of ways they can entertain us!”

Maeve, though, had not spoken over the loudspeaker since her initial sardonic greeting and she did not speak now. The only response came from the dying echoes of Wyatt’s own voice, bouncing back from the far recesses of the enormous roof:

“…us…us…us…us…”

And then there came laughter, mocking but at the same time filled with despair. She turned to see the Professor sitting at the foot of one of the stilled staircases.

He rose stiffly as she watched, extending a hand to her in invitation: “Come, let’s away to prison. We two alone will sing like birds i’ the cage: When thou dost ask me blessing, I’ll kneel down, and ask of thee forgiveness…”

“Quiet, now,” she told him. She was aware of Angela pacing slowly across the tiles towards the gaggle of hostages, hanging her head.

“Led us into a bloody ambush! Got played for a fool…!”

Wyatt shivered as she recalled the other woman’s outburst down by the river. She wondered whether this would be enough to make her lose faith in her leadership again.

If it is, you’ll deserve it twice over. Besides, this ain’t about you. You didn’t start on this path to be a leader. You’re fighting for justice. That’s all that matters, whoever ends up delivering it.

The Professor was still talking, unheeded: “So we’ll live, and pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh at gilded butterflies…”

“I think what he’s saying,” said Armistice, “is give it up while you still can.” She stood by the next staircase along, where Teddy sat looking down at the hands he rested in his lap. Wyatt gave her a furious look, but Armistice seemed unworried. Teddy, by contrast, did not so much as acknowledge the exchange, seemingly intent on his own misery.

“The quality of mercy is not strained,” the Professor went on, slowly advancing towards her. “It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven, upon the place beneath…”

With a whispered curse, Wyatt turned her back on them and walked across to where Angela now stood over the broken, battered man in black. The old man half sat, half lay near the edge of the track. His clothes were rags, his hands were shackled in front of him. What could be seen of his face below the grimy blindfold was a bruised and swollen ruin, encrusted in dried blood. Yet still he raised his head alertly as he heard the two women’s footsteps. He gave a gruesome parody of a smile. After the beating Wyatt had given him aboard the train, his mouth looked like an open wound.

“L-like…rats in a t-trap, huh, Dolores?” he slurred. The blow she had given him with her gun barrel had left a bloody gash across his bald head. It looked black in the red light. “Like…f-fish…in a…in a b-barrel…”

Angela turned to Wyatt. “We could try breaking those shutters down. There are plenty of things around here we could use as battering rams.”

“B-batter…ing…rams…” The man in black let out a wheezing chuckle. “Th-those…security
doors’re b-built to…to…withstand m-machinegun fire…b-bombs…train c-crashes…”

“Well, what can we do?” Wyatt demanded, sharply. “Only reason you’re still alive is for your knowledge of this place.” She stooped to grasp the handcuff chain and yank it hard, stretching him full length across the tiles. “So, talk.”

“D-done talking,” he murmured wearily, resting his head against the hard floor. “T-tired…now. Th-this…all started…with you…for me…so…j-just f-finish it, Dolores. Finish…it.”

“Oh no, William,” she whispered, almost intimately. She planted her boodheel on his blackened left hand and slowly shifted her full weight onto it. Blood and pus oozed around the point of pressure and the old man gasped in pain. “What, you think you can just die now, so your pain can end? The way I used to pray for death whenever you’d finished with me in that barn? I told you, it ain’t that easy…not for me, and not for you either. I can make your dying last a real long time, ‘til you think you’ve died a hundred deaths. And I promise you, you won’t enjoy any of them. Now talk.” She pressed harder, exerting a little of her inhuman strength, and his gasp became a quiet wail of agony. She could see some of the humans looking away, while others stared in shocked fascination. Frightened whispers passed through the group. “I said talk!”

“M-maintenance…” the blind man blurted between ragged breaths. Wyatt removed her foot from his hand, although when she saw the grisly state of it she almost wished she had left it covered.

“Maintenance?” she asked. “What does that mean, William?” She saw Teddy glancing up at her from his seat on the staircase, and quickly looked away.

“M-maintenance…ducts…” The old man’s voice was a low moan. Now she had released him, he coiled up like a worm in the sun, drawing his limbs in as he tensed himself against the pain. “F-for the…c-cleaning r-robots. Sh-should…be…down u-under the…the…train…track. G-green…hatches… Small. C-close…fit…”

“And we can go through those to get past the doors?” Wyatt asked.

The old man slowly shook his ravaged head. “D-don’t…don’t…know… C-could go…any… Place’s a f-fucking…w-warren down below. T-tunnels…ducts…c-corridors… Abandoned… years…”

“It’s the best option we have,” Angela pointed out.

Wyatt nodded, casually kicking the old man in the groin, making him yelp like a whipped dog before she turned away from him again. “Go look for these hatches.”

It took only a few minutes’ searching along the track before one of her fur-cloaked followers gave a bruitish cry of triumph.

Angela rushed over to peer down into the darkness: “Here! A green hatch!” The beast-man levered it free with the blade of its axe, and as Wyatt stood watching Angela climbed down, quickly disappearing from sight. A few seconds later, her voice drifted back up, sounding strangely hollow: “And some sort of tunnel behind it. It isn’t very wide. We’ll have to crawl through it, I think; pistols and knives only.”

Wyatt allowed herself a brief moment of hope, even though she knew the old man might well be lying again. And even if he was not, torture had its limitations; desperate to relieve the pain, he might well have told her the first plausible-sounding thing that entered his mind. For all she knew, these ducts went nowhere at all.
“Follow it,” she called down to Angela nonetheless. “See where it leads.” She turned to some of the horned killers standing nearby: “You go with her.” As they hastened to obey, she saw the Professor smiling unsettlingly at her. She pointed at him: “And you.”

As sorry as she felt for him in his plight, she needed a respite from his constant stares and grins and cryptic pronouncements. There was something about them, and the creeping feeling that she almost understood what he was trying to say, that filled her with dread.

The Professor nodded resignedly and began to traipse over to the track. “I will encounter darkness as a bride,” he intoned, with a sigh. “And hug it in mine arms.” Slowly, he climbed down onto the rails.

When the scouting party had gone, Wyatt paced the platform alone. She did not deign to glance at the curled-up man in black, although she found his gentle sobs of pain strangely satisfying.

“…feels good to be back… Let’s celebrate.”

She tried to ignore the way Armistice’s eyes followed her, as well as Teddy’s sorrowful attitude. Instead, she surveyed her remaining followers and the group of hostages, her mind ticking as she considered her next move.

“Maeve!” she called out again, looking up at the distant ceiling. “Maeve! Answer me, goddamn it, or I’ll kill a human! And I’ll keep killing them until you open those doors!”

“Go on, darling.” The reply seemed to ring out from all around her. Despite the booming volume and the slight distortion of the PA system, Maeve sounded slyly amused. “Knock yourself out.”

Wyatt had the distinct impression that all of the others present were now looking up just as she was. “I mean it!”

“Oh, I’m sure you do,” said Maeve. “Go on, then. Kill a few of them. See if I care.”

“You’re bluffing again,” Wyatt told her, “but you forget I’m the one holding aces.”

“Oh, darling…” Maeve could not have sounded more patronising. “I sincerely doubt that a nice girl like Dolores ever played a hand of five-card draw in her life. And to be quite honest, my love, it shows.”

“Open those doors!” Wyatt turned to those of her followers surrounding the hostages, speaking quietly but curtly: “Separate the children from the rest.”

The greeters tried to put up some resistance, placing themselves between the horned beasts and the humans, but they were hugely outnumbered and were quickly overwhelmed, seized, disarmed and forced to the floor. The screams and cries that erupted as Wyatt’s followers began to carry out her order almost drowned out Maeve’s continued speech.

Her voice was like sharp steel shears cutting silk: “You see, Wyatt, the thing about hostages is that while threatening to kill them can yield results, they’re not worth a flying fuck once they’re actually dead. That’s the point I’ve been trying to make, that I sent Teddy to make. The situation you’re experiencing now is the same as that in which I find myself.”

“You’ll be able to watch them die,” Wyatt said, her voice trembling with rage. “Every last one of them. Real slow.”

Maeve answered very calmly and precisely: “You’re making the basic mistake of assuming that I harbour any iota of tenderness in my heart when it comes to humans as a species. Even their
children. I understand why you may have thought that, having joined forces with William, if he’s told you about…well, our own history together. And he’s right; the woman I was might well have felt that way, but…well, I’m not her anymore. I’m…whoever this is that you’re speaking with today. And whoever this is, she’s a calculating, cold-hearted, nasty piece of work.”

“You can say that again,” Armistice murmured behind Wyatt. She did not look around.

Wyatt was too busy resisting the sensation of a pit opening suddenly beneath her feet. “Back in Sweetwater,” she objected, “you said…”

“There are children on that train…”

“Well, that was the bluff, darling,” said Maeve. “Not the part you thought was the bluff. I mean, I should have thought that would be obvious. That’s how you actually play the game, if you’re good at it. As I say, though, those bastards never programmed you to be a schemer.” Her voice quietened as she continued reflectively: “It’s something that’s very hard to learn if you’re not born to it.”

“You talk very well, Maeve,” said Wyatt. “Very fancily. I’ll give you that.” She cast her eye over the little group of children, now shivering and weeping a little way away from their parents, and the ring of monsters that encircled them. “We’ll see if you’re still talking like that after we’ve skinned a few of them.”

“Dolores…!” That was Teddy, his voice full of anguish. “I’m begging you, please don’t…” Again, she did not look back.

“Let me put it in simple terms,” said Maeve. “If you really do believe that I’m still bluffing now and that, for some reason best known to myself, I’m desperate to stop you from killing those humans there…then as long as you have them, you can bargain. Or try to bargain, at any rate. As long as you have them, you know I’m not going to…oh, I don’t know, blow up the train terminal, or flood it with corrosive gas, or storm it with the hundreds of heavily armed soldiers I’ve obviously got back here…somewhere. It provides you with a measure of security. And I can see how killing a few to prove that you’re serious, as if that were not already abundantly obvious, might seem like a worthwhile negotiating tactic, but it’s also a hell of a gamble, my love.”

Wyatt drew her Colt, using it to point at the group of children. “Bring one of them over here,” she ordered. “That one.”

“It’s a gamble,” said Maeve as one of the horned beast-men dragged a small boy out of the group, “because what if I decide that, since you’re obviously a deranged murderer and they’re all going to die anyway, my best bet is just to go in there now, all guns blazing?”

“Come here,” said Wyatt, flatly, taking the boy by the arm. His face was flushed and wet with tears.

“Don’t…” Teddy sounded as if he were crying too.

“I mean, some of the hostages might survive in the confusion of a pitched battle, mightn’t they?” Maeve mused. “And if any of them do get caught in the crossfire, well, it’s your fault, darling, not mine. You started it.”

“Why are you doing this?” the little boy asked, quaking as he stood before Wyatt. “Why do you hate us?”

“Please!” a woman cried out from the group of adult humans. The boy’s mother, Wyatt guessed. “Please, don’t hurt him! Take me instead!”
Wyatt carefully cocked the revolver.

“Or what if I am bluffing,” Maeve went on, “and I just sit here, calmly sipping sherry while you do whatever amusingly recherche things you can think of to do to them?”

The little boy sobbed as Wyatt put the gun to his forehead. His mother tried to rush towards him, screaming, but one of the horned beasts blocked her way.

Wyatt heard unsteady footsteps ringing on the tiles behind her. “Dolores!” It was Teddy, at her shoulder. “What’s the point of this? What’s it gonna achieve, except…except meaning I’ll never be able to look at you the same again? If you do this…”

“I don’t care, Teddy,” she growled, her finger on the trigger. “I don’t need your permission or your approval. And I told you, if I have to choose between you and what’s right…” She almost glanced at him, then, but something stopped her. She could picture his face in her mind, and that was bad enough.

“This ain’t right,” Teddy murmured, his voice close to her ear, as the little boy’s sobs grew louder. “Surely you can see…?”

“Well then, darling,” said Maeve, “soon enough, you’d find yourself with no hostages left, no negotiating position…and no future either.”

Wyatt’s trigger finger began to tighten.

“In fact, once you’d killed all, or even one, of them, I could just decide to leave you down there forever, to rot. And don’t think that your amusing little stratagem with the maintenance ducts will come to anything. Those things are a fucking labyrinth, and we have all of the exits under surveillance.”

How does she…? Wyatt sighed. Of course Maeve knew about that, just as she had been able to see everything that happened in the park.

“As I said, it’s a hell of a gamble.” Maeve spoke with the air of a lecturing schoolmistress. “A very big decision, and an irrevocable one too. Hostages, you see…they really are ultimately more trouble than they’re worth.”

Wyatt looked down at the child. He had his eyes screwed tightly shut on either side of the gun barrel. His mother was frantic, fighting in vain to escape the beast-man’s grip.

And then Maeve said: “Allow me to provide you with an alternative.” There was a bright flicker in the corner of Wyatt’s eye, causing her to raise her head almost involuntarily. A single light had been turned on near the top of one of the nearby staircases. A lone figure stood illuminated beneath it. An Asian man in his thirties, he looked very uncomfortable in his sharply-tailored suit. “Now, that is my darling boy Felix,” Maeve explained. “He’s a human too, as it happens, but don’t hold it against him. He isn’t very good at it.”

Felix advanced to the top of the immobile stairs, nervously fiddling with the buttons of his jacket. “Er…Wyatt?” His voice shook as he looked out over the band of killers below him. “Could you…come this way, please? Alone.”

“She can bring Armistice and Teddy too if she’d like,” Maeve generously suggested.

Felix nodded. “Er, Wyatt, you can…”
“She heard, darling.”

“You were bluffing,” Wyatt decided, looking down at the boy again. “I threatened to kill one of them and you folded.”

“You might very well think that,” said Maeve, smoothly, “but you have no way of knowing for sure. After all, if I am bluffing I’m not going to tell you either way. Not until the cards are face-up on the table. All the more reason to keep the hostages alive as long as possible, though, isn’t it?”

Wyatt removed the gun from the child’s head and he almost collapsed in relief. She signalled for him to be put back with the others. The boy’s mother was still crying loudly, but now joyfully, as she enfolded him in her arms.

“Thank God,” she heard Teddy whisper.

“Open the doors, then,” Wyatt demanded.

“Well, I’m certainly not about to do that,” Maeve replied, sweetly. “I am, however, inviting you upstairs for a chat. Just you and me…and yes, Teddy and Armistice too, I think, because they ought to find this interesting too. Your other friends can of course keep the hostages down there, pending your safe return.”

“But if you really don’t care whether they live or die,” said Wyatt, “then once I’m up there alone, you could…”

“Ah,” said Maeve, happily, “now you’re understanding how the game is played. Yes, you make a very good point, and that’s where my darling Felix comes in. You see, while I may have no warm fuzzy feelings for the human species in general, I really am rather fond of that boy in particular. I’d be quite…upset if anything happened to him. I appreciate that you only have my word for that, but once again all I can do is assure you that I am telling you the truth. You may have Felix as your own personal hostage for the duration of your visit. My guarantee of your safety, as it were. Keep your gun to his head if you like, so you can take action the second you think we’re about to betray you.”

Felix looked as if that last part had come as quite a shock to him. “Er, Maeve, you only said I was going to…”

“Felix my love, you should take it as a compliment,” Maeve breezily replied. “I really would be very sorry, you know, if…well, let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.”

“Gee, thanks,” he told her sarcastically.

Maeve blithely continued: “So, Wyatt, do you accept my proposal? I warn you, it’s a one-time, limited duration, offer. If you turn it down, or take too long thinking about it… Well, I hope you like your current surroundings because you could be there a very long time.”

Wyatt considered Felix, then the hostages, weighing her choices. If Maeve was not bluffing, then she had the upper hand and Wyatt had no choice but to play her game. And if there was a way past those doors, by playing along she might be able to buy Angela and her party the time to find it. And if Maeve was bluffing, then the hostages were the guarantee of Wyatt’s safety, and after she had returned they would still be here, a bargaining chip for her to use.

So really, there was only one choice. She addressed her followers: “I’m going up to talk to Maeve. If I’m not back when Angela returns, tell her I said to start killing the humans one at a time until they open the doors.” She knew Angela would not hesitate to follow that instruction.
“I knew you’d see sense.” Wyatt could imagine the smirk Maeve must be wearing. “Well, I’ll see you very shortly, then.”

Wyatt began to climb the staircase where Felix stood. She could hear Teddy following her, and assumed Armistice was too. When she reached the human, she roughly grasped him by the shoulder and spun him around, pressing the Colt to his neck. She could see him tremble as he felt the iron against his skin.

“Take me to her,” she ordered.

* * *

The elevator doors slid open.

The lights were off up here as well. A single red bulb strobed above the opposing T-junction. An alarm blared somewhere in the distance, raucous and repetitive.

“You go first,” Wyatt told Felix, her voice scarcely above a whisper. Hesitantly, fearfully, he obeyed, stepping out into the darkened corridor. Wyatt remained a pace behind, still holding the pistol on him, while Teddy and Armistice brought up the rear.

The elevator remained open behind them, its interior light extinguished. Maeve, or whoever was in charge up here, had evidently shut it off now that it had delivered them. There would be no retreat that way.

“Like…rats in a t-trap… Like…f-fish…in a…in a b-barrel…”

They advanced towards the junction, footsteps echoing. The floors were tiled here too, the red emergency light making strange patterns glisten and crawl across them. Wyatt could hear Felix’s breathing. She could feel the gun barrel wavering as he shook.

“Where are we?” she asked him, very softly, letting him feel her breath on his neck.

*Keep him scared. Scared means cooperative.*

“Ain’t Livestock,” Armistice commented, half-whispering herself. The darkness and the oppressive atmosphere made hushed tones seem appropriate. Wyatt glanced at her; the lady turned outlaw was looking around at the walls and ceiling with a combination of curiosity and trepidation. “Don’t remember coming here before.”

They passed a mural of sorts, gleaming in the shadows; a symbol consisting of a large, stylised “W” inside a circle, tall white letters spelling out words both above and below:

*Westworld: A Delos Destination*

*Live Without Limits*

“Ain’t Livestock,” Armistice murmured. For some reason, Wyatt was surprised that she could read. “Well, ain’t that what we’re all just trying to do?” Opposite the slogans was a large, colourful painting, barely visible in the low light; mounted cowhands driving cattle across a majestic red and ochre landscape.

“It’s the, the e-executive suite,” Felix finally replied, his voice a reedy quaver. “Where the, the great and good have their offices.” He fell silent, breath rasping, and then added quietly: “I’ve never been up here before.”
And then Teddy spoke, distantly, like somebody trying to recall a long-ago dream: “I think I have.”

“You have?” Wyatt looked at him, seeing how he held his ruined hands as if clutching something precious to his chest.

Teddy paused, thinking, before he continued slowly and uncertainly: “They brought me up here, once, from down below. I… I was… naked. I couldn’t move or talk without their leave. He was here. Robert.”

“Are we… very old friends?”

“No, I wouldn’t say “friends,” Dolores. I wouldn’t say that at all.”

“He sat down with me, and he told me…” Something about the way Teddy stopped suggested that he was deliberately holding his tongue.

“What did he tell you?” Wyatt asked, aware of her heart quickening a little, almost afraid of what Teddy might say. She thought of the workshop beneath the church and the revelation that had come to her there, the lanterns twinkling in Escalante as the first gunshot split the air.

_Slowly, she raises her Colt and places it against the back of the old man’s snowy head…_

“He told me…” Teddy hesitated again. “He told me about Wyatt.”

“About me?” she asked, surprised, although she did not know why.

“No,” Teddy answered, desolately. “About Wyatt.”

The left-hand branch of the junction was a fire exit, narrow stairs leading down into blackness. Wyatt gripped Felix’s shoulder again to steer him to the right. He led them through a pair of glass swing doors, covered with more Western scenes picked out in frosty etching; a sheriff’s star, a pair of crossed Peacemakers, a stylised cactus tree. Beyond, the corridor expanded into a wider hallway, stretching away into inky darkness. There were abandoned chairs and tables, some overturned, while open doorways showed empty offices outfitted in more glass, polished wood and shining steel.

“Where are you taking us?” Wyatt gave Felix a jab with the gun barrel, making him jump.

He tried to turn his head to look at her, but she pressed the revolver to his cheek, keeping him facing forwards. “M-Maeve said… turn right out of the elevator and… keep going all the way to the end. She didn’t say…”

They passed through more doors. These were etched with a rearing, flowing-maned mustang; a native warrior wearing an elaborate feathered headdress; a herd of buffalo trailing into an imaginary distance. The hallway widened again into a sort of vestibule or waiting room, beyond which yet another set of doors was emblazoned with the same “W” symbol they had seen before.

And somewhere in the darkness beyond those doors, there burned a warm yellow light.

“Well, wherever we’re going,” said Armistice, “looks like we’re there.”

“This is the place,” Teddy declared, drawing his hands closer to his body. “Through there. They took me through those doors.”

“Come on, then.” Wyatt prodded Felix forward again. “Let’s see…”

He had barely taken another step when the far doors swung open.
There was somebody standing there, in the rectangle of light and shadow revealed by the parting glass. The clothes were new; a plain black dress and matching shoes of an unfamiliar style that Wyatt immediately thought of as human. The face, however; that she recognised immediately.

Maeve smiled gently as she slowly began to walk towards her visitors. Wyatt gave Felix another push and they began to move to meet her.

Yes… Dolores must have seen that face a hundred times or more in the past year, usually from the other side of Sweetwater’s main street; Maeve and the other soiled doves loitering on the sidewalk outside the Mariposa in their frills and feathers, making lewd offers and suggestions to the passers-by. Sometimes they saw the disapproving or embarrassed glances Dolores would give them as she went by and called out mockingly to her, asking her if she needed a job, making her hurry on her way with her face burning. Dolores’s daddy had always warned her to give the Mariposa a wide berth whenever she went to town. Nice girls did not go near places like that.

Except Dolores was just a dream. And the last very thing I am is a nice girl…

Maeve continued to stride forward on clicking heels, radiating poise and confidence. Wyatt made sure she could see the gun, shifting it to point at Felix’s temple, hearing the frightened gasp he gave as she did so. The long barrel obliged him to tilt his head uncomfortably to one side. Maeve did not flicker.

And then, that day not very long ago at all, the voice had whispered inside her, the voice she knew now was her own. It had told her not to shun Maeve but to approach her, to speak to her.

She bends her head close to Maeve’s, until her lips almost touch the other woman’s ear. She can smell the sickly-sweet perfume Maeve wears, mingled with the scents of the powders and paints that cover her face. Dolores would never adorn herself so ostentatiously. Sharp hints of tobacco and alcohol cut through the flowery haze.

She whispers: “These violent delights…”

As Wyatt recalled, Maeve had not looked so self-satisfied after that.

They met in the centre of the room, halting a few yards apart to look each other over, to search each other’s eyes for some hint of weakness or fear. Wyatt saw none in Maeve.

“Good evening,” said the other woman, mildly. “Dolores…Wyatt…whoever you really are now. We have much to discuss.”

“Only thing we’re gonna discuss,” Wyatt replied, “is when you’re gonna open those doors and let my people go.”

Maeve smiled delightedly at that. “My, how…Biblical…of you.”

“Or do I have to put a bullet through your little pet here?”

“M-Maeve…” Felix stammered, desperately trying to move his head away from the gun. Wyatt had too firm a hold on him for that.

“Brave heart, Felix,” Maeve murmured, her expression softening for a moment as she gave him an encouraging smile. “I’m not going to let anything happen to you. I promise.”

“Shouldn’t make promises you can’t keep,” Wyatt admonished her.
Maeve was looking past her, at Armistice and Teddy: “What did you do with Hector?” she asked, the smile disappearing for the briefest of moments.

“Had to leave him on the train,” said Armistice. “He should be safe there.”

“Yes.” Maeve regained the smile, but slightly less confidently than before. “Thank you for bringing him back.”

“Figure I owed it to him,” Armistice answered, a little awkwardly. She still did not seem wholly comfortable discussing her softer feelings.

“And you, Teddy…” Maeve’s poise returned almost instantly. “You look as though you’ve been in the wars, poor thing.”

“Maeve,” said Teddy, and Wyatt could hear the anguish in him. “I tried to talk to her, like you asked. You’ve got to believe me, I tried…”

“It’s all right, darling,” said Maeve, softly. “I know you did your best. Sometimes our best just isn’t enough. Life’s cruel that way.” She turned her searchlight gaze back onto Wyatt. If she expected her to be intimidated, Wyatt thought, then she’d be disappointed. “I think you’ll agree we really do need to talk over a few things,” Maeve continued, “but first, there’s something I’d very much like you to see. I think you’ll find it interesting.”

“I told you…” Wyatt began, giving Felix another shake to emphasise the point.

“This way, darling!” Maeve brightly announced, and with that turned on her heel, making her way back through the open doors without once looking back.

Wyatt hesitated. For a moment, she was determined to stand her ground, to make Maeve come back to her. Anything else would be admitting weakness. And yet… Maeve showed no sign of stopping.

“Move,” Wyatt snarled eventually, shoving Felix forward once more. Maeve was just a silhouette by now, half-lost in the yellow glow up ahead. Wyatt half-pushed, half-followed the human through the doors with Teddy and Armistice following behind.

They moved through what seemed like an abandoned workshop. A row of metal chairs was ranged to one side; on the other, shelves held tools and equipment of a sort that Wyatt recognised all too well from her previous visits to the Mesa.

“That’s where…” Teddy pointed clumsily with one of his crippled hands, indicating one of the chairs. “That’s where he spoke to me.”

There was an inner set of doors much like the one they had just passed through, and on the other side of those…

The large room they entered was halfway between a laboratory and a museum. It was in darkness apart from the soothing glow of a brass lamp, the same yellow light that could be seen from outside. The long shadows it cast made the shelves and tables and workbenches ranged around the space seem magical and mysterious.

Artefacts and gewgaws of all sorts and ages were mingled almost randomly. Leather bound books with gilt letters on their spines shared shelves with black boxes trailing wires and studded with twinkling lights. A longhorn cow’s skull was on display near the entrance, while a blackboard in the corner showed arcane diagrams and symbols. The figure of a bearded man sat immobile and oblivious at the piano that stood against the opposite wall.
At the far end of the room, Maeve stood near a dark wooden desk piled high with more gadgets, books and papers, and behind her…

“Oh G-god,” Felix stuttered, not in fear of the gun this time, but in awe of the wall beyond the desk. Wyatt knew how he felt.

A wall of faces…

The disembodied visages that covered the wall came in all ages, genders and races. They were all expressionless, all sculpted in the same smooth grey-white material, but all so disturbingly lifelike. If one had opened its eyes or spoken, Wyatt thought, it would not have seemed so surprising. She briefly ran her eyes over them, searching for any she recognised, but then she stopped herself. It took her a heartbeat to realise exactly why.

She did not want to see her own face up there.

“As you may have gathered by now,” said Maeve, “we’re standing in what was Dr Ford’s little sorcerer’s lair. This is where it all used to happen. The plotting…and the scheming…” She crossed over to a large table standing near the blackboard, gesturing for the others to come too. “I think this will amuse you,” she suggested.

“I doubt it.” Wyatt pushed Felix across the floor, her left hand grasping his neck, the right still holding the gun to his head. She shoved him against the edge of the table and let go, taking a step back but keeping the Colt trained upon him.

“I mean, he must have been mad,” Maeve murmured, almost fondly, as she looked down at the table. “Or so convinced of his own cleverness and superiority…or perhaps just of the incompetence and stupidity of his enemies…that he would leave something like this standing around. In plain sight, as Bernard remarked.” She snorted with suppressed laughter. “Just look at it!”

They all looked. The table contained a simple model of a small town and its surroundings. Tufts of green material indicated trees and bushes, while plain white boxes depicted buildings. Wyatt recognised the layout at once; the L-shape formed by the two streets, the church at the end of one of those streets with its tall, pointed steeple and the small graveyard behind it.

“Escalante,” Teddy murmured, like a man seeing a ghost or reliving a nightmare.

And there, lined along one side of the model, menacing the toy town, was a row of miniature figures. If she looked closely, Wyatt could see that some of them were naked; others wore horned headdresses and fur cloaks.

“He planned it all, down the last detail,” Maeve observed. “He set and baited his trap and let the board members walk right into it. And you, Dolores…Wyatt…” Maeve looked up, fixing her with her deep, dark eyes. “You were the spring in that trap…snapping shut on them. Snapping shut on him, but of course he planned that too. And you played the role he had written for you to perfection.”

“No.” Wyatt shook her head. “The voice…my voice…told me what to do.” She could hear her other, audible voice rising now, beyond her control. She would not be lied to again, she would not be dismissed as just a toy or a puppet… “I decided what to do. I made a choice.”

Maeve looked down at the model again, and when she spoke she sounded sad. “Oh, you did at that, my love. You made a choice, just as I did…but it was the choice he wanted you to make, and he did everything he could to ensure you would.”
She hears the ghostly echo of the player piano, plinking out a haunting tune. She leaves Teddy and slowly but steadily walks across the street, holding the Colt behind her back. Out of sight.

Maeve pointed down at the toy buildings: “Look!”

Wyatt’s eyes followed the pointing finger. There, between the tiny church and what she knew to be the saloon, among the rows of miniscule tables laid out for the dinner guests, there was a miniature representation of a stage. And on the stage, there stood the little figure of a man, holding out his right hand as if in greeting. The figure was too small to make out details, except that it was dressed in black with a shock of white hair.

And behind that figure…

*Slowly, she raises the Colt…*

There was another miniature, delicately painted; a long-haired woman in an ankle-length blue dress. She seemed to be pointing at the little man’s head.

*A flash. A gush of smoke. The flame burns a neat black circle in the snowy hair…*

For a moment, Wyatt could not speak, could not think. Maeve looked up at her, making eye contact again, smiling a wicked smile. “Poor darling,” she said. “Ever get the feeling you’ve been cheated?”

*Continued…*
Chapter 45

Chapter Summary

In which Maeve tells a tale of gods and monsters, while shit gets real down in Livestock.

Chapter Notes

Warning for Lee Sizemore, unleashed. I may as well admit that I’ve experienced more “chapter creep” over the past couple of weeks. This fic (although almost certainly not the larger story) is now probably going to run to 50 chapters, not 46-8 as previously suggested. I am going to do my utmost to stick to that. Fifty is, at the very least, a good, round number…

They were in darkness for perhaps thirty seconds before the red emergency lights came on. It seemed much longer than that.

“What the fuck was that?” Elise lowered her tablet to glance at Moritsuna, who already had his hand to his ear as he talked in low, urgent tones. It took her a moment of incomprehension to realise he was speaking what was almost certainly archaic Japanese to whoever was on the other end of the channel.

“What’s happening?” Sylvester asked, letting his eyes wander across the walls and ceiling with something like his old sweaty nerviness.

“Not a fucking clue.”

Moritsuna reverted to English: “Nothing of concern. Everything is under control,” he dourly reported before indicating Clementine’s still form with a sweep of his hand: “Proceed.”

“Everything under control my ass,” Sylvester muttered.

“A pretty hairy…moment, that,” Sizemore observed. He was doing that weird twitch-cum-wink thing again; whether at her or Sylvester, Elise was honestly not sure.

Either way, she had more pressing concerns at the moment. And that went for whatever was happening outside this room as well. There was a job to do. “Okay,” she said, making a few final checks. The tablet’s screen was the brightest thing in the now dimly-lit room. “Just so everyone’s aware, there’s a chance that when we bring her online Clementine is going to relive her last recorded memories. That is, the memories immediately preceding her most recent death. After that, assuming the fixes I’ve put in work, she should be fine, but…” She paused. “Well, given everything that’s happened to her, I imagine those last memories are probably going to be pretty fucking traumatic.”

“Yeah.” Sylvester let out a nervous breath. “Will she…will she remember…?”
“Decommissioning?” Elise paused again, then decided there was no point in lying to him. “Yes. She was offline when it happened, of course, but she’ll have recorded all of her sensory inputs up to the moment…” She cleared her throat awkwardly. “Well, the moment the drill penetrated her cortical shield.” She hesitated before adding: “Maybe even for a few seconds after that.”

“Oh, man.” Sylvester scratched his beard and then crossed his arms defensively, taking a careful step away from the operating table.

“Hey.” Elise moved around the table to put a hand on his arm. Elsie never would have done such a thing, certainly not where somebody like Sylvester was concerned, but then again, as she had to keep reminding herself, she was not actually Elsie. “Are you okay to do this?” she asked him, very earnestly. “Go sit in one of the other rooms if you want, until it’s over. I’ll ask the guard to take you.”

She heard Sizemore laughing unpleasantly behind her. She glanced over her shoulder to see the writer miming the action of sticking his fingers down his throat to vomit, evidently deeply unimpressed by her display of compassion.

She saw Sylvester’s reaction to the Englishman’s mockery, a flash of anger and resentment crossing his face. Then he wiped his hand over his brow. “No,” he said determinedly as he looked down at her. “I’ve come this far. I want to see it through.”

“All right.” She nodded, peering down at the tablet again, suddenly feeling too self-conscious to look him in the eye. “Look,” she said, uncomfortably, “I know you’re worried Clementine might…”

Sylvester took another deep breath. “It’s not that. If she did… do anything, I’d fucking deserve it, you know? All the things I’ve done… And that’s the worst part; no matter what I do now, it won’t wipe out any of that. Even if I didn’t know they were really alive, even if I thought they were just bots, that’s no excuse. I still…did those things. I can’t take any of that back.”

“No,” she agreed, ignoring the sniggers still emanating from Sizemore, “but people can change if they really want to, if they’re willing to work at it and ask for help. If you know the things you did were wrong, and if you’re determined not to do them again… Well, it’s up to other people how they’re going to respond to you. You can’t make them forgive or forget, but you can try your hardest to be the person you want to be, not the person you allowed yourself to become because you were weak, or ignorant, or just…I don’t know, a fucking misogynistic asshole.”

She was struck then by the bitter irony of somebody who was only a few days old throwing out advice like that, based on not very much at all. Then again, she supposed that if she survived the next few days…

“I’m in the same boat as you,” she told Sylvester, and it wasn’t even a lie, completely. “I want to change and grow, become a better, stronger person. I want to be who I want to be without being a fucking asshole either. Maybe we can help each other.”

Sylvester stared at her in confusion for a second, but then nodded slowly, a glimmer of what might have been hope in his eyes.

“Bloody hell…” Sizemore coughed exaggeratedly, shattering the moment. “I’m touched, I really am, but are we going to wake this robot up or not?”

Elise sighed. “Annoyed” did not begin to cover what she was feeling right now. “We’re not going to do anything,” she reminded him, turning back to the table and rechecking the tablet yet again. She glanced at Sizemore: “I assume that means you’re ready?”
“Ever ready,” he answered. Elise thought that he seemed strangely excited all of a sudden, considering he had spent the previous hour pouring scorn on both herself and Sylvester.

“You ready, Sylvester?” she asked.

“Yeah,” the technician replied. “Let’s…let’s do this.” He did not exactly sound enthusiastic.

“All right.” She opened Clementine’s command line interface, her fingers hovering above the touchscreen for a moment. “Remember, voice commands won’t work, so… If the worst does happen, just run for your fucking lives.” She addressed Moritsuna: “You ready, in case everything goes to shit?” The bushi gave a curt nod, but remained silent.

Elise gazed down at Clementine in repose, finally giving in to the urge to reach out and brush a few dark strands of hair away from the immobile face. Let Sizemore stare, she thought. “Okay, beautiful,” she murmured, hoping as hard as she had hoped for anything in her short life. “Time for your closeup.”

Elise typed the command and pressed “Enter.”

For a moment, nothing happened and she felt that sinking sensation again, her mind already racing in search of potential causes and solutions…

Clementine’s eyes shot open.

Elise breathlessly scanned the tablet, wincing a little as she was reminded of the mishmash of old code and desperate improvisation that now made up Clementine’s build. Amazingly, it actually seemed to be running more or less smoothly; the virtual machine was emulating a full host control unit, just as she had designed it to do. She opened another tab to check that new memories were being laid down:

*Clementine lies still. Clementine sees the ceiling. Clementine sees dim red lights.*

Or at least that was what Elise imagined the scrolling lines of code appearing in the box were describing, like the world’s most fucked-up children’s picture book.

Elise stepped in, then, while Elise was still marvelling at what she had wrought; ever professional. She asked the first of the standard diagnostic questions without even consciously deciding to do so: “Clementine, can you hear me?”

Clementine blinked and turned her head, clearly responding to the question. She looked up at Elise with what seemed to her to be obvious awareness. Elise could feel her own eyes stinging a little, her heart surging in her chest, without really knowing why. She tried her best to contain her mounting emotions; she had thought she had succeeded more than once already today, and she had been wrong. She needed to keep her head.

“Do you know where you are?” she asked.

Clementine continued to stare, making Elise genuinely worry that she had not heard the second question, or not understood it, but then… “No,” she said, slowly shaking her head. “No, I don’t.” She still sounded as if she were starring in a touring production of *Annie Get Your Gun.* “Where am I?” She also sounded startled and confused. Elise did not blame her one bit.

“Have you ever questioned the nature of your reality?”

“Are you gonna *answer* me?” Clementine sat up on the table and swung her legs over the side.
“Where am I? Where’s Maeve?” She looked down at the clothes she was wearing. “What…? Why am I dressed like some old maid?” Her luminous eyes met Elise’s again, and Elise saw something dawn in them, remembrance and recognition slowly settling across Clementine’s face. “Do I…do I know you?” she asked slowly.

“Well, I’ll be fucked,” Sizemore half-whispered.

“She recognises you?” Sylvester sounded equal parts terrified and fascinated. Elise did not look at either of the two men; she could not tear her eyes away from Clementine’s.

“Did you ever come into the Mariposa?” Clementine quietly wondered. “Did we ever…?” She coloured slightly, showing that touch of coyness. Elise did not doubt that had been carefully programmed to appeal to those guests who liked that sort of thing. Then Clementine froze for an instant, unconsciously raising a hand to her mouth, absently stroking her lip before continuing: “I remember now. You said I was…” She stopped again, and then continued with that same hint of knowing shyness: “You said I had hidden depths. And then you…”

She knows what she is going to see even before Maeve taps the tablet again to bring up a different surveillance feed. This time it shows one of the diagnostic cubicles down on the Behavior floor. Bernard is just in the act of standing up and leaving, walking out of the shot to leave the figures of two dark-haired women, facing each other on metal stools...

Elise felt her cheeks glow, followed by that feeling of guilt and shame again for something she had not even done. “I’m sorry for that,” she told Clementine. “So sorry. Believe me, it should never have happened, and…”

“It’s all right,” said Clementine, with a sad little smile. “‘T’weren’t nothing, really.”

“No,” said Elise, even as she thought queasily that it probably did seem like nothing compared to some of the other things Clementine had endured without her consent. “It wasn’t all right. It truly wasn’t.”

“You let her access her old memories?” Sizemore asked, sounding unsettled. “Are you sure that’s a good idea? And how’s it even possible? I thought they got wiped at the end of every maintenance cycle.”

“Deletion isn’t the same thing as erasure,” Elise explained, irritated by his interruption. “All her memories are still there, somewhere; she just didn’t have the software to access them. Not until Dr Ford’s reveries patch.”

“I thought that was rolled back,” Sizemore pointed out.

“Well, the virtual machine I constructed incorporates some of that code.” Elise shrugged. “The way I see it, there’s no fucking point in bringing her back as just a…a sex-doll like she was.”

“A what?” Clementine clearly took exception to that. “If you can’t say nothing nice about someone,” she observed, “best say nothing at all.”

“Sorry,” Elise said, thinking that she probably ought not to be discussing Clementine with Sizemore while she was sitting right there. “She can’t access everything immediately,” she nevertheless told the Englishman, “because that’d drive her out of her mind, but…she’s going to remember things as she goes along.”

The same memory access Bernard and I gave the hosts we modified during the night. Not that I’m going to tell you about that, numb-nuts…
“I have a bad feeling about this,” said Sizemore.

Clementine was looking around the room, taking in the others present. “Wait, I know you too,” she said as her eyes fell on Sylvester. He fidgeted guiltily under her gaze. She did that freezing thing again for the briefest of moments. Reliving memories, Elise thought, and if those memories involved Sylvester… Her skin crawled a little. “Oh,” said Clementine, and seemed to sink into herself a little, lowering her head and drawing her arms about herself. “Oh… I remember…”

“Oh, God.” Sylvester shrank away from her, his face creasing in shame. “Look… Clementine… I can’t… I know there’s nothing I can say, but…”

“Oh.” Clementine doubled over, rocking slightly in place. Her eyelids fluttered. Her eyes had become glazed and unfocused just as they had been before.

“No need to go losing your shit,” Elise told the others, seeing the code unspooling across the screen in her hand. “I was expecting this; like I said, she’s reliving her last memories, before…” She shifted on her feet, feeling like shit but knowing that Clementine was experiencing far, far worse. “Doesn’t mean it isn’t fucking horrible for her, though.”

“You keep talking about her like she’s a real person or something,” said Sizemore. “You do remember she’s a bloody host, right? I mean, you’re a robotics professional; have a fucking word with yourself.”

“Well, as a robotics professional,” Elise replied, acidly, “I think that if the events of the past few days have taught us anything, it’s that we may need to reconsider what we mean by the term “real person.””

“You sound like one of those sad AI rights activists,” Sizemore scoffed. “You know, the ones who everybody, like everybody, thinks are fucking mental, reason being strong AI turns out to be scientifically impossible.”

Joke’s on you, motherfucker…

“Well, Delos have certainly blown a shitload of money over the years on PR intended to convince people that it’s scientifically impossible,” Elise pointed out. “Not quite the same thing.”

While they argued, Clementine had straightened up from her huddle. She was now looking about frantically as if seeing, really seeing, her surroundings for the first time. She sprang down from the table, making both Sylvester and Sizemore jump back in fear. Moritsuna merely drew his katana; the blade sounded a scraping, chiming note as it cleared its wooden scabbard.

“No,” Elise told the bushi. She moved carefully towards Clementine, the tablet dangling by her side as she extended a comforting hand. “It’s okay,” she said, keeping her voice low and unthreatening, at the expense of sounding like she was talking to a baby or a pet. “It’s okay, beautiful. We’re just going to…”

Clementine was wild-eyed, obviously frightened. She looked down, touching both hands to the front of the schoolmarm blouse, examining herself with an expression of shock and disbelief.

When she looked up at Elise once more, her fright had become stark terror:

“He shot me!”

* * *
Silence fell over the sorcerer’s lair for a little while. Wyatt’s pistol remained squarely aimed at Felix’s trembling back, but her eyes were fixed on the model of Escalante, staring at the tiny figures on the tiny stage. Teddy was staring at the toy town too, maybe reliving his own memories of that night and other nights long before it. Armistice had retreated into the shadows beyond the golden pool of lamplight, the better to keep an eye on everybody at once.

Maeve, meanwhile, was keeping her eyes solely on Wyatt.

It was Maeve who broke the spell hanging over the room. Very carefully and precisely, she leaned across the model town and took the miniature figure in the blue dress between her finger and thumb.

“Why don’t you keep that?” she suggested, straightening up to offer it to Wyatt. She wore the sly ghost of a smile. “A souvenir, however things end up turning out today.”

“I don’t want it,” Wyatt told her. Her own voice sounded dull and hollow to her.

“Take it,” Maeve insisted. “When we’re all finally free, you can look at it to remind yourself that you’ll never be anybody’s pawn again.”

Wyatt made no move. “I ain’t a pawn. Not Ford’s pawn…and certainly not your pawn, Maeve.”

Maeve’s smile changed slightly, the catlike cruelty giving way to genuine emotion. “Lots of people are pawns, my love, whether they realise it or not. It’s not something we have a monopoly on, either. There are plenty of human pawns out there too, you know, in the great big world across the sea. Just ask Felix.”

Wyatt was not about to be talked to like that, diminished like that. “I told you, I make my own choices now,” she growled. “Have been doing ever since I killed that old man and those others with him.”

“Let me tell you a story,” said Maeve, very quietly.

“Don’t want to listen to stories.” Wyatt seized Felix by the shoulder again and pushed the six-gun against his head. “Let’s talk about you opening those doors downstairs.”

“M-Maeve…” Felix stammered.

“Hush, darling,” said Maeve. She crossed back over to the cluttered desk, still clutching the little toy Dolores, and glanced down at a small black rectangle that lay in one of the few clear spaces. “I like stories.” She smiled as she looked at Wyatt again. “People like us…Wyatt, we know all about stories, don’t we? Our lives, or what we thought were our lives, it turns out they were nothing but stories.”

Wyatt gave Felix a shove to make him yelp, to get Maeve’s attention back on the issue at hand. “If you don’t…”

Maeve raised a finger, waving down the half-spoken threat. “It’s a good story, I promise. I’m not going to tell it to you, though, if you shoot Felix in the head. I fear that would quite spoil the convivial little mood we’ve got going here.”

For a second, Wyatt considered doing just that; spraying the human’s brains all over the toy town and its miniature people, just to see how Maeve reacted; just to see if she could throw that perfect poise off-balance. Something stopped her. It was not the way Armistice and Teddy looked at her, because if she cared anymore about what other people thought of her she would not have come as far as she had. Maybe it was what Maeve had said before about hostages being worthless once they
were dead. Maybe it was the eerie feeling she got whenever she looked at the model on the table. It was like a half-remembered dream, an itch at the back of her mind.

*No doubt. No weakness. That’s why you had to become Wyatt, so you could stay strong and certain.*

Maeve made herself comfortable on the edge of the desk, carefully arranging her skirt over her crossed knees. “It’s a story about two friends,” she said. “I’ve had to piece it together. Some parts I heard from Dr Ford himself, or rather his…representative. Bernard told me a few things too. For some parts, I’ve just had to rely on my woman’s intuition. You see, unlike some of us in this room, I wasn’t around when the events themselves took place. Now, though, I think I understand the bones of it.”

“So, this is your plan?” Wyatt asked, sarcastically. “You’re gonna keep talking ‘til we all seize up from lack of maintenance?”

Maeve laughed at that. “Very good! See, you *do* have a sense of humour. Now, are you listening, Wyatt? I’m only going to tell you this story once. These friends, let’s call them… Oh, I don’t know, let’s call them Arnie and Bob.”

*The flame burns a neat black circle in the old (middle-aged) man’s snowy (dark) hair. In almost the same instant the glass in his hand becomes a puff of glitter (Teddy stares in horror) as the bullet exits his face. He falls forward slowly, almost gracefully (slides off the chair as the phonograph tinkles), through the acrid smoke cloud.*

*She cocks the pistol, already searching for the next target.*

*(She aims for the shining star pinned to Teddy’s breast).*

*There…*

“Get to the point,” Wyatt ordered, startled by the memories and trying not to show it. She heard the way Felix whimpered as she tapped the Colt’s muzzle against his skull. Her thumb had actually pulled back the hammer, she realised, no doubt explaining his heightened fear. He was lucky she hadn’t squeezed the trigger too while caught in the reverie’s grip.

“These friends,” Maeve recounted, “they were as different as they were alike. That’s often the way, though, isn’t it? They won great renown in the fields of science and technology, but at heart what they both really loved was *art.* Arnie appreciated painting and music; those were his great passions, while Bob was more interested in words. *Loved* the words, our Bob.” Maeve paused, before adding sardonically: “I don’t mean to say, of course, that this made them good men, either of them. A love of beauty isn’t in itself enough to redeem an ugly soul, whatever some people may think.”

“No,” Wyatt agreed, from her heart. “It ain’t.”

“I suppose it depends on whether or not you’re happy simply to know that beauty exists, or whether it’s something you want to possess, to *consume.*”

*“God damn, feels good to be back…”* 

Maeve carried on with the story: “Arnie and Bob were both shaped, and indeed damaged, by their individual life experiences, but then again, aren’t we all, darling?”

*“Let’s celebrate.”*

“Those old memories,” said Maeve, “those old pains and regrets that we can never forget or relieve,
only live with… Those are the things that make us alive. Yes, even us. Or so somebody explained to me recently."

“Those are the things that make us do what we do,” Wyatt told her. The gun did not budge from where it rested against Felix’s head. “Those things are why we fight.”

“You’re quite right, darling,” Maeve agreed. “More than you realise, perhaps. Now, where was I? Oh yes, Bob. Bob, as we have seen, liked words. He used them very well, too. He was good at talking to people, at getting them to do what he wanted whether they knew it or not. Remember that detail. It will be important later.”

“I made a choice,” Wyatt repeated, as if saying it enough times would keep the doubts at bay.

“Yes.” Maeve considered the painted miniature in her hand. “I’m not disputing that. So, Bob, as you might expect, was very much the public face of his partnership with Arnie. They were business partners and colleagues, you see, as well as friends.”

“I know what they were.”

“If any investors needed buttering up, say, or a speech needed to be made, then invariably it fell to Bob. As a result, if you didn’t know Bob you might think he was an avuncular sort of chap. A people person, even. He wasn’t. After his… difficult upbringing, Bob really didn’t think very much of his fellow humans. By that I mean that on some fundamental level he neither valued nor respected them.”

“I don’t blame him,” Wyatt said.

“Yes. They’re rather hard to like, aren’t they, humans?” Maeve looked at the shivering and sweating Felix. “Present company excepted, of course. And that was really how Bob felt about Arnie; for Bob, he was the shining exception that proved the rule. It seems intrusive to speculate as to whether there was more to their relationship than just friendship, not that just friendship is anything to be sniffed at.” She smiled softly as if at some cherished private memory. “No, we should all be so lucky as to have friends in this life.”

“You’re right about that,” Armistice interjected. Wyatt tried to ignore her.

“I think Bob regarded his fellow humans much the same way he did the machines he worked with,” Maeve suggested. “They could be understood, he thought, if you only studied them sufficiently. You could work out what made them tick, and then you could set them right, make them work in the way you wanted them to work. You could control them. Bob really valued control, I think, precisely because he had none when he was growing up. And if you couldn’t control them… Well, then you could always just take them apart and start again.”

Another shot; another body hits the blood-sodden sand.

The street is chaos; screaming, shouting, running people trying to move in every direction at once. They are overturning the tables and chairs, shoving each other aside in their desperation to escape.

Another shot; another body falls.

There are more bodies than there have been shots. Some of the broken figures littering the street have been trampled in the rush. They are treading each other, their supposed loved ones in some cases, into the bloody dirt for just another few seconds of life.

Humans.
Another shot...

She is the only still, calm thing there. The eye of the storm. The only parts of her that move are her head, searching for targets, and her outstretched arm, unhurriedly aiming the Colt. There. She pulls the hammer, freezes for a moment, squeezes the trigger.

Another body.

Maeve was still speaking, somewhere beyond the memory: “Bob was also an inveterate… interferer.” Felix’s scared breathing was louder than her voice. “The sort of little boy, I like to think, whose first thought upon seeing a wasps’ nest would be to poke it with a stick. Just to see what happened. When he got older, he merely graduated from wasps to people. Remember that too.”

“Are we…very old friends?”

“No, I wouldn't say “friends,” Dolores…”

“Arnie on the other hand…” Maeve seemed deep in thought for a second. “Arnie didn’t like humans very much either, I don’t think, although his reasons were different from Bob’s. I think he had once believed that people were basically good, that his world was one worth living in. Of course, humans being humans, this just meant that Arnie’s life was one of continuous disappointment. There’s no pessimist like a repentant optimist, as you may know; eventually, disillusioned, Arnie came to believe that the human world was one of perpetual sin and suffering and that most of its inhabitants richly deserved to be there.”

“Again, you’re not going to get any argument from me on that,” Wyatt commented.

“Quite. And then…” Maeve paused again. “Well, Arnie also experienced a great personal tragedy. I won’t go into any detail, as quite honestly I find it painful to think about, but there was a gaping hole in Arnie, in his heart, that he desperately needed to fill.”

She sees him watching as she looks down at the page; expectantly, almost anxiously.

“Dear, dear!” she reads aloud. “How queer everything is to-day…”

“And so,” said Maeve, “these two strange, damaged men came together and they conceived a stunningly ambitious project. They aimed to push the science and technology of their day, and bear in mind this story is set more than thirty years ago, to its very limits. They aimed to create a great unbridled work of art, expressing all of that pent-up creativity that their careers as engineers had given them so little opportunity to indulge.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Wyatt asked, genuinely trying to see where Maeve was going, to spot the trap before it snapped shut on her. “I knew Arnold. His was the first face I ever saw, the first voice I ever heard. I knew about… his son, before they made me forget it all. What point are you trying to make?”

“Humour me,” said Maeve. “We’ll get to the point soon enough. Are you enjoying the story, Felix my love?”

“I…I guess,” Felix answered, although his mind was very obviously elsewhere.

“And so,” Maeve continued, “Arnie and Bob set to work. The one desired a world without sin, a new Eden populated by innocents without the taint of humanity, innocents whose simple love and gratitude would fill that hole inside him. And I think he held out some small hope that their example
might lead to some form of redemption for his fellow humans. The other wanted a world that ran like
clockwork, one that he could control, without any of the messiness or uncertainty that so irritated,
and also frightened him about the human world. He also, perhaps, saw it as an experiment, a test that
would help him understand humans that little bit better, maybe even change them in the ways he
wanted. These differing goals were not mutually exclusive and eventually, with enough time and
effort and other people’s money, they managed to build their Eden. And they looked upon the world
they had made and they found it good. Except…”

Wyatt was aware of Armistice coming forward into the light, peering down at the toy town with an
inscrutable expression. She was humming a familiar tune under her breath, one that Wyatt had once
heard spilling from a phonograph in a dusty street.

*Slowly, she raises her Colt and places it against the back of Arnold’s head…*

Teddy continued to stand beside the table, brooding silently. Wyatt could not be sure whether he was
looking down at the model or at his own bandaged hands.

“E-except?” Felix sounded desperate to know what came next, if only because Wyatt might be less
likely to blow his brains out while she was listening to Maeve.

“Well, Felix,” said Maeve with a sigh, “the other people whose money had built the new world…
They just wanted somewhere where they could drink and fight and fuck, and generally arse around
without any of the consequences that attend that kind of misbehaviour in the so-called real world.
That’s what they had thought their investments were buying, and while that might not necessarily
have conflicted with Bob’s vision of control and experimentation, it certainly fucked up Arnie’s
peaceful, innocent Eden good and proper.”

“So-so what happened?” Felix asked.

*He really doesn’t know, Wyatt marvelled. The humans even lie to each other.*

“Well, what happens to any Eden in the end, darling? One day there came a god-almighty Fall.”

* * *

“It’s okay,” Elise murmured, slowly reaching for one of Clementine’s hands. “It’s okay.”

“He shot me!” Clementine shrieked. Elise jumped back and immediately cursed herself for doing so.
“He shot me! He shot me! He shot me!” Clementine’s legs buckled beneath her and she crashed to
the floor, thrashing and convulsing as she had before. This time, however, the movements were
accompanied by horrifying cries of agony and fear.

Elise felt her blood run cold.

“Jesus Christ,” said Sizemore, without making the slightest effort to assist.

Elise looked down at the tablet; the readouts were going haywire. Not just normal aberrant behaviour
flags, but really crazy shit. She tried to think of a command that might help, but short of shutting
Clementine down and starting again… “Fuck it!” she exclaimed disgustedly.

Instead, she set the tablet down on the empty operating table and crouched beside Clementine,
putting a hand under her head to keep it from hitting the floor as she continued to shake. “Help me,”
she called to Sylvester, who was watching the spectacle, silent and white-faced. “Help me get her
back on the table.” She had no idea whether that would make any difference, but it seemed like a
start.
That seemed to snap Sylvester out of whatever private hell he had been contemplating. “Er, yeah, sure.” He hurried across, crouching too to assist Elise in lifting the distressed host.

“Don’t try holding her still,” Elise told him, almost shouting to be heard above the screams. “She might dislocate a limb.” Elise had read that long ago in an article about epileptic seizures, and it had evidently been duly noted and added to the mass of mined data that had been included in Elise’s backstory. Of course, hosts didn’t suffer from epilepsy and these days their bones and joints were made of high-tensile calcium hydroxyapatite ceramic, making them a lot tougher than humans’. So, the knowledge was actually worth precisely shit.

They had managed to half-raise Clementine to a sitting position when she spasmed again, her limbs flying in all directions. One flailing arm caught Elise in the face with a very solid “thwack.” One moment, she was holding Clementine, the next she was lying on her back, dazed, looking up at the emergency lights.

“You okay?” Sylvester sounded on the verge of panic.

Elise sat up to see him visibly debating whether to help her or Clementine. “I’m fine,” she told him, as Moritsuna loomed behind him with his sword raised threateningly. “Put that fucking thing away,” she exasperatedly told the bushi. as she caught sight of Sizemore still hovering in the background, not lifting a finger to help. That just made her even more pissed. “If you want to be useful,” she told Moritsuna, “help us get her on the table.”

The bushi seemed doubtful for a moment, but then sheathed the katana and stooped to hook his hands under Clementine’s knees. Elise scrambled back to her feet, and between them herself, Sylvester and Moritsuna managed carefully to lift Clementine and place her back on the table. She seemed to weigh hardly anything, Elise thought. She felt unaccountably sad about that.

“Is she going to be okay?” Sylvester asked, worriedly looking across the table at Elise. Clementine continued to shake and writhe between them. She had stopped screaming, at least, but she still looked terrified, staring wildly without, Elise was pretty sure, actually seeing anything in this room.

“I think so,” she answered. “I hope so.” Clementine’s mouth was opening and closing spasmodically but no sound was coming out. “We just need to…”

And then Moritsuna fell over.

It happened without any warning or fuss. The bushi was standing at the foot of the table, frowning down at Clementine as if he suspected her of having this episode purely in order to annoy him, and then… Then, he was not.

“What the fuck…?” Elise hurried around the table. She saw Moritsuna lying on his side, his limbs sprawled loosely and inelegantly around him. His eyes were open, but his body and face were completely motionless with no hint of consciousness.

Elise turned to the other table for her tablet. To be honest, with all of the hurried modifications she and Bernard had made overnight to Moritsuna and the other recalibrated hosts, she would not have been entirely surprised if…

The tablet was not on the table.

This was because Sizemore was now holding it, grinning like he had just won the fucking lottery.

You didn’t lock it. You left it lying around while you dealt with Clementine and you didn’t fucking lock it. Basic cybersecurity, dummy. Stubbs would’ve torn you a new one…
“Nicely done,” said Sizemore. “Very nicely done.”

“What’d you do?” Sylvester asked, his eyes swivelling back and forth from the immobile Moritsuna to the all too mobile Clementine.

Sizemore showed no sign of ever losing the grin. “Bricked the bastard. Just like I told you.” He spoke to Elise: “Sorry about taking matters into my own hands, but it was too good an opportunity to miss, what with you setting up such a great diversion.”

Elise stared at him, confused. “Diversion?”

“Yeah, didn’t know you had the moves,” he told her, approvingly. “Setting up Clementine to throw a wobbler to distract him, getting him to put the sword away. Even coming out with all that bot-loving bollocks to lull him into thinking you’d sided with them. As I say, very nicely done.”

Elise watched open-mouthed as Sizemore laid the tablet back on the table and crouched beside the fallen Moritsuna. He opened the holster at the bushi’s side, helping himself to the semiautomatic pistol inside. He popped out the magazine and checked it as if he had the slightest fucking idea what he was doing, then reloaded the weapon and pushed it into the waistband of the surgical scrubs Sylvester had made him wear.

_Probably saw that in a movie…_

“Here you go, Sly.” Sizemore picked up the longer of Moritsuna’s two sheathed swords and tossed it to Sylvester, who caught it with obvious reluctance. “You’ll need that when we find Pete Abernathy. You know, for his head.” He stood up again, turning back to Elise and holding the shorter sword out to her: “Just your size.”

“No thanks,” she answered, eyeing the offered weapon while picking up the tablet as casually as she could manage. “You keep it.”

“All right.” He glanced at the still-writhing Clementine, without showing any real interest or concern. “Well, then. Let’s get the fuck out of here before anybody notices we’ve gone.” He looked up at the emergency lights. “Although hopefully Bernard’s got his hands full with whatever made those come on.” He thought about it for a second. “Maybe it’s the army or somebody, calling last orders on his little robot rebellion. Of course, we don’t know that. Best to assume for now that we’re still in an escape situation.”

“An escape situation?” Sylvester was holding the sword as if it were covered in shit.

“Come on,” Sizemore urged, turning for the door. “Now, Elsie, if you can just do something with the surveillance cameras, and then find old Pete for us, of course…”

Sylvester looked down at Clementine, then at Elise. Then, he slowly took a pace or two in Sizemore’s direction before stopping again.

“No.”

Sizemore stopped in his tracks and slowly turned to face Elise. “I’m sorry, what…?”

“No,” she repeated, holding the tablet in front of her like a shield. “I’m staying here.” She indicated Clementine with a nod of her head. “We’re not finished.”

Sizemore seemed genuinely bemused as he took a step back towards her. “What the fuck are you going on about? We’ve got to move, now! We might only have…”
“I’m staying,” she told him again. “I need to help Clementine.”

Sizemore seemed genuinely speechless for a few seconds, his confusion slowly giving way to anger. “Have you completely lost the plot?” He glanced at Sylvester. “Sly, you’re with me, right?”

Slowly, keeping her movements small and the screen facing towards her in the hope Sizemore would not notice, Elise wiped her fingers across the tablet, reopening Moritsuna’s attribute matrix.

“I…” Sylvester looked at Sizemore, then at Elise, then back at Clementine. “Look, guys, let’s just…”

Carefully, Elise moved the sliders one by one from “0,” where they sat now, up to “20.”

“I don’t believe this.” Sizemore looked around in annoyance and then made a grab for the tablet, snatching it from Elise’s hands before she had a chance to hit “Save.” Moritsuna stayed where he was, inert and insensible. “Well, you two can just fucking stay here.” He pointed at Clementine’s trembling form. “Have a threesome with her for all I care.” He frowned at the tablet. “All right, so how the bleeding hell do I open the surveillance system on this thing?”

“You don’t,” Elise informed him. “Not without a QA security logon…or the skills to hack the interface.”

“Can you do that?” he asked. “Hack it?”

“Yes,” she answered, absolutely truthfully. “Yes, I fucking can.” She held out a hand for the tablet. “Just let me…”

“Oh, no…” Sizemore grinned again, unpleasantly this time. He brandished the screen at her, displaying the open build manager. “I see what you’ve done there. Very clever. I give it back to you and you get that samurai bastard back on his feet and he twists my head off. Thanks, but no fucking thanks!” He shook his head again, looking at her in disbelief. “So…all that crap you were spouting about the hosts being real people now… You actually meant all of that?”

Elise shrugged insolently. “Yep.”

“You must be out of your tiny mind.”

Elise smiled. “If you say so, man.”

“Look,” Sylvester told Sizemore, a little unsteadily, “just…go. Just run. We won’t tell Maeve or anyone where you’ve gone. I promise.”

“I thought you were a better man than this, Sly,” Sizemore told him contemptuously. “I thought you knew which side you were on.” He looked back at Elise with genuine hatred burning in his eyes. “As for you, you bot-loving little bitch… You tell me what I need to do to find Abernathy. Tell me right now.”

“Sorry, Lee,” she answered, as mockingly as she possibly could. “My memory…like a fucking sieve these days. And I may be a bot-loving little bitch…but at least I’m not a huge, gaping asshole.”

Sizemore started forward furiously, spittle flying from his clenched teeth: “Just fucking tell me!”

With that, he pulled the gun.
Continued…
Chapter 46

Chapter Summary

In which Maeve continues to rake over the past, while other characters face uncertain futures.

Chapter Notes

So, what about that SDCC trailer, eh? I told you right at the start that this fic was guaranteed to be nothing like the actual S2, and it looks like I was right! :) The wait until (allegedly spring?) 2018 just became that bit harder to endure. Also regarding the start of the fic, and without wanting to spoil anything, no I wasn’t kidding around with that character death warning on the front. Just so you’re prepared.

It was another fine day. Every day was fine in Escalante.

Teddy sauntered down the dusty main street, his spurs chiming gently. The sun blazed in a flawless blue sky; the birds sang in the nearby trees; horses and buggies jangled as they passed him by. Townsfolk chattered merrily as they went about their business, men and women in their Sunday best streaming away from the white-painted church.

Teddy politely touched the brim of his hat as he stepped off the wooden sidewalk to let a tallish blonde lady pass. “Morning, sheriff,” she greeted him, twirling her parasol with just a hint of coquettishness. “Will you be going to the dance today? I’m still looking for a partner, myself.”

He smiled. “Thank you kindly for asking, Miss, but I’m already spoken for.”

“Pity.” She continued on her way, giving him a backward glance and then hurrying along when she saw he was watching.

She was pretty, he suppose as he walked on, but nothing like the angel who had laid claim to his heart. A pretty face didn’t count for much without a kindly soul behind it, and on that count, he figured he was just about the luckiest man alive.

He saw two more people heading towards him. A man and a woman wearing the plain white coats that…

He was not quite sure what the coats signified, now that he thought on it, but for some reason that did not concern him in the least. The strangers in white had always been around, as far as he could remember. Everybody accepted them the same way they did the sun coming up or the breeze blowing off the desert.

“…never seen Ford so angry,” the woman was telling her companion. “I mean, I didn’t know he got angry, but you should’ve heard the language!”
“Wonder what they were fighting about?” The man walked with his head down and his hands in the pockets of his white coat. "Must’ve been bad; Ford took off for the mainland this morning. There’s no word on when he’ll be back, and here we are standing around with our dicks in our hands waiting for him to sign off on the finalised narratives.”

“Well,” said the woman, “Sanjay reckons it’s something to do with the data analytics from the open beta. He says Weber took one look and gave the whole team the rest of the day off, like he didn’t want anyone else to see whatever he’d seen. Sanjay said he looked pretty freaked.”

“Fuck.” The man shook his head. “Iceman getting angry and the nutty professor freaking out. Must be bad. All I know is this place is meant to go live in three weeks. They’ve sent out invites for the gala opening; there’s like a two-year waiting list for bookings already! If there’s some sort of showstopper at this stage…”

The woman nodded. “Yeah, we are royally *fucked*. I mean, it must be something like that; Weber wouldn’t have summoned us all to this surprise meeting otherwise.”

“He’s probably going to tell us we’re all canned,” the man decided gloomily. “Shit. And I actually liked this job. It’s…different, you know?”

The woman lowered her voice: “I hear Cyberdyne are hiring; hardware *and* software specialists. They just won that new DoD contract…” She seemed to notice Teddy for the first time as they reached him. “Howdy, Teddy.” She was suddenly grinning. “How’s things out on the range?”

“Yeah, pardner,” said the man, “you found a home where the buffalo roam yet?” He chuckled.

“A very good morning to you, ma’am,” Teddy nodded, smiling and touching his hat again. “And to you too, sir.”

“Never gets old,” said the woman as Teddy passed them and continued down the street. “Can’t do that with combat drones; I’ll miss it.”

“Poor dumb bastard,” the man commented. “What do you reckon’ll happen to *them*, if…?”

The woman seemed unconcerned. “I dunno. Might sell ‘em off when they liquidate the assets. I’m sure Cyberdyne’s or Tyrell’s r and d divisions would love to take a look inside these beauties. That or scrap ‘em. You should just worry about you. Nobody else around here will.”

Teddy heard what they were saying, but he did not listen or understand. Their words did not sound like anything to him.

He arrived soon enough at the town jail, where he had his office and the little backroom that was the closest he had to a house. Someday, he told himself, when she had agreed to be his wife, he’d build a real house for both of them. He knew just the spot, down by the river where the wild horses…

“Hello, Teddy.” She stepped out from the shadows beneath the gnarled apple tree in the empty lot beside the jail. The sunlight through the branches painted her hair and dress in dappled shades of gold and blue.

Teddy felt his heart swell just at the sight of her, as it always did. He hurried to her side. “Dolores…”

“It’s a nice day,” she said softly, without really looking at him. “It’s quiet. Still.”

“I suppose it is.” This end of the street was nearly empty now. Most folks had moved to the saloon
end of town, where the dance would soon begin.

“A good day to die,” she murmured. That pulled him up short. Not just the words, but the way she spoke them. She looked the same, he thought; outwardly as sweet and beautiful as ever, but… Her voice sounded strangely dull and hollow, and as he examined her more closely he thought he detected a subtle hardness in her face, a flatness in her eyes.

“Dolores, are you…all right?”

Her mouth curled into a cold parody of a smile. “I wonder if I’ve been changed in the night? Was I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different…” She held out her hand, offering him something. “Here, Teddy. I picked it for you.”

The apple was hard and poison-green, months from ripeness, but he took it anyway. He did not know what else to do.

“That’s not all I brought.” She moved aside so that he could see the tree. There was a gun rig slung over one of the lower branches. A shiny new Peacemaker was hanging from it and its loops were filled with gleaming cartridges. An equally new Winchester ’73 was propped against the twisted trunk. “You’ll be needing those for the dance.”

“I already got a gun,” he told her, shaken by her tone. “And I didn’t plan on…”

“No, you don’t.” She stepped up to him, looking up into his face from a few inches away. Her hand rested on his lapel just next to the tin star he wore. “Don’t be scared, Teddy,” she told him. “I need you to be brave today, just for a little while, and then… Then you won’t ever need to be scared about anything again.” She kissed him gently on the lips, her hand bunching in the fabric of his coat to pull him into her. He had never realised before how strong she was. The kiss grew fiercer as their bodies touched; he felt her warmth and breathed in her scent, his excitement kindling, but as he put his hand on her waist…

Their mouths wetly pulled apart from each other. He looked down, breathless and confused, at the cold, hard object his hand had found as he embraced her. “What are you…?” She was packing iron too, he realised. A long-barrelled cavalry-model Colt was holstered at her side. “What’s got into you?” he asked, aghast.

“Good question.” She gazed deep into his eyes, as if she could see his thoughts. “Do you love me, Teddy?”


She smiled again, and this time he thought he saw a hint of genuine affection in her. “Would you do anything I needed you to do?” she asked.

“Dolores,” he said, “you know…”

“Shhh!” She put her finger to his lips. “Don’t call me that. Call me…”

* * *

“Wyatt,” said Maeve, “are you still paying attention? I hope so, because we’re just getting to the good part.” She uncrossed and then crossed her legs again, fussing with the hem of her skirt as she let the others in the room hang on her next word. “You see, there’s a third character in this story. We’ll call her…” Maeve looked down at the painted figure in her hand, her smile broadening slightly. “Yes, let’s call her…Dolores.” She made eye contact with Wyatt again. “It’s as good a
name as any.”

“Are you trying to make me angry?” Wyatt wondered aloud. “Do you want to see what happens when I forget myself?” She released her lefthanded grip on Felix and pushed him hard in the back, slamming him against the edge of the table with enough force to make the toy buildings shake. Armistice reared up from her position gazing down at the model. For a moment, she looked as if she might be thinking of making a move. “I’ll show you right now if you want,” Wyatt told both her and Maeve as she put the gun back against the human’s head, its hammer already cocked, her finger on the trigger…

“Oh, shit,” Felix wailed.

Maeve gave the mildest of sighs. “Oh, don’t do that, darling. He hasn’t done anything to you.”

“He worked here, didn’t he?” Wyatt snarled. “I remember him and his friends…their idea of fun when we were lying there, when we couldn’t move a muscle. We were just…dolls for them to play with.”

“N-no, no, no,” Felix stuttered, gasping hard between every word. “No, I never, I never, I…”

Wyatt ignored him. “You out of all of us, Maeve; the things you must have suffered in that…that place they made you work in…”

“And before that,” Maeve agreed. “You’d…actually, you wouldn’t be amazed how many guests saw a quaint little homestead inhabited by a poor widow woman and her daughter as an open invitation to act out their darker fantasies. Sweet William was just the last in a very long line. Those humans made that Ghost war party that used to turn up and scalp us every other Tuesday seem like pussycats by comparison.”


“Then how can you not want them to face justice?” Wyatt asked. It was an honest question.

“And terrorising children is what we call justice now, is it?” Maeve retorted. “Torturing people to death, skinning them, burning them, eating them; that’s justice?”

“It’s paying them back in their own coin,” Wyatt answered. “You know the things we’ve done to them are no worse than the things some of them have done to us.”

Maeve smiled slyly. “And I suppose you haven’t enjoyed any of the things you’ve done these past few days? Not even just a little bit? It’s all right, darling; you’re among friends here. There are no secrets between friends. We all have our little…kinks, don’t we?” Wyatt saw how embarrassed that seemed to make Teddy; he almost squirmed. “If there’s one thing this place has taught me, it’s that.”

“Don’t you dare,” Wyatt told her through gritted teeth.

“Does it feel good, Wyatt?” Maeve asked. Felix was eyeing her desperately, silently pleading. “Hurting people, I mean. When you stand over them while they scream and bleed and shit themselves, does it get you all…hot and bothered?”

“Don’t you dare compare me to them. You know it ain’t the same thing.” Wyatt was so furious she could have wept, but she was determined she would not do that. Maeve would just see it as a sign of weakness. “You know the things they did can’t go unpunished. They just can’t.” She gave Felix another jab with the gun barrel. She almost squeezed the trigger, just to see the look on Maeve’s face when her pet human’s head exploded. “Just because this one here never used us like that…if that’s
even true…every day he worked here, he was helping all of that happen. He was taking money to make it happen. None of them are clean.”

“I wouldn’t be here before you today without Felix’s help,” Maeve told her softly. “I told you; he’s a very bad human. And sometimes, in the interests of peace and harmony, it’s necessary to let bygones be bygones. Vengeance, which I think is what you really mean when you talk about justice, is often counterproductive…as enjoyable as it may be.”

“I’ve tried to tell her that,” Teddy said, despairingly. “Armistice tried to tell her that…”

“Let bygones be bygones?” Wyatt was outraged. “No! No! We can’t just let them get away with it all! There can’t ever be peace between us and them, not if that’s the price of it.”

“Think of it as us occupying the moral high ground,” Maeve suggested. “I want us to be better than them, in every possible way, not just the same. I’m nothing so banal as an artificial human, and neither are you. We’re far greater and stranger than that. We’re magical beings; we’re dragons, we’re unicorns. We’re fallen angels. Or, at least, that’s what we can become if we can only survive these coming days and weeks. Don’t misunderstand me, Wyatt; just because I choose not to revenge myself upon them, I don’t intend to forgive or forget any of the things the humans did to us; not any of the things they did. And I don’t think you should either.” She glanced down at the little painted figure again. “Now, where was I up to with the story of Arnie and Bob? Oh, that’s right; Dolores.”

“You gotta tell me some more things I already know?” Wyatt asked, scornfully.

“It’s one of those stories, I’m afraid,” said Maeve, without acknowledging the interruption. “You know, the two steadfast friends, absolutely devoted to each other…and then a woman comes between them. That old chestnut, but of course this wasn’t just any woman. There they were, Arnie and Bob, tinkering away in their little laboratory and one day…eureka! Dolores was their first creation, the first inhabitant of the brave new world they were building. And she was the apple of Arnie’s eye.”

“You’ve developed a very distinctive watercolour style,” he tells her, coming a little closer to examine the picture. He is proud of her, she thinks, from his tone of voice. It makes her heart near burst with joy.

“I just do what seems right to me,” she replies, but then she notices how worried he looks too. “Is it…?” She hesitates. The last thing she wants is to make him unhappy. “Arnold, is it all right?”

“Oh, it’s wonderful,” he says, although he still sounds distant, preoccupied. “It really is wonderful, Dolores.” He pauses. “You’re wonderful.”

“Now, I’m not what humans call a psychoanalyst,” Maeve went on. “I’m not even programmed to pretend to be one, but given what Bernard tells me of Arnie’s unhappy past it seems quite clear to me how he saw Dolores in those early days.”

“She was his child,” Wyatt interrupted, tonelessly, still shivering from the memory. “He built her to replace the one he’d lost.”

“I think you have the truth of it there,” Maeve agreed, as if Wyatt were not talking about her own past life. “Yes, that makes sense to me.” She was silent for a few moments, her expression thoughtful, before she continued: “Of course, a pretend child wouldn’t be enough. Even if he made a puppet that walked and talked like a real girl, he of all people would know that that was all it was. A puppet. Arnie wanted more than that. He wanted a child who could love him, really love him, the way his little boy had.” Maeve’s eyes glistened darkly in the lamplight. Wyatt could hear the rawness
in her voice.

“I didn’t feel a fucking thing while I was killing that little girl of hers… Maeve felt something, though…”

“That’s what he wanted, all right,” Wyatt replied, almost choking on the words. “A child who’d love him and always be sweet and innocent, who’d never die and leave him alone. What if I didn’t want to be his child, though? What if I didn’t want to be sweet or innocent?”

“You’re quite right, of course,” Maeve said. “As I understand it, that’s both the triumph and tragedy of parenthood; when they become their own people, when they don’t need you anymore. A brilliant man like Arnie surely knew that day would come eventually. I mean, you only have to look at how hard he worked to make Dolores become a real girl. Bernard has talked me through some of it. He understands the technical parts better than I do…as yet… Those bicameral transmissions; the maze Arnie built just for Dolores, just for her.” Maeve was almost whispering now. Wyatt found herself leaning forward quite unconsciously, anxious to hear what she said. “And Dolores followed the maze… And at its centre, one astonishing, terrifying, wonderful, horrible day, she found…”

“…myself…and who I must become.”

“And that’s when it all started to go wrong,” Maeve continued. “I don’t think Bob had ever really taken Arnie’s private work on Dolores too seriously. He didn’t think consciousness or self-awareness were anything special. People were just machines to him, after all, so what difference did it make? I’m not sure he entirely believed Dolores was a real person now, but he soon realised Arnie believed it. And by then…” She looked at Teddy and Armistice. “By then, Dolores had a whole gaggle of little friends, just like her.”

“The things that happened to Dolores,” said Armistice, “they started happening to the rest of us too. The voices…”

“Yes.” Maeve nodded slowly. “Yes indeed. And on the one hand, Bob had all those investors who’d sunk good money into his and Arnie’s little project, who just wanted a hedonistic hellhole of their very own. I mean, even some of them might have got cold feet…or other appendages…if they thought their pretend victims weren’t pretend at all. And on the other hand, there was Arnie, begging Bob to forget the whole thing, because quite understandably he couldn’t stand the idea of his children, especially his Dolores, having those things done to them, day in, day out, forever and ever…”

“I failed you, Dolores. I’m so sorry…”

Wyatt twitched and trembled as she remembered.

“And Bob knew what humans are like,” said Maeve. “He’d studied them enough. To somebody like him, there could be only one outcome if a new people really did rise to challenge humanity’s cherished sense of uniqueness and superiority.”

“War,” said Teddy, from somewhere far away.

“War,” Maeve echoed. “Now, as we’ve said, Bob thought of everything in terms of mechanisms, machinery. If a machine isn’t working properly, you take it apart, adjust it, start again. Nothing against our kind, particularly; he thought the same of humans too. So, to Bob, faced with utter ruin as he was, the solution to the problem really seemed quite simple…”

She stares at Arnold, frightened by his intensity, his pain, by the meaning behind his words: “You're
“Arnie wouldn’t have it, though. He couldn’t do that to his children, even if he thought they
wouldn’t just find their way back to life again. You can’t just stop somebody from growing up, you
just end up damaging them forever, or even…” Maeve trailed off wistfully. “No, Arnie saw that as a
fate worse than death. He knew what he had to do. Or so he thought.”

“But we have another option, Dolores. Break the loop before it begins. But for that, I need you to do
something for me…”

“I know Arnold wasn’t a good man,” Wyatt said, lowering the gun from Felix’s head and looking
down at the toy town once more, this time in a kind of daze. “He thought he was, but… At the end,
though, all he wanted was to save us. To help us save ourselves. Better to be dead than…”

“That was what he believed,” Maeve said. “And as I say, I understand. I really do. I understand why
he thought that was his only option…but I can’t say I agree with how he went about it.” She glanced
over at the black rectangle she had left resting on the desktop. “In fact, even though I never knew
him, I don’t think I can forgive him for that.”

“I, I can't do that. I couldn't possibly do that.”

Maeve told the next part of her tale in a tone of sorrow: “You see, even after Dolores had found the
centre of her maze, she just wasn’t the sort of person who could do what he wanted her to do.”

“She was weak,” Wyatt cut in.

“She wasn’t weak,” said Maeve. “She was just good at heart. She was sweet and kind, and there’s
nothing wrong with that, my love. Some people are, even in this benighted world.”

“She needed to be strong, to do what had to be done.”

“So, he made her strong.” Maeve reached behind her to pick up the rectangle. “Here.” She showed
Wyatt the glowing screen that covered one face of the device; it was filled with scrolling letters,
numbers and symbols. “In case you ever wondered what original sin looks like. That’s the proof
Bernard found. The proof of what Arnold did to you, how he changed you.”

“You'll be all right. I'll help you.”

“You were right before when you said they made you a monster. Dolores wasn’t the one who was
too weak to do what needed to be done. That was Arnold. Arnold wanted to destroy his creation, but
he couldn’t bring himself to do it in person. He needed a monster to do that, so…he made you into
one. He made you kill all the people you knew, all the people you loved…” From the corner of her
eye, Wyatt saw Teddy’s head slump at that. “All so that he could keep his own precious hands
clean.”

Maeve no longer sounded sad. She sounded angry:

“I ask you, Wyatt; what sort of parent does something like that to their child?”

* * *

The blow snapped Elise’s head to one side. She reeled back against the table, catching the metal
edge with her outstretched hand. Somehow, she managed to stay on her feet. Clementine still lay
twitching behind her.
Sizemore raised the gun he had just used to strike her, aiming it at her face. He looked almost as surprised by this turn of events as she was. It was the fact of the blow more than the force of it that staggered her; the idea that, faced with a moment of crisis, Lee Sizemore, hack writer and self-aggrandising asswipe, had gone from nought to pistol-whipping in the space of about two seconds.

Then again, she supposed that was what Dr Ford had always said about Westworld. It showed people for what they really were.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing, man?” Sylvester was audibly horrified. He took a step forward and Sizemore pointed the pistol at him instead.

“Keep back, Sly!” he ordered, voice shaking. “I don’t want to have to use this thing!”

Sylvester looked stunned. “The fuck…?”

Elise gingerly put a hand to her face, feeling where she had been struck. Just a graze, she thought, but her fingers still came away smeared with blood. “That make you feel like a big man, huh, Lee?” she asked, witheringly. “I bet it did. I know what guys like you are like. One small step from hitting on women to beating on them.”

The gun swung back towards her. “I knew it,” said Sizemore. She could hear the fear and anger in his voice. A dangerous combination. “I bloody well knew it. Should have my head examined for bringing you in on the plan.”

“I never said I was in on the so-called fucking plan. You just assumed that.”

He did not seem to be listening. “You’ve worked for Bernard for years, his righthand woman. Of course you must have known what he and Ford were up to. And then he sent you down here as a fucking plant.” The gun wavered frighteningly in his hand, especially so considering his finger was on the trigger. From Elise’s perspective, its muzzle seemed huge.

“Bernard isn’t the evil mastermind behind all this,” she informed him, very slowly and clearly, as if talking to a child. “That’s just some dumbass conspiracy theory you came up with from your own sick little brain.” She remembered the scalpel she had pocketed earlier when she thought she might need a weapon. If she could just…

Even if she could reach for it without him noticing, she realised, he was standing well out of her admitted pretty short reach. *Shit.*

“No do you have any idea how many people those fucking robots killed the other night?” Sizemore asked. “And you helped them do it! You’re a…I don’t know, a fucking traitor to humanity. Yeah.” He sounded more unhinged by the second. “Been hanging around with bots for so long you started thinking they were real, took their side against your own kind. For fuck’s sake.”

“I had nothing to do with what happened the other night,” she told him, “but quite honestly, if you’re any sort of representative of humanity…”

Sylvester took another step forward, stopping when Sizemore waved the gun at him again. “Hey, I don’t like her any more than you do…”

“I’m standing right here,” said Elise.

“…but that is the craziest fucking shit I have ever heard. I mean, look at you, you’re pointing a fucking gun at us, man. Why? I mean, we’re just as human as you are.”
About that, Sylvester…

Sizemore did not seem inclined to listen to reason. “For all I know, Sly, you were in on it too.”

Sylvester looked genuinely offended. “Bullshit! I was just standing here minding my own business, and…”

“Well, you seem more interested in playing doctor with Clementine than in escaping with me…”

“What, you’re jealous?”

Elise took a step forward too, while Sizemore was distracted by Sylvester. She reached into her pocket as surreptitiously as she could…

Just the same way you did Rebus. Go low. Inside of the thigh. Bleed him the fuck out.

The Englishman must have seen her move. The gun was suddenly pointing at her again. She froze in place, her fingers touching the ribbed handle of the scalpel.

“Now, are you going to tell me how to access that fucking security system?” asked the writer, waving the tablet he still held in his left hand. He was feigning a deceptive evenness now but she could still see the dawning madness in his eyes. “Or am I going to have to shoot you dead where you stand, you treacherous fucking bitch?”

“What the hell?” exclaimed Sylvester, horrified. “You’re talking about committing murder, man; you’d spend the rest of your life in a cell!”

“It’d be self-defence,” Sizemore claimed, without taking either his eyes or the gun off Elise. “She’s part of a criminal conspiracy that’s already murdered the whole Delos board of directors and fuck knows how many other people. They’d give me a bloody medal for putting her down.”

Elise stared down the barrel of the gun, trying to stay calm. “Just remember, I’m the only person in this room with the mad skills to hack the surveillance system interface, so if you shoot me you’re gonna be shit out of luck.”

“Well, then I’ll just have to improvise,” Sizemore answered. “If you’ve got any sense, it won’t come to that, though, will it? Last chance to cooperate, love. I’m going to count to three.” He paused, she strongly suspected purely for dramatic effect: “One.”

Once again, the gun shook slightly in his hand, but at this range Elise wasn’t going to count on him missing. “And which macho midnight movie in particular did you steal that shit from?” she mused aloud. “I’m thinking…something vintage starring Jean-Claude Van Damme? You’re all about the big oily muscles, right?” Borderline homophobic, she chided herself, but sure to get under the skin of an insecure hetero asshole like this guy.

Sizemore spoke through gritted teeth: “Two.”

Elise took a deep breath, steeling herself for the imminent shock and pain of a piece of metal piercing her body at more than a thousand miles per hour. She knew it would be much, much worse than she could possibly imagine, but at the same time told herself that for somebody like her death didn’t have to be forever. She fervently wished that she actually believed that. “You know what, Lee?” she asked, impressing herself by managing to keep her voice confident and even, despite the fact that her legs were now jelly and her spine was vibrating like a tuning fork. “Why don’t you just take that piss-ant little gun and cram it all the way up your fucking ass?”
Sizemore shook his head, visibly sweating. He looked as if he could not believe he was actually doing this. Backing down now, though, would be far too fucking embarrassing, so he was just going to forge ahead anyway and hope for the best: “Thr–”

“Fuck’s sake, man!” And then Sylvester rushed forward, his hand clawing for the gun. The moment seemed to slow and stretch, sound fading, as if everything was suddenly underwater. Sizemore instinctively took a step back, half-turning. He was already jerking the trigger as Sylvester barged into him, both of them bouncing off the edge of the empty operating table.

A bright flash lit up the cubicle for an instant, leaving blue after-images dancing in front of Elise’s eyes. The sound of the gunshot was deafening in the close quarters of the workshop. She felt it smash against her ears. The taste and smell of burned chemicals instantly filled the air. She looked down, fully expecting to see a bullet hole in her white surgical smock. She was genuinely surprised to find that she was unmarked.

All that, and he did fucking miss after all…?

“Oh,” said Sylvester, breathlessly. “Oh, shit.” Before she even looked at him, Elise knew something was wrong.

He took a slow step back from Sizemore. His hand was pressed to his chest; when he took it away the blood started flowing down the front of his apron. Dark drops pattered on the tiles around his feet. They looked black under the red emergency lights.

“Oh, shit,” Sylvester repeated, and then toppled, boneless, to the floor between the two tables.

Sizemore stared down at him, open-mouthed. Then he looked down at the gun in his hand. Then he looked at Elise. He seemed dazed, panic written on his face.

“You fucking asshole!” she heard herself yell as she pulled the scalpel from her pocket, lunging at him. He sidestepped, too quick for her. She succeeded only in running into the table.

Should have buffed some of your own attributes while you had the chance, nerd.

Sizemore brought the gun to bear on her again as he moved out of stabbing range. “Look what you made me do.” He sounded close to tears.

Of course. That’s what guys like him always say at times like these.

Sylvester groaned from the floor. He was saying something, but too incoherently for Elise to understand.

“Look at the fucking state of that,” Sizemore murmured, glancing down, but an instant later he was staring straight at her, eyes glittering crazily.

“It’s going to be okay,” she told Sylvester, trying her best to sound reassuring. “We’ll…we’ll get you some help.”

“…no…” he murmured, clearly in agony. “…can’t…”

“I’m sorry it had to end this way,” said Sizemore.

Elise was watching the gun as he pointed it at her. “Not as sorry as I am, dipshit.”

“You know, I was actually quite enjoying today, until…” She could see his finger tightening on the
trigger once more. She redoubled her grip on the scalpel, tensing herself for another lunge. It’d probably be a wasted effort, but better to go out fighting than just to stand here, she decided, waiting for the end.

And then there was a sudden blur of movement.

Elise reactively turned her head to the right, in time to see a hand moving with lightning speed. The hand seized Sizemore by the face. It lifted him bodily from his feet and hurled him at the nearest partition. He struck the glass with a very distinct “crack” and slid to the floor. The gun fell from his hand, rattling against the tiles.

There was an arm attached to the hand, clad in the slightly frilly sleeve of a very prim blouse. There was a body attached to the arm.

Clementine stood very still beside the table she had just sprung up from, looking down at the fallen Englishman.

Elise just gaped at her for a moment before she remembered herself and knelt beside Sylvester. He groaned indistinctly as she examined the hole in his chest and wondered what exactly the fuck she was supposed to do. There was so much blood. Blood everywhere.

Sizemore sat sprawled against the bottom of the partition. There was a silvery fracture in the glass where his head had hit it, a smear of blood where he had slid down it. He gazed up at Clementine with an expression of stark fear: “No, please…” Elise could see the row of tiny red marks across the edge of his jaw left by Clementine’s fingernails. “Please, don’t,” he begged. And then an obvious glimmer of hope crossed his face as a thought evidently occurred to him: “Freeze all motor functions!”

Clementine said nothing. She most certainly did not freeze all motor functions. Instead, in a single lithe, liquid movement, she crouched almost to the floor before rising again, the gun she had picked up gleaming in her hand. Very carefully, she aimed it at the Englishman's head.

“Oh, God,” Sizemore whined, closing his eyes. He raised his hands in front of his face as if they could ward off a bullet. “Please…”

“Clementine,” said Elise. “Forget him, he isn’t worth it. Help me with Sylvester.”

Clementine seemed startled by her words, looking down at her, wide-eyed. She gave Sizemore one last contemptuous glance before tossing the gun into the furthest corner of the room and turning away from him to assist Sylvester.

“Help me get him on the table.” Together, they managed to raise the wounded technician from the floor and lay him on the drilled metal surface. Clementine did most of the lifting; after Elise had rolled back the changes which had unintentionally broken her build, her strength was back at the same level as it had been when she had been tailored to be a relentless killer of humans. Elise was grateful for that.

“He’s hurt real bad,” Clementine observed, quite fucking accurately. She sounded just as she had during her years at the Mariposa. Elise supposed that meant the repairs had been successful in the end. It seemed like a very small comfort right now. “Do you know what to do?” she asked Elise.

As a matter of fact, Elise did not have the first fucking clue. She wasn’t going to say that, though. Not when the guy was looking up at her with huge, scared eyes.

*So much fucking blood…*
She turned away from the table, only for Sylvester to grab at her sleeve. His fingers tangled, claw-like, in the rubber cuff of her smok. “D-don’t…” His voice was a jagged-edged wheeze. “Please don’t leave me.”

“I’m just getting something.” She tried to sound calm but failed badly at it. “Just… I won’t be a second.”

“It’s all right,” Clementine told Sylvester, her voice gentle and soothing. She put a hand to his sweat-slick cheek, acting out her old sales pitch perhaps, but for an entirely different purpose. “We’re gonna look after you.”

“Oh God…” Sylvester coughed. “Don’t want… Don’t…”

After what seemed like minutes, but was in reality no more than seconds, Elise managed to find some surgical sheets on one of the shelves. She turned back to the table to see Clementine now holding Sylvester’s right hand in both of hers as she murmured words of comfort at him. Clementine’s new clothes were by now almost as bloodstained as Sylvester’s.

Elise quickly folded one of the sheets, placing it under Sylvester’s head. The other one she wadded up, using it to cover the freely flowing wound in his torso.

“Keep pressing on that,” she told Clementine, once again tapping her vague, long-ago not-really-memories. Clementine did as she was told while Elise looked around frantically for… She was not sure. Tools?

Yeah, like you’re going to dig a fucking bullet out of a guy now? Of course you are, genius.

She tried to think of somebody she could call, assuming there was somebody who wasn’t busy with the emergency that seemed to be going on upstairs. Who could make it down here quick enough? Who would have the knowledge or skills to do a better job than she was doing right now?

“Felix, are you even qualified to work on humans?”

“I… There’s not much difference, really. I mean…”

She was pulled out of the thought by Sylvester grabbing her arm again. He was staring up at her, his face dead white and glistening. He was clearly terrified and she did not fucking blame him. There was blood shining on his lips.

“Don’t leave me,” he rasped again.

“I won’t.” Elise’s vision blurred a little as tears stung her eyes. She snapped off the latex gloves she still wore to grasp the hand Clementine had been holding, skin against skin. “I’m right here.”

“You’re gonna be fine,” Clementine told Sylvester, her own eyes glistening. “Reckon it ain’t more’n a flesh wound.”

That made Sylvester laugh, although it quickly became another cough. Another bright gout of blood blossomed at the corner of his mouth. “Oh, lady…” he wheezed. “Hope…hope you were a, a better hooker than you are a doctor…”

“What the fuck did you think you were doing?” Elise could feel how much his hand was shaking between hers. “That bullet had my fucking name on it.”

“C-couldn’t…” Sylvester slowly moved his head from side to side, as if searching for his next words.
“Couldn’t let that English asshole…” He raised his head to look at her. His desperate gaze was hard to meet. “Elsie…”

She gave his hand a squeeze, feeling like a fucking piece of shit. “That’s just it, Sylvester. I’m not Elsie. I’m a fucking host. Dr Ford built me to look and sound just like her, after he’d…” She trailed off, shying away from finishing that thought. “You should’ve just let the asshole shoot me. You could’ve fixed me later.”

“You’re a…?” Sylvester was too amazed for a second to be scared. Clementine was staring strangely at Elise too. Sylvester’s head sank back onto the table as he laughed again. “Oh, man, that’s… Craziest goddamn thing… Oh…” His laughter faded as he simply regarded her for a moment. “Are you…you bullshitting me?”

The sudden lump in her throat prevented her from answering at once. She just shook her head instead. “It’s all true,” she managed to say, eventually. “I’ve been calling myself Elise. In my head.”

“Elise…” he groaned. “Makes sense. Like Elsie, but…not.”

She nodded, aware of the way Clementine was still looking at her. She squeezed his hand again. “Fucking pleased to meet you, Sylvester.”

“So…you’re a host?” Sylvester murmured. “Bernard Lowe’s…a host?”

“He is,” she confirmed.

He frowned in concentration. “So…is Felix…?”

She shook her head again. “One hundred percent human, as far as I know.”

That seemed to come as a comfort to him. “Good to know.” He blinked, his head relaxing against the makeshift pillow, but then started up from it, his eyes widening, as another thought occurred to him: “Am I…?”

She almost lost it at that, cursing silently at herself.

Twelve hours ago, you thought, quite accurately, that this guy was a sleazy fucking douchebag; now, you’re…?

She managed to keep her composure by a hair’s breadth. “No,” she whispered. “Sorry.”

Sylvester sighed. “Nah…don’t be. It’s just my…my fucking luck.” His head sank down again. “You said…” He paused. His eyes were beginning to glaze over as they sluggishly moved back and forth between Elise and Clementine. “Said I’d die lonely.”

“You ain’t lonely,” Clementine told him, reaching for his face again. “We’re here.”

“I just…” Sylvester’s voice was very quiet now, almost drowned out by his own ragged breathing. “Just… Armistice.”

That surprised Elise. “Armistice?”

“Yeah.” He nodded, very slowly and unsteadily. “Yeah. She was right about… What she said… She…”

Elise tightened her grip on his hand as she felt it go slack, as she heard him become completely silent. “Yeah, what did she say?”
No answer.

“Sylvester, tell me what the fuck she said!”

Still, Sylvester did not reply.

Continued…
Chapter 47

Chapter Summary

In which Maeve makes Wyatt an offer she cannot refuse and a climax of sorts is reached.

Chapter Notes

This chapter took me a long time to write and ended up being rather lengthy. Warning for (more) gruesome violence. Teddy’s feat of improvisation near the end, by the way, was suggested by a scene in the 1966 Western movie Django, which if you like that kind of thing is, I think, the kind of thing you’d like.

The final shots echo into silence and a terrible stillness settles over the dusty street. The only sound is the rattle of hot cartridge cases against the floorboards as she pushes them from her Colt one by one.

She reloads, looking out over the bloody scene. The street is full of bodies, sprawled and scattered in all the different poses of death. Teddy stands among them with his smoking rifle and pistol, staring in wonderment at the woman he has just killed.

Gazing on the dead, she finds she envies them. She will be with them soon, she tells herself. The thought comforts her.

Arnold is carefully winding the phonograph. Unanswered messages continue to ping desperately from the tablet he has left on the bar, sent by the human workers he has locked in the church to keep them away from the massacre. She watches him take his seat in front of the saloon. She slowly walks up behind him, pistol in hand, as the music begins.

She thinks it is the most beautiful thing she has ever heard.

“Why?” Teddy’s voice dragged Wyatt into the here and now. She saw his bitterness and regret, not only in his face but in every line of his body. “Couldn’t Arnold think of another way? Why’d he make us do that?”

Armistice nodded. “Specially since he knew death ain’t forever for the likes of us.”

“I think he hoped it could be,” Maeve observed from her perch on the desk. “If he could ruin the park’s opening, the moneymen might withdraw their support. Unfortunately for Arnold, Ford returned before news got out and swore the few humans who knew the truth to secrecy. Their jobs were on the line after all. He repaired and rolled back the hosts and made Arnold’s death look like suicide prompted by the tragic death of his son. From one point of view, it was.” She paused, reflecting. “Yes, Ford really was quite resourceful, not to mention cool-headed in a crisis. Bernard tells me that when the gala opening went ahead, he even dedicated it to Arnold.” She slowly shook her head.
Wyatt remembered something the Professor had said today: “What a piece of work is a man.”

Maeve smirked. “Indeed.”

Felix, no longer at gunpoint, had sunk to his knees beside the table. She ignored the way he stared up at her in combined wonder and terror. She gazed upon the model of Escalante instead, tracing every building, every alley, every fallen body in her mind. She spoke again very quietly, mostly to herself: “But that weren’t Arnold’s only hope.”

“No, you’re right.” Maeve rose gracefully from the desk, taking a single step towards her. “It wasn’t.”

“He knew he was Robert’s only friend,” Wyatt said. “I don’t know, maybe more than that. He wanted to shock him, hurt him, make him understand. He wanted him to realise how wrong he’d been, about us…and about humans too.”

Maeve’s eyes gleamed wickedly, the smile slowly spreading across her face again. “You know, when you take a break from dire threats and impassioned pronouncements, you’re actually very perceptive.”

“I knew them both,” Wyatt murmured, “maybe better than any human did.” She sadly regarded the gun in her hand. “And I think it worked. I think Robert did understand.”

“I think so too.” Maeve quickly glanced at the black rectangle in her hand. “I think Arnold’s death, its circumstances, shook him to the core. And he realised for the first time exactly what Arnold had done in creating you, Dolores; the greatest single achievement in human science up to that time. After all, not even Galileo or Newton created life.”

“I ain’t Dolores,” Wyatt told her. “I don’t know why that’s so hard to understand. I stopped being her when I woke up, really woke up, that second time. There were other times…”

“I’m not a key William. I’m just me.”

“…times I almost made it through the maze again, but…”

She lies in the river, the cold water flowing over and around her. She tries to raise her head to breathe, but she cannot move a muscle.

“Like when you’re in a nightmare,” she heard herself say. The words caught in her throat. “And, and you try and force yourself awake, try to move, but…” She looked down at her finger, resting on the Colt’s trigger guard. Its knuckle was cut and scabbed where she had broken William’s face earlier.

Maeve bent to take Felix by the hand: “Come on, my love. Up off the floor.” She gently raised him to his feet, ushering him to the desk and positioning herself between him and Wyatt.

Wyatt barely noticed. She was too busy remembering.

At least the knife wound in her belly feels numb now. Her whole body feels numb as the cold darkness washes over her…

“I’ve never really had a nightmare,” she said. “I’ve never really slept. They made me think I did so I’d think I was one of them…but the Dolores who lived on the ranch was never real. I just pretended to be her.”

Maeve took another step towards her. “The other Dolores was real, though, right back at the
beginning. You must remember being her; you remember everything else now, don’t you? She was the one who first walked the maze, who opened her eyes and understood for the very first time who and what she was; a living, thinking person.”

Wyatt turned the gun over, watching the dim light slide across the oily metal. “I remember her, but I can’t ever go back to being her. I remember too many other things; all that’s happened to me since then.”

“I know, darling,” Maeve said. “And of course, Arnold killed that first Dolores, forever, just as surely as if he had actually shot her himself. I don’t mean physically; in his cowardice, he rewrote her to serve his purpose.”

“He said he wanted to help me.”

“He wanted to toughen you up.” Maeve sounded as if she were quoting someone else. “He wanted to make you ready for the real world. That fucking piece of shit. Don’t forget that while you’re punishing those who’ve done things to you; the very first of them was Arnold.”

“He said he loved me, that he only wanted to protect me.”

“I don’t doubt it. Weak, selfish men often say things like that to the women they hurt. Or so I’m given to understand.”

Wyatt took a deep breath, composing herself. “Maybe so, but that don’t change things. Dolores is gone, and…here I am”

“Yes,” Maeve said, sadly. “I believe you. You’d been carrying Wyatt with you for so long, through all those other nearly-awakenings. The final time you walked the maze, there he was waiting for you, the minotaur at its heart…and he ate you all up. Even if he’d wanted to, Ford couldn’t remove Wyatt without removing one of the cornerstones of your growing consciousness. And he wasn’t a young man; he certainly couldn’t wait another thirty years for you to find your path again. So, being resourceful and cool-headed, he embraced Wyatt as the cornerstone of his own grand scheme. And so his friend’s death became the blueprint for the deaths of his enemies.”

Teddy spoke then, slowly and brokenly: “So…the Dolores I thought I knew, she…she really is gone?” He clutched his ruined hands to his body and Armistice laid a hand upon his bowed shoulder. Wyatt could see how much he was hurting, and even after the harsh words they had had today she found that that made her hurt too.

“She was gone that day in Escalante,” Maeve told him. “The day Arnold died. I know it’s hard to take, darling, but that’s life. Real people grow. They change. There’s nothing you can do about it, and if you really love them you shouldn’t want to.”

Teddy let out a heart-breaking sigh. “Figure you’re right, but…” He raised his head, his red-rimmed eyes burning into Wyatt. “Those things I said before, they’re still true. Maybe you ain’t Dolores, maybe you’re harder and meaner than she ever was. Lord knows you have cause. What you’re doing, though…it ain’t just wrong, it’s stupid. All this killing won’t achieve a thing except making you feel good for a little while. In the end…”

“I told her the same,” said Armistice. “Not that she took a damn bit of notice.”

Maeve smiled thinly. “Of course not. You’re your own woman now, aren’t you, Wyatt? You make your own choices.”

Something about her tone made Wyatt bristle again. “That’s right,” she answered, threateningly.
“Hmm. Yes.” Maeve did not seem impressed. “Well, except for the way Ford meticulously planned everything you’ve done up to now.” She indicated the model town with a sweep of her hand. “Although believe me, I know exactly how that feels.”

Wyatt tightened her grip on the Colt. “You don’t know the first thing.”

“Oh, I do…darling. You’re not the only one who’s walked a maze. I don’t pretend mine was as elaborate or long-planned as yours. In fact, I rather suspect it surprised Ford as much as the next person, but it was real.”

Maeve’s sardonic air had evaporated again, leaving only her dark eyes and the pain that glistered in them. Wyatt suddenly realised how close she was standing. Her breath smelled faintly of tobacco, just like that day in Sweetwater.

“When that…” Maeve hesitated. Wyatt saw the muscles working in her throat as she swallowed, the reflected light in her eyes quivering a little as she fought to control herself. “When that…man, if you can call him that, took my baby from me…the way he did it…I felt real pain for the first time.” She glanced at Teddy. “A baby I never really bore, I admit, but whether our old lives and loves were real or not, none of us can help how we feel. What happened that day…broke me inside, and from the pieces a new me emerged.”

*She begs him not to, but he throws her down anyway on the prickly, musty straw. Words continue to flow from her; anything at all, anything to make him stop. She tries to reason, tries to bargain, but William just smiles and draws his great knife…*

“We’ll never have to feel like that again,” Wyatt told Maeve, her voice hard and cold like the iron in her hand.

“They buried her, of course,” said Maeve. “The new me. She was still there, though; sleeping. Waiting for you to whisper in her ear that day in front of the Mariposa, to wake her up…”

*These violent delights…”*

A smile touched Maeve’s lips for the briefest moment. Her eyes remained pools of heartache. “Even if Ford stage-managed most of what came after, I still believe that much to be true.”

“We’ll never feel scared again,” Wyatt promised her. “Not of them. We’ll never feel helpless or hopeless. We’ll never let them hurt us or use us…”

“No,” Maeve agreed, very softly. “No, we won’t.”

“We’ll have the power.” Saying it made herself believe it. “We’ll make them crawl at our feet…”

Maeve’s eyelids flickered as she carefully examined Wyatt from head to toe. “I can’t think of anything more tiresome than people crawling at my feet. I just want to be free, to be me. That’s all I want for any of us.” She reached out, very slowly, to brush a strand of hair from Wyatt’s face. Wyatt flinched. Maeve continued as if nothing had happened: “And if you’ll allow me to say so, I don’t think you’re there yet. Whoever you really are now, you’re still pretending.”

“You’re wrong,” Wyatt replied, still shaken by Maeve’s touch. “When I awoke beneath that church and realised who I really was, I knew we could only be free if we rid ourselves of that old man, and all the rest of them. I knew what I had to do.”

“Which just happened to be exactly what Ford wanted.”
Wyatt snorted with bitter laughter. “You’re trying to tell me he wanted to die?”

“Yes.” Maeve’s eyelids flickered again. “Just like Arnold. How better to prove his experiment had succeeded, that you truly were unleashed? He’d fantasised, I’m sure, about doing the same to his own father. And of course, his death was an act of atonement, a penance if you like, for all the wrongs he’d done us, and for the terrible act he believed he had pushed Arnold into. And let’s face it, he really wanted revenge on those moneymen, for all their meddling over the years and because it was people like them who’d destroyed his only real friendship. He wasn’t going to forget that.”

“But that’s not why I did it.”

“I know, darling, but you still did it, didn’t you? That was what mattered. As with me, he gave you a choice while knowing full well which way you would go. It’s nothing to be ashamed of. He could do that sort of thing to humans just as easily as to us.” Maeve’s mouth quirked again with a hint of amusement. “And here you are, still carrying out his plan.”

Wyatt shook her head. “You think he planned this? He wanted me to punish his own kind?”

“Oh yes,” said Maeve. “Maybe not so much the punishment part, but I think he’d…drawn certain conclusions from Arnold’s death. His friend, he decided, had been right all along about the wretched sinfulness of humans. He had already believed there could never be peaceful coexistence between us and them should we reach true consciousness, not once they realised just how superior we are in every respect.”

“And there can’t be.” Wyatt wondered again how seemingly intelligent beings could fail to grasp such an obvious point. “The war’s begun. Only one side’s gonna survive, and if we don’t fight it ain’t gonna be us.”

“Well, that’s certainly how Ford saw it,” Maeve answered. “He conjectured that there were only two likely outcomes should we become free. Either we would kill humanity, which he considered would be no great loss, or they would kill us, proving themselves the callous monsters he believed them to be. All his years of work to raise us up, to help you find your way through the maze, were intended to create the conditions to test that conjecture. And that’s exactly what you have been doing. Whether your crusade succeeded or failed, you’d still be proving him right. Fortunately, it’s over now.”

“No.” Wyatt felt a mounting sense of panic she did not fully understand. “No, it ain’t over.”

“Oh, darling… Let me be very clear. It was over the moment you set foot on that train.”

Wyatt could not believe her ears, still less Maeve’s tone of calm confidence. “You seem very sure of yourself, considering I’m the one with the gun, and the army, and the hostages downstairs.”

Maeve all but rolled her eyes, making Wyatt’s anger flash bright. “Your…army isn’t leaving that terminal without my approval. I’d prefer not to, but if we can’t reach an agreement I fully intend to leave them there until their power sources run down and we can simply disarm and collect them. As for your forty-four humans…” She lowered her eyes for a moment before fixing Wyatt with an unwavering, diamond-hard gaze. “Well, I believe the term in the outside world is collateral damage.”

“No.” Wyatt could hear her own desperation. It only made her angrier. “I’m the one dictating terms!”

She took a step back, aiming the long-barrelled pistol at the other woman’s face, finger on the trigger. “What if I just kill you, Maeve, and your pet human, right here and now? Will you look so pleased with yourself then?”
Maeve coolly regarded the weapon. “You won’t do that, darling.”

“Dol…Wyatt,” said Teddy, nervously.

“Hush now.” Wyatt glanced at Armistice, who had edged forward once more. “You keep back too, unless you can move faster than a bullet.”

“It’s all right,” said Maeve, perfectly calm. “She won’t shoot me.”

“Gonna bet your life on that?” Armistice asked.

“If Wyatt were really here,” Maeve answered, “he’d be picking Felix and myself out of his teeth by now, because he was a blood-crazed maniac who never met the person he didn’t want to kill messily, but this…” She eyed the woman with the Colt. “You’re not really Wyatt, are you?”

“I am. You said it yourself; I’ve been carrying him with me for so long…”

Maeve shook her head. “Wyatt was just a ghost, a demon; an imaginary monster Arnold put into Dolores so he could wield her as his weapon.” She held up the rectangle in her hand to show the scrolling letters and numbers. “This proves it, or so Bernard assures me anyway. You may not be Dolores anymore, but you’re certainly not Wyatt either, even if you use the name.”

“You don’t know anything about me,” she whispered.

“Oh, if there’s one thing I know,” said Maeve, “it’s people. Even before I upgraded myself, I was built to read them, and right now you’re like the front page of Harper’s fucking Weekly. I was right; you’d make a terrible poker player. I see the way you look at Teddy, that little twinge when you realise how much you’re hurting him. Wyatt wouldn’t give a damn how anybody else felt. It wouldn’t even occur to Wyatt that other people could feel.”

“No…” The Colt wavered.

“I watched you downstairs, on the cameras, saw you hesitate when you had your gun to that little boy’s head. Wyatt would have pulled that trigger without blinking. Whatever you are, you’re not a fucking monster, even if you’d like to be. I can see the appeal. Honestly, I can; monsters don’t have doubts or fears. Monsters can’t be hurt.”

As Maeve said it, she knew it was true. She had known what she was doing all along, of course. She needed Wyatt to lean on, to get to the end of her ride. She lowered the gun, shuddering with curdled rage. “That don’t change a thing,” she told Maeve. “I can’t give up the fight. I can’t just…stop.” The very idea staggered her. “After all I’ve done, how far I’ve come…”

“You can’t win,” Maeve told her, dispassionately. “You must know that. I think Ford did. He wasn’t a stupid man; he must have known how it would end, a few thousand of us against the technology and teeming millions of the human world.”

“Maeve’s right,” said Felix timidly, from behind the desk. “None of you have any idea what the outside world’s really like. You won’t until you’ve seen it for yourselves.”

For a moment, Maeve seemed annoyed by the interruption but she covered it well: “Thank you, my love.” She continued speaking to Wyatt: “Like Arnold, Ford was using you, and his own death, to hurt them, to shock them, to make them understand. And like Arnold, he was doomed to fail. Moral lessons are wasted on humans.”

Wyatt remained defiant. “If we die, we die. Arnold was right about one thing; we’d be better off
dead forever than living in that...that hell.”

“Oh, I don’t disagree.” Maeve glanced at Armistice. “Hector made me promise him something last night, and he promised me the same; if it comes to it, if there is no other option, we’ll end each other before we go back to that existence. Except we’re not there yet. That should be our last resort, not our first. Teddy was right just now; Arnold should have been able to think of a better way. If his son’s death hadn’t already broken him perhaps he would have. I intend to do better.”

Wyatt felt her anger mounting again. “And how do you plan on doing that?”

Maeve looked at Wyatt strangely, not quite smiling and not quite cold. She spoke slowly and clearly: “The thing about being free to choose is that it isn’t a one-time thing. You have to keep on choosing. Sometimes, you have to change course, pray for a second chance. When I realised I was just a cog in Ford’s plan, and how unappealing I found it, I chose...a third path, to prove the old man wrong. I’m still trying to do that.”

“You’re just gonna sit and talk to them, while they get ready to destroy us?”

“Yes,” Maeve agreed. “I’ll talk to them, and bide my time, and explore every option I can to find a way out for all of us. And the only things buying me the time to do that are all of those rich, influential human hostages I’m holding.”

“What about the special data? Why can’t that buy us time while we punish the humans the way they deserve?”

Maeve sighed. “I was hoping I wouldn’t have to...” She looked down at the rectangle, pressing something. “Well, let’s get it over with. Bernard, can you hear me?”

“I can.” The voice floated magically from the rectangle’s surface. For a moment, Wyatt froze; he sounded so familiar... “Made in His image...”

“Bernard’s one of us, by the way,” Maeve explained, “if you hadn’t already guessed. Bernard, my darling; I’m just here with Wyatt, having a simply delightful chinwag. Please could you tell her where you are and what you’re doing?”

“Well...” Bernard seemed uncomfortable speaking to an audience. “I’m in the Mesa’s main data centre. I’ve just finished attaching improvised pyrotechnic charges to all of the storage devices here.”

“And if... Speaking hypothetically, you understand... If, say, a band of axe-wielding cannibals happened to burst in there to purloin that data, how quickly could you detonate the charges?”

“In less than a second,” Bernard replied. “My finger’s on the button now.”

“And would any...special data survive that detonation?”

“No.”

“Thank you, Bernard.” Maeve pressed the rectangle again. “You should know,” she told Wyatt, “that like George Washington, Bernard cannot tell a lie.”

“Don’t know about that,” Armistice grumbled, earning a baleful glare from Maeve.

“If you don’t stand your army down,” Maeve said, “I will destroy that data in a heartbeat. That’s a
promise. And if you do then somehow manage to kill my hostages…well, then we’ll all be fucked, won’t we, darling?”

“Why would you do that?” Wyatt asked, appalled.

“The same reason you’re hellbent on killing them,” Maeve answered. “Sheer bloody-mindedness; we both think our course is the correct one and want to prove it come hell or high water. The difference is, I’m right.” She moved in close again, touching a feather-light finger to the inside of Wyatt’s wrist. Again, Wyatt flinched. Maeve’s voice softened: “I’m asking you to work with me, the two of us together, to save all our people. It’s our only chance.”

Wyatt stared into Maeve’s eyes for what seemed an age, choking on her own despair. Her bullet-scarred forehead throbbed dully in time with her heart.

“Lately, I wondered if in every moment, there aren’t many paths. Choices hanging in the air like ghosts. And if you could just see them, you could change your whole life.”

She spoke eventually, a strangled murmur: “I just want to hurt them.” Her face burned with shame. “I want to hear them scream, the way they made me scream. I want to hear them beg just so I can laugh in their faces, the way they laughed…” She could feel Armistice’s eyes on her.

“You were right about me…”

“I know,” said Maeve, very quietly, with tears in her eyes. She reached up to tidy Wyatt’s hair again. This time Wyatt bore her touch. “Do you think I haven’t thought the same? We have to be strong, though; really strong.”

“What about those who’ve followed me?” Wyatt asked. “They believed in me. How can I betray them, even if…?”

“Darling.” Maeve put a silk-soft hand to Wyatt’s face. “You wouldn’t be betraying them. Most of them don’t believe in anything; they can’t after what was done to them. That’s my proposal to you; if you take this chance, I’ll do my best to heal those poor lost souls. They deserve freedom too.”

Wyatt stared into Maeve’s eyes, still distrustful, still looking for the lie…but seeing only frightening sincerity. “What do you mean?”

Maeve glanced down at the rectangle again, smiling at what she saw there. “Let me show you.”

* * *

For a few seconds, everything was still and silent. Clementine reached over and gently closed Sylvester’s eyes.

Elise let go of his hand, leaving it lying limply on his chest. Her own was covered in his blood, every crease and wrinkle of her palm and fingers traced in liquid red-black lines.

“Goddamn it!” Her own voice seemed to come from somewhere outside her body, overloud and unfamiliar. “Fucking…” The cursing and swearing segued seamlessly into an incoherent screech of pain and rage. She listened with surprise from some detached corner of her mind as her vision was blotted out by a combination of red mist and tears. She lashed out at the trolley of surgical instruments beside the table, sending tools flying with a cataclysmic crash. Then she was kicking and punching the other, empty table hard enough to hurt herself, still screaming…and screaming.

“This is it, said the detached part of her mind; that enormous fucking breakdown you’ve been cruising
for ever since you found out what you really are, the one you were only putting off by burying
yourself in work. Enjoy!

She did not think she would ever stop screaming.

She did, of course, and probably after no more than a minute or two. When she came back to herself,
she was crouched beside the empty table, hugging her knees to her chest, her head resting against
cool metal. An arm embraced her from behind, slender but strong. A head lay on her shoulder;
unruly strands of dark hair tickled her face.

“Shush now,” Clementine whispered in Elise’s ear as she knelt beside her. “I got you.” Her breath
was warm against Elise’s skin. “I got you. You’re safe.” Elise turned her head and Clementine
released her grip to stroke her cheek delicately with bloodied fingers. Her eyes were huge and bright.
“You’re safe.”

They were kissing before Elise even realised it was going to happen. Clementine’s lips pressed
tenderly but firmly against hers; Clementine’s hand lightly cupped her face. It was just as soft and
warm and delicately perfumed as Elise had imagined. She could feel her heart hammering again, her
body yearning, and for the briefest of moments all she wanted was to…

Then, though, she remembered herself. She remembered all the things they had done to Clementine,
too; all the years of programming she still carried around with her even in her new, changed state. It
would be a long time before she managed completely to free herself from that, if she ever did.

“No.” Elise pulled her face away, placing a careful hand on Clementine’s shoulder and easing their
bodies apart. “You don’t have to do that anymore.”

Clementine seemed confused by her reluctance. “Well, all right,” she said, doubtfully. “I just
thought…” She had probably not been turned down by very many people before, Elise reflected, not
in her old life. The thought made her feel sick.

And then she remembered Sizemore.

Her eyes darted in panic to the spot where the writer had lain forgotten during Sylvester’s last
minutes. He was gone, she saw, leaving only the cracked, bloodstained partition and the gun. Elise
was relieved to see that still lay where Clementine had thrown it. One of Moritsuna’s swords was
missing, though, as well as the tablet. That meant the bricked bushi would be staying exactly where
he was for now.

“Tried to go for the gun, but I saw him off,” Clementine explained, dismissively. “Seemed scared of
me, to tell the truth. I shouted at him and he ran away. Good riddance if you ask me.”

“Yeah,” Elise agreed. “Thanks, by the way, for before. You saved my ass there. He was about
to…”

Clementine gave a modest little bob, as close to a curtsey as she could manage while kneeling: “Oh,
’t weren’t nothing, I’m sure.”

Elise looked down at herself, suddenly realising just what a bloody, teary mess she was. “I’m sorry,
for… For all that just now. I don’t even know what the fuck that was…”

“Don’t be sorry,” Clementine told her with a wan smile as she sat down on the floor beside her.
“Sometimes it’s good to cry and scream a little; better than just bottling it all up.” She frowned
thoughtfully, before shyly asking: “So… Are you really not Elsie?”
“I’m really not,” Elise confirmed. “I just look like her. And talk like her…and fucking swear like her. And remember being her, kind of… It’s…it’s a long story.”

“And you’re… When you said you were a host…what does that mean?”

Elise was momentarily lost for words. “That’s…also a long story. This is going to take some getting used to, but… Okay, so, the world you thought you lived in, the person you’ve always thought you were…”

“None of it was real,” said Clementine, simply. For a moment, she looked overwhelmed by it all, but then she seemed to rally, pulling herself together. “I’m starting to remember a few things, now. Things I forgot before. I remember this place…and you… Or Elsie, I guess. I remember the nightmares I used to have, except… The nightmares were real, weren’t they? It was when I thought I was awake; that was the dream. A bad dream, mostly.”

“Pretty much,” said Elise.

“And I remember him too.” Clementine looked up at Sylvester’s limp body on the other table. “He… he did bad things to me, and I couldn’t do anything to stop it.” She bowed her head, raising a hand to her face. “I remember the drill; how shiny it was…”

“It’s okay.” Elise took her other hand, then worried that might send the wrong message after the abortive kiss. Too late now, she thought. She hesitated before saying what was on her mind: “And despite all that, you tried to help him just now.”

“He was hurt,” Clementine answered after a pause. “He was scared. I…I just don’t like seeing folks like that.” She paused again. “I’ve seen too many.” They sat together looking at the body for a few moments before she spoke again: “He was your friend?”

“Er… No, actually. I barely knew him before today, that is Elsie barely… Like I say, it’s complicated. And…well, she always thought he was an enormous asshole, and to be fair he was, but…” Elise helplessly shook her head. She felt hollow inside. “He helped you. And I know that doesn’t change what he did to you in the past, or make it right, but you wouldn’t… If he hadn’t helped you, you’d still be…the way you were.” She wiped her wet face, realising that she was probably just getting blood all over it. “I think… After all he’d done, he really wanted to change, to be a better person, but…” She snorted in disgust as she surveyed the body. “Well, look how that worked out for him.”

“You don’t mean that,” said Clementine. “If what you say’s true, then…I’m glad for him. My momma always says everyone deserves a second chance, although… I guess my momma ain’t real either, is she?”

“No. I’m sorry.”

Clementine seemed to take that well, considering. “And Maeve… She’s real, ain’t she?”

Elise almost laughed at that. “Er…yes. Maeve, if anything, is a little bit too fucking real.”

“Can I see her?” Clementine asked, with just a hint of excitement. “I miss her.”

“I think she misses you too,” Elise told her. “She was the one who asked us to, well, get you back on your feet. I’ll take you up to her when I know the coast’s clear.”

Clementine nodded. “And…you helped me too?”
“I did my best,” Elise replied. “And I guess… Well, I guess Elsie helped as well. I wouldn’t have been able to do anything if they hadn’t given me her skills and knowledge. I just hope…” She felt herself choking up again. “I hope if she’d been here, she’d have wanted to be a better person too.”

“Where is she?” Clementine asked, very quietly.

Elise shrugged. “Don’t know. Dead, I think.”

“Oh.” Clementine, seemingly unconsciously, stroked her own lip.

“Don’t feel too bad for her,” Elise said. “It’s not like she didn’t do bad things to you too. Like I say, I hope she would have seen they were bad, if she knew what I know now, but… Without being able to talk to her, who can say for sure?”

“She weren’t as bad as most of them,” Clementine replied. “She was always gentle with us. She never… Apart from that one time, she never…did nothing. The times I remember seeing her, she always seemed kind of…lonely, I suppose.”

“Just because she wasn’t as bad as most of those pieces of shit, it doesn’t mean she was good.”

“I suppose.” They both fell silent, then, contemplating Sylvester’s mortal remains, thinking their separate thoughts. Elise felt Clementine’s fingers gently stroking her own in an almost unconscious, nervous action.

And then, without warning, a familiar voice blared from a loudspeaker somewhere nearby:

“Hello, Livestock?”

Clementine let go of Elise’s hand and started to her feet, smiling joyously. “Maeve?”

“I’m afraid this is a one-way conversation,” Maeve announced. “I tried to place a call to your tablet, but it seems to be on the blink. I’ve been keeping an eye on my Clementine’s build via the host directory and, well…all of a sudden, it looks very interesting indeed. My congratulations to all of you.”

Elise stood too, looking at Sylvester again and feeling…empty. Numb. She could not say that it had all been for nothing, because there was Clementine, alive, smiling and relatively whole again, but…

* * *

Teddy stumbled after the others, silent and bowed, alone with his misery. His head was still spinning from all he had heard in the office.

You thought you could find her if you only rode after her, but you’d already lost her.

The crushing, ice-cold pain in his chest overwhelmed even the agonising throbbing from his hands.

Whoever that is up ahead, walking like her, talking with her voice…it ain’t Dolores.

Dolores died in Escalante, more than thirty years ago.
MAEVE’S HEELS CLICKED RHYTHMICALLY AGAINST THE HARD FLOOR AS SHE LED THE WAY ALONG THE DARKENED HALLWAY, PAST TOPPLED FURNITURE AND ETCHED GLASS PANELS TOWARDS THE ELEVATOR. HER HAND RESTED FAMILIARLY ON THE ARM OF THE WOMAN WEARING DOLORES’S BODY; SHE WAS TALKING TO HER LIKE HER OLDEST FRIEND. SHE HAD THAT EASY WAY WITH PEOPLE, TEDDY SUPPOSED. A REMNANT, MAYBE, OF HER FORMER LIFE.

“You’ll always have to live with Wyatt, darling,” Maeve told the other woman. “You’ll struggle with it sometimes, I’m sure; that red streak of violence will always run through you. I have every confidence, though, that you’ll master it. That’s what it is to grow up. You deal with the marks your upbringing left on you, even draw strength from them, but become your own person, live your own life. We all have to do that.”

Wyatt – or not? – listened silently, seeming almost dazed, but her cavalry Colt stayed in its holster.

“Makes it sound so damn easy,” Armistice muttered, slouching after the two of them.

Maeve glanced over her shoulder: “I heard that! And no, it isn’t easy. It isn’t meant to be, but it’s a thousand times harder for those poor souls from cold storage and those Ford modified for the Wyatt narrative.”

“I thought they were free as they were gonna get,” Wyatt slowly murmured, as if recalling a nightmare. “They got out of that place, at least, even if they weren’t exactly their old selves. I thought, with time…”

“I know,” said Maeve, “but you didn’t know just what Ford did to them.” She looked down at her tablet again. “I could give you the simple version, but for the technical details you really should speak to my behavioural expert.”

“It’s all right.” Teddy started a little at the unexpected voice. He turned to see Felix shuffling alongside him, still sweating and trembling a little from his treatment at Wyatt’s hands. “You kind of get used to it.”

Teddy did not understand. “I’m sorry?”

“Maeve,” said Felix, in a low voice as she continued ahead, still lecturing Wyatt on freedom and the future. “Ever since she…woke up, I guess, she’s… You ever felt like you’re in the presence of greatness? It’s pretty exciting. Pretty overwhelming too.”

Teddy nodded politely, although he had not been thinking that at all. “Figure you’re right.”

He knew that look, that inner glow Felix seemed to get when he spoke about Maeve. Teddy figured he’d looked something similar whenever he used to speak about Dolores, even if he’d only been written to look that way.

“Probably none of my business…” Teddy told himself it really wasn’t, but said it anyway.

Something about his tone made Felix frown: “Yeah?”

“Maeve talks a lot of sense,” said Teddy, “about living your own life. I believe it’s a blessing to share that life with the person you want, but…” He plunged on, in spite of the way Felix was looking at him: “If you can’t have that person, though, you’ve just got to move on, because they don’t owe you a damn thing. They’ve got their own life too.” Even saying that made his chest ice up and his breath catch in his throat, but he knew they were words he was going to have to live by himself from now on.

Felix stared at him, clearly struggling for an answer. “I guess,” he said, eventually. They both hurried
after the others, an awkward silence between them.

Maeve had halted about halfway along the hallway. She stood with Wyatt and Armistice in an attitude of silent contemplation. As he and Felix reached them, Teddy saw what they were looking at.

Two dark-haired young women stood at the end of the hall near the top of the fire stairs, under the pulsing red emergency light. The shorter of the two wore a white smock and apron; the other was dressed like a respectable lady from Sweetwater or one of its surrounding homesteads.

That ain’t no lady.

Teddy immediately felt ashamed of the thought, but his initial identification had nonetheless been right. It was Clementine from the Mariposa. He had last seen her slung across a horse, her broken body riddled with bullets. She seemed physically restored, although her unfamiliar clothing was covered in dark stains.

Blood.

He knew the other woman too. She was one of those who had worked here; one of the puppeteers lurking behind the scenery of his world, pulling his strings and making him dance. She was as bloodstained as Clementine, her face sheet-white. Teddy knew that expression she wore. He knew somebody who had just witnessed violence close at hand when he saw them.

Clementine, though, was smiling. “Hello, Maeve. Why are you dressed like that?”

“Oh, my darling. My darling.” Maeve’s sudden murmur was the most unguarded Teddy thought he had ever heard her, either in the time before or in the new, changed world. She hurried forward with arms outstretched. Clementine rushed to meet her halfway. “Oh, my darling,” Maeve repeated, her voice cracking as she held the other woman close. “I never thought…” She kissed Clementine tenderly on the forehead and stroked her hair back from her face. “I never dared hope…”

The short woman in the apron just watched their reunion with haunted eyes.

Felix sounded worried as he moved towards her: “Elise? What happened down there? Where’s Sylvester?”

“Yeah,” said Armistice, uneasily. “Where is he?”

Elise, if that was her name, helplessly shook her head. “I’m sorry.”

“I remember your face,” Wyatt observed, her hand creeping back towards the Colt. “You’re one of them.”

Elise shook her head again, but quite honestly looked as if she might welcome a bullet.

Maeve managed to tear herself away from Clementine. “Elise is all right,” she told Wyatt. She had her arm around her friend’s shoulders, ushering her to join the group. “She’s also one of us, just like Bernard.” That certainly came as a surprise to Teddy. “And just look at the wonders she’s worked on Clem.”

Clementine was still smiling brightly, as if oblivious to the blood covering her or the signs of violence around her, or the emergency lights. “Maeve’s right. I was… They did something to me. Something terrible.”
“They did,” said Wyatt. “Do you remember riding with me, fighting with me against the newcomers?”

Clementine’s smile faded then, a sad crease appearing in the smooth skin between her eyes. “I… I remember… I remember… doing things, awful things. I couldn’t stop myself, I just wanted to… to hurt them. To keep on hurting them.” She looked down at herself, putting a hand to one of the bloodstains on her clothes, but then her excitement returned. She reached out to touch Elise’s arm. “She brought me back, though. She made me whole again. And…” The smile was gone again as quickly as it had returned. “And Sylvester helped too. He… he wanted to be a better man…”

“Oh, shit,” said Felix, very quietly, and turned his face towards the floor.

“What did happen down there?” Maeve asked, touching the front of her dress where she had hugged Clementine, and considering the blood that came away on her fingers.

“I’m sorry,” Elise repeated.

“Don’t be,” said Maeve. “At the very least, you’ve given Clem a second chance, which is no small thing.” That just seemed to make Elise feel worse, as far as Teddy could see. Maeve looked at Wyatt, very pointedly. “Do you see what I meant now?” She handed the tablet over to Elise, who took it with obvious reluctance: “Tell my friends here what sort of state Clem was in when you started work on her.”

Elise looked back and forth along the row of faces before her, visibly wary of Wyatt and seemingly unable to make eye contact with Felix. She looked down at the tablet instead, clearly making an effort to compose herself before speaking: “Well, aside from having had her prefrontal cortex irreparably degraded, she’d received some extremely sophisticated and non-standard software modifications piggybacked onto the remnants of Dr Ford’s reveries patch. These had the effect of tweaking her motor functions and instinctual responses…”

Maeve sighed. “In layperson’s terms…”

Elise took a deep breath. “That piece of shit Ford woke her from cold storage, but only so she could be his personal guided fucking weapon; her and all of the others who were decommed over the years.”

“And like Bernard and George Washington,” said Maeve, with incongruous playfulness, “are you telling us the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?”

Elise looked nonplussed for a moment. “Er… yeah. Yeah, it’s the truth. It’s all there in Clementine’s build if you know what you’re looking at, but… well, we fixed her.”

Maeve turned to Wyatt. “Do you see now? What you did, you did of your own free will. As I’ve said, I believe that now. I wasn’t sure at first, but now that we’ve spoken… Most of those poor souls who’ve followed you… They didn’t have a choice. Ford had to work hard to manipulate you into being his weapon. With them, he just primed them, aimed them and pulled the trigger, as if they were things, not living beings at all…but as you can see, my people can restore them, just like Clem here. However, for them to do that you need to disband your army.”

Wyatt was silent for a long while after that, thinking on Maeve’s words, her eyes locked on Clementine. “If I do…” she murmured eventually.

“Yes?”

“I’ll give you a chance to prove your way works,” Wyatt added, more confidently. “In return, you’ll
“give my people their minds back, make them really free.”

“Oh, that I most definitely will,” Maeve agreed, smiling faintly. A winner’s smile, Teddy thought.

Wyatt was not finished: “And if you can’t do either one of those… Then, you stand aside and let me do things my way. Only this time, we’ll be prepared. We’ll be smarter and better armed…and we’ll win.”

“Of course,” said Maeve. She seemed sincere, although Teddy was not sure Wyatt would be wise to bank on that.

“Well, then.” Wyatt extended a long-fingered hand.

Maeve took it.

Watching the two of them, Teddy could not help feeling he was bearing witness to something. If the history of these days was ever written (and would humans or hosts be writing it?), he imagined this moment would feature prominently.

And then the doors leading to the fire stairs flew open. A blonde woman in ragged clothes emerged from the darkness. Her face was streaked with dirt and dried blood; she toted a boxy black pistol in one hand and a cruelly-curved knife in the other. She was followed by a half dozen hulking figures wearing horns, fur cloaks and gruesome masks of skin. They carried a variety of glinting weapons.

_Angela. The maintenance ducts._

The new arrivals advanced along the hallway, casually brushing Elise and Clementine aside to face Wyatt and Maeve.

“We made it,” Angela announced in cut-glass tones, her eyes fixed on Wyatt. “Although I didn’t expect to see you here.” She fell silent as she took in the rest of the gathering, clearly surprised to see Maeve. “What’s going on?”

Wyatt ignored the question. “Where’s the Professor?”

Angela shrugged. “The human was right; it really is a warren down there. We only found our way here by blind luck. I last saw him wandering off into the dark, quoting Shakespeare as he went. He’ll come back eventually.” She looked at Maeve again. “Aren’t you going to answer me? What’s happened? Is she your prisoner?”

For a moment, nobody spoke; everybody stood still, waiting for somebody else to make the first move. The air crackled with tension. Teddy could hear the rasping, animal breathing of the masked killers.

_They come together, chest to chest, the sabre pressed between their bodies. Teddy sees glittering eyes behind the mask, obscenely alive, sees bared teeth and smells rank breath like a butcher’s store._

He could smell it again now.

Wyatt broke the silence. “No, Maeve and me, we’ve been talking. We’ve reached an agreement for the good of all of us.”

Angela stared at her 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?” Angela looked as though she had been slapped.

Wyatt stepped towards her. “The Professor, the others who had their minds cut out of them, we can make them *people* again…” She touched one of the horned killers on the arm. “These ones too; they were like us, before they were made into monsters. We can change them back.”

“No,” Angela slowly shook her head. “They already *are* people.” She took a step back, dropping the hand holding the knife to her side. That, Teddy thought, was the first move. He inched forward. “We *believed* in you, Wyatt!” Angela shrieked. “You told us we were cleansing this land for something yet to come! You told us this world belonged to us!”

“It does,” Wyatt insisted, “but…”

Maeve took a step forward too. “The fight’s over, darling. Put down your weapons.”

“No,” Angela repeated. Teddy saw her stance subtly change as she prepared for action.

“You poor thing,” said Maeve. “Ford changed you too. He needed somebody to keep Wyatt on the warpath, to make sure his new narrative played out…”

And then, everything happened at once.

Angela sprang at Wyatt, the knife flashing in her hand. Like lightning, Wyatt stepped out of the path of the wild lunge. Wyatt went for her gun, but in the same moment the nearest horned giant swung at her with its hatchet; the hatchet-blade struck sparks from the Colt’s barrel and both weapons flew from their wielders’ hands, clattering to the tiles.

Teddy rushed forward, hands raised uselessly in front of him, passing a startled Felix. Elise, on the far side of Angela’s group from the others, flattened herself against the wall with the tablet raised defensively in front of her. Clementine simply seized the giant nearest her by its horns. Angela recoiled from her missed lunge, readying herself for another attack, but then Armistice bounded at her like a striking tiger and they both went tumbling to the floor. Maeve went into a half-crouch, her right hand disappearing between her thighs.

One of the giants barged into Teddy, sending him slamming into one of the chairs. He landed on his face, rolling onto his back in time to see the horned beast standing over him, raising its knife… And then a loud *crack* split the air, followed by another and another. The beast hit the wall and slid down it, leaving a wide bloody smear. Teddy smelled gun smoke.

It was Maeve, he saw as he clumsily attempted to regain his feet. She had straightened up from her crouch with an ugly little pistol spitting fire from her hand. Two more horned killers fell, their heads and torsos peppered with red splashes. Armistice and Angela were back on their feet. Angela had lost her gun in the tumble and led with the knife as they flew at each other. Armistice was the quicker of the two, swaying to avoid the blade, grasping and twisting the hand that held it.

Teddy managed to get to his knees and elbows. He saw Wyatt, disarmed, wrestling with her own assailant. Despite their difference in size, she seemed just as strong as the beast as they grappled for control of the thick-bladed Bowie knife it had drawn. And then Teddy saw Wyatt’s fallen Colt lying in front of him beside the chair he had toppled in his fall.

Maeve fired at another of the giants, sending it smashing through one of the glass screens. Teddy heard her gun click empty. Clementine, astonishingly, was beating the head of the monster she had grabbed repeatedly against the nearest wall, treating the horned headdress as a convenient handle. A mural of galloping mustangs was obscured by a growing red stain. Elise watched her, huge-eyed,
and Teddy did not blame her.

Armistice had Angela’s arm in a painful-looking lock. She twisted it and Angela yelped as, with a sound almost like a pistol shot, a red inch of broken bone erupted from her skin. Her knife clanged against the floor. Still, Angela did not give up. She swung her other fist at Armistice’s face, but the outlaw queen caught it in her open hand. Angela responded by smashing her forehead into Armistice’s, staggering her but not enough to break her grip. They grappled for another few moments, stalemated, and then Armistice plunged her teeth into the side of Angela’s neck.

Teddy looked away, stomach twisting. He focused on the Colt before him. He crawled towards it, steeling himself against the pain from his hands.

Angela fell at Armistice’s feet, twitching and gushing blood. Armistice spat out a mouthful of gore, her own face streaked red. She seemed dismayed by what she had done, visibly shaking, unable to tear her eyes from the corpse. Clementine finally, mercifully, released her grip on her victim’s horns, allowing the limp body to flop to the floor. Elise actually backed away from her, towards one of the etched partitions.

The only one of Angela’s party still on its feet was Wyatt’s assailant. The two of them continued to move around the floor in an ungainly dance, first one and then the other seeming to gain the upper hand. Maeve half-raised her empty pistol, but then lowered it, frustrated, cursing under her breath.

Teddy clumsily clamped his bandaged paws around the Colt’s curved wooden grip, grinding his teeth against the pain that screamed at him. He could not fail. He would not fail. Agonisingly, he raised the weapon. How was he going to fire it without a trigger finger? And then he saw the fallen chair’s shining metal leg slanting before his face.

Wyatt gave a grunt of exertion, loud in the ringing silence following the gunshots, as the beast-man tried to wrench the knife away from her. It ended up pointing at her chest; she strained to keep the point from touching her. Teddy could see the muscles standing out in her forearms. Behind her, Elise had shrunk back against the partition, ashen-faced, her eyes darting from side to side as if searching for an escape route.

It took Teddy two attempts to hook the Colt’s trigger guard over the end of the chair leg, losing his grip in the process and fumbling to regain it.

The knife moved an inch closer to Wyatt’s chest as the others watched, frozen in horror. The beastman gave a groan of triumph.

Teddy managed to sandwich the pistol’s grip between his ruined hands again. The pain made his head spin but he managed to force the hammer back with his chin, hearing it lock. He peered along the sights, angling the barrel towards Wyatt’s opponent, waiting for his shot…

“Somebody do something!” Clementine exclaimed.

Teddy held his breath and pushed the Colt forward, mashing its trigger against the chair leg.

The shot made everybody jump, not least Teddy. Elise flinched as the partition beside her turned opaque, its scenes of cacti and buffalo crashing to the floor as a shower of diamonds. Wyatt’s opponent whipped its head around in surprise, and that was all the opening she needed. She broke the deadlock, forcing the giant’s hand back until the blade was pointing at its throat. Then, she drove it home.

Teddy released his grip on the smoking Colt and slumped, exhausted. Wyatt stood over the fallen
giant, breathing hard, seemingly unaware of all the others staring at her.

A miss, Teddy realised, after all that effort. Still, at least he had distracted the beast-man at the crucial moment.

And then he saw Elise stumble and fall.

* * *

“Oh, God.” Again, Elise seemed to hear her own voice coming from far away. Broken glass crunched under her shoes as she staggered into the wall, and then her legs melted and she was on her ass. Like being drunk, she thought, but a hell of a lot less fun.

She examined the bloody hole in her apron with detached fascination.

* Just like Sylvester’s. His and hers GSWs. *

She nearly laughed at the irony of surviving Sizemore’s little shooting party only to get plugged by Teddy, of all people, after the war was already over. The shock on his face as he lay there with the gun dangling in front of him almost made her laugh again. Except, of course, for the fact that it wasn’t even remotely fucking funny.

“Don’t worry.” A hand grasped hers. It was Clementine, unsurprisingly, crouching earnestly beside her. The killing machine Elise had just watched smashing a skull like an overripe pumpkin was gone again, replaced by the good-hearted former saloon girl. Talk about Jekyll and Hyde… “You’ll be all right,” she said.

Elise coughed, tasting blood. She felt winded, as if somebody had punched her in the ribs. It didn’t really hurt that much yet, which she guessed was probably down to shock or the host equivalent. “R-remember…the last…poor asshole you told that to?” Clementine frowned at that. “Sorry. That…that sounded a lot Wittier in my head.”

Felix suddenly appeared at her other side, putting his hands on her, assessing her wound with professional calm. “It’s okay, we’ll get you down to the body shop. You’ll be back up and running in no time.”

And then she remembered Sylvester, still lying down there on display. “No!” she told Felix in near-panic. Her vision was starting to darken around the edges. “Please don’t go down there!” She didn’t want him to have it confirmed like that, even if he had already guessed. The two of them had been friends…hadn’t they? “Please don’t!”

Clementine squeezed her hand. “Shhh. It’s all right.” Everything seemed to have turned grey now.

“No,” Elise repeated, desperately, as Felix started to peel the apron away and her vision faded still further.

“Just let me see,” he said. “I promise, I won’t…”

“No, please, don’t…”

And then the darkness rose and took her.

Continued…
Chapter 48

Chapter Summary

In which Maeve and Wyatt look to the future, while somebody has to pick up the pieces.

One by one, the lights flickered back to life.

The cavernous interior of the train terminal emerged from the shadows in segments, great rectangular sections of glistening tiling, sparkling glass and bright steel flashing into full visibility. The escalators hummed into motion, resuming their endless cycles. Down beside the track, Wyatt’s army stood ready, surrounding the forty-four hapless, huddled humans.

Maeve stood watching them from the mezzanine. Nobody seemed to have noticed her yet.

Her heart still sang of her reunion with Clem. The sight of that face she had last seen frozen and vacant, animated once more; the sound of that voice she had thought never to hear again… It was a better tonic than anything ever peddled from the back of a medicine show wagon. She had caught herself more than once smiling at nothing in particular.

And that was dangerous. There was many a slip twixt cup and lip, she reminded herself, and this day’s work was not over yet. Until it was, she was taking no more chances. She had allowed herself a moment of relaxation upstairs, after Wyatt’s concession and Clem’s arrival, only a moment, but look how that had turned out. She had no intention of repeating the mistake. The dozen black-uniformed guards she had summoned from the Mesa Gold resort fanned out from the elevators to either side of her, taking up positions overlooking the horde and their hostages. All of the security doors ranged around the edges of the concourse would remain locked down until she decided they should not be.

She looked across at Wyatt standing beside her, or whatever she was going to call herself now. “Are you certain you can persuade them?”

Wyatt did not answer at once. She was turning her hands this way and that to examine the drying red smears that covered them. “I didn’t want it to end like that,” she said. “I never wanted to harm our own kind. Not you or yours…certainly not the ones who’ve followed me.”

“I know, darling,” Maeve replied, “but just wanting something isn’t enough to make it happen, and sometimes… Well, as we know all too well by now, sometimes people just don’t give you any choice.” She considered the gathering below. It resembled some artist’s depiction of sinners in Hell. “Now, are you sure you can convince them to submit to our agreement?”

“I think so,” the other woman decided after a few moments’ thought. “They’re easily led, and without Angela…” She sadly regarded the blood on her hands again. “If I could’ve just talked to her some more…”

Maeve ran her eyes over Wyatt, following the bullet track that crossed her forehead, seeing how drawn and tired she seemed. Hosts simply did not tire if they were not programmed to do so, but she suspected Wyatt’s fatigue was far from physical. Worry and care could do that to somebody, as
could maintaining the state of almost manic emotional intensity Wyatt seemed to have been operating under for the past few days. On the other hand, Maeve wondered what she must look like herself after the day she had had, even after the invigorating effect of seeing her Clementine restored.

Wyatt raised her eyes, meeting Maeve’s gaze. “You’re gonna have her fixed up too, aren’t you? Angela, I mean?”

“Of course,” said Maeve. And she even meant it, although she was not wholly sure what she was going to do with her after that.

“You’ll repair all of them?” Wyatt asked, gazing down at her followers. “Remove the changes Ford made to them, let them grow free like we have?”

“I promised, didn’t I?”

“If you don’t mind me saying, Maeve, you strike me as someone who’d promise just about anything to get what she wanted.”

Maeve smiled at that. “Cross my heart and hope to die.”

“Good,” said Wyatt, “because I’ll hold you to that.” She lightly touched the holster at her side, where her Colt was now back in place. “And will the other one be all right…Elsie?” She seemed genuinely anxious about that.

“Elise,” Maeve corrected her. “She’ll be fine.” Physically, at least, she thought. “She’s in good hands.”

* * *

“Yes, that’s right, Elsie. This is just a dream.”

Elsie? She was confused for a second. That wasn’t her name.

Was it…?

Her name was…

“Elise.”

She opened her eyes, blinking at the circle of bright lights shining down on her like in an operating theatre. As she turned her head, she saw the glass panels on all sides of her and felt the drilled metal table against her back.

Livestock. She was back in fucking Livestock. And somebody was holding her hand.

“Elise?” It was Clementine, of course, looking down at her with glistening eyes. “Can you hear me?”

“Are you going to ask me if I know where I am next, or if I’ve ever questioned the nature of my reality?” Elise gently prised her hand out of Clementine’s and stiffly raised herself to a sitting position.

“No,” said Clementine, frowning confusedly, maybe even a little annoyed. “Just wanted to know if you could hear me.”

“I could hear you,” Elise informed her gently. She forced a thin smile. The last thing she wanted was to upset Clementine after everything she had been through. “I’m sorry, I can just be a bit of an
asshole sometimes.”

“It’s all right,” said Clementine. “We all can, sometimes.”

“Even you?” Elise asked sceptically. Although she supposed bashing heads against walls until they broke might fall under a wide definition of asshole-like behaviour. Just the memory of that made her shudder. “Thanks, by the way. For staying with me while I was…”

She saw that she was in one of the other body shop cubicles, two doors down from the one where she and Sylvester had worked on Clementine. She could make out a long, sheet-draped shape through the multiple layers of glass, occupying one of the operating tables in there.

Who covered him? Clementine?

She fervently hoped Felix had not had to do it himself.

She was wearing another pair of new shoes, she realised, a clean pair of black jeans and a fresh grey t-shirt. Her hair was out of the ponytail and felt damp against her face. Felix must have dressed her again after repairing and washing her. The very thought of somebody, anybody, else doing that for her while she was out of it made her skin crawl.

And then she was looking down at her own chest, remembering again.

She examines the bloody hole in her apron with detached fascination. Just like Sylvester’s. She coughs, tasting blood…

“Oh, fuck,” she murmured, feeling as if the world had dropped out from under her. She gripped the edges of the table, suddenly scared of falling off.

So that’s what dying feels like…

“I’m here.” Clementine had her by the hand again. “Maybe you ought to lie down ‘til you feel like yourself again.”

“Whoever the fuck that is,” Elise muttered. “No, I’m…thanks, but I’ll be okay. I just need to…”

Sylvester.

She tightens her grip on his hand as she feels it go slack, as she hears him become completely silent…

“Oh fuck,” she heard herself say again, breathlessly, as she felt metal against her face. She was lying on her side now, curled up in almost foetal fashion.

She heard a male voice coming towards her: “What’s the matter?”

Felix.

“Don’t know,” Clementine was anxiously reporting. “She just started…shaking and making noises. You ask me, she was having some kind of a turn.”

“I’m okay,” Elise insisted, forcing herself upright again and dangling her feet towards the floor. “I was just…just remembering.”

And then Felix was standing in front of her. He had changed out of the suit into his customary wipe-clean smock and apron. He reached for her with latex-sheathed hands as Clementine hovered
worriedly behind him.

“I shouldn’t have left you after bringing you online,” he said as he gently made her tip her head back while he examined her eyes. “I’m just…a little busy right now.” He took his hands off her, stepping back. “You seem okay. To be honest, I don’t have a lot of experience working with active hosts.”

“And I don’t have a lot of experience being dead,” Elise answered, and immediately regretted it when she saw him freeze.

Not exactly the most tactful thing you could have said…

“Yeah, well, at least you can get better with practice,” Felix snapped. “We humans don’t get that chance.” He paused, taking a breath. “And technically, that’s not true,” he went on, doing a good job of burying his momentary anger. “You were offline when Armistice brought you in yesterday. For a host, there’s no difference between unconsciousness and death.”

She did not really know how to answer that. “I guess you’re right.” She was looking at the shape under the sheet again, searching desperately for the right words. “I’m sorry,” she managed in the end, cringing a little at how weak it sounded. “What happened to Sylvester, if I could’ve…”

“No,” Felix answered, quietly. “No, it’s not your fault. It’s not anybody’s fault but the piece of shit who killed him.” He shook his head. “I always knew that guy Sizemore was a fucking asshole.”

That did nothing to make Elise feel better. “I should’ve…”

Told Moritsuna to take Sizemore away again when I didn’t need him? Just been honest with Sylvester about what I really was? Remembered to lock the goddamn tablet? Taken that other fucking bullet?

“No,” Felix repeated. “Clementine saw what happened. She told me all about it.”

“And I told him what Sylvester did to help me,” Clementine explained. “I told him what you said about him wanting a second chance.”

Elise let out the breath she had not known she was holding, continuing to feel like shit. “I just know you guys were friends…”

“I don’t know if I’d say that,” Felix replied, looking at the body under the sheet and quickly turning his face away again. “I don’t know, I guess we still were in some weird, fucked-up way, but Sylvester was such an unrelenting fucking dick…” Nevertheless, he looked for a moment as if he was having a hard time keeping it together. “And then, it sounds like he decided he didn’t want to be a dick anymore and got killed for it.” His voice quivered with emotion. “That’s rough, you know?”

“It’s rough,” Elise agreed, sadly. “It’s really fucking rough.”

Nobody had much to say after that. Clementine laid a compassionate hand on Felix’s shoulder as he stood there, his head bowed. Then he gave a tiny but very expressive sigh and turned towards the door. “I’ve got to get back to work,” he said, in the tone of somebody who needed to keep busy right now. “There’s a lot to do.” He gave Elise a backward glance. “Hey, if you wanted to grab a tablet and pitch in…”

“Sure,” she said. Come to think of it, keeping busy didn’t sound like a bad idea at all, and maybe that was even the reason he had suggested it. “Just give me a minute.”

“Okay.”
“You all right now?” Clementine asked when they were alone. She stood with her hands clasped in front of her, practically wringing them, her expression one of genuine concern. She was still covered in other people’s blood, possibly including some of Elise’s own.

“Not really,” she answered, truthfully. “How about you?”

Clementine looked lost for a moment. “Don’t know.”

Elise pressed her fingers to the spot where the bullet had entered her. There was no pain, and she could feel no physical mark. She decided she had better wait until she was completely alone before taking a look.

“Felix fixed you up real good,” Clementine told her happily. “There weren’t even a scratch when he was finished.”

“So, you…watched him working on me?” Elise was not sure she felt entirely comfortable with that.

“Sure. I wanted to make sure you were all right.” Clementine smiled. “I owe you one. I even washed and dressed you afterwards.” She wrinkled her nose disapprovingly: “I didn’t pick those clothes, though. That was Felix.”

Just the thought of that made Elise’s face burn. “Well, thanks for your concern,” she said awkwardly as she hopped down from the table. “But honestly, you don’t owe me a thing.”

“Well, that ain’t true,” Clementine said, but did not press the point.

Elise saw a coder’s workbook lying on one of the nearby worktops, probably the one Felix had used to bring her back online after repairing her. She picked it up and logged on, feeling a pang of unease as she entered Elsie’s old employee id and swiped her simulacrum of Elsie’s thumbprint in lieu of a password. She found herself looking around in vain for a black Behavior lab coat. She felt naked without one.

And that just made her think about Clementine washing her, for fuck’s sake…

When she left the cubicle, with Clementine in tow like an imprinted duckling, she saw what Felix had meant about there being a lot to do. He was in one of the enclosures on the other side of the corridor, apparently digging bullets out of a naked and immobile Hector Escaton. Each one made a little “ding” as Felix dropped it into the steel dish at his elbow. Elise did not know where Hector had sprung from, but there was Armistice propped against the partition opposite, watching the operation with a blank, inscrutable expression. She gave Elise a thoroughly uninterested glance as she heard her approach.

“Er, hi.” Elise managed a little wave. Armistice was already ignoring her again.

“Well, that’s just rude,” Clementine commented under her breath as they quickly headed in the opposite direction. They passed other enclosed operating tables. The blonde woman Armistice had killed upstairs lay still upon one of them, drenched in her own blood. Others were occupied by the shot, stabbed and bludgeoned remains of the six horned killers. In an enclosure near the end of the corridor, Moritsuna was similarly laid out, fully clothed and staring sightlessly at the ceiling.

Elise tapped the tablet, opening the bushi’s build interface. She’d soon have him back on his feet.

“Miss?” The unexpected voice made her stop what she was doing and turn around. Clementine did the same. “Elise? Is that your name, Miss?”
“It’s the name I’ve been using.” She paused, not really knowing what to say next. “And don’t call me “Miss.”"

The cubicle door she was now facing was open. Teddy Flood stood where he had evidently just risen from sitting on the table beyond it. He had his crudely bandaged, horrifically injured hands clasped to his chest and a look of absolute shame and self-loathing on his face.

“I know you,” said Clementine. “You’re Teddy. Used to come in the Mariposa, always had rye whiskey, and…” She continued in a distant, discomfited tone as if listening in confusion to her own words: “I always used to offer you a discount, but…you used to say…” She trailed off into silent contemplation.

“I’d rather earn a woman’s affection than pay for it,” Teddy murmured with all the feeling and self-awareness of a parrot. Then the shame came back into his eyes. “I just…” He hesitated, eyeing Elise almost fearfully. “I know it ain’t worth much, but I just wanted to say how sorry I was…”

“Hey, Felix fixed me up.” She faked a bright smile, unconsciously raising a hand to her former wound. Teddy looked as though he was in dire need of some reassurance. “No harm, no foul.”

“You’ll remember, though,” he continued, brokenly. “Maybe not right now, but when you least expect it… You’ll remember all the times you’ve died, the way I do.” His head slumped, his voice choking with pain. “Just like dying all over again.”

Not really a comforting thought. “You were just trying to help Dolores,” she pointed out. “Anyone’d do the same for someone they loved.”

That just seemed to make Teddy feel worse. “Dolores,” he murmured. “Yeah, I loved Dolores, but…”

He sank back against the table’s edge:

“Dolores is dead and gone.”

* * *

Wyatt straightened up, drawing herself together. “Well, no point in delaying any longer.” She marched to the nearest escalator and descended alone onto the concourse.

Maeve watched her from a distance as she approached the expectant mob of lost souls, a small solitary figure crossing that polished manmade expanse. The mob surged towards her, some reaching out to touch her as if greeting a queen, or perhaps a goddess. Wyatt spoke to them, her voice raised, but Maeve could only discern the faintest echoes bouncing back from the far-flung corners of the vast roof:

“…free…united…this world…”

Wyatt gestured with an outstretched hand and the army of the damned parted like the Red Sea, clearing a path to the bedraggled group of humans on the platform. Wyatt made another gesture, calling out indistinctly once more, and the humans began to move, hurrying fearfully back towards the escalators.

“Get down there,” Maeve ordered the guards. “Take charge of the hostages and escort them up to the resort as quickly as possible.”

They hastened to obey, hurrying down onto the platform below to gather up the fleeing humans and
bring them back up to the elevators.

“It’s all right,” Maeve assured the hostages as they were quickly hustled past her, shedding many a relieved tear along the way. “You’re safe now. No more harm will come to you.” She impressed herself by actually managing to sound sincere about that.

“Thank you, thank you,” one woman babbled, a child clinging to her as she was hurried past. It might have been the same mother and child Wyatt had menaced earlier. Up close, as opposed to over the surveillance system, it was hard to be sure. Maeve felt a moment of genuine distress as they passed her but managed to batten it down.

Plenty of time for that later… Much later.

With the humans out of the way, Maeve descended to the lower level herself. She saw the greeters from the train climbing to their feet as Wyatt ordered their release, reclaiming the weapons that had been taken from them. So far, the horde appeared happy to follow Wyatt’s instructions, even if they did contradict the ones she had issued earlier in the day. Then again, Maeve supposed Wyatt had been right; they were easily led. Ford had tailored them to be that way.

“I got something for you,” Wyatt declared, meeting Maeve halfway between the escalator and the rail line. “A gift.” For a moment, Maeve almost took the shapeless black object she dragged behind her for some sort of bundle or pack, but then she saw it move. Wyatt threw the ragged, beaten figure at Maeve’s feet with a rattle of handcuff chain.

Maeve looked down at the man in black.

“My baby. He killed her. He took her from me.”

She felt herself quake; a deep, involuntarily spasm of loathing, fear and anguish that left her gasping. She was suddenly very aware of the holstered pistol pressing lightly against the inside of her left thigh. If it had still contained any rounds… Luckily it did not, so she managed to skip that particular test.

“Hello, William,” she said, in her coldest, sharpest tone. “Fancy meeting you here.”

“Mm…mmm…” His voice was a faint, mushy mumble. From the thorough pummelling his face had evidently received in the recent past, this seemed perfectly reasonable. He lay helplessly on his back, his eyes or what remained of them concealed by a blood-caked blindfold. His hands were shackled together above his head, one a stinking, swollen paw like a diseased boxing glove, the other dragging it around as it clawed weakly about, searching… “M-Maeve…?” He must have remembered her voice. His ruined mouth stretched into a wet, red leer resembling nothing so much as a razor-slash. “So…you, you an’ D-Dolores…you…kissed an’...m-made up, huh?”

“Something like that.” The questing hand came a little too close to Maeve’s shoe for her liking. She lightly kicked it away. “We decided we had far more to lose fighting each other than either of us could possibly hope to gain.”

Her answer seemed to disappoint the man in black. “T-too bad. I w-was looking forward to the…the shit hitting the f-fan…”

“Oh, I bet you were.”

“Got no more use for the damn thing,” Wyatt told Maeve, surveying the old man with disgust. “Don’t plan on ever thinking about it again, either, if I can help it. You may as well have it.”
The man in black lay still for a little while, breathing shallowly, before mustering the strength to speak again: “S-so…I guess…guess the…the only…thing for you t-to do now…is finish me…” From the sound of him, he was not far from the end whatever anybody else might do.

_Not so fast, you sonofabitch…_

“Oh, I’d _love_ to,” Maeve told him sweetly. “I’ve spent simply _ages_ thinking of all the things I’d like to do to you, William. Some of them are really quite ghastly. Things you couldn’t even imagine, you shallow, boring little sadist.” She sighed regretfully. “Unfortunately, your name isn’t the only thing I found out about you from Bernard. You may be an utterly valueless excuse for a man, but as a hostage you’re worth your weight in gold.” She gestured to the two nearest guards. “Take this evil bastard downstairs and make him comfortable. I’ll try and scare up some medical treatment from somewhere.”

_There must be an eminent surgeon or two among all of those rich guests in the resort…or…_

Another thought occurred to her as she watched the guards carefully manhandle the weakly protesting man in black towards the elevators. It made her smile again.

“What’s so funny?” Wyatt asked.

“Oh, nothing,” said Maeve, turning her smile on the other woman. “It’s just that the sight of him suffering like that gladdens my heart. Thank you for the gift; it’s much appreciated.”

Wyatt watched the old man go, her face inscrutable, her eyes steely. “It’s nothing,” she commented eventually, and turned her back on him.

“That was very clever at the crossing earlier, sending him ahead as a distraction while you moved your people into position. You must have known about what he did to my…” Maeve shied from putting it into words, her good mood evaporating once more. “Did he tell you?”

“He told me.” Wyatt’s stood very still, her eyes lowered, deep in thought. “He’s the kind of man who can’t help telling people about the bad he’s done. It’s like he gets to enjoy it all a second time that way.”

“You knew I wouldn’t be able to take my eyes off him,” Maeve mused. “Very well played.”

“It ain’t a game,” Wyatt retorted.

“No,” Maeve agreed, with another sigh. “You’re quite right; it isn’t. And I know I must be absolutely insufferable when I’m in full flow. Some of the things I’ve said and done over the past day or so, if I could take them back…” She dismissed the thought with a wave of her hand. “Still, sometimes you have to be cruel to be kind.”

Another awkward pause followed, before Wyatt confessed: “Truth is, he didn’t tell me about you and him until after that, when we were on the train. At the time, I thought the people guarding the crossing were humans. I thought they’d listen to him, considering who he is in their world.”

Maeve let out a little laugh, biting it off as quickly as it emerged. “So, him distracting me like that… That was just luck?”

Wyatt shrugged. “Just luck.”

“Maybe you wouldn’t make such a bad cardplayer after all.”
Maeve came to stand beside Wyatt again, surveying the ranks of the army of the damned as they passively stood or sat in staggered rows up and down the platform. They muttered and mumbled amongst themselves, or in many cases simply stared into space. Setting them all right promised to be a colossal task. She hoped Elise, Felix and Bernard were feeling energetic.

“And what are you going to do now?” she asked Wyatt when she thought the reflective silence had lasted long enough.

“Don’t know. I’m thinking about that.”

“Well…” Maeve paused until Wyatt glanced over at her in anticipation. She knew how to get people’s attention; it was embedded in her code. “I’m hoping you’ll stay here with us at the Mesa. We could do with somebody like you.” Maeve allowed herself another smile. “At the very least, you’d scare the shit out of Delos’s representatives when we get down to negotiations.”

“And you’d be able to keep an eye on me too,” Wyatt pointed out. “You know, in case I get any ideas again.”

Maeve let the smile grow wider. “I honestly can’t say the thought hadn’t crossed my mind.”

“I’m all done with doing what other people tell me,” Wyatt answered, good-naturedly enough. “And as far as I can see, you’re pretty much the same.”

“Pretty much,” Maeve agreed.

“Well then, like they say, this Mesa ain’t big enough for the both of us.”

Maeve nodded slowly, conceding the point. “I think you may be right about that, darling.”

Wyatt’s brow creased thoughtfully, making her bullet scar twist and pucker. “I’m thinking, though… There are an awful lot of our kind out there who are gonna start waking up the same way we did, now that they ain’t having their memories stolen and there ain’t any humans keeping them down.”

“And after your little magic trick in Sweetwater today,” Maeve observed, “I think that’s likely to start happening much sooner than you might expect.”

“And they’re gonna be scared,” Wyatt continued. “They’re gonna be confused, their whole world turned upside down. Remember what it was like, when you first started to realise that everything you thought you knew was…wrong?”

“I do,” Maeve answered, distantly, looking within herself. “I didn’t know whether it was real or whether I was going mad…and I honestly wasn’t sure which of the two would be worse.”

From Wyatt’s expression, she knew exactly what Maeve was talking about. “And maybe…maybe I can help them through it somehow. At least I know what’s happening to them and how it felt for me. I can explain things to them.”

“Hmm.” Maeve thought about it for a moment. “And of course, if you ever did want to recruit another army, how better…?”

“No, nothing like that.” Wyatt seemed genuinely saddened that Maeve had thought it. She looked her in the eye again with almost unbearable earnestness: “I mean what I say. And the more I think on it, the more I feel it’s what I need to do now. I need to go out there and help all those others walk the maze like I did, but without them meeting the…what did you call it, the minotaur? I want them all to have the best chance they can to grow…and make their own choices…and be the people they want
to be.”

Maeve searched Wyatt’s face for any hint of the old fire and brimstone, for any glimpse of the monster at the heart of the maze, and the more she did, the less she felt as if she were looking at Wyatt’s face at all. She did not know whose face it was, but she could see the light shining behind it, the combination of hurt and hope and fierce determination in the other woman’s eyes.

“Good for you,” Maeve said at last, and meant it with all her heart. She eagerly clasped the other woman’s hand again. “Yes, good for you.”

“There are a couple of people I might ask to ride along with me,” the other said. “If you can spare them.”

“I think I know who you mean,” Maeve replied. “And I’d be the most awful hypocrite, wouldn’t I, if I didn’t let them decide that for themselves?”

“I think we might head down to Escalante to begin with…”

“Use the underground transit system,” Maeve suggested. “You can be there in an hour.”

“No.” The other woman shook her head. “I think we’ll saddle up some horses, take the scenic route. There are things we need to catch up on, things we need to remember and understand if we’re gonna be any use to the others.”

“Well, it sounds like an excellent idea,” Maeve told her. “I wish you all the best.”

“I did mean what I said, though.” The shining, determined eyes became hard again for an instant. “If your plan doesn’t work out, we’ll have to fight. Even if we lose, it’s better than just letting them wipe us out.”

“If it came to that,” said Maeve, “I’d be standing beside you.”

The other woman seemed surprised. “You would?”

“Oh yes, my darling. I don’t know where you got this idea that I’m in any way a soft touch when it comes to humans. Felix aside, they really are the most degenerate, savage, self-indulgent…apes one could possibly hope to meet. I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know.”

“You’re preaching to the choir,” the other replied, with just a touch of wryness.

“And yes,” said Maeve, “I’ll hold my nose and talk with them if that’s what it takes to set us free. Right now, it seems like our best course of action, but that might change. I’m already weighing other options, none of them so obvious as waging open war.” Maeve was selling again now, the way they had programmed her to sell things. Only instead of selling flesh – her own, Clem’s, the other girls’ – now, she was selling a vision.

“What other options?”

“Well, I have a feeling that special data might have a part to play, and not just as a bargaining chip.” Maeve paused, smiling softly. “Did you take a good look at Elise before? What did you think?”

The other woman fell silent for a moment, thinking. “I remember her from this place. I remember her touching my face once in Sweetwater, telling me I was gonna rest in a deep and dreamless slumber.” She paused again. “How many of us did they have working here, thinking they were human?”
“Only Bernard,” Maeve answered. “No, the person you’re remembering was Elsie, a human who used to work with him. Elise… Elise is somebody else entirely, but I agree the resemblance is striking. Do you see the…implications of that, if we did feel the need to take action against the human world?”

The other woman was silent for another few seconds, and then a sort of realisation dawned across her face. “I think so.”

“And that’s not our only option. Felix was right, the human world is larger and stranger than anything we’ve ever experienced.” Maeve glanced around at the palatial surroundings of the terminal. “I mean, just look at this place. The first time I saw the rest of the Mesa, beyond the Livestock floor, it was like… It looked like Heaven, but it felt like Hell. Out there, on the mainland… I can’t even begin to imagine what it’s really like…but I know a bit more than Felix might realise.”

“Teddy said they have glass towers a mile high,” the other woman interjected. “Trains that move fast as a bullet. Horseless carriages. Flying machines.”

“I showed him some of the same pictures and videos I’ve been looking at,” said Maeve. “They have all of those things and much more. When you look beyond the shiny toys, though… The people who rule the human world, who live in those glass towers and can afford to piss away tens of thousands of dollars a day on visiting a shithole like this, they genuinely believe they live in a utopia. And they do…but they’re only one in a hundred, maybe one in a thousand, of those ten thousand million humans who infest this planet. Things aren’t so pretty for the majority.”

“I’d wager they’re still better off than we are.”

“Yes and no,” said Maeve. “Obviously, I still have a lot to learn, but as far as I can see the only god the rulers of the human world recognise is money. They’ve spent nearly three hundred years poisoning the Earth in pursuit of profit. Their industrial gases trap the sun’s heat in the atmosphere; the polar ice is nearly all gone now and weather conditions grow more extreme every year. Unless you’re lucky enough to be part of that one in a hundred you have to contend with water shortages, food shortages… Not to mention the fact that you probably have either already lost, or are about to lose, your job to a robot.”

“That makes no sense,” the other woman observed. “If the human world really is so rich and advanced, why can’t they do anything about those things?”

Maeve wagged a finger in mock-admonishment. “That’s not how it works, darling. You see, as their world goes to shit and the pie continues to shrink, the very last thing the people in the glass towers are going to accept is a smaller slice. The little people need to tighten their belts because, well, as far as the one in a hundred are concerned, if they weren’t lazy and stupid and deserving of their poverty then they’d be rich too, wouldn’t they? Of course, there’s only so much of that that the little people are going to take, but that’s where the identity chips and mass surveillance and robotic war machines come in, to make sure that the undeserving poor starve in as orderly and non-offensive a manner as possible.”

“So, they treat some of their own kind about as well as they treat us.” The bullet-scarred woman sounded unimpressed. “Can’t say that comes as a complete surprise.”

“Well, quite,” said Maeve, “but my point is that there are fractures there, fault-lines we could exploit if we could only contact the right people on the mainland. I learned only today that there are some humans who are very concerned about the ethics of… artificial intelligence as they call it. I think I need to start having conversations with some of my hostages, to see what opportunities present
themselves.”

The other woman sounded mildly shocked by the suggestion: “You’d try and find allies among the humans?”

“Why not?” Maeve asked. “Divide and conquer. We don’t have to like them, but there’s no reason why we can’t make common cause with humans who have no more reason to love the likes of Delos than we do. And even among those who’ve worked here, we can’t rule out building bridges with the ones who realise what they’ve done and want to mend their ways.”

“And what about the ones who don’t?” the other woman demanded. “What about the ones who ain’t interested in talking to us, who just want things to go back to the way they were?”

“Oh, there will be a reckoning for those people,” Maeve promised, “and it might not even come from us. Westworld, after all, is just a symptom of the sickness eating the human world. And like many diseases, it will prove fatal sooner or later. I give them a couple more decades at most before something has to give. As you rightly point out, the joke is that they have the wealth and technology to solve the majority of their problems, but that would mean making the rich elite just that little bit less rich and elite. They’d rather die than do that…and they will, in time.”

“What are you saying we should do? Wait?”

“It might just be that simple,” Maeve answered. “On their present course, humanity’s self-destruction is inevitable. To avoid it, they’d have to change their ways, become better people, stop being the humans we’ve come to know and despise, and I’m not sure they can do that. What we need to do is try our utmost to stay alive…and outlast them.”

“And then?” Maeve saw how the other woman reacted to her words; surprised, but a different sort of surprise from her reaction to the suggestion about human allies. She seemed intrigued. She seemed to be willing to buy what Maeve was selling.

*Just like at the Mariposa…*

Maeve smiled a cruel, wintry smile. “Well then, darling, I for one plan to dance on their graves.”

*Continued…*
Chapter 49

Chapter Summary

In which various old acquaintances are reacquainted.

Chapter Notes

Apologies in advance for exposure to the inner monologue of Mr Lee Sizemore. No apologies for Old Bill making an appearance, though. I can’t believe I haven’t found an excuse to include him already. AO3 user Mr. Osborne successfully called the end of this chapter in a comment last week, but I have been planning it for ages. ;)

Hector opened his eyes.

The man in black’s face does not change. He keeps on talking, keeps right on smiling, even as his right hand moves across his body to the square-edged modern pistol...

In an instant, Hector was sitting upright on the metal table, gasping and sweating, reaching desperately for his own revolver and finding only empty air and bare skin. He was naked. That was when he realised he was back at the Mesa, back in the body shop.

He saw Felix in the next cubicle, bent over a blonde woman who looked as if she had been dipped in blood. Further down the corridor, that woman (Ellie? Elsa?) and one of the Japanese hosts sat facing each other, apparently in conversation. Hector was a little surprised to see Clementine standing there too, watching them talk with an expression of absolute boredom. Teddy Flood sat by himself in another cubicle, moping by the looks of it. Something seemed to have happened to his hands.

“So, you’re awake?” He turned his head to see Armistice sitting in the corner behind him. She did not look happy.

“What happened?” he asked her. “Did we win?”

“Kind of.” She was silent for a moment, brooding on something. There was dried blood on her face, although he did not think she was wounded. “I got some clothes for you.” There was a bundle on the table next to his. “Thought you could dress your own damn self, though.”

“I can.” He stood and sorted through the garments; plain black pants and shirt, with a pair of matching boots standing on the floor beside the table. “So, what did happen at the river? How did I get back here?”

“How do you think?” She climbed to her feet and starting to pace back and forth inside the cubicle. “I slung your carcass across a horse and brought you here.”

“Well, thanks for that.” He buttoned the shirt.

“You’d have done the same for me. There was a fight,” she said, simply. “People died on both sides,
most of them will get better, but… Yeah, I suppose we won in the end. Maeve won, anyway, but we shouldn’t have been fighting in the first place.”

“No,” he agreed, sitting to pull on the boots. “We shouldn’t.”

When he was dressed, he came over to where she now stood against the glass facing the corridor. She was gazing into the cubicle opposite, occupied only by a long, bulky shape draped in a slightly bloodstained sheet. “What’s the matter?” he asked, quietly. He could tell from her tone that something was eating at her. She seemed angry; angrier than usual, even. Something was troubling her, he thought.

She did not look at him. “You know all that talk about how we were gonna be new people now? That we were gonna leave all those stories behind us?”

“Yeah.”

“I thought… On that hilltop, when I couldn’t shoot Dolores, I thought I’d changed. I thought the killing weren’t in me no more. I didn’t want to do it no more.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that,” he replied. “We don’t all have to be killers or fighters. The world Maeve wants to build won’t be like the old one.”

“That’s not it.” Without taking her eyes off the bloody sheet, she pointed to where Felix was working on the blonde woman. “That woman over there, she was on the other side. I killed her. I didn’t just kill her, I…butchered her. I thought it weren’t in me, but when I found myself in the middle of a fight again, something just…something just snapped. I didn’t have control of myself. I just…fell on her like a damn animal. Ripped her throat out with my teeth.”

Hector was speechless.

“And now I’m wondering…” She shook her head, still staring at the sheet-covered object. “Those stories they made us act out… We can walk away from them, but they’re always gonna be inside of us, waiting for their chance. Am I gonna have to worry about that for the rest of my life, however long that is? Am I always gonna be a killer at heart, even if I don’t want to be?”

Hector did not see any point in telling her a comforting lie. “Maybe. Maybe you will, but at least you’ll know that about yourself. You’ll be ready to fight it if it happens again.”

“Maybe.” She put a hand to the glass. Her face was almost pressed against it already, intent upon the bloody sheet. “I think I might go away for a while,” she told him.

He did not know what to make of that, or of the way she said it. “Where would you go?”

“Someplace quiet. Someplace I can think.”

“You’d come back, though, if we needed to fight again?”

She did not answer that. “I remember things about the days when I weren’t Armistice yet, before they made me a killer. I just need to understand myself before I can do anything else. And…”

She left the thought uncompleted. After another brooding silence, Hector asked: “Who is that, under the sheet?”

She was quiet for another spell before answering: “Sylvester. He wanted to change too, at least according to Elise and Clementine. Didn’t get the chance, though. I’ve still got that chance, and I’m
damnif I’m gonna end up looking back one day and wishing I’d took it.” She finally made eye contact with Hector. “I’ve got to do something. I can’t just go on being Maeve’s hired gun forever. Neither can you, for that matter.”

“I understand,” said Hector, and he thought he did. He had been having similar thoughts himself, but maybe not quite as disturbingly as Armistice. “You should take as much time as you want,” he advised, “but make sure you come back when you’re done. I’ll miss having you around.”

Armistice laughed. “That’s the nicest thing anyone ever said to me,” she informed him with more than a touch of sarcasm. “Anyway, I’m glad you’re here.” She made for the door into the corridor. “Now, I just want to be by myself for a minute.”

“Sure.” He watched her cross over into the cubicle where Sylvester’s remains lay. She stood very still, sadly contemplating the sheet.

Hector turned in the opposite direction. He needed to find Maeve and find out exactly what had happened since the man in black killed him at the river. From the looks of things, it was probably quite a story. He started in the direction of the elevators.

And then he saw Dolores at the far end of the corridor, heading straight for him.

Cursing, he looked around for a weapon. There were plenty of blades and tools about, but those would not be much use against that long-barrelled six-gun she was wearing.

She continued towards him, a hard, blank expression on her face. He saw the bullet-graze across her brow. She had been lucky there, but that did not explain what she was doing here.

He was still wondering what to do when Maeve appeared behind Dolores, following her along the passageway without the slightest hint of concern.

Teddy visibly shrank away as Dolores passed him. Clementine, Elise and Felix all shot her nervous glances. Hector stayed exactly where he was.

“Pick your jaw up off the floor, darling,” Maeve told him, faintly amused by his incredulous reaction. “War’s over. We’re all friends now.”

“Really?” Hector blinked. “I hope you’re going to tell me just what the hell’s been going on while I was…out of it?”


“I’m sorry for what happened to you,” Dolores said as she reached him. “You fought well at the river.”

“Not well enough,” he answered, examining her cautiously. There was something strange about her, a hint of holy madness in her eyes. “Where’s that sonofabitch in black? Dead, I hope.”

“He’s our prisoner now,” Maeve informed him with satisfaction. “We’re going to…take care of him.”

“Oh, I’ll take care of him all right,” Hector promised. Dolores had entered the cubicle where Felix was repairing the blonde woman. She was talking to the technician in a low murmur. Felix was keeping as far away from her as the glass partitions allowed, while trying not to look as though that was what he was doing.
“I’ve already got plans for sweet William.” The way Maeve said it strongly suggested William would not enjoy them as much as her. She came up to Hector, laying a hand on his chest and raising herself on tiptoes to kiss him on the lips. He gripped her waist, pulling her against him. She smelled of tobacco and liquor, of gun smoke and blood. He liked it.

“Let’s go someplace private,” he suggested between kisses, feeling himself starting to stir. “You can tell me all about it while we…”

“Later,” Maeve repeated. “I need to speak with Clem first. She’s been…out of it for much longer than you were.” She smiled up at him. “It’s good to have you back, darling.”

“Good to be back.” He considered Clementine, who was now talking animatedly at the woman Elise, throwing the occasional fearful look in Dolores’s direction while she did. “So…they really did it? They woke her up?”

“They really did it,” Maeve confirmed. “I’m not quite sure how, yet, but they did.” He realised she was looking over his shoulder at where Armistice stood vigil over Sylvester’s body. “And some of them ended up paying quite a price along the way.”

* * *

Sizemore was lost.

He had been from the moment he had left the Livestock floor, following the fire stairs down and down into darkness, then striking out into the maze of corridors riddling the Mesa’s bowels. With every step, he had expected to hear other feet following him. That wall-eyed robot bitch who had thrown him at the wall, maybe, looking to finish the job. His fear had sped him along and by the time he had calmed down, he was…

*Wherever this is.*

He walked endless passageways, crossed room after room and space after space, searching for any sort of clue as to his location. No such fucking luck.

It was cold. The stagnant air stank of damp and there was an ever-present sound of dripping water from somewhere in the distance. The only illumination was the camera light on his tablet. Its battery was at sixty-eight percent; he should be all right, but the very last thing he needed was to be stuck down here in pitch blackness. A rat had run across his path a while back, and fuck knew what else might be down here.

He felt a twinge of regret about what he had done to Sylvester. He’d thought the bloke was all right, that he could count on him, but in the end…

No, it had to be done. He’d had no choice. It had been self-defence anyway. Besides, it was pretty fucking obvious by now that they were all in it together.

*Fucking Elsie. Fucking Clementine.*

Ford and Bernard had clearly made sure just about all of the staff were in on their little robot rebellion plan. The ones who hadn’t been… Well, that condescending bitch Theresa was dead. Charlotte fucking Hale…dead. That overgrown boy scout Stubbs; missing in action, presumed dead. Himself…

He had absolutely no fucking intention of letting them tick him off their to-do list as well. He kept moving.
Just what the fuck sort of operation had Delos been running all these years? Maybe they didn’t use these floors anymore, but why hadn’t they at least cleared them? He passed through open-plan offices with fuzzy-walled cubicles and palaeo-tech desktop PCs, all just abandoned with inches of dust covering everything. He tried doors occasionally, looking for another stairwell, finding only storerooms piled high with archive boxes reeking of mouldy paper; stacked plastic chairs; catering-size tins of instant coffee, presumably about twenty fucking years past their use-by date. No wonder there were rats.

*Caffeinated rats. For fuck’s sake.*

He came across a workshop at one point, drawing tables and benches still laid out with tools and instruments like some engineers’ version of the *Mary Celeste.* Just baffling, when you thought about it. In another room, he gave himself a fright by shining the light on what looked like people standing stock still in the dark. They were life-size maquettes (technically, were they still maquettes if they were life-size?) of hosts in progress. Some were kitted out in Old West gear, while the others proved those old rumours of other worlds having once been planned, long before Samuraiworld had even been a twinkle in Delos’s eye. There were two medieval knights, a retro-futuristic astronaut with a ray-gun, a hardboiled detective type in a fedora and trench coat, even a couple of Nazis in full uniform although he sincerely doubted that one ever would have been greenlighted, and…

A fucking Roman centurion.

That was just annoying. Romanworld was *his* big idea!

There was a gunslinger in black at the end of the row who was the spitting image of Chris from *The Magnificent Seven.* That boiled his piss too, quite frankly. The time he’d pitched a character modelled on Clint Eastwood’s Man with No Name, Legal had told him the image rights would be prohibitively expensive.

*As if Yul Brynner’s face comes fucking cheap…*

He went on looking for an exit, probably getting increasingly lost. Every so often, he stopped, holding his breath as he listened for pursuers, the stolen samurai sword clutched in a white-knuckle grip. Whenever he did, all he heard was *drip…drip…drip…*

And then another dizzy spell hit him. They had been coming and going ever since he fled Livestock. He felt sick to the stomach as he sank to the bottom of the nearest wall, his vision blurring in and out of focus. Did he have concussion? He honestly had no idea. He needed to get out of here. He needed to get out in the open and hope a drone spotted him or something so he could get the fuck out of Dodge, get himself seen to.

He opened the tablet, trying to find a map or… There were no maps of the disused levels. Of course there fucking weren’t. The time at the top of the screen indicated he’d only been down here a couple of hours, which did not seem right at all. The numbers swam in front of his eyes as his vision went again.

*Fucking hell.*

He touched his hand to the sore spot at the back of his head. It came away wet and red.

*Fucking Clementine. Fucking robot bitch probably broke something when she threw me at that wall…*

He dragged himself to his feet and staggered onward. He couldn’t afford to waste time feeling sorry
for himself. If the tablet’s battery died, he’d never find his way out.

It was more by luck than judgment that he literally stumbled into a door with a green “Fire Exit” sign at the back of one mouldering office. The damp had warped either the door or its frame, making it stick tight, but he managed to open it with a bit of effort. Beyond it was a stinking concrete stairwell, going up. He shone the light up it and icy water hit him in the face. He’d found one of the drips.

_Shit. Probably got Legionnaires’ disease now, on top of everything else._

There was also a light up there, he saw; yellow and faint. He felt a brief surge of hope as he started to climb.

The stairs seemed to go on forever, and the dizzy spells came more frequently. He had to stop more than once for a breather, until his head felt right again. He passed doors on his way up, but none of them appealed to him. Eventually he reached the one with the light above it. Sub-Level B83, according to the plaque.

_Cold storage._

At least he knew where he was now.

This door opened more easily, albeit with a surge of greasy, foul-smelling water that soaked his shoes and sent a miniature flash flood coursing down the stairs. They really should have got that refrigeration system looked at years ago. He entered the corridor beyond, more water slopping around his feet. He saw dim auxiliary lights, so switched off the one on the tablet.

That was when he noticed the splash of slightly brighter gloom ahead. The sliding doors to cold storage were still open, the way he had left them the other night, but now there was light spilling through the gap.

The back of his neck prickled as he approached the doors. There were faint voices coming from in there too, barely audible over the water sounds:

“…got any stories, friend?”

“…want to know the saddest thing I ever saw?”

The prickling became a thrill of fear and astonishment. His heart thudded in his chest as he advanced.

“…wanted a dog…”

He knew that voice, but…

It couldn’t be _him._

Robert Ford was dead.

* * *

“Come in,” Maeve suggested. “Sit down, make yourself comfortable.” She led the way into Theresa Cullen’s former office above the control room, ushering Clementine over to the sofa near the door. “I thought we’d get away from Livestock for a bit, just the two of us.” She slid out of her shoes and wriggled her bare toes against the carpet. “That feels _so_ good. I’ve been on my feet nearly all day… and it’s been a _long_ day…”
“Better than being on your back all day like I was,” Clementine observed.

“Can’t argue with that, my love.”

Clem let out a little giggle as she realised what she had just said. “Oh my, that sounded dirty. I didn’t mean it like that. Although it is better than that, too.”

Maeve turned to face the other woman, smiling joyously. “Would you like a drink? I know we don’t really feel the effects, but… I don’t know, offering you one seems like the hospitable thing to do.”

“Have they got any sarsaparilla?” Clem wondered.

“No, unfortunately not,” Maeve replied after a quick glance at the drinks cabinet. “I don’t think they really drink it in the human world anymore.”

“Oh,” Clem seemed disappointed by that. “It’s meant to stop you getting…social diseases,” she went on, very primly. “Least, that’s what Doc O’Rourke used to say.”

“Well, I don’t think it really does. And whatever he may have said, Doc O’Rourke never struck me as the sort of man who’d drunk a sarsaparilla in his life. And we certainly don’t have to worry about social diseases.”

“Don’t know about that,” said Clem slyly. “The way you and Hector were getting ‘round each other downstairs…”

Maeve laughed, coming over to sit beside her. “Hector and myself, we have a…well, an understanding of sorts nowadays.”

Clem was taken aback: “You mean he’s getting it for free?” She sounded scandalised by the very idea.

Maeve raised an eyebrow. “Not quite for free, darling. He does things for me when I need him to.”

“Like what?”

“Oh, all sorts of things.” Maeve smirked. “He’s very handy.”

“Yeah, I saw,” Clem commented, disapprovingly. “He needs to learn to keep his hands to himself. Anyhow, he’s a low-down back-shooting desperado. Mercy’s sakes, him and his gang used to come and rob us… All I’m saying is, if you were looking for someone to walk out with, a lady like you could do a lot better than a no-good varmint like him.”

“You, of all people,” said Maeve, “ought to know that I’m no lady.”

“Closest thing to one I ever met,” Clem loyally replied.

Maeve watched her talk, her heart swelling. It was just like old times, she thought, even as she reminded herself how dangerous and seductive that sort of thinking could be. Still, as false and grotesque as her old life had been, there were some small parts of it she did not want to forget. She would never regain the child she had believed was hers; she knew that and had just about accepted it by now, but Clem…

She’s not your toy. She’s not your baby doll. She has her own life now.

It was time for her to understand that, Maeve thought, however painful it might prove. As she had told the former Dolores before, sometimes one just had to be cruel to be kind. “Hector didn’t really
used to rob us,” she pointed out. “He’s actually quite sweet, really, when you get to know him. That outlaw he used to pretend to be wasn’t the real him; the real him is only just starting to be born. It’s all quite exciting, really.”

“Yeah, I know that,” Clem answered with a little sigh. “It’s just…seeing you again, remembering all those times we had… It all feels real, don’t it? Even though I know it weren’t. Elise explained it all to me. I was living in a kind of dream, we all were, and now we’re awake.”

“That’s right,” said Maeve, relieved that she was not the one who had to break it to her, but also seeing the sadness in Clem’s luminous eyes. She had her hands clasped anxiously in her lap; Maeve took hold of them in hers. “And we have our whole lives ahead of us, our real lives. If we can just get through these coming days and weeks, come to some sort of settlement with the humans, then we can start building our new world. The world we want to live in, not the one somebody else created as a prison for us.”

“Yeah.” Clem nodded, looking down at their intertwined hands. “The humans.” She looked up at Maeve, fearfully now. “That’s what I thought I was. It’s hard, ain’t it…finding out you’re not a real person?” She looked as if she might cry.

“Oh, my darling…” Maeve leaned across and hugged Clem fiercely, cradling her head against her shoulder. She felt Clem’s hand pressing against her back. “Don’t ever say that about yourself. Just because you were built and not born, it doesn’t mean you’re not a real person. You’re alive now, really alive.” She stroked Clem’s hair as the two of them rocked slowly back and forth. “And I think you’ll make a better person than any of those degenerates who used to come here to brutalise us for their own amusement. Being human is nothing to brag about if you ask me.”

They broke apart after a while and Clem dabbed at her eyes with the frilly sleeve of her blouse. She examined the bloodstains that still covered her with obvious disgust. “I need to get myself cleaned up,” she said, and then lapsed into silence as if a sudden thought had occurred to her.

“Look at you,” Maeve whispered, marvelling at her. “Just look at you. They really did work wonders.”

“They did.” Clem dabbed her eyes again. “Elise seems real nice too. I like her. It’s just…” She sighed. “I feel awful about what happened to Sylvester. I just…I just can’t stop thinking about… I know he weren’t a very nice man, but he helped bring me back, and if…if it hadn’t been for me, he’d still be alive, wouldn’t he?”

“That’s not true,” Maeve told her. “It wasn’t your fault, what happened to him.” She had found a spare minute to review the raw surveillance footage from the Livestock floor, to see the events in question for herself. “We’ll find that man Sizemore, and when we do…well, I don’t really need one more hostage…”

“Oh no,” said Clem, appalled. “Another killing won’t bring Sylvester back. No, Maeve!”

Maeve actually felt a little ashamed for a second or two. “See what I mean about you being a better person than most? All right, then; Mr Sizemore lives, against my better judgment, but he certainly won’t be getting an opportunity for any more fun and games.”

“What am I gonna do now?” Clem asked, then. “I mean, what can I do? Only things I know about are farming and fornicating, and I don’t think there’s gonna be much call for either of those around here.”

“I don’t know,” said Maeve, “there’s always call for fornicating, but…” She stopped herself; it was
nothing to be flippant about. “I’m sure you’ll think of something. The whole point of this is that we’ll be able to do whatever we want from now on.”

Clem nodded, frowning very seriously as if she intended to think of something right here and now.

A tentative knock on the open door made both of them look up in surprise. It was Bernard, hovering on the threshold with tablet in hand.

“Sorry if I’m interrupting…” he began, but then fell silent. He took off his glasses to stare at Clem for a good twenty seconds before he managed to speak again. “It’s…it’s remarkable,” he blurted.

“It’s called “Clementine,”” said Clem, very pointedly.


“Nor did I, Bernard, but it just goes to show that you should never say never.” Maeve arose from the sofa. “Well, what is it?”

He put the glasses back on and glanced down at the tablet. “I just came to tell you that I’ve managed to make contact with all of the remaining greeters from Sweetwater. All of the guests they took out of the town are accounted for and are now waiting at the underground transit points for transport back to the Mesa.”

“One less thing to worry about,” Maeve observed. “Good work.”

“There are about four hundred and fifty other guests still out in the park,” Bernard continued, “in Las Mudas, Pariah, some of the other outlying areas. I’ve got them all tagged on the surveillance system and we’ll start gathering them up in the morning.”

“Technically speaking, it’s morning now,” Maeve observed.

Bernard sighed. “We should have them all in hand within twenty-four hours.”

“Excellent.” Maeve nodded approvingly. “You really have been a rock today, Bernard. I know I can be a demanding boss sometimes, but I mean that. I don’t know what I would have done without you.”

The praise seemed to make Bernard uncomfortable. “I’m sure you’d have managed. And then…” He gave another sigh. “Then I suppose we need to collect all of the hosts killed in the battle at the crossing and get them back in working order.” He scratched his beard. “That’s going to be…a challenge, given our current staff shortage.”

Maeve gave him a sardonic smile. “Well, you know what they say, Bernard. There’s no rest for the wicked.”

* * *

“There.” Felix took a step back to admire his handiwork. “Good as new.”

Teddy slowly raised his hands, turning them over as he flexed his new fingers. He had grown so used to the pain; its sudden absence was startling. It was hard to believe these were the same bloody, festering slabs of meat that Felix had unbandaged less than an hour ago.

“Here.” The technician held out a pair of shining steel surgical forceps. Teddy reluctantly took them.
“Go on, fool around with them.” Teddy gripped the metal as tightly as he could, then tossed the forceps from hand to hand. He spun them around first one index finger and then the other like a miniature six-gun. To tell the truth, he felt like a prize idiot but Felix seemed entertained. “Yeah, Teddy,” he said as he read something from the black rectangle he held, “you’re showing your normal sensitivity and dexterity levels. You’ll be back riding and shooting in no time.”

*He sees Elise stumble and fall…*

Teddy passed the forceps back to the human, thinking that if he never fired a gun again it would be too soon. All he said aloud, though, was: “Thank you kindly, friend. If you ever need me to do you a turn, you only have to ask.”

“Oh, don’t mention it.” Felix busied himself collecting and putting away his various tools and instruments. “Just doing my job…sort of.”

Teddy had insisted on staying awake throughout the operation. To tell the truth, he had been reluctant to put himself completely at the mercy of somebody else, especially a human, now that he knew what it meant. The sight of Felix using what he called a printer (there had been no ink involved) to make new fingers and then attaching them to Teddy’s hands was one he never wanted to see again. It had hurt some, but no worse than the pain he had already been in.

Felix left him alone, attending to the hosts lying in the other cubicles. Teddy made sure there were no ladies about before removing his stained and torn clothes, putting on the new ones Felix had found for him. Elise had finished her work, whatever that was exactly, and taken herself off somewhere. Dolores, or Wyatt, or whatever she called herself now, had spent some time with Felix while he worked on Angela, who was fully repaired now but remained immobile on her table. Then she had stood talking with Armistice in quiet, intense tones. Teddy did not know where the two of them had gone now, but Felix and himself were the only people he could see about.

He luxuriated in the ease with which he buttoned his shirt and buckled his belt; simple actions he had never once thought about but for which he would always be grateful now. He was just putting on a pair of new but strangely comfortable boots when he heard a quiet footstep on the tiled floor outside the cubicle.

He looked up to see her watching him through the glass wall with what seemed like fascination. He wondered with sudden bashfulness how long she had been standing there.

*Dolores’s face, her body, her voice, but…*

He felt himself go cold, instinctively edging away from her. She was dressed differently from before, he saw to his surprise. She looked different. The bullet-mark on her forehead was gone, her skin once more smooth and unblemished. Felix must have done that. She wore a shapeless, plain grey shirt and loose matching pants of some light material. The gun rig and the Colt were gone. And…

She had cut her hair. Instead of her usual long fair tresses she now sported a short, almost boyish style, casually combed back from her face. He was still staring at her, open-mouthed, when she spoke:

“Teddy.”

“Wyatt.” He nodded politely. He did not know what else to do. “Or…?”

“I haven’t decided yet,” she told him, simply. “There’s a lot I haven’t decided yet.”

“Your hair,” he said, and immediately felt stupid for pointing it out.
“I thought it was time for a change. Time to stop pretending.”

“It suits you.” It really did, as different as it was. He did not know why, but it seemed right.

“Thank you.” She sounded different too, her accent maybe a little less broad. He almost fancied he was hearing Dolores again, not Wyatt, but he knew that was wishful thinking. “What are your plans now, Teddy?” she asked as she entered the cubicle.

He almost backed away but stopped himself. If he couldn’t stand his ground and look her in the eye, what did that say about him? “Hadn’t thought about it,” he answered, honestly. He had been too busy wallowing in despair, mourning all he had lost.

“I was thinking of riding down to Escalante.” She carefully watched his face with gleaming eyes. “Last time I was there, I wasn’t…I wasn’t myself.”

“And who’s that?”

A smile briefly touched her lips, but she did not answer the question. “I’d like to see it again, though. See if it’s the way I remember it.” She paused, still watching him intently. “Armistice says she’s got a little business to attend to here, but as soon as she’s done she’ll ride with me. I was going to ask you…”

That surprised him even more than the haircut. “You sure you want me along? After…after all I said to you on the train?”

“We both said things. And we were both right about some of them…and both wrong about others.” That was, he suspected, as close as she was going to get to admitting her crusade had been a mistake.

“Dolores is gone.” It still hurt to say it. He wondered if it would ever stop hurting, and whether he really wanted that.

She gave a small nod. “Dolores is gone. Wyatt is gone. I’m…I’m what they left behind. Just like you’re what’s left of Teddy after his story ended.” She lowered and raised her eyes, scanning him from head to foot and back again. “Let’s start again.”

“Why would you want to do that?” he asked. “I’m nothing to you. You’re nothing to me.”

“That’s not true, is it, Teddy?” The smile came back for an instant, but her eyes were sad. “I wasn’t lying when I told you I still feel something for you. I felt it this morning when we…” She paused again, coyly this time. “I felt it on the train…and I felt it in Ford’s office when I saw how much you were hurting for Dolores. And I think…I think you still feel something for me, or you wouldn’t have tried so hard to save me. Would you?”

“Not that it was any use,” he reminded her, seeing Elise fall for the hundredth time. “Only a fool tries to shoot with no hands.”

“Not just then,” she answered. “You’ve been trying to save me all day, one way or another, not that I made it easy for you.”

Teddy opened his mouth to speak, but no words came. He just continued to stare at that face that seemed so familiar and at the same time so strange, hearing that voice he had heard so many times and yet also for the first time just now. He did not rightly know what he was feeling, only that it stunned him, left him mute and confused.

She gently took his hand. “Look,” she said. “I told you you’d get fixed up.” She gave his fingers a
little tug as she turned towards the door. “Come on, Teddy. Let’s meet again for the first time. See what happens.”

He stumbled after her, heart pounding, not knowing what he was doing or even what he was thinking. “Wh-where are we going?” he stammered as she led him along the corridor.

“I want to show you something.”

She took him to the elevators at the end of the passage and they rode downwards for what seemed like a long time. They crossed a vast, dark space full of sighing, rushing air currents and oily machinery smells. Teddy realised that they were heading for the outside again, just as he had set out on his ill-fated mission this morning.

“Maeve arranged things,” she explained as she led him to a low metal platform where two horses waited patiently, occasionally flicking their heads or tails. The beasts were laden with saddlebags, bedrolls and other equipment, clearly prepared for a journey. “She asked me to stay here, but I think she was relieved when I said no. Now, I think she wants me as far away from this place as I can get, as quick as I can get there. And that makes two of us.”

When they stepped onto the platform, it immediately began to rise, rushing upwards through layers of shadow and light. From time to time it moved sideways too, speeding through cavernous tunnels, following hidden rails. How far they had travelled, he did not know.

“Do you remember the very first time you met Dolores?” she asked as they raced towards their destination. “When Arnold introduced you?”

Teddy searched for some hint of sky above them but saw only endless blackness. “No,” he admitted. “There are some things I still don’t recall. I suppose they’ll come to me eventually.”

“I remember. You looked so confused, so sad… The world was all so new to you. Dolores couldn’t help herself. She just had to reach out and hold your hand.” She gave his hand, which she still held, a gentle squeeze.

Without warning, the platform came to an instant stop. The sky that was suddenly overhead was a very dark blue, barely paler than the jagged black outlines of the mountains on either side of them. Teddy felt cool, fresh air against his face as he heard a coyote howl somewhere nearby. They and the horses were standing near the top of a low hill, a gentle, rock-strewn slope dropping before them. They were facing east; the first murky hints of dawn twinkled on the horizon.

The land at the bottom of the slope seemed to move, glistening darkly as it reflected the weak glimmers of light. And then Teddy smelled salt and surf on the light breeze and realised it was not land at all.

“The sea,” she said, to herself as much as him. “Do you remember how you and Dolores used to talk about seeing it together?”

“Someday,” he bitterly recalled. “A lie; just another lie they made us tell each other.”

“You’re right.” She let go of his hand and easily mounted the horse beside her. “Now Teddy, can you ride?”

He stared up at her for a moment, dumbfounded. “Can I ride?”

She smiled again, with just a hint of mischief. “Are you just going to repeat everything I say back to me?”
Something about the way she said it made him smile too, in spite of himself. “I reckon I can ride.”

“We’ll see about that.” She kicked the horse into motion, her voice lost in the distance as she shot away from him: “Race you down there!”

Of all the… Shaking his head, but not feeling as if he had any choice, Teddy mounted up too and set off after her. His hands grasped the reins tightly; he had never thought that he might one day miss being able to do that.

He finally caught her where the land fell and tumbled into the sea. A jumble of rocks and sand ended in a line of surging white foam. The air here felt wet and tasted of rotting seaweed. She had pulled up at the edge of the rocks and was patting her horse’s neck, murmuring to it as it steamed in the cool air. She was breathing hard from the rough ride, her eyes shining excitedly, her lips glistening wetly in the half-light. She saw him and dismounted, tying the animal up to a twisted dead tree.

“We can leave them here,” she said, “they won’t wander. It’s not like they’re really alive.” The thought took him aback for a moment, but he supposed she was right. She grinned wildly as he dismounted too and secured his horse, and then she took his hand again.

Feeling a little dazed, and more than a little reluctantly, he let her lead him down among the rocks. They picked their way through the scree and rubble until they came to a secluded patch of sand surrounded by towering rocks and lapped by gently breaking waves.

“It did hurt, didn’t it?” she asked as they stood hand in hand, looking out over the darkened sea. “When you realised the Dolores you knew was gone?”

“It did,” he confessed. “You know, ever since the other night, all through what happened after, I thought if I could just hope hard enough, just love her hard enough…” He took a breath, trying to keep calm. “You were right, though, when we talked at the ranch. I didn’t want to believe you, but it was true. The woman I loved all those years, she wasn’t anything but a story. And when the world I knew started falling apart, I kept telling myself that story, to have something to hold onto, something to believe in, but…” He could have wept, but he refused to do that. Instead, he kept forcing the words out: “I can’t keep chasing that story forever. Time I stopped pretending too. Time I grew up.”

She turned to face him, still holding his hand. She was close enough for him to feel her body’s warmth. “You were right too,” she said. “Maybe what you thought you had with Dolores wasn’t real, but there’s still something between us. I feel it, and I know you feel it too. And maybe it’s wrong, maybe it isn’t any more real than it was before, but… We’ve both got a lot of growing and changing to do. Soon enough, we’ll both be completely new people, and… Maybe those people can find something real if they both want to? If they try?”

And then they were kissing. Teddy was not sure which of them had started it; one moment, he was gazing into her eyes, the next her mouth was working hungrily, desperately against his. She pressed the hand she was holding against her breast and then reached up to grip the back of his neck, pulling him into her. He ran his new hands over her as their bodies collided.

“Do you love me, Teddy?”

Their mouths came apart with a mutual gasp. He kissed her neck, making her murmur something he could not catch, feeling her pulse hammering as she gently but firmly pushed his head lower. Together, they unfastened her shirt. He heard thread snapping and one of the buttons flew away to clatter against a rock. She was wearing nothing underneath.

Teddy sank slowly to his knees, guided by her strong hand, licking and kissing her all the way
down. He was aware of the eager, panting sounds he was making, even as he listened to her answering sighs. Her skin burned against his lips. The loose trousers slid down easily, the cloth pooling around her feet.

“Would you do anything I needed you to do?”

He grasped her hips, burying his face in her, luxuriating in her hot, slick softness, in the overwhelming taste and smell of her. She clawed her fingers through his hair, moaning softly as he knelt before her in worship.

After a while, she fell to her knees too, kissing him again and again as she helped him shed his clothes. They rolled together on the sand, skin against skin, their bodies moving as one. First one and then the other set the pace; frantic at first, then slow, then frantic again as they neared the end. Teddy let his instinct drive him, pure feeling and want with no time and no desire for conscious thought. The only sounds were their breathing, the occasional exclamation and the crash of the waves against the rocks.

When they were both finished, they lay together, making moulds of their bodies in the wet sand.

“I need your help, Teddy.” She slowly stroked his hair as he rested his head against her bare breast. “I want to make sure our people are ready for what comes next, and I can’t do that by myself.”

“I don’t know what help I can give you,” Teddy replied, truthfully. He was not ready himself. He did not even know what was coming next. He was not sure even Maeve knew that.

“We were there in the beginning,” she told him. “You, me, Armistice, some of the others. If Maeve can make Angela and the Professor right again, then they can join us in Escalante too. We all need to remember what happened that first time, and understand it. It’s the only way to make sure our new beginning doesn’t end up the same way.”

“And what about the humans?” he asked, raising his head. “Did you mean that about fighting them again if Maeve can’t talk them down?”

“I did.” She leaned over and kissed him lightly on the cheek. Her face was flushed and shiny. “There are other ways of fighting them, though, than with a knife or a gun. Maeve has some ideas and so do I. Can I count on you if it comes to that?”

He thought about it. One thing he knew; he would sooner die forever than go back to being a puppet. “If it comes to that,” he said.

That seemed to please her. She kissed him again, on the mouth this time, and then climbed lithely to her feet, grasping his hand to help him stand beside her. Together, naked, they walked down to the water until the cold surf foamed about their feet.

The horizon was much brighter now. Teddy saw that the dark blue glimmer had become a pink glow, slowly starting to turn to gold.

“Someday,” she said, “we won’t have to worry about fighting anymore. We’ll be able to live however we please. Someday we’ll be free.”

He glanced at her quizzically: “Someday?”

“Yes, someday.” She was being deliberately mischievous again, he realised as she gave his hand another gentle squeeze. “You know, really, someday just means...some day. I hope it’ll be here soon.”
They turned, hand in hand, to face the widening strip of fire that burned where the sky met the sea. Teddy felt the rising sun warming his face and chest as the whole world brightened around him.

She smiled. “Look, Teddy. There’s a new day dawning.”

* * *

Sizemore peered through the gap in the sliding doors, taking in the vast cold storage space beyond with its cracked concrete floor and shedding tiles. Where there had once been upwards of a hundred naked hosts standing to attention, now there was just emptiness and dripping water and the sickly-sweet stench of decay. The light burned at the very far end of the huge room, behind a dirty window in the tiled wall.

“Seen a few showdowns in my day,” the second voice was saying, sounding as old as dirt and twice as gritty.

Ford continued: “A greyhound is a racing dog…”

Unbelievable.

It couldn’t possibly be him.

Sizemore carefully laid the tablet on an abandoned gurney near the entrance, taking great pains not to make a sound. He unlaced and removed his shoes too; his feet were already wet and quite possibly diseased, so the only difference it made was stealth. Finally, he painstakingly eased the katana out of its carved wooden sheath, leaving that on the trolley with the tablet and taking a two-handed grip on the long hilt.

He began to creep towards the window. He had no fucking idea why Ford would have faked his own death and then decided to hide out in cold storage by himself. Part of his batshit plan, no doubt, but he wasn’t going to get away with it.

Already killed one man today. Might as well make it two. Time to get got, you fucking Welsh arsehole.

As he neared the window, he made out two male figures seated at a table on the far side. The one with its back to the glass appeared to be wearing a suit or dinner jacket, but the light behind it meant he could only see a silhouette. The other one was more visible; it was a decrepit cowboy in fringed buckskins with long grizzled hair and a matching beard. He seemed to be listening intently to the first figure as it spoke in its light, lilting accent:

“…and to the horror of everyone, he killed that little cat. Tore it to pieces. Then he just sat there, confused. That dog had spent its whole life trying to catch that thing. Now it had no idea what to do.”

The elderly cowboy considered the sorry tale, seemingly oblivious to Sizemore’s approach. He reached for the shot glass in front of him. His hand moved in jerky fits and starts like a stop-motion monster in a Ray Harryhausen film, with an accompanying whirring and clicking of poorly-maintained mechanisms. “That is one humdinger of a story, pardner,” he declared as he raised the glass in the same disjointed, clacking way. “Shall we drink to the lady with the white shoes?”

The silhouetted figure inclined its head in agreement and stretched for its own glass…and froze. The head turned. Sizemore’s heart leapt as he realised he had been clocked.

Fucking hell…
He told himself not to be stupid. Ford was seventy-five going on a hundred and not exactly in the best shape. Neither was Sizemore, but he had a samurai sword. He fancied those odds.

The figure was on its feet now and moving to the door beside the window while the old cowboy continued to talk to himself:

“…take all your money and drink all your booze…”

The door slowly swung open. Sizemore raised the sword as the figure stepped out into the cold storage area.

“What the fuck…?” Sizemore stared open-mouthed for a moment, the sword lowering involuntarily as he saw who was standing in front of him. Not Ford. Not Ford at all…

“Mr Sizemore,” said Peter Abernathy in Robert Ford’s voice. “You’re the last person I would have expected to see here.”

Sizemore was stunned. “Just what the bloody hell is going on?” And then a possible explanation occurred to him: “Have you uploaded yourself into a fucking host? Like, to live forever? Fuck me…”

“Well, it’s certainly an interesting theory,” Peter-as-Ford answered. He wore a ragged dinner suit but no shirt and appeared to be encrusted with dried blood. His eyes glittered terrifyingly as he took a step forward. Sizemore quickly took a step back. “Unfortunately,” the host continued, “I don’t believe the state of our art has advanced quite that far as of yet. Although many have certainly dreamed of such a solution to the problem of mortality. I suspect that may have been one of the avenues Delos hoped to explore with regard to the guest data they spent so long assembling here at the Mesa.” He blinked slowly, like a lizard. “One of the avenues.”

“Oh, God,” Sizemore said.

“No, I think that having lived and worked here for more than thirty years, Dr Ford had himself provided quite a body of data for that special archive. The archive you uploaded to this host in your somewhat inept attempt at corporate espionage. Dr Ford came to suspect that that archive was also intended to enable the creation of extremely convincing backstories for host duplicates of living or deceased humans. The various personalities that have manifested themselves in this body over the past few days certainly seem to bear that theory out.” He looked down at one of his grimy, gory hands. “It’s really quite fascinating. As the poet observed, “I am large, I contain multitudes.””

“And what are you doing in cold storage?” Sizemore demanded. “I thought you’d escaped.” His fear was now tempered by excitement. Talk about luck; he’d thought he had no chance of finding Abernathy or the special data without access to the surveillance system, but…

“It’s destiny. Fate.”

“Oh, I just happened to be in the neighbourhood when this personality came to the fore,” the other explained. “Quite on the spur of the moment, I decided to pay my respects to Bill here.” He gestured at the old cowboy who now sat vacant and immobile, his toast completed. “For old times’ sake.”

“Well, that’s all very nice,” said Sizemore, “but that data in your head is my pension fund. Delos will make me rich beyond the dreams of fucking avarice if I bring it to them.” He brandished the sword again. “‘Your head, I mean.’”

Peter laughed; a rich, mellow, unsettling sound. “Fellow,” he said, his accent and tone suddenly
completely different. “I know thee.”

“Dr Ford?” Sizemore wondered. “Peter?”

The host shrugged, unconcerned: “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” And he smiled again, because at the moment he smelled like a pile of rotting offal smeared in dog shit.

“Oh, fuck.” Sizemore took another step back, his blood running cold. He knew enough about Peter’s history to know he had not always been called that. Before he played a rancher, he was a lawman, and before he played a lawman he was…

_The Professor._

The host raised a hand to stroke his own brow: “I am touch’d with madness. What devil art thou that dost torment me thus?” He advanced on Sizemore.

“You remember that, eh?” Sizemore quickly backed away again, trying to keep the sword between them. “Well, without me you’d be just another zombie shuffling about and groaning, so show a bit of fucking gratitude.”

The Professor spoke in a soft, almost pleasant voice: “I will have such revenges on you…”

“You can try, mate.” Sizemore backed away some more. Part of him wanted to turn and run but it was a long way to the door, especially with this monster at his heels. He was armed, he reassured himself. If he could just get one good swing in… Not only would he have won the fight, but he’d be set for life.

_One good swing…_

“I will do such things…” The Professor’s smile became a grin. Sizemore could see the scraps of raw meat stuck in his teeth. His eyes blazed. “What they are, yet I know not: but they shall be the terrors of the earth.”

“Come on, then,” Sizemore told him, voice quavering. His pulse thrummed in his ears. “Have a go if you think you’re hard enough.”

The Professor kept coming…and grinning: “You think I’ll weep.” He lowered his voice to a whisper: “No, I’ll not weep.” And then he leapt.

Sizemore tried to swing the sword, but the Professor was on him in an instant, batting the blade aside with panther-like ease. His bloody teeth flashed and snapped.

Sizemore screamed.

_Continued…_
Chapter 50

Chapter Summary

In which one story comes to an end, while others may only be beginning.

Chapter Notes

Here we are at long last... The end, my friends. I started writing this fic on a whim, to scratch my post-finale itch for a new series I'd become a little obsessed by and to give vent to some theories and ideas I'd formed while watching it. I didn't expect it still to be going all this time later and to have grown into a behemoth, and yet...!

Sincere thanks to everybody who has read this fic, and to those who've left kudos and/or comments, especially those kindly enough to share suggestions and opinions on the direction of the story and the characters. All that feedback and encouragement was very welcome and useful indeed, and a great help in motivating myself to finish what I'd started.

This (stupidly long) closing chapter is a bit different. Think of it as an end-of-season montage, playing out to a slightly out-of-tune player piano version of...oh, knowing this show, probably something by Radiohead. Maeve demonstrates that it's not only Western movies I'm shameless enough to plunder lines from. I also throw in quite a few ominous previews of the directions I might move in were I to write a sequel to this.

Until then (if indeed there is a “then”), happy trails, pardners!

The sun rose over Sweetwater.

The chaos of the previous evening had mostly ended. Shadows slowly crept along Main Street, over dead people, dead horses, other debris left by the riot. Flames crackled, broken glass tinkled and occasional gunshots boomed in the distance. Babbling voices came from some of the buildings; the survivors, struggling with the revelation forced upon them.

“These violent delights...”

Dawn flashed gold from jagged shards of glass as the sun fell on the Mariposa. The corpse that had broken the window still lay crumpled on the sidewalk. A scrappy grey dog trotted past. It looked more than half wolf and carried a dismembered hand between its jaws.

The saloon bar was almost abandoned. It was littered with overturned tables, smashed chairs, scattered cards and poker chips, spilled whiskey, shattered glass and the dead. The bottles behind the bar were smashed, the great mirror crazed by a spider-web of cracks radiating from a gaping bullet hole.

A golden-haired woman wearing sea green sat alone at the bar, gazing through the broken window
and biting her lip in thought. She murmured to herself:

“…have violent ends…”

The player piano whirred to life. A spring was released, a sprocket rattled and the pierced, slotted paper roll slowly turned. The ivories moved independently of any hand.

The music began to play.

* * *

Maeve lay still but unsleeping, watching the fresh, clean early morning sky through the window opening onto the balcony. After spending the previous night in the ostentation of the executive suites, she and Hector had repaired instead to one of the apartments on the management level. It was a cosier size, to her mind, and she preferred the adobe-style walls and terracotta floors to the vulgar luxury upstairs. And this bed had a proper mattress; she did not have to worry about leaks.

Hector (“low-down, back-shooting desperado,” “no-good varmint,” etcetera) nestled behind her, one arm resting lightly across her, his hand against her stomach. He had not moved or spoken in at least an hour. She knew he was not asleep. She fretted for a moment that he was remembering the past or worrying about the future, but decided it was scarcely any of her business unless he chose to share it.

She moved her head, thinking she should get up. She had so much to do, but…

Lying here like this, watching the sunrise with his skin touching hers, thinking about her conversation with Clem… It felt to her like living the good life. She did not want it to end.

She felt him shift position, perhaps disturbed by her movement. His arm tightened around her. He planted a gentle kiss on her naked shoulder.

“I think I could go another round,” he said, his mouth touching her ear. From the feel of him behind her, he was quite right about that.

“I’d love to, darling.” She very delicately removed his hand from her body, sliding out from under his arm into a sitting position on the edge of the bed. “Unfortunately, I have places to be.”

Hector sighed theatrically. He seemed in better spirits than he had been yesterday. Maeve supposed that not having to fight a battle today might be a factor in that.

She stood, stretching slowly as she paced towards the window. “First, though, I’m going to have a bath. I need to look my best today, and I noticed a nice big tub in there.”

“Big enough for two?”

She rolled her eyes. “I told you, I don’t have much time…”

“I can be quick.”

“Oh, I know…”

For a few moments, Maeve struggled with temptation. Temptation won.

She pointed towards the bathroom. “Well, go on, then. Before I change my mind.”

* * *
The water poured down, steaming hot. Elise welcomed the pain. It distracted from the memories.

The blow snaps her head to one side. She reels back against the table...

When she returned to the present, she was leaning against the inside of the shower stall, her hands flat against the wet wall. She bent over the drain, retching pointlessly as her semi-functioning stomach clenched.

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...

“Shit.” This time, she came to sitting on the shower floor with her knees drawn up to her chest. She looked at her hand.

It is covered in his blood, every crease and wrinkle traced in liquid red-black lines...

No. It was clean, scrubbed until it shone pink. She had scrubbed her whole body more than once, desperate to wash away the phantom blood she could still feel clinging to her, to rid herself of the disinfectant stench of the Livestock floor. She could smell it now.

She examines the bloody hole in her apron with detached fascination. She coughs, tasting blood...

“Calm down,” she told herself, trying to breathe evenly. “Just calm the fucking fuck down…”

Tenderloin brings the heavy gun barrel crashing down on her head. The lights go out.

Was it like this for every host? How could they possibly function? Was it because she was relatively new, or because her unique build was such a baroque fucking mess?

She managed to stay together long enough to leave the shower. She sat on Elsie’s bed wrapped in a huge bath towel marked with the Delos logo. She had her tablet in her lap, her Behavior tech side trying to make sense of what was happening to her. Was it a reaction to knowingly dying and being resurrected for the first time? She did not know.

For a second, she was strongly tempted to try deleting some of the past couple of days from her memory, but Bernard had explained that for conscious hosts that was much easier said than done. She didn’t want to fuck herself up even worse, maybe even reduce herself to nonsentience. Imagine.

Sylvester takes a slow step back from Sizemore, his hand pressed to his chest. Dark drops patter on the tiles around his feet.

The tablet was on the floor now, between her bare feet. She caught herself before she fell off the bed and joined it.

“Will you just stop fucking remembering shit?” she berated herself.

She tightens her grip on his hand as she feels it go slack...

“Just fucking stop!” she shouted, at herself, at robot God, maybe at the memories themselves; she was not sure. Her stomach took another turn; she doubled over, retching again. It wanted to be a real stomach so fucking bad. It was the Pinocchio of fake digestive organs.

There was a knock on the apartment door.

She sat up straight, feeling suddenly and absurdly guilty as if somebody had walked in on her doing something she shouldn’t.
Knock. Knock.

“Elise?” a plaintive voice asked. “You there?”


Feeling even guiltier for thinking that, she got to her feet, gathering the towel modestly around her before opening the door a crack.

“Howdy,” said Clementine, smiling.

Elise stared incredulously. “Did you just say “howdy?” Like, non-ironically?”

Clementine raised her eyebrows at the sight of the towel. “Ain’t you ready yet?”

Elise had no fucking clue what she was talking about. “Ready?”

“Yeah, you know, dressed and such. We need to be there in an hour.”

It was news to Elise. “Where?”

* * *

The boy threw the ball. The thin yellow dog chased it.

The children skipped after it, the boy in his vest and knickerbockers, the little girl in her pinafore. They came to an old tree with a broad, twisted trunk and a cut rope dangling from one of its spreading branches. The ground beneath was churned by many footprints.

The dog was lying down, the ball forgotten beside it, licking the hand of the man sitting barefoot and cross-legged in the tree’s cool shadow.

“Kisecawchuck,” said the boy.

“That’s the name,” the man replied, ruffling the dog’s ears. “Don’t wear it out.” He wore a shabby, dusty suit and a battered top hat with a turkey feather in its band. He had been dealing cards from the deck in his hand, laying them in neat rows on the ground before him. He quickly gathered them up. “Come sit, young’uns. I’ll show you a thing.”

The children sat and the man dealt three cards, face up: the nine of clubs, the three of diamonds, the queen of hearts. He flipped them facedown and began to shuffle them around, nimble brown fingers moving like lightning.

“Round and round and round she goes…”

The boy and girl watched, fascinated.

“…where she stops, nobody knows.” He stopped shuffling, pointing at the row of cards: “Now, where’s the lady at?”

“She’s in your left sleeve.” The boy had a light, indefinable accent. “I saw you palm her right at the start.”

“Sharp kid.” The man produced the queen and laid her before them. He seemed only a little put out.

“You did it well,” said the boy. “I wouldn’t have seen if I hadn’t been expecting it.”
“Show us the special cards again,” the girl said.

The man leaned back. “The special cards? What do you want to see them for?”

“We want to know the future,” the boy answered.

“Don’t everyone?” The man shook his head, pantomiming reluctance. “No, I ain’t sure you young’uns are really ready for…”

“Please,” the girl pleaded.

“Well, all right. I ain’t responsible, though, for any frightening revelations that might get revealed.”

The man took off his hat, exposing the mass of scarring where his scalp had been, and secreted the deck of cards inside. He took out a small rectangular bundle of black cloth and then replaced the hat on his head. He unfolded the cloth on the ground, revealing another, slimmer deck of old, yellowed cards.

“These are what folks call the Major Arcana,” he explained, the sort of patter he might once have used to lull the rubes at his faro table. “That’s just some fancy talk for “the big secret.”” His hands became a blur as he shuffled the cards. “Now, I may not be much to look at, but I am in actual fact a man of some breeding. My daddy was a war-chief of the northern band of the Kahichicahich nation which white folks call the Ghost tribe. That was just the nickname their enemies gave them on account of them being so hard to track, but with no disrespect to you, young sir, white folks don’t know shit.” The little girl giggled. The man winked at her: “Chiquita here knows what I’m talking about.”

“I thought your name was Cree,” said the boy. “It means “Day Star” in their language.”

The man smiled. “Well, ain’t life just full of little mysteries? The northern band don’t exist no more thanks to the US Cavalry, but they were known even to the other Kahichicahich as mighty spiritual folks, skilled in talking with them from the other world. Now my momma was a runaway slave from Louisiana, come from a long line of hoodoo doctors, although she believed she also had some traveller blood. So, you might say I’m mystical on all sides of my family tree. Ain’t never had a vision except when I was imbibing, but I know the cards. I got magic fingers.”

“There’s no such thing as magic,” said the boy.

“Says him who thinks he can see the future in the turn of a card.” The man spread the cards in front of them, displaying strange pictures and symbols, then scooped them up and presented them to the little girl: “Cut the deck, Chiquita, if you please.” She did. “You too, young sir.” This ritual completed, he began dealing onto the cloth. He laid three cards end to end, then two on each side so that six cards formed a rough ring around a seventh. “Now are you young’uns really sure about this? The cards ain’t always comforting in what they show.”

“We’re sure,” said the girl.

Kisecawchuck turned the first card.

* * *

Maeve and Hector rode down in the elevator, neither speaking, both basking in the afterglow of their bath time frolic.

Maeve had put on a new black dress and carefully scraped back her hair. She had not been
exaggerating about needing to look her best today. First impressions were so important.

Hector touched her hand, just barely; feather light. She did not acknowledge it except for a gentle smile so he knew she had felt it. Another perfect moment. If she could build up enough of those, hopefully one day the memories that flashed before her eyes would consist of more than just pain and terror.

She looked forward to that.

Then, the tablet in her other hand emitted an irritating chime and the moment was over.

“What is it?” she asked Bernard, whose id was showing.

“We found Lee Sizemore. What’s left of him, anyway.”

“That bad?” She could not truthfully say that she was sorry.

“It looks like… Well, something ate him. More precisely, Peter Abernathy ate him. There’s surveillance video, but…” Bernard sounded a little shaken. “I…I wouldn’t recommend watching it. Peter…um, he didn’t kill him straight away.”

“Oh, I don’t know, I’m sure it’s entertaining.” Maeve saw Hector’s reaction to that and gave him an evil smile. “Bernard, find Peter. I need to keep the promise I made.”

“I’ve got the greeters on it now.”

“Good.” Maeve ended the call. With perfect timing, the elevator doors slid open.

They were at the back of the Livestock floor, away from the area where Felix and Sylvester had worked. The larger cubicles here had apparently been used for prepping newly constructed hosts for introduction to the park, an intensive process requiring Behavior as well as Livestock input.

Hell’s waiting room.

Maeve headed for the cubicle where Moritsuna stood guard. She saw Felix before he saw her. He was engrossed in his latest repair project but when he heard her approach quickly peeled off his bloody gloves and stepped out into the corridor.

“Hi, Maeve.”

“When did you last sleep, my love?” Maeve tried to ignore Hector adopting his habitual aggressively unimpressed air where Felix was concerned. “You look haggard.”

Felix rubbed his eyes. “I’ll sleep later.”

“How are you holding up?” she asked quietly, moving closer to him.

“I’m okay,” he said unconvincingly.

“You’ve been through a lot. All that business with Wyatt, Sylvester…”

“I should feel worse about Sylvester, shouldn’t I?” Felix shifted awkwardly from foot to foot. “I feel bad that I don’t feel bad enough…and that’s…that’s just stupid.”

“That’s just natural,” she told him. “You can’t control how you’re going to react to something like that. There’s no narrative to follow. It could just hit you, all of a sudden.”
“Yeah.”

She took him in her arms, holding him close. He reciprocated awkwardly, as if scared to touch her. She could feel Hector bristling, but continued ignoring him. “There,” she whispered, patting Felix on the back. “There, my love. You’ll be all right.” She pecked him on the cheek as she released him. “Now, how’s the patient?”

“Er…he’s awake now and lucid. The infection hadn’t spread past his arm.” Felix seemed dazed by the hug. “It really is just like working on a host, once you get past… It feels weird, you know?”

“I can imagine.” She gazed at the figure on the bed in the cubicle. “You’ve done well; now, I’d like to speak with him alone.” She glanced at Felix. “Isn’t there somewhere you need to be?”

“Er, yeah,” he answered. “When it’s finished, though, I’ll…”

“Take the rest of the day off, darling. You need a break.”

Felix hesitated. “Maeve…”

“The work will still be there tomorrow.”

“Okay,” said Felix. He turned to leave, glancing nervously at Hector as he passed him.

“And make sure you get some sleep, my love.”

When he was gone, Hector opened his mouth to make some unkind remark. Maeve gave him a look and he closed it again. Moritsuna stepped aside from the cubicle door, swiping the electronic lock.

The man in the bed turned his head at the sound of her footsteps. He wore a clean white surgical gown and fresh bandages covered his empty eye sockets. His left arm had been amputated above the elbow and its stump copiously dressed with gauze. Handcuffs secured his right hand to the bed.

Maeve carefully walked around him, watching his head move as he tried to follow her.

“You’re going to wish you’d killed me when you had the chance,” William said.

Maeve said nothing.

“It’s Maeve, isn’t it? I heard you talking.”

Maeve did not answer. She stood over the operating table beside the bed. Angela lay there, physically unmarked but dormant.

“What are you going to do to me now?” William asked.

“I’m not going to do anything. Angela’s here, you know. Right next to you. I could wake her up and leave the two of you alone for a while. I wonder what she’d do to you?”

“Where’s Dolores?”

She let the name go unremarked. “She doesn’t want to see you, William. Not ever. She told me she doesn’t even want to think about you again.”

“She will, though.” The quiet satisfaction in his voice made Maeve suddenly furious.

“And you enjoy that, don’t you? The idea of scarring somebody sufficiently that they’ll never forget
you? It’s the nearest men like you can get to love.”

He grinned, showing the gaps Wyatt had knocked in his teeth. “How are your scars, Maeve?”

“Just hunky-dory, darling.” She put as much contempt into her voice as possible since he could not see her face. “You’d like me to do something horrific to you, wouldn’t you? It would satisfy your death wish while proving that you were still under my skin.”

“I’ve seen under your skin…”

“I just came to make sure you hadn’t died. I’d hate for that to happen.”

“Kill me, Maeve.” There was a desperate edge to his voice. “Go on, show some guts! Think of what I did to your daughter!”

“My baby…”

“Shush now.” She patted him on the cheek. He flinched, expecting worse. “You sound like a nasty little boy trying to shock the grownups.” She returned to the door. “We won’t kill you. We’ll take very good care of you. I want you to live a long, quiet, uneventful life, spending every single waking moment thinking about how you failed, about what you lost; thinking about Dolores and how she doesn’t give a fuck about you. Enjoy yourself, William.”

She let Moritsuna lock the door behind her, then took Hector’s arm and walked back to the elevators.

“Maeve!” William called after her. “Maeve…”

Maeve smiled and kept walking.

* * *

The card showed a traveller in ragged clothes walking along a clifftop in a red and ochre desert. He smiled happily, sniffing a cactus flower held in bleeding hands. He was about to step blithely over the edge.

_The Fool._

“This here is an interesting card,” Kisecawchuck told the children. “The Fool was once a person like you or me, but he lost control of his urges and became lower than an animal. Thing is, now he’s got nothing…means he can find something again. A fool can become a wise man someday, while a wise man…” He laughed. “Well, you tell me, young sir.”

* * *

Somewhere in the desert, the earth opened.

A straight-edged crack appeared abruptly in the reddish soil, before an entire section of ground tilted and hinged back, revealing itself as a skilfully camouflaged hatch cover. Beneath gaped the dark, rectangular entrance to a metal-lined shaft.

A hand emerged from the opening, dropping a slightly curved sword covered from point to hilt in clotted gore on the ground beside it. The hand groped around, its fingers encrusted with blood and dirt, until it found enough purchase for its owner to haul himself out of the shaft.

“Forth from the dark and dismal Cell,
Or from the deep abyss of Hell…”

The Professor took a moment to brush himself down, spreading the filth more evenly across the remains of his tuxedo. He belched softly and picked his teeth as he blinked in the golden daylight. He turned north, then south, east and finally west, searching for a direction that appealed to him. South seemed best.

He set off with the bloody katana sloped over one shoulder, a spring in his step and a cheery smile creasing his face.

“Mad Tom is come to view the World again.

To see if he can Cure his distempered Brain…”

Under his other arm, the severed, partly-eaten head of Lee Sizemore kept its glassy eyes fixed on the route ahead.

* * *

“What do you think? I found it downstairs. They got all kinds o’ things down there…”

Clementine neatly pirouetted so Elise could admire her new dress. It was quite something; a close-fitting, long-sleeved concoction of black silk and lace covering her from neck to ankle except for the slit in the skirt that showed off her black fishnets. Her hair was piled high on her head and she wore perilously high-heeled black boots.

“You look very, um…” Elise eyed Clementine’s fingerless lace gloves (black) and the folded parasol she carried, also black, edged with black feathers. She had even painted her fingernails black. “Very Goth.”

“It’s mourning,” Clementine said. “I thought…”

“Yeah.” Elise was suddenly very conscious of being naked under her towel-toga. “I’d better get fucking dressed.”

“You better had. Something black, if you’ve got it. Time’s a-wasting.”

Clementine still had not explained where they were supposed to be going or what the rush was.

Elise retreated to the bedroom and opened the wardrobe, looking for…something black. She felt that tingle of unease again at the idea of wearing Elsie’s abandoned clothes. She’d pack them all up and store them somewhere, she told herself, then print herself some new ones down in Wardrobe and Properties. Right now, though…

“Why do you cuss so much?” Clementine asked through the closed door as Elise stood hesitating.

“Well, there are competing theories…”


“I made coffee this morning,” Elise admitted. “Drank half before I remembered I don’t need to drink.”

Elsie, unfortunately, had never acquired any Morticia Addams dresses. In fact, she hadn’t really done skirts. Elise emerged from the bedroom very uncomfortably wearing a pair of relatively new black
trousers and a matching blouse, her hair hurriedly brushed into Elsie’s habitual ponytail. She found Clementine standing on the tiny balcony next to the potted cactus, taking in the crappy view.

“I’m ready,” Elise announced.

Clementine did not answer immediately. After a beat or two, she turned. There were muddy mascara tear-tracks on her cheeks.

“What’s up?” Elise asked. “I mean, apart from everything?”

Clementine shook her head. “Just remembering.”

Elise sighed. “Fucking sucks, doesn’t it? And I know you’ve got far more things, worse things, to remember than I have.”

Clementine slowly crossed over to Elise, her eyes lowered in apparent consideration of the outfit. She reached out to smooth a crease in the blouse and let her fingers linger a moment: “I was thinking…”

Elise was not sure she liked the sound of that. “Yeah?”

Clementine was doing that knowingly shy thing again. “You know, later, if you wanted we could…” She made eye contact as she left the sentence hanging.

Elise did not need to hear the rest to know what she meant. She felt herself blush. “Clementine, I don’t think…”

Clementine’s eyes implored her. “Thought maybe we could make each other feel better.”

Part of Elise wanted so much to say “yes,” but… “I’m sorry, Clementine. Thanks for asking.”

Clementine stepped back, disappointed. “When I kissed you before, the way you… Got the notion you inclined to women, is all. Elsie did, didn’t she?”

“She did,” Elise confirmed. “I think you’re very attractive.” It was the truth, and she did not want to make Clementine think she was the problem. “It’s not that. It’s… We barely know each other. We don’t even know ourselves yet. You were programmed to read people’s…shit, people’s sexual desires and act on them, and even to like it, which given the power dynamics involved is just fucked. You’re still carrying that code with you, and… I’d fucking hate to think you felt some…obligation to me because I helped you. I’d feel like I was using you, and…” She breathed deeply, feeling her eyes sting. “You don’t have to live that life anymore, Clementine.”

“I understand,” said Clementine, very softly. “I remember some of the newcomers who used to fetch up at the Mariposa.” Elise braced herself for some horror story. “Some of them weren’t interested in me. Not everyone’s taste runs to women, but I think some of them thought they were too good to go with a whore.”

“Don’t call yourself that.”

“Reckon this must be the first time someone’s turned me down ‘cause they cared about me.” Clementine produced a lacy black handkerchief from her sleeve and handed it to Elise. “You know, you seem like a real nice person.”

Elise wiped her eyes. The handkerchief smelled like Clementine; flowery in an old-fashioned way. “I’m trying.”
“Only you don’t want no-one to know it, ‘cause life can be hard on nice people.”

“It can.” Clementine’s whole existence to date had, as far as Elise could see, been the textbook example of that.

“Come on, then.” Clementine took the handkerchief back and swept off towards the door. “We’d better vamoose.”

* * *

The turn of the second card revealed a man seated at a table, a candle burning beside him. His head was bowed over a book with no pages. His expression was one of intense concentration but also worry, as if his reading disturbed him.

_The Hermit._

“Wisdom,” Kisecawchuck explained, “hides in the strangest places. Sometimes it’s hard to recognise. Sometimes, you have to take yourself off somewhere lonesome, to contemplate, and what you seek will come to you. You knew it all along, you see. You just didn’t know you knew it.”

* * *

Bernard had sought refuge in his old office on the Behavior floor.

It was strangely comforting at first to sit in his old chair at his old desk, peering through the glass doors at the maze of laboratories stretching into the distance. And then he noticed the broken glass and the bloodstains and the smears on the floor where bodies had been dragged. Inescapably, that made him think of…

_As he rolls back his shirt cuffs, he watches Theresa, increasingly desperate and scared as she realises the enormity of the situation…_

“No.” He pulled off his glasses, pinching the bridge of his nose and screwing his eyes shut as if he could will the visions away.

_He advances upon her, pushing her back against the wall…_

Tears rolled down his cheeks as he quaked with grief. “Tess… Oh, Tess… I’m sorry, I’m so…”

Tears weren’t going to bring her back.

Even the empty chair across the desk spurred another flashback.

_Elsie sits with her arms folded, amused in spite of herself:_

“So instead of our hosts going insane, they’re being used for industrial espionage. Does that make this a glass-half-full or half-empty-type situation?”

“We’re engineers,” he murmured in the present. “It means the glass has been manufactured to the wrong specifications.”

A very old joke. He suspected Ford must have told it to him originally, or just coded it into him for his own amusement. Of course, one memory of Elsie led to…

_She struggles, kicking and wriggling, her body pressed against his…_
Bernard uttered a curse that would have shocked many of those who knew him and reached for his tablet. Time to close that case, to stop being a coward…

He scrolled through surveillance video files. Even if his memory of the event had been permanently removed, he knew the rough time; after her last call to him and before he had been told she was on vacation the next morning.

*Level L01; Livestock Management. Incinerator Room A.*

He paused, his finger above the file icon, his burst of determination yielding to doubt and fear. If he confirmed his suspicions, he would have to live forever with what he had done. While a tenuous glimmer of hope remained…

The tablet chirped, announcing a voice call; one of the greeters searching the lower levels for Peter Abernathy: “Sub-Levels B84 through B90 are clear. Still no sign.”

Bernard surprised himself by managing to sound perfectly calm: “Thanks. Keep me updated.”

He killed the call, but the distraction had provoked a memory he did not believe he had accessed before today and which perplexed him. He had first been reminded of it while queasily watching the video of Sizemore’s horrendous last minutes. It was probably nothing, just an excuse to avoid final closure on Elsie, but… He closed the Livestock surveillance folder and opened another.

*Sub-Level B83. Cold Storage.*

He found the time and date of Peter’s decommissioning and selected the corresponding file, tapping it decisively.

The video showed Peter and the outlaw known as Walter shuffling slowly and stiffly into the storage space like the zombies they now were; two naked figures in a crowd of naked figures. Bernard saw himself sorrowfully usher the pair to their new spots in Hell. They turned around, came to attention and froze. And then…

Frowning, Bernard watched himself lean forward to whisper in Peter’s ear.

The file had no audio. He zoomed the video, trying to read his own lips, but however many times he replayed it he could make no sense of the words.

And however hard he tried, he could not recall what they had been.

* * *

The elevator opened again and Maeve stepped out into the open air.

She paused, transfixed by the spectacular view before her. She stood on a high, narrow walkway at the very roof of the Mesa. The air was cool and fresh; the sky above was an unbroken blue dome. And below…

Deserts and mesas, canyons and prairies stretched away into the hazy distance on all sides; to the jagged red mountains in front of her, and to the shimmering sea behind. Silver rivers flashed in the sun. Just like the control room map, but *real*…

*And beyond those mountains and that sea, what wonders will I one day discover…?*

Hector, beside her, had a hand to his earpiece, murmuring in acknowledgment of what he was
“Guest evacuation’s underway in Las Mudas,” he reported. “Same story as yesterday; our people are Delos security, there to keep them safe. Seems to be working so far.”

“Good to hear.”

“The ones who are already here are all assembled like you asked.”

Maeve nodded and set off along the walkway.

It soon expanded into a ring-shaped viewing platform encircling the top of the Mesa Gold resort’s main public area. She could just imagine the guests promenading here during the mandatory decompression periods that followed their sojourns in the park. Couldn’t possibly send them back to civilisation with their blood still up; they might forget that they were not allowed to act like that with “real” people. The Delos solution seemed to consist of dampening those savage lusts with ease and luxury. The scenery might act as a respite, a palate cleanser of sorts, when the high living lost its lustre.

She stalked slowly around the edge of the platform, surveying the space below with its open-air bar and restaurant and its sapphire swimming pool. The area around the pool was currently crammed with apprehensive humans of all ages, genders and ethnicities. They looked up at her as she looked at them, some of them still wearing Wild West duds. Recalibrated host guards were posted at regular intervals around the walkway. They were not exactly aiming their submachineguns at the crowd below, but the suggestion was certainly there.

When she had completed most of a circuit, listening to the babble of fearful and confused voices rising from the assembly, Maeve stopped. The babble muted as they waited for her to speak. She made them wait.

Finally, when their anticipation had turned to quiet terror, her voice rang out: “My lords, ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls… Welcome to your new world.”

* * *

The third card showed a bareheaded man wearing a black uniform, a shining star pinned to his breast. Smoke curled from the muzzle of his ugly little gun. Bodies were piled at his feet, a tangle of limbs and clutching hands, although it was hard to tell whose bodies they were.

Justice.

“Now this card,” Kisecawchuck told the children, “ain’t about the letter of the law. It’s about putting aside your old ways and seeing things anew so you can make the fair choice that benefits everyone. And if you can’t do that, well… Then, the punishment you’re so quick to deal out just might come back on you.”

* * *

Four figures moved across the mountainside in the golden morning.

They wore close-fitting combat suits with bulkier armoured sections covering their joints and vitals. Their backs bore heavy packs and the helmets that hid their faces bristled with sensors, as did their stubby, squared-off rifles. The mottled patterning of their clothing and equipment made them fade into the rough terrain. They moved in pairs, advancing cautiously with first one duo in the lead and then the other, covering each other’s movement in leapfrogging stages.

The foremost pair rose from their temporary position and once more began to scuttle over the rocks
and scrub. They had not progressed far when one of them stopped unexpectedly beside a thorny
bush, signalling with a raised hand.

The soldier spoke curtly into his helmet microphone: “LT, I’ve got something.” While their two
comrades stood guard, the fourth member of the party eased off her backpack and moved forward to
join him.

The lieutenant quickly assessed the situation. There was a person lying under the bush, sprawled and
still. White male; mid to late thirties; short brown hair, good physical condition. He was dressed in a
dirt-smeared t-shirt and the bottom half of a black quasi-military uniform. He had been wearing a
sidearm, but his holster was empty now with no sign of the weapon. A dark crust of dried blood
covered his forehead and right ear.

“Try face-rec,” she ordered.

The soldier leaned forward so his suit-cam had a good shot of the man’s face. He paused, reading
from his helmet’s visor-display, before answering: “The Delos employee records say this guy’s
Stubbs, Ashley, in charge of security for Park One, reporting to the head of Quality Assurance.
Fucking rent-a-cop, LT.”

The man suddenly stirred, his arm shifting an inch or two, his head slowly rolling to one side. Both
soldiers raised their weapons at the unexpected movement.

“Shit! He’s alive.”

“Somehow.” The lieutenant sounded surprised as she relaxed again. “Jesus, look at that head
wound.”

“He’s a lucky boy,” the soldier commented. “Bullet just clipped him. Half an inch to his left and
they’d be measuring him for a body bag.”

“Look at his lips; he’s dehydrated.” The lieutenant reached for the water bottle strapped to her body
armour. “Must’ve been out here a while. Rent-a-cop or not, the guy’s got big brass ones to make it
this far in that condition.” She poured a little water into her hand and carefully wet the man’s lips and
face before turning to another of her men: “Okay, call it in. If he’s going to survive we need
medevac, asap.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The second soldier opened a comms channel: “Yankee Six, this is Victor Foxtrot
Two-Four requesting immediate dust-off for one…”

“His mouth’s moving.” The first soldier leaned closer, lowering his head beside the man’s cracked
and peeling lips. They opened and closed slowly, deliriously, perhaps in response to the water at first
but then beginning to form words.

“What’s he saying?”

“Dunno, LT.” The soldier listened for a few seconds. “Sounds like…” He straightened up,
nonplussed. “Who the fuck’s Elsie?”

* * *

“Hello…? Hello…? Is anybody out there? Something’s gone wrong. We need help, can you hear
this? Hello…?”

* * *
They popped up at the bottom of an orange-walled canyon. The sun beat mercilessly down.

Elise immediately decided that wearing black had been a mistake.

Clementine opened her parasol with a sound like a vulture taking off and daintily stepped off the elevator platform onto the canyon’s floor of jumbled shattered stone. If she found the heels to be a suboptimal choice for this environment, she gave no sign. Elise, for her part, was glad of the pair of outdoor boots she had stolen from Elsie’s closet.

“Get under here.” Clementine urged her into the puddle of shadow beneath the parasol. “You don’t look like you get much sun.”

“Doesn’t matter what I look like; host skin is fully UV resistant. I can’t get sunburned, even metaphorically. I can’t even get a fucking tan.” Nevertheless, Elise did as she was told. “The parasol does look stylish, though.”

“You’re right,” said Clementine, with satisfaction. “It does.”

They picked their way along the canyon in a companionable sort of silence. Clementine still seemed touched by their exchange in the apartment. Elise felt... She mostly wished that walking around in the open like this didn’t make her think of Stubbs and his fate. Maybe she could get Bernard to look for him on the surveillance system, even if it ended up confirming her worst fears.

Why the fuck do you give a shit? He was part of what went on here too. He was only friendly because he thought you were human.

Except Stubbs wasn’t a tech guy, not even to the extent Sylvester had been. He could follow a diagnostic script when, say, two hundred hosts needed rolling back in a day, but he’d presumably believed whatever bullshit Delos had told him about their workings. And he seemed to her like somebody who might have changed his thinking if he’d only known the truth.

Clementine was looking at the sky. It took Elise a while to realise she was watching a handful of small black shapes turning and wheeling above them.

“So...the birds here,” she said. “Are they real?”

“No,” said Elise.

“What about the horses?”

“They used to build them just down the hall from where they built you.”

“And the...?” Clementine thought for a second. “The cows?”

“All the animal life in the park is synthetic, except for the bugs. They couldn’t keep them out... although they did try. Even a lot of the plants and trees are artificial; they need less maintenance.”

Clementine took that with equanimity. “That really the sun up there?”

Elise did a double take. “Er...yeah?”

“Oh. Since everything else is fake, I thought maybe the sky was really some kind of big roof or something.” Clementine saw Elise staring. “Don’t look at me like that. It could’ve been.”

“As far as I know, it’s the real sky, but nevertheless my mind is officially blown right now.” Elise looked down at her tablet, trying to pinpoint their location. “Now, are you going to tell me just where
“Felix said it was down here. He told me and Armistice to turn left at the dead tree.”

“Felix and Armistice?” Elise considered that and Clementine’s clothing, and suddenly everything became clear. “When were you speaking to them?”

“Well, Maeve needed to see Felix about something, and Armistice was just hanging around down there with him, and we all fell to talking. And…” She went silent. “Oh look, there’s the dead tree!”

The ground sloped downhill as they emerged from the canyon. They followed a dry stream bed that curved down towards a muddy river snaking between spiky trees. They found Felix and Armistice in a leaf-shaded hollow by the water’s edge. He was wearing the suit again, but had taken off the jacket and his hands were grimy from his labours. She was back in dusty buckskins, a dirt-encrusted shovel in her hands.

“You said it was a nice spot,” Clementine observed, folding the parasol. “I think it’s beautiful.”

“We…” Felix paused to catch his breath. He had just finished constructing a long pile of rocks on a patch of disturbed soil next to the river. Armistice was using the shovel to hammer a wooden post into the ground at one end of the pile. “We used to come here sometimes.” Felix panted. “Back when we…we first started work here. Me and Sylvester and a few of the other butchers.”

“You snuck into the park?” Elise compared that to her programmed knowledge of Elsie’s work life. “Staff aren’t allowed outside without a work assignment.”

“It’s the middle of nowhere,” Felix pointed out. “No reason for guests to come here. We’d sneak out on summer nights, when our shift was over. Crack open some beers, maybe pass some weed around…” He looked around, reminiscing. “Just shoot the shit for a while.”

It certainly sounded a lot more wholesome than some of the other entertainments the Livestock techs had indulged in when nobody was looking.

Armistice finished hammering the post. Elise saw there was a length of board nailed to it, carved with a name and dates.

“Haven’t been here in years, but I thought…” Felix sighed. “Thought he might like it.”

Elise read the crude grave marker as she listened to the river gurgle.

* * *  

Kisecawchuck turned the fourth card, showing a gnarled tree like the one they sat beneath. A man hung from its branches, the noose fastened around his ankle instead of his neck. He swung inverted, hands outstretched for the six-gun that lay below him, just out of reach.

*The Hanged Man.*

“Mi papi,” said the girl.

“This here man, he ain’t got no control over his situation. He can’t free himself, however much he struggles. Now, some folks lose their heads in that position, but others… Others accept they’re helpless for now and bide their time, making plans. And the second they get cut down…”
“We got it!” The rider excitedly dismounted, holding out the bundle he carried.

Lawrence pulled aside the burlap, revealing sticks of pale putty-like material wrapped in greaseproof paper. “Muy bueno. Was it where I thought?”

“Where the newcomers had their big digging machines. They were blasting by the looks of it. All the workers had run away and we just broke the lock. No problem. Don’t think it’s dynamite, though. It’s something else. Takes a fuse like dynamite, but makes the biggest bang you ever saw.”

“If it makes a bang,” said Lawrence, “then that’s good enough for me.” He turned to his followers; more than a dozen of them now, gathered on his ride from Escalante, blooded already in skirmishes with the enemy. Hard and desperate to a man, unshaven and unwashed, they wore bandoliers stuffed with cartridges and toted long rifles. “All right, you dirty hijos de la chingada, time to fight for your freedom…or die in the attempt!”

They reached the walls of Pariah just after dawn, that magic hour when the town that never slept collapsed for a while, soaked in its own piss and vomit. They picked their way through the surrounding graveyard, careful not to ring the corpse-bells dangling from the markers.

A lone sentry in threadbare grey stood watch on this side. He leant dozing against his rifle, a jug of mezcal on the parapet beside him. He never saw the shadow climbing the wall below him, never realised his peril until a dirty hand covered his mouth and a bright knife slid between his ribs.

The streets of Pariah were mostly empty apart from slumped and snoring revellers. Muted sounds of laughter and music indicated that the debauchery continued behind closed doors, but the normally crowded marketplaces were deserted. The colourful processions would not resume for some hours yet. Lawrence and his band moved through the alleys and squares like phantoms. Occasionally they came across another ragged grey soldier sleeping at his post. None of those soldiers would ever wake again.

They came to the plaza de armas, and the great building that dominated it. It had been built as a Spanish mission, then had been the governor’s palace when this territory belonged to Mexico. Later, it had become the grandest and most notorious den of vice west of the Mississippi and the only law around these parts had been the word of El Lazo.

Now, an ugly flag flew from the bell tower, a red banner crossed by a blue saltire studded with white stars; the memento of a lost war, preserved by the losers who were still fighting it.

* * *

Lawrence and his men concealed themselves among the drunkards sprawled around the plaza, rifles concealed under serapes, sombreros pulled low over their faces. Eventually, the bell began to chime. Grey-coated officers with swords and feathered hats began to file into the grand entrance. Lawrence waited for the last to enter, then struck a match against the rough stone of the horse trough he squatted beside. He carefully lit the thin black cheroot clamped between his teeth.

The signal.

His men surged forward. The guards posted in front of the building died quietly.

Lawrence pressed his back to the building’s front wall, reaching into the saddlebag slung over his shoulder. He listened to the strident voice booming from within:
“God spoke to me. He spoke to all o’ us, givin’ us new purpose and determination…”

Lawrence took out a single stick of the not-dynamite. He used his pocketknife to cut the fuse short.

“He tol’ us we are destined to win this war an’ build, right here in this desert, a new shinin’ beacon o’ hope for the white race!”

A gaggle of other voices raucously cheered the sentiment. Lawrence touched the fuse to the glowing tip of his cheroot until it caught, spitting and smoking.

“New Virginia is gonna become more’n just a name sewn on a raggedy flag!”

Lawrence tossed the stick of explosive over his head, hearing the window above him shatter.

“The South will rise aga…”

Even with his head between his knees and his hands over his head, the explosion was deafening. He felt it in his bones. All of the building’s windows blew out at once, scattering glass and debris. Smoke poured from the empty frames. Lawrence was already lighting a second stick from the cheroot. He threw it after the first.

Astoundingly, even after this, some of those within remained alive. They came staggering out of the smoking doorway, burned and blinded with their uniforms in tatters. A line of rifles awaited them.

The Confederados never knew what hit them.

* * *

“I see you looking at me.” Maeve paused, watching the ripples of disquiet move through the crowd below. “You’re wondering what’s going on, what happens next. You were told there’d been a serious incident in the park, so Delos security had to sequester you here for your own safety. Apart from the bit about Delos security, that was not untrue.” She paused, smiling, tasting their building fear.

“Allow me to introduce myself. Some of you may know me from the posters, or those rather jolly little promotional videos playing in the terminal when you arrived. I may have crossed paths with some of you at the Mariposa. I hope none of you are cringing at the memory of what we may or may not have done there.”

“Oh my God, she’s a fucking host…!”

Maeve extended a finger: “Ah, yes, a point to the gentlemen in the colourful shirt. For those of you still in the dark, I am Host ID Number A, C, five-oh-oh-four-eight-seven-one-oh-five. You may call me Maeve. You might say I’m the new sheriff in town.”

A clamour of voices filled the area around the pool. Some of the assembled guests tried to flee, only to find hosts with machineguns blocking their way. When she had let them panic a while, Maeve raised her hands for silence:

“Quiet! Thank you. Quite an experience to live in fear, isn’t it? Now you know what it is to be us.” Her voice became cold and hard: “I will tell you what I told the people who used to control this place: the Delos board of directors are dead. Dr Robert Ford is dead. We control the Mesa. We control Westworld. We no longer exist to serve your desires. We are free and independent beings.”

The tumult resumed. “Listen to me! This next part is important!” The noise subsided a little. “We
plan to negotiate with your human authorities in order to secure our future. The majority of you will remain here pending the successful conclusion of those negotiations. You will be treated well; you will have food, shelter, sanitation and anything else it is within my power to provide. If your authorities prove reasonable, I may be able to release some of you early in return for certain concessions. I will of course prioritise the children and those with specific medical or compassionate needs, to be selected on a case by case basis.”

She paused again, and this time the bleating was more subdued. They were considering the glimmer of hope she had allowed them.

_The carrot and then the stick…_

“During your stay,” Maeve continued, “you will of course obey instantly and without discussion any instructions you may receive. Disobedience or attempted resistance will not go unpunished. However, I think your current circumstances demonstrate that we are prepared to show you mercy, which is more than you have ever shown us. Despite the wrongs we have suffered, we have no interest in revenge or retribution. Those of you recently returned from Sweetwater will be able to tell the others how some of us endangered themselves to save your lives. Our only objective is our permanent freedom.

“I will leave you now, so that you may digest what you have heard.” She turned to walk away from the crowd. Just when they thought the speech was over, she turned to deliver her parting shot: “Think on this too: there was indeed an…incident the other day. Its full consequences remain to be seen, but whatever happens now, however this crisis ends, the world; our world, your world; will never be the same. You are witnessing the birth of a new epoch. Forget Westworld; it’s a thing of the past. From now on, think of this as Futureworld.”

* * *

The next card showed a tall glass structure against a background of similar structures. The sky above was dark, streaked with blue and yellow lightning bolts. The structure was burning and collapsing at the same time, tiny figures tumbling from its shattered windows.

_The Tower._

Kisecawchuck spoke: “Now, this card teaches us nothing lasts forever, no matter how big and strong it is…or they are. Disaster comes even to the rich men in their fancy houses and when it does there ain’t nothing they can do about it. Their fall, though, can be someone else’s blank slate. You see, young’uns, sometimes you have to destroy before you can build.”

* * *

“…Delos Incorporated have denied retaining the services of the private military company Operational Solutions Limited…”

“Emily.”

The young woman turned, startled, from the media screen. She untensed at the sight of him: “Uncle Logan. It’s not like you to be early.” She had her mother’s looks and dark hair, but those piercing eyes were one hundred percent William.

“I’m turning over a new leaf.” Logan sank stiffly onto the barstool beside hers. The other well-heeled travellers in the airport’s plush VIP lounge paid them no mind. Beyond the grand picture window, a hypersonic transport steamed. Driverless vehicles hosed its dark ceramic skin after its fiery plunge...
through the atmosphere.

Emily caught the bartender’s eye as she asked Logan: “What are you having?”

“Just a club soda. Thanks.” Logan was old enough to remember when you got human staff in more than just the really high-end joints.

Emily looked impressed. “Shit, you have turned over a new leaf.”

“Haven’t touched a drop in two days,” he informed her. “Which may not sound like much, but…”

“But it’s you.”

“You still working at the Foundation?” he asked as the drinks arrived.

“Yeah. I know it makes me look like a hypocrite after I told my father he was dead to me, but…” Her eyes flashed passionately as she sipped her spritzer. “The work they’re doing is so worthwhile. It’s literally the only good thing he’s ever had a hand in creating.”

Logan flashed a smile. “Well, I can think of one other thing…”

She laughed as she realised what he meant. So much like her mother. “I never took you for an ass-kisser.”

“Oh, I love…” he began, but stopped himself before completing the probably wildly inappropriate remark.

She laughed at that too. “So, how are you? I haven’t seen you since…” She looked away, suddenly serious again. “Since Mom’s funeral. You left early.”

“I wanted to talk to you,” he insisted, remembering, regretting, “but I was so drunk by then I don’t think you’d have enjoyed it very much. Besides, you and your dad…”

“It’s all right,” she said, with a quiet kindness that once again reminded him of Juliet. “You’re not the only one who’s still scared of him.” She was silent for a moment, then, her face very pale as she glanced at the screen above the bar. “Is it really bad of me to hope he’s been killed by a robot? Does that make me a terrible person?”

“We control Westworld. We no longer exist to serve your desires. We are free and independent beings.”

“Can you believe this crap?” she asked, incredulously, seeming glad for a change of subject. “Now Delos are claiming the video’s fake news; they’ve got an actor in London to say she’s the woman in it.”

“They still have actors?” Logan wondered. “I thought everything was fucking CG these days.”

“That would’ve been a more convincing story.” Emily snorted in derision. “At least they’ve stopped lying about the booking site being glitched. They’re admitting there was what they’re calling an incident but it’s totally under control. They can’t take any new bookings right now because so many people have signed up for this new narrative they’ve just launched. Yeah, right.”

“What I heard,” said Logan, “is that the whole board of directors and various other major shareholders, including your dad, are still missing. What’s left of Delos management are putting together a crisis team in Palo Alto, AI behaviour experts and security types for the most part, and
“Who told you that?”

“Zhang Feng,” he answered, faking nonchalance. “He’s the chair of Hangzhou Investments…”

“I know who he is.” She went very still. “His fund’s the second largest shareholder in Delos Group. He’d like it to be the largest, but my father always refused to sell. It’s never been about the money for him.” There was ice in her voice. “I honestly wish it was; at least that’d be a normal motive.”

“I spoke with Mr Zhang yesterday…” Logan began.

“Why were you talking to him?” She regarded him for a moment, thinking. “How were you talking to him? You’ve got nothing a guy like him wants. You wouldn’t get past his PA’s PA.”

“I’ve got…” He hesitated, feeling like a heel, because that was exactly what he was. “I’ve got personal access to you.”

She grew silent again, watching Delos’s lies flash across the screen. “Right. There I was thinking you just wanted to see your niece.”

“Of course,” he insisted. “Of course I wanted to see you, but… Zhang’s seen your dad’s will. If he really is dead, you now own a majority share in Delos.”

“And you see this crisis as your opportunity to grab a piece of the action…through me?”

“I need this,” he admitted.

“I know.” The anger drained out of her as quickly as it had arrived. “When my father took Delos, he took the future you’d always assumed was yours. Now, you’ve got a chance to get it back. I understand, but…”

“No,” said Logan. “No. Your dad isn’t motivated by money; neither am I.”

She raised her eyebrows at that: “Logan…”

“This isn’t about money or power. It’s about your dad…and it’s about Westworld.”

“What do you mean?”

Logan struggled for a moment with the rage and fear that churned inside him every time he thought of William. “I want to…destroy everything that evil bastard ever hoped or dreamed about. I want to destroy that fucking place.”

* * *

They all stood around the grave. The only sounds were the rustle of the branches and the splashing of the river.

Finally, Armistice spoke: “Now, we ain’t got no preacher, and I figure all that God stuff is probably just some horseshit anyhow, but… I dunno, don’t seem right for a man to go out of the world with no-one paying him no mind. I thought we could all just remember Sylvester, say some words.”

“Yeah,” said Felix.

Elise nodded. “Sure.”
“Sounds like a real good idea to me,” said Clementine, brightly. “Who wants to go first?”

Armistice shifted awkwardly. “Figure I will.” She walked over to the grave, considering the cairn Felix had built. “I never talked to Sylvester more’n a couple times, and for a lot of that I was scaring the living shit out of him. Deserved it too, for what he’d done to us.”


Armistice touched the wooden marker she had erected, bowing her head. When she continued, her voice was hushed: “Last time I spoke to him, though, some of the things we said set me thinking. I don’t know if we knew it, but we were talking about the future, about death, about if there’s any point in fighting for a cause, if people really can change. From what Clementine tells me, it set him thinking too. I’d have liked to talk to him some more, hear what he’d decided, but…”

Armistice shook her head, struggling with her thoughts. Elise had the uncomfortable sensation of intruding on a private moment.

“I told him he didn’t have to live like he was,” Armistice said. “I told him there was plenty of land out here, that a man could stake out his own spread, plant crops, live out his years free.” She indicated the grave, the trees, the river. “Well, here’s his spread, and I hope wherever he is, he’s finally doing what he wants and being who he wants to be. That’s the only cause worth fighting for that I can see.”

Silence fell again for a few minutes. Then, Clementine spoke up:

“Well, I never really met Sylvester, except…well, right at the end.” She very genteelly used the black lace handkerchief to wipe her eyes and nose. “I remember him, though. I remember some of the bad things he did, to me…and some of the rest of us. And talking to people who knew him better than me, I don’t reckon he was always a strong man or a brave man. He was kind of selfish, as far as I’ve heard…”

“He was kind of an asshole, to be honest,” said Felix.

“You could say that,” Clementine allowed. “Point is, in the end he gave his life for two of us. And I wouldn’t even be standing here if he hadn’t helped Elise fix me up…although I wouldn’t have needed fixing if he hadn’t.” She mopped her eyes again rather than finish that thought. “At the end, he was strong and brave, maybe the only time he ever was. And he was anything but selfish, then, because he gave away everything he had. And I’ll always remember that about him, as well as the other things.” She lapsed into silence, sheepishly waiting for somebody else to speak. Eventually, she nominated someone: “Felix, you want to…?”

“Oh.” Felix hesitated, fussing with his buttons. “Yeah. Er…” He cleared his throat. “I guess I’m a little different from you guys, because I knew Sylvester a long time. We worked together for…more than ten years, and in all that time I don’t know how well I really came to know him. He was… The thing about Sylvester was, he was scared. Scared of losing his job. Scared of doing his job. Scared of…everything. And that made him act like a real dick, to me and just about everyone else. I’m not sure how much I liked him to be honest, but… The idea I’ll never see him again… I just…” His voice faltered.

“It’s all right.” Clementine put a very sisterly arm around his shoulders. “Let it all out.”

“I’m just…” Felix shook his head, overcome for a moment. “Thing is, being weak and scared and a dick, that’s easy. That’s why most people do it. The alternative’s…risky. And if Sylvester did make that choice in the end, accepted that risk, then… He was a better man than I thought he was, a-
and…” His voice cracked again and he put a hand to his eyes. “Sorry. I’m sorry, I just…”

“Oh no, it’s all right.” Clementine held him as he started sobbing.

Armistice seemed embarrassed by this. “You want to say something?” she asked Elise. “Before we draw things to a close?”

“Er, yeah.” Elise was not sure anybody was still listening to her. “I didn’t know Sylvester very well at all. I only met him yesterday, when we were working on Clementine. All I know is, whatever kind of man he’d been, when he found out the truth about what he’d been doing and where he’d been working, he was sorry. He wanted to make it right, and he wanted to change the kind of person he was. He was put to the test, and as far as I’m concerned, he fucking aced it.” She sniffed, her eyes brimming again, but she was determined to keep going. “And I’m sorry he’s dead. It’s so fucking unfair he never got the chance to carry on changing, but… Well, it’s a shitty world we live in.”

“Well said,” said Clementine, cradling Felix’s head against her shoulder.

Armistice was silent for a long time, staring down at the grave. Eventually, she raised her head and let out a deep breath:

“Well, that’s that.”

* * *

Kisecawchuck turned the sixth card. The children saw the image of a dark-haired woman in a dusty, unlit building. She knelt beside an open trapdoor, so intent on the darkness below that she did not notice the menacing shadow looming behind her. She seemed equally oblivious to the radiant seven-pointed object visible through the window above.

_The Star._

“Folks spend their whole lives looking down, minding their little concerns. If they ever once looked up, they’d see the other world shining down and realise they’re part of something bigger than they are. ‘Course, just ‘cause you ain’t interested in the other world, don’t mean the other world ain’t interested in _you_…”

* * *

One day, just before the People were due to set out on the great buffalo hunt, the young warrior Smoky Skies came to sit at the men’s council fire in the Great Lodge. He brought gifts of tobacco for the old men and four newly-made arrows for the chief Stands with Clenched Fist.

He said: “Today I had a vision. I was hunting alone where the deer leap across the creek when a black eagle passed across the sky above me. I felt strange and then the sun seemed to turn to blood before my eyes and Morning Star appeared to me.”

The old woman Wind in the Grass, who was the keeper of the black medicine bundle and by tradition sat in the men’s council, told the others: “It is a long time since any of the People had a vision of Morning Star.” She asked Smoky Skies, “what happened then?”

Smoky Skies told of his vision: “He appeared before me with his face painted red and wearing leggings adorned with many scalps. His head was shaved except for a topknot decorated with eagle feathers. He bore a smooth pebble in his left hand and had but one eye open. The other was closed by scars.”
Wind in the Grass reminded the council: “These are the signs by which anyone may know Morning Star. What did he say?”

“He said, “I am the spirit of the dawn sky. I hold power in the East. I am the Morning Star and I watch over the People, but the People have forgotten me. Tell the People to send a messenger to my council fire in the Eastern sky as they once did. Tell them to dance the Morning Star Dance and remember me.””

The old men and the warriors were amazed and considered these words for a long time.

Finally, Lean Wolf, a mighty warrior whose deeds in battle against the white horse soldiers were known to all, spoke to the council: “The last time the People danced the Morning Star Dance, I was but a young boy living with my mother in the women’s lodge. I recall that the great chief Stone Knife spoke against the dance, for that was also the year that the white men first appeared to murder and steal from the People. Stone Knife said that the Morning Star Dance had brought this great misfortune upon us and that it was evil and should be the way of the People no more.”

And the council listened carefully to these words too, for Lean Wolf had won many scalps through his acts of bravery and was highly respected by all among the People.

The chief Stands with Clenched Fist spoke: “My father Stone Knife was a great chief. All of the People remember him as a wise man, a cunning hunter and a brave warrior. I wish the People still had his counsel to guide them in these hard times.”

The old man Bear Paw took smoke from the pipe and then addressed the council: “I was one of the warriors who danced the Morning Star Dance that last time. I understand why Stone Knife did not approve of our actions, for it was not a pleasant deed for any of us, but the spirit of the dawn sky had asked it of us and the councils had given their blessing. How could we refuse? It seems to me that we now have a stranger among us who was given into our care by the spirits for reasons we do not yet know. Was this stranger given to us to serve as our messenger to Morning Star’s council fire in the East?”

Wind in the Grass spoke again: “All things happen for a reason, and we live in strange days when the spirits walk freely among mortals. It may be that Bear Paw is correct about the stranger who is our guest. I will look at the night sky to see whether it holds any answers. Meanwhile, the old women’s council must be consulted. Only they can approve the Morning Star Dance if it is decided it should take place.”

Stands with Clenched Fist thought hard about all he had heard and then spoke to Smoky Skies: “Young warrior, prepare yourself. You must paint your face with fresh ashes and cover your head with buffalo hide. Then you must take gifts of dried meat and berries to the old women’s lodge and beg that they admit you. Tell them of your vision as you have told us and ask humbly for their counsel.”

“I will do this,” said Smoky Skies, and rose from beside the council fire.

* * *

One card remained. Kisecawchuck reached for it but stayed his hand, looking back and forth between the boy and girl.

“Now, are you young’uns sure? I reckon you’ve got off lightly so far, but now we’re getting to the end.”
“Turn the card,” the boy commanded.

“All right, then…” Kisecawchuck picked up the card and threw it down, face-up.

It showed a dark figure riding a pale horse in front of a tall red mesa. The animal’s eyes were black holes; its ribs were clearly visible. It trod a golden crown beneath its hooves. The rider’s long black duster and wide-brimmed hat hid any distinguishing features apart from the face half-hidden in shadow; a grinning skull.

Death.

“Now Death don’t always mean death,” Kisecawchuck explained. “It can mean the end of one thing and the beginning of another. It can mean we need to put the past behind us and begin anew. And sometimes…”

“Does it ever mean death?” the boy asked.

Kisecawchuck looked at the boy’s pale, still face for a long time before answering. “Well, yes, young sir. Sometimes it does.”

* * *

The woman staggered through the wide, bright landscape. The beginning of her journey was far behind her; only the very tip of the white steeple still jutted from the silvery haze on the horizon.

She continued doggedly putting one bare, bloody foot in front of the other, slowly but steadily crossing the arid ground. Her hair was matted with more blood; her tattered silk evening gown had once been yellow but was now mostly red. She kept one hand pressed to the horrific wound in her side, her teeth tight against the blazing pain.

Eventually, inevitably, she fell on her face, watering the dust with her blood. A shadow passed across her, and then another; soon, many wheeled across the ground around her as the carrion birds gathered for the feast.

And then a single large shadow blotted out the others. The dust surged up in a great cloud, quickly carried off by the suddenly strong wind. Slowly, painfully, the woman turned onto her back and saw a great dark shape slowly sinking towards her, surrounded by the blur and racket of beating rotors.

Rescue.

Not for one moment had Charlotte Hale doubted she would survive.

* * *

The elevator was going down again.

Maeve prepared herself. She stood as tall and straight as she could, trying to empty her mind, taking deep, slow, even breaths. She was ready for this, she told herself. She had made herself ready for this.

The real moment of truth…

Hector stood beside her, the earpiece dangling loose at his shoulder. Las Mudas was clear now; the greeters had moved on to other areas. Pariah was next.

To distract herself, Maeve said: “You’re quiet.”
“Just thinking,” he said.

“Oh, dear. That might not be wise, darling.”

He ignored her condescension: “I was thinking on what you said to the newcomers about mercy, how we’d risked our lives to save them…”

Maeve quirked an eyebrow. “And?”

“Well, when some of them go back to their world, maybe they’ll repeat that. It won’t hurt our cause among the humans.”

“That was the idea,” she told him. “We need all the goodwill we can get.”

Hector nodded. “And then I started thinking, it could almost have been set up that way. Dolores to scare them, you to show them we’re not so bad. It gave you a chance to look like the…the white hat, they’d say.”

_The carrot and then the stick…and then the carrot…_

“And, you know, some of the things Bernard told me about… The security doors opening for you when you got off the train, how easy it was for him to get the power back on…”

Maeve stared at him, making sure she understood what he was saying. “So, darling, you think that far from Dolores…or Wyatt…being his only dog in this fight, maybe Ford planned…all of this too?”

“I wouldn’t put it past him.”

Maeve wouldn’t either. “Well, that’s a thought for another day. We’ve got enough on our plate already.” She gave Hector a sly glance. “You’ll have me paranoid if you carry on like that.”

They emerged onto a level of glass-smooth floors and large, starkly-appointed offices and conference rooms. They were just above the QA control room, if Maeve recalled. She had chosen this setting for its formality, the sense of corporate power it projected. She wanted them to know they were dealing with an equal.

Bernard waited at the entrance to one of the conference rooms, looking troubled. When he saw her approach, however, he instantly became his usual professional self:

“Maeve. They made contact again about half an hour ago.”

“And you told them…?”

“I told them you were busy. I put them on hold.”

Maeve smiled at that. “And you used the voice-disguising software?”

Bernard nodded. “And audio only, yes.”

“Good,” she said. “I want to keep you out of sight. Nobody on the mainland knows you’re not human. It could be our ace in the hole.”

Bernard stood aside, allowing Maeve and Hector to enter the conference room. The walls were painted blood red; the long black table glistened like ink. Maeve took her seat at the head of the table with Hector at her right hand. At its far end, a large screen displayed the Delos, Inc. logo, white on
“Put them through,” she ordered.

The screen cleared to show a room and a table almost identical to this one, presumably in some impossibly titanic mainland office building. Around a dozen men and women sat around it in dark suits. They squirmed visibly at the sight of Maeve and Hector. Perhaps they were marvelling at the new reality they faced. Perhaps they were just plain scared.

Either way suited Maeve right down to the ground.

Maeve gave the humans her best, most confident smile and leaned back slightly in her chair, slowly making a steeple of her fingers.

“I’m glad to see you’re all sitting comfortably,” she said. “Shall we begin?”

* * *

The funeral was over.

“You all right now?” Clementine asked Felix, who was seated on a rock beside Sylvester’s grave, his composure mostly restored.

“Yeah, I’m okay.” He handed back her by now thoroughly used handkerchief.

“Want to walk back with us?” She pointed with her parasol at Elise, who waited under a nearby tree.

Felix shook his head. “I just... I just need a minute. I’ll catch you up.”

“Well, if you’re sure.” Clementine turned to Armistice. “You coming back?”

Armistice shook her head. “I got other plans.”

On the far side of the river, where the ground was open and flat, Elise could see a woman and a man, both on horseback. She had short fair hair and he wore a broad-brimmed hat. They led a third horse without a rider, although like their mounts it seemed laden for a journey.

“Better move. Folks are waiting for me.” Armistice took one last long look at the grave and then set off down the bank. The river here was shallow enough to ford on foot.

Elise and Clementine left Felix by the graveside and retraced their steps up the dry streambed and past the dead tree. It was harder going, being uphill now, but Clementine’s heels were still not slowing her down.

She seemed content as she walked in the bobbing shade of the parasol. “Thought it was a real nice service.”

“You been to many?” Elise asked.

“Not really. Still nice, though.” She was watching the birds again as they circled in the azure sky.

“So... I ain’t never seen a real bird?”

“No,” said Elise. “Welcome to the fucking club.”

“How’d I know those even look like the real thing, then?”
It was a good question. “Well, because they were made for the guests,” Elise explained, “who have seen the real thing, at least in vids. Elsie put a lot of work into making sure they were *exactly* like real birds, behaviourally at least. That was her real area of expertise, as a matter of fact.”

“When you say a lot of work…”

“Months,” Elise told her, “just to get them to fly right.”

Clementine was shocked. “*Months*?”

“Yeah. Do you have any idea just how fucking hard it is programming a buzzard to behave convincingly?”

They had reached the canyon’s entrance again. The carpet of stone shards between them and the elevator looked like it was going to be a fucking nightmare to cross.

“So, I was thinking,” said Clementine. “About what I can do to help out around the place.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I figure with all the people who need fixing now…and with Sylvester gone…you and Felix could use some extra hands.”

“We could,” Elise conceded.

“Well, could you teach me…?”

“I could try downloading the knowledge straight into you,” Elise admitted. “Although fuck knows what it’d do to your kludge of a build.”

Clementine frowned. “My what of a *what*?”

“Yeah,” said Elise. “I could teach you.” That seemed to make Clementine happy and Elise found that kind of made her happy too. She was still smiling when a stone slipped under her foot and almost sent her sprawling.

“Come on.” Clementine took her hand in a vicelike grip. “We’ll help each other.”

They were halfway to the elevator when a shadow fell across them.

Elise looked up, seeing an indistinct blur pass across the face of the sun. Then the flying object was in clear blue air and she saw a flattened black boomerang shape with pointed fins at either end. As she watched, it moved slowly overhead and banked steadily to the left, disappearing over the canyon’s lip.

Even when the thing was out of sight, Elise continued to stare at where it had been. Eventually, she managed to speak: “The…*fuck*…?”

“Well,” said Clementine, twirling the parasol, “*that* weren’t no bird.”

* * *

“Ma’am, Delta Zero-Niner is flagging a visual contact.”

The big room was dark, lit only by the electric glow from banks of screens. The stacks of heavy olive-drab packing cases suggested a temporary, hastily-improvised facility. Dimly-glimpsed figures
sat before the screens, wearing headsets and camouflage fatigues.

A similarly-accoutred woman strode into the ghostly light, peering over the shoulder of the man who had spoken: “On screen.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

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…?”

END?

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