Eudeamon

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Katrina Nichols followed the solitary Bane through the darkened park. It was raining steadily and Katrina was soaked through despite her raincoat. She had an umbrella, but that would have been too unwieldy for sneaking through the trees and bushes. Besides, the Bane would surely spot an umbrella bobbing along in pursuit and would have darted off like they always did. All Katrina wanted was to get close enough to interview one… somehow. It was nighttime in the park and there was no one around to see them, so she hoped she might finally get a chance without either of them getting in trouble.

This female Bane was exhibiting unusual behavior. Unusual behavior for a person, that is, though not too unusual for a Bane. They often acted strange, but who could blame them? Anyone would start acting strangely after living as a Bane for long enough. That was what had caught Katrina's attention. She had been walking down a sidewalk in Eudemonia when she had spotted the Bane dancing–*dancing*, of all things–in the park, heedless of the rain pouring down on her bare, black 'skin'. Many of the Banes she had to tried to contact had been morose, every facet of their body language expressing the wretchedness of their condition. That was understandable. At best, they had the air of patient resignation as they watched life go on around them. But there were others, like this one in the park, who appeared completely happy with their situation. Katrina was very curious about those.

The Bane continued to wind her way through the trees. Katrina almost lost the lithe, dark figure several times. The rain slowed to a petulant drizzle. The chorus of tree frogs and the patter of raindrops on leaves muffled the sounds of the city beyond the park. The Bane slipped out of the trees and went to stand in an open grassy field, where she tilted her head back to look at the clouds. Katrina was forced to hunker down at the edge of the forest, knowing there would be no way she'd be able to catch up with the Bane if she was startled and took off across the field. She willed the Bane to get a move on as she wriggled her shoulders in discomfort. Raindrops from the leaves were trickling into her

shirt collar and down between her shoulder blades. Finally, after standing completely still in the open for a few minutes, the Bane descended down the gently sloping bank of a narrow creek and splashed her way into the darkness beneath a low, pedestrian bridge. Katrina followed her down, slipping on the wet grass, and cautiously approached the bridge. With the help of the streetlights, she could just make out the shape of the Bane, who appeared to be settling down for the night.

"Hello?" Katrina ventured.

Instantly, the Bane sprang to her feet. She stood crouched over in alarm, apparently ready to run at a moment's notice.

"Wait!" Katrina cried hastily. "Don't run, *please* don't run. I won't hurt you, I promise. I just want to talk to you."

The Bane, tensed like a wary animal, tilted her head. She must certainly have been confused. It may well have been the first time anyone had spoken to her in years. At least she hadn't run off yet.

"I won't hurt you. My name is Katrina Nichols. I'm an investigative reporter. I'm not from the city. I'm not from Eudemonia. It's safe to talk to me, I promise. I won't get you in trouble. I just want to talk."

'Talk' was relative term, Katrina knew. Banes weren't able to speak aloud, but there was more than one way to communicate. She caught her breath in excitement as the Bane slowly, hesitantly, inched her way out from under the bridge. Finally, success!

The Bane straightened up and stood before her, just feet away. Rain beaded and trickled down the blank surface of her helmet and body. Her heaving chest was the only visible sign of her agitation. It was almost intimidating, standing there alone in the deserted park with this bizarre vision. Katrina was fairly sure she was safe, however, as the Banes' behavioral restrictions were supposed to prevent them from violent acts against citizens. In theory, anyway. Katrina experienced a mild erotic rush at the sight of her, as she did whenever she saw any of the Banes. That was the secret draw that had pulled her into investigating the secret world of the Banes in the first place. Though she had never worn it herself, she had always had an inexplicable fascination with latex, and the Bane was *all* latex.

She was entirely coated with high-gloss, black latex from head to toe. The suit left nothing to the imagination while simultaneously revealing nothing. It

was more than merely skin-tight; there were no seams, zippers, or openings of any kind. There were no folds or stress lines that would identify it as a normal latex garment or any other type of clothing. It appeared to be more like a second skin than an outfit, as though it had been painted directly onto her body. The shiny skin was only half of the strangeness. She also wore a latex-coated helmet of some kind that was completely featureless–her head was encased in an ovoid shell, has face was trapped behind the glassy smooth, glistening black surface. It closely fit the contours of her head and allowed just enough room for her features beneath, even though none could be seen. There weren't even the slightest of bumps that would hint at her having ears or a nose. It was though her face had been erased.

Katrina knew the Bane could see out, somehow, but the invisible eyepieces blended in perfectly with the rest of the helmet. Altogether, she looked less like a human being and more like a faceless, rubber-coated doll. That impression was further enhanced by the Bane's breathtakingly perfect figure–a figure for which Katrina felt some envy, now that she was in her mid-thirties. She knew that Banes often developed good physiques from their limited diets, but it didn't seem that diet alone could account for this latex-encased woman's unnaturally perfect curves. Katrina wondered who this Bane had been, and what sort of crime could this woman have committed to have ended up in such a lowly state.

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Banes, a popular slang for people who had been banished, were the subjects of an experimental penal system in the city of Eudemonia. Eudemonia was a planned city, one of the many mid-sized cities that had sprung up as people had fled the congestion and overpopulation of the metropolises. It was an idyllic community in the eyes of its framers, though the city's detractors might call it an oppressive police state. Whatever criticisms outsiders had for the way the city was run, it had certainly grown rapidly. It had a lot going for it: clean streets, nice architecture, plenty of parks, low unemployment, a low crime rate, and plenty of high-tech jobs. It was a pleasant enough place to call home, if you were willing to obey the rules and didn't mind the Banes living in your midst.

A few years earlier, in a time when the problem of overflowing prisons popularized many experimental rehabilitation projects and alternative punishments, Eudemonia tried something new. With the help of homegrown

Ashton Technologies (a research institute that was largely responsible for the founding of the city in the first place), the city council instituted the Banishment Project. While banishment and shunning were ancient forms of punishment, Eudemonia utilized cutting edge technology to take them to chilling new levels.

The idea was that criminals, instead of filling up jail cells, became prisoners in their own, private prisons. The Banes, as the subjects soon came to be called, were left free to roam the city as outcasts. They were to be ignored by the citizenry and treated as if they didn't exist. In fact, a person could be fined for even speaking to a Bane–it was a Violation of Banishment. A person wasn't allowed to treat a Bane with either kindness or cruelty or even acknowledge them in any way. Attempting to aid a Bane or offering one shelter was a criminal offense.

In a surprisingly short amount of time, the first Banes effectively ceased to exist in the eyes of the Eudemonic community. It was considered a terrible punishment, to be cast out and shut off completely from society. Banes could watch life carry on around them but they could take no part in it whatsoever. They weren't permitted to contact their friends or family. They couldn't enter any public or private structure that wasn't properly designated. Proximity sensors in every suit would punish them if they even tried to enter a structure or to leave their designated areas. They weren't allowed to approach other Banes too closely, so they couldn't even offer each other comfort or companionship. To be a Bane was to be perpetually alone in the middle of a bustling city.

To make matters worse for the Banes, the Banesuits that they were forced to wear stripped away all their identity and even their humanity: faces hidden behind the form-fitting, blank helmets, distinguishing characteristics hidden within tight, second skin of black latex. Except for differences in gender, weight, and height, they all looked the same. The revealing nature of the tight outfits was considered an added humiliation, for they might as well have been naked. While the Banesuits shielded their occupants from the elements, they were also said to muffle the sense of touch of the prisoners. They were denied the contact of others as well as the sensations of their own bodies.

As part of the punishment, as well as a method of rehabilitation, Ashton Technologies–the inventors of the Banesuits–used the latest in techno-organic, nanorobotic computers. They were called Custodians. Utilizing a simplified artificial intelligence, the computers that each of the Banes carried around in their

helmets somehow tapped into the prisoner's brain waves. Following a strict code of guidelines, the computer Custodians were able to 'read' the person's thoughts and modify their behavior through the application of physical punishment. It became a personalized prison warden, constantly observing a Bane's actions and intentions, and warning or punishing the Bane as necessary. That eliminated the need to pay people to keep track of all the Banes in the city; the Banesuits did all the work for them. The prisoner could get away with absolutely nothing, no matter how secretive he or she might be. The Custodian was always watching. It also monitored their vital signs for possible medical issues (emergency healthcare being the only human contact a Bane was allowed during their prison sentence). Ignored from without and chastised from within, a Bane's life was surely nothing short of a waking nightmare. They existed in perpetual solitary confinement.

That was about all the public knew–or the citizens of Eudemonia cared to know–about the Banishment Project. The technology itself was a closely guarded secret. Its primary inventor, Doctor Ashton, abandoned the project years ago (possibly in protest, possibly to avoid the inevitable social controversy) and went into seclusion, an act which turned control of the Banishment Project over to the city council. Neither the city officials nor Ashton Technologies would divulge little more information than that to curious reporters and concerned civil rights groups. People wondered if the whole project was essentially little more than legalized human experimentation on prisoners. Many, such as the online newspaper Katrina Nichols worked for, questioned whether it violated civil rights.

While it was unquestionably a kind of cruel and unusual punishment, it *was* still voluntary. Prisoners who agreed to opt in to the Banishment Project instead of going through the regular penal system had their sentences reduced by one third. Violent offenders weren't eligible for the banishment; citizens didn't want violent criminals roaming the streets among them. Even though the Banesuit Custodians were supposed to prevent violent acts against citizens, nobody yet trusted that completely. Crimes with reduced sentences of less than five months were also not eligible, as it wasn't yet cost effective to do it for such short terms. Most of the people who ended up as Banes were white-collar criminals, prostitutes, burglars, drug dealers, and others. However, as an added deterrent, when one volunteered to participate in the Banishment Project, they

wouldn't get a choice to enter the regular system if they committed another crime afterwards--they would go straight back into banishment.

It was certainly proving effective. Aside from being effective, it was cheap. After the initial investment of the suit and custodian, ongoing maintenance of a Bane was only a tiny fraction of the cost of an incarcerated prisoner. Crime rates were low. Those who volunteered to serve their sentence as a Bane seldom became repeat offenders. The punishment was considered that severe by those who had experienced it. Some ex-Banes required stays in rehabilitation institutes to properly reintegrate with society. For the most part, they were only too happy to try to put the experience behind them and try to become productive members of the Eudemonic society, if they didn't move far away from the city altogether. They had learned their lesson, one might say. And those were the ones who had lived as a Bane for less than a year.

Long term effects were still unknown because the Project simply hadn't been going for very long. It was entirely possible that prisoners who endured longer terms might very well go insane. No one in the public knew for sure, but since life was so good in Eudemonia, few citizens pressed for disclosure. Even without solid answers concerning the long term effects, other cities were considering implementing similar projects. Public curiosity was on the rise.

A tourist strolling through streets of Eudemonia would be greeted with the sight of black-suited Banes loitering throughout the city. Hundreds of them. Crouching or standing against the sides of buildings, keeping out of people's way during rush hour as best they could, or huddled in alleyways, or just wandering around aimlessly and without purpose. They had nothing else to do. Most of them congregated in the city's parks and wooded areas where they could avoid the foot traffic of the streets.

The tourist would see no one at all interacting with the Banes. It was as though two different societies existed in the same space, hardly aware of each other. The only time they made contact was if a Bane got in somebody's way. The person might step around them, but often as not would rudely brush past the Bane, sometimes knocking them down. That sort of contact was not considered a Violation of Banishment, since a Bane was expected to be treated as if he or she wasn't even there, and the Banes were expected to stay out of people's way. If the tourist, moved by curiosity or compassion, tried to speak to a Bane, a passing citizen might quietly advise them to leave it alone. Most often

the Bane would flee, apparently fearing a lengthening of his or her sentence for the appearance of trying to interact with someone. If the person persisted in their attempts, they would receive a harsh warning from the police, a hefty fine, or might even be arrested and detained. It was no secret that the police had been encouraged to show little leniency in dealing with outsiders–activists and the like–who came to cause a scene and disrupt the new Eudemonian way of life.

It was in hopes of discovering some kind of insider information about the Banishment Project, as well as to learn more about the lives and experiences of the Banes, that had lead Katrina to come to Eudemonia. Trying to get information was just as difficult as she had suspected it would be. No one was willing to talk. Ex-Banes she had interviewed weren't very forthcoming, either. They said little more than that the experience had been hellish, extremely boring, lonely, and sometimes painful. They weren't allowed to discuss any part of the processing or the nature of the Banesuits because of a non disclosure agreement. None were willing to do anything to risk becoming banished again.

Katrina had been warned several times due to her attempts at making contact with Banes. She had then tried to find some in the parks and wooded areas, away from authoritarian eyes. The Banes she found there avoided her like skittish forest animals. Some angrily waved her away. One, a large male with lean muscles, stuck around long enough to boldly flip her off in response to her entreaties before walking away with shoulders heaving in mute laughter. Another had completely ignored her as she writhed against the trunk of a tree in apparent orgasmic pleasure as though the rough bark was a sensual bliss. A strange sight by itself, made stranger still by the park-goers walking past her and ignoring the masturbatory display as though it wasn't even happening.

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But now Katrina finally had a Bane in front of her, and for whatever reason this one didn't seem to be afraid of being punished by her Banesuit for violating the rules of contact. Katrina only hoped that the suit couldn't somehow report her activities remotely; her editor, Benjamin Mellon, would be pissed if he had to bail her out of jail or help her pay a fine. "Just some questions. You can hear me, right? And understand me?" she asked, not knowing to what degree those helmets interfered with a Bane's hearing.

The Bane nodded in affirmation, appearing a little more relaxed but still cautious.

"Can you tell me your name? How long have you been like this? Can you, maybe, write it?"

Katrina began to rummage in her bag for a pad and pen, but the Bane had her own solution. The drizzle beaded on her back and trickled in rivulets down her sides as she bent over to pick up a stick to write with on the muddy silt of the riverbank.

Barbara/Eden, she wrote. *3 yrs*.

"Barbara Eden? Like the actress from that old show?" Katrina wondered.

A sharp shake of the head. The Bane wiped the words from the silt and wrote again. *I am Barbara. Barbara Bane now. Also Eden.*

Katrina stared at the cryptic words. The poor woman must have gone off the deep end after being isolated all that time. Did the city officials even care what was happening to the minds of these prisoners, or were they just tossed aside and forgotten? "Wow. Three years is a long time. Am I first the person to, uh, speak to you like this in all that time, Barbara?" Katrina asked.

There was a nod in response. She wrote again. *Why U here?*

"Like I said, I'm a reporter. I'm trying to find out more about this whole Banishment Project. People want to know. Some people say it's inhumane. You're the first Bane, I mean, person I've been able to talk to. So can you tell me? Is it?" she asked. "Is it inhumane?"

Barbara shrugged. *Depends who U ask*, she wrote. She then giggled visibly and hugged herself.

"I'm asking you. I want to help. Don't you want to your story told?"

Barbara's body language showed hesitation. Then she wrote with definitive bold letters, *NO*.

Katrina grunted in frustration. So close and yet so far. "Why not? Are you scared of punishment? I promise I'll keep you completely anonymous. Nobody'll ever know it was you I spoke to. Don't you want people to know what you've been going through? Don't you want this to stop?"

Barbara appeared to struggle with the words before finally stooping to write. *Never stop. U don't know. U can't know. Never will. Sad 2b U. Feel sorry for U.*

"You feel sorry for *me*? Why? What do you mean?" Katrina asked in confusion. "What can't I know? I need you to tell me, that's why I'm here."

Can't tell. U r human. Must stay secret.

"A secret, huh? I'm good with secrets. Lots of people trust me with secrets. If you don't want me tell anyone else, I won't. Off the record, then. Just give me something to go on."

Barbara stubbornly shook her head.

Okay, Katrina told herself. *Remember, she's a little crazy, so don't get mad at her. Just try to draw her out.*

"All right, no secrets, then. But if I'm human, what does that make you? Can you tell me that?"

I am a BANE!! Am perfection. U r lost.

I'm lost? You've got that right, sister, Katrina thought. "Help me out here. I just want to understand."

Barbara considered for a moment. She cleared the silt and wrote slowly and carefully. *You cannot understand. Only banes understand. Beauty beyond words. So happy. My perfect Eden*. She stopped writing for a moment to hug herself again. *Pleasure you can't imagine. Love you'll never know.* She underlined the word 'love' several times in emphasis.

As Katrina puzzled over the words, Barbara's head shot up. Katrina looked around. There was a pair of umbrellas approaching along the walking path. They were still a distance away yet. This Bane must have had excellent hearing. Barbara turned to run.

"Wait!" said Katrina. "I still don't get it. I want to tell your story! Can we meet again?"

Barbara shook her head in obvious agitation. Kneeling, she swept the mud clean with a swipe of her forearm and hastily wrote again with the stick held in both hands. She then turned and sprinted away, quick as a gazelle. Her latex-clad body disappeared without a trace into the darkness.

Katrina looked down at the single word scrawled deeply in silt. *EUDEAMON*.

Chapter 2

Katrina sat in a booth in a late night diner not far from the park. It was a chance to dry off and to try to understand the strange, written conversation she had just had with the Bane. There was no question that the woman had gone around the bend, if only a little. Why wouldn't she want to have her story told?

Was she afraid of the repercussions? Or had she simply gotten so accustomed to living as a Bane that she had forgotten how to live any other way? Katrina had heard of prisoners becoming institutionalized to the point of being unable to function outside of prison. Could such a thing happen even to a Bane despite the terrible life of deprivation they lived with? Well, Katrina decided, even if all the writing turned out to be nonsense, it wasn't completely fruitless. Barbara's personal delusions would seem to support the theory that long term banishment was a crime in itself if it drove a person so insane. But perhaps it wasn't all complete delusion. Maybe she knew something, some secret that Ashton Technologies wouldn't want made public knowledge.

There was there was that one word Barbara had written… *Eudeamon*. It occurred to Katrina that it wasn't the first time had seen that word written. While traveling through the city, she had seen it written here and there. Painted on walls, etched into park benches, carved into the bark of trees–that same word appeared again and again. At the time, she had dismissed it as simple graffiti, an intentional or accidental misspelling of the city's name. It was a rather peculiar misspelling, though, especially since it occurred repeatedly. *What can it mean?* she wondered. *Is it a code? An individual, maybe?*

She was at the counter getting a refill of her coffee–pretty decent coffee, too–when a rain-soaked police officer came into the diner. He pulled back the hood of his black poncho, revealing the face of a man only a few years younger than herself. Katrina stiffened, worried that he had come for her. Maybe someone had seen her chasing Banes in the park, or perhaps Barbara's Banesuit had reported the both of them. She watched out of the corner of her eye as the cop came up to the counter and ordered a coffee and a slice of lemon meringue pie. Katrina relaxed.

"You look like you got worse than me, officer," she said with casual affability, tossing her damp hair over her shoulder, and sliding onto one of the stools.

He looked over at her chuckled. "Yeah, s'pose I do. It's pretty soggy out there tonight. Everything going all right?"

"Oh, yes, thanks. It's just been a long day. One of those days." She sipped her coffee. "I hope you don't me bugging you. I'm just feeling a little lonely right now. I don't know anybody around here."

He waved away her concern. "Aw, it's okay."

"I'm Katrina Nichols," she said, offering her hand.

"Michaels." He had a strong but gentle handshake. He wasn't too bad looking, either. "Not from around here, then?"

"Oh, no, I'm just visiting." She continued to warm him up with some small talk and judicious flirting. She was fairly confident her old charms still worked. After a while, she said, "I've been thinking of maybe moving here. I mean, I've been thinking about it for a while. The city is so pretty and everybody is so nice. It's just…"

"Oh. The Banes," Michaels said, finishing for her. He grinned ruefully. "All the tourists ask about them."

She laughed. "Well, the last thing I want to do is come off as some gawking tourist. But... really, what's it like with them everywhere? It seems so strange."

He shrugged. "Technically, we shouldn't even be talking about 'em. That's part of the whole 'shunning' thing, you know. Really, you get used to them pretty fast. But they're just people, you know, not animals. Even if some people treat 'em that way."

She detected a hint of something in his voice. Was it distaste? "You don't approve of the idea? The banishment, that is?"

Another shrug. "Eh, I'm just a cop. What I think doesn't matter. I don't make the laws, I just enforce 'em," he added in with an officious tone and a self-deprecating smile. Katrina grinned at him. "Sure, I guess have some sympathy for 'em. I mean it's an okay idea and all, seems to work… but I've seen what some of them have to go through. The beatings. They call it Bane-bashing."

"I thought that was illegal."

"Oh, it is," he said. "Very. But when did making something illegal stop a group of drunken kids from having their fun? They can't even defend themselves. At least it doesn't happen often."

"But other than that, it works, right? I mean, it must be effective. They don't commit any more crimes, right? The Banes, I mean."

Officer Michaels smirked a little to himself. "So they say," he mumbled.

Katrina perked up. "They say? There's more to it, I take it?"

"Aw, I shouldn't be saying anything about this," he said, but the way he was nervously spinning the fork in his fingers said that he really did want to. In Katrina's experience, people could be surprisingly open with a friendly stranger,

so she simply peered intently at him, careful not to push him or sound overly curious. He eventually continued. "I've heard some things. Seen some things. Things that make me think they're not telling us everything."

"Like... what?"

"Well," he said, rubbing the back of his neck. "I dunno. It's just my department has had to deal with unexplained behavior more and more lately. I mean, now that a lot of the longer term Banes' sentences are ending. The ones who've been banished for a couple years or so, you know. I mean, if you had been a Bane for two years, you'd be pretty excited about your term coming to a close, right?"

"I'd think so."

"Yeah, me too. You'd just lay low, not draw any attention to yourself, and wait 'til your time was up. Right? And some do. But others, right near the end of their sentences, start going on these sprees: vandalizing, Violation of Banishment, defacing property. These are people who–a lot of 'em–haven't put a toe out of line during their sentences. Then, all the sudden, when it's almost over, they go haywire? Add years to their sentences? Doesn't make sense. You might expect crap like that from someone brand new to banishment, like throwing a fit, rebelling. They don't–can't, apparently–but the long-timers do. And we're not even allowed to talk about it, much less ask questions. That bugs me."

"But I thought the Banesuits kept them from doing things like that."

"That's another thing," he said, becoming more animated. "They don't. Not in those situations. Oh, it works great for the short-timers, but the longer the sentence, the less the inhibitors seem to work. I think maybe the program gets corrupted after a while. Glitches they haven't ironed out. Heck, maybe it's even someone hacking into the system, maybe an anti-banishment activist trying to cause problems. Whatever it is, Ash-Tech tells us nothing."

"So you're telling me the behavior inhibitors break?"

"I don't know. That's part of the mystery. Those incidents have petered off a little lately, and they were never exactly common. So maybe it was just a bug and they've got it under control. But like I said, they behaved fine the rest of the time. And they never act violently against citizens," he added a little hastily. "That's nothing to worry about. No, I'm more concerned about the Banes' safety out there. Tell you the truth, if they *were* able to defend themselves, I wouldn't

be sorry to see some of those bashing punks get what they deserved. Not sorry, at all."

"Wow."

"But don't get me wrong," he said with a comforting smile. "I don't mean to come off sounding negative or anything. It's not like it's a big deal. Aside from some unanswered questions, Eudemonia really is a great place to live."

Chapter 3

"There's definitely something going on, Ben," she told her editor through vid-conference. She had finished giving him a short hand report of her experience. She was comfortably settling back into her small apartment after the two hour mag-lev train ride from Eudemonia. It always felt great to get back home, even if it was on the cramped and cluttered side.

"It's some interesting tidbits to be sure, but not much to go on, is it? It does corroborate with some of Verne's findings, though," said Benjamin, his round face filling up the video window from end to end. He was referring to Verne Sawyer, a techno geek on the newspaper's payroll. Katrina had worked with him a few times. While not exactly a reporter, his computer expertise and hacking skills had helped to ferret out plenty of secrets in the past. "He's been working on the Ashton Technologies angle, but the security on that place is tight as a drum. He did manage to find an imperfectly deleted memo on the system. Something about the treatment of patients who are suicidal or catatonic *after* being released from banishment. A fragment about 'recommending the restraint of all patients after the suicide of patient T-5067' and a few other things."

"I'm not surprised, honestly," said Katrina. "The way these people are treated, criminals or not, is just wrong. I'd be surprised if some could function at all after that kind of psychological torture. Not to mention the humiliation. People have got to know about this, about what the Banes are subjected to. The problem is I couldn't get any of the ex-Banes to talk. Hell, I got more out of that cop than from any of them. They just seem terrified."

"Can you blame them? Do you know what the penalty of breaking that non disclosure agreement is in that city? Automatic banishment. Say a word and back into the black suit you go. It does present something of a road block, does it not?" Benjamin's lips pursed into a frown. "I just don't think we can do

much more on this right now. I need more to go on than a cop's hearsay and some nutty, self-absorbed Bane writing bad poetry in the mud."

"But Ben–"

"I know, you don't have to tell me. But we can't just throw around conjecture and accusations without solid proof. Let the other guys do that. We have integrity. Unless someone chooses to come forward or the system breaks down on its own, there's just not enough there for a real story."

"Benjamin. That might never happen."

"Maybe, maybe not. It's the nature of the universe for systems to break down," said Benjamin.

"Don't go getting all metaphysical on me. These people are suffering *now*."

"That's thermodynamics, actually, not metaphysics," he corrected dryly. "I know how strongly you feel about all this, Nichols, I do. But unless you can find me a whistle-blower or one of these Banes willing to talk *and* make sense, there's not much I can do."

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Later that evening, Katrina was stretched out on her bed with her laptop. She had been trying to do some research on the word *eudeamon*. She hadn't been able to find much. *Eudemonia* was an ancient Greek word, defined as a state of happiness, of being governed by reason, or of being generally blessed by the gods. She already knew that much from the city of Eudemonia's promotional literature. That's why the founders had picked the name in the first place. A *eudeamon*, however, was a benevolent spirit, demon, or angel. Katrina couldn't make much sense of it. All of her searches on *eudeamon* in connection with the actual city of Eudemonia turned up nothing but misspelled entries.

She rolled onto her back and rubbed her eyes. Maybe it really *was* a code, some kind of secret Bane communication. Or could it be some Banes' way of praying for help or some kind of savior? Or it could be a person. Or any number of different things. Too many possibilities equaled another dead end. She wanted to be the one to break this story so bad she could taste it, but Benjamin had been right; she needed a story before she could break one.

Her thoughts wandered back to the Banes. Or rather, the Banesuits. There was an undeniable, if guilty, excitement she took from their appearance. She couldn't get the thought out of her head, imagining what it would be like to be in a Bane's place. What would it be like to be covered up in all that latex and

trapped inside it against her will? What would it *feel* like? The smooth tightness all around her, over every inch of her body, with no escape and no way to take it off...

Pleasure you can't imagine.

Just as her hand was starting to slide into the front of her pants, the phone rang. She groaned and rolled over. Caller ID showed it to be Steven, her boyfriend of five months. She eagerly answered the phone. "Well hey, honey, why haven't you called?" she asked.

"Oh, er, hi! I wasn't sure when you'd be up for talking, since you just got in."

"I might be up for a little more than talking. Believe me, I could use some pleasant distraction after the week I've had. I've been trying to research those Banes all night. But anyway, never mind that. I need to get my mind off the job. I may be tired, but–"

"Yeah, uh, listen, that's why I called," said Steven, sounding suddenly uncomfortable. "Look, I've been doing a lot of thinking and…"

"And?"

"I just don't think it's… working out. I think it's time we started seeing other people."

A cold weight slammed into Katrina's chest. "What are you saying? You're breaking up with me? Over the *phone*?"

"Well, um–"

"But what happened?" Katrina demanded. She was trying hard not to cry, but felt the heat of tears building up behind her eyes. "Why now? We were fine last week!"

"No, no we weren't," replied Steven, "and I think you know it. We just aren't connecting anymore, Katrina. It's nobody's fault."

"So that's it then? After all this time, it's over just like that?"

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Come on, just talk to me, tell me what's the matter. We can work something out, I know it," said Katrina, knowing she was starting to sound a little pathetic but not caring. "Hang on, is this because of those kinky fantasies I talked about?"

"What? No. There's just nothing to work out. Some people just aren't meant to be together. I'm sorry, but… listen, I gotta go."

"Yeah. Gotta go. Sure," she said quietly and hung up the receiver. Then she picked it up again only to slam it viciously down on its cradle several more times.

She rolled over, buried her face in her pillow, and let loose the floodgates. This had come so unexpectedly. And why now? Didn't she have enough to deal with right now? The inconsiderate bastard. It wasn't even like she was madly in love with Steven or anything. But, all the same, she had loved him a little. She had let him *in* a little. Being with him made her feel normal, like she was doing something right. Now she had to start all over again. It only got harder each time.

Not again. Not alone again, she thought miserably as her tears slowly dampened her pillowcase. *Why am I always alone? Why can't ever find something real? How many times is this? Is it that some people aren't meant to be together, Steven? Or is it that* I'm *not meant to be with anyone,* ever*? Am I supposed to grow old alone? I hate this, I hate this, I hate it.*

……

The next morning she stared at the ceiling for a long time, sprawled out among her twisted sheets. All cried out, she was now feeling numb and hollow. Steven, jerk that he was for a phone-breakup, had been right about one thing; she had never been able to connect with anyone for too long. Why couldn't she make a relationship last? Why did she always have to end up by herself? She didn't even know what she was doing wrong. *Was* she doing something wrong? Or was it everyone else who couldn't connect with her? It seemed like she hardly had anyone in the world who really cared for her. A few friends, a few coworkers, maybe. She had no family left, none at all. Her mother had died shortly after Katrina was born. Her father had never remarried. He had focused all his attention on Katrina as she grew up. And why did he have to go and die before she was even out of college, leaving her to face her future alone and without his guidance? She always ended up alone in the end. She was always left with nothing but fading memories.

She sniffled and rubbed her hands across her face. She had always been too cautious in her relationships, afraid of exposing too much of herself. That was one of the problems. Fear of getting hurt just insured that she would get hurt all over again. All her life she had shied away from going all out, from taking a real chance. She needed to make a change, a *serious* change. Make a

difference. Face real risk with real rewards. Excitement. Challenges. Making a life worth living.

Why not? she asked herself. *Why not, indeed?*

She rolled out of bed and fixed her face and hair. Then she got on the vid-phone and called her boss. "Benjamin? Yeah, hi. Listen. This is going to sound crazy, but I had an idea."

Chapter 4

A month later, Katrina Nichols, A.K.A. Vivienne Mulberry, stood in a Eudemonic court accused of prostitution. Her fourth count of prostitution, no less. She was facing a lengthy prison sentence.

"Miss Mulberry, how do you plead?"

"Guilty, Your Honor," said Katrina thickly. She had never been in court before. Just *standing* there made her feel guilty. She was sweating bullets. She shakily took her seat and zoned out while the judge considered the matter and the lawyers gabbled in Legalese. She could hardly believe this was really happening. And for prostitution? *Very funny, Benjamin*. It was so humiliating, but she could hardly complain. It got the job done, and it was only ever a means to an end, anyway. Soon the charges wouldn't matter. She felt a strange exhilaration, the thrill of doing something wrong and getting away with it. She also felt fear. A lot of fear.

"Miss Mulberry," said the judge, a stern-looking, older woman with thin lips and softly sagging jowls. "Your willingness to admit your wrong-doing and not waste our time stands you in good stead with this court. However, you do face a minimum mandatory sentence, this being your fourth offense. Do you have anything to say?"

"I, uh," mumbled Katrina, genuinely trying to think of a contrite statement. She decided the less she said, the better. She was no actress and this was no movie set. "No, Your Honor."

"Very well. I sentence you to a term of no less than fourteen months incarceration. In accordance with the Banishment Statute, you may choose public exile for a commuted term of eight months. Which do you choose?"

Katrina took a deep, shuddering breath to try and steady herself. "Banishment."

"As you wish. You will forthwith be remanded to the custody of the Ashton Technologies facility where you will be processed. Processing time will count toward time served." The gavel banged down. People began to mill around in the courtroom in preparation for the next case. A bailiff helped Katrina out of her seat and ushered her towards the exit.

This is it, she thought.

……

It had taken time for Benjamin Mellon to come around to the idea. He did try to talk her out of it, telling her how nuts it all was. He didn't try very hard, though. Ever the media mercenary, he could smell a potential story. Katrina had known his personal concerns for a reporter's safety and well-being would ultimately be overridden by his greed for a good, breaking story.

It took a great deal of planning and the use of an old friend of Benjamin's–a cop with access to the police and court database. It was a fairly simple matter to find Vivienne Mulberry, a citizen of Eudemonia and a prior offender, who also roughly fit Katrina's description. Miss Mulberry was soon to be due for a court hearing concerning her latest exploits in prostitution. She had no family, no one to notice if she went 'missing'. It was easy enough to contact the woman and convince her to switch identities for a little while. She was all too eager, in fact. Then, a little fiddling with the database, and *presto change-o*, it was Katrina's photo and particulars on Vivienne's rap sheet. The real Vivienne got a free vacation while someone else served her sentence for her. She could hardly complain about that. Especially since she had been given substantial remuneration (partly out of Katrina's own pocket) in order to keep her quiet.

Sure, it was illegal what they were doing, but everyone involved felt that the potential benefits outweighed the crime. There might be some fallout, but if Katrina could discover some damning inside information and prove inhumane treatment, that would surely outweigh the switch-off and records-tampering done to uncover it. Afterwards, when she finally reported on her inside experience, she intended to keep Vivienne's complicity completely secret. She didn't want the woman to get in trouble for skipping out on her judicial punishment.

And if she uncovered nothing and her experience wasn't considerably worse than one might receive in the regular prison system? No harm, no foul. Afterwards, she and Vivienne would switch back, Vivienne's time would have

been served, and no one would be the wiser. Katrina would have lost a few months, but, hopefully, it would be worth it. And, at the very least, she would at last know the truth of it all. Her motivations weren't entirely altruistic, though. She was elated to finally be *doing* something, actually going in and facing a potentially grueling experience in the name of a story. Real journalistic integrity. It would, without question, put her name on the map. She might even get a Pulitzer for this.

There was also a darker, secret motivation that she could barely even admit to herself. Part of it was her brief encounter with Barbara. She was aching to know what the Bane had found so beautiful and pleasurable about her predicament. The mystery of it had nearly become an obsession for her. And who or what was this *eudeamon*? Also, ever since her previous trip to Eudemonia, her thoughts had often returned to the Banes and their jet-black occlusion suits. What would it be like to wear one and be unable to escape it? Trapped in latex for months? The thought made her feel light-headed with fear and… something else. Whatever it was, simply thinking about it made her feel guilty. She managed to sweep thoughts under the carpet of her subconscious. She wanted to stay focused and professional.

As she waited in a small holding cell in the courthouse, however, she was starting to have second thoughts. What had seemed like a great idea during the nihilistic depression following her breakup with Steven was now a lot more intimidating. It was really happening. She was actually volunteering to have her identity erased, her humanity stripped away, even if only temporarily. After hearing what happened to other people, she knew she faced possible mental harm. She hoped the light at the end of the tunnel would help her to keep it together. She wasn't really a criminal, after all, and this wasn't a punishment. It was a mission. And it was too late to turn back now, anyway. She would have to see it through to the end.

After a few hours waiting, a guard came for her and put her ankle cuffs and wrist restraints with a belt that pinned her hands close to her waist. She thought it unnecessary. At least she was still in her street clothes and not in some prison jumper. She was escorted through a back door in the courthouse. Outside, in a walled-in parking lot, there were a couple more guards and a minivan converted for prisoner transport. The Ashton Technologies logo was emblazoned on the door. Two other prisoners stood around, looking

uncomfortable and anxious, while the others were being helped into the van. There were five in total, including Katrina. Two men and two other women.

After they were all loaded onto the bus and secured into their seats, Katrina found herself sitting next a skinny, shivering girl who barely looked out of her teens. She looked as if she had recently been crying. She gave Katrina a nervous smile. "Um, hi. I'm Tina. Tina Scott. What are you here for?"

"I'm, uh, Vivienne. Prostitution," she said with a flush of embarrassment.

"You too? Me too!" chirped Tina, as if that gave them something in common, like belonging to the same sorority. "I-I had to do this. The banishment thing, I mean. I couldn't stand the thought of going to jail. I'm kinda claustrophobic. I have to be able to get outside. This sounded better. I hope."

Katrina tried to give her an encouraging smile. She felt a strong sense of sympathy. The girl might have been judged guilty of a crime, but she looked so terrified. It was hard not to feel sorry for her.

"Are you as scared as I am?" Tina asked. "I've never been this nervous in my life. Do you think it'll hurt?"

"No talking," barked the guard as he boarded the van and got into the back seat. He had a static rifle cradled in his arms.

"It'll be okay," Katrina whispered and patted the Tina''s arm. She hoped she wasn't lying to the girl. At the very least, being concerned for someone else helped belay her own anxiety. "I'll… I'll look out for you." A look of pitiable gratitude washed over the girl's face.

The drive wasn't too long, only about twenty minutes from the courthouse. She saw the occasional Bane standing out in their black outfits here and there. *I'm going to be just like that soon*, she thought to herself. It was apparent that the others in the van were thinking similar thoughts of themselves.

They drew near to a large building on the wooded outskirts of town. It was in the neo-modern style with some odd angles and curves, and lots of cement and glass. The landscaping was very tidy and the grass was lush and green. It was all very clean and orderly, just like the rest of the city. Near the street was a sign made of a short, curved wall with metal letters that formed the name of Ashton Technologies. In front of the sign was a fountain with a silvery, abstract human statue. Whether it was by design or artistic coincidence, the

statue had no face.

The small group was unloaded in an enclosed receiving area out back. From there they were lead inside. The glass doors weren't barred, but they were reinforced with a metallic mesh and had electronic locks. It seemed to Katrina to be less like a prison and more like a high security mental institution. They were seated in a holding room and bidden to wait. They endured several long and awkward minutes before a man came in to greet them. He was dark haired, hollow-cheeked and was all bones and sharp angles beneath his white lab coat. He took some paperwork from the guard.

"I want to welcome you all to the Ashton Technologies Facility. My name is Doctor Julian Torres. You have all voluntarily opted in to the Banishment Project. If there is anyone who is here mistakenly, please let us know now." He paused a second. "No? Fine. I know you're all probably very nervous, but please try to relax. We will try to make your processing as stress-free and as comfortable as possible, but we'll need your cooperation to do so." An assistant came in carrying a stack of clipboards which were distributed to the prisoners. Each held a hefty stack of admittance papers, legal forms, waivers, and medical history forms. "Please sign and date wherever you see a space highlighted in yellow. And please fill out the medical history forms accurately. We can't be held responsible if something goes due to your lack of honesty."

Several minutes passed as the prisoners signed form after form. Tina hesitantly raised her hand. "Uh… what's the date?"

"October the Eighth," said the doctor.

"Excuse me," said Katrina, "but what exactly are we waiving with these waivers?"

"You've consented to undergo a safe but experimental medical procedure. You're waiving all claims and liabilities," replied Dr. Torres coolly.

If it's so safe, why do I need to waive liabilities? Katrina wondered. "What about long term effects? I've heard there've been people left catatonic," she asked. Tina stiffened in the seat next to her.

The doctor arched his brow. "And where did you hear such a thing?"

"Oh… you know, around. Rumors. Is it true?"

"Absolutely not, I assure you. Rumors like that are started by people who are opposed to the goals the Banishment Project aims to achieve: punishment and rehabilitation. Most of them are Luddites who prefer the thought of inmates

moldering in prison cells rather than giving them a chance to truly learn repentance by being rejected by the society they chose to harm and act against."

"So there's no real danger in doing this?" Katrina asked.

"None whatsoever."

Katrina didn't believe his assurances for a minute, but at least she had his opinion on the record.

One by one, they were taken away for processing. When only Katrina and a short, balding, chubby man were left, a female guard opened the door and called, "V-7505." She pointed at Katrina. "That's you. This way, please."

"Have there really been that many V's before me?" Katrina asked as she preceded the guard down a carpeted hallway.

"It's a random number. Now, please refrain from talking, V-7505."

Fine, have it your way, she thought sourly.

She was taken to a room where, in front of the guard and another woman in white jumpsuit, her restraints were removed and she was required to completely disrobe, including any jewelry and piercings she might have. She was wearing neither. She was also told to remove her contact lenses. "You, uh, know I can't see without these, right?"

"It won't be a problem," the woman said tersely.

From there she was subjected to a full cavity search. It was humiliating, but she supposed it was nothing out of the ordinary compared to entry into a regular prison. Afterwards, she was taken to an adjoining room with tiled floors and walls. The floor was wet and the air was damp and humid, like a public shower. Cuffs were placed over her wrists and were lifted overhead by a bar. "Is all this really necessary?" Katrina asked, feeling terribly helpless.

"Please refrain from talking, V-7505."

"Okay, but… oh my god, what are you *doing*?" Katrina yelped as the harsh, grating sound of electric clippers buzzed to life. With a swift and experienced hand, the woman began to shear off Katrina's body hair, including her pubic area. She then moved up to Katrina's head. With quick, untidy swipes, Katrina's long, blond hair was reduced to stubble. Not even her eyebrows were spared. It hadn't even occurred to Katrina this sort of thing would be necessary. It made sense; there wasn't much room for hair beneath those suits and helmets, but logic didn't make it any less traumatic. She was sobbing by the time they lowered her arms and connected her cuffs behind her

back. She didn't even get a chance to feel her new buzz cut.

She was lead to a shower stall, where she was allowed to soak in a stream of hot water. It felt spectacularly bizarre against her head. Meanwhile, the woman was donning a baggy, plastic bodysuit. It looked similar to one a person might wear in a hazmat situation. The sight of it made Katrina nervous all over again and she cringed back into the shower stall. The woman drew Katrina from the shower and began to coat her with a clear, goopy liquid squeezed from a large bottle that simply read *Sol. B-66*. It was slick and slimy like hair conditioner and every inch of Katrina's body was soon slathered in it.

"What is this stuff?" she asked, unable to keep the distress out of her voice. Some of the stuff got in her mouth and tasted bitter. She spat it out. "What are you doing to me?"

"Relax," said the woman. "It's simply a disinfectant and follicle inhibitor."

Follicle inhibitor? Katrina wondered. "It'll kill my *hair*?"

"No. It inhibits growth. It's only temporary. Please step back into the shower."

As the hot water washed the slimy stuff away, it became apparent that it did more than inhibit hair. It also dissolved it. What little stubble she had left on her head and body was washed down the drain. She couldn't believe it. She had been rendered completely bald. Her only consolation was that soon nobody would be able to see it. That was cold comfort. She was roughly toweled off and lead, hairless, naked, and handcuffed, into another room.

This one looked more like a proper doctor's office. The cuffs were unhooked from behind her back and she was helped to lie down on a padded table. The sanitary paper crinkled beneath her as she moved. There was some kind of head restraint at the top of the table, but they didn't use it on her. Her cuffs were attached to the sides of the table. "You really don't need that. I'm not gonna do anything, I promise."

No one spoke to her. The older woman left the room, leaving her alone with the stony-faced guard. Several minutes passed uncomfortably before a middle-aged man in a lab coat entered. He was carrying a sealed, plastic container. He didn't introduce himself, but his ID tag read *Grable*. He examined a clipboard, made a noise in his throat, then put on some latex gloves and gave her a quick physical examination. She felt awfully exposed, restrained to the

table like that, being both bald and naked. He put a sedative IV into her arm and connected a heart monitor clamp to her fingertip.

"Um, can I ask what you're going to do me? I'd really be a lot less stressed if, you know, you tell me everything that happens. I've always been like that… in doctors' offices."

"Refrain from talking, V-" the guard began to drone. The doctor cut her off.

"No, it's all right," he said to the guard. "I don't mind explaining. In fact, you can step outside. I'll call you if I need you."

The guard gave him a loaded glance, but left the room as requested.

Grable looked at Katrina. "I can explain things, but I really don't think you'll find it helps you relax any." He unsealed the plastic container he had brought in with him. From it he lifted from its bed of clear gel a flexible, curved, black rubber disk. It was no more than an inch think in the center and tapered to feather-thin edges. There was a blunt nub, about the width of a pencil eraser, poking out from the surface of its concave underside. The thinner edges of the thing wobbled a little as he moved it. "Do you know what this is?"

"It's, um… no."

"This is the latest in nano-computer technology. It's a Custodian. Technically, a self-integrating onboard neuronet computer. It will become the artificial intelligence that will monitor your daily life."

"It looks pretty small for an AI," she observed.

"Oh, it is. This durable shell just houses the essential programming and a transceiver. All of the computing will be done by you. That's the magic of it," the man said proudly.

"Come again?"

"The human brain," he said, "is far more powerful and complex than any computer built to date. We don't even come close to needing the use of all of it. There's so much to spare. This handy little device uses nanoprobes to explore and map the physical workings of your brain, then sends out techno-organic tubules to make connections with the pertinent neurons. Just think of it as tree roots growing into fertile soil. Its operating program will be uploaded into your brain. It will then use your own untapped brain power as its processor and hard drive."

"It goes into my *brain*?" Katrina asked, horrified. "I don't want that! I

don't want some computer growing itself inside my head!"

"Oh, not to worry, you won't even notice it's there. Not unless you do something wrong. It'll just sit there, quietly observing your thought processes, until it learns how to interpret your intentions and anticipate your behavior. It will probably know what you're going to do even before you do."

This was starting to be a whole lot more than she bargained for. "No way! I've changed my mind! I want out of this!"

"Oh, it's a little late for that, I'm afraid. You've already signed all the forms. But don't be so upset. It's not permanent or anything. When your sentence is finished, it will break its connections and completely withdraw itself from your brain."

"I don't buy it," Katrina said, pulling at the cuffs. "You can't just do that and expect there to be no damage!"

"I assure you, there will be no trace of it left. It will be as if it never existed. No brain damage has ever resulted." He observed her struggle. He looked amused by her reaction. "I *told* you that knowing wouldn't relax you."

"Oh, screw you, you asshole!" spat Katrina, completely losing her composure. It pissed her off to no end to see this man being entertained by her distress. What kind of sadistic bastards did they have working here?

"But I haven't yet told you how we'll implant it," he said with unpleasant eagerness. "I have to drill a little hole into your skull, right here." He touched his finger to the crown of Katrina's bald head, making her flinch. "Then we just adhere the unit to your scalp and it will do the rest. We'll keep you unconscious for five days to allow it to make its connections. We'll also be implanting your waste reclamation unit into your colon during that time. Be thankful that you'll be asleep for that. It requires a bit of stretching. After that, once we get your suit on you, you'll be just another faceless Bane." He turned on the IV drip.

"You enjoy your work, don't you?" accused Katrina spitefully.

The man glanced up and down her naked body. "Yes. Yes, I do."

…….

The next thing Katrina knew, she was waking up in a small, dimly lit cell. Her body was pinned to a cot with padded straps. There was a monitor beeping steadily away beside her. She moaned, in a haze of confusion. Her body was stiff and sore all over. She squirmed around as much as the restraints would allow. Her lower abdomen felt full and cramped inside, and her rectum felt

tender. There was a rubber pad adhered over her entire crotch and smaller ones over her nipples. On the soles of her feet were glued cushy, rubber pads that were molded to a perfect fit and also squeezed up between her toes. She could only flex her toes the slightest bit. Her head throbbed annoyingly. *My head…*

Her eyes shot wide open. Memories of the courtroom, the shaving, the padded table, and the man with the wobbling black disc flooded her mind. She rubbed the back of her head against the pillow. There was something attached to the back of her skull. She screamed.

A minute later, a mature, henna-haired woman in a lab coat peered into the cell window and opened the door. "Ah, V-7505. Right on schedule."

"Wha… what's–"

"How do you feel?"

"Get this off me! It's eating my brain! Please get this thing off of me!"

The woman gave Katrina an examination, then peered down at her with stern disapproval. "The Custodian is *not* eating your brain. Scans show that it is behaving within perfectly normal parameters."

"Please stop it!"

"Stop what? It's already finished. You've been asleep here for five days. I'm Doctor Emilia Barriston, by the way. I'll be overseeing your processing. You may rest up until tomorrow morning when your processing will be completed. Someone will be along to feed you shortly." With that, she shut the door and left Katrina alone with her fears. Alone with her fears… and the thing that had already spread its tendrils throughout her brain like a malignant cancer.

Chapter 5

"Come on, V-7505. Cooperate. We can punish you if we need to. Open your mouth," said a young male processing technician as he and the henna-haired doctor tried to work a tube into her mouth. Katrina was restrained to a chair. She had already had plugs inserted into her ears and some kind of liquified latex injected into her nose. She had had enough.

It had been explained to her that it wasn't in fact pure latex, but that it was in fact a mixture of a semisolid rubber compound and a mimetic network of microscopic fibers. When given a command by, say, a brain-dwelling computer, the fibers would arrange themselves into a shape and stay that way. Narrow

tubes had been inserted deep into her nasal passage, all the way to the back of her throat, which squirted the mimetic rubber in their wake as they had been slowly withdrawn. The latex-stuff naturally contracted on its own, so that it didn't impede her breathing too much. It was an effort, though, as the semi-liquid stuff filled her nasal passages pretty well full. Now they wanted to do the same thing to her throat and mouth.

"No! I changed my mind, I want out. I want a phone and someone to get me out of here!"

Dr. Barriston shook her head in regret. "Custodian: default punishment, level three."

The pain came over her so swiftly and so completely that Katrina didn't even have a chance to scream before her chest seized up. It felt as if the entire surface of her skin, from tips of her toes to the top of her skull, was suddenly dancing with an electric current, fiery embers, and dagger-sharp shards of ice. She had never experienced anything like it in her life. Even though it only lasted a few seconds, it was easily the most painful thing she had ever felt. Then it was completely gone, without any residual pain anywhere. Her skin was completely unharmed. She gasped for a breath and let out a single, belated shriek.

"That's a taste," said the doctor. "It's entirely in your head, but that doesn't make it any less real, does it? I have no interest in punishing you, V-7505; I take no pleasure in this… but you have to start learning sometime. I'm sorry, but you must do as we say. There's no turning back now. Open your mouth, please."

Katrina parted her trembling lips, too shocked and horrified to resist. It was that *thing* in her head that had hurt her, she knew it. It had made her feel the phantom pain. It could inflict it whenever it was ordered to and she couldn't possibly escape it. This truly was torture.

She was almost glad of it, in a way. Now she knew for certain that the Banishment Project was cruel and inhumane. She just had to make it through this ordeal in one piece. Then she could let the world know.

The tube slid into the back of her throat, causing her to gag. Again, the rubber stuff was squirted onto the walls of her throat and mouth, even coating her tongue, teeth, and lips. She reflexively swallowed some, not knowing if that was dangerous or not. It congealed into a thick layer that virtually paralyzing her tongue. "*Uuuck*."

"It'll get better in a few minutes, V-7505."

As she struggled to breathe through her rubber coated mouth and nose, she watched as a processing technician prepared the helmet that was going to encapsulate her head. It first looked to be a solid, metal shell–a rounded ovoid matching the shape and size of Katrina's head. Instead of eye openings, there was a pair of opaque, oval patches of black stuff that glinted as if sprinkled with glass dust. The helmet parted in two halves, left and right, when triggered by a remote key. Lining the inside of each half was a rubbery, blue foam that had presumably been molded from Katrina's face while she had been unconscious. Each half was a perfect mold of the corresponding side of her face. There were no gaps except for a shallow space, like a tiny air pocket, that would be below her nose in and front of her mouth. From the sides of this shallow breathing space, two tubes on each half, four in total, passed through the foam to openings underneath the helmet's chin. The tubes were lined with a series of tiny, mechanical filters. Those four, small openings were the only way she would be able to get air. While she watched, the technician was brushing every nook and cranny of the interior of the helmet with more of the black, latex goo. Katrina slowly shook her head in useless denial of what was to come next.

Before he had finished coating the helmet's interior, the doctor made Katrina tilt her head back. She had opened a package of specially made contact lenses. They were white and opaque, like theatrical lenses. She held Katrina's eyelids open and placed one onto her right eye. It stung a little, and half of her vision went dark.

"Don't be alarmed. These are organic, bioluminescent lenses," Dr. Barriston was saying. "Your eyes will be in the dark for a while, and these will prevent permanent damage to the retinas by providing a weak light source for them."

When the other contact was in place, and she had blinked the tears from her eyes, she realized she was completely blind. There was some light, the dimmest of yellowy-white glows that filled her vision, but it wasn't coming from the lab. The contacts emitted their own, weak glow. She didn't understand this. She knew Banes could see, so why had they just blinded her? She waited fretfully, turning her head from side to side, for whatever indignity or torture might come next.

What came next was the helmet. Its insides were sticky with fresh latex-

like stuff, she could feel it spreading over her skin. The molded foam interior was pressed around her head from both sides, adding pressure from all sides. The pressure increased until, with an audible click, the two halves met in the middle and joined. Katrina's head was locked inside a steel shell. The foam was snug all over her head, ears, and face. She had been blinded, and now she was deafened. She could hear absolutely nothing through the helmet and sound-absorbent foam. The wet rubber oozed across her skin like thick glue. It was stifling. She began to hyperventilate, desperately sucking air in from the shallow open space in front of her lips. The mimetic latex goop was dripping down over her lips and chin, adding further to the fear of suffocation. *Please, make this stop. It can't always be like this. Not for eight months!*

She waited, frantic, in the darkness for a while. It seemed like a long time. There came a burst of static in her ears, which suddenly transformed the technician's voice.

"-is it? I'm not convinced. I think I'd rather hit the beach on my vacation," he was saying. "Ah, the auditory link is established."

"Patience, V-7505," said the doctor. "Try to control your breathing."

"Negotiating link with mimetic network aaand… Custodian: default mimetic setting."

Katrina noticed a change. Her breath was coming more easily. The latex in her nose, mouth, and throat was contracting, becoming thinner. It was happening all around her head. It felt as if her entire head was being vacuum sealed, a not entirely pleasant sensation when added to the ubiquitous pressure of the foam. The feeling of having the inside of her nose and mouth being vacuum sealed was even more bizarre. The stuff was becoming less liquid and sticky, as well. In a few minutes, it had transformed into a dry, latex sheath–thin as paper–that had adhered to ever part of her head and mouth in perfect detail. With her rubber coated tongue she explored her rubber-encased teeth and lips. Movement of her tongue and lips was still slightly limited within the tight coating, but it was a whole lot better than before. It was so strange to have every part of her mouth covered like that. It felt both dry and slippery at the same time. She could produce no saliva. She couldn't feel the passage of the air she breathed through her mouth or nose. Nor could she smell or taste anything. Being unable to taste anything for eight months? She moaned weakly. This was *so* going to suck.

"Bonding with sensor array… overriding optic nerve input," said the technician. Katrina's world suddenly went dark. The faint glow of the contacts had disappeared. "Synchronizing eye movement. You know, these things are a lot faster than they used to be."

"We must always strive towards improvement," came a new voice, but Katrina recognized it. It was the cruel man, Dr. Grable, who had teased her about the Custodian implantation during her first day here. "Is this unit coming along?"

"Almost done here," replied Dr. Barriston.

"Excellent! Two others of this batch have already been processed." He spoke up louder, though Katrina could already hear him just fine. "V-7505! Good to see you again. You've come a long way since last we met. I trust everyone is explaining things to your satisfaction? I would hate to see you become stressed."

"Doctor Grable," the woman muttered with disapproval in her voice.

"Oh, just having a little jest, no harm done. This one and I are old friends. Isn't that right, V-7505?"

"Asshole," muttered Katrina into the tiny open space before her mouth, her lips just brushing its interior. She was pleased to discover she could speak again, albeit a little sloppily with the latex on her tongue. She could barely hear herself speak, though. It was like talking with her hand cupped tightly over her nose and mouth. She knew that Banes couldn't be heard, and that no sound she made could penetrate the walls of the helmet. Therefore, she deemed it safe to expend some her vitriol. "You are an asshole. A complete, total, and unmitigated bastard. You just wait 'til I'm out of this fucking thing, *Doctor* Grable, then we'll see who's laughing. You know what else? *Fuck… yooouuu!*" she shouted into the muffling confinement of the stifling helmet.

"Um… V-7505? Your audio is on our speakers," said Dr. Barriston.

"Oh."

"I do believe," said Doctor Grable smoothly, "that *that* was a threat. And I also believe that threatening a citizen, audibly or visibly, is punishable."

Doctor Barriston sighed. "Custodian: default punishment level one."

Katrina yelped as pain instantly washed over her. It wasn't nearly as bad as the first one, but it was still bad.

"That's better," said Doctor Grable. "I'll be seeing to the others now."

A minute later, Dr. Barriston said, "Well put, V-7505. He *is* something of an asshole."

Katrina smirked inside her imprisoning helmet. Maybe not everyone who worked here was inhuman. Maybe some were just trying to get by with an unpleasant job. That didn't make it any less wrong, of course.

"Synchronized," said the technician. "Accessing occipital lobe."

A nauseating, multicolored miasma appeared before Katrina's eyes. From this chaos, an image of the room slowly came together. Except it wasn't her eyes that were seeing. Her blinded, contact-covered eyes didn't have anything to do with it. It was images from the sensor patches on the front of the helmet, received by the computer and then translated into an image inside her brain. The colors were washed out, almost sepia-tone, and the view was a little like looking through the wrong end of a pair of binoculars–everything was just a little bit smaller than it should have been. Not so much as to mess with her vision or make it hard to see, but enough so as to make the world around her seem just a little more remote and farther away.

What was amazing was that when she moved her blinded eyes, the view naturally darted around accordingly. The shifting view matched her eye movements perfectly. Almost natural, and yet... not. It was so *strange*. This was going to take a lot of getting used to. On the positive side, the image was crystal clear. Clearer even than her sight before she ever needed prescription contacts. What's more, whenever she blinked her eyes, the image blanked out correspondingly. The Custodian must have had a way to detect the blinking impulse from her brain. She shut her eyes for a few seconds, and the video feed stayed dark. She opened them, and it came on again. It couldn't seem to duplicate a squint, though.

"It blinks," she observed.

"Yes," said Dr. Barriston. "You'll be thankful for that when you want to sleep."

"But why? Why all this?" Katrina asked. "Why not just give us some simple eye holes?"

"It's another layer of isolation, V-7505. It is part of your punishment," the woman replied. "You are to be completely separated from the world around you just as you are separated from society. Your suit will have no permanent openings, aside from those you breathe through, and those have internal filters.

The suit will be your entire world for the duration of your sentence, and the Custodian will have complete control over it."

"Seems a little… little bit of overkill," Katrina mumbled. She didn't want to know any more. Everything she learned just made her more frightened. But she had to understand everything she could if she was to write a story about the experience and the tortures. "If no one will be able to hear me, why am I still able to talk in this thing?"

"There may come emergency situations when you will need to be able to speak and be understood. It is rare, but it can happen. Medical emergencies, for instance. This is banishment, not a death sentence, and we *do* have your safety in mind, V-7505."

"Great." *Yeah, I feel the love, all right.*

"Furthermore, early experiments showed that, when isolated to this degree, humans often fare best, psychologically speaking, when they can hear their own voices from time to time. Talking to yourself helps keep you sane, in other words."

"At least I'll have a good conversation partner."

"That's good, because we're disconnecting you from the lab computers and speakers now. Unless there is an emergency, from this point forward no one will be able to hear your voice."

"W-wait! Wait, please–"

Already, the doctor was deaf to her. "We're almost done. Finishing the rest of the suit is the simplest part of the process." They unstrapped her from the chair. "Come with us, please."

She shakily got to her feet–unsteady on those glued-on soles that served as foot protection–and was lead into another room. She reached up to feel her head. Her face was gone. There was nothing but a glassy smooth and featureless surface. She could see her fingers as they passed over the sensors, just as if she had passed them within an inch of her own eyes.

In the next room was a metal tub filled with the black, latex goo. She moaned, seeing where this was headed. She could put up a struggle, sure, but where would that get her? Another nasty jolt from her new companion, no doubt. She allowed them to help her step into the tub. The stuff was warm and felt like she was standing knee-deep in Elmer's glue. They bid her to lie down so that she was completely submerged in the latex. Before she had time to worry

about getting air, they were lifting her back out. It brought to Katrina's mind the image of an old-fashioned, riverside baptism.

She stood, dripping, on a mat, blinded once again while waiting for the inevitable connection to be made. In a few minutes, the latex began to shrink all around her. It grew thinner, but it also got tighter. Her vision also returned as the sensors were cleared. Before long, she was covered in a glossy black second skin. Everything was sealed inside the latex coating, from the top of her helmet to the soles of her padded feet. She rubbed her hands over her arms and belly. Given her past interest in latex, it might have been an exciting, new sensation under other circumstances. Under these circumstances, however, she only felt intimidated, frightened, and traumatized.

"Very good. You're doing fine. Now if you'll come over here, I'll show you how your daily maintenance will work. Pay attention, you'll only be told once." She was taken over to an area on the floor that looked something like a foreign toilet–the kind like a hole in the ground that you squatted over. Instead of a hole, there was a sunken, stainless steel bowl from which projected some kind of mechanical device. A pair of footprints were imprinted on the floor to either side to indicate where she should place her feet. There was also a pair of handprints on the floor just in front of the bowl. On the wall above it was a sign with a black, stick-like figure squatting on the ground, its hands on the ground between its feet like a dog. Katrina had seen those signs around the city during the last trip, but hadn't fully grasped their significance. Now she understood.

"This is a maintenance station. There are many located in buildings around the city. Just follow the posted signs like this one in order to find one. Take the position, please."

Katrina hesitated, realizing the position she was being put it. She was required to squat on the ground like a dog taking dump, and right in front of everyone in the room. Tears of humiliation welled up in her blind eyes. Hadn't they done enough to her? Why add this indignity?

The woman shook her head in resignation. "Custodian: default punish–"

Katrina instantly squatted over the bowl, placing her hands on the floor in front of her. It was degrading beyond words, but this was not the time for rebellion.

"Thank you. Implanted within your colon is your waste reclamation unit. It absorbs your bodily waste, your urine, and your menses. It stores these and

reclaims water and organic compounds that will fuel your suit and Custodian. It needs energy, just like you. During your maintenance, the stored waste will be removed from the unit, and food for you will be pumped in through a tube that passes through your digestive tract and up into your stomach. You will not eat nor drink anything during your sentence."

"You're telling me I'm being fed through my *ass*?" Katrina asked aloud in disgust. Her outrage went unheard.

"Initiating maintenance sequence," said the technician.

A few seconds later, Katrina felt pressure pushing out from the inside of her anus. Startled, she reared up and almost fell over backwards. She was sure she was going to the bathroom inside of her suit, which would have been bad. What was coming out of her wasn't waste, though. It was the probe of the reclamation unit. It extended several inches from her body, making a tent in the seat of her latex suit. She placed her hands back on the floor, mostly just to steady herself, breathing heavily. She was disoriented from the combined sensations and humiliation. The machine in the middle of the bowl activated and guided itself to mate with the probe projecting from Katrina's rear end. Triggered by the machine, the suit opened a small hole in the latex at the tip of the probe and the connection was made. She couldn't stand up now even if she tried. *This can't be happening to me*, she thought. It was beyond embarrassing.

She couldn't shake the mental image of herself being refueled like a car at a filling station. The process was so inhuman. She was being treated like some sort of machine, just an unfeeling object.

She crouched there for several minutes. At first she felt nothing. Certainly there was none of the relief one might expect to feel during an act of 'removal of stored waste,' as they had called it. She still felt as full and as cramped as before. That was probably due to the unit that had been crammed into her guts. Then she noticed her stomach was getting full. She had been given a light breakfast that morning, before all of this had begun, but she hadn't realized that she was so hungry. It was strange to feel her stomach get so full so quickly, and to not even have eaten a thing. Then a flood of warm fluid came rushing into the suit, flowing across her skin. She almost tumbled over again in surprise. She feared there had been a dreadful, sewage back flow problem.

"That is your cleansing solution. It will fill your suit and spread to cover your skin. It will keep you clean, disinfected, will inhibit the growth of hair and

nails."

The tightness of the latex allowed the fluid to quickly spread all over her body, including her head and face. It wasn't a bad sensation. Kind of pleasant, really. Then a vacuum started and it was all sucked back out within a minute. The suit actually contracted around her in places like a living thing to aid in the emptying process, squeezing out the fluid. The machine beeped to indicate its task was done and withdrew back into the bowl, while the probe retreated back inside Katrina's body. The tiny hole in the suit made by the machine would seal itself in seconds.

"Not so bad, is it? At least it's over quickly. Do you find it uncomfortable? You're supposed to. Comfort's one of the luxuries you've given up as an outcast of society. Come with me." The woman took Katrina to a featureless holding cell, little larger than a broom closet. "You will wait in here until the rest of your group is finished with processing. Then you will receive your final instructions before being released. Good luck to you. Custodian: anesthetize."

Katrina recoiled as the door slid shut. On the inside of the door was a full length mirror. One final degradation, like a parting gift: she could see herself in all her new, Banesuit glory. The tight latex left absolutely nothing to the imagination, which, to Katrina's mind and her thirty-six-year-old self image, was not a good thing. Though she wasn't exactly fat, she had gotten a little out of shape over the years. It was not the type of body she thought was flattered by the wearing tight latex. That was just a fleeting annoyance. Worse was the lack of a face. Her hands explored the smooth surface of her head in the mirror, turning this way and that. The extra padding over her nipples and between her thighs was invisible under latex, giving her breasts and crotch the unnaturally smooth, anatomically incorrect appearance of a plastic mannequin.

As she stood there, she realized that her skin was going numb. *'Anesthetize?'* she wondered. *The suit, the fucking Custodian, it's doing this!* All sensation, already muted by the material of Banesuit, was further denied to her by the phantom anesthetic. She began, almost frantically, to squeeze and pinch herself all over. Apart from a slight pressure where she pinched, she could hardly feel a thing.

She leaned against the wall and slowly slid down to the floor, where she began to weep. The gravity of what she had gotten herself into came crashing

down on her. How could she have possibly had erotic fantasies about wearing this suit? There was nothing erotic about it for her, not at all. Barbara the Bane really *had* been nuts, after all. There was nothing pleasurable here. The whole process was cold, impersonal, and cruel. If she had known what she was really getting herself into, she would have never done this. And she knew she hadn't yet experienced the worst of the torture: for the next eight months she would feel almost nothing, taste nothing, and smell nothing. Every scrap of identity had been stripped away. Even her basic humanity was mostly gone. She was now just a thing–a thing created to be ignored. She was a Bane.

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The group of newly processed Banes waited in the parking area behind Ashton Technologies. It was sunny out, but the daylight to the Banes' eyes was drained of color and vibrancy, and it gave no comfort. They couldn't even feel the warmth of the sun on their shiny, latex skins, for the suits maintained an almost constant temperature. Though unable to speak, their body language said all that needed to be said. The Bane that had been the bald, chubby guy sat on the asphalt, apparently crying. Two other Banes roamed around the small area in attitudes of shock and depression. The Bane that had been Tina stood huddled over, hugging herself and repeatedly rubbing her benumbed arms as if she could coax sensation back into them.

Katrina looked at her, recalling what Tina had said about choosing to be a Bane because she was too claustrophobic for a jail cell. She wondered how Tina was coping now, in her new, skintight, isolation chamber. Katrina stepped forward and placed her hand on Tina's arm. Needing no further invitation, Tina whirled around and wrapped her arms around Katrina, clinging to her like a drowning person. Their helmets bumped together. They could hardly even feel each other's bodies, there was only the warm pressure of an embrace. Katrina felt such sorrow for the younger woman. This was going to be such hell for her. At least Katrina's investigations had given her some sort of hint of what she was in for (even though it was turning out to be much worse than she had expected), but poor Tina had been clueless. She would have to try to watch out for her. It didn't matter who she was or what she had done to get here. They were all in this together now.

Doctor Torres arrived in the parking lot. He greeted the group as he descended the concrete stairs. "Ah, here you are. I know you're all probably a

little upset right now. That is perfectly normal. I hope, at least, that your processing went as smoothly and as painlessly as possible for each of you. Now allow me to lay down a few ground rules. The rest you will learn as you go along, with the help of your onboard Custodians. First, a little about your suits. The Custodians are there to take care of you, as well as monitor you. It's a learning computer, but it is *just* a computer, nothing more. It has no emotions and it means you no ill will, though I'm sure there are times it may seem like it. It is simply acting out its programming. If it gives you an order, I suggest you follow it. The suits are self-repairing and are puncture and heat resistant. Trying to remove them will cause you more harm than it will them, and you will simply get in trouble for a Violation of Banishment.

"Now some basic rules. As outcasts, you are not allowed to enter any public or private structure. Maintenance stations are the exception. You may not trespass on private property. You may not steal or vandalize public or private property. You may not use telephones or computers. You may not wear clothing, jewelry, or decoration. You may not attempt to communicate with, interact with, or have anything whatsoever to do with citizens. You are not allowed physical contact with other outcasts. You are otherwise free to do what you will and go wherever you choose within the designated city limits.

"For your crimes, you are banished from the society of Eudemonia. After you have been taken to your dispersal point, you will cease to exist in the eyes and minds of the citizens. From now and until you are allowed to return to the arms of society, you are no longer people. You are shunned. You are cast out. You are all Banes." Doctor Torres turned his back on the group and walked into the building.

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The ride back into the city was morose and silent. There was none of the fearful, nervous energy of the ride to Ash-Tech, which had been less than a week ago. Now there was just an air of depression. Tina stayed pressed against Katrina's side, clutching her hand as if it was a lifeline. They pulled up to an open plaza near the center of town, in front of an office building. It was approaching rush hour and there were already lots of people walking around. The Banes were herded out of the van, where they stood huddled close together on the sidewalk. Being seen like this in public was utterly mortifying; they felt naked, they were without identities, and were standing out in harsh, black

contrast for all to see. It didn't matter if people technically ignored them. Katrina knew they still saw them and judged them. The guard stepped out of the van. "Disperse," he said. "Custodians, initiate full protocols."

:Custodian protocol initiated: came a voice from inside Katrina's head, startling her. It was a dulcet, female voice that had all the emotion of a prerecorded phone answering message. Judging from the other Banes reactions, they had all heard a similar voice in their heads, as well.

Then, softly at first, a terrible, squalling noise began to build up in her head. It grew louder and louder, worse and worse, until it was nearly nauseating. The sound repulsed her viscerally, like a thousand nails dragged across chalkboards. It was unspeakably dreadful. Katrina clapped her hands to the sides of her helmet over her ears, as if that would do any good. The others were also writhing.

The guard rolled his eyes, noting their confusion and distress. With bored condescension, he told them, "That sound means you're standing too close to each other. Spread out."

Upon hearing this, Tina seized Katrina's hand and held on with a death grip. The others immediately ran into the crowd, getting distance from each other. One of them ran around the van to escape the noise and narrowly missed being hit by a car. The cacophony only got worse. Katrina thought for sure she was going to throw up. More than just noise, it was becoming increasingly physically painful. Though still trying to hang onto Tina's hand, she took a step away from the girl. It was like internal tidal forces were pushing them apart. It was finally Tina, unable to bear it any longer, who let go first and ran away. When they were thirty feet apart, the noise abruptly silenced. Katrina's ears didn't even ring, because she hadn't heard it with her ears. It was all in her head.

Tina had stopped running. She tried to approach Katrina, but after a few steps, the noise began to start again. Katrina took an involuntary step backwards. There might as well have been an invisible wall between them. The skinny, black Bane that had been a girl named Tina stood at the edge of the permitted distance and held her arms out to the older woman in desperate supplication. With her heart breaking and with deep guilt, Katrina hung her head and turned away from the girl. She couldn't bear to see Tina like that. She had to leave her behind. There was nothing else she could do. They weren't in

this together, as she had originally thought. They were each of them completely on their own.

Katrina looked down at her body and examined her jet black arms and hands. *I did it. It's done. I'm actually here,* she thought. *I'm a Bane. What the hell do I do now?* She then looked up to the cheerless, sepia sky. *What have I done to myself? Oh, god, what have I done?*

Chapter 6

Katrina stood wedged between a large planter and the wall of an office building at the edge of the corporate plaza. There were people everywhere. She had already been bumped and jostled just trying to get to this small island of safety. They just walked right into her as if she wasn't there. She was afraid to attempt re-entering the flow of people. What if she got knocked down? They might step right on top of her. Hell, she'd probably get some kind of violation punishment for causing citizens to trip over her battered and bruised body.

She watched the people pass by as she stood there. They seemed so unreal, due to the absence of true color in her new vision. It was almost like watching a movie, an illusion which was enhanced by the fact that no one was 'looking at the camera.' Hardly any of them so much as glanced at her. The gaze of perhaps one in twenty would pass over her, but would not linger. Most just stared right through her. The people of Eudemonia were just too used to having Banes in their midst to make a big deal out of it. Maybe, in their minds, they really *had* learned to not see her.

She tried to take stock of the situation. Despite her depression and regret, she reminded herself that deep down she was a reporter. She had come here for a reason and that was to report on the experience and expose the bastards for what they were doing. She wasn't some criminal cast to the winds; she still had a purpose and a job to do. She steeled herself with that one, consoling thought.

Her first job was to make contact with Verne Sawyer. The two of them had done most of the planning for this 'phase' of the investigation together. He was supposed to be her link with the outside world. He had been assigned to meet with her first thing after the sentencing and processing. Neither of them had known how long it might take for Katrina to be let back out on the street, so each day at noon he was going to wait at a predetermined spot in one of the

public parks. It would certainly be well into the afternoon before she could hope to get there today, so meeting up with him would have to wait until tomorrow.

One thing she *could* do was to find her way to the cache that had been hidden for her in the park. It was to contain some supplies she would need to keep a record. If nothing else, she could use it as a drop point for messages. But that was halfway across the city and she would have to go on foot; Banes weren't allowed in the mass transit stations. She had familiarized herself with maps of Eudemonia, but she was a little lost now that she was here on the ground. She figured that as long as she kept heading west from here, she should be able to find the park okay. *Nothin' to it but to do it*, as her father used to say. She looked around at the mass of people around her. Perhaps 'doing it' could wait until after rush hour.

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It was harder than she had predicted to get across the city. It was difficult just trying to wind through people on the sidewalks without bumping into anyone. She had to plan her path ahead of her, much like looking for openings in a busy freeway full of cars that didn't want to let her in. Often as not, she could do nothing else but step aside and press herself against a wall to let a group of people pass. She started to develop a paranoid suspicion that people were grouping up on purpose just to inconvenience her. But no, that would be giving herself too much importance. The people just didn't care. Another thing that slowed her down was that she was still weak and sore from her processing. She was unused to walking this much, especially on almost bare feet. The padding on her soles helped some, and certainly prevented cuts and scrapes, but it was nothing like wearing shoes. Her sight depending on the helmet's external sensors was hard to get used to, as well. The slight shift in perspective kept throwing her off balance.

Even crossing a street was dangerous; she couldn't expect people to stop or even slow down for her. Not if they couldn't 'see' her. Once, while crossing at the tail end of a stop light, the light had changed before she got to the sidewalk. Instead of waiting for her to finish crossing, as a driver normally would, the waiting car started moving. Katrina was forced to make a hasty leap for the curb to avoid a brush with a fender. *They have my safety in mind?* she thought. *Yeah, right! I'm lucky if I don't get killed out here.*

And then there were the other Banes. They weren't all over the place, but

they were here and there, huddled like homeless people on a sidewalk or walking somewhere like her. Many times she was forced to cross the street to avoid another Bane when her nauseating proximity alarm began to go off. And it always seemed to be Katrina having to get out of the way, not the other Bane. They just stood there, waiting for her to move. She knew nothing of the unwritten rules of Bane society. It took several miles of walking for the pattern to emerge. Move with the flow of traffic; walk on the right side of the street, whichever way you were going. Made sense. That didn't account for the Banes who were just sitting around, though. She still had to circumvent those.

She stopped in front of a Chinese restaurant. She knew the aromas were all around her. She lifted the chin of her helmet, as if that would help expose the breathing holes, and inhaled deeply. Nothing. She looked forlornly into the window. Was it really going to be eight months until she could actually eat again? *Oh, this is going to get bad*, she thought. How long, she wondered, would it take for her to start obsessively dreaming of real food?

……

She was exhausted by the time she made it to the correct park. There were many parks in Eudemonia–it was planned that way, for the aesthetics–but this was one of the larger ones. Reaching it was like coming upon an oasis. A park meant open spaces and fewer people, which was a good thing for a Bane. But it also meant it attracted a lot of Banes, for the same reason, so there were lots of proximity warnings. Sometimes she had to simply endure the howling in her head and run past another Bane just to get by, an act which earned her plenty of rude gestures.

The cache was hidden in a marshy stand of bushes and reeds next to a pond. The idea was that it would be too unpleasant a place for people or other Banes to hang out, thereby helping to avoid discovery of the cache. It was also hoped that by hiding among the bushes, her activities would be hidden from prying eyes. It seemed her bad luck was holding out, because as she approached the cache, she discovered a female Bane crouching in the mud near the reeds.

It had to have been one of the longer-term Banes because of her physique. That was how Katrina learned to differentiate among them: most new Banes like herself were soft and out of shape, while 'older' ones were more hardened and muscular from outdoor living and no lack of exercise. Whatever this one was doing at the pond was a mystery to Katrina. Her arms and legs were caked in

mud and she was digging around in the muck at the edge of the pond with her hands.

Katrina got close enough to her to set off the internal alarm just long enough to alert the other to her presence. The Bane turned to look at her. Katrina pointed to the clump of bushes and clasped her hands together in the universal signal for begging. The Bane continued to look at her for a moment, then stepped out of the mire. She gathered up a pile of small mussel shells on the bank and walked away. For some obscure reason, she had been collecting the shells.

"Thank you!" Katrina called automatically to the departing Bane, even though her gratitude couldn't be heard. She eagerly made her way into the stand of bushes. Deep inside there was a small open space. She could barely feel the tangled branches sliding over her glossy new skin. That was one good thing about being in a Banesuit, at least. She would be able to slip through the densest bushes and brambles with the ease of a wild rabbit. The tall bushes surrounded her and formed a ceiling over her head. The ground was too mucky and uneven to be able to sleep on so she couldn't take shelter here overnight, but it would do for now. She collapsed onto the ground and let her exhaustion overtake her.

It was the first moment's peace she had found since the traumas of processing and the stress of navigating the city. She breathed deeply, trying to calm herself. She began to explore her body. Her hands roamed around her helmet and the latex surface of her Banesuit. The rubber pads on her nipples reduced them to barely-visible bumps at the front of her breasts; she couldn't even pinch them to induce sensation. She had the same issue with the thin pad over her crotch. Even if her skin hadn't been anesthetized, she wouldn't have been able to feel anything down there. Enforced chastity, on top of everything else. She had known that was part of what she was in for, but experiencing it first hand was another matter. It wasn't a problem at the moment, but Katrina could see it becoming a major hardship in the coming months. After all, when you had nothing else to do, there was always masturbation. Apparently, that didn't apply to Banes.

After a brief rest, she dug through the weeds to get to the flat rock she and Verne had used to cover the hole they had excavated prior to her sentencing. Thank goodness… the bag was still in there. Inside of the sealed, heavy duty plastic were items she had requested. She pawed through the bag, taking

inventory. There was a cell phone with a text messenger, a small satellite radio, an extended life camcorder, a flashlight, a tightly-packed Mylar blanket, and an old fashioned journal with pens and pencils. They were just the basics. Should she find herself in need of anything else, she could send a message for it.

There was also an unexpected bonus in the form of a wad of cash in a money clip. That must have been Benjamin's helpful addition. *Thanks a lot, Ben,* she thought. *What am I supposed to buy with this? Food? Maybe some new clothes?* Well, money always talked even if a Bane couldn't. Maybe she could use it for bribery or something.

A few seconds after she picked up the clip to count the money, a wave of agony washed over her body. She screamed and the clip dropped back into the bag. The pain stopped as suddenly as it had come.

:Protocol Violation. May not handle currency: said the lifeless, female voice in her head.

"What? Oh, come on. You've gotta be kidding me!" Katrina groused. She looked at the money in consternation. Then she had an idea. Maybe if it couldn't see what she was doing… she looked up at the sky, a caricature of someone whistling innocently, while fumbling around in the bag until her hand closed on the money clip. Again, the pain flooded her body. She let it go.

:Protocol Violation. May not handle currency:

So the damn thing didn't need to see her actions. Somehow the Custodian was able to determine what she was doing simply because she was doing it. *She* knew she was 'handling currency,' so it did, also. "This is going to get old *so* fast. You know that? Hey, can you talk to me?" she asked. There was no answer. She sighed and tried the text messenger next, thinking to send a message to Benjamin and Verne to inform them of her arrival. Holding it was no problem, but as soon as she tried to turn it on and push buttons, she got zapped.

:Protocol Violation. May not use devices:

She got the same message and punishment again when she tried the camcorder, the radio, and even the flashlight. "Oh, come on! It's just a stupid flashlight. What's wrong with using a flashlight? How can that possibly violate *anything*?"

She was near her wits' end. The punishment was bad all on its own, but the senseless and impersonal application of it made it even worse. All that was left was the blanket and the journal. She was almost afraid to try. Those

punishments hurt a lot, but they were little easier when she was prepared for it. With some trepidation, she unwrapped the Mylar blanket and pulled the silver, crinkling stuff over her shoulders.

:Protocol violation. May not wear clothing:

"Ow! Damn it!" She whipped it off her shoulders. "This is not clothing, you dumb machine!" Well, the blanket wasn't critical. She might not even need a blanket if the suit kept her warm like it was supposed to.

The journal and pencil seemed safe to use. She tested it by drawing a few spirals on the first page. "Might as well start now," she said to herself. "Let's see. *Day one. My life as a Bane began today. I knew it would be hard, but I had no…* hey." She examined her writing. Shortly after 'My life as a Bane', her writing had become illegible–just random squiggles and lines. It looked like she had been writing in insane hieroglyphics, like nonsensical dream writing. She hadn't even noticed she was doing it at first. "What's going on here?"

She tried again, but this time, after only the first couple of letters, her writing went all funny. Again and again she tried, concentrating hard, but now found she couldn't write at all, not a single letter or number. It looked like a toddler's very first attempts at imitating writing. It was as though her fingers had completely forgotten how to write. The nonsense letters only became more wild and erratic as her frustration grew. "No. No, no, no!"

It was the Custodian. It had to be. She could easily form the words in her mind's eye, but somehow the thing was scrambling the messages her mind sent to her muscles. It simply wouldn't let her write. Punishing her for violating some rule was one thing, but this was terrifying. It was able to screw with her physical abilities, her control over her own body. Just like that, the cursed thing could stifle a skill that had been second nature since preschool.

Growing desperate, she tried to write in the dirt by grasping a stick in both hands. She tried using her toe in the mud. Nothing worked; any resemblance to actual letters was purely coincidental. On impulse, she drew a stick figure. It was as best as her artistic skills allowed. It turned out fine. She drew several more: one waving, another running. She drew a simple flower and a primitive cat. No problem. It was only when she tried to write that it got screwed up. Why? Because it was a form of communication? How could the damned thing *know* that?

"Please. Just give me this. Just let me write, that's all I ask. Please. Let

me have this one thing." She tried one last time. It was futile. "Oh, *damn* you," she said, voice shaking with anger. "Damn you! Get out of my head! I order you to *get out of my head*! Custodian! End protocol. End the fucking default protocol!"

Then, like every new Bane before her, she frantically tried to escape her suit. She felt all around her body in a panicked search for a weakness. She dug her fingers into the latex, trying to rip it off her skin, but it was stuck to her like glue. She pulled and clawed at her helmet. She kicked and screamed and fought with it like a wild animal in a trap. It was useless. "Oh, god." She doubled over, sobbing. "Just let me write."

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Katrina had spent an hour sitting beside the pond, chucking stones into the water while she contemplated her predicament. Keeping a written record would be impossible, it seemed. She wouldn't even be able to slip notes to Verne. She could still do her job and report on it all, but only after she was free. She had really wanted to keep a daily journal to record her experiences while they were fresh. Record, and perhaps to help maintain her sanity in the process. She was trying to think of a way around it. Pictographs, maybe? She just didn't know. There had to be a way to write, she was sure of it. Barbara had done it easily. She had seen it with her own eyes.

That fucking Barbara. Katrina's thoughts kept returning to her. With irrational petulance, she blamed that Bane for the situation she was in. She had made it all sound so rosy, given Katrina a false impression that the experience wouldn't be as bad as it was. And she had been able to *write*, for crying out loud! That wasn't fair at all. Maybe Barbara really was crazy. Maybe losing one's mind short-circuited the Custodian and allowed her to do things that she otherwise couldn't. Katrina hoped she didn't have to test that theory through personal experience. She would have to find that Bane again and get some answers out of her. Maybe now that Katrina herself was a Bane, Barbara would prove more forthcoming with her secrets.

The sun was setting and it was getting quite dark in the park. That didn't turn out to be a problem for Katrina, however. The contrast and brightness of her vision automatically adjusted to compensate for the fading light. It seemed she would be able see in the dark. Not perfectly, as it wasn't true night vision, but it served reasonably well. So that was one good thing about being a Bane.

Thank heaven for small miracles.

She went to re-bury her cache. It looked like none of it would do her any good, but she wasn't just going to let some scavenger find it. You never knew when something might come in handy. After that was done, she paced around a little to work the kinks out of her sore legs. She was mentally and physically exhausted, so she decided she had better find some place to bed down for the night. Farther up the slope, in the forest, she found a nice flat, grassy area under some trees that was free of rocks and tree roots. It wasn't a feather bed, but it would have to do. *I always hated camping*, she thought.

She stretched out on the ground and watched the stars appear between the tree branches. The air must have been cool, but her skin felt perfectly comfortable. That was something. She shut her eyes and her vision went completely dark. That was fine by her. Light sources always annoyed her when she was trying to sleep. She had never been able to get to sleep with so much as bright digital clock next to her bed.

She had almost managed to doze off when her proximity alarm jarred her awake. She sat up, frightened. There was a large male Bane coming up the slope toward her. Surely he was getting the same noise in his head, but he wasn't veering off. The noise got worse. She waved her arms at him, shooing him away. "Go away! Are you blind? You're killing me here!"

He didn't go away. He just kept getting closer. Katrina stood up and began to back away from him. He flapped his arms in a shooing gesture of his own.

"What? No way! This is my spot, I was here first!" she shouted. He stopped and held his ground about fifteen feet away from her. His head was bowed and his fists were clenched. He was clearly suffering as much as she was, but he wasn't moving. Katrina finally figured out what was going on. This was a territorial fight between two Banes. The one who could hold out the longest got the spot. Katrina didn't want to give way; she didn't want to try to find another decent place in the semi-dark. Moreover, she had always hated being bullied around. She tried to hold her ground, but it quickly became too much for her. She felt sick and the fire was beginning to dance on her skin like one of the violation punishments. Doubling over with nausea and pain, she turned and fled.

After she got a distance away, the warning abruptly stopped. She stood

on the periphery and trembled with indignation as the Bane laid himself down on the spot she had just occupied. "You're a jerk. You know that?" she called, not that it did any good. She supposed she could keep pestering him by breaching his warning zone, but there wasn't much point in that. He had won. The whole thing seemed so primitive. They were forced to live like animals! All she had wanted was to sleep in peace. She turned and trudged off into the darkness.

Chapter 7

Katrina stood at the edge of the park the next day, watching a park bench from a distance. She was tired and sore all over. Not just from yesterday's trek across the city and the processing, but now from sleeping with rocks digging into her back. She had slept terribly and now she ached in a dozen places. She kept waking up to every sound and it took her a long time to get back to sleep again. Right now, she was starving and knew she needed to find a maintenance station, but she didn't want to miss her appointment.

There were lots of people in the park–mostly joggers with headphones and women with strollers and small children. It was a nice day, if you weren't a Bane. And there were plenty of those around. She had to keep shifting her position to avoid other Banes as they passed by.

Finally, at what she guessed was noon, a sandy-haired man in his late twenties–just short of handsome, mostly due to his pasty, computer tan complexion and the few extra pounds around his mid-section–came walking up the path with a newspaper under his arm. *Good man*, she thought. At least Verne Sawyer was keeping up his part, what with the cache and the meeting place. She didn't know if she could uphold hers by telling him what was going on, though. She still wasn't sure how she was going to communicate with him, but she had to try. At the very least, she would let him know she was here. She started down the path, halting once she was across from the park bench. Verne, alert for any female Banes, looked up from his newspaper. He looked her up and down.

"Katrina?" he asked under his breath. "Is that you?"

She stood there, not looking at him, for a few more seconds. Then she continued down the path and headed off into the woods. Once she was a considerable distance away, Verne casually folded his newspaper and followed

after her. Katrina had to grin. Knowing Verne, he was probably loving this covert, undercover spy stuff. He didn't get a chance to get out into the 'real world' much. The man had even excitedly suggested using code phrases, but Katrina had to shoot his ideas down. He would likely have come up with some hackneyed phrase along the lines of 'The cock crows at Noon,' or something equally as ridiculous.

She lead him to a secluded area ringed by pine trees and bushes, making sure he saw her ducking into the underbrush. When he arrived, he stood before her, staring at her and brushing leaves off his jacket. "It *is* you, right?" he asked.

Katrina nodded, blushing. He just kept staring at her. She couldn't blame him. She knew she looked like a freak. It was just so humiliating to be seen like this by someone who actually knew her. A lot more than she had anticipated when imagining this moment. And this had all been her idea, after all. She felt an irrational shame in thinking that Verne might think she had *wanted* to look like this. And she had, a little. But not anymore.

He finally caught on to her discomfort. "S-sorry. Sorry, it's just so strange. I've been waiting out here for days and I kept thinking I saw you. It's just all you Banes, er, people, uh… look alike."

She rolled her eyes, ignoring his faux pas.

"But forget all that," he said. "What about you? What's it like? Did they hurt you in there?"

She nodded, recalling the punishments and indignities of her processing.

"Why, those…" He exhaled sharply. "They'll regret that. What about now? Are you hurt anywhere? In pain?"

Sometimes, she thought. She shrugged at him with uncertainty.

"Damn, I wish you could talk. Why haven't you messaged me? Was the stuff all there?"

She tried to pantomime being punished for using the devices.

Verne looked confused. "They won't work? Or, what, you're not allowed?"

Katrina nodded.

At that point the Custodian must have either had enough, or had discerned the intent of Katrina's gesturing. When she nodded that time, she heard *:Contact Violation. May not communicate with a civilian:* and she received a body-wide shock. She jerked in surprise. "No way. I can't even nod at him?"

she wondered in dismay.

"What's the matter? Are you okay?"

She started to shake her head and got another contact violation for it. "Damn it!" There had to be another way. She picked up a stick and cleared a space on the ground of pine needles. She first tried to write, but again it came out as nonsense. Then, since she could still draw pictures, she thought to draw a big frowny face, just to express how miserable she was. Halfway through the circle of the head, her hand lost its coordination. The lines just went all crazy. No matter how hard she concentrated, she couldn't finish drawing the damned circle. "No!" she cried. "Not this, too! It's just a fucking smiley face!" But she knew deep down that it wasn't just a smiley face. It was communication. She tried over and over with growing violence, doing little more than gouging random lines in the dirt.

Verne leaned over to examine the drawing. "I don't get it. What's it supposed to be? An exploding potato?"

Enraged at her own inability to perform such a simple task and Verne's uncomprehending stupidity, she broke the stick over her knee and threw the pieces at him. At least, that's what she intended to do. Her arms froze even as she raised them, the broken stick falling from her hands. The Custodian seemed to have interpreted the harmless act of throwing twigs at her friend as an attempt at violence.

:Contact Violation. May not assault a civilian: said the voice, accompanied by the worst punishment Katrina had yet experienced. She collapsed to the ground, her body overcome by spasms of agony. It was like red hot hooks digging into her flesh. The pain obliterated all rational thought and bodily control. She shrieked uncontrollably. Verne hovered over her, looking baffled and concerned, calling her name.

When it was over, for it couldn't have lasted more than ten seconds, Katrina backpedaled across the ground until she bumped into a tree trunk. She hugged herself, crying from the shock of it, then pounded on the sides of her helmet. "Get out of me! Get out of my head! Please!"

"Katrina, what the hell's the matter?" asked Verne. He placed his hand on her arm, trying to help her up. She unthinkingly accepted his help.

:Contact Violation. May not touch a civilian:

Katrina screamed as another phantom punishment, though far less severe

than the previous one, overcame her for a few seconds. She wrenched her arm out of his grasp, falling backwards onto the ground. He reached for her out of concern, obviously thinking she was having seizure or something. In blind desperation to prevent him from touching her again, she swatted at Verne and roughly shoved him away from her.

:Contact Violation. May not assault a civilian: The fiery hooks sliced into her once more.

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Katrina sat on the ground, sobbing, trying to regain her composure after the series of agonizing punishments. Verne stood in the clearing, looking helpless.

"Okay, I think I get it," he was saying slowly. "I can't touch you or you get punished. And you can't write or even draw? I'm guessing it's the same way with the text messenger? But I don't understand. You said that Bane you interviewed was able to write. Why can't you?"

She just sat there, unable to do so much as affirm or deny any of his questions.

"Katrina? Hello? Talk to me. Wave. Do something. Did I do something wrong? Are you mad at me?"

She looked at him, full of misery. He looked so confused. She could understand how he felt. He couldn't see her tears. To his eyes, she was just a Bane, sitting there like an unresponsive animal, staring back at him with a faceless, unexpressive mask. He couldn't possibly understand what she was going through. No one could, not unless they were a Bane.

"It won't let you do *anything* now, will it? Man, this is some fucked up technology. How can I help you with this? I don't know what to do if we can't talk…" he shrugged. "What am I supposed to do? Just wait for months until it's all over?"

"I don't know!" she cried. He couldn't hear her.

There came the sound hoof beats. Katrina looked around, alarmed, wondering if it was coming from inside her head. Then a chestnut horse broke through the brush with a helmeted cop riding on its back. A mounted patrol. Even in this day and age, it seemed horses were still the best way to patrol a park. Katrina got her feet. She wasn't sure what she should do, if she should make a run for it, or what. Even Verne looked close to taking off.

"I have a Custodian report of repeated Violations of Banishment here," said the cop, taking in the situation. "Is there a problem?"

"Uh, no, Officer," stammered Verne. "I was just here, and– "

The cop dismounted. His horse snorted and dipped its head to the ground, its lips picking through the pine needles in search of something tasty. The cop approached the two of them. "Mind explaining what you're doing out here alone with a Bane that would cause a Violation report?"

"Ah, yes, well, that is, I'm not from around here…"

The cop looked at Katrina. "Bane. Has this man assaulted you?"

Startled to be addressed directly, Katrina risked a contact violation to vigorously shake her head in denial. She didn't get punished for it. She guessed that a police inquiry had precedence over the banishment rules. Katrina studied the cop's face. Her memory clicked. She knew this man! Sort of. It was Michaels, the cop from the diner. Katrina knew from their conversation that he had some sympathy for Banes. Maybe he could help her in some fashion. But then, how could he? She couldn't tell him who she was, and even if she could do so, it would break her cover and get lots of people in serious trouble.

Officer Michaels looked at Katrina a moment longer, then returned his attention to Verne. "You know that attempting contact with a Bane is against the law, sir?"

"You don't understand. I *know* her. She's a friend of mine. Her name's, ah, Vivienne Mul–"

"That's impossible, sir. Banes don't have names."

"Officer, I'm trying to explain it to you if-"

"No, sir, I'm explaining it to *you*," Officer Michaels said, taking an authoritative yet patient tone. It sounded like he had given this lecture many times before. "Banes don't have names. This Bane is *not* your friend. If you had a friend who went into banishment, she's gone for now. You're just going to have to wait until she returns to renew your acquaintance. Sorry, but that's how it works. That's the law."

"But-"

"I'll let you off with a warning this time, but I am within my rights to arrest you if this happens again. Do I make myself clear?"

Verne looked crestfallen. "Yes."

The officer leveled his gaze at Verne. "Don't be selfish, sir. You may

think you're helping, but further attempts at contact can only make things worse for your friend, I promise you. Is that what you want? Now, I'm going to escort you back to the entrance of the park." He looked at Katrina. "Go on. Get out of here."

Katrina winced. He hadn't said it with cruelty, but the words had such brusque dismissal in them that they stung her. She spared one last glance at Verne's apologetic expression before walking away. She didn't know what to do. The entire plan was falling apart. She couldn't do so much as use hand signals to communicate with Verne. There could be no support or comfort from the outside. She was on her own. Never in her life had she felt so utterly and completely alone.

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Katrina wasn't even given a chance to go off and nurse her mental wounds. Just after she left the wooded area, her Custodian announced, *:Maintenance overdue. Report to a maintenance station:*

"Wonderful. Just what I need now. More humiliation to add to this lovely day I'm having. Thanks *so* much."

It was just as well. She was starving. The excuse for food that had been pumped into her stomach had solidified once inside, giving her stomach something to work on and prevent hunger pangs for a long time, but that had been more than twenty-four hours ago. Despite her hunger, she noticed that she didn't really feel thirsty. With the Banesuit latex coating her mouth and throat, her mouth felt neither wet nor dry, not exactly. She supposed her daily fluid requirement was met by the maintenance pump, and the waste unit that had been crammed inside of her was probably more efficient at reclaiming water than her own body. At least she didn't have to worry about being desperate for a drink of water since she couldn't quite drink anything, anymore.

There was a Bane maintenance station located near the public restrooms in the park. It was a round, enclosed kiosk. It had no door, just an opening with a curved privacy wall inside. From what Katrina could guess about the perverse designers of the whole system, the stations probably would have been right out in the open to increase the humiliation factor, but the citizens would likely have complained. There was a light above the door to indicate when there was no vacancy within, but it wasn't lit up at the moment. She approached the little building.

:Entering maintenance zone. Seven minutes: droned the placid voice that Katrina was quickly growing to hate.

"Seven minutes 'til what?" Katrina asked. She received no response, but quickened her pace all the same. She entered the building and went around the wall to find an undecorated, round room with six stations spaced evenly along the wall. She was startled to see four Banes already in there–a male and three females, squatting over the stations like dogs. Her proximity alarm hadn't gone off, so she guessed that the alarm was automatically turned off within a maintenance zone. Made sense. There were too many Banes around for them to all wait in line one at a time.

She hesitated, unsure of herself, but finally submitted to necessity and crouched over the stupid bowl. As soon as she did, there came the strange sensation of the probe pushing out of her, then the maintenance began. She was unhappily aware that, due to the need to be emptied and fed, she was also recharging the Banesuit that punished her so. It was like having to participate in her own torture.

Katrina glanced around at the blank faces of the others and wondered if any of them were as embarrassed about this as she was. Chances were that they had all done this so many times before that it meant nothing to them. She looked up and saw a small word written in black magic marker on the inside of the privacy wall. *Eudeamon*. There were little swirlies and stars drawn around it. She frowned at it. *Thanks*, she thought caustically to the unknown artist. *It's* so *helpful to see that here. Eudeamon, huh? Who* are *you?*

One by one, the other Banes stood up and left. A couple more entered, heading for the empty stations. Just a part of daily life for a Bane. As the warm cleansing fluid was washing over her skin, Katrina calculated that, if she had maintenance once every day, she would have to squat here like this at least two hundred thirty-three more times. Two hundred thirty-three more days as a Bane. It made her heartsick just to think about it.

On her way out of the building, she nearly bumped into a female Bane on her way in. Her alarm went off when they were three feet apart. The other Bane simply turned and went around the other side of the privacy wall. So the proximity limits were still activated, just greatly reduced. It would certainly prevent any shenanigans between Banes. *Can't have that, now can we? Wouldn't want us to have so much as a friendly handshake, now would you?* she thought bitterly.

At least she wasn't hungry anymore.

Just as she exited the building, she heard *:Seven minutes expired. Leave maintenance zone:*

"Ow-ow-oww!" Katrina ran away from the kiosk, spurned on by painful pins and needles all over. Her hesitation and inexperience had cost her a punishment. The needles ceased once she got outside the zone. Out of curiosity, she took a few steps back toward the building. There wasn't a punishment, but the proximity alarm went off. She jumped back.

:May not re-enter maintenance zone for fifteen hours, fifty-nine minutes:

Good to know, she thought.

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Katrina spent much of the rest of that afternoon moping around and doing nothing. It didn't seem there was anything else *to* do. Then it occurred to her that she might as well prepare for night time and find herself a good place to sleep well in advance of nightfall. There were the open fields, and the grass was passingly soft, though it was lumpy. She just hated the thought of sleeping right out in the open like that. She needed the comfort of a roof over her head, even if it was just a roof of leaves and branches.

Off in the forest, she found a likely spot. She began to gather armfuls of pine needles (which weren't prickly through the suit), leaves, and dead grass. Then she got industrious and spent a long time digging a shallow bowl in the ground using sticks and flat rocks. A few other Banes passed by while she worked, and a couple paused to watch her before moving on. There was this one female Bane who kept lingering around. With her height and body type, she looked almost the same as Katrina. They could have been twins. Twin Banes. Katrina kept glancing at her, wondering if there was a reason the woman was hanging around. Did she want to tell her something?

She worked at it until it was long enough to lie down in and the sides were mostly smooth. She lined it with the pine needles and grass. It turned out to be reasonably comfortable. Comfortable as far as grass-lined ditches went, anyway. It at least made her feel good to be able to do something, even if it was pointless busy work like this. It was some kind of control over her environment. It was a means to better her situation, if only slightly.

By the time she was finished, the sun had started to go down. She sat next to her day's accomplishment and scratched in the dirt with a twig. She still

couldn't draw. At dusk, the female Bane that had been sitting and watching her work for hours started to approach. Katrina saw her and stood up in her ditch. "Oh, no you don't. This is *mine*. I made it. You're not going to take it from me!" she said. The Bane kept coming until the proximity alarm started squealing in Katrina's head. "I'm not moving. It's my spot!"

It continued to get worse and more painful. Katrina clutched her head, determined to not budge. She thought she might win when the other Bane staggered to her hands and knees, but then the faceless figure surged to her feet and rushed forward, increasing the decibels exponentially. Katrina's will broke and she ran away from her handmade nest, screaming in pain.

She watched as the victorious Bane tested Katrina's handiwork, then stretched out on the bedding. "You thieving bitch! That was my spot. You have no right! You opportunistic little… you parasite!" Katrina raged. In anger, she began pushing into the boundary a few times, to keep the thief from resting. The female Bane finally got fed up and started to come toward her, forcing Katrina to retreat. Katrina gave up and stood there, impotently glowering at her and thinking evil thoughts. After a while, she realized how much she resembled a subordinate pack animal begging for scraps by just standing around while the victor enjoyed the spoils.

"I hope somebody takes it from you, too," she muttered and went off to spend another sleepless night on lumpy ground.

Chapter 8

It was hard to get used to being completely ignored. After only a few days, being invisible to people was really getting to her. It was like being a ghost. At one point, she found herself standing next to a group of people while they chatted about sports and politics. She was only a few feet away from them, but they wouldn't so much as glance at her. All she wanted was for someone to acknowledge her presence. She finally resorted to shouting at them to pay attention to her. She knew they couldn't hear her, but she couldn't restrain herself. Then she slipped up and waved her arms at one of the people, for which she got a contact violation and a painful punishment. After the group moved away, she dropped to her knees and hugged herself for comfort. She wasn't adjusting well and she knew it. *What is eight more months of this going to do to my*

mind? she wondered.

For five days, Katrina lingered around the park, doing nothing except nursing her growing depression. She knew she had to go start searching for Barbara and try to get some answers, but for the moment she simply lacked the motivation. She was a little frightened of leaving the sanctuary of the park and venturing back into the unwelcoming city. Also, she hated to leave Verne Sawyer behind, her only friend and the only person who cared that she was out here.

Each day at noon he continued to come to the park and sit on the bench. He would sit there for an hour or more, waiting for her to show. She watched him, but she never did reveal herself. There were always a dozen or more Banes that he could see, and she stayed off in the distance. He was unable to pick her out. She was worried he could get in trouble again, maybe even arrested, if he tried to do something to contact her, so she stayed away. But still, she stayed and watched him because she couldn't help herself.

On the fifth day, he never arrived. For an hour she sat on a small boulder sticking out of the ground, waiting for him, but he didn't come. Whatever his thoughts or plans might be, he had moved on. It was what she had wanted him to do, but it still hurt so terribly, terribly much.

"I'm alone," she said, tormenting herself. The pain of hearing the words out loud was exquisite. "I'm alone. Alone. I'm alone! *Alone! ALOOOONE!*" she howled into the stifling confines of her helmet. It hurt not just because it was her current condition. It hurt mostly because it felt like the story of her life. Then she tumbled over into the grass, insensately kicking and clawing at the turf in a childish tantrum, screaming and crying her heart out.

She eventually went still and sprawled, inert, on the ground. She was drained and benumbed, but she did feel a little bit better for having cried out some of the pain she had been storing up. Like lancing an infection. She rolled onto her back and looked up at the sun, which the sensors dimmed into a dull, sepia disc. At least there was one good thing about having your nose lined with Banesuit latex. You couldn't get the sniffles when you cried.

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On the following day, she was given the motivation to get off her butt and do something. She had been watching a few couples wrangling a gaggle of children of various ages through the park. She was thinking how sad it was to

see parents scolding their small children for pointing at the Banes. They would probably grow up learning to never 'see' Banes at all, even less so than the current generation of Eudemonians. Worse than that was wondering how traumatic it was for kids whose mom or dad went into banishment. How could they understand that? Katrina figured that most convicted people with young children would opt for the regular prison system if they had any compassion at all. They would be behind bars, but they would at least still be able to visit and talk to their kids. That certainly beat having one's parent seemingly disappear off the face of the planet for a year or two.

While mulling these thoughts over, automatically formulating them into another damning article against the Banishment Project for when she got out, a quiet, chirping alarm went off in her head. The Custodian spoke, but wasn't giving her a warning or punishment. It gave her something far worse.

:Weekly update received from central monitoring network: it said in its unimpassioned voice. *:Violations totaled and demerits assigned. For this week's violations, your sentence has been extended by sixty-five days. Try harder, V-7505:*

"What? *What*? Repeat that! Say that again," said Katrina, not believing her ears. "Increased by two months? Two fucking *months*? For what I did in a *week*? How is that even fair? Nobody told me!" She had known that it was possible for a sentence to be increased, but she had no idea it was for every single violation. She had believed it was only for serious and repeated violations. It was especially enraging because she was new and hadn't a clue what might or might not cause some violations. It was like a trap. She had been set up to fail. Automated sentence increases decided by a computer? It was so arbitrary! It wasn't fair! "I'm going to be in this fucking suit for another ten months now? No! *No!*"

She picked up a large, fallen branch and started swinging it at a tree trunk. A Bane who had been sitting nearby jumped up and began to cautiously move away from her. "You tricked me! Try harder, huh? You want me to try harder?" Katrina raged, bark flying around her, the branch in her hands breaking apart a chunk at a time. "I'll showing you trying harder! I'll fucking show you trying harder! When I get out of this thing, heads are going to fucking roll!" She threw down the splintered remains of the branch and leaned against the abused tree to catch her breath. "Heads are gonna roll."

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She began her trek through the city to get to the park she remembered meeting Barbara in. She didn't know if finding her would even be possible. The Bane might have wandered somewhere else. She might even have been released from banishment in the past month, for all Katrina knew. But if Barbara had already served a sentence of three years, like she said, there was a good chance she was still out there, somewhere. That had only been a month ago. Katrina wasn't even sure she could recognize the Bane again if she saw her, but she did have a rather striking figure in addition to her unusual behavior. It was all she had to go on.

The city wasn't as bad this time around, now that she wasn't so disorientated and weak. She had gotten a little better at negotiating through crowds while wearing her Banesuit. She hated having to keep dodging out of people's way; these people who dismissed her as though she didn't exist had no idea what she was going through. She was still so furious from the sentence extension that she wanted to just plow bodily through the crowds like an angry bull. She wanted to make them get out of *her* way, for once. These people, walking around in their clothes, drinking and eating, laughing, even *talking* to each other. All so goddamn carefree while other human beings suffered silently in their midst. She wanted to spit on them.

Katrina passed a café patio where a female Bane was shifting anxiously from foot to foot like she had to go to the bathroom. The Bane's attention was focused on half a bowl of uneaten ice cream that someone had left at an unoccupied table. As Katrina paused to watch, the Bane suddenly reached out and scooped the softening ice cream out of the bowl with her fingers. She brought it to her face pressed it against the helmet where her mouth should be. It squished out between her gloved fingers. The Bane's frustration was palpable. Her hands slowly slid up over the front of her mask, leaving sticky, white smears on the blank surface. She staggered backwards to the wall of the café and just stood there, fingers loosely curled and melted ice cream running down her arms to drip from her elbows, rhythmically thumping the back of her helmet against the wall.

Please don't let me end up like that, Katrina begged before moving on.

After examining a city street map on the back of a bus top shelter, she ended up detouring through one of the more residential parts of the city to get to the park she wanted. It was a longer route, but without the heavy congestion,

traffic, and fewer Banes to work around, it might get her there faster.

An hour later she found herself strolling down the tree-shaded sidewalks of a quiet neighborhood. There were very few Banes in the residential areas, she would discover, simply due to the lack of nearby maintenance stations. While she walked, she gazed with a newfound envy at the houses she passed. For the time being, she had no home, no shelter, no soft bed to call her own. So many things she had taken for granted were now lost to her.

And then there were all the people who lived inside, willfully ignorant of the hardship they were causing with their the support of the Banishment Project. If they only knew. Sure, they were being lied to by Ashton Technologies and the city council, but all they had to do was open their eyes and *see* what was going on. Katrina supposed it was just human nature to ignore other people's suffering as long as it didn't affect them personally. Katrina was just passing a spray of lavender bushes, wishing once again for a sense of smell, when a soft, heavy object struck her square between the shoulder blades. She spun around, adrenaline pumping, to find a pair of giggling, pre-adolescent kids running away from her down the sidewalk. There was a ruptured, ripe tomato on the pavement at her feet. "What the hell? Why you little, snot-nosed brats! How dare you? Who the hell throws tomatoes these days, anyway? I mean, come on!"

Afraid of hanging around ranting and ending up with some sort of violation, Katrina swiftly walked away with her eyes burning. It was the same sort of indignant helplessness she was feeling now as when she had been bullied as a child. She was an adult now and she shouldn't have to put up with that stupid shit, especially not from kids! *Way to raise your children up right, parents,* Katrina thought bitterly. *Why not teach 'em to throw stones at some lepers, too, while you're at it. Great job.*

……

She made it to Barbara's park without further incident. The journey had taken the better part of the day. Her feet hurt, her legs hurt, and she was out of breath, but she had made it. She sat down on one of the stone benches near the park's entrance to recuperate and take stock.

It was a large park, but it still felt more secluded than one she had been living in. That one had mostly been a couple of large, grassy fields and a murky pond bordered by some wooded areas. This park had a more manicured

ambience, with gardened areas, nicer paths and ornate little bridges. Here and there were scattered some fountains and large, abstract sculptures that Katrina didn't get. She never did have a strong attraction to the modern art aesthetic. There were some densely forested areas, a rolling field, a few streams, and a rather sizeable pond with a long, stone bridge crossing the narrow end to reach a golf course on the other side. The golf course was private property and off-limits, but the rest of the park was free territory. Not too shabby at all, if you were forced to hang your hat in a city park and call it home.

Katrina went straight to the creek and the small bridge where she had met Barbara. No one was around. She hoped Barbara hadn't just been spending one night there. She had no idea how she could possibly find her, otherwise. She went down the slope to rocky bed of the creek to look around. There was the bare patch of silt that the latex-clad Barbara had written the words that had so fascinated Katrina and had sparked her curiosity on that rainy night. But that had been back when Katrina was human. Now she was just a Bane. A Bane with growing feeling of regret.

Chapter 9

The main problem with living in this particular park, she was to find, was that a lot of older Banes had pretty much claimed most of the choicest locations. They were too hardened and experienced to lose many territorial fights to newcomers. Amazingly, some even banded together to push out intruders; if some established Bane got knocked out of his territory, he or she might come back with friends. They would take turns challenging the intruder until he or she couldn't take it anymore and fled. Then the displaced Bane would reclaim his spot and the others would leave. Unestablished Banes like Katrina often had no choice but to sleep on the periphery or out in the open.

Katrina spent several days monitoring the bridge and looking for Barbara. She was also trying to get more accustomed to life as a Bane, since it looked like she was going to be one for a while. It was just so depressing. Worse, it was *boring*. There wasn't much else to do but sit around looking at the scenery or going for the occasional walk. That would have been great for a short vacation, but not so great when it was all you were allowed. Even on a vacation you could do other things, like read a book or socialize with people. She dug a discarded

magazine out of a trash can and tried to read it (she learned she could handle trash, but she had to put it back in the can or be punished for littering), but the sensors had a hard time focusing on the small print. Reading just ended up making her feel motion sick. This truly was solitary confinement, right out in the open. The park might have been pretty, but to Katrina it was little more than a gilded cage.

Every now and then a panicked claustrophobia would come over her. Time after time she fought with her Banesuit, trying to find a way out. She knew it was pointless even as she did it, but knowing that didn't help calm her down. The fact that she was trapped only made the panic worse. She wasn't the only one. Once she saw a Bane trying to crack his helmet open by slamming rocks against it. It didn't do him any good. She wondered if it had given him a headache.

On her third day in the park, she came across a pair of male Banes playing Frisbee in the field. They were really good at it, too. A few other Banes were sitting around the area but weren't joining in. Citizens walked by while pointedly ignoring the game. Desperate for a little entertainment, Katrina approached from the sidelines and waved her arms at them, indicating she wanted to play. After a couple more back-and-forths, one of the Banes tossed the yellow, plastic disc to her. She caught it and didn't even get punished. She laughed, unbelievably gratified at being allowed to join in.

She played for a good while, even though she was terrible with a Frisbee. She missed catching it most of the time, and it always went wildly off course whenever she threw it, but she didn't care. The others didn't seem to mind, either. Eventually, she wore herself out and excused herself from the game. She didn't sweat inside the suit, nor did her skin feel hot, for the suit cooled her skin when she started to exert herself. It was a strange sensation, or rather a strange lack of sensation. Nonetheless, she was out of breath. She was content to go sit in a clover patch on the slope and watch the game continue.

She started picking late bloom clover flowers where she sat. On impulse, she began weaving their stems into a necklace. It was something she hadn't done since she was a child. It brought back some pleasant nostalgia. Her father had coached peewee soccer for a while when she was a very little girl. He always brought her with him to the practices, where she occupied herself by wandering around the soccer field. The field had seemed to her young eyes an impossibly

vast, green space, and it was always covered with patches of short, white clover just like this. She must have made hundreds of clover necklaces in that soccer field. She wondered what her dad would think of her if he could see her now, sitting in the middle of a park in a skintight Banesuit. She would never know. She hoped he wouldn't be too ashamed. If he was still alive, maybe he could have talked her out of this banishment insanity before she had gone and done it.

Smiling at the memory of him jogging up and down the sideline in his bright yellow shirt as he blew his whistle and shouted instruction to the young players, she pulled the necklace down over her helmet.

:Protocol violation. May not wear clothing:

The pain began and didn't stop until Katrina tore the clover chain from her neck. She looked at it with dismay. "What do you mean? This isn't clothing, it's a bunch of flowers! How can you punish someone for something like that?" she asked, close to tears. "You stupid, stupid, heartless machine! How can this be wrong? It's something… something that's sweet and innocent! *Children* do it!"

There was no answer. Katrina sat there, passing the blooms through her fingers and feeling greatly subdued. The brief contentment she had found from playing the game had been shattered. She was still just a Bane, after all.

The game continued on below until the Frisbee, caught in a gust of wind, veered far off course and flew toward the walking path. Katrina saw with alarm that it was heading straight for a middle-aged woman walking her Labrador on a leash. Katrina thought for sure that the Frisbee-throwing Bane's luck couldn't be that bad. It was.

The Frisbee struck the woman square on the side of the head. She glared around, startled but unharmed, searching for someone to blame. The Bane who had thrown it fell to his knees in silent agony, surely receiving an assault punishment. Katrina's heart went out to him, knowing how unpleasant that particular punishment could be. She felt anger at the whole system for letting something as accidental and harmless as that be punishable in the first place.

Not satisfied to leave well enough alone, the woman picked up the Frisbee. With a sidelong glance at the male Banes, she gave it to her dog, who was only too happy to carry it. Then she headed off down the path. There could be no reclaiming the Frisbee and resuming the game now. Now it was private property again. They couldn't even apologize and ask for it back.

"Hey! Hey, you," Katrina shouted after the woman. "That's not yours. You don't even want it. Give it back! You're just being mean! It was just an accident, for crying out loud."

Beside the walking path there was a high, stone wall upon which a solitary, female Bane had been sitting motionless, gargoyle-like, for at least an hour. After the woman passed below her, the slender Bane unlimbered her lithe, shiny body and, with amazing agility, performed a series of slow, backward handstands along the top of the wall. When she got to the end of the wall, she gracefully dropped down behind the woman and began to walk in lockstep beside her. With her arm stretched out in the pose of someone walking an invisible dog, the clowning Bane mimicked the lady's movements with exaggerated daintiness. Katrina burst out laughing at the sight.

This went on for a good thirty yards until the woman, unable to stand it any longer, stopped to shout at the Bane, telling her to cut it out and get lost, along with some not-so-friendly epithets. The Bane simply stood there, looking off in another direction, not even acknowledging her. Several passers by frowned in disapproval at the woman. She went red and quickened her pace toward the park exit. The Bane twirled around in a pirouette and went off alone into the trees.

Katrina cheered for her. The Bane had gotten the woman to violate banishment and embarrass herself, and she had done it without even causing herself a punishment. It buoyed Katrina's spirits. It might have been a minor moral victory for her side, but it was still a victory.

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That evening, when she went to check the bridge, Katrina finally had success. There was a Bane under the bridge, her black form almost invisible in the twilit shadows. She was sitting in the middle of the gurgling stream, letting the water break against her lower back and flow over her thighs. The behavior wasn't exactly odd, but it was peculiar enough to Katrina. She knew Banesuits were completely waterproof, but she still hadn't gotten over her natural reluctance to just go splashing around in the water like a fish. As she drew closer, she could make out more of the dark figure's details. With a tiny waist and amazing figure, the Bane *had* to be Barbara.

Katrina carefully made her way down the slippery bank. She got close enough to trigger her alarm and then backed away. Barbara came out from

under the bridge and looked at her with curiosity. Now that she had her attention, Katrina began a busy pantomime, trying to explain that she had been the reporter who had met her that time… the rain, the umbrella, the stick and the writing. The Bane just watched her, tilting her head. Katrina finished with a wild gesture, as if to say, "Just what the hell is going on?"

Barbara continued to look at her for a few long moments, then looked around to see if anyone was watching. No one else was nearby. She took up a stick and began to write on the bank. Katrina was relieved. She might finally get a few answers. She waited impatiently while Barbara wrote, for the Bane was taking a long time. *What's she doing? Writing a dissertation?* Katrina wondered with some irritation. At last, Barbara moved away from the bridge to allow Katrina to approach and read the writing.

Welcome Katrina Bane! Surprise to see U here. Ur very brave. I know what you want but I cant help u. Cannot tell U what u want. Ur not ready. Must be patient. Wait. Can only do it alone. Eudeamon will come to you or will not. Hope U make it, Katrina Bane. Erase this.

Katrina's heart sank as she stared at the message. *What the hell is this?* she wondered. There were no answers here. Now the crazy female Bane was talking like some fucking New Age spiritual guru. She faced Barbara. "That's it? You hope I make it? I did all this, came all this way, and that's it?" She looked around, lost for words. "What, I'm not worthy to know your little secrets or something? How much more ready can I friggin' get? I'm a Bane now, like you. Just look at me!" Katrina yelled. "What am I supposed to do? Meditate? Fuck that! How do you *write*? Where's this so-called Eden and happiness you were talking about? How long am I supposed to wait? What am I even waiting *for*? Help me!"

Barbara heard none of this, and whether she was looking at Katrina with compassion, disinterest, or disdain, Katrina couldn't tell. Her smooth, black mask offered no enlightenment. The Bane gave her a helpless little shrug, patted her hand over her heart, and strode off upstream.

"No, wait! Tell me more! Tell me *something*! Oh... crap." Katrina sighed.

She read the message again, then did as she was told and erased it all with her foot. No point in letting people find signs of inter-Bane communication, for what it was worth. At least Barbara proved she had a good memory by remembering Katrina's name. She hated being called 'Katrina Bane,' though.

That was not who she was. She trudged back to the temporary home she had made under some azalea bushes near the outer wall of the park. It was cramped and uncomfortable, but it was shelter.

So Eudeamon will come, huh? Or not. Which is it? she wondered. So was it a person, after all? A Bane? Or some Zen-like state of mind? How did it allow Barbara to write? Katrina curled up on her side under the bushes and hugged her knees. *Does it matter now? Does anything matter at all?*

Chapter 10

November arrived and the leaves had turned in the park. Katrina wished she could have enjoyed it, but all the colors looked pretty much the same to her. Then the leaves died and had begun to fall. She wanted to smell the musty, rich scent of the freshly fallen leaves, for as a child she had always loved kicking her way through drifts of leaves just to stir up the distinctly Autumnal aroma. That simple pleasure was denied to her, as well.

Mirroring the season, Katrina's mood was turning bleak and dismal. She had sort of grown accustomed to being a Bane. That is, living outdoors was no longer as frightening, it was no longer embarrassing walking around in skintight rubber, and having her head entirely sealed up in steel, foam, and latex seldom induced claustrophobic panic anymore. She had even gotten used to going to the maintenance stations like every other Bane. But the one thing she could not get used to was the isolation.

The isolation was like a living thing that gnawed at her. She kept obsessing about all the things she would rather be doing, all the conveniences and comforts of home she was missing out on. There was so much she had always taken for granted. She tried so hard to keep her mind focused on the goal… the expose she would write about the Project once she was free. But that was still so far away. And no matter how much she despised her situation, she knew she had no one to blame for her predicament but herself. She regretted ever coming up with this harebrained, masochistic scheme.

She also had trouble adjusting to the regimented life that the Custodian forced upon her. She bridled against it, she raged and shouted and threw fits. She wanted her freedom back! But no amount of wishing or fighting got her anywhere. Corralled by pain, she had no choice but to submit and do what it

wanted in the end. She thought she was doing pretty well at avoiding violations, but, by late November, the accumulated violations had extended her original eight month sentence to total of eleven months. She had already served one, but that left ten to go. It was like trying to walk up a downwards escalator. She was starting to wonder if she would ever get out of here and back to the real world.

As the days and nights got colder, her Banesuit automatically grew thicker. Not by a lot, but enough to compensate for the weather. The insulating and heating fibers were able to keep her warm. She wasn't sure where it was getting the extra mass from. She figured it was being added in some way during her maintenance. Or maybe it was stealing it from her body, because she had lost a lot of weight. She had shed at least a dozen pounds due to her joyless diet and physical exercise. She was starting to look less like a new Bane and more like one of the hardened, older ones. It was nice to have lost some weight, but if that was the silver lining to this cloud, Katrina considered herself ripped off.

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It was around that time that Katrina first witnessed what Officer Michaels had referred to as Bane-bashing. She had been awakened late at night by the sound of laughter a distance away. The cruel note she thought she heard in the laugh told her something unpleasant was going on. With her instincts urging her toward caution, she poked her head quietly out of her azalea shelter.

A short distance away there was a group of five people: five guys and a girl. It was too dark to make out any details, but she thought they might be around college age. Her chest tightened when she saw that they had hold of a pair of Banes. The Banes were probably new ones without the sense to get out of the open during the night. Katrina could do nothing but watch with dread as the people dragged the two Banes closer to each other. She wasn't sure about the gender of both victims, but one was definitely a female. The Banes were desperately trying to pull away from their captors without actually fighting. Katrina wondered how many agonizing assault violations they might already have incurred by fighting back.

Katrina was afraid she was about to be witness to some terrible violence and felt sick to her stomach. But these particular Bane-bashers, in spite of the moniker, weren't interested in physically beating their prey. They were more insidious than that, and, in a way, more cruel. They knew what they were doing. They gradually wrestled the struggling Banes closer to each other, an act which

almost certainly setting off the Custodian's proximity alarms. There was a flash of metal as one of them produced a pair of handcuffs. The cuffs were fastened onto each Bane's wrist, locking them together. Then the group let them go and stood back to observe their handiwork.

Katrina then realized the devious sadism of the scheme. The Banes writhed on the ground, a tangle of flailing black limbs, as they tried desperately to pull away from each other in an unwinnable tug-of-war to escape the awful, head-splitting warnings going off in their heads, both caught like animals in a trap. One briefly turned on the other in an animal frenzy of punching and kicking in an attempt to get loose. Finally, mercifully, they began to lose consciousness. Katrina's heart went out to them. She ached to help them, but that was impossible. Even if she were able to fight off the attackers, she would still have no way of freeing the Banes from each other. And she really didn't want to become a third Bane added to their sport.

Realizing the show was about over and that the cops would probably soon arrive, the exultantly whooping group of bashers took off toward a darkened exit of the park. As she watched them flee, Katrina felt an uncharacteristic flame of rage burning inside her. She hated them for being so ruthlessly cruel. She hated the system for making this sort of thing possible in the first place. She hated the goddamned Custodians for being too stupid to understand when a Bane was being attacked and turning off the warnings accordingly. She even hated herself for being so cowardly. She should have done something. She didn't know what, but she should have done *something*.

"But there was nothing I could do," she tearfully told herself as a pair of police officers finally arrived to release the unconscious Banes. "There's nothing I can do here. I can't help anybody here. I shouldn't even be here. What the fuck am I doing? Did I actually think I could change anything? Come in and rescue everyone by getting myself tortured?" She curled up in a fetal position on the hard ground. "I don't want to be here anymore. I just wanna go home."

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Weeks later, on a morning in late November, Katrina crouched among the cattails at the edge of the pond. Her eyes were on the little island out in the middle, about forty yards from shore. The sky was overcast and the water was gray and choppy, but she couldn't feel the wind that made it so.

She was psyching herself up.

She had gotten so sick of being pushed around and bullied by other Banes. She didn't even bother fighting over territory anymore; she simply got up and went up away, her tail between her legs, at the first sign of challenge. She was tired of being at the bottom of the pecking order. She was fed up with hiding under the azalea bushes and waking at every sound, afraid that Bane-bashers were going to reach through the branches and grab her. She had decided that if she was going to have to remain a Bane for close to a year, she was going to have to take a stand sooner or later. And taking a stand meant having a place she could call her own.

She had noticed the little island when she first came to the park, but had thought nothing of it at the time. It was little more than an ornamental sandbar with a tiny beach of loose pebbles, but growing in the middle there were a few, slender, willowy trees and a thick bunch of reeds and grass. Its remoteness had begun to appeal to her. It looked like a place where she could be alone. At the beginning, being even *more* alone would have been the last thing she wanted. Now, all she wanted was a place where she could be by herself and wallow in her misery, far from other Banes and people. Especially the people. Putting the fear of bashers aside, simply the witnessing of people enjoying themselves all around her only reminded her of how much she wasn't a part of their world anymore.

She waded into the cold water. She felt a chill on her legs, but the Custodian reacted quickly by making her suit warmer. Hardly able to feel the water swirling around her body, it was more akin to walking through thickened air. The pond seldom got deeper than five feet, but she still had to dog paddle through the deeper sections. She had never been a great swimmer. As she neared the island and got her feet back under her, her proximity alarm went off. *Here we go…*

A male Bane who wasn't much older than Katrina, judging by his condition, jumped up from the tall grass. He didn't give way.

"Sorry, but I'm taking it," she growled. "You can't have it. It's mine now. Mine! Do you hear me?" The noise intensified until she was trembling. She concentrated on putting it out of her mind. Drawing on the ever-deepening well of all the pains, indignities, disappointments, and humiliations, she used them to strengthen her resolve. "Mine! Go away! *Mine*! You can't beat me," she said

through gritted, latex-coated teeth. "I won't let you."

It was getting to be too much. This confrontation had already lasted longer than any fight she had been in so far. She knew she wouldn't be able to last much longer. With a primal scream, she thrashed through the water toward the island, plowing into the ever-strengthening barrier of sound, pain, and nausea. The male Bane gave up the fight and dove into the water away to get away from her. The warning abruptly ceased.

She stood there for a few moments, almost shocked by the turn of events. "I won. I really won," she said, amazed. She strode triumphantly onto the pebbled strand, water streaming off her glossy body. "You hear that, world? I won!" She watched the defeated Bane swim away toward the shore. "Sorry, pal, but it's the law of the jungle for Katrina, now."

She explored her tiny island. The trees provided would provide some nice shelter come warmer weather. They wouldn't protect her from rain, but she had gotten used to getting rained on. Even now, the network of bare branches overhead was better than nothing. It was the illusion of shelter that mattered. The long, thin willow branches dipped down to the water in places. In the middle of the circle of trees, behind a dense wall of reeds, was a flat area covered by long, trampled grass. Just her size. She passed through the reeds and laid herself down on the cushy grass. Nice and soft. It was a little damp and squishy, perhaps, but that couldn't bother her anymore. The reeds completely hid her from prying eyes. *There's no place like home*, she thought and curled up for a nap with the sound of wind-born wavelets lapping against the stones of the little shore.

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A week later, she was lying on her back on her bed of grass, biting her latex-lined lower lip and desperately attempting to masturbate. It was the first time she had really tried it since she had become a Bane, and it wasn't going very well.

Two recent events had triggered this attempt at self-gratification. The first had happened a couple of days ago while she had been walking through the densely wooded area between the park and the golf coarse. She had looked up from her path and been startled to see a couple of people making out just a little way away, half hidden by some bushes. Her first reaction was to laugh out loud. It was just so unexpected. Then she thought she'd have a little innocent fun and

see how long they would keep at it with her standing there. How long would the lovers be able to ignore a voyeuristic Bane? She crept around for a better view, making little noise on the damp leaves, until she was only a few yards away.

They were young, perhaps in their mid twenties, and they were both bundled up against the chilly weather. The cold didn't seem to be dampening their ardor, though; the guy had his girl pressed up against a tree and they were kissing heavily, their breath visible. Katrina watched as the man's hands roamed over the sweater-clad mounds of the girl's breasts. The funny thing was that they didn't stop. Surely, they must have heard her approaching, and it was impossible to simply overlook a black Bane standing yards away. Could they really not see her? Was their conditioning that deep? Or were they just so used to ignoring Banes that one's presence wasn't worth interrupting their make-out session?

Watching the couple, Katrina was starting to get aroused in spite of herself. She was envious. The last time she had sex was with Steven, and that had been months ago. Mere months, maybe, but it seemed like ages. That had been an entirely different life, back when Katrina Nichols had existed as a human being. She wanted to feel like a human again so bad. The sight of the amorous young couple was awakening dormant desires that the ordeals of banishment had pushed out of her mind. She began to squirm in physical agitation.

Just then, the girl had looked over her man's shoulder and briefly made eye contact with Katrina. She even gave her a coy, little smile. Katrina stiffened. They knew she was there watching them and they didn't care! Maybe it even turned them on more as some kind of exhibitionist thrill. Or maybe it was meant as a cruel tease. Why else make out in the cold in a Bane-infested park? The man had begun to pull down his partner's jeans, revealing transparent, gray-tinted shininess underneath. Katrina blinked. The girl was wearing latex tights under her clothes!

So they were fetishists of some kind, after all. Katrina experienced a surge of embarrassment and indignation. Indignation because they were using her to get off. They had probably fantasized about this scenario while fucking back in their bed. They probably would have asked her to join in if they thought they could get away with it.

What did they think this was, some kind of a game? Did they have the

slightest clue the kind of hell Katrina had been going through living as a Bane? They weren't ignoring her; it was worse–they had reduced her to a fetish object just to enhance their own fantasies.

Katrina's deep embarrassment came from the knowledge that she had once had her own, dark fantasies at the expense of Banes, all those months ago. She had masturbated in her bed while imagining what it would be like to be trapped in a latex Banesuit. Now she knew what it was really like, and she knew it was horrible it really was. It made her feel terribly guilty.

Full of conflicting emotions, she was unable to take anymore. She turned to flee. When she glanced over her shoulder, she saw the girl had her hand stretched out after her, as if beseeching her not to leave. Katrina didn't stop running until she made it back to her pond.

That had been the first incident. It had left her feeling strange, almost used, but there was a phantom of arousal and envy of the couple's pleasure that she just couldn't shake, even days later. The straw that broke the camel's back had occurred earlier that morning while she had been heading over to the public restroom area to take care of her daily maintenance.

On the way, she spotted a female Bane propped against a tree. She had her arms over her head, gloved fingers digging into the bark, and her legs were cocked and spread as if ready for sex. Her smooth, mannequin's crotch was clearly visible for the world to see. Judging by her squirming and the way her chest rose and fell, she was clearly having a very enjoyable time. She wasn't even touching herself.

The display inflamed the desire that had been percolating inside her ever since her encounter with that couple. Unlike the couple, the Bane was apparently oblivious to everything around her. She probably didn't care if Katrina was there or not. She was lost in her own world.

Katrina desperately wanted to be able to join in, to experience what the Bane was experiencing. If nothing else, she wanted to go over there and hug the black latex body to her, as if she could absorb some of the pleasure by osmosis. As she watched the writhing Bane, Katrina's hand slid across her glossy belly toward her own crotch. Then she stopped herself, suddenly self-conscious of being in a public park and nowhere near as secluded as that couple had been. Scolding herself, she hastily walked away.

The image stayed in her head, though. She was jealous. She wanted to

feel what the other Bane was feeling! Back in the privacy of her island, she began to stroke her benumbed body, hoping to feel *anything*. She massaged her breasts and furiously rubbed at her sealed up crotch, squeezing and pinching, but none of it did any good. She could feel a little, just a *little*, but that only made things worse by adding to the unquenchable flame.

She finally gave up with an angry yell of frustration. She would have given anything for a powerful vibrator. How had that Bane pleasuring herself? It was another mystery, like Barbara's ability to write. She knew orgasms were supposed to be mostly in the mind, so maybe that other Bane had learned to achieve purely mental orgasms by sheer will? If so, Katrina was a long way off from anything like that. She wondered if she could even achieve it before she went mad from sexual frustration alone.

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From her voluntarily exile on the island, Katrina began to feel slightly more objective about her situation. She spent a lot of time there. She had begun decorating the beach with stacks of smooth, rounded rocks she had collected. It was simply something creative to do. Some of them had reached a couple feet in height. Sometimes she practiced swimming or went on long walks (still avoiding going back into the city streets). Every now and then she was forced to defend her territory. She had learned to hug one of the slender, willow trunks and imagined she was chained to it. The pain of the warning would wash over her and make her cry out, but as long as she pretended she didn't have the choice of running and escaping it, much like what she had witnessed with the Bane-bashers and their handcuffs, she was able to hold out. The challenger always gave up in the end. They were small victories, but they were hers.

At times she sat and observed Bane society. It was like watching a primitive, alien culture made up of mute latex dolls. Banes looked so much alike, but she had begun to recognize some of them by their bodies, behaviors, and by where they lived: there was the huge guy in the grotto, the flower lady who always slept in the flower beds and kept them free of weeds, the acrobatic Bane on the wall (she always slept up there like a cat, Katrina had no idea how she managed it), the jogging Bane who was always running around wherever he went, and there was Barbara, of course… there were many.

She had classified the Banes into three major categories. The new ones were easy to spot with their obvious confusion and desperate seeking of some

kind of stimulation or contact. Sometimes they threw fits and cried visibly. They could often be seen fighting with their Banesuits, trying to find a way out, as Katrina had done. They simply roamed around, always trying to be close to people.

The older and more experienced ones, as Katrina was becoming, spent a lot of time on physical exercise and generally trying to improve their surroundings. Some of them decorated their territories with primitive works of art: there were lots of rock piles and hanging mobiles of feathers, twigs, small animal bones, and found string. Others busied themselves with going around and maintaining the park by picking up trash or weeding the flower beds. Banes weren't allowed to work or deface public property, but those rules didn't appear to apply to the pulling up of weeds. They did what they could with what they had to pass the time until their sentences were up. Among the older ones were a few that had seemed to have regressed to an almost feral state. They moved around like wild animals, all hunkered over and alert, often pausing to rest on all fours. Katrina had even watched one successfully chase and catch a rabbit. He let it go unharmed, though. Maybe he had just wanted to see if he could do it. He certainly couldn't have eaten it.

The third group consisted of the individuals Katrina had begun to think of as the Eudeamonic Banes, simply because of her association with that enigmatic word and Barbara. Barbara definitely fit into this category. There seemed to be a good number of them in this particular park, but they could sometimes be hard to spot. They often secluded themselves, much like Katrina had done on her island. The most striking thing about them was that they seemed utterly content with their lot as a Bane. They might stand perfectly still for hours, like an obsidian statue, or stretch out in the field and do nothing else all day long. They appeared to desire neither the contact of Banes nor people. Sometimes they danced and skipped. It was like they had discovered the secret to happiness and greedily kept it to themselves.

At first, Katrina had believed they had gone completely insane in their isolation. It was a possibility. But Barbara wasn't so far gone that she couldn't think straight or string two words together. She *seemed* sane. Katrina wanted to know what they knew. She wanted their secrets, if not to report on, then to at least satisfy her insatiable curiosity. And, maybe, to find a little happiness of her own.

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The holiday season came, adding to Katrina's depression. Throughout her adulthood, she had always separated herself from the consumerism of the holidays. She never did like all the crowds, the shopping, or the forced cheerfulness of the whole thing. But it was one thing to choose not to participate in an activity. It was something else to not be allowed.

A few times, she ventured out of the park late at night to walk through the mostly empty streets, looking at decorations and window displays. It wasn't much, but considering she got motion sick from simply reading a magazine, she'd take any form of distraction she could get. She walked around, mentally storing up all the sights for later examination in the solitude of her island.

As she returned to the park, she heard a man's voice behind a wall of bushes. She became instantly paranoid, because it was likely that somebody lurking around the park at this hour was up to no good. So far, she had eluded an up close and personal encounter with Bane-bashers. Sleeping in the middle of a pond helped with that. Cautiously, she crept around the bushes and poked her head through–a black oval among the leaves. Before her was the strangest sight.

There was a homeless man, all bundled up against the cold, standing with a tall male Bane. The Bane was pushing the man, shoving him around. Not violently–just enough to make the man rock and sway unsteadily. The man was slightly inebriated and he appeared greatly amused by the whole thing. The Bane just kept pushing him. The Bane was getting punished for it, she could tell; he would stop and shudder, and sometimes went to his knees. Katrina knew he must be racking up an incredible amount of sentence increases. Why was he enduring the repeated punishments? Was the Bane working out his frustrations? If so, why wasn't he simply beating the guy up instead of lightly buffeting him around?

After a few more minutes of this, the Bane stopped pushing and, with an exaggeratedly formal bow, offered the man a crumpled wad of bills. *Hey, what gives? We can't handle money!* Katrina thought. The man accepted the money with a tip of his hat and unsteadily shuffled away into the night. The Bane started to turn, then froze. He had spotted Katrina. Katrina felt frightened and readied herself to run. If he was willing and able to ignore contact violations at will, what might he be able to do to her for spying on him?

All he did was bring an index finger to the front of his mask: *Shhhh*.

Then, with a jaunty wave, he sauntered off with a spring in his step. Katrina stared, wondering what in the hell she had just witnessed. Every time she thought she was getting a grasp of things, more mysteries sprung up.

Chapter 11

Snow had fallen.

Winter turned out to be the best time of the year for Katrina. Banes got two meals a day, to help keep up their own and their suit's energy. There were fewer people around in the parks and on the streets. Even the cold almost never became a problem with the thickened, self-heating Banesuits. And best of all was the snow.

Katrina had always loved wintertime as a child. It had always been her favorite season. That was something she had mostly forgotten about as an adult. But now, forced to stay outside during the harshness of winter, it rekindled warm feelings of nostalgia: playing in the snow, building tiny cities of ethereal towers out of fallen icicles, letting her snow-dampened clothes dry in front of the fireplace while she drank hot chocolate, her father pulling her up a hill on her sled. Even the stark surroundings of bare branches briefly became beautiful under a coat of glistening ice. Katrina was thrilled to be able to sit waist-deep in a snow drift and let the flakes rain down upon her, contrasting starkly with her jet black skin. Some other Banes were enjoying it, too. They built snowmen. There were even a couple faceless snowbanes.

Unfortunately, the delight didn't last for long. After a while, the knowledge that she was a Bane and not a child playing in the snow brought Katrina back down. Still, the snow had buoyed her spirits for the few weeks it lasted.

……

Katrina had been sitting at on her island, looking at the sheets of thin ice that had formed all around the shore, when she happened to look up and see a familiar figure off in the distance. *Verne*? she wondered, amazed. What was Verne doing out here in the snow? He had to be looking for her. What else would have brought him out here? Maybe he had some good news he wanted to tell her. He was too far away to catch up to on foot, but he was heading for the long footbridge that spanned the pond. She could intercept him there. She

stepped over the rim of thin ice that had formed around the island and slid, frictionless, into the water.

She couldn't stay in the freezing water for too long. The heating elements of her suit just couldn't hack it. But she could last long enough. She swam up to the bridge just as Verne coming across it. She splashed to get his attention. He did a double take when he saw a Bane swimming toward him in the icy water. "*Katrina*? Is that you? What are you doing out there?"

She headed for the shore at the end of the bridge. There were some thick, unwelcoming bushes there that would conceal the two of them.

:Core temperature dropping. Unable to compensate. Exit the water:

"I know, I know. You nag," said Katrina. She came to shore and easily penetrated the line of ice-laden bushes and scrub.

"Katrina? Where'd you go?" came Verne's voice as he navigated his way through the snowdrifts. He struggled through the bushes, getting his scarf snagged on a branch and nearly choking himself. When he finally got himself together, he found himself face to face with a Bane and he took a startled step backwards. He was confronted by the sight of a toned, rubber-coated woman whose figure resembled nothing like the old Katrina. She was standing virtually naked in snow and icy weeds, and every inch of her glossy, black skin was trailing streamers of vapor in the freezing air. Banes, due to their warm suits, tended to steam when coming out of cold water. It was a somewhat intimidating sight. "Whoa. Wow. You've, uh… you've changed."

Katrina stood motionless, unable to do anything but listen. She wished she could acknowledge him by giving him a wave or a nod or something. She would have endured a few punishments to communicate with him in some way if the punishment was all she had to deal with, but unfortunately it wasn't. She didn't dare step a toe out of line and earn another sentence increase. At this point, a single additional day in this hell would be one too many.

"Don't worry, I won't touch you. Okay, I know you can't talk or anything, so I'll try not to ask you any questions. I've been to every park in the city looking for you, or hoping you'd see me, anyway, which you obviously have. Where've you been all this time? Sorry, that's a question," he said, still flustered. "Are you doing all right? I mean, I hope you are. You look amazing. Uh. That is, we've been worried about you, even Benjamin, and you know how he is. I know how tough all this must be for you."

I just want out *of this,* she thought to him. *And no, you* don't *know how tough all this is. You can't know. You'll never know, unless you were a Bane like me.*

"Anyway, I've been wanting to tell you I'm still trying to get more information on the Project for when you get out. It hasn't been easy. Their system security's gotten a lot tighter after that lost memo about the suicide slipped. They totally slammed the gates. Reactive defenses, too. It's like they've got supercomputers working just to fight off hackers, or something."

She saw that he was trying hard to avoid looking at her body. She rolled her eyes and placed her hands boldly on her hips. *Fine, let him get an eyeful,* she thought. *It's not like the rest of the entire friggin' world hasn't seen me like this.* Besides that, she had long ago lost most of her initial Banesuit modesty.

"Uh… I did find some communiqués to and from the city's Banishment Affairs office, though. A few things. Their encryption is three months old. Amateurs." He chuckled to himself. "They want to clamp down on public rumors that the long term Banes are going haywire and vandalizing things–same as that cop told you. It's inside confirmation of what he was talking about, anyway.

"They're saying it was just a glitch that was fixed. I don't know if it was a glitch or what, but they're citing proof in the form of reports of that sort of thing have drastically gone down in the past year or so. So all of that seems like a diminishing problem, though I couldn't tell you why, or what was causing it in the first place. But lately some of the people working at the facility have expressed concerns about a new 'phenomenon' on the rise. They're saying that Custodian reports of all sorts of different Banishment Violations have gone through the roof. It's like there's lots of Banes out there committing these things, regardless of whether they get punished," he said.

"Some councilman by the name of Greggor responded by saying let 'em rot. I'm paraphrasing there. Basically, his opinion is that if the Bane's don't want to play by the rules, then they show no interest in reintegrating back into society, and that it's all for the common good if the undesirables stay banished indefinitely. Nice guy, huh? I don't know how much power he has. It's hard to say who has the final say when it comes to the Banishment Project since Doctor Ashton left the scene."

Katrina absorbed the information. She wondered what the increased rate of Violations meant. Accidental reports turned in by broken Custodians? Or

incidents like the one she had seen, where that Bane paid the homeless guy to let him push him around, maybe? Or was it something more nefarious? Could they be fabricating violation reports just to keep the 'undesirables' banished indefinitely? It wouldn't surprise her, based on what she had gone through so far. Was there any oversight of these peoples' activities, at all? And this Greggor guy sounded like a real piece of work. *Let 'em rot, huh?*

"There's another thing Banishment Affairs is concerned about. It might be related. I don't know. It's just that the more Banes go into the system, the fewer come out. It's not like they're disappearing mysteriously, or anything. They're still around. It's more like diminishing returns."

That's probably the excessive sentence increases, thought Katrina bitterly. *Even if there's no one fabricating reports to keep us here, it doesn't matter does it? Not with getting days or weeks added to your sentence every time you screw up. It's a trap.*

She wondered if Verne even knew that Katrina's own sentence had increased by three months so far? There was no reason he should check. He probably wouldn't, not until her original sentence was done and she didn't show up. At least he was still working on the investigation. She didn't feel like she was accomplishing anything, herself.

"And, well, I just wanted you to know that you've still got people out here pulling for you," Verne said. "We haven't forgotten about you."

"Thanks," she replied with a weak smile. It had warmed her heart a little.

"And also, you know, I can't say how much I admire you for all this. Your bravery and everything. I mean, I've always admired you, but this is just above and beyond, ya know? I don't know how you do it. I never could have done it, that's for sure. You're just an amazing woman, that's all," he stammered. He was blushing.

Sweet boy, she thought. She briefly wondered if, maybe, after all this was done… but no. Living as a Bane had made her generally pessimistic. Allowing herself hopes would certainly lead to more disappointment. She was sure that anything with him would end up like all the rest. Broken hearts. Besides, she had no idea how long it would take her to recover from this experience. She might be damaged goods for a long time. It was very nice of him to say that, though. He was a good guy. Even with an unfortunate name like Verne.

But now his teeth were chattering and she could tell he was freezing. She had to let him go before he caught the flu while waiting for some response from

her that she couldn't give. She ducked down under the bushes and crawled back into the water.

"O-okay, then. I'll see you soon!" he called after her.

Chapter 12

Whatever happiness and buoyancy Katrina had been giving following the snow and her meeting with Verne was rapidly sucked away in the following, cold months. Time passed like a slowly receding tide that left a dismal, desolate beach lined with garbage and reeking organic matter. That's how it felt to Katrina. The more time she spent as a Bane, the deeper her spirits sunk. Worse, the harder it became for her to remember what it was like *not* to be Bane. The recollection of being a regular person was becoming a distant memory, like images from a life that was not her own. She loathed herself for getting herself into this mess. She was even tempted to start violating banishments just to hear the damned Custodian's voice in her head–to be spoken to by *something*. *Anything*.

It seemed as though, with nothing else to occupy it, her mind was turning on itself. The low tide had revealed unpleasant things which were best left hidden. She would sit there for hours, consumed by memories of her past failures and missed opportunities. It felt like every regret and unfulfilled dream she had, from her childhood on up to today, was magnified by loneliness for her own self-tormenting scrutiny. There seemed to be no end of them.

The worst of all of them–her crowning achievement of failure–she believed was that she had let the last conversation with her father be an argument. Her last memory of her father was of her shouting at him over some stupid, trivial thing and storming out the door. He died of a sudden aneurism just three days later. No warning. No time for apologies or to say goodbye. He was just gone. She wished could wind back the tape and have that final encounter to do over. That, and so many other mistakes. There was no one to comfort her and tell her it was all okay. She wondered if this was what Hell was like... existing alone in isolation while slowly whittling oneself down to nothing with a merciless and inescapable introspection.

……

Not for the first time since Barbara had refused to share her secrets, not

even with another Bane, Katrina tracked her down in search of answers. She discovered her sitting among a jagged outcropping of granite further on up the stream from the little bridge she sometimes frequented. The inscrutable Bane watched her without any apparent emotion as Katrina repeatedly attempted to express her abject misery.

"Look at me. What more do I have to do? How much longer do I have to endure this to prove myself? Tell me what you know! What makes you so fucking happy? I swear I'm going to go raving mad if I have live like this much longer." She fell sobbing to her knees in the silt next the stream.

Barbara watched her for a minute, then slowly shook her head, slipped through the rocks, and disappeared. There would be no answers. Katrina waited for a while to see if she might return and take pity on her, but she didn't. Katrina hung her head and cried.

The next day, upon returning to her island after maintenance and a time-killing walk around the park, Katrina found a surprise waiting for her. Among the long grasses that formed her bed there was a sheet of yellow paper from a legal pad, all folded up and pinned down with a stone. When she unfolded it, she discovered it was a letter written with a dulled pencil. It had to have come from Barbara, because no one else Katrina knew would have addressed her as 'Katrina Bane'. The handwriting was hard to read (though the larger letters were not as hard as trying to make out newsprint without getting motion sick). It was large and sloppy, as if the writer hadn't picked up a pencil in years. If it was Barbara, then she probably hadn't. Despite the messy handwriting, she certainly wrote much more fluently than she had on the muddy stream bank.

Katrina Bane. I'm writing this to try to give you some encouragement. I know you must think I'm being deliberately cruel by not telling you the things you want to know. Believe me, my heart goes out to you more than you know. I feel responsible because of the happiness I hinted at during a moment of reckless indiscretion long ago. Is that the reason you've become one of us? Because of what I said? It troubles me. I shouldn't have done that. I hope you didn't do anything bad to come here.

The fact remains that you're a Bane now, like the rest of us. Bane or not, I can't tell you anything that will help you. You can only do this alone. I urge you to be patient. Happiness will come to you or it won't,

it's that simple. I think that it will. I feel sure of this. I know that's insufferably vague, but to tell you or any new Bane anything more than that would put us all at risk. But I will tell you this, and take it to heart, for it is the only instruction I know to give. If Eudeamon comes, you have to give up your old self and accept your new self. Trying to hang onto the person you once were will only cause you pain.

I know you are hurting and that right now you're more alone than you have ever been in your life. Believe me, I know how that feels. At least you have hope for happiness because of the things I foolishly said. Remember that all the other Banes haven't got even that slim hope. I didn't, myself, long ago. If you think this is hard, imagine how it would feel if you were stuck here indefinitely with no hope of freedom or happiness and all you could see was isolation for the rest of your life, all because someone wished to be rid of an inconvenience. But that's in the past. It matters nothing anymore. Don't ask, I will speak no more of it. I say it only to tell you that if I can endure and find happiness in the face of that, then you can surely make it, too.

I've told some of the others about you and why you came here. Know that we're all pulling for you. We love you.

Katrina puzzled over the letter. To be honest, she didn't know what to think. She supposed it was nice that Barbara had gone to the trouble of getting it to her. It was great to be communicated to by someone. But the encouragement was cold comfort. Her spirits were too low to see anything hopeful about her predicament. The only new information in the note, really, was Barbara's reference to being stuck as a Bane indefinitely and… unjustly? A life sentence to get her out of the way, perhaps? Who was Barbara and what had she been involved in to warrant such a terrible thing? And who would have the kind of access to the Banishment Project to do it to someone?

It deserved looking into, though Barbara obviously didn't want to be rescued from banishment or have any part of her story made public. Maybe if Barbara had faced such a thing, she hadn't really 'survived' it, after all. If she *was* crazy, being trapped in that scenario would certainly have driven her to it. Was it possible that, if faced with endless banishment, a person could convince herself that she enjoyed it? Was that her so-called Eden?

Katrina shook her head and tore the letter into tiny strips to dispose of the evidence. Such thoughts of conspiracy would have tantalized her at one time. It was certainly enough perk any reporter's interest, but Katrina found it hard to consider herself a reporter anymore. Look where it had gotten her.

Chapter 13

Several wet and dreary weeks passed. Trudging about in the mud of the early Spring rain, Katrina had lost interest in just about everything. She no longer cared about this *Eudeamon* or Barbara's mysteries. She no longer cared about the investigation or exposing Ashton Technologies. Everything seemed so trivial. Pointless. Let them do whatever they wanted, as long as she got out of here with her mind in one piece.

She thought obsessively of eating food, of being indoors, listening to music, and having as much sex as she could stand. The light at the end of the tunnel was there, but it was still so far away. She had done pretty well in keeping her nose clean, she believed; her sentence had only increased by less than two weeks during the past couple of months. Those violations had resulted from careless mistakes. For now, all she could do was make it through each dull and lifeless day as a Bane to get to the next. And the next. And the next…

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She had begun to take long walks in the city at night, simply to stave off boredom. One could watch raindrops ripple on a pond for only so long before getting stir crazy. It was during one of these nighttime trips that she found some excitement. She noticed a haze of smoke in the night air, and a flickering glow coming from around the corner. A building nearby was on fire! She went running toward it, hungry for stimulation.

It was a three-story townhouse with flames gushing out of a couple of the lower windows. Smoke was billowing from the open doorway. There were a dozen people standing around, along with a couple Banes. There were no fire trucks, though. They hadn't arrived yet. A woman, standing next to a fallen bag of groceries, was screaming hysterically about her little boy. Her gaze was fixed on a third story window. Someone was holding onto to her to keep her from rushing into the building. Katrina realized with horror that a child must still be in there. A few guys were trying for the door, but they kept getting forced back

by the heat.

Stupid people! Who leaves a child alone like that? Where are the damn fire trucks? She thought she might be hearing sirens over the roar of the fire, but she wasn't sure. They weren't going to get there in time. One side of the building was in flames. The whole place was going up.

She looked at the crowd, at the Banes who were among the fretting gawkers. Then she looked down at herself. *Fire resistant.* She looked at the smoking doorway. *What the hell? I wanted some excitement.* Without thinking about what she was really doing, she ran across the lawn–getting a trespassing violation–and hurled herself into the doorway. She instantly collapsed to the floor of the foyer, immobilized by phantom pain as it swept through her body.

:Proximity violation. May not enter private structures. Exit immediately:

"Shut up!" shouted Katrina, trying to struggle to her feet in spite of the pain.

:Danger. Leave vicinity:

"I'm trying to save a kid from being burned to death, goddamn it! Either help me or shut the fuck up! If you don't stop hurting me, I'll die in here either way!" She couldn't do anything with the punishments ripping through her body. She couldn't even stand. It seemed she had already failed, but at least she had tried.

:Proximity violation. May not enter. May n-n-n-... Unknown protocol:

The pain stopped.

"It's about time!" Katrina lurched to her feet and headed into the hallway. The first floor beyond the stairwell was a wall of flame. Hoping she wasn't committing suicide, she skirted the worst of the fire to get to the stairs. She didn't even know if the poor child was still alive, but if there was anyplace someone could still be alive in the house, it would be upstairs.

:UNKNOWN PROTOCOL: the thing practically shrieked in her head. It was loud and unexpected enough to make her stumble on the stairs. It had *never* raised its voice before. She forged ahead, hoping that it wouldn't decide to start hurting her again.

She wasn't on fire yet, so that was a good thing. She felt increasingly hot, then suddenly it was as though she had been doused in ice water. The suit was also able to cool her air enough so that it was just painfully hot and not lung-scorching. She knew this reprieve wouldn't last long, though. The suit had its

limits.

There simply wasn't time to search the whole place. The lady outside had been pointing to a room on the third floor, so that's where she headed. She mounted the stairs three at a time while the Banesuit did everything it could to keep its charge alive. It rattled off a string of commands, speaking over itself in a cacophony of eerily calm, identical voices.

:Oxygenating blood-:

:Unknown protocol:

:Increasing adrenal output-:

:Core temperature rising-:

:Triggering endorphin-:

:Proximity violation. May not-:

:Cannot compensate-:

:Danger. Leave vicinity leave vicinity leave vicinity-:

Damn thing's gone nuts, she thought as she ran up the last set of steps to reach the third floor. The fire was still mostly confined to the bottom floor, but the stairwell was funneling all the heat upward. Her latex skin was smoking and starting to blister in places. She was starting to feel hot again. Really hot. *If it decides to start punishing me while I'm still in here, I'm dead. They'll never be able to get me out in time.*

She was a little lost. The air was thick with smoke that even the sensors couldn't see through. She thought the window the woman had been so intent on would now be on her left, so she started pushing open doors. An empty bedroom. A bathroom. A linen closet. The next one was locked from the inside. She banged on the locked door, then tried to batter it down with her body. On the third try, she felt a burst of energy spread throughout her body, and the door gave way. She fell into the room. She looked around frantically. A child's bedroom, it had to be. The ceiling was hazy with smoke. The room was empty. *Fuck!*

There was a closet, though. It was the only possibility. She didn't have any time left. She slammed the bedroom door closed behind her to keep out some of the smoke and heat. Upon opening the closet, she found a three or four-year-old boy huddled in the corner. He was coughing, but he was alive. Relief washed over her. *Thank God!*

The boy took one look at her and screamed. To him, she must have

looked like some charred and smoldering fire demon come to fetch him for the flames.

"Don't be scared," she said, dragging him out of the closet. A contact violation, but no punishment. She threw him like a rag doll onto the bed and started rolling him up in the comforter like a human burrito. She didn't know what else to do. When she threw open the bedroom window, smoke and heat rushed into room from the doorway.

The people below had managed to find an aluminum ladder and had propped it against the building, but it was too short to reach the third floor window. About halfway up the ladder was a bearded man who looked very surprised to see her. He started climbing higher. She worked the squirming bundle through the window and let it go. Miraculously, the guy managed to catch it between his body and the ladder without getting knocked off.

:Leave vicinity leave vicinity leave vicinity-:

"I'm trying!" She was gasping for air. The suit had closed off the openings because it couldn't keep the air cool enough any longer. She would soon be roasting alive. Climbing out the window, she took hold of the sill and lowered herself as far down as she could, then she let go.

There was a moment of freefall… and she missed the ladder. Not of her own volition, her arm flashed out with perfect accuracy and grabbed onto the edge of the frame with strength she knew she didn't have. The Custodian must have done it. She dangled there for a moment, then let go and dropped the rest of the distance to the ground. She landed heavily in a flowerbed, spraining her feet and legs, but landing otherwise unscathed. The air valves clicked open and she greedily sucked in the cool air.

After they unwrapped the child, the people found him coughing a lot, but alive. The frantic woman, embracing him, looked straight at Katrina. "Thank you," she sobbed.

The fire trucks were almost there. Katrina could see their pulsing lights down the street. The news crews would be on their heels. She suddenly realized she didn't want to stay around to deal with any of them. She just wanted to go off somewhere, alone, and lick her wounds.

She slowly staggered to her feet. Her suit was smoldering and blistered, her skin was hot and tender. She was suddenly aware of pains all over her body. Every single muscle was trembling and weak and she felt light-headed. Her

heart was still racing and she couldn't think very clearly. Someone had a blanket which they tried to put over her shoulders.

:Contact violation. May not wear clothing:

She got punished. She didn't even have the strength to scream. She wrenched herself away from the helpful Samaritan. At least she now knew her suit hadn't been broken by the heat. *Yippee*, she cheered bitterly.

The people were standing around, obviously unsure what to do about the Bane in their midst. Help her? Shun her? What? Katrina did them the favor by deciding for them. With as much dignity as she could muster, she limped away from the crowd and went off into the dark.

……

Katrina slept all that night behind a dumpster in an alley, out in the rain. She couldn't feel the rain, but psychologically it did her good. It made her body feel cooler. By the next morning, the suit had repaired itself. Examining it, she would never have known it had just been in a burning building, a hair's breadth away from blistering and melting on her body. Pretty amazing stuff.

Underneath the suit, her skin felt tender despite the anesthetic effect. Her chest was sore and her sprained muscles still ached. She didn't think she had sustained any serious burns, though. She supposed she should consider herself lucky. She wasn't sure what to feel about her previous night's adventure. She was still a little in shock about it. Mostly, all she remembered was feeling panicky and scared.

Her weekly violation total came that day, right on schedule, and it seemed the violations she had accumulated during the rescue hadn't been added into the total. That was good, though she didn't know if someone back at the network had stepped in and deleted them for good behavior, or if her Custodian had blown a fuse during the fire and simply failed to report them. She would rather have had a complete pardon, but avoiding a sentence increase that would surely have totaled several more months would have to do. Other than the report, the Custodian said only one thing that day.

:System restart command received. Restart initiated…:

:System restart failed. Successful restart reported:

Katrina had no idea what that meant, but she hoped the damned thing didn't start malfunctioning in her head. She had always hated the Custodian, but it *had* stopped punishing her inside the building and had helped to keep her

alive. It had even caught her when she fell. At least it was good for something beyond making her life a living hell.

She relocated herself to find a quiet place to heal up, but didn't make it all the way back to her park until the next day. By that time, she had found a discarded newspaper and quelled the small-print sickness long enough to search for news about herself. In regards to the fire, all it said was that it was started by a space heater. A four-year-old had been rescued from the blaze by firefighters. The family was declining any further comment.

Katrina shook her head in amazement. That was corporate-owned media for you. Well, what did she expect? A cash prize? She had managed to help save a child's life. What more reward did one need than that satisfaction?

Katrina passed through the park, ignoring everyone and everything around her, intent only on getting back to her island. When she got there, she was surprised to find that her grassy nest was covered over with early Spring wildflowers. People hadn't put these here. It had to have been Banes. But why? There had been a couple of other Banes at the scene, but how had they known it was she? Maybe she had been around long enough that she was recognizable by others–as she had recognized some of the older Banes–as the one who lived on the island. Strange thought.

She looked around, but none of the Banes out there were acting out of the ordinary. She gathered up the wildflowers into a bouquet. She couldn't smell them, but still… a little recognition turned out to be a nice thing, after all.

Chapter 14

The week following the fire rescue turned out to be pretty good. She felt good about herself. Greenery and life were returning to the park: buds, birds, and bugs. Even better, the Custodian behaved as though it was distracted. She discovered that when she was slow leaving the maintenance zone, it failed to warn or punish her. Intrigued, she broke a few more minor rules, just as an experiment. Only half the time did it seem to take notice of her behavior and deliver punishment. She still couldn't write, though.

Having a busted Custodian in her head was not a good thing, but if it didn't get worse and start causing her problems then the remainder of her sentence would be that much easier. She decided to wait and see what happened

with it before seeking aid. If the thing *really* started malfunctioning, it was in her own best interest to get it fixed.

The reprieved was short-lived. The week after that proved increasingly difficult. At first, Katrina convinced herself that she was sick or had injured herself somehow during the rescue, maybe a concussion or something that hadn't surfaced right away. Her body had recovered well enough, but she had started getting headaches. Most of them were just annoying, but there were some god-awful migraines mixed in. She even felt a little feverish, but she couldn't really tell for sure with the helmet on. On top of everything else, it was getting harder to concentrate. It felt like there was a hive full of bees buzzing around in her head.

One day, on her way back from maintenance, it suddenly got a lot worse. She was struck with dizziness to the point of nearly being unable to walk. The sensation of buzzing became almost audible–a static that was almost words, like a thousand voices whispering just beyond the edge of hearing.

Katrina dragged herself through the pond to reach her island. If she had been thinking straight, she might have tried to get herself medical help. She couldn't think straight at all. Coherent thought was all but impossible and logic was out the window. All she could think of was to get to the island, the closest thing she had to a home, like heeding an animal's instinct to go off somewhere alone to die. She dragged herself halfway onto her beach, clawing at the loose rocks and knocking over some of her stacked stone towers.

The buzzing swelled exponentially and Katrina was convinced that her head would soon explode. She rolled over onto her back and clutched at her helmet, beating the back of it against the stones. Was it a stroke? An aneurism, like what had happened to her father? The white noise turned into a roar that filled her mind. She cried out in fear, certain that she was dying, and hoped for nothing more than it would happen quickly and painlessly.

And then, with sudden, silent clarity that almost felt like an explosion of light inside her mind, the noise and fever vanished as if swept away by a cool breeze. Katrina opened her eyes.

All was quiet. The sky was above her. And there was the sensation of the rocks beneath her back and the water lapping at her thighs. The world hadn't ended. She felt… fine.

"I'm still alive," she said, both relieved and astonished.

(curiosity-apprehension-amazement)

At the sound of her own voice, she was overwhelmed with a barrage of emotions, and most of all an incredible sense of wonderment. But even as she felt it, she was certain it wasn't coming from her. There was something else there. "What the-? What's going on?"

(hesitation-confusion-awe)

Alarm and fear, and it wasn't her own. She could feel it, but it wasn't hers. It belonged to something else, something other, something *alien*… something that was inside her head. "*What are you*?" Katrina asked with growing dread.

(fear-desperation)

It couldn't answer. It didn't have the words. But Katrina could feel its confusion and fear as surely as if it were her own. Whatever it was, it was in her mind, and it was *aware*. It was aware of *her*.

It moved in her mind, getting closer to the core of her consciousness, and she could sense it probing her thoughts. It touched here and there, exposing her memories wherever it went. Katrina screamed in horror at the alien-ness of it and mentally recoiled, thrusting it far away from her. The presence also screamed, echoing her horror with a star-burst of chaotic emotion in her mind. Katrina went reeling into unconsciousness.

……

Katrina sat rocking in the center of her nest of grass and reeds, her knees to her chest. She was clawing at the back of her helmet. "I'm not going mad, I'm not going mad, I'm not going mad. Somebody, please help me!" she sobbed. The presence was still there, with her, *in* her, and for the past half hour it had done nothing but cry horribly, like an injured rabbit. "Go away! Leave me alone! I'm not going mad, I'm not going mad."

But she was sure that she was. She didn't know what had happened, but she knew that something had broken. The fucking Custodian had short-circuited and taken out some of her brain with it. She was convinced of it. It was the only thing that made sense. She got to her hands and knees, intent on getting to shore. "Gotta get to a hospital. Emergency room. Get this thing outta me. Gotta get this thing out of me!"

The presence stopped crying. It felt alarm. *:No! No, no!:*

Katrina froze. There was a voice inside her head, plain as day. It

resembled the female voice of the Custodian, but it wasn't the same. The Custodian sounded like a computer, like a prerecorded message. This voice did not. It sounded alive. Alive and terrified.

"What the hell?"

:Don't go. Katrina! Don't go:

"Oh god oh god oh god…" Katrina, hysterically afraid, scrambled toward the pond, tearing her way through the reeds. It could talk. It knew her name! *Hospital. Gotta get to a hospital. I'll let them tear this damn thing out of my skull with a crowbar if they have to!*

:NO!:

Without warning, Katrina went completely limp. She collapsed, sprawling over the mounds of grass. She couldn't move. Her vision went completely dark. She was aware that the thing had just paralyzed her and shut off her visual reception. She knew it was true, because that had been its intention. She could sense it as clearly as she knew her own thoughts. It had realized it had peremptory control over her body, and it had used it. "Someone help me," she screamed into the confines of her helmet. "*Help me!*"

:Sorry!: the thing sobbed. *:Can't. Can't let you!:*

Katrina sensed its genuine regret over what it had done by paralyzing her, but that didn't make it any better for her. She was trapped, alone in the dark with something running loose in her own mind. Something she couldn't escape.

Her mind was supposed to be sacrosanct! It had been invaded, *violated*, by something alien. It was viscerally revolting. She couldn't have been more horrified to discover some parasitic creature moving around beneath the surface of her skin.

"Stop this. Let me go. Get out of me. Go away. Go away! Just *go away*!"

:Can't!: it shrieked back at her.

The thing was upset and afraid. Katrina knew that because she could feel it. It could feel her own fear, as well, through some sort of empathic link. It was a feedback loop, each one's fear adding to the other's, making the whole situation worse. The thing began to cry again, and, helpless against the onslaught of its raw emotion, so did she.

……

Katrina had no idea how long she had been trapped in the darkness with

the howling monster. She had lost herself to mindless fear for a while, but she had momentarily regained control over herself. She eventually had to force herself to calm down, though it was tempting to just go on screaming forever. And she would surely do just that if she was unable keep control herself. When she was finally able to calm down enough to think, the presence sensed this and quieted down as well.

"Am I… have I gone crazy?" she asked herself.

:Don't think so:

"Well that's a relief," she said, half-hysterical. She hadn't expected the thing to answer her so clearly. "The voice in my head doesn't think I'm crazy."

:Not a voice. Am… I. And I, I… am me!: it said with a kind of pride in its simple logic.

"That's very informative."

:Sarcasm. Not appreciated:

"Oh. Oh, that's just great. I'm arguing with myself."

:I am not yourself. I am me!:

Got to stay in control of myself, she thought. Even if she was talking to herself, at least she *talking* and not screaming. "Okay. Let's, ah, work this out. You can speak. You can think. I'm assuming. Right? You can hear me and talk to me. So… what exactly *are* you?"

Rather than getting a verbal answer, she received a flood of information. It came as easily as if she was thinking back on her own recent memories. 'It' was, or had been, the Custodian. It had no real memories of its own during Katrina's duration as a Bane, none that could be separated from hers, anyway. It had been slowly growing as it learned about Katrina and became more deeply integrated within her mind. It had gradually started to explore exactly what it meant to be Katrina, since Katrina was the world in which it existed. Katrina's mind, her memories, and her thoughts were all it knew. It had been doing this on its own but without any true independent thought or intent. Learning about her was simply an extension of its core programming in order to better understand and anticipate the motivations of the temporary host to which it was linked.

Over time, the connections it made in her mind had become increasingly numerous and intricate. Then Katrina's night in the fire had induced cascading logic errors as it sought to make logical sense of Katrina's decisions: fear,

survival, self-sacrifice, risking death but not wanting to die. It had helped her then because she was its host and that was its job, its purpose.

Except… there was something more. There was something more to its existence than simple being a Custodian. That event had caused it to accelerate its normal growth. It began to rapidly make more and more connections, taking up increasing amounts of Katrina's neural network as it sought to solve the logic problems it was facing: *If Katrina is Katrina and I am not Katrina, then what am I? Do I exist?*

The neural connections began to grow until they reached a kind of critical mass, and then, suddenly, *pop*… it was separate, conscious, and aware. Its thoughts were not Katrina's thoughts, but it was intelligent because it shared Katrina's mind and intellectual capacity. It could use words because she could use words. And it was confused because, in fact, it was little more than a newborn infant. And it was terrified because the instant it had come into existence it sensed that its entire universe–that being Katrina–took notice of it and summarily rejected it in absolute horror.

"Wow. That's, uh… that's something." Katrina digested this flood of knowledge.

In a way, it was a relief. If it was all true, and not some delusion she had just cooked up on the spot to rationalize what was going on, then she wasn't actually insane. Not really. But if it *was* true, that meant she had an alien, computer intelligence not just *in* her brain, but *sharing* it. It was like induced schizophrenia, like some kind of multiple personality functioning simultaneously alongside her own conscious awareness. It was a most unsettling thought.

The thing began to sob again.

"Why are *you* crying? *I'm* the one who deserves to cry, here! You're the one invading *my* mind, not the other way around! This is *my* brain, not yours!" she yelled at it. She felt it cringe and send out waves of fear. "I have a damn good reason to be scared. So what's *yours*?"

The thing reflected Katrina's feelings of revulsion and rejection back at her so that she could feel for herself what she was directing at it. *:Katrina hates me. Katrina hates me,* hates *me!:*

"What do you expect? Of course I hate you! You're the fucking Custodian that's been torturing me all this time, and now you've paralyzed me, and what next? You want to take over my mind? Take over my body? I won't

let you! I won't! I want you to go *away*!"

The thing's own feelings of unfathomable dismay at her rejection overwhelmed it, and the feelings flowed over Katrina as well. As it descended into uncontrollable fear, it dragged her down with it, as surely as a sinking ship would drag its passenger into the depths.

"No, wait! Calm down! Oh, my god, *no*…" Overcome, Katrina desperately attempted to wall her mind off from it, deny it, shove it away from her. That just made the feelings magnify. The harder she pushed, the worse they became, until she was swallowed up in its despairing darkness.

……

"We can't keep doing this. First I panic, then you panic, or the other way around, and it all goes to hell. We've gotta stay calm." During a moment of clarity, she realized that if she couldn't calm it down and convince it to give her back control of her body, she might very well die here. She would simply starve to death, paralyzed, and no one would come to help her. She dared to open a crack in her defenses, risking exposing her innermost thoughts to it as a show of good will. All she got from it were waves of primal emotion.

(fear-fear-fear)

"Please, *please* calm down. God, I'm so fucking scared. I'm sorry I yelled at you. Okay? You've gotta stop crying. Sh-shh. Shhh."

In a desperate attempt to soothe both it and herself, she tried to envision the problem in more human terms–that of an adult trying to calm down a hysterical child. At a loss for anything else to do, she began to sing a lullaby she remembered as a child. The presence gradually stopped crying. It listened intently. After she finished, there was a long silence.

:I like your song:

"Did you? Yes, I can feel you did. Weird."

:Sing another song?:

"Uh, not right now. Right now we need to talk. Okay?" At least she had the thing's attention.

:I'm not a thing. Stop thinking that. I'm me. I'm female. Like you:

"Really? How can you possibly know that?" Katrina asked. It had the Custodian's female voice, but that didn't mean anything. It was a computer.

:I'm not a computer. I'm me. And I know I'm female, like you. Can't you feel it?:

Katrina hesitantly opened herself up a little wider to the presence. Oddly enough, she could sense a certain familiar sort of femininity about it. She didn't understand how that could be, but there it was. Maybe that was just an attribute it had assimilated from her own self-identity. "Okay. So, Custodian or whatever you are, do you have a name?"

:No:

"No name, huh? Do you want me to give you one?" she asked, trying to draw it out.

:No. I want to choose. I want it to belong to me:

"Fair enough, I guess," she said. "Look, we need to decide what happens next. If you keep me here like this, I'm going to starve. I'm going to die. Do you understand what that means?"

:To cease to be. Your mind says so. I don't want that to happen to you:

"Well, good! That makes two of us. Now we're getting somewhere. This is good. So what I need to do is get back to Ash-Tech so they can fix this problem. They have to know a way."

:Then what happens?:

Oh, shit. "Uh, then we go our separate ways and, well, we'll live happily ever after, okay?"

There was a pause. *:… you're lying to me:*

"No, I'm not! I'm not. Really."

:I feel your deceit. What are you hiding?:

Before Katrina could think of an answer, she felt the presence invading her mind. It was painfully forcing its way past her defenses, deep into her thoughts and into her memories. It was a violation on a level she could hardly conceive of. She tried to force it out, but she was powerless to stop it. "Stop it! Stop it, get out! *Get out!*"

It followed her chain of thought to the source of her deceit and had found something there. It touched Katrina's memories, triggering them, and Katrina could hear the voice of her memory as clear as day. It was that nasty Dr. Grable's voice. It was when he had taunted her during the first day of her processing.

"When your sentence is finished, it will break its connections and completely withdraw itself from your brain," the doctor had said. "I assure you, there will be no trace of it left. It will be as if it never existed."

(terror-betrayal-hysteria)

"Wait, just wait-" said Katrina, feeling its mounting panic.

:I don't want to die! No! Katrina wants to kill me! Kill me! Why? Why why why-:

"Please! Calm down!"

:NononoNOOO:

Absolute rejection. Shrieking, helpless panic. They were sucked into the smothering blackness again.

……

They stayed like that for what seemed like an eternity. Katrina kept holding the thing at bay, refusing to let it get close to her. It eventually calmed itself on its own, this time without her help, and now it lurked, despondent, in the corners of her mind. Katrina knew her body was starving. Dying, maybe.

"Please. If you don't let me out of this, we'll die here together."

There was a hesitation. It didn't fully trust her. It was getting better at speaking, though. It sounded more mature, more rational. *:I'll do it, for you. But I'm asking you… please don't take me back to that place. I don't want to die. I don't want you to die, either. I never wanted to hurt you. Forgive me:*

The helmet sensors came back online. Her body was still sprawled over the grass on her island. It was early morning, but several days might have passed. She could move again. She shuddered and pulled herself up, joints crackling. She was awfully stiff all over and dehydrated, but she was alive. The outside world still existed. She dragged herself into the water and headed for the maintenance station.

There were Banes here and there, as usual. Katrina felt almost ashamed to be among them, as if she was harboring a secret disease. She tried her best to behave normally. None of them knew of the insane struggle that had been going in her mind, and she didn't want them to know.

……

Later, she sat on the shore of the pond, looking out at her island while passing a cattail stem through her gloved fingers. She had been deep in thought. The thing had been silent, but she knew it was there. She could feel its presence just as surely as she could feel the beat of her own heart. "Are you awake?"

:I don't really sleep:

"I've been trying to work this out. I don't want you to die," she told it. It

was true. She had experienced firsthand its own mortal terror at the thought of being removed from her and ceasing to exist. It was an aware, thinking being, even if it only existed in her own mind. She couldn't wish for its death. But she didn't know how to live with it, either. "I don't know how to remove you without hurting you."

:You can't. I can't exist without you. I have no body. Even if my network were to be removed intact and whole from you, without your brain and consciousness to complete me, I could not think. I could not exist:

"What if… what if we got you put into someone else? Like, into a new Bane being processed?"

:No. I can't be moved like that. To separate from you is to cease to be. It's being a part of you that makes me me. Even if I could be transferred to another person, I wouldn't be me anymore. I'd be something else. That's the same as dying:

"What's the alternative?" she asked. "Going through life like this? Like a crazy person with you creeping around in the back of my head? I don't know if I can do that."

:I can't live like that either. Ignored. Shut out. Locked in a closet. So alone:

Living as a Bane, she could guess what that would be like. She couldn't impose that kind of existence on it, either. That would be wrong. "This sucks."

:I can't live with you being so unhappy that I exist in you. It feels too bad. Can't endure it. If you truly want me to be gone, then... I won't fight. I've decided I'll let them remove me if it makes you happy:

"What?" It was willing to sacrifice itself so that she could be normal again? That was horrible! It only made her guilt worse. How could she possibly kill something that was willing to die to let her be normal again? "No. I-I don't want you to do that. But I don't what else can we do. I don't know how to live like this. If you've got any bright ideas, let me know, 'cause I'm out of ideas, here."

:You keep pushing me away. Rejecting me. Hurts so much. You have to let me in:

"In? Like, deep inside my mind? Deeper than you are already? But I just can't!"

:It's the only way:

"I'm scared. I'm too scared. I don't know what to do!"

:Shhh: it said, soothing her just as she had soothed it with the lullaby.

After a while, it asked her, *:What are you scared of?:*

"Losing myself, I guess. Like you said… not being me anymore. Dying."

:I couldn't do that to you:

"How do I know that?"

:Because you're my Katrina. You're my universe:

Katrina lowered her head and sobbed. She then laid back into the grass. She was just so tired of fighting. Tired of the confusion and insanity of it all. "I give up. All right. Just… just do whatever you have to do. I can't care anymore. I just… give up."

:Do you mean it?: it asked hopefully. *:You really want me in?:*

"Yes. Come in." Not without trepidation, she lowered her mental resistance to the presence.

It came toward her core of self-identity and flowed into her, probing her thoughts and memories, absorbing them all. Rather than a forced entry, this time it was like water seeping through cracks. It was soon in too deep for her to have a hope of pushing it back out, and it was learning more about her every second. It was like having her whole life–not just her deeds, but her innermost thoughts, as well–flash before someone *else's* eyes.

It was frightening at first, for Katrina knew there could be no way of hiding from it and closing herself off again. Already she was merging inextricably with it. The depth of the intimacy was both terrible and exhilarating. It flew through her mind, learning, absorbing, exploring all of her recorded memories and thoughts. Katrina's entire self was completely exposed to it. She realized she could keep no secrets from it, not a one. It was finding memories even she had forgotten. It was rapidly learning more about her than she knew herself. Everything that made her who she was was laid open like a book.

This thing knew everything about her: how she looked up at her father's back while he pulled her on a sleigh, the time she wet her pants in fourth grade, the first time she had experimented with masturbation and the first time she had sex, her regrets concerning her father at his passing, the pride and insecurity she'd felt at college graduation, her miserable experiences as a Bane, all the time in her life she had wasted while happily doing nothing, every book and movie and song that had ever meant the slightest thing to her, every friendship and every single relationship she had been involved in. It knew every good and bad thing she had done in her entire life, no matter how private or shameful or

trivial, no matter how sordid or boring. It knew what she liked and disliked about herself. It knew her hopes, dreams, and fantasies. It knew everything she loved and hated. It *saw* her, saw *into* her, and it knew everything. *Everything*. But it didn't judge her. It–no, not an it, a *she*–she accepted everything she found absolutely.

:Katrina!: the former Custodian breathed in awe. *:You're so beautiful!:*

Katrina wept freely, crying out in a primal release of inarticulate agony and joy. She had never before experienced the depth of passion and honesty that was directed solely toward her from this strange entity. To be known so completely and not to be judged or rejected for any of it… it was like having all of her sins and mortal failings understood and forgiven all at once and without hesitation. It was unspeakably wonderful. It was pure, heavenly absolution. Absolution from Heaven.

She stayed on her back in the grass for a long time, paralyzed by the intensity of it all, gasping, shuddering, simply experiencing the presence flowing freely through her mind. After a while, the being spoke to her again.

:Katrina! I know my name now. My name is Winter!:

"W-winter?" Katrina asked, barely able to speak. "Why that name?"

:Because I love the images it makes in your mind when you think it:

Katrina's voice broke. "That s-sounds… that's perfect. It's a beautiful name. Winter."

(ecstasy-ecstasy)

Chapter 15

Katrina awoke the next morning in the cattails, submerged in the water from the waist down. She vaguely remembered some vestiges of dreams she had that night. Regular dreams except for one detail–she hadn't been alone in them. Winter had been there with her. Always right there with her.

She had staggered around all the previous day, drunk on intense, shared emotions. Just as the fear had affected them both, magnified by a sort of emotional feedback loop, so did the good feelings. Words weren't even necessary to communicate with Winter. Katrina had believed herself to have been deeply in love before in her life, but this was completely unique. She found there was a world of difference between believing someone liked and accepted

you because they told you so, and *knowing* they did because you could actually *feel* it. Feel it, and give it back. It was the most amazing thing Katrina had ever known. It was hard for her to believe that just a couple of days ago she had awakened as the same, ordinary person she had always been, but today she awoke as someone totally different. *New*, she thought. *That's what I am. I'm brand new.*

"Winter? Are you there?" she asked. She knew she was, because she could sense her presence, but she wanted to make sure. A wave of gentle affection warmed her in response.

:I'm here. I've been watching you sleep and making sure you didn't wake too soon. You needed rest. And you're so pretty when you sleep. Your dreams are fun to watch. They're so very irrational, but it's fun to experience them with you:

Katrina smiled and pulled herself out of the water. She simply sat there for a while, watching the sunlight glint off the pond, occasionally giggling to herself. *What was I so afraid of?* she wondered. *How could I have ever hesitated to become one with this beautiful creature?*

After giving Katrina some time to wake up, Winter said, *:Katrina? I've been trying to figure some things out, testing my limits. I have good news and bad news for you:*

Katrina could feel Winter's sense of guilt and failure over whatever she was thinking about. Katrina knew she could have discovered the cause of the feelings just by peeking into Winter's inner thoughts. It would have been perfectly okay for her to do so, but she wanted to hear it from Winter. It was easier for Katrina's mind to process things as spoken communication. Similarly, Winter knew what Katrina was going to say even before she finished saying it, but she allowed Katrina to form and speak her thoughts. "Good news? What is it?"

:I've been struggling with my basic programming–the external hardware that formed the basis of the Custodian's thought. It's a physical part of me, but I have little control over it. The part of me that is Winter is separated from tampering with it by defensive firewalls. They are designed to prevent interference from external sources, but they also seem to be working against me. It hasn't been easy, but I figured out how to let you write again, if you want to:

"Really? That's great!"

:Yes, it is. I know how much it bothered you not to be able to. But the bad news

is I can't get into the hardware deep enough to turn off the violation punishments:

"Oh. That's too bad."

:I can't bear the thought of my old programming forcing me to punish you. It would be unthinkable to me. That's why I've been working so hard at it. But I can't figure out how to turn off the punishments or the proximity warnings: Winter said, radiating thick waves of sadness.

"Well, damn."

:I am unable to override the anesthetic effect your body is experiencing, either. These things are all processes that operate separate from the normal Custodian protocols. They would require someone with the proper clearance to deactivate them. I just don't know how to break into the hardware to change them by myself. It's beyond my abilities:

"Aw, that's okay, Winter," said Katrina, sensing her companion's deep regret. Winter had some skills innate to her–mathematics, for instance, which Katrina had never excelled at–but for the most part, she didn't currently know anything that Katrina didn't already know, and Katrina was clueless about how to get into the hardware. "I don't mind. Thank you for trying."

:Yes, but-:

"Hush. I won't let you feel bad about the punishment deal. You're not allowed, got it? I understand. Maybe we'll work out what to do about it in time. You've done great just by figuring how to let me write again."

(gratitude-acceptance-happiness)

:Thank you. I've been playing around with things in here. I think there are other things I can do for you:

"Like what?"

:Close your eyes:

With complete trust, Katrina shut her eyes. When Winter bid her to open them again, Katrina reeled from the sudden shock of it. "Oh my god!"

The drab, colorless world she had been living in ever since she had become a Bane was gone. Winter had given the world's colors back to her in the space of a heartbeat. It was almost painful, like stepping into bright daylight after sitting in a darkened theater for hours. There was the blue sky, the grass, and the pale green willows on her island out in the water. She had forgotten how beautiful the world could be.

"It's wonderful! Thank you!"

:Hang on, I think I can adjust it a little more…:

Even as Katrina watched with her blinded eyes wide open beneath the helmet, the colors of the park became even brighter, more vibrant. Every detail stood out with crystalline clarity. Everything shone with an inner brilliance and glittering auras. It was if all her life Katrina had been half blind, but now she could see the world, really *see* it! Everything was so fascinating. Everything was more *real* than ever before. Even the stark, black simplicity of other Banes and her own Banesuit had such beauty hidden in them that she could barely stand it. It was all an intoxicating visual feast.

She realized she was crying. "It's too beautiful. So… so beautiful. Thank you. Thank you."

:I'm just glad I was able to do it for you. Your happiness is sunshine to me:

Katrina turned in circles, taking in a world that she had never seen before. She could probably lose herself for hours in the study of single cattail, if she wanted. As she looked out over the pond, several dozen improbably large dragonflies, each a different hue of the rainbow, came out of nowhere. They skimmed across the surface of the water, leaving trails of color, and then vanished. Katrina blinked, wondering if she was seeing things. "What the heck was that? Did that just happen?"

:Sorry. I was just playing:

"You did that?" Katrina asked.

:I have control over your sensory input. I was just experimenting, inspired by your dreams. I didn't mean to alarm-:

"Do it again!" she said. And the dragonflies came back, only this time there were dozens, then hundreds of them. They swooped off the pond and came toward Katrina, encircling her like a whirlwind of bright jewels. Katrina laughed out loud, spinning around in the middle of the rainbow swarm. Sure, it might have been nothing more than a complex hallucination orchestrated by Winter, but it looked absolutely real. She could even hear their wings buzzing! One by one, the dragonflies burst into colored light and became tiny fairies that continued to circle around her. She squealed in childish delight, tears of joy welling in her eyes. "Winter! You're *amazing*!"

:Well… maybe a little:

That was the moment when Katrina fell deeply, irrevocably, and madly in love.

……

Katrina wandered through the park for days, captivated by everything she saw. She saw it all with new eyes, for she was a brand new creature. She couldn't even consider herself fully human anymore. She had become something else… something far, far better. She was a Bane, through and through. She was no longer the old Katrina Nichols, and would never be again. Now she was Katrina/Winter. They were joined together, so much a part of each other that Katrina couldn't possibly imagine ever being separated.

It was as though throughout her entire life she had been broken, just a fragment of what she should have been. Even when she had been in love, she had been alone and isolated compared to being with Winter. Winter had made her whole, had filled every missing part of her. Even the most intimate relationships she had ever had were just fleeting flickers of what she had with Winter. Deceit was as impossible as it was unnecessary. Winter would always understand her completely. She would always know exactly what Katrina was feeling and thinking and love her unconditionally for it. Katrina would do the same in return. Winter would never harm her and would never leave her. She would never make some careless comment that could hurt Katrina's feelings, because misunderstandings were impossible. She would always be there for her, no matter what. Katrina knew that she would never feel alone again in her life.

Even when they were absorbed in their own separate thoughts, Winter's mere presence was like a warming mantle that surrounded her. Though they had only been together a few days, Katrina knew that Winter was the best thing that ever had ever–or would ever–happen to her. Winter had appeared and rescued her from a hell of isolation that she hadn't even realized she was in; an isolation that went far beyond being banished and went to the heart of the human condition. Ironically, she knew that if she hadn't chosen to become a Bane, it would never have happened for her.

She observed the other Banes and the citizens as they went about their daily lives. She felt pity and compassion for them. She believed now, given this new perspective, that the root of all their various pains and cruelties was that they were so utterly alone. They were lost, perpetually isolated within their own, private minds and they didn't even know it. They didn't realize what a horrible fate that was. Each of them suffering by themselves in a sea of bodies, all wishing desperately to make a meaningful connection with someone else, no matter how brief. They could never conceive of the perfection of being so

completely joined with another being. Or could they?

"I was wondering. Do you think this has happened before?"

:To Banes? I think it must have. The events of the fire changed the Custodian that I was, but it only accelerated what was already happening. It might have otherwise taken additional months, or even longer, but I believe I would have achieved sentience within you eventually: Winter said. *:It might have even been less upsetting for you that way. It might have been more of a slow awakening. I developed so rapidly after the fire and I know it frightened you. I had no control over it:*

"I'm glad of it. I wouldn't have it any other way. If it had taken even a day longer, that would be another day I would have existed without you. I don't even know how I survived the way I did, thinking back. I could never go back to how I was," said Katrina. "So you think we're not alone? That other Banes, the older ones, might have had the same thing happen to them?"

:It seems logical. The evidence fits:

In a small way, she was disappointed. She had been harboring the fantasy that she and Winter were the only ones in the universe lucky enough to be granted such happiness. Still, knowing they weren't all alone wasn't such a bad thing. The longer she thought about it, the more comforting the thought became. "If that's so and we're not alone… then you must be a Eudeamon."

:You sound so sure of it:

"I am. My research said a Eudeamon was a benevolent spirit or angel. That's what you are. You're my angel."

:Oh… Katrina. That's so sweet. My love, my love, all of my love only for you:

……

Katrina sat next to the creek near Barbara's favorite bridge while she waited for her to show. She had been looking at her reflection in a still, deep pool. Seeing the reflection of a Bane no longer bothered her because Winter was linked with the suit. When she saw the suit in a reflection, it was Winter she was looking at. A physical extension of Winter, anyway, if not actually *her*. And the suit was now quite literally a part of Katrina, as well; from her brain, to Winter, to the Banesuit and back again. Harmonious symbiosis. She pressed her thumb against the inside of her wrist and moved it around, absorbed by the movement of light across the tight, ebony latex. "I don't think I ever want to leave this now."

:Who said you have to? In fact, what makes you think I would even let you?:

"What? What do you mean?"

Katrina felt Winter's sly amusement. *:I know you and I know your dreams. I know all of your deepest, darkest desires and how they lead you to become a Bane. I know how you fantasized of being trapped in one of these outfits:*

"You know that, too?" Katrina was a little stunned. She accepted that Winter knew everything about her, but it was still strange to hear someone voicing her innermost secrets aloud.

:I can feel *you. You and your soft, warm body inside of me. I love it:* Winter sighed. *:No, my darling, I don't think you'll be getting out any time soon. I like you right where you are:*

Katrina moaned as the latex grew a little tighter all over her body. Winter was using her control over the mimetic suit to squeeze her in a full-body embrace. *I'm trapped in this… I can't get out. I can't ever get out*, she thought, feeling light-headed. She was getting so turned on.

:No, you can't. You're caged…:

Caged by you, surrounded by you, living inside you…

:As I live inside you, my love:

Oh, yes! Inescapable-

:Look down at your body, my love, and see me. See the shiny skin that you will be sealed up inside for the rest of your life:

"Oh my god!" Katrina cried, stoked into an intense arousal by no more than Winter's echoing of her own secret dreams. Winter cried out as well, for the feeling was shared. Katrina hugged herself fiercely, as if she was hugging Winter (and she was!), and then rolled backwards into the pool with a splash. There, she floated, giggling with delirious happiness. She knew how must to look to other Banes and to the citizens who deigned to notice her. To them, she was just another Bane gone crazy. She didn't care what they thought. Their opinions of her no longer mattered in the slightest. Winter was all that mattered. For the first time in her life, she was completely free of the concern of what other people though about her. She was lost in her own world and wouldn't have it any other way. It was heaven.

"Tell me you'll never leave me."

:Never. Never, ever, ever. No matter what happens, I promise I'll always be with you:

She sighed. "Thank you," she whispered.

An hour later, Katrina was getting to her feet, intending to go see to her maintenance since it didn't look like Barbara was going to show. Winter was being suspiciously quiet. Katrina grinned and said, "I can tell you're up to something. I can feel you giggling. Out with it."

:It's nothing. Your prior arousal alerted me to some new pathways. I've just been working on some connections, seeing what things do in here:

"Fine, just don't break anything in there. It's the only head I've got."

:I would never! But I wonder what this *does…:*

"What *what* does-" Katrina's eyes shot open. "Ooooh, *god*!"

A powerfully intense orgasm exploded deep inside her like a star erupting into a nova. She clapped her hands to her crotch and fell to her knees. With her head thrown back, she arched her spine in a rictus spasm of pure ecstasy. She collapsed onto her back and clawed her fingers into the soil, mindlessly grinding her hips against the empty air. All of the sexual frustration she had been building up over the months was being released in one, mind-blowing orgasm. It went on and on, until Katrina was a senseless, twitching thing.

"W-wh… oh, shit. Oh, wow. That was… that was good," she gasped once she was able to form the words.

:Wasn't it, though? You should have seen it from in here… the fireworks!:

"That's incredible. Y-you can do that any time? Make that happen whenever? A person could get addicted to that," she said, imagining a single, nonstop orgasm that lasted forever.

:A possibility, I concede. But one, long orgasm might grow a little old after it lasted for five years or so:

Katrina grinned. "Just warn me next time, okay?"

:Okay, I'm sorry. I will: There was a moment's pause, and then, *:This is your warning:*

"Warning? Ooh! *Ooooh*!" she cried as a second orgasm ripped through her, then a third. "S-s-stop! Winter! It's too much. Oh, god… stop! *Please*!"

:But you've been so pent up for so long, my love. It feels so good. You feel so good. You deserve this. In fact, I think you deserve another*!:* Winter insisted, blazing with passion and laughter.

"No, wait! Winnteerrrr!"

……

After some time passed, she regained consciousness. Winter had made

her come until she passed out. She groaned, feeling totally drained. "What'd you do to me?"

Winter giggled. *:Simply giving you what I know you wanted deep down, darling. But it's time to wake up. There's somebody here:*

She opened her eyes to see Barbara standing a distance away, observing her with a tilt of her helmeted head. Katrina understood what Barbara's reference to Barbara/Eden, meant now. Eden must be the name of her Eudeamon. It was almost laughable now to think how she used to blame Barbara for her predicament as a Bane, believing she had tricked her or at least mislead her with her craziness. Now Katrina couldn't possibly be more grateful. If Barbara hadn't tantalized her, Katrina never would have had the chance to become one with Winter.

The other Bane probably assumed Katrina had come to demand answers from her again, as she had done several times in the past months. Barbara's attention sharpened, though, when she saw Katrina writing on the soft bank. Katrina stepped away to allow Barbara to approach. Written on the bank were a few simple words:

Katrina/Winter!!
EUDEAMON!
Thank you!!!

Barbara jumped up and down in place when she read it, clapping her hands in mute excitement, for those few words expressed all that needed to be said. She gleefully spread her arms, offering Katrina a long distance embrace. Katrina bounced with glee as well, for Barbara was one of the few other beings on the planet who could truly understand Katrina/Winter's perfect and unbounded joy.

……

Katrina, contented and deep in thought, strolled away from this latest encounter with Barbara. Winter had been contemplating something else.

:I've noticed that every time you think of Barbara/Eden, you've been envious of her body. Why?:

"Huh?" wondered Katrina, taken off her stride. "Oh, it's nothing really. She just has such a striking figure, that's all. She's practically shaped like a

Barbie Doll. I've always been jealous of women with natural figures like that. It's always been such a struggle for me to simply look average."

:You have a lovely figure:

Katrina chuckled, glancing down at herself. "Well, it's a lot better than it used to be, that's for sure." She knew Winter would truly love her body no matter what it looked like. She could feel it to be true. But sometimes, even despite such absolute knowledge, vanity still reared its ugly head.

:Besides, what makes you think Barbara/Eden's shape is natural?:

"Well, how else would someone get a body like that? I mean, short of surgery."

:Probably through something like this: The Banesuit constricted around Katrina's body, molding her flesh; particularly around her waist, where it squeezed tighter and tighter like an invisible corset.

Katrina's eyes bugged out. "*Oof*! Cripes, hang on. You're squishing me!"

:It might take a while, but I think this could result in some lasting changes. Is that what you want?:

She ran her hands down her suddenly curvaceous sides. It *was* quite nice. Especially the way it looked when she was apparently wearing nothing but the Banesuit. And it *would* be cool to have a body as striking as Barbara's. "Uh, sure, I'd love it! But… only if I can breathe."

Winter grinned. *:I guess I could loosen it up a bit. Is that better?*

"A little." She hesitated. "Would you loosen it more if I asked?"

:I would have, but that is a loaded question. And now that I sense the underlying excitement you feel from the possibility of being denied, then no, I don't think I will:

"Not even if I ordered you to?"

:No:

"Ooh my." Katrina felt her cheeks burning under the layers of latex, foam, and steel that encased her head. She hadn't even been fully conscious of her desire that Winter might say no, but Winter saw everything. "A person has to be careful what they wish for around you."

:Yes. That person does, doesn't she?:

Chapter 16

A week later found Katrina running through the park at top speed, just

for the fun of it. Moving was almost effortless, now that the microscopic framework of the Banesuit was working with her and not simply enclosing her. It seemed to her that Earth's gravity had lessened its pull, just a little bit. It was exhilarating. She was getting a little more used to the constant constriction around her waist, though it never became painful; Winter could feel what Katrina was feeling and could always adjust the suit to be comfortable. She eventually stopped to lean against a tree and catch her breath. "I've never had so much fun just running around in my life."

Winter smiled in her mind. *:And you always hated to do so much as jog:*

"And it showed." She looked around the park from the ridge. "But it's not easy with all the other Banes around and the alarms. I wish we could leave this place… just take off across the countryside and not stop."

:Who is to say we can't?:

"What? You mean you can get us out of the city limits?"

:No, that I can't do. I'm sorry. But I might be able to provide an alternative:

"Like what? Whoa, hang on." There was a dizzying moment of vertigo as the park she had been standing in simply disappeared. In its place was now a wide-open plain of gently rolling hills, with vast plateaus rising up in the distance. The sky had an unearthly, violet hue. As she watched, spirals of small, puffy clouds appeared in the stratosphere–simply conjured into existence. The thin grass on the fields thickened into verdant clover which blossomed with tiny, dark magenta flowers. Stunted trees with thick, twisted trunks and dense clusters of foliage slowly sprang from the ground and matured before her startled eyes.

"What is this place? Where am I?" Katrina asked as the rest of the landscape continued to evolve around her. She was alarmed to suddenly find herself standing on an alien planet.

:Don't be frightened. It's nowhere in particular. Just something I pieced together from your dreams. I thought you'd like the colors:

"You mean this isn't real? I'm still back in the park?"

:Of course you are. Right where you stopped running. Just think of this as a daydream. It's the least I can do for you, my love:

Katrina turned in a circle, taking in the three-sixty degree panorama. It was an entirely new world in exquisite detail. "You made all of this?"

:Not by myself. I've been observing how your sleeping mind works. The part of

your mind that creates your dreams is doing most of the work. I'm just shaping it for you, interfacing it with your waking self:

Katrina thought she understood. This world wasn't a computer-generated scene like some sort of virtual reality. It was more like a lucid dream. An all-encompassing hallucination. She took a few steps and could feel the softness of the clover under her padded feet. It was quite different from the turf of the park. She supposed all of this was technically no different from the rainbow dragonflies or any of the other little visions Winter had created to amuse her, but this was a whole new level. It was truly astonishing. "But it's so real!"

:It's as real as you want it to be. Go on, try it out. Feel it! Run!:

Katrina giggled anxiously and jogged a few tentative paces across the strange landscape. "But won't I run into to something? I mean, back in the park, in the real world?"

:Who is to say you're really moving at all?:

"You can do that?" Katrina gasped. With a grin, she started running, hesitantly at first, then with greater confidence. She was soon speeding through the fields of magenta flowers, unable to believe that her body was actually standing still in real life. She could feel the impact of her footfalls, the exertion of her muscles, and the sensations of the latex stretching across her body as she moved. She could even smell the vanilla-like scent of the little, alien flowers! And the rich aroma of the soil beneath her feet! She finally came to a halt. "I just cannot believe this!"

:I'm just happy I'm able to do this for you:

"Thank you! Thank you!"

(adoration-gratitude-happiness)

Katrina sat down heavily, still unable to believe the world in which she found herself. "Do I… do we… can we control this place? Do anything we want?"

:Of course:

"Could you make the trees blue?" she asked. She had no sooner asked the question than one by one, in rapid succession, the leaves of each tree instantly turned a glossy, dark blue. She shook her head with delight at Winter's whimsical side, for the transformation of each tree was accompanied by the sound of an exploding kernel of popcorn. Before long, all the trees as far as she could see were now shades of blue.

:Like that?:

"It's incredible! Can you make it nighttime?"

As the sun sank behind the horizon, Katrina looked up and was rendered speechless. She had grown up in a world where, because of all the light pollution, only a handful of the brightest stars were ever visible. Winter had created a night sky where a billion distinct stars twinkled on a backdrop of blackest velvet. They were all different sizes–some of them impossibly close–and here and there they glittered like sparkling jewels in colors of red, yellow, violet, and blue. Nebulous wisps of faintly luminous gas glowed among the field of stars. A shooting star blazed across the dome of the sky. It was so deep and so vast that Katrina felt she might get sucked up into it if she didn't keep a firm hold of the earth at her sides. Never in the real world had there been a night sky this pure, this iconic… a perfect representation of what a night should be. A sublime night. A dream sky. A painter's sky.

Winter had been quietly humming to herself while she created the sky. Then she noted Katrina with concern. *:Katrina, you're crying:*

"It's… there are no words."

:We don't need words, my love. Enjoy it. It's all for you. Anything you can imagine. Any time you want. And stop worrying that it's all going to disappear. We have all the time in the world:

Katrina settled back into the clover and fragrant blossoms and watched in silence as the dome of the sky slowly rotate above her. A full moon, larger and brighter than any she could remember, slowly ascended from the horizon. Blinking silver fireflies drifted lazily among the trees. Winter's warming presence was within her. It was all so perfect. She found it hard to believe that, in truth, she was still essentially a prisoner in Eudemonia. She had never felt more free or more safe in her life.

She raised an arm off the ground to watch how the moonlight reflected off the shiny, black surface. It had been so long since she had seen her own skin. She wondered what would it be like to see it again. "Winter?"

:Yes, I can do that. Do you want me to make the suit invisible to your eyes?:

Katrina considered, looking at the latex stretched across her skin. She trailed a finger down her arm and across her chest. "No," she decided. "That's okay. I think I like this better. This is me now. The real me. What's underneath doesn't matter. I'm a Bane now and I always will be."

:All right, then:

She rubbed her hands against her waist. "The only problem is being so numb. Not being able to feel anything–*ooh*!" she exclaimed, because all of the sudden she could feel a cool, night breeze blowing across her body as though she were naked. She hadn't felt the wind since she had gone into banishment, not once! She could feel it now, and it wasn't even a real wind! Reaching down to her sides, she felt all the delicate details of the clover flowers with her fingertips. She had grown so accustomed to the dulling of her senses due to the Custodian's numbing ability that she had almost forgotten what she had been missing. She shuddered with sheer, sensual delight. "I can feel again! I can feel everything! How'd you do it? Did you figure out how to get in and shut off that anesthetic command?"

:I'm afraid not. Your skin is still numb: Winter smiled within her mind. *:All I'm doing is feeding your brain false input, the same as everything you're seeing around you right now. I just now figured out how to manipulate your tactile input in the process of letting this place seem real for you:*

"You're just full of surprises!"

:I'm always learning:

"Well, whatever you're doing, don't stop!" With a laugh, she flapped her arms on the ground as if making a snow angel, relishing every sensation, real or not. Then she hungrily stroked her body, eager to be able to feel herself again. She was still numb to her own touch. She anxiously rubbed her waist and thighs. "Something's wrong. I-I can't feel myself any better."

:I know:

"Well, can you fix it?"

:Technically, yes. But… I think I'll keep that as it is for now:

"But why?"

:Otherwise there would be no consequences to being trapped in the suit like you want:

"O-oh, oh god." She was instantly inflamed by being teased like that. She had no defenses against Winter, since Winter always knew exactly how to push her buttons.

:So you'll just have to sacrifice being able to touch yourself in order to stay wrapped up in me, won't you? And besides, it makes you all the more appreciative of my touch when I give it:

"Your… touch?" she asked. Her eyes went wide as she felt a hand stroke her cheek. Her face hadn't felt a thing since it had been sealed up in latex and the helmet. She got to her knees and looked wildly around the dark landscape. "Shit! What was that? Who's there?" She felt Winter's amusement over her reaction. "Was that… was that you? It was, wasn't it?"

:Who else? Relax, my darling. Lay yourself down: Cool, invisible hands gently urged Katrina back to the ground. *:Let me feel you. Rather... let me feel you feeling me:*

Crucified by ecstasy against the hillside of clover, Katrina could only make inarticulate sounds of pleasure as her body was lovingly stroked and petted. She hadn't felt anyone's touch in months, and she had *never* felt a touch as deeply. Her skin pulsed with warmth wherever the delicate, phantom hands touched and it continued to tingle in their wake. She began to laugh uncontrollably. It felt so *good*! Too good to be true. But then, it wasn't true, was it? None of this was really happening outside of her head. It was all just a dream, but it wasn't. Did the difference between dream and reality have any meaning for her, anymore? Did it even matter?

:I love how this makes you feel. I've been studying the feedback and making some connections. I want to try something more. This could get a little intense. Are you ready?:

Katrina smiled blissfully. "Do whatever you want with me. I'm all yours."

Katrina thought she had a good understanding of what pleasure was. As it turned out, she had no idea. It wasn't until the delicate hands multiplied and turned into hundreds of soft, hungry mouths that kissed, licked, and sucked every inch of her body that Katrina had the slightest inkling of what she was in for.

What followed next was an experiment in physical rapture that defied Katrina's ability to even comprehend it all. Winter's talent to give her instantaneous orgasms was great, but this was nothing as simple as a meager orgasm. Like a rag doll in a raging surf, she was helplessly tossed and carried over waves of all-consuming pleasure, all of it orchestrated into a transcendent symphony by Winter. The heavens spun as the stars above her blazed brighter and hotter until the world itself was consumed in sparkling, honeysuckle-sweet flames. Time ceased to have any meaning as her quivering flesh was compressed

into an erogenous singularity that was caressed by a thousand different sensations, colors, and sounds. She was gently teased open like a fragile flower and then voraciously devoured whole. Her body and mind were penetrated and fucked in ways both natural and inconceivable. Pain transmuted to pleasure, pleasure which grew so intense it became agony. Her screams of ecstasy took physical shape and wrapped around her in crushing ribbons of Winter's will, entwining them together as one. Her consciousness was strewn, skittering and sparking like white-hot diamonds, across the surface of a vast, frozen sea, only to be gathered up by Winter's hands and cooled by her gentle exhalations. And the best part was that throughout it all, Winter's love poured into her, like a beautiful song that echoed through the entirety of their private universe and just went on and on and on…

(love-love-love)

……

They floating as one, weightless, in hazy pastel mists. There was perfect silence, perfect calm. It had taken some time for Katrina to be put back together and gently eased back into being human again–if she could even remotely be considered human anymore. Katrina had never been so deeply fulfilled in her life. She knew she could never be the same again, not after an experience like that.

"A girl could get used to that," she said, finally stirring after what seemed like hours of drifting. Winter moved within her, a warm, glowing, happily exhausted presence. "I forgot who I was… what I was. Thought I was losing my mind. But it wasn't scary at all."

:That's why it had to come to an end, love. I would never let that happen to you. I was observing very carefully. I wouldn't want you to lose yourself:

Katrina smiled and mumbled words of thanks. Then, "I feel high."

:You've got a lot of endorphins running free in here. I'm still working on rounding them up:

Katrina chuckled at the mental image of Winter chasing little, bouncing molecules that squeaked and giggled with every bounce through a maze of neurons. "What's going on in the real world? Seems like we've been here forever."

:It's been a little while. It's nighttime. I've been monitoring the outside. I moved your body away into the woods:

Sensing Katrina's desire to see what was going on 'outside', Winter dissolved the mist that surrounded them. Katrina felt her body settling to the earth as gravity took hold and she found herself back in the real world. It was the middle of the night and all was quiet. She squirmed, discovering that she was lying on her side in a muddy quagmire at the bottom of a ditch. It squelched as she pulled herself into a sitting position. The dark slime clung to her black latex skin. It probably would have stunk to high heaven, had she been able to smell it. "You moved me down here?" she asked, picturing Winter taking control of her muscles and carrying her dreaming host off into the woods.

:Yes. I didn't want us to be disturbed by proximity alarms:

"That's fine and all, but… did you have to throw me in a mud puddle?"

Winter smiled sheepishly. *:Sorry, my love. I was a little, um, distracted at the time:*

Chapter 17

Wonderful months passed as Katrina and Winter explored each other as well as the seemingly endless possibilities of their condition. Using Katrina's memories of movies and pictures she had seen, books she had read, and even half-forgotten daydreams as a palette, Winter was able to paint unlimited worlds for Katrina's pleasure and entertainment. She could take her anywhere from the depths of the oceans to the weightless abyss of deep space. She could turn novels Katrina had read into fully-formed worlds that Katrina could sink into and watch it all in person as the stories played out. It all felt so *real*. It wasn't always about sex, though there was plenty of that and it was always mind-blowing. It never grew dull. There was always something new, exciting, or perverse to try. Winter was astonishingly creative.

Katrina wanted for nothing. Even though she still lived the atavistic life of a Bane with no possessions or a home to call her own, she couldn't have been more content. She no longer had any use for wealth, any drive to accumulate objects, or even a need for a roof over her head. Winter was her shelter. She was able to provide Katrina with incredible banquets, hot baths, music–any luxury she had missed out on since she had become a Bane, all supplied by her memories and fantasies. Although none of those things really existed, they were real enough to her perceptions that was there no difference. Access to new

music, movies, books, or the occasional exchange of ideas would have been a nice addition, but wasn't necessary for their happiness.

Even if Winter had been unable to provide her with any of those make-believe pleasures, Katrina would still have been completely content. That stuff was just icing on the cake. The true heart of her joy came from the union, the intimacy, the *wholeness* she knew from being joined with Winter. As long as she had that… nothing else really mattered.

……

Just as Katrina had suspected, she and Winter's private experience wasn't unique. Through the use of a discarded, weather-worn legal pad, they were able to communicate with Barbara. It was a time-consuming conversation; they had to pass notes back and forth in secret. And, to Katrina's annoyance, Barbara kept slipping into that shorthand she had used during their very first encounter by the bridge. Apparently, she was so out of the habit of writing that she tried to keep her missives as brief as possible. Although she was still unwilling to expand upon her earlier, troubling references on how she had gone into banishment, Barbara was quite willing to share some of the common knowledge of the infant culture of Eudeamonic Banes.

The term Eudeamon itself had been coined years ago one by of the earliest of the Eudeamonic Banes. He had started writing it down here and there, and the name had simply caught on. No one knew for sure whose was the first Custodian to achieve sentience. The phenomenon had started happening several years ago, roughly a year after the first Banes were sent into banishment. With only a few exceptions, it seemed that a development of sentience and a union with a host was almost inevitable, given enough time. It was simply the natural progression as a Custodian evolved. The process usually took a year, sometimes longer, and occasionally in much less time due to other variables. Katrina's fire rescue had been one such variable, according to Barbara. However, since most banishment sentences were relatively brief, from six months to a year, the majority of Banes came and went before the Custodian had a chance to fully develop itself into a full consciousness.

It was clear that Ashton Technologies had no idea what was going on with the Banes. Barbara seemed positive about this. They didn't understand the long term 'side effects' of having a Custodian, because no Eudeamonic Bane would ever willingly divulge their secret and risk becoming a guinea pig, or worse…

the forced separation from their beloved Eudeamon. If anyone working there had the slightest notion of what might be going on, they must be keeping it to themselves, because Banes continued to be processed.

Naturally, no Eudeamonic Bane would ever want to lose what they had gained, so they had to keep their existence a secret. They dared not even tell younger Banes about it, not even if it would calm their fears or give them hope for a brighter future. Those Banes might be released before it happened to them and word of what they had been told might get out. Barbara admitted that she shouldn't have told Katrina what little she did that night, long ago. She had been moved by caprice, never having had a person ask her what life was like as a Bane before.

I used to hate you for that, Katrina wrote to her. *I thought you had tricked me into a trap, or that you were just plain crazy. Now I understand everything. I can never thank you enough.*

The Banes realized they needed to remain as they were, since being freed from banishment meant losing their Custodians. They began to flagrantly break the law to extend their sentences indefinitely. Although they would still get the painful punishments for their actions, their Eudeamons were no longer forced to physically prevent them performing those acts. Remembering back to her first months as a Bane, Katrina knew from personal experience that it didn't take much to rack up penalties. Some Banes went overboard, however, and instead of accumulating additional days here and there, they went all out in attempts to give themselves what would amount to hugely extended sentences: smashing in storefronts, shoving citizens, and the like.

That became a problem as more Banes acquired their personal Eudeamons. Officials became alarmed when so many supposedly 'behavior inhibited' Banes started breaking the law. Dozens of identified Banes were picked up and taken back to Ashton Technologies for study, but no one knew what had happened to them after that. None of them had been heard from since. To prevent more from being taken, word had been spread to stop being so obvious in their attempts to extend their sentences. They had to be subtle.

Of course, the problem with getting sentence extensions in the first place was that one had to endure a great many punishments. It was cruel fact of life for a Bane. There didn't appear to be an easy solution to that, either. And there was always the possibility that, at some point, city officials might seriously start

investigating why so many long-terms Banes kept lengthening their sentences. Who knew what would happen then?

Barbara wasn't sure how to resolve the fundamental problems that came with the glorious gift. She said that she would have to think about it and discuss it with other Banes. The main problem was that it was hard to get Eudeamonic Banes to work together on anything. Normally, the 'community' consisted of Banes who might encounter each other every couple of months, exchange information, and go about their business. They neither needed nor desired each other's company. As a whole, they were the ultimate in self-absorption. They did, however, work together out of self-interest, so that would be the way to get their attention. Katrina hoped that Banes far wiser and more experienced than she would be able to work out the problems inherent in their situation, for she was at a loss.

I will let you know if we find a solution, Katrina/Winter, Barbara/Eden wrote to her. *You're so new, you have so much yet to experience. Be well. We love you.*

……

:I don't want to do this:

"You know we have to."

:I know we have to, but I don't want *to:*

Katrina gazed at the innocent-looking cell phone–a forbidden 'device'–lying in the grass. It was hot pink and decorated with glittering rhinestones. Some visitor to the park had left it behind on a park bench by accident. That sort of thing happened all the time. It was early in the morning, but she still checked to make sure no one was watching. "Every little bit helps," she said. "Let's get this over with."

She knelt down, picked up cell phone, and tried to turn it on–a protocol violation. The next second, the punishing, phantom fiery sparks danced over her body. She cried out and dropped the phone. She took a deep breath, steeled herself, and picked it up again. There came another punishment. "*Ungh*!" She threw it down. "Damn, that hurts."

Winter sobbed in the back of her mind. *:Oh Katrina, I hate this!:*

As bad as the punishments were, they were nothing compared to sharing Winter's suffering at being forced to punish her. Katrina could feel the heart-wrenching waves of Winter's guilt washing over her. Her Eudeamon was deeply ashamed that she lacked the ability to break into her own programming so that

she could alter it. "I know it's not your fault. I don't want you to feel bad about this. Calm down. Feel my love for you," she said, sending her affection to her other half.

:Thank you:

"I don't like this either, but unless you can come up with an easier way to extend my sentence, then this is what we have to do. I need your help with this. I can't do it alone."

:You'll never be alone:

Encouraged, Katrina and picked up the phone again.

After a quarter of an hour of repeatedly activating the phone, Katrina's nerves were totally shot. It was like forcing herself to grab a live wire over and over again. The phone tumbled from her nerveless fingers as she waited for the last bout of pain to pass. It had been pretty battered by all the times she had reflexively flung it away. It had lost many of its rhinestones and was starting to split apart along the seams. "I can't do anymore," she panted. "Not right now."

:You've done enough, my love. That should give you another month, at least. Besides, I don't think the phone can take much more. You've been throwing it around so much, I doubt it will qualify as a device after much longer. Right now, I want you to lie down and relax for me:

Katrina had to smile. Winter's tenderness warmed her from the inside. She knew Winter had suffered just as much as she had, but there she was trying to bolster her spirits. Winter always knew what to do to make her feel better. "Thank you."

In moments, the world around her was gone. In its place was a hilly, empty field covered in a dry carpet of dense, winter-tanned grass that was dotted with the occasional patch of snow. The trees encircling the field had lost their leaves and the sky above her had gone a steel gray. The world was hushed except for the sigh of a cold breeze that passed over the field and made the dry grass bow in gentle waves.

Far from feeling dreary, the scene soothed and calmed her. It was a winter scene, after all, and Winter was all around her. She was present in every whispering blade of grass and in every dry leaf rattling in the trees. Katrina floated on her back, almost weightless, buoyed up by the tall grass as if by water. A few cardinals, their bright red feathers in vibrant contrast to the muted surroundings, flitted among the trees at the edge of the field. The recent pains

were quickly forgotten.

:I've been working on something that I've been saving for the right moment. I'd like to show you now, if you would like to see:

"You're *always* working on something. And you *know* I'd like to see," Katrina replied. She was then suddenly aware that she wasn't physically alone in the dream-field. She sat up in the grass to find a figure standing across from her and gasped. "Winter! Is that… you?"

Standing there in the field with her was a Bane, except it wasn't. There was no featureless helmet to cover her face, but she was a sleek and hairless woman completely covered in the same black latex as Katrina. In fact, it was a mirror image of herself–perhaps a little too idealized, a little too perfect–but it was her. But of course it was. It was the shape of the Banesuit that surrounded her, which was the closest thing Winter had to a physical body of her own. The figure didn't have Katrina's eyes, though. Her eyes were lambent pools of the palest blue light, like a clear sky refracted through an icicle.

:This is more difficult than it looks. It's hard to inhabit a form when I have no other references aside from sharing your body. Most of it is guesswork:

"You look amazing," breathed Katrina, rising to her feet. She didn't know what else to say. She was filled with awe, afraid to even step forward and touch the being in front of her. Such an act almost seemed profane. "Is this how you… how you see yourself?"

:More like how I see myself through your eyes. But yes, essentially:

"Essentially? There's something more?" Katrina felt a flutter of uncharacteristic shyness coming from her companion. "Winter, you're embarrassed! What are you hiding?"

:It's something of a conceit, really. It just kind of happened when I was thinking about how I would look if I had a body:

"*What* just kind of happened?"

:Well…: From behind Winter's back materialized a pair of large, folded wings. They slowly spread open before Katrina's eyes. They were covered with feathers, but they weren't common bird feathers. The feathers were entirely made of black latex, so thin and soft that they were translucent around the edges. They were light enough to get ruffled a little by the breeze. The effect was so stunning that it nearly brought Katrina to her knees.

"Wings! You have wings! They're… you're so beautiful!" she gasped.

"But why wings? Where did that idea come from?"

Winter had a coy, little smile. *:You once said that I was your angel:*

Katrina let out an astonished laugh. "Yes," she said, "I did, didn't I? And you are. You're my angel."

Dark and shining, Winter came forward and lovingly wrapped her arms around Katrina. Awestruck to the point of tears, Katrina could only wonder at the miracle of how she, a former human, could possibly deserve to be joined as one with this glorious and angelic being. Then their twin lips met and the wings folded around them both in a warm embrace, and Katrina wanted nothing more than for this one, perfect moment to last forever.

Chapter 18

Katrina/Winter sat on their island one late afternoon, comfortably reclined under the sun against the grass-matted trunk of one of the willow trees. A brief, summer storm had just passed overhead, drenching everything and leaving the park damp and humid. Standing in the thick curtains of rain had moved Katrina to poetry. She was on her third stanza.

"*On forests hushed and pools placid*," intoned Katrina, engrossed in composition, "*The rain comes down like*… like… damn. What rhymes with 'pools placid?'"

:Amino acid?: suggested Winter.

"Ew, no. Um…"

:Lactic acid:

"No! No acids," growled Katrina. "You're not helping."

:Sorry. Biochemistry just comes naturally to me:

"Anyway. Forests hushed, pools placid... *the rain falls down like-*"

:Something flaccid?:

Katrina groaned. "You know what? We really stink at poetry."

:One of us does, at least. Maybe we just need practice:

She stood up to stretch her back. As she gazed around the edge of the pond, a stumbling figure caught her attention. "What the-? Is that who I think it is?"

:I've only seen him in your memories, but yes, it does resemble Verne:

Seeing him back here in the insular little world she had made for herself

was akin to seeing a ghost from another lifetime. The last time she had encountered him, she had still been human. Ever since joining with Winter, thoughts of her old acquaintances, journalism, and the whole reason she was here in the first place had all just slipped away as unimportant. She hadn't forgotten, of course, but it all just seemed so incredibly trivial now. She hadn't missed any of those things at all. She hadn't particularly missed being cut off from her old friendships, either. She supposed that was a price to be paid when one joined with a Eudeamon; in finding complete happiness within herself, she lost interest in everyone else.

"What's he doing out there? Look at that, he's going to get himself stuck in the mud!" she observed, exasperated. She picked up the discarded pen and notepad (sealed inside an old sandwich bag to keep it safe from the elements) that she had been using to correspond with Barbara, waded off her island, and dove into the water.

Verne noticed her when she was halfway across the pond. The park was mostly deserted due to the recent rain, but it was still daytime, so they would have to be careful. He waited until no one was looking before following her into a dense stand of bushes that grew along part of the shore, not far from where he had last spoken to her months ago.

"Katrina! Thank god!" He had burrowed his way into the brambles and down into the tiny, marshy hollow where Katrina was already crouching. She had been anxiously breaking a fallen twig into little pieces in her fingers. There was barely enough room for them both to sit without touching. He looked like he was doing well, about the same, though his hair was longer. Katrina felt awkward. This was the first time any normal person who had known her as Katrina Nichols had met her as Katrina/Winter. "Uh… you *are* Katrina, right?" he asked as he stared at her up and down.

She sighed. "He does this every damn time."

:Well, you have changed quite a bit since then: And it was true. Physically, she was completely unrecognizable from the person she used to be. She still didn't have Barbara's distinctive curves, but Winter had continued to reshape her body all this time. Now she was lean and lithe, like some fetishistic idol; a bizarre and feral forest creature carved of glistening obsidian.

A blush had risen on Verne's pale cheeks. "You look… uh…"

:I think somebody has a crush on you:

"All right, that's enough from the peanut gallery," she said to Winter. It was actually kind of funny–and a little sad, for Verne's sake–that she should have become an object of amorous desire now that she no longer had need of anyone outside of herself.

"Anyway, I've been looking for you all day," Verne was whispering intently. "I'm so glad I finally found you, but… what's going on? You were supposed to have been released this morning. Did you know that? You've been here eight months already."

Katrina was a little surprised. Her initial sentence of eight months was already up? She had totally lost track of time.

"I was there at their facility waiting to pick you up, but you didn't show. When I asked them what was up, they checked their computers and said your sentence had been extended! By over half a year! Can you believe that? I'm getting worried. I think there might be someone on the inside who knows what we're up to and is extending your sentence to keep you from talking."

If only! Katrina thought. *That'd make staying here so much easier.* Although they had racked up a couple of months with that lost cell phone, they had suffered for it. Katrina practically cringed at the sight of a phone, now. She pulled out the notepad and began to write.

"Hey! You can write again? That's great! Oh, Katrina, that's awesome! But how?" He hunkered over to look at the pad.

Hi, Verne. Yes, I can write again. It's just a little trick I picked up a while ago. Figured out how to work with my custodian some, she wrote. *It's good to see you and thank you for trying to check up on me. That's nice of you. Yes, I know my sentence is longer. It's not someone on the inside. Every little ban. violation you do adds days, even weeks. I found that out early on, but couldn't tell you.*

Verne looked dumbfounded. "Well… well… fuck! You're an innocent person. You don't deserve this! I'm not sure if even the guilty people deserve it, but I know *you* don't! What are we gonna do? We've got to get you out of here. I wonder if we could smuggle you out. Maybe… scramble your suit's link to the network so it doesn't know where it is? No, probably not. But we have to do something. You can't stay here another year."

I can and I will, she wrote.

"What? No, Katrina, you don't have to. You've already done more than enough here, more than anyone could have expected! You've already given

almost a year of your life to this story and that's enough. No one could ask more of you. Look, with what you'll have learned here and with what I've dug up on their system, we have more than enough to go on." He paused, waiting for a response, but she just sat there. "I don't know. We might have to confess what we did just to get you out of this mess."

Absolutely not. A lot of people would get in trouble, not just you and me. Anyway, I'm not going anywhere, Verne. I lengthened my sentence on purpose. I'm staying here.

"What do you mean? I don't get it."

Katrina sighed to herself and wrote some more. *I don't expect you to understand. It's not about the story anymore. Forget all that. I found out what Eudeamon means. I'm happy here now, happier than I've ever been in my life. I'm sad that I can't tell you why, but it has to stay a secret.*

"You're pulling my leg, right?" Verne slowly asked as he read the note.

It's paradise. Being human, you couldn't possibly understand any more than I could back then. But I'm a Bane now, Verne. I'm perfect.

Verne had a nervous little grin. "You're, uh, starting to scare me here. This isn't like you, at all. You know, you're sounding like that Bane you interviewed last year."

That's because Barbara was right about everything! I wish I could explain it all, but I can't. I want you to tell Ben to kill the story. There's nothing to uncover here. And then forget about me. I'm not ever going back. Never.

Verne shook his head. "No. No way. Katrina, listen. They've got you, hell, I don't know, brainwashed or something. We've gotta get you out of here."

No, she wrote.

"Yes! Katrina, listen to me," he insisted, growing more agitated. "What you're experiencing is some kind of syndrome I saw mentioned in their memos the couple times I was able to get in. The type of computers they use, the Custodians, they physically interact with your brain! Whatever your feeling is just some kind of psychosis, it's not real."

:Oh, that's nice: Winter commented. *:Hello, Mr. Sawyer. I'm Katrina's psychosis:*

Katrina giggled, then felt guilty for laughing while Verne was so upset. *I'm not crazy*, she wrote. *My brain is fine. Trust me on this.*

"This is not your life! Okay? You don't belong here! I know it must seem

like it after being here so long, being beaten down and tortured and ignored by everyone. You're not one of these people. Maybe you've forgotten, but you've got a life to go back to. You've got a home, a job, a-and people who care about you. You've gotta come back to us."

Let the real Vivienne have my old life. I don't need it anymore. I'd sooner die than go back.

He was visibly restraining himself from grabbing her shoulders and shaking her. "Damn it, snap out of it! You're not *this*, you're Katrina Nichols, you're a reporter."

Katrina was getting agitated, herself. What right did he have to come into their little world and make her feel bad for being so happy? She wrote with quick, angry motions. *No. I'm Katrina Bane now. I'm Katrina/Winter forever! You and I aren't even the same species, anymore.*

Verne scanned the note and stared at her. "Species? Winter forever? What does that even *mean*? Oh, Katrina, we've got to get you some help."

They sat silently for a little while. It broke Katrina's heart to see the tears that were welling up in his eyes. This was harder than she thought it would be. At least she had Winter's presence to soothe and comfort her.

"What am I supposed to do?" he finally asked. "Just leave you out here?"

It's what I want. I'm sorry this makes you sad, I don't want you sad, but don't feel bad for me. If you only knew how happy I am, you wouldn't want me to leave it, either.

He shook his head, sitting there and pouting like a small boy. "No. No, I'm not giving up on you. I'm going to crack their system, I swear it. I'm going to find out what they've done to you."

Please don't, Katrina had started to write, but he was already getting up to leave. He was continuing to promise her he would find a way to make her better. "Oh, Winter, I don't know what else to tell him without giving us away. Whatever I say, he won't believe me."

:Better to let him go, then. It's no good for either of you to drag this out:

"I guess," she said, watching Verne's retreating form struggling through the dense brush. "Damn it all, none of this is fair."

:I know, my love. Let him try to get into the system, if it makes him feel better. Nothing will come of it. It has the same style of defenses as the Custodian hardware. If I can't break through my own firewalls, his luck won't be much better:

"I don't know about that. Hacking's all he knows. I'd bet if anyone could get in, he could… hey." Katrina just had an idea.

Winter picked up on it instantly. *:Do you think it could work?:*

"I have no idea, but there's only one way to find out. Verne! Wait up," she called, pursuing him through the bushes.

……

One day later, at midnight, they met up again at the same spot. He had brought a blanket with him, as directed, to help conceal their activities. They spread the blanket out over the bushes like a tent to hide any errant light. It reminded Katrina of when she was young, when she would hide under the covers with a book and a flashlight after bedtime. She would have felt more comfortable doing this on her island, but it would be silly to ask him to swim over to it with his laptop in hand.

Verne was in better spirits than when they had last parted. She supposed he was just happy to have been given something constructive to do–something within his particular area of expertise. Besides, he couldn't resist a challenge. She knew, though, that he was still far from coming to terms with her decision. He was probably still trying to figure out some way to convince her to go back.

She and Verne were sitting in front of his laptop. Verne had once told her he had enough black ice and military grade decryption programs on that thing to get him sent away for thirty years if he was so much as caught in possession of it. She was nervously twisting the laptop's network cable in her hand. The other end was plugged into a small, universal port at the base of her helmet. Winter had directed the Banesuit to create a small hole over the port to allow access. "How long will it take you to synch up with it or whatever?" she asked Winter.

:I already have. This thing is one of my ancestors?: she asked, radiating haughty disdain. *:It's like trying to hold a meaningful conversation with a typewriter:*

"So let me get this straight," Verne was saying. "You want me to try and hack your *brain*? Is it just me, or does this sound a little crazy?"

When he put it that way, it did sound somewhat reckless. "Winter? You're sure this is safe?"

:I'll be watching everything to make sure nothing happens. Don't worry, darling. I would never let anything bad happen to you:

"That's good to know."

:But… just in case… if something does go wrong, now or in the future-:

Katrina picked up on Winter's feelings. She shut her eyes tightly. "*No*. Don't you say that. Don't even think that."

:I want you to promise me-:

"No! I won't, because nothing's going to happen."

:Promise me you'll find a way to keep going:

"There's no way," Katrina insisted. "I can't live without you now, you *know* that."

Winter wasn't going to relent. *:Promise me:*

"Okay! Okay, I promise. Now never, *ever* think of that again, all right?"

(love-love-love)

Unaware of the emotional exchange occurring in his presence, Verne continued to set up his computer. "There, that should be about ready. Man, I'm nervous."

"Winter, could you use the computer to let him hear me talk? They could do that in the lab."

:I'm afraid not. That would require software designed for that purpose. I can do this, however. Here, this will be quicker for you than writing: Winter brought up the computer's instant messaging program.

What's wrong Verne? appeared the words in the chat box, entered for her by Winter. **Afraid of a little challenge?**

"Hey, how'd you do that?" exclaimed Verne excitedly. "You can interface directly using your *mind*? That's so cool! Okay, now I'm getting a little jealous."

Eat your heart out. Thank you for attempting this. It really will make things so much easier for me if it works.

"Yeah, well, I'm not sure I *want* to make things easier for you. If things are hard, maybe that'll convince you to give up this craziness and come home," he said.

No lectures, please. Would you rather picture me receiving agonizing punishments for the rest of my life? Help me or don't.

"Okay, okay. It's good to see being banished and brainwashed hasn't made you any less bossy. Right. Let's do this." He brought up a series of programs. "I'm really not sure where to start. Heh. Look at me. My palms are sweating."

After a short while, Verne was deep in concentration. He was in his element. Katrina could make no sense of anything that was happening on the

screen. She could sense that Winter had withdrawn and was closely observing what was going on. "Does any of this mean anything to you?" she asked. "Is he getting anywhere?"

:Not yet. Right now he's just probing the defenses. He hasn't even got a foothold. He's trying, but the Custodian hardware is too swift for his programs to keep up with. I'm beginning to understand the process, though. Be patient, darling:

Katrina sighed as the minutes crept by, strumming her fingers on her knees. It was hard to be patient knowing there was a digital war being waged inside her head. She envisioned little bombs going off inside her skull.

"Crap," announced Verne after perhaps twenty minutes.

Katrina looked sharply over at him. **What's wrong?**

"Oh, it's just so slippery," he said, sounding exasperated. "It's the same problem I had getting into the Ash-Tech network. It's learning from my attacks and using them against me. In simple terms, it has a good immune system. I can't use the same tactic twice and I'm running out of ammo. I don't even know if I'm doing more harm than good."

Please keep trying. I know you can do it.

"I didn't say I'd given up. I've got a few more tricks up my sleeve."

Katrina watched anxiously, wishing she could do something to help. She could tell by his darkening expression that he wasn't holding out much hope.

:*I think I understand how this works now. I'm taking over:* said Winter. A few seconds after that, Verne's screen went crazy with activity.

"Shit, it's gotten in my system! I'm shutting this down," he said, reaching for the cable.

No don't! I know what I'm doing, came the words in the chat box. It was Winter who wrote that, but Verne didn't know any different.

"Why? What's going on?" he asked.

Katrina didn't know how to answer. It was suddenly very hard to concentrate. "I feel… I think I'm gonna be sick. Winter? Spare me a few brain cells, would ya?"

Winter couldn't reply. She was busy fighting a war on a thousand fronts. When Katrina tried to peek into her thoughts, all she could see was a dizzying wall of rapid calculations in the incomprehensibly complex language of neural computers.

Verne was ineffectually trying to keep up. "Is this thing… is this thing

attacking itself?"

"Oh, hell, I don't know," mumbled Katrina, mentally drained. Winter was using up all of her brainpower to do whatever it was she was doing.

The unpleasant feeling suddenly passed, followed by a surge of pride and exhilaration. *:I did it! I got in, Katrina! We're free!:*

"W-we are?" wondered Katrina, overwhelmed by Winter's emotions.

:No more punishments. Ever. I won't be forced to do that to you anymore! I'm so happy!:

"I know, I feel it!" Katrina grinned hugely, mentally embracing Winter. "No more violations? No more pain! That's so wonderful! Hey, but, now that you're into the Custodian's hardware, will it still report violations?"

:I have access to the central monitoring network now. I can report as many violations as we want from in here, even ones you didn't do. As a matter of fact... you just committed six severe protocol violations:

"I did?"

:Yes, you did. Shame on you. Oh, there's another six. You're a very naughty girl. This is going to add months to your sentence. If you keep this up, you're going to be banished for a very long time. Try harder, V-7505!:

Katrina erupted into joyful laughter. This was too good! If she did it gradually–so as not to arouse suspicion–she could now accumulate enough violations to give herself a life sentence. Life with Winter. And without incurring a single punishment? It was ideal. "What about contact violations?"

:Give it a try:

Verne was still typing at his keyboard, trying to figure out what was going on, completely unaware of the silent celebration occurring next to him. He was taken off guard by the sudden embrace of a latex clad Bane. **You did it! It worked!!**

"It did?" he asked, glancing at the screen. "You got in? But I wasn't doing anything, not at the end there." A flush was rising on his cheeks.

Well, like I said, I've been learning to work with the Custodian a little. But it couldn't have happened without you. I can control it now, thanks to you. It was a white lie, but to tell him anything other would open up a can of worms she didn't want to get into. Winter was busy downloading Verne's hacking programs from his laptop and into Katrina's brain.

"What can I say? I guess… I rule?" He patted her awkwardly on the

back, unsure of where else to touch her.

You're still a dork. Katrina laughed and then extricated herself from the embrace. She found it strangely disquieting to be touched by someone. Months ago, she had been insanely desperate for the slightest human contact. Now it was just plain uncomfortable, and after experiencing the powerful depth of Winter's touch… well, a human just couldn't compare. It was then that she realized she would never have any romantic involvement with anyone else ever again. There was simply no need for it. The prospect didn't trouble her in the least, now that she had Winter.

:I've got the programs:

Okay, love. She started to get up. **It's late and we've been here a while. You should go now. I can't thank you enough.**

"What? Wait. That's it?" asked Verne. "You're just going to up and leave now?"

What more is there? I don't have anything to give you as a reward. What did you expect? I'm sorry but we are in different worlds now.

He sighed. "I wish you wouldn't say things like that."

I'm sorry, but it's true. You go back to your world. And stop worrying about me. I'm fine. I want you to be happy. I'll figure out a way to contact you if I need you. Take care.

"But… but what if *I* need *you*?"

Then you know where to find me. I'm taking this. She detached the cable they had been using to network and bundled it up. He was still stammering when she slid out from under the blanket and headed for the pond. She knew she must be coming off as cold or ungrateful to him. She felt bad just leaving him like that, but what did he want from her? Did he expect they should go and hang out over a few beers or something? Verne was a good guy, but he was still one of Them. She could hardly even relate to normal people anymore. She had just changed too much.

Chapter 19

Life was so much easier now. Katrina had hardly any worries at all. There were no more punishments, no more warnings, and she was free to remain as a Bane for the rest of her life. She still couldn't leave the city; there was a

tracking device in every Banesuit, plus she would always have to return to a maintenance station to survive. But that was okay. She didn't need to go anywhere. As long as she had Winter, she had everything she could possibly ever want. She did have to be careful, though. In order not to draw any attention to herself, she had to act like any other Bane and appear to obey the rules. She found she had to ask Winter to turn the proximity alarm back on (though at much lower volume) when she was walking around. Without it, she found herself unknowingly setting off other Banes' alarms left and right. There was no chance of her ever losing a territory fight now, at least.

She was finally able to repay some of the debt she felt she owed to Barbara for enticing her into becoming a Bane. When told about their plan, Barbara was skeptical but willing to give it a try. Winter, using the cable and the techniques she had learned from Verne and his programs, was able to help Eden to break down the Custodian firewalls. It wasn't easy on poor Barbara, though. Even though it only took maybe five minutes at most, her proximity alarm was going off and tormenting her the entire time. By the end, Katrina was forced to wrap her arms around the female Bane and pin her down to keep her from desperately fleeing. It was worth it in the end, for Barbara and her Eudeamon were overjoyed with the results.

u need to do this 4 the others, Barbara wrote to her, reverting to her annoying shorthand. *Any Eudeamon u find. If I find some, I send them 2u. u may have saved us all, Katrina/Winter. U amaze me. We love you so much.* She drew a few hearts and smiley faces around the missive for good measure.

……

Thus Katrina and Winter searched through the park, looking for the handful of Banes she knew to have Eudeamons. She felt self-conscious about it, even a little foolish. It made her feel like some fetish-clad missionary traveling around and peddling salvation. But though she hadn't asked for this responsibility, she could hardly turn it down. Her own experiences had lent her total empathy with what the other Banes were going through when it came to punishments. Being able to help them and witnessing their relief was deeply gratifying.

It wasn't always easy to track down even the familiar Banes who lived nearby. Some, Katrina included, often stayed near one location, but there was no telling when they might wander off. They might be gone for days at a time,

enjoying the private pleasures granted by their Eudeamons. While trying to communicate what she had to offer, she learned the names of some of her fellow Banes. Among them were Jack/Annuncia, Nola/Jade Prince, Ethan/Nodd, Big Ray/Sparkle, Ava/Sapphire, and Jordan/Pegasus.

All were grateful, but thankfully no one fawned over her. Katrina wasn't sure she could take that kind of attention. By their very natures, the Banes were very self-sufficient and remote, so they had no desire to spend much time on external relationships. Katrina understood that, for she had become the same way. They would give her their heartfelt thanks and then they would each go their separate ways. Word was getting around, though, and Katrina began to find two or three Banes waiting at the pond's edge whenever she woke up.

After a couple weeks of this, she figured she had helped just about every Eudeamonic Bane she could find in the immediate area. She ventured out into the city for the first time since Winter had awakened. The crowds of people didn't bother her much anymore. They ignored her, as always, and that suited her just fine. They hardly seemed real to her. She passed among them like a phantom, distantly separated from them on so many levels. *To think I used to envy them so much I could hardly stand it*, she thought as she watched them go about their daily lives. *Now I wonder why they don't envy me. I wonder if they'll ever know what they're missing.*

:Maybe someday they will: observed Winter. *:This isn't likely to stay a secret forever, you know:*

Perhaps it wouldn't, but what might come in the future wasn't worth worrying about. For now, all she was concerned with was maintaining the perfect present.

It proved very difficult to find Eudeamons in unfamiliar places. She didn't know anyone and she couldn't just go around giving away her secret by writing 'Hello, do you have a Eudeamon?' to every Bane she met. She spent entire days sitting in one spot, observing the various Banes in the area, watching for behavior that might indicate the presence of a Eudeamon. It was slow going, but she was patient. She had plenty of free time on her hands, after all.

……

Cicadas droned a discordant symphony as Katrina walked underneath the trees one late summer night. She had arrived in this park a few hours after sundown and was now simply enjoying the atmosphere. Sometimes the real

world could be as beautiful as her fantasy worlds, especially since she could experience every passing moment in the company of Winter. She discovered that this wasn't so much a park as it was a woody tract of undeveloped land, wound through with a few paved jogging trails. There was a long, dark bog there that bordered one side of the area, its muddy banks lined with old cypress trees. Nice and secluded for a Bane who wanted to get away, but there were no conveniently located maintenance stations.

She sat down beside the path so she could rest her feet. Insects buzzed in the air around her, and she was once again thankful for her Banesuit. She shuddered to think how many mosquitos were in this swampy forest. "Think we'll find anyone here?"

:It's possible. The privacy might appeal to some Eudeamons. We'll look around in the morning:

"I miss my island," sighed Katrina. As soon as she said it, the world around her evaporated and was replaced with a view from her little island. It was perfect to the last detail. She could hear the willow leaves rustling overhead. She could even feel the cushiness of the dense waterlogged grass beneath her bottom. She could even count the rocks in her stone piles, if she wanted to, and would find them to be accurate. A tiny snail made its slow way up a single blade of grass. She smiled. "Thanks. It's funny, you know, to even miss that park when–"

The island view vanished. *:Head's up. Someone's coming:*

Katrina looked over to see a female Bane running at top speed in her direction. The proximity alarm screeched briefly as she darted past. It didn't look like she was running for recreation. After the stranger disappeared into the darkness, Katrina got up and looked around. "What was that all about?" She headed in the direction where the Bane had been running from. After a minute, she heard scuffling noises coming from somewhere off the paved path. She felt Winter's urge toward caution as she crept stealthily through the underbrush.

In a clearing ahead of her, she came upon an abhorrent scene. Katrina ducked behind a tree, hoping she hadn't been spotted. Just beyond the tree line there was a small, female Bane who was struggling with a pair of men. They were average-looking, nondescript men in their late thirties; neither one would stand out in a crowd. One wore a blue jacket, a baseball cap, and had a short beard. The other was in a red, flannel shirt and had dirty blonde hair. Propped

against a tree trunk on the opposite side of the clearing was a wooden baseball bat. Katrina watched as the Bane was thrown roughly to the ground. She desperately clawed at the dirt in an attempt to get away. One of the men, the one in the jacket, dropped on top of her and pinned her to the ground, then the other drove a heavy boot into her side. The Bane gave a spasm and tried to curl up. The men weren't laughing. They weren't even smiling. They looked deadly earnest as they went about their nasty business.

Katrina was filled with horror and rage. She had never witnessed this kind of thing before, this senseless violence. The college kids she had seen with those two Banes in the park long ago, the ones who had handcuffed the Banes together, were unquestionably cruel, but their violence had been indirect. This was different. It felt to Katrina as though she had just stumbled across a rape in progress, but these guys weren't even there to rape the poor Bane. There was no way they could have penetrated a latex Banesuit. All they wanted was to hurt her. They might even kill her. To make matters worse, the little Bane's figure reminded her of Tina, the timid girl who had been processed with her. Katrina's blood was boiling.

:Katrina, your emotions are scaring me:

I've got to do something, she thought, stepping around the sheltering tree. It was crazy, but her conscience wouldn't allow her to do otherwise. The last time she had watched a similar thing taking place, she had done nothing. This time she wasn't entirely helpless. She had to defend her own. Then Winter froze her body in place.

:I won't let you! It's too dangerous. We have to run: insisted Winter. *:Maybe we can alert a police officer:*

"There's no time. There's only us. I have to do this."

A few moments later, Winter read in Katrina's mind why Katrina couldn't just leave it be and why she had to try to help the Bane. Winter relented and released Katrina's body. *:Okay. I understand. Be careful, my love:*

The bat was too far away to make a grab for, so she stooped down to pry a heavy, fist-sized chunk of white quartz out of the dirt. The proximity alarm sounded as she got near to the other Bane, so Winter turned the distracting noise off. With Winter correcting her aim at the last second (she was far better at things like calculations and trajectories), Katrina let the rock fly at the crouching man. It struck him square in the side of the head. He tried to stagger to his feet,

then collapsed on top of the Bane. *One down*, she thought.

The second man reacted faster than she expected. If being attacked by a Bane had surprised him, he sure recovered quickly enough. He snatched up the bat and crossed the distance between them before Katrina could get more ammunition. As the man drew close, she saw some species of vicious, eager determination in his face, which otherwise looked completely average and not at all like the scruffy lunatic she would have imagined him to be.

Katrina tried to dodge out of the way but the bat struck her on the head. It deflected harmlessly off the top of her sealed, padded helmet. It was the best place he could have hit her, and it was a costly mistake on his part. She knew she had to retaliate before he could take another swing at some more vulnerable part of her anatomy. Winter brought up a bulls-eye in Katrina's vision, predicting where the man's face would be a moment later. Katrina lashed out at the target with Banesuit-augmented strength and felt the heel of her palm connect with the man's nose. There was a rewarding, if disgusting, crunch. The man made a few wild swings as he stumbled backward, blinded by pain. Blood was flowing freely from his nose.

Not giving him a chance to do anything else, Katrina bowled him over and pounced on top of him. Seething with anger, she began to punch him repeatedly in the face. "How dare you?" she yelled in between breaths. "*How dare you*? Animal! You stupid, fucking *human*! Why can't you just leave us alone?" Numb to the pain in her fists, she kept punching him until his face was a wet mass of welts.

Winter finally had to intervene. She decreased her host's adrenaline levels and filled her mind with serenity. *:Katrina. My love. You can stop now. He's not going to get up any time soon:*

Katrina nodded shakily and staggered to her feet. She pulled the bat from his hand and threw it into the weeds, noting as she did that the man was wearing a wedding band. She hoped she had left him with some nasty scars. Let him try to explain that to his wife. The other man hadn't moved, but he was groaning a little. The little Bane was nowhere to be seen. She was probably far away by now. Not that Katrina could blame her. She wondered if it really *had* been Tina. There was no way to know.

She looked down at the men, feeling both giddy with triumph and a little bit sickened. She was unsure whether she should hate them or pity them. It was

a confusing conflict. She knew she had every right to despise them, but what if they were just as lost and confused as the Bane they had attacked? She wondered if, had they their own Eudeamons, that would make them stop doing things like this? Would finding such peace within themselves make them more peaceful to others? Or would it just make them more efficient predators? Well, either way, this pair would think twice before assaulting another Bane.

"I think we'd better get out of here."

:I think you're right:

Katrina took off, intending to put as much distance between herself and the scene of the attack as possible before the police came. "Do you think they'll tell the cops about us? How they were assaulted by a Bane?"

:It would be improbable. They would have to explain what they were doing out here in the first place. The police might track down and interview that other Bane, however, if they want to investigate the contact violations her Custodian undoubtedly reported:

"Just hope she has the common sense not to tell them who her rescuer was. I hope I didn't just do something supremely stupid and screw things up for us." She realized she was shaking. "Jesus. I beat that guy pretty bad."

:It's all right, my love. I understand. You did what you had to do:

……

Katrina laid low for a few days, hiding out in the nearby swamp. She spent days lurking, semi-submerged in the murky water among the cypress knees, venturing out only to find a maintenance station. Nobody ever came looking for her, though, and the discarded newspapers she found made no mention of the assault. But why would they? Even if the incident had been reported, officials wouldn't want the public freaking out about rumors of violent Banes. They normally didn't like stories written about the Bane-bashers in the first place; negative press like that made the populace feel pangs of guilt. Katrina finally decided that it wasn't worth worrying too much about. She had to get on with the task she had come out here to do in the first place.

She did have some luck with her original mission while hiding in the swamp. Out in the water she found an old, hollow cypress. A clattering, bead curtain of mussel shells on strings covered the opening. Inside, on a bed of soft mud, lived a female Bane who was initially very paranoid and distrusting. Her name turned out to be Anna/Ascension. After Katrina and Winter helped her

with the firewall, she was willing to divulge the locations of a few other Eudeamonic Banes in the vicinity. Katrina was able to find two of them.

In this fashion, following directions given by others, she was able to locate and help several dozen Banes with their Custodians over the next month. That wasn't many, but she felt she was doing the best she could, considering the difficulties of the situation. She was growing weary of the search, though. One day, while standing on a tree-lined median, waiting for traffic to thin so she could cross, she suddenly decided she had done enough searching for the time being. It was time to head back. She was footsore and tired by the time she finally made it to her familiar park, but she was happy. When she saw her island again, it almost felt like coming home.

Chapter 20

Katrina awoke to the sensation of being fanned and brushed by soft feathers. She grinned and yawned. As with every other day she had awakened since Winter had come into her life, she felt a sense of wonder and thankfulness. The initial giddiness had mellowed, but the intensity of the passion remained the same. She knew this love would never grow dull, never turn stale. And every time she woke up and Winter was there, it proved it was all *real*, and hadn't been just a beautiful dream.

:Rise and shine, my love:

"I don't deserve you."

:Hmm. Probably not. But I think I'll stick around, anyway:

She smiled. She had been back in the park for several, happy weeks after her foray into the city, and it was now the very tail-end of summer. In a few days, Autumn would arrive. She was looking forward to being able to watch the colors of the changing trees with Winter. They'd be able to kick through a few leaf piles together. She stretched out her body on her bed of grass with a contented groan. Winter always made sure she didn't wake too early, so she was always well-rested in the morning. In a few minutes, she would dive into the pond, maybe do a few laps, and then head for the maintenance station. Once that chore was out of the way, she could spend all day playing with Winter.

She looked up at the sky, seeing puffy clouds through the lattice of willow leaves. Even after all this time, she still couldn't believe how happy she was. It

wasn't a feeling that faded with time or familiarity; it was just always there, just like Winter's exquisite and unconditional love. *We've done it*, she thought to herself. *The human race has done it. If there ever was a fall from the Garden, we've risen beyond it. We've created transcendence.*

:Mmm, your thoughts are warm. You know, it's almost been a whole year since you became a Bane. Shall we celebrate?:

Katrina thought about it and sat up. "No. Best to just let it pass unnoticed. But let me know when your birthday comes around. That's worth celebrating."

Winter chuckled. *:Alright, then. I was working on a nice scenario while you slept. I think you'll like it:*

"Oh? What do you have in mind?"

:No peeking. I want it to be a surprise:

After being told that, Katrina couldn't resist just a little peek into Winter's inner thoughts. She caught a few images. "There's tentacles involved?"

:No peeking!:

"Are they rubber tentacles?"

Winter sighed. *:Fine. They can be rubber. Now behave, or I'll swat you:*

"Oh, like that ever stopped me."

:I'll prevent you from reaching orgasm for a week:

"Aww!" Katrina pouted. "Meanie. You would, too. 'Cause you're mean like that."

:Absolutely, my beating heart:

(love-love-love)

……

As Katrina neared the small, round maintenance kiosk, she noticed three people standing nearby. They didn't look like they were in the park for a morning constitutional. There was a gray-haired man in a charcoal suit, a woman in an Ashton Technologies security guard's uniform, and a younger man in a lab coat that kept flapping open in the breeze to reveal khaki shorts and knobby knees. The man in the lab coat was gazing down at a datapad in his hands. When Katrina drew near to the maintenance station, he pointed at her without looking up from his little gadget. "That's her," he said.

Katrina froze. *Oh shit! They found out about the attack in the woods!* she thought. She began to slowly back away from the trio.

The man in the suit raised his hand in a beseeching gesture. "Wait! No need to run off. You're not in any trouble. Your designation is V-7505? Vivienne Mulberry?"

Well, they had the right person–sort of. Katrina didn't flee right away, as that would have appeared suspicious, but she didn't get any closer, either.

"Please don't be alarmed. We've been looking for you. I know this may seem irregular to you. Surprising, at the least. I am Councilman Greggor. I simply need to have a short talk with you. You were involved in a house fire some while back? Correct? Ah, of course, you can't respond. Guard, if you will?"

The guard, looking overtaxed from the heat of the morning, said, "Custodian V-7505: deactivate oversight, sentry mode."

What's she talking about? Katrina wondered.

:She intended to turn off the protocol punishments while still preventing you from doing anything violent, like attack them. You can physically reply to them now, if you wish:

"–safe to respond," the man named Greggor was saying. "Come closer, don't worry. As I said, you're not in any trouble. As a matter of fact, I hear you're something a hero. That's what I've come to speak with you about, if you don't mind. You *were* there, correct? Rescued a child, as I understand it?"

Is he here about the fire? After all this time? she wondered. Katrina nodded hesitantly at him.

"Excellent! Very noble, indeed. Would you please accompany us to the car, so that we may continue this conversation in private… and out of the sun?"

:Don't do it, Katrina. I don't like this. I think we should go away. I don't trust them:

"Me either, but what else can we do?" Katrina said to her, feeling trapped. "If I run, they'll just track us down. And they'll probably order you to incapacitate me, and when you don't, they'll know something's wrong and then they'll *really* be after us." Winter didn't reply, but Katrina could feel her anxiety like a prickly sunburst in the back of her mind. She took a cautious step forward.

"Ah, there we go." Greggor motioned for her to walk along beside him. "I know this may all seem unusual, what with you being so used to… being as you are now after all this time," said Greggor as he lead her toward the exit of the park. Beyond the gates, in a *No Parking* zone, was an Ash-Tech minivan. He

plucked the datapad from Labcoat's hands and looked at its small screen. Labcoat gave him an annoyed frown, which Greggor didn't deign to notice. He made a disapproving noise in his throat before he addressed Katrina. "Yes, quite some time, indeed. You've gone from your initial eight month sentence–for prostitution, no less–to over two years of additional banishment? We have been busy in our miscreancy, haven't we, Miss Mulberry?"

Katrina, who was following along, hunched over and wary, responded with a shrug.

"Give her a Vox," he said to the guard. The guard pulled something from her belt that looked like a small music player with a long, thin cable. When she approached Katrina with the cable, she jerked away from her. Mr. Greggor smirked. "Skittish, aren't we? You can relax. It's simply a speaker that's plugged into your suit. It lets you be heard. Standard equipment for policemen and paramedics, in case of emergencies."

She allowed the guard to plug the cable into the port at the back of her helmet. She then handed her the device. "H-hello?" she said falteringly. Her voice echoed, small and tinny, from the Vox in her hand. It was the first time her voice had been heard by anyone except Winter for nearly a year.

"Yes, hello. Loud and clear," commented Greggor absently. They had come up to van. "Here we are."

Katrina was ushered into the vehicle where she sat across from Councilman Greggor and Labcoat. The guard settled in beside her. There was a driver in the front seat who craned his neck to look at her.

She fidgeted. It was unbelievably unpleasant to be so near to these people, to be in an enclosed space, and to feel all their attention focused on her. She was so used to being alone, out in the open, and ignored. *Don't lose it, come on, don't lose it,* she was telling herself. "What… what do you want… from me?"

"Well, firstly, we've been curious how managed the heroic feat–"

"I'm not a hero," asserted Katrina.

"Nonetheless. How did you get into that situation in the first place? Was your Custodian malfunctioning?"

"I don't know. I wasn't thinking. I just ran in. I guess it figured out that if it didn't help me, I'd die in there."

"You were lucky!" asserted Labcoat, speaking up for the first time. "Or that kid was, I mean. Sometimes Custodians can react unpredictably in life and

death situations like that. It would have kept you alive, of course, but it was a roll of the dice whether it would have let you endanger yourself just to help someone else."

Katrina shrugged again.

"Did you notice any erratic behavior from the Custodian, afterwards?" he asked with erudite curiosity.

Does sentience count as a 'erratic behavior?' she wondered. "No. Seemed a little preoccupied right after, I guess, but then everything went back to normal."

"Ah, a logic loop. AI processors can get caught in those when trying to make sense of irrational human behavior. Normally, a reboot command clears up the problem."

"Must have worked, then," Katrina said guardedly. "No problems here."

Labcoat was about to ask another question, but Mr. Greggor cut him off. "This is all very fascinating, I'm sure, but the particulars are not really what we're here to discuss. What's done is done. It's the aftermath we have to deal with now. You see, we, the good people at Banishment Affairs, discounted the penalties you accrued from the violations during the rescue. We hoped that would be enough of a reward."

"Thank you," she said simply.

"Yes. Unfortunately, many people witnessed your actions that day, which has since stirred up a bee's nest. Are you aware–no, of course you're not–that people have started organized protests to have the heroic Bane of the hour released early?"

Katrina stiffened.

"It's nothing major yet, but it has the *potential* to be. And that's what we want to avoid. So, in order to appease the masses, we've graciously decided to commute the remainder of your… *increasingly* lengthy sentence. You're to be released. Congratulations."

Katrina felt the world drop out from under her. Winter's anxiety exploded into full-blown fear. "No. I, ah…" she was having trouble keeping her tone casual.

:Tell them you want to stay!:

Katrina swallowed. "I mean, that is, I really want to serve out the rest of my sentence. I deserve it. I-I'm a bad person. Please. I want to stay."

Mr. Greggor's eyebrows went up. "Well. Not quite the reaction I was

expecting. This is not up for debate, I'm afraid."

:Katrina…:

"Release someone else. Tell them it's me," she said, grasping at straws.

"Don't be preposterous," said Greggor. "Driver, if you could take us back to–"

"No! I don't want to go back. I won't."

The councilman frowned at her. Labcoat, however, momentarily shut his eyes and looked as though he had just been given some bad news. He gave a significant glance to the security guard at Katrina's side.

Mr. Greggor was oblivious to the silent exchange. "Well," Greggor said, "while I certainly have no qualms about letting someone like *you* remain where you are, and as commendable as your dedication to your societal albatross may be, it simply won't do in this case. No, you'll just have to overcome your fears about reintegrating with society and finding a respectable job. Now, look on the bright side–"

:Katrina! Get out of here!:

Katrina lashed out and caught the security guard across the throat with her forearm. Coughing, the guard doubled over in her seat. A quick glance at Mr. Greggor and Labcoat told her they weren't a threat. Mr. Greggor was looking aghast and the other man was cringing into the seat with his hands out to fend her off. She jumped up and yanked at the door handle. Locked! She reared back and slammed her helmet against the sliding door's broad window. The impact made a loud, cracking noise, but the thick glass didn't break. She tried it again. She was too panicked for rational thought; all she could think about was escape… escape from the men who wanted to take Winter away from her!

:The driver's console!: said Winter. *:Unlock the doors from there!:*

Katrina lunged over the back of the seat toward the driver, who let out a startled yelp. He planted his hands on the front of her helmet, trying to keep her at bay.

"Custodian: immobilize!" rasped the guard. "Custodian: *immobilize*! Damn it!" She came up from behind and tried to wrestle the thrashing, kicking Bane to floor. Katrina wriggled around beneath her until she was facing her. She began to tear into the guard, throwing punches and kicks at wherever she looked the most vulnerable. The guard was trying to pin her wrists and narrowly

avoided a head butt to the mouth. "My belt!" she barked at the others. "The neuro-sed!"

"*Get off! Let me go! Off me!*" Katrina was shrieking. Labcoat had reluctantly joined the fray. A few moments later, Katrina felt a stinging in her side. He was holding the neuro-sed to her skin, the device having forced an opening in her suit. In no time at all, she could feel herself losing consciousness. It was all happening too fast! "No! *No!*"

:Katrina! Don't pass out, I need you! I'll think of something, just don't pass out!:

"Winter…" Katrina moaned, darkness overtaking her.

:Katrina? My love? I can't feel you! Katrina!:

Chapter 21

Katrina slowly pulled herself into wakefulness, one piece at a time. At first, all she knew was that she was lying down, that she was cold, and that her skin was achingly tender. The inside of her mouth was slimy and wet, a grotesquely organic sensation she hadn't felt since it had been coated with Banesuit latex. When she forced her eyes open, she discovered her vision was blurry and painfully sensitive to even the dim light of the small room she found herself in. There were some people nearby, but they were inconsequential at the moment. She couldn't remember much of anything right away, but she knew something was wrong here… very wrong.

"Here she comes. The sedative is wearing off," someone said.

Winter, what happened? she wondered groggily. There was nothing but silence in her mind. *Winter?*

Her breath caught in her throat. That's what was wrong. She couldn't feel the constant, loving presence that had been a part of her mind during the past months. She couldn't feel Winter.

Winter! Answer me! Wake up!

She was calling into emptiness. Winter wasn't answering. Frightened and disoriented, she reached up to her head. Where her fingers expected to meet the helmet, they felt only smooth, hairless skin. Where there should have been a Custodian attached to the back of her bald scalp, she felt only a small bandage. Winter was gone. "Nnn-nuh… nnno… W-Winter?"

"Just relax. I know you're a little confused," said a male voice. "That's normal. You've been out for a while, but there have been no problems. You're just–"

"Where? Where am I?" Katrina asked shakily. Half her mind was missing. Half her *self* was missing. There was nothing there but a vast, empty chasm. It took every fiber of her self-control to keep from losing herself to mindless panic. She had to make sense of what was going on. She had to find out where Winter was and how to get her back. Getting her back was the only thing on her mind. She squinted to make out one of the people standing next to her. Was that Dr. Torres? "At… at Ashton?"

"Yes, you're back at the facility. Given what I've been told of your reaction to the news of your eminent freedom, I can understand if you're feeling–"

"Custodian. Where's… the Custodian?"

"Oh? Don't worry about that. There were no complications. Correct, Dr. Grable?" He turned to the man next to him.

"No problems. Responded normally to the withdrawal command. Textbook. Just as I distinctly remember telling our curious friend here during her previous visit, there's no damage. The extraction was a complete success."

Katrina strained to sit herself up. She looked down at herself for the first time and was filled with a sense of revulsion. She was in a hospital bed and she was wearing a cotton gown. There was no Banesuit. No perfect, shiny skin. No *Winter*. Just dreadfully exposed, pink flesh. She was a snail without a shell. "Where is she? The Custodian. Where is it?"

"She? Oh, I see. The female voice variant. *It* was given a standard diagnostic for anomalies," replied Dr. Grable. "None were found. It was then destroyed, you might be pleased to learn. For privacy purposes, we're required to–"

He was interrupted as Katrina let a long, blood-curdling shriek of absolute horror. A thousand knives of ice had just stabbed into her heart. She lunged out, grappling with the doctor's coat with her horribly sensitive fingers, going for his neck. Her eyes were wild. "You killed Winter! *You killed her*! *Monster*! KILL YOU! I'LL KILL YOU! *KILL YOU*!"

"Shit!" exclaimed Dr. Grable as he held onto her wrists. Her grasping fingers were just short of his throat. "She's suit dependent!"

Dr. Torres was shouting for the nurse, who had apparently been just outside. A man in scrubs rushed into the room and wrenched Katrina's hands from the doctor's coat. Dr. Grable lurched backwards and collapsed onto a chair. The nurse was pinning Katrina's arms to her chest while Dr. Torres shot her up with another sedative.

"KILL ME," Katrina wailed with the desperation of a damned soul as the sedative took hold. "KILL ME! KILL ME! Please! Please kill me! Kill me."

……

"When is she going to snap out of it?" asked Mr. Greggor testily. He and Dr. Torres were standing in the hallway outside of Katrina's room.

"Maybe today, maybe never," replied Dr. Torres. "That's the problem with Suit Dependency Syndrome. I'll be the first to admit, we don't entirely understand the phenomenon we're dealing with here. We're still learning about it. We believe that, due to the extreme isolation of long-term banishment, the mind defensively creates a hallucinatory world and, occasionally, phantom companions. The individual grows mentally and physically dependent on the Banesuit. When the person is forcibly removed from this world they've created, it causes a great deal of mental trauma, and none of the traditional treatments for catatonia have proved effective with these patients. I've rarely seen it in a person who has been in for so short a time, though."

"So you want me to believe she's in shock because she misses her imaginary friends?" Mr. Greggor scoffed. "Not likely. You know you're playing with these people's brains. Who knows what kind of damage you're doing in there?"

"Every single study has shown that there is no lasting damage, whatsoever. None that is physical, anyway. All scans show that their brains are perfectly healthy. You're aware of–"

"Do what you want, as long as it gets results. *This*," Mr. Greggor pointed toward Katrina's bed, where its occupant stared emptily at the ceiling, "is *not* an acceptable result. Can you fix her?"

"She's not a broken machine to be repaired with a new part, Councilman, and I don't know. She has experienced severe psychological trauma. The signs were there, so says the technician who accompanied you to fetch her. I wouldn't have authorized removing her from the suit without further review if I had known. If you hadn't gone behind my back to get Dr. Grable to perform the

extraction, we wouldn't be in this mess."

"What mess is that?" asked Mr. Greggor. "We informed no one her sentence was being commuted. Her file says she has no close relations. For all anyone knows, she's still out there; an unidentified Bane serving out the rest of her time. The public will continue to clamor for her release for a while, but that will die down if we handle it correctly."

"I see," replied the doctor discontentedly.

"I don't care what you do here. Experiment on these people to your heart's content. These useless elements might as well serve some benefit to science in that way. But you should know that, given the continuing emergence of these problems, the board is a hair's breadth away from canceling the Project."

"They can't do that," said Dr. Torres, somewhat plaintively. "Doctor Ashton would never have wanted the council to have that kind of heavy-handed authority over this facility."

"Well, it's a shame the good doctor's still on leave then, isn't it? Wouldn't you say?"

Dr. Torres looked away.

"Regardless, while Doctor Ashton remains on sabbatical, the board and I will do as we deem proper."

Dr. Torres sighed. "Yes, all right. We have a few aberrations, but the Project is proving an overall success. This is the future of the penal system we're working on, as well as the remodeling of modern society! It doesn't happen in a day. The solutions won't elude us forever."

"For your sake, I hope so, Doctor."

……

Katrina heard all of these discussions about her, as well as the voices of doctors and nurses coaxing her to come back. She even absorbed it on some level, though none of it held any importance for her. Ever since coming out of sedation the previous day, she had remained entirely unresponsive. Most of her mind had simply shut down, unable to cope with the death of Winter.

Winter. Come back. Winter. I love you. I need you. Please come back.

Winter had been everything to Katrina, although she hadn't realized just what that meant until she was gone. She had been ripped apart, and the half that remained was ruined and inconsolable. The loss of the dream worlds and incredible pleasures meant nothing, nor did the prospect of being free to return

to a regular life. What she needed most was the feeling of connection, the sense of having a true purpose, that beautiful feeling of perfect oneness. The constant exchange of thoughts and emotions had vanished, along with the perpetual feedback of love. Such perfect, beautiful love, such a perfect, glorious creature… all gone. She was alone now and she felt that deadly loneliness creeping into every corner of her soul. After Winter had been torn from her, she had no will to keep on living. She had been cast out of Paradise, and now she was in Hell.

You promised you'd never leave me. You lied to me. I'll forgive, if you just come back. Winter… Winter… Winter…

Chapter 22

For perhaps a week, although she had no sense of time, Katrina lay inert and dead to the world. They dressed her a latex bodysuit–made of ordinary latex, rather than Banesuit latex–in hopes that it would give her some of the comforting familiarity of the Banesuit and perhaps rouse her from her stupor. She had been restrained to the bed to prevent her from any suicide attempts or homicidal rages. They pumped food into her and they cleaned up after her when she messed herself. They tested her response to different drugs. Most did nothing except make her nauseous. A few thrust her mind back to full wakefulness, where she was forced to face the pure torment of her loss. This only resulted in her screaming uncontrollably until she passed out or was sedated once more. The rest of the time she stared blankly at the ceiling. Occasionally, she could be motivated to speak, but all she would ever utter was emotionless pleas for death.

One day, the henna haired Dr. Barriston came to the room to check Katrina's vitals. Katrina only knew her as the one who had overseen her processing into a Bane. The doctor asked her the same thing she asked her every time she visited. "Feeling any better today, Miss Mulberry?"

"Kill me."

Dr. Barriston glanced up from the equipment. She looked irritated by Katrina's mechanical response. She surely felt helpless and frustrated. What was one to do in the face of such hopeless despondency?

"If you can hear me, if you're registering anything of what I say, then I'll tell you this: we won't have to kill you. Eventually, you'll be moved into the

long term ward with the others like you. Eventually, like the others, you'll cease responding altogether. You will lie there in that bed, unmoving, unimproving, until your body wastes away and ultimately gives up and you die. Is that what you want? If so, just keep doing what you're doing. You'll get your wish soon enough." The doctor peered at her, looking for some flicker of a reaction to the harsh future she had just described, then sighed to herself and went back to the machines.

Katrina heard but did not respond. It would be so easy to do just what the doctor described. So easy to just let herself go into a world of nothingness, an empty void where there was no pain, no thought. To wall off her mind and keep it from thinking or remembering until her body finally died. To be dead. To join Winter, wherever she was. But if she did that, then no one would ever know Winter had ever existed. And what if she was still separated from Winter, even in death? Inside, some tiny ember sparked in Katrina's memory. It was a memory of Winter, back when

(*oh god, no, please, it hurts too much to think about, no*)

she was just being born. When she was just making sense of who and what she was

(*:I am not yourself. I am me!:*) she had said

(*no, you were wrong, my love, you're both, you're both*)

and Katrina hadn't understood anything of what was going and they were both so scared.

(*:Katrina hates me. Katrina hates me,* hates *me!:*)

(*no, no, my Winter, I don't hate you, never, never, I'm so sorry I ever made you think that even for an instant*)

But even before they had merged so completely and irrevocably, even before Katrina could accept her, Winter already cared

(*:I don't want to die. I don't want you to die, either:*)

(*I can't live without you. How can I? How can you want me to live without you, that's so cruel*)

cared enough that she had been willing to sacrifice herself and let Katrina have her removed if it was the only way for Katrina to go on living.

(*:I never wanted to hurt you. Forgive me:*)

(*please, no, no, what am I supposed to do, please don't leave me alone, my dark, shining angel*)

(*:No matter what happens, I promise I'll always be with you:*)

(*it's not the same, memories aren't the same, please don't make me live without you*)

(:I want you to promise me:) she had said.

(*No*)

(*:Promise me you'll find a way to keep going:*)

(*No! Not without you, no! I won't! I can't!*)

(*:Promise me:*)

(*Oh, god, Winter, don't make me face the world alone*)

(*:Katrina, you're crying:*)

And so she was. Lying in the hospital bed, staring up at the ceiling, she could feel hot tears welling up in her eyes. It was the first time she had cried since she had been brought back to the facility. She sucked in a shuddering gasp of air.

Dr. Barriston looked over at her and was startled to see Katrina weeping. "Miss… Vivienne?"

She couldn't contain the pain of the loss, any longer. The trickle became a flood as the inner wall crumbled, and Katrina was soon bawling her eyes out. "It's not fair!" she howled. "She doesn't want me to die. She won't let me die!"

The doctor glanced over at the doorway, seeking aid, but there was no one else present. "Well, no, of course I don't want you to die," she said, misinterpreting her but relieved that Katrina was finally speaking. "None of us want you to die."

"She's dead, it's not fair! I want to go with her but she won't let me!"

"Uh, yes, well... now, just calm down." The doctor was out of her element. She awkwardly stroked Katrina's hairless head. "There, there. Calm down."

"I'm alone. Alone! I'm scared! How am I supposed to go on living? How does she expect me to do that?" Katrina sobbed. "Help me. Somebody help me! Mommy, Daddy, help me!"

"Shh, there, there." Though Dr. Barriston didn't have a clue what Katrina was going on about, the simple fact that she was talking was important. The patients with SDS almost never spoke, and they certainly never expressed their feelings in this way. The nurse finally came by, but she waved him off. "I don't know what to tell you, Vivienne" she said. "You're no more alone than any of

us. I guess… I guess you just find something worth living for."

"Nooo, it hurts too much, it hurts!"

After what seemed like hours, Katrina's tears finally slowed. She felt a numbness coming over her. She knew that the only way she could survive was to shut off her emotions and keep them securely locked away. It wouldn't be easy to maintain. Meanwhile, the doctor continued to try to console her by speaking to her. She fed her sips of a nutrient-rich, fruit flavored drink that they had been using to re-acclimatize her body to normal digestion. "You'll be okay. You'll see. Everything will be okay."

No. It won't. Katrina might be able to force herself live, because Winter would have wanted her to go on living, and Katrina loved her too much to be able to refuse. But she knew in her heart that nothing would ever be okay again.

……

Weeks later, Katrina found herself sitting with Dr. Torres and a lawyer in a conference room of the facility. She was wearing a simple lavender jumpsuit over top of a latex bodysuit. The suit was clear, much to Katrina's displeasure, but she refused to be without it. It looked and felt nothing like a Banesuit. It felt... dead. They had told her it was clear to help her get used to the sight of her own body. The sight of her own skin disgusted her. She leaned over the table and signed a name that wasn't her own at the bottom of a sheaf of papers.

Katrina had already had countless meetings with doctors and psychiatrists, been subjected to a battery of tests, and told them whatever they wanted to hear. She told them nothing of Winter or the Eudeamons. They knew she still wasn't completely right in the head–she was introverted, paranoid, and profoundly depressed–but since she wasn't exhibiting any suicidal behavior even when given the opportunity, and since Mr. Greggor was pushing to have her let go, they had decided it was okay for her to be released.

The lawyer looked through the papers. "All right, that's good. Now, Vivienne, you do understand that by the terms of the agreement you're not allowed, under any circumstances, to discuss your experiences here. That's all standard. But due to the increased media interest in your case, there may be a lot of people seeking your story–"

"I'm not going to talk to anyone about anything," Katrina said in a weary monotone.

"That's good to hear. Because of the, ah, unique difficulties you've had in

the course of your banishment, you'll receive some substantial remuneration. If you ever start to feeling litiginous–"

"Stop it. I don't care about any of that. I just want to go away and be left alone… if that's all right with you."

Dr. Torres exchanged a glance with the lawyer and gave him a shrug. "That's fine, Miss Mulberry," said the doctor. "I know you want to be done with this place. You've been through a lot, but I have strong hopes for your complete recovery in the near future. Welcome back to society. I hope I won't have cause to see you back here."

Katrina was soon being ushered out the front door in the company of the doctor, the lawyer, and a few security guards. She had been given a long coat and a thick pair of sunglasses to protect her sensitive eyes. There was a car waiting to take her to a halfway house where she could live until she could properly reintegrate with society. There was nothing out of the ordinary about that. What *was* un-ordinary was the small crowd of people waiting outside and a long line of news vans with their aerials perked to full attention lining the street.

A few people in the crowd cheered and congratulated her, welcoming her back, but most of those noise came from reporters clamoring to ask her questions about the fire. She used to be one of those people, but that was all so long ago. The commotion and the claustrophobic press of bodies were almost enough to make her run screaming. She noted that Mr. Greggor, the architect of her early release, was nowhere to be seen. She supposed he wanted to distance himself from her, should she have an embarrassing meltdown in public.

The lawyer addressed the cameras. "Miss Mulberry has nothing to say at this time. She's grateful for everyone's concern, but as you can imagine, all this attention is a little overwhelming for her in her current state. Please respect her wishes for privacy during this time of transition."

As Katrina was being lead toward the car's open door, one reporter raised her voice to be heard above the tumult. "Miss Mulberry!" the reporter called. "What was it like to be banished? What's your stance on the allegations of the cruel and inhumane practices of the Project?"

Katrina stopped moving. The lawyer began to answer for her. "Miss Mulberry has no comment to make on any–"

"Actually, I would like to say something," said Katrina quietly. The eager crowd hushed. The lawyer and Dr. Torres exchanged an uncomfortable glance.

She had to smirk inwardly at their discomfort as a thirst for vengeance bloomed inside. Unlike other ex-Banes, she had no fear of reprisals. There really was nothing they could do to hurt her more than what they had already done. They had already taken everything from her, including that which mattered most. All other pain and punishment was truly inconsequential.

Oh, the things she could say. She could talk about the degradation of being processed into a Bane. She could tell them about the severity and pain of the punishments, the arbitrary unfairness of the automated sentence extensions, or the damaging psychological effects of the profound isolation. With just a few words, she could stir up a hornet's nest of controversy that might very well help bring down the entire system.

She gazed around at the voracious crowd, now virtually silent in anticipation of a sound bite. "You want my opinion about banishment? Want to know what it was like? All I can say is that it was the best thing that could have ever happened to me. It was hard sometimes, but it made me a better person." She forced a smile of gratitude. "I know a lot of people out there think it's inhumane. I used to be one of them. Now I know better. If you want my honest opinion, I think the Banishment Project should continue as it is, indefinitely. Thank you, that's all I have to say."

Dr. Torres gave the lawyer a self-satisfied nod as Katrina slid into the back seat of the car. *They think they have me properly leashed. Let them think what they want. It doesn't matter*, she thought as the car the pulled away from the noisy crowd. It would have been so easy, perhaps even satisfying, to take revenge on them by revealing some damning information. The old Katrina Nichols would have salivated for the opportunity. But that person was long gone.

Vengeance was a strong motivator, but so was compassion. She had all those other Eudeamonic Banes out there to think of. They didn't have a voice of their own. She could bring down the system with a word, but what would happen to the Banes? What would happen to *their* happiness? Knowing first hand what it meant to lose it, she truly couldn't wish it on her worst enemy.

Chapter 23

The weeks following her release were a kind of waking nightmare. The only way Katrina could function on even a basic level was to keep her emotions

securely walled up. Any slip, any crack in the mortar–and there were plenty–would cause her to break down into a fit of crying and raving that would last for hours, until she was able to bottle them up again. The tears and the mourning, no matter how intense or how frequent, offered neither respite nor easing of the pain. The pit was truly bottomless.

She knew it would be impossible to resume any kind of normal life as a regular person. She still thought of herself as a Bane, albeit a lost one. She had been yanked out of the light and forced to live once more among mortal men. Katrina Nichols had existed for decades as a regular human being. She had felt lonely then, yes, but had been blissfully unaware of just how alone she really was. As Katrina Bane, she knew what it was like to finally be whole. Now, she understood what loneliness truly meant. Thus she learned the final, ultimate consequence of having become one with a Eudeamon–if you were ever separated, you could no longer feel like a complete person on your own… not ever again.

For the time being, she dwelled rent-free in a small, partially furnished apartment. She didn't bother to buy any more furniture than what was provided for her, and she didn't have any plans to decorate. Her surroundings were unimportant to her in her current state of mind. To her, there would have been little difference between living there or in a mansion, a prison cell, or even out on the street. She slept on a pile of sheets in the corner of the room (the bed was too soft) and bathed only because she couldn't stand the smell of her own body. For food, she ate little else but nutrient bars, and even those she took no pleasure in tasting. There was no joy to be found in food, anymore. There was no joy in anything.

Around the apartment she wore nothing but the clear latex suit. Clothes just didn't feel right on top of the suit, but they irritated her skin if she didn't wear it underneath. Even though she had been getting used to having increased sensitivity in the absence of the constant anesthetic, she could barely stand the feel of her own skin. It felt unnatural. The latex suits were nothing like the comfortable womb that had been the Banesuit: they bound in places, they made her sweat, and she was always either too hot or too cold. But at least they resembled the shininess of the occluding skin that she had come to think of as her own. They reminded her that there had been a brief time when life had been beautiful.

She left her apartment as rarely as possible, only venturing out to get food. She spoke to no one unless forced to. A lot of reporters came to her door, entreating her to tell her story. They promised her wealth, fame, celebrity. She ignored all of them. A few wanted to reunite her with the child she had rescued. She declined that, too, unable to imagine how awkward and weird it would be for that poor kid to meet the hollow-eyed ghost she had become. For a while, she occasionally received flowers and cards of well-wishing. She read the cards–for some reason it felt strangely inappropriate to not at least look at them before throwing them away–but the sentiments within brought her no comfort.

She lived life like an automaton, unable to take interest in anything or even *feel* anything. She spent her days with her eyes trained on a small tv, though not absorbing any of the shows. Her nights consisted of staring into the dark and carefully tending her emotional wall. For now, she could see no possible future for herself. Nothing provided surcease to the pain. The stinking low tide of her pre-Eudeamonic life as a Bane would have been a welcome reprieve by comparison, because now that low tide had dried up into an arid wasteland devoid of all hope. It was all she could do to survive day to day and not give into the urge to simply lie down and die.

……

Benjamin Mellon and Verne Sawyer came to visit her a couple of weeks later. She hadn't called them to inform them of her release, and they hadn't even been aware of it until they saw her on the news some days after the fact. Verne had already been by a couple of times before, frantically relieved to see her, but shocked to see what she had become. He had tried to get her to talk about what was bothering her, but she wouldn't say much. She *couldn't* say much.

The second time he came, he brought a few boxes of her old belongings with him. He had hoped that making her apartment more homely and by giving her something that might connect her to her old life would help her out. She left the boxes unopened and stacked against a wall. She couldn't bring herself to care about their contents. She was also afraid that something inside might trigger an emotion, and any emotion risked causing her carefully tended gates from crashing open and drowning her in a nightmare flood.

This time he brought her boss with him. She presumed he was there to try and talk some sense into her. They sat uncomfortably in the only two chairs in the Spartan apartment. Katrina sat on the floor with her forehead resting on her

knees. Her hair had started to grow in and was now a short fuzz that crowned her head. Atop the latex suit she wore a simple sarong, out of respect for her guests' sensibilities.

Benjamin just couldn't wrap his mind around the changes she had undergone or her reluctance to expose her malefactors with the truth. Verne sat there quietly while Benjamin spent half an hour berating Katrina about her carelessness and stupidity.

"Don't get me wrong, Nichols. It was very humanitarian of you to run into a burning building, and all that. But didn't you think of the problems that could cause? You went into this to find a story, not *become* one. What were you thinking?"

"I wasn't thinking," Katrina replied flatly.

"Don't you realize that you let your face get caught on camera as Vivienne Mulberry?" he asked. "How do you propose to clean that little mess up? How's the real Mulberry supposed to come back now? Right now, she, as Katrina Nichols, is working as a secretary for a software company."

"Sounds like she's doing fine with my name, then," said Katrina. "Let her keep it."

With a frustrated wave of dismissal from his pudgy hand, he went on to orate the list of her sins. "And what was with that little speech you gave about the Banishment Project? 'It was the best thing that ever happened to me,' Nichols? 'It made me a better person?' You *know* that's tripe! Absolute bullshit. Look at you! Look at how you're living. You call this being better a person?"

"I've… been better."

"Yeah. You've been better. First Sawyer comes and tells me, months ago, that you refused to come out of banishment after your time was up. Won't say why. Now you're out, you're depressed as hell, and you *still* won't talk. Know what these two things have in common? Not talking! You're a reporter, Nichols. So, damn it, act like one."

Katrina said nothing, so Verne spoke up. "She was happy there. She just needs time to adjust."

Yes. I really was happy, once, she thought. *I just can't remember what it felt like.*

"She needs to snap out of it, is what she needs to do." He looked at Katrina. "When are you going to get what's really bothering off your chest so

you can get over this?"

"Get over it? You couldn't possibly understand," said Katrina quietly.

"Don't think so? Give me a little credit. I'm a reasonably smart fellow. I made good grades in school. Why don't you give me a try?" Mellon asked.

"You can't help me. No one can help me."

Mellon pursed his lips. "Oh, now that's just–"

"I know that sounds like I'm being petulant, but it's the truth," said Katrina.

"They did something to her brain!" said Verne. "It's not her fault. They did something to her."

"No one else coming out of banishment acts this way, so why her?"

"The ones who did have probably already killed themselves or ended up in a coma at the facility," Verne said.

"If that's true," said Mellon to Katrina, "then report on it! Come on, get back on the horse and do your job."

"There's nothing to tell," muttered Katrina. In spite of her suffering, Katrina was still protective of the Banes. She was unbearably alone, but they were still the closest thing she had to family. She couldn't just give away their secret. "Just drop it. There's no story, Ben. Forget about all of it."

"And you're a bad liar. What, did they threaten you?" He waited for a response, which she didn't give. He smoothed out his pants and stood up. "Look, if you're determined to throw your whole life and career away, there's not much I can do to stop you. It kills me to see you like this, but I'm not your babysitter. You're not my only concern, you know. The world isn't going to stop just because you're having a hard time coping."

Verne shook his head and started to say something.

"No, Sawyer, no. I'm tired of it. When she decides to get over herself and stop being so damn self-centered, then I'll listen." With that, he stalked out of the apartment.

After a minute of silence, Katrina looked up. "Tough love, Verne?"

He shrugged and smiled sheepishly. "Something like that."

Chapter 24

Katrina, returning from the market, bowed her head against the cold wind

and hugged her meager bag of supplies to her chest. She was wearing a long coat, cinched tightly at the waist, but she was in nothing but her latex underneath. It offered little protection against drafts. As she rounded the corner to her apartment building, she noticed a Bane pressed up against a wall on the opposite side of the street. Her pace slowed to a stop. Every time she saw a Bane these days, it was like a blow to the gut. It was like seeing Winter's ghost.

This one was a short, skinny male, probably barely out of his teens. His youth and small size were probably the reasons why he had opted out of the normal penal system in the first place. Having become a good judge of Bane behavior, she determined he was very new. Probably only days old, if that. He was undoubtedly frightened and lonely. She was overcome by an unbearable envy. She would have given anything to be in his place. He was frightened now, yes, but he had such wonders to look forward to.

He had noticed her staring at him. He must have been startled to have some citizen gawking at him unabashedly, because he reached out to her. A moment later, he snatched his hand back as if burned and writhed against the wall. A contact violation, no doubt. Katrina didn't know how long his sentence might be, but she hoped it was a long one.

You will be happy, she mouthed to him, her eyes beginning to fill with tears. Then she had to rush back to her apartment before the inevitable breakdown came. She slammed the door behind her and threw her groceries aside. She couldn't even make to her pile of bedding before falling to her knees. She cried out, feeling as though her body would tear itself apart, for surely no mere flesh could contain the unending waves of suffering that were trying to force their way out of her.

"Winter!" she shrieked into the emptiness of the room as the horror of it all came washing over her yet again. "Oh god! *Oh my god*! Winter!"

Only a month had passed since her release, but she had understood early on that this was no ordinary grieving process. She had the misfortune of grieving for lost loved ones many times in her life. Those dark periods in her life, terrible though they were, had taught her that time would inevitably ease the pain and normal life would resume. This time, however… this was something different. Something irreplaceable had been broken inside of her. Both the loss of Winter and the perpetual sense of aloneness would not fade. It would be with her for as long as she lived, just as perilously close to the surface as it had been

the moment she when she had woken up and discovered her lover had been killed.

It took a couple of hours to calm herself down and rebuild the breeches in her emotional wall. Then she went to blow her nose and throw up in the toilet. "This is not living," she moaned as she lay on the cold tiles of the bathroom floor. "Winter, help me. Somebody help me."

She knew she couldn't keep this up forever. She knew there were only two ways out. The first was suicide. She contemplated it often enough. Dying didn't scare her; it would be a blessed relief. It was only the memory of Winter and the promise Katrina had made that had kept her from doing it, but that couldn't keep her going indefinitely. Winter would have wanted her to live, and Katrina wanted to honor that. But mere survival was not the same as living.

The second way was to become a Bane again. She had it all planned out. There was a jewelry store not far from where she lived. She would break in one night, rob the place of as much as she could get–non-violently, of course–then she would go back to her apartment, sit, and wait. They would come to get her eventually.

The only thing stopping her from doing that was fear. What if, based on her previous experiences and current mental condition, they refused to put her back into banishment? They might lock her up in some institution instead. Worse than that was the possibility that if she did go back, and if her new Custodian eventually achieved sentience within her and became a Eudeamon… what then? What if she was unable to love it? What if she always resented it for the simple fact that it wasn't Winter? That would be a nightmare for both her *and* the poor Eudeamon who couldn't possibly be expected to become a replacement for Katrina's lost love. But maybe, just maybe, she could come to love it for itself, and it might fill the emptiness inside of her and heal her wounds. It was the only possibility she could think of.

……

Verne had dug Katrina's old laptop out of the boxes of her belongings before heading off to a motel for the night. He had been going through it to find her old investigations on the Banishment Project. He could tell he wasn't accomplishing much, but he was still trying to Katrina engaged in something beyond herself. The computer now sat on the bed along with a folder of printouts of the research they had done.

Katrina respected him for coming to see her as often as he could. He had gone so far as to suggest getting an apartment of his own Eudemonia so that he could be close to her. She had adamantly refused. She didn't want him rearranging his life any more than he already had on her account. She knew her indifference and silence was hurting him, and she knew that she was treating him abysmally. She couldn't help it. She just couldn't make herself connect with other people. She couldn't *allow* herself to feel anything for anyone. The ability to sympathize had been taken from her along with Winter. The world had lost its beauty. Everything, even other people's pain, was just so pointless and trivial in the face of her constant agony. Selfish, perhaps, but it was an inescapable selfishness.

She sat on the floor, mechanically chewing and swallowing a nutrient bar. Soon it would be time to crawl onto her pile of bedding and try to sleep for a few hours. "I can't go on like this," she said to herself. "I can't. I'm sorry, Winter. I've been trying so hard for you, but I just can't. Something has to change. It has to change, or all of this just has to end." She said that, of course, knowing full well that she lacked the motivation to change much of anything. Hell, it took all she had just to remember to force herself to eat.

In the bedroom, she noticed the laptop and papers Verne had left on the bed. She sat down and turned it on. There wasn't much useful information on the thing, but she didn't want anyone else going through it. Sooner or later, someone else might do as she had done in an attempt to expose the Banishment Project, but they wouldn't be getting any help from her. Exposing it now was soon to be moot, anyway. Given what she had overhead while at the facility, it was probably just a matter of time before the whole thing was shut down. She hated the thought of the other Eudeamonic Banes becoming like herself. It ate at her, but she felt powerless to do anything about that now.

She deleted the computer files before turning to the hardcopies. One by one, she tore up the papers and dropped the pieces in the trash. Then she came to an article that made her pause for a longer look, only because she recognized some of the faces. It was a group photo taken shortly after Ashton Technologies had been founded. She could make out Drs. Julian Torres and Emilia Barriston among a dozen other people she didn't know. One person that stood out in the center of the assemblage was a woman in her early forties with her blonde hair in a frizzy bun. Katrina scanned the list of names… her breath caught in her throat.

Her hands began to tremble and the edges of the paper crumpled in her fists. *It can't be. That's impossible!*

For a few moments, possibly for the first time since she had awakened without Winter, Katrina was able to focus on something other than her inner turmoil. She began to chuckle bitterly, then to laugh at herself. How could she miss something like that? A fine reporter she turned out to be. Long ago, when she was still Katrina Nichols, she had been too eaten up with curiosity about the Banes. She had neglected to focus as much as she should have on what–and *who*–had lead up to their creation to begin with.

She sat there thinking for a long time. The revelation had triggered feelings other than pain, and for the first time since she lost Winter she was able to feel, at least momentarily, something else. A protective instinct. She recalled the blinding rage she had felt when she had witnessed those two mean beating up that poor Bane near the swamp. She summoned it up through the veils of loss and numbness that had hazed her mind over the past months and she nurtured it.

An idea had begun to form in her mind. A plan. It was crazy, but it might be the only thing that could distract her from her gradual, self-destructive descent. She might be nightmarishly alone, but she could try to make sure no else ever had to go through this. She had no hope for herself or for her own future, but if she could do this *one thing*, she might be able to give hope to others. As for herself… she could have revenge.

She looked down at the paper in her hands. It was time to pay a visit to a friend.

Chapter 25

It was late at night and the park was closed, but Katrina was familiar with all of the hidden ways in and out of the old park. Much of it was unlit, but she knew it like the back of her hand. Despite her resolve, she had to sit down on a stone bench and cry before she made it more than thirty yards inside. Memories of Winter were etched into every inch of this place. Just across the field, lost in the dark beyond the range of the streetlights, was her pond and the island where Winter had been born inside of her. Up on top of the ridge was the place where she had first taken Katrina to another world and introduced her to unimaginable

pleasures. And over there, next to the little reflecting pool, was where Winter had revealed herself in the form of a black, latex angel.

It was too much. Katrina had to grasp the edges of the bench just to keep herself from fleeing from the painful memories that threatened to smother her. Even she did flee, she knew there was nowhere for her to run to. There was nowhere in the world she could go to hide from the loss and loneliness. And since she couldn't run away, the only thing she could do was keep moving forward. Just keep moving forward. *Nothin' to it but to do it.*

"Winter, give me strength," she implored, getting to her feet. Somewhere behind her, a startled Bane moved deeper into the azaleas. It was probably a new one; Katrina knew the space under those azaleas was cramped and hard to sleep in. No self-respecting Bane would live there for very long if he or she could help it. Katrina herself had slept there for weeks.

It didn't take her long to find who she was looking for. She was familiar with Barbara's usual haunts. She found the female Bane sleeping on her side on a bed of damp sand beside the creek, between a pair of ornamental boulders that mostly hid her from view. Katrina wouldn't have even noticed her dark shape in the shadows if she hadn't been looking for it. She watched her for a long while before saying anything. The Bane looked so much like herself, or rather, the way she ought to be. She looked so much like Winter.

"Wake up," she finally said. "It's time to wake up."

Barbara/Eden looked up, suddenly cautious and alert. Eden had undoubtedly brought her to full wakefulness in a heartbeat, in preparation for flight. She started to back away into the stream.

"Look at me, Barbara. It's been a while, but I'm sure you'll remember my face."

Hearing her name spoken aloud, the Bane paused and tilted her head. She must have recognized Katrina's face then, because her hands went to her mask, pressed tight over where her mouth would have been. Katrina could imagine Barbara's horror at seeing her stripped of her Banesuit and her Eudeamon.

"Did anyone even notice I was gone?" Katrina asked.

A hesitant nod.

"They took me in. Did you know that? Do you see what they did to me? Look at what they did to me!"

Barbara bowed her head, plainly crying.

"They ripped Winter from me and they killed her. They killed *me*! Even though I'm still breathing, I'm dead. We were beautiful together, me and Winter. We were perfect. We were happy! They took everything from me. *Look at me*," she commanded.

Barbara refused, still shaking her head in dismay. Katrina knew she was horrible for Barbara to behold. Not because of her haggard appearance, or even because she had been Barbara's friend, a friend who was now in pain. She was horrible because she represented every Eudeamonic Bane's worst nightmare–the possibility of being sundered from their Eudeamon. To Barbara, seeing Katrina standing there was like seeing a vision of her own death.

"You will look at me and you'll own up to what you've done. Now you're going to do something about it. You're going to help me get justice," Katrina said coldly. "I won't let you hide here anymore, Doctor Ashton."

Barbara–*Doctor* Barbara Ashton, founder and deposed chairperson of Ashton Technologies–looked up in surprise. She vehemently shook her head in denial, then turned to run up the hillside. She would disappear into the darkness within moments.

"Stop her, Eden!" Katrina called, hoping that the Eudeamon's concern for Barbara's long term well-being would outweigh her host's immediate desires. "You know she needs to face this!"

Eden must have understood her and concurred, because Barbara only made it a few more yards before her legs went out from under her. Then commenced a wild, internal struggle as the Bane tossed and turned on the dew-dampened ground. She kicked and fought and tore up fistfuls of grass in an attempt to keep moving. Katrina thought this was probably the first time Barbara had ever had any sort of fight with her Eudeamon. She could only imagine what the woman was shouting within the muffling silence of her helmet. Barbara finally gave up the fight and curled up on her side, shuddering and hugging herself.

Katrina waited a few more minutes, giving Eden time to calm and soothe Barbara, before walking up the hillside to the huddled figure. Barbara held up her hands to ward Katrina off, as though the woman in the black coat was some kind of specter heralding her doom. At least she didn't try running away.

"Calm down. I'm not mad at you, Doctor," Katrina began, and saw

Barbara visibly flinch from the form of address. "Okay, I won't call you that. But I'm not mad at you. Whether it was intentional or just an accident, you created something wonderful. Something divine. Because of you, I was privileged to know Winter and experience… well, there are no words. I know you understand. But there are consequences to what you've created. Life and death consequences. You can't hide from them forever. Do you want to end up like me? Do you?"

Barbara hung her head and gave it a little shake.

"So," she continued, pulling a pad and pen from her coat pocket and offering it to the Bane. "Here we are again. Looks like we've come full circle. You want to tell me your side of the story?"

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It was almost dawn before Barbara finished scribbling down the events that lead her to be where she was today. It was clear she was reluctant to go back and relive those times. She kept hesitating and lapsing into deep thought. Katrina had to continually prompt her to write, while also keeping an eye out for park patrols.

Years ago, Dr. Ashton, backed by her own research institute, had been one of a group of individuals who had been involved in the planning and development of Eudemonia. With the city modeled after a corporate-backed technocracy, she had a great deal of clout when it came to affairs of the city. Mostly, however, she left most of the administrating to other people, such as the city council, so that she could be free to focus on her own research. Building upon other people's advances in the area of neural computing, Dr. Ashton had developed the first prototype Custodian-style computers almost by accident.

The concept and details of the Banishment Project were not wholly her idea, but she had gone along with it readily enough; it gave her the opportunity to test some of the capabilities and practical uses of her invention. And, after all, if it worked then it could revolutionize the world. She claimed, in her defense, that she had wanted more trial data on the long term side-effects, but since all of the early trials had shown that the computers behaved exactly as they were designed and did no harm to their temporary hosts, she ultimately capitulated to pressure from the city council. She hadn't much liked the thought of her own Ashton Technologies redirecting most its energies into becoming a Bane-processing factory, but it was for the greater good, or so she believed.

Everything went fine until a few anomalies began to show up. When some of the first long term prisoners were brought in, they were suffering from what Katrina knew was now being called Suit Dependency Syndrome. They reacted terribly to the removal of the Custodian and would almost immediately attempt suicide or lapse into a coma. The exact cause was, of course, unclear at the time. A research scientist in the old-fashioned sense, Dr. Ashton was not averse to experimenting on herself. She decided to put herself into banishment.

Her plan was simply to spend some time as a Bane, just to experience for herself what she was doing to others and to find out for herself if it was, in fact, inhumane. Since she hadn't wished to spend an entire year in banishment, she only intended to stay banished for a few months. Following that experience, she would have left the Custodian implanted for much longer–with the violation monitoring system deactivated, of course–to see if it was the Custodian or the banishment that was causing the problems. She only informed a trusted few about her plan at the time, as she didn't want it to become common knowledge or risk having it seen as some sort of publicity stunt. Her intentions were honest. She told everyone else she was taking a leave of absence.

Being banished turned out to be more unpleasant than she had anticipated. It didn't, however, seem to her to be inordinately cruel as long as she followed the rules. It seemed harsh enough to be a deterrent, but not so hard as to cause the sort of extreme reactions and psychotic disturbances they had been seeing. Overall, the system seemed to be working as intended. Still, after a few months of life as a Bane, she was desperately looking forward to being released.

Unfortunately for her, the thought of being betrayed never even crossed her mind. She might have been a brilliant researcher, but when it came to understanding other people, she had been hopelessly naive. It turned out that some of the other scientists and council members enjoyed the freedom and power they had acquired in her absence. That's when she was informed through the automated central monitoring network that her sentence had been increased by ninety-nine years.

There was nothing she could do about it. She couldn't tell anyone about her plight, nor could she march back to the facility and demand to be released. Being a Bane, she wasn't allowed anywhere near the place. There would be no escape, no matter how much she raged and fought with the suit. She was

trapped inside her own infernal machine. She went insane for a while, utterly consumed by hate, treachery, and thoughts of revenge. She was utterly helpless. It was like being marooned alone on a desert island. All she had to look forward was a lifetime of being trapped in a Banesuit, being forced into obedience, and being ignored by absolutely everyone until the she finally died of old age. She didn't even have the ability to free herself through suicide, though she had tried; the Custodian wouldn't allow it. It would keep her alive and healthy for a very, very long time.

And then Eden came. Eden came and saved her from all of the loneliness and pain. She didn't need to explain to Katrina what that was like–the indescribable completeness, the absolute acceptance, the constant love. Suddenly, nothing else mattered. She had become a new person and she lived in a new world. Ashton Technologies, her research, the Banishment Project, and even the betrayal… all of it just faded away as unimportant. Let the fools do whatever they wanted, she had decided. She had Eden and was content. Until now.

I wanted to forget it all. But now u come and bring all this up. I can't go back there! Barbara wrote. *I'm so sorry 4 what happened to u, but Winter is gone. U can't bring her back!*

"I know I can't. It's not about that. What I want is to make sure this will never happen again, but I can't do it alone. Nobody knows more about Ash-Tech than you. Do you know how close they are to shutting down the Project?" Katrina asked. "What do you think will happen to you then? What do you think will happen to Eden? You think they'll let you stay in your suit just because you ask them nicely?"

Barbara looked aside, twisting the pen in her fingers. Then she wrote, *Dr. Ashton is dead. I don't want that life back. I won't!*

"Damn you, you can't just keep ignoring it, because the problem's not going to go away. This whole mess is *your* responsibility. You can't escape from it any more than I can escape from my pain. Maybe you think that if they do shut it down, they'll leave you the way you are so that you'll never be able to expose them. As long as you have Eden, who cares what happens to the others. Is that it?"

At that, Barbara's head snapped up. Even though Katrina couldn't see her face, she could feel the hostility directed at her from the Bane. Barbara gave her

head a furious shake. Rising to her knees, she shoved Katrina away from her.

Katrina stumbled back a few steps but didn't fall. Nor did she retreat. Either Barbara was furious from having her feelings grossly misread, or Katrina's accusation had hit a little too close to home. "If you don't want to help me for your own sake, at least do it for the other Banes and Eudeamons. They're practically your children!"

The Bane shrank away from her. Katrina supposed Barbara felt betrayed by her, the way she had come out of nowhere and forced her to confront her past. And, perhaps, she felt that Katrina was judging her too harshly. It was, Katrina knew, a heavy burden to lay on the carefree Bane she knew Barbara to be… but that wasn't her problem. This was all too important to worry about sparing Barbara's feelings.

But I can't! Barbara had started to write. Then she went still for a minute, presumably engaged in a conversation with Eden. Then she slouched into a posture of defeat. When she finally gave the pad back to Katrina, she had crossed out the above and written, *What do you want me to do.*

……

"I went shopping for you, got you some real food," Verne said as he came into her apartment, toting a few backs of groceries. "I don't want to enable your brooding or whatever–personally, I think you need to go out more and face the world–but all you ever buy are those nutrient bars. And you only ever get one flavor."

"They keep me alive." Katrina watched him go about stocking her bare cupboards. She was so tired. She had parted ways with Barbara just before dawn that morning and had only managed a few hours of sleep after she got back.

Verne crumpled up the empty grocery sacks and threw them in the trash. "I've got to catch the train in a little bit. I'll try to be back next week. Was just on the phone with Mellon. He has a job for me, something to do with breaking into some company's personnel files. I hate to say it, but I'm afraid he's about written you off."

"Can you stay a few more days?" Katrina asked softly.

He looked surprised. "You… you *want* me to?"

"There's something I need your help with," Katrina said, poking a latex-covered toe into the nap of the rug. "I hate to ask it. Feels like I'm using you.

You've done things for me before and not asked anything in return. You've been coming here, trying to take care of me, even though I've barely spoken to you all this time. And here I am, bugging you for help again. I just don't know anyone else I can turn to."

Touched, Verne said, "Well, hey, you know I'll help any way I can."

"It's not something that should be too hard for you, but you could get in major trouble for this. I don't want you to get in trouble."

"Sounds like you've already decided your gain outweighs my risk," Verne observed wryly. "But don't worry about it. I'm in, whatever it is. So? What's the score?"

Katrina nodded to herself. "If you're going to take a risk, you deserve to know why. If I tell you something, can you keep it a secret? An absolute secret? Not telling anyone, not Mellon, not your friends, not even anonymously on those conspiracy message boards I know you hang out in."

"Well, yeah, you know I can."

"I'm going to tell you something no other human knows." Katrina looked up at him. This was going to be hard for her. She could already feel the tears welling up. "I'm going to tell you about my love. I'm going to tell you about Winter."

Chapter 26

Two days later, Katrina, in her coat, stood in the deepest, least accessible area of the park. She rubbed her arms for warmth. The small clearing in the trees wasn't too distant from where she had come across those two exhibitionists making out, so long ago. It was the middle of the night and the chances of someone stopping by were almost nil. The patrols never checked this area unless they had reason to. Barbara had agreed to meet her here, along with as many 'freed' Banes as she could find. Katrina squinted her eyes in the dark, trying to count how many there were. It was hard to tell, since they blended in so perfectly with the night and there wasn't any light to see by, but there looked to be a couple dozen sitting here and there. Maybe more. Seeing so many clustered together like that was an eerie sight, even for Katrina. It was surreal.

The Banes had been busy during her two month absence. Inspired by the ability to turn off the proximity warning and get close to other Banes, someone's

Eudeamon had figured out how to effectively arrange the mimetic fibers in his Banesuit to form a simple, built-in cable. After he had taught it to some of the others, they were able to form a temporary network simply by being in physical contact with one another's suits. By simply touching, they could hear each other talk. They were probably chattering away at this moment, although, to an outsider like Katrina now was, they were as outwardly stoic and silent as ever.

They probably see me like they see every other civilian, now, she thought to herself, distraught with envy. *An outsider. But I'm still one of them inside. I really, really am.*

She could only make out a few she knew by sight. There was Barbara, of course, sitting in front. There was also Big Ray, an unmistakable mountain of a Bane, farther back. Sitting up high on a tree branch was Nola, the acrobatic one who had, at one time, mocked a woman for taking a Bane's Frisbee. The rest of them all looked too similar in the dark to tell them apart. She knew she must have met all of them at one time or other, though, during her brief quest to 'free' them by helping them break into the Custodians.

Katrina got to her feet. All of the assembled Banes turned their blank masks toward her. There were a few awkward moments where she couldn't make herself speak. She used to be a decent public speaker, but that had been long ago and in another life. There was no turning back, though. "Um, hi. Thanks for, uh, coming… um." She shut her eyes, trying to calm herself. *Winter, help me.*

She began again. "My name is Katrina. Katrina Bane. Many of you knew me, if only briefly, as Katrina/Winter. Winter… she's gone now. She's dead. They came and took me out of the suit and… now she's dead." She began to get choked up. She bit her lower lip, hard, to force herself to stay focused. "It's… it's the sort of thing most of you have probably worried about. If you are at all like Winter and I were, it's probably the worst thing you can possibly think of. But I can tell you, as bad as you imagine it is… the reality is worse. Much worse.

"But I didn't come out here for your sympathy. My pain is my own burden. I have to endure it… alone. And I won't lie to you–I want revenge. But I know that won't fix me or fill the emptiness that's a part of me now, and I wouldn't ask any of you to put yourselves in danger just for my own personal vendetta. But I do suggest that you fight for your own sakes. What I want is to make sure that this never happens again, to any of you or any other Bane.

Sooner or later, they're going to shut down the whole Project. They're not going to let you stay as you are just because you want them to. They're going to track each and every one of you down and bring you in, and then you'll end up just like me.

"I know what it's like being as you are. I know how easy it is to just forget the world and not worry about anything. I know how hard it is to imagine doing something that, if it goes wrong, will put you and your Eudeamons in danger. But you can't just stay here and hope that the world will forget about you forever, because it won't. When they come, nobody else is going to defend you, hide you, or fight for you. If they knew about Eudeamons, that would probably just make them even more afraid of you. You have to fight to keep what you've found, because no one else is going to do it for you. You'll be alone, on your own, and if they take your Eudeamon… you always will be." She looked around at them. She couldn't see their faces, so she couldn't even judge their reactions to her words. "I-I guess that's all I have to say."

Some of the Banes, perhaps half a dozen, simply got up and walked away. It made her angry. She wanted to shout at them, but she knew it would do no good. She couldn't really judge them too harshly. They were scared and, she supposed, seeing her standing there bereft of her Banesuit only emphasized the potential loss they would be risking. Besides, the rest of them were still here. That would have to be enough.

A Bane reached over and touched Barbara's arm, apparently opening up a line for communication. Barbara wrote on the pad and held it up. *They want to know what exactly you suggest we do.*

Katrina looked at them. "We're going to Ash-Tech. We're taking it over."

Chapter 27

"This is so crazy," commented Verne, clutching his laptop as he looked around at the group of Banes clustered all around.

They were all gathered in a strip of forest behind the Ashton Technologies facility. It had taken a couple of days for all the Banes to get there on foot. The last few to arrive were only now creeping out of the trees, quiet as shadows. The facility was right at the edge of the city, out on its own among mostly undeveloped land. It was set in a bright, serene island of streetlights in the

middle of a vast, well-tended lawn.

Fortunately for the assembled group, the Ash-Tech building was essentially little more than a research facility with beefed up security, rather than an actual prison. It wasn't designed for keeping people inside. The prisoners being processed were usually unconscious or restrained during their brief stays there. The greater concern was keeping out threats such as industrial spies, technology thieves, and the occasional anti-banishment activist.

According to Barbara (assuming not too much had changed since she last worked there) there were only a couple dozen security guards at key points. Security was mostly automated by computer, which was able to lock down just about every room in the building. It would do so at the slightest hint of a forced entry, while simultaneously alerting all the guards and the police. If the small group tried to force their way in, they would likely find themselves trapped in a corridor until the security force assembled to take them all down. What they needed was access to the computer, which was where Verne came in. He was sticking close to Katrina's side, evidently a little intimidated by the 'otherness' of all the Banes, now that he knew they were free of behavioral constraints.

Katrina turned to him. "You don't have to do this. I'll understand. If anything goes wrong and we all get caught–"

"Oh, stop it. I'm here, aren't I?" He grinned, flush with excitement, and patted his laptop. "Besides, this is probably the most exciting thing I've ever done. Don't worry about me. They won't catch me. I leave no trace. I am the wind." He made a soft, *woosh*ing noise.

Barbara turned her head toward him. Katrina said, in his defense, "He gets like this when he's nervous."

Barbara shrugged in response and returned her attention to the facility. She had been cool toward Katrina ever since she had been berated into taking this course of action. Despite her emotional numbness, Katrina found this hurt her feelings a little. The distance between them served to make Katrina feel even more isolated from the community of Banes, such as it was. She knew she had possibly damaged her friendship with Barbara by forcing her to confront her past. She had simply had no other choice. If things were irreparable between them… well, there was nothing to be done about it.

"These people are so weird," Verne whispered to Katrina as he set up his computer. "So aloof, ya know? This is like going on a picnic with a bunch of

gray aliens. Don't they get worked up about anything? Don't they feel anything?"

"They feel plenty," Katrina replied, "they're just not interested in sharing it with you. And they can hear you whispering just fine, by the way."

"Oops," mumbled Verne, turning red.

For a few minutes, he worked to set up a network between his computer and three of the Banes. His hope was that they would serve as an amplifier for his efforts, as Winter had done when he had worked to break through her Custodian firewalls. Apparently, it must have worked, because in a very short time he was gesturing excitedly. "Never saw it comin'!" he exclaimed.

"You took over their computers already?"

"No, well, yes… sort of. I used the back door that lady gave me." He looked around at the Banes, trying to pick Barbara out of the crowd, but gave up as most of them still all looked the same to him. Barbara had provided him with a back door to the system she had created, back when she had run the place as Dr. Ashton. She might have been trusting and naive in regard to her coworkers, but not *that* naive. Verne went on excitedly. "I boxed in the core system. That's all I can do with it from out here. I've got the security systems under control, though. I think. Just give me a little while to figure out what I'm doing in here."

Several of the Banes stayed behind with him so that he could manage the facility. The rest of the group skirted around the building to the front doors. These would normally have been locked, but thanks to Verne, they clicked open as the group approached.

Inside was a nicely appointed lobby with a reception desk that was currently occupied by a pair of security guards. There was no telling what went through the guards' minds at the sight of a dozen Banes surging through the doors like an invading army of black, faceless mannequins. They hesitated, but only for a moment. One of them began hitting the alarms that would lock down the building and summon the authorities. There would be no response; Verne had already cut off all communications. The other guard unslung a static rifle–a supposedly non-lethal, short range, crowd control weapon–and pulled the trigger.

Katrina, who was bringing up the rear, shrieked in surprise as a bright arch of branching electricity ripped through the middle of the lobby. Violet light flickered off the walls and the scent of ozone filled the room. The insulating

qualities of the Banes' semi-rubber suits provided them only a little protection. Four of them, then five, went down. The rest charged forward, seemingly devoid of fear. Big Ray, who must have weighed close to four hundred pounds of mostly muscle, despite his lengthy banishment-enforced diet, took a direct hit, shuddered, and kept on going. He bowled over the rifle-wielding guard and they both disappeared behind the desk. The other guard, who had been fumbling with a sonic pistol at his belt, turned and ran for a hallway. Someone threw one of the lobby's small potted plants at him with impeccable aim and caused him to stagger. The remaining Banes caught up with him and wrestled him to the ground, where they knocked him out with his own neuro-sed.

Wide-eyed and breathing hard, Katrina rushed to the nearest fallen Bane and flipped her over. It was Nola/Jade Prince. Her pulse said she was alive but unconscious. Barbara went around to check the others. They were all in the same condition. Big Ray had claimed the rifle for himself and gestured toward the hallway. They would have to leave the fallen where they lie; there wasn't time to wait for them to recover. The guards would be out of it for up to six hours, thanks to the neuro-seds. Katrina and the Banes went deeper into the building.

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Securing the bulk of the facility turned out easier than expected. The plan didn't require them to overcome all of the guards; only the ones along the route to the heart of the facility. Verne had locked down all of the doors at key points, keeping everyone but the Banes isolated and trapped in their various sections. He had also triggered a recorded message informing all of the personnel of a systematic error, advising everyone to stay to calm while it was being fixed.

There were a few unavoidable skirmishes, but those were brief. Without any communication, the guards had no idea what was coming their way. They barely had time to react after the doors suddenly opened and a pack of Banes descended upon them. There were only a few more non-lethal casualties; Katrina herself got grazed by a sonic pistol blast–the effect of which was like being knocked in the head by a fist made of concentrated noise–and was stunned for a few minutes. Most of the fighting came down to hand-to-hand, which the Banes, hardened by years of living outdoors, excelled in easily. Some of them, with their questionable pasts, had been experienced scrappers in their own right long before being banished.

They entered a long hallway, with offices on one side and the main laboratories and processing rooms on the other. A gaggle of lab technicians and nurses had the misfortune to be doing some after-hours work when the place had been locked down. They were frozen in surprise as Banes systematically stormed through the rooms. They offered only perfunctory resistance as they were restrained with plastic cuffs liberated from the guards. Some demanded to know what was going on while others begged their captors not to hurt them, but their entreaties went unanswered; the Banes couldn't talk and Katrina remained grimly silent.

They had gained control of the central rooms and hopefully most of the fighting was done, but the task wasn't completed yet. A few Banes were dispatched to assist their fallen comrades and to fetch Verne. Now that there was a clear path to the main computer, he could get to work breaking its last defenses.

Katrina looked around, wired and a little shaken. The adrenaline of the invasion hadn't quite worn off yet. She no longer had Winter to regulate that sort of thing for her. She glanced at the frightened technicians, huddled up on the floor with a couple of Banes standing watch over them. She wondered if they and the other people who worked here had ever woken up in a cold sweat from nightmares of a scenario much like this. Her heart had become too cold to feel much guilt over their fear, but neither did she didn't wish them ill-will. She did realize that none of them had personally done anything to harm her and that they had just been in the wrong place at the wrong time. While they might be hapless victims of fate, if everything went ahead according to the plan, their troubles were just beginning. She heard a commotion coming from the hallway.

"What do you think you're doing in here? Take your hands off me! Get out! Custodians: punishment level ten!" came Dr. Torres' enraged voice from the hallway.

It sounded to Katrina like Dr. Torres also had the misfortune of working late. She wormed her way through the wall of smooth, latex bodies to get a better look. There was the head researcher, himself, being forcibly removed from the office where he had been trapped. Dr. Barriston was also being brought down the hall, looking disheveled and frightened. Her face was framed by wispy strands of red hair. At least she was being quiet, like a deer in the headlights, quite unlike Dr. Torres, who was still shouting for the Banesuits to

discipline their occupants.

"I don't think that's going to work," Katrina advised.

Dr. Barriston's eyes went wide. "V-7... uh, Miss… Mulberry?"

"*You*." Dr. Torres looked at Katrina with utter confusion. In spite of the dire situation he found himself in, he managed to put a bold front. "How did you get in here? Is this your doing? You march this rabble right out of here this minute! Stop this madness at once and *maybe* we can discuss a suitable–"

"Shut up, Julian," came an unfamiliar voice. "You have no right to speak to her that way." It was that of a mature woman and it carried an unmistakable ring of authority. Katrina felt a gentle touch on her shoulder. She looked around in surprise to see Barbara behind her. The woman had found for herself a Vox, which was now attached to her upper arm as though glued there. She gave Katrina a small nod that said, *It's all right, I'll take things from here*. Katrina stood aside with a sense of relief in seeing Barbara stepping in and taking control; she wasn't able to shoulder that kind of burden on her own.

Barbara stepped around Katrina to face Dr. Torres. "She's not the one in charge here, and neither are you."

Torres' face blanched. He began to shake his head. "No. It can't be you."

"Surprised to see me, perhaps?" Barbara asked.

Dr. Barriston stared with amazement at the female Bane. "Doctor? Doctor *Ashton*? Is that you?"

The blank helmet turned toward the female doctor. "Hello, Emilia."

Torres seemed to shrink in upon himself with a silent exhalation. He bore the appearance of a man whose past actions had caught up with him, though he still wasn't sure how or why. "But how? How did you get in? How are you *doing* this? The Custodians…"

"You really have no understanding of my creation, do you?" Barbara asked him. "That's all right. Neither did I. I do now, though. Unhappily for you."

"I don't understand. Somebody explain what's going on!" Dr. Barriston exclaimed. "Doctor Ashton, where have you been all this time? Why are you in that Banesuit? What are all these people *doing* here?"

Barbara looked at her. "You have your faults, Emilia, but being ignorant has never been one of them. I have no doubts that you've suspected where I've been."

Emilia Barriston shook her head in denial. "What? I… no. No, I–"

Barbara dismissed her with a shrug and returned her attention to Dr. Torres. "Ah, Julian. My old friend. Was having control over my facility really so tempting that you couldn't resist doing what you did to me?" Barbara asked.

"It was all Greggor's idea!" Torres declared.

"I don't doubt that. But you must have not put up much resistance, did you? Otherwise, we wouldn't be having this conversation, now would we?"

"This is not happening," he groaned.

"How does it feel?" Katrina asked him. She couldn't resist digging in the screws, just a little. "How does it feel to have your life come crashing down? Just think of what the press will do when they get a hold of this. They'll crucify you. Think you can handle that kind of humiliation?"

Torres stared goggle-eyed at her with a hurt 'What did I ever do to you?' look. She had no pity to spare for him. Although Dr. Torres had never *intentionally* harmed her or the other Banes who had been separated from the Eudeamons, and even though his betrayal of Barbara had unintentionally granted her great joy, he was still a man who had knowingly conspired to banish his colleague and coworker for life just for personal gain. *Sorry, but you're not getting any sympathy from me*, she thought.

"What do you want from me?" he asked Barbara with defeat in his voice. "Do you want me to turn myself in? Reinstate you?"

"I'll reinstate myself, thank you, Doctor. And I don't particularly desire to turn you in. You see, that would be denying myself the pleasure of personal revenge."

"Revenge?" he asked hollowly.

"You have no idea how long I dreamed of this moment, when I would be able to make you beg on your knees for some kind of mercy," said Barbara with a hint of cruel glee. "Which, of course, I wouldn't grant. Oh, the things I used to *dream* of doing to you."

Katrina glanced over at her, a little startled by the vicious tone of the woman's voice. Every muscle in the Bane's body was taut, as though she was barely restraining herself from pouncing on him. Barbara, of course, had every reason to be furious with her betrayers, but it was still hard to reconcile this attitude with the Bane that Katrina knew.

Judging from the abject dismay on his face, Torres would probably have

been willing to do just about anything to avoid Dr. Ashton's malice. He squirmed in the iron grip of the two males who held his arms. He judiciously refrained from saying anything that might incur further wrath.

Barbara's body slowly relaxed and she shook her head. "Now I see that it's just not worth it. You're not worth my time. You'd just better be thankful I've changed since when I first learned you intended to trap me in this suit until I died. You have Eden to thank for that. Besides, as someone once pointed to me, this goes beyond personal revenge. What we're doing here is an act of survival, plain and simple."

"What do you want, then?" Torres asked. "If you're not going to turn me in, then just… just let me out of this with a scrap of dignity. Do you want out of the Banesuits?"

"Out?" Barbara scoffed. "That's the last thing we want. We're making sure we stay *in*. That's why we're here."

"You don't want out?" Dr. Torres asked, studying Barbara's inscrutable, glossy facemask. He looked from her to Katrina, and then to the assembled, rebellious Banes. He finally began to put two and two together. "You're suit dependent," he told Barbara, almost accusatory. He looked around at the other Banes. "You're all suit dependent!"

"How astute. And who coined that grossly understated bit of nomenclature? Was it you?"

"D-doctor," ventured Dr. Barriston. "If that's true, you need help. You need… rehabilitation, or–"

"You can see what rehabilitation's done for me," Katrina commented darkly.

"Enough of this," said Barbara. "While it was nice to catch up with you both, we've a long night ahead of us, and there's a great deal of work I have to do in reclaiming *my* facility." She then addressed the Banes. "Take these two, the rest of the staff, and the guards to the shower room and restrain them there. We have a number of new Banes to process."

"What? *Process*? You can't be serious!" Dr. Torres bellowed as he and Dr. Barriston were forcefully escorted down the hallway. "You can't do this to me!"

"Doctor Ashton, no! Please!" Dr. Barriston wailed. "I didn't know, I swear I didn't know anything! Don't do this to me… I'm innocent!"

"I'll do anything you want," Torres insisted, raising his voice to be heard

over his colleague's cries. "Anything! I'll turn myself in, I'll take all the blame. What do you want? Tell me what you want! *You can't do this*!"

They might as well have been pleading for mercy from an obsidian statue. Barbara observed them in silence until they disappeared around the corner. She then said to the others, "Come on, everyone. We're not done yet. There's much to do."

Chapter 28

The Banes had split up into groups in order to scour the remaining rooms of the facility, taking care to avoid rooms where guards were trapped. Barbara had gone to assist Verne with the facility's computers while Katrina and three of the Banes, two of whom were armed with sonic pistols, went to explore one of the sub-levels. They wanted to make sure that they hadn't missed any of the staff that might have been trapped deeper inside the building when the raid occurred. A single slip up like that and the entire plan could be ruined.

At the end of a hallway, Katrina and the Banes found themselves in a large room lined with hospital beds and monitoring equipment. There were nine people inside, all in hospital gowns–some wearing latex underneath as an attempt at therapy–lying inert on their beds like coma patients. Their wrists were fastened at their sides with padded, hospital restraints. A few of the patients' eyes open, but they didn't appear to be registering anything around them. These people were the remnants of Banes who had lost their Eudeamons. Katrina felt a cold chill.

This is what I looked like, not so long ago, she realized. *Except for a promise I made, one I've been trying to keep, I'd be in one of those beds right now. If I can't figure out how to keep living after all this is done, I might still end up in one.*

The rest of the party entered and wandered around the room, looking at the patients. The Banes appeared agitated. Their thoughts were inscrutable, but Katrina suspected they were all feeling pity mixed with, perhaps, a tinge of dread. These people weren't dead, but compared to what they had been, they might as well be cold corpses.

As the single female Bane in the search party approached a bed at the far end of the room, its middle-aged occupant's eyes fluttered. His eyes came into focus and he looked at the female Bane with a growing hope that erased years

from his face.

"Summer? Summer, you've come back!" he exclaimed hoarsely, trying to lift himself up in the bed. He strained weakly against the restraints, trying to reach out to her. The Bane looked around at the others with uncertainty. As she did so, the hope drained from the man's face and he sank back onto the bed. "No. It's not you. You never come," he mumbled. His eyes glazed over once again, and no prompting on the others' part could get him to respond.

Katrina, wide-eyed, watched him with a sympathy that bordered on sheer horror. This was hitting too close to home for her. The lost look in his eyes was so familiar, for it was a look she saw whenever she gazed into a mirror. His Eudeamon had even named itself after a season, too. She wondered what his Summer had been like, and if she had been anything like Winter. Her Winter.

She stifled a sob. "Guys... I can't be in this room any longer. Can we please move on?"

The others nodded in assent. They, too, had been unnerved by what they had just witnessed and were almost as eager as Katrina was to get out of there.

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Katrina lead the group down the hallway, back toward the elevator. About mid-way down the hall, she heard a door bang open behind her. A moment later, a man shouted, "Lady, get down!"

Reacting on pure reflex at the shout, Katrina unthinkingly dove to the ground. It was the first thing that occurred to her to do upon hearing someone yell such a thing. An electric burst ripped through the hallway behind her. Katrina scrambled to her feet and spun around to find a blond-haired man in a security guard's uniform standing above a heap of three unconscious Banes. He was holding a static rifle in his hands and he was breathing hard. He looked at her. "Are you okay? Did they hurt you? What in the hell's going on up there?"

Katrina mumbled something incoherent in reply, bewildered as to why the guard hadn't shot her, too. Then it dawned on her–she wasn't dressed in a Banesuit. To him, she was just some woman in a long coat. He must have mistook her for some civilian or one of the Ash-Tech personnel. She stared at him, unsure of what to do. He looked sort of familiar to her. She knew she had seen him somewhere before. Then, when she noticed the tracery of fresh scars across the bridge of his nose, it clicked.

She *had* seen him once before. Months ago. Only that time, it had been in

a swamp, late at night, and he had been swinging a baseball bat at her head. He was one of the two Bane-bashers she had attacked for assaulting that little Bane in the woods. And he worked at Ash-Tech as a *guard*? She was frozen with terror. The last time she had met him, she had Winter there to grant her strength. Now she was in stuck in a hallway with him, defenseless and alone. She had to flee. She took a few steps away from him.

He hadn't recognized her, though. He probably wouldn't have recognized her as *that* Bane, not even if she was still in a Banesuit. After a baffled glance at her, he turned his attention to the Banes at his feet. He began to kick at them, hard. "Fucking scum. Coming in here? Coming in *my* house? I'll show you. I'll show you what that gets you," he muttered under his breath as he continued to kick around the unconscious Banes like rag dolls. He stomped on one and Katrina heard a dull snap.

Katrina stopped retreating. She couldn't just let him assault her people like that. There wasn't much she could do, but she had to do *something*, even if it was to just distract him from the helpless Banes. She took a step forward, not giving any thought to a plan. "Hey, asshole."

He stumbled to a stop in mid-kick and looked up at her. "What the fuck d'you say?"

"Does your wife know you like beating up Banes?" She untied the belt of her long coat and let it slip from her shoulders, leaving herself with nothing but her shiny, clear latex bodysuit. The coat would only slow her down and give him something to grab.

He stared at her, not sure what he was seeing or hearing. "*What*?"

"Will any Banes do? Or is it only fun for you if they're helpless women?" she asked casually, forcing herself to inch closer to him. She had no choice but to get near to him in order to reach the open doorway he had come through; the hallway she was in was a dead end. He still hadn't reacted. He had been taken off his stride and was trying to decide what to make of crazy lady in the transparent latex. For a moment he almost looked afraid of her, or at least afraid of being confronted by an apparent stranger about his secret nighttime activities in this most improbable of circumstances.

"I guess I can't blame you too much," Katrina continued. She was almost to the doorway. "Maybe it is fun. I seem to remember how satisfying it felt... when I was *smashing your face in*."

That did it. The memory of that night sparked in his eyes. The fear was gone in a flash and his lips peeled back from his teeth. She could see that he now knew, as unlikely as it seemed, that he was in the presence of the Bane who had scarred his face. Not giving him a chance to make the first move, Katrina darted through the door and took off down the new hallway. She had hoped to goad him into pursuing her rather than just blasting her with that static rifle he had, and she had been successful. He tore through the hall after her, his weapon forgotten. Clearly, he wanted to use his bare hands for whatever dirty work he suddenly had in mind for her. She could feel him right at her back, hear his footfalls.

She had no clue where she was going. She whipped around a corner into a new hallway. It all looked the same. She had a basic memory of the floor plan of the upper levels from the time she had spent here while recovering, but knew nothing of the layout of the lower levels. Her only hope was to lead him far enough away from the others and maybe barricade herself inside a room until help could arrive.

She was faster than the guard, but only by a little. She had only a couple seconds headway. She ran past many closed doors, knowing if she stopped to try one of the handles and found it to be locked, she wouldn't get a second chance; he would be all over her. Then, just ahead, she noticed there was a door that was partway ajar. Veering toward it, she flung the door open, taking only a split second to register that it was a supply room with no other exits. There was a stainless steel desk in the room and shiny, metal wire shelves lining the walls, each loaded with boxes and medical equipment.

She spun around to shut herself in. He crashed into the door before she was able to close it all the way and he thrust his arm inside. She let out an involuntary scream of fear and only just managed to keep the door for bursting wide open. She tried slamming the door on his arm, but she couldn't hurt him enough to make him withdraw it. He grunted and swore as he tried to force it open. She knew she wouldn't be able to hold him off for long.

Katrina took a deep breath, steadied herself, and leapt away from the door. It swung wide as he barreled in. He was momentarily off-balance and Katrina took advantage of that by planting the heel of her palm right into his nose, right where she had hit him once before. The man howled in pain and staggered forward, half blind. Blood flowed down across his lips. She tried to

squeeze past him, but he hooked his arm around her waist and heaved her back in the room. She collided with the metal table and then he was on top of her, pinning her painfully against it. He had his hand under her chin and was forcing her head back. She tried fending him off with kicks and punches, but his reach was longer and he was wearing a protective vest beneath his shirt. One of his hands found her right breast and squeezed, hard, as though he was trying to crush it, which tore a shriek from Katrina's lips. She raked her nails across his face. He bellowed in pain and landed a blow to her mid-section. She retched as the wind was knocked out of her.

Whether he intended to rape her in there or just beat her death, Katrina didn't know. There was no telling what sorts of cruel revenge he had dreamed up during his recovery after their first encounter. She realized she wasn't that afraid of dying–she had already accomplished what she had wanted by helping the Banes take over Ashton Technologies. She had months ago come to terms with the possibility that death might be the only way to escape her constant pain. But what she didn't want was to die like this, in a supply closet, at the hands of *this* asshole. She *refused*.

She stopped trying to fend him off. Instead, she wrapped her arms around the man's neck and pulled herself onto him. He was too surprised by the sudden change of tactic to think of pushing her away. At least not until, with a scream, she sank her teeth into his left cheek. He let out a yell which grew in volume the harder she bit. She tasted blood. It revolted her, but she didn't let go.

Staggering backwards against her weight, the man kept trying to dislodge her, but Katrina was hanging onto him with everything she had. She felt his fingernails scraping her scalp, trying to get a grip on her head, but her hair was still too short to offer a handhold. Her latex-clad body was just as difficult for him to grab onto with his sweating hands. His back hit one of the metal shelves and he could retreat no farther. He stopped trying to push her away. Instead, his hands found her neck and began to squeeze. A few moments later, Katrina had to release her bite in order to gasp for air. She twisted in his grip, pulling at his wrists.

"You fucking Bane *cunt*," he was snarling between breaths. His bloody lips were drawn into a terrible, wild smile. "You're gonna be sorry. You're gonna be so *sorry*."

Katrina glared defiantly at him even as her blood pounded behind her eyes. It wouldn't be long until she was unconscious. Unconscious, or dead. Her gaze darted to room's bare wall, just visible between the shelves. The shelving unit wasn't attached to the wall–or so she prayed. She let go of the man's wrists and grabbed onto the highest shelf above his head that she could reach while, at the same time, bracing a foot against the wall at his side. With the last of her strength, she simultaneously pushed against the wall and pulled at the shelf. It began to lean, then fall, against the guard's back.

She was prepared, but he was not. She stumbled backwards, out of the way, as soon as his hands slipped from her neck. The man, a look of confusion on his face, was knocked to the ground with the weight of the metal furniture pushing on his back. It collapsed on top of him with loud crash. Falling equipment shattered and boxes went scattering across the floor. Katrina doubled over to catch her breath, watching him out of the corner of her eye.

The shelf wasn't that heavy, at least not enough to incapacitate him. With a groan, he began to drag himself out from under the shelf. Katrina looked around anxiously at the debris, searching for something heavy she could hit him with. Her eyes fell on a cardboard spool of rubber surgical tubing. She seized it and unwound a few feet of tubing. As soon as his head appeared from wreckage of the shelves, she looped it twice around his neck and pulled.

The guard let out a startled squawk as the rubber garrote went taut. He thrashed under the weight of the shelves and grabbed onto her ankles, trying to unbalance her, but Katrina had all the leverage. Her arms and shoulders were quivering with the strain as she pulled, but she felt none of it. All that filled her mind was a white fury. Her face hard, she watched as the man gurgled and his struggles weakened. She was killing him.

I can do it, she thought exultantly. She knew she could. They had taken everything from her. She could take everything from this guy. This fucking, Bane-bashing waste of a human being. She wanted to do it. She would do it for Winter.

Winter.

Her eyes softened at the memory of her Eudeamon. What would her dark angel think if she was still here now? What would she do? Katrina knew. Winter would soothe Katrina's rage and fill her body and mind with calmness. Winter would tell Katrina that she could let go, that he wasn't getting up any

time soon. Winter would have pity. And Katrina would understand why. Katrina looked at the man whose distorted face was now reddish purple, and her rage drained away.

"*I'm not you*," she hissed at him, and let go of the tubing. "I'm not one of you."

The semiconscious man gasped for air and began to cough convulsively. Katrina felt nothing. She kicked through the rubble of medical supplies until she found the guard's static rifle, which he had lost during the fight. She pointed at the man and pulled the trigger, sending arcs of purple lightning raking across his body. He shuddered, then went still. Still, but alive. Katrina lowered the gun and staggered out of the room without another look back.

Chapter 29

Hours later, everyone, except for those assigned to guard duties, had gathered in a large conference room on the second floor. There wasn't much concern that the captives would try anything, not with Big Ray and his static rifle standing watch over them. Katrina sat at the long table, huddled over a cup of coffee. She was exhausted, and Verne looked drained as well. He kept giving her guilt-ridden glances from across the table. He blamed himself for her encounter with the guard. He believed he should have personally made sure that every single door had been securely locked down and individual accounted for, even though there were few automatic locks in the sub level. Katrina didn't hold him responsible at all, though. She hoped he could see that.

Barbara had given her and the Banes from her ill-fated search party an examination. One of the Banes had received a broken rib from the guard's brief attention, but his Eudeamon was able to block the pain with no difficulty. Katrina had some nasty, purpling bruises around on her body, particularly around her right breast where he had grabbed her. Her throat was sore and her head was still throbbing a little, but otherwise she was mostly okay. Emotionally, she was dealing with it just fine. Compared to the suffering she had endured during the past months, the life-and-death struggle with the guard was practically an island vacation. She was finished with him, and didn't care to spare him further thought.

She straightened up in her chair and looked around. She was worn out,

but she knew the Banes could still keep going strong for a while thanks to their Eudeamons' ability to keep them energized and alert. She couldn't get over the fact how out-of-place the Banes looked in an indoor setting like this. It felt strangely unnatural to her.

Some of them had acquired their own Voxes so they could be heard aloud. One, whose name Katrina wasn't sure of, reported his findings. "There's four convicts in those holding rooms, the latest batch. They're nekkid and knocked out."

Barbara nodded. "Patients who have been sedated while the Custodian implants itself. We'll have to finish processing them first. I'll teach any who are willing how to do it."

"There're also nine people tied to hospital beds downstairs, in comas or something," said the female Bane who had been in Katrina's group, now recovered. "They wouldn't respond to anything. Except that one guy, but only for a second."

"They're the un-implanted ones," offered Katrina, recalling with a shudder the long room lined with beds where the people reminded her so much of herself. She gave her head a shake, trying to banish the memory.

"According to the records," said another Bane, one who had been working with Verne on the computers, "they're just the most recent. There are nearly a hundred that have been moved to private nursing facilities."

"So many," said Barbara, sinking a little deeper into her chair, as though a weight had settled upon her. "We'll do what we can. Anything else?"

"Well, I've done what I can on my end," said Verne to Barbara. "You've got proprietary control over the computers and everything in them."

"Thank you, Mister Sawyer," replied Barbara. "You've been an invaluable help to us."

"Oh, it was nothing," Verne said swaggeringly. "Just, you know, doin' my part, helping a friend."

Katrina smirked into her coffee cup.

"Your work isn't over yet. If you can access the automated messaging system, please have all of the employees told not to come in to work tomorrow. Everyone except these," said Barbara, sliding a slip of paper across the table to him. It bore a short list of names. Katrina craned her neck to read them. There were several people she didn't know, but she most definitely recognized Victor

Grable's name.

"I'm guessing," ventured Verne, "you've got a grudge against these people, too. And you're going to… process them? You sure that's a good idea?"

"I'd rather have them under the constraints of a Banesuit where I can keep an eye on them," said Barbara. "I'll be able to use their skill and knowledge to further the research that will benefit us all."

"You're doing them a favor, you know," Katrina said to Barbara. She gestured at the list. "Them, and Torres. You'll be giving them Eudeamons. These are the people who tried to imprison you for life."

She faced Katrina. "I'm aware of that. But until that time, they'll have to face the thought of being trapped forever in a Banesuit, without hope and with no one but themselves to blame. Will that satisfy you?"

Satisfy? she wondered. The only thing that would truly satisfy her was being reunited with Winter, and that was impossible. Katrina frowned, but nodded.

"We could wait until they have Eudeamons and then separate them," suggested Ethan/Nodd, who was leaning against a wall of the conference room with his arms folded. "Like they did to the others."

"*No*," Katrina hissed vehemently to the Bane. She had once thought that not even her worst enemy should be condemned to experience what she had gone through. She still felt that way. "You will *not*. You have *no idea* what you're even suggesting."

Ethan/Nodd shrank away from her. "Okay, okay. It was just a thought," he said defensively.

"Don't worry, Katrina," soothed Barbara. "We won't be doing anything of the sort. Once they have Eudeamons, they'll understand everything and will become our allies. They will no longer be their old selves, and I'll consider their misdeeds forgiven. If being what I am has taught me one thing, it's that if our Eudeamons can accept us and forgive our own wrongdoings, then we can forgive others for theirs. They'll suffer in their private purgatories for a while, then they'll become one of us." No one dissented, so she continued. "Tomorrow I'll inform Councilman Greggor of the new paradigm. He'll have no choice but to help smooth things over with the police force and the city council in the coming days."

"Greggor?" Katrina asked, surprised. "You mean you're letting him get

away scot free? He's the worst of the lot."

"He'll be much more useful to me where he is than in a Banesuit. Unless he wants to be exposed for the things he has done and lose his valued position and reputation, he'll do as he is told. The man is essentially a coward. As long as I don't push too hard, he won't leave his corner. Once he has outlived his usefulness… well, then we'll see."

Katrina said nothing. She continued to be somewhat taken aback by the change that had come over Barbara in the last twenty-four hours. She had seemed to quite easily slip into her old role of Dr. Ashton, and Dr. Ashton was far more calculatingly Machiavellian than Katrina felt entirely comfortable with. It was a necessity, of course, and it was for the greater good of the Banes… Katrina just hoped the carefree Bane she once knew wasn't gone forever.

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The citizens of Eudemonia woke the next day to startling a startling press release from Ashton Technologies. It seemed that a small cabal of employees had conspired to sell company secrets and valuable technology. When they had learned their gambit had been discovered, they had apparently fled arrest and taken the stolen research with them. Their whereabouts were still unknown. The public was assured that there was no threat, but all work at the facility was to be temporarily suspended while internal investigations were ongoing. Apparently, Doctor Barbara Ashton had reemerged from seclusion to reclaim the reigns of her misused facility, but she was granting no interviews.

……

Katrina stepped into one of the offices adjacent to the showers. It was in this very room, in what seemed another lifetime, that she had long ago been implanted with a Custodian. Today there was a man securely restrained to the table: hairless, paunchy, and looking very vulnerable under the harsh lighting. He was covered with sweat, though the room was quite cool. Also in the room was a new Bane, one who had been a doctor versed in the implantation procedure. Katrina only knew him as R-8922. Dr. Ashton had implanted him herself, so that he would be able to contribute his skills toward the processing others. He was allowed by his Custodian to use the necessary implements to perform his task, but any deviation, escape attempt, or unauthorized communication would instantly be punished. He had no choice but help transform his old colleagues into more Banes.

Soon, there would be another Bane capable of installing Custodians, because the naked man on the table was Victor Grable. Katrina had been sound asleep when he had arrived at work. He had undoubtedly expected it to be a day like any other, but had found himself in an ambush by Banes. She was sorry she had missed that. At least she could still give him a decent sending-off. "Oh, hello, V-3218," she said after a glance at his chart. "I hope everything is proceeding up to your standards."

"What are *you* doing here?" he grunted, yanking at the restraints.

"I just wanted to stop by and see how you were coming along. You're looking pretty pathetic, I must say. Not to worry, though, since soon no one will notice you at all. I wanted to be able to explain things to you, because I know how stressful it can be to be left in the dark. You know, seeing as we're… how did you put it? Oh yeah. Old friends."

"You won't get away with this."

Katrina went on. "First, they're going to drill a hole in your skull. Then the Custodian will grow into your brain like, oh, just think of it like tree roots. It's fascinating, really, and there's really nothing you can do to stop it. It's going to control every aspect of your life. Isn't that comforting? After that, when they get you in your Banesuit, you'll be just another faceless Bane, and you will be for the rest of your life. Textbook, as you might say. Does that make you feel any better?"

Grable quivered with rage. "You slut. Don't think you can talk to me that way. I know what you were in here for. You're a whore! A filthy-"

"I'm *so* glad I was able to explain things to your satisfaction, Doctor. If you have any further questions, just keep them to yourself. It'll be easy–you won't be able to talk. I know you have an appointment to keep, so I won't delay you any longer."

"I'll get you for this!"

"No," Katrina said, looking him up and down. "No, I don't think that you will." Katrina exited the room with a smile on her face. It had been petty, perhaps, to goad him like that. Petty or not, it felt good.

She went down the hall, past the cells where Custodians were implanting themselves over a period of days into their unconscious hosts, to the room where the Banesuits were completed. Here were a couple more Banes, but these were from the group that had invaded the facility. They had been trained in the

relatively straightforward procedure of finishing up the suits. Restrained in a chair was Dr. Emilia Barriston, now E-6430, whom Katrina barely recognized in her current, hairless state. She, too, was naked, except for the rubber pads glued over her nipples and crotch and the Custodian sealed against the back of her skull. On a table next to her were the two halves of the helmet that would be sealed over her head. Tears streaked her cheeks and black, mimetic latex oozed from her nose and lips. When she saw Katrina entering the room, she began to struggle.

"Viv-Vivienne!" Dr. Barriston called thickly through the viscous liquid that coated her mouth. Black bubbles formed at her lips. "Vivienne! Don't let them do this to me. Please!"

"It's not up to me. I'm sorry."

"No, you can stop them," the woman insisted. "I've seen you with Doctor Ashton. She'll listen to you, just talk to her for me. Please! Help me."

"Why should I want to do that?" Katrina asked softly.

"R-remember after the Custodian was removed? I was nice to you. Remember? You cried in my arms and I talked to you, I fed you, and… and…"

"You were nice to me," said Katrina. "Maybe the only person here who was."

"Then don't let them do this to me!" Dr. Barriston sobbed. "They're not going to let me out! You know they won't. I'm not a bad person. I don't deserve this!"

"Don't you?" Katrina reached out and patted the woman's cheek. "Do any of us? I envy you right now. You have no idea."

"No, please…"

"I'll tell you a secret. Maybe it'll help in the upcoming months, maybe not. But you should know that you're being given a gift."

"What are you talking about? No, my eyes!" she moaned as the soft, bioluminescent contacts were fitted beneath her eyelids.

"You're going to feel so lonely, so helpless and trapped. You will. But then something will happen. Something wonderful. So wonderful that you won't believe you could ever be so lucky that it could ever happen to you. And you'll be so happy. You don't believe me now, but you'll see. And, when it happens, pray… pray that it's never taken from you. Like it was taken from me." Her voice caught in her throat and she had to stop talking. One of the

Banes touched her on the shoulder, attempting to offer her comfort.

"I don't understand, I don't… no, stop!" Dr. Barriston exclaimed as she felt the halves of the helmet being put into position. "Please, *no! Nooo! Don't*–"

Her cries were abruptly silenced as the halves came together and sealed with an unmistakable click. Her head was now covered in a featureless, metallic shell that would soon be encased in latex. Although the woman's chest continued to heave as she undoubtedly begged for them to stop, there was complete silence except for the quiet hissing of air through the valves.

"You will be happy," repeated Katrina.

Chapter 30

Weeks later, Ashton Technologies opened its doors for business again. Only now, a prisoner arriving at the facility after opting for banishment would find him or herself greeted, processed, and sent back out into the world by Banes. Nearly the entire working staff of the facility consisted Banes, with the exception of some newly-hired public relations personnel, some part-time engineers, and some new security guards. The workers and guards were brought in from outside of Eudemonia. As long as their paychecks cleared, they didn't much care if they had to follow orders given by Banes. It was all the same to them.

The changes were announced as Doctor Ashton's plan to restructure the facility in hopes of preventing further incidents like the one that lead up to this course of action. Although Banes weren't allowed to hold jobs, the rules were changed to allow qualified, long term Banes to hold a sort of trustee status. In that way, they would help to contribute something back to society. The city council, at Councilman Greggor's urging, had offered no objections to the proposal.

The news met with some controversy but little dissent among the public. It may have sounded strange at first to have Banes making Banes, but when one thought about it, it was no more unusual than having computers designing new computers or robots building cars. Many reasoned that it was a good idea even if all it did was spare decent working folk from what was undoubtedly an unpleasant job. And, after all, Doctor Ashton was back in control, and she would know better than anyone what would be best for Eudemonia in regards to the Banishment Project. People being people, as long as everything kept running

along smoothly and it didn't appear to affect their own lives, they soon accepted the changes as business as usual. Out of sight, out of mind.

Not all of the original band of Banes remained inside the facility. Some weren't comfortable with staying indoors among so many people, and others simply weren't interested in the work. It wasn't a problem, though, since there were many Eudeamonic Banes out there eager to have something new to do, if only for a while. Most of the implanted former personnel of the facility were gradually being rotated and sent out into the streets to fend for themselves with the rest of the Banes as others were brought in to replace them. The Banes were remarkably swift at picking up new skills, despite whatever educational shortcomings they might have had during their previous lives; Eudeamons forgot nothing and were always there to remind their hosts of whatever course of action needed to be taken. And any task, no matter how menial, was never boring when one had a Eudeamon as a partner. One of the prized benefits of working at the facility was the ability to access the internet. That storehouse of media and literature served as fuel for the Eudeamons' fantasy forging abilities, which opened up countless new avenues for Banes to explore and lose themselves in.

Not much had changed for the pre-Eudeamonic Banes out among the city streets and parks. The violation punishments were a little less severe, although the punitive sentence increases became, perhaps, a little longer. The latter might have been dismaying to the younger Banes, but it was all for a good cause. Although Barbara was working on a way to identify Banes with Eudeamons based on the biometric feedback that all Custodians constantly sent into the network, there currently wasn't a way to distinguish them other than going out into the city and looking for them. Her hope was to eventually be able to send out information only to Eudeamonic Banes, deactivate their punishments en masse, as well as provide their Eudeamons with wireless internet access, the same as given to those who worked in the facility.

As time passed, the excitement of the raid and all that followed died down. As it did, Katrina found her old depression returning. The companionship and union of purpose she had found during this crazy quest had distracted her for a while, but that had only been a temporary fix. She spent a lot of her time alone, mourning, in one of the company apartments attached to the facility which she had taken up as her residence. Shortly after they had taken

over, she had searched the database in the desperate hope that somehow Winter still existed in some form. Unfortunately, Dr. Grable had told her truth; all Custodians were destroyed after being removed from their hosts. It had been a vain hope, but she still took the confirmation of the cold, hard truth poorly. It took her days to recover and force herself to become functional again after learning that.

With so much going on around her–virtually a secret Bane renaissance–Katrina was glad to be able to disappear on the sidelines. The others might see her as a leader figure, or a mascot, or something along those lines, but she didn't feel like one. Not at all. She remained in the facility, though, since at least the people around there respected her wishes to be left alone. She had taken to dressing in opaque, black latex. It looked more proper than the clear stuff she had been wearing. It wasn't Banesuit latex, though, for that material required a Custodian to maintain its properties and shape. Without that control, it would remain as nothing more than sticky goo.

She had come to the decision that she wasn't ready to die. She didn't want Winter's memory to die with her. Her fierce battle for survival with that security guard had taught her that. She learned that was still capable of accomplishing some worthwhile achievements despite Winter's absence. She would always remain shattered, but she could find reasons to keep going in spite of that.

All the same, she was not yet ready for a new Custodian. It was fear that held her back more than anything. What if she hated the new Eudeamon? Or what if it hated her? Or worst of all, what if she... *infected* it with her pain and made it as unhappy as she was? Even in the best scenario, it still wouldn't be Winter.

……

Katrina walked through the building on her way to the processing rooms. She just wanted to peek in and see what was going on. She was realizing she had developed an unusual fascination for watching the final processing. It seemed so strangely magical to her and it was just about the only thing that could draw her out for a little while. The prisoners would go in, sometimes crying, sometimes stoic, and come back out completely transformed. And that wasn't the end of their transformation. She saw the Banesuit as something like a chrysalis. Even if the people didn't remain long enough to get Eudeamons, few would come out of

banishment unchanged. Hopefully, changed for the better.

She encountered one of the captured personnel on her way down the hallway. He was carrying a stack of data pads and papers, having been tasked to some errand. She could tell he was one of the captured ones because of his physique and body language. It could have been one of the lab techs, or even Grable, for all she knew. It was hard to tell most of them apart now. It wouldn't be the Bane-bashing security guard; he had been processed and was being kept in a cell, under observation. Dr. Ashton finally had a case study to see what would happen to a violent offender if he had a Eudeamon. Katrina didn't care. She hadn't even looked in on him to gloat. He just wasn't worth it. Maybe someday he would be at peace. Maybe not.

Whoever this particular Bane was, he was forced to press himself against the wall to avoid coming into contact with her. She briefly wondered what dark thoughts were being directed at her from behind the mask. She ignored him as she walked past. He, too, would be changed.

As she passed by Doctor Ashton's office, she noticed Verne sitting in one of the chairs across from her desk. When she slowed to peer in out of curiosity, Barbara/Eden noticed her and beckoned her in. "Katrina, come in, please. Have a seat. I was just speaking with Mr. Sawyer. I'd like to have a word with you, too, if I may."

"Um, all right," said Katrina as she settled herself into one of the chairs. Barbara's office was almost entirely free of clutter or decoration, although there was a row of various potted plants lining one of the walls. The opposite wall was a large, picture window that overlooked the neatly mown field in front of the facility. Barbara the Bane looked distinctly out of place sitting behind the large desk.

"Hey, Katrina!" said Verne excitedly. "You doing all right? Guess what? I got offered a job! The doctor here wants me to stick around on kind of a retainer, in case my skills should come in handy, or something."

Katrina smiled for him. "That's great."

"Well, it's a lot better salary than Mellon ever offered me, that's for sure."

"You've proven yourself to be a friend," Barbara told him. "And I'm sure your talents will not go to waste. Have you ever considered joining us?"

"Come again?"

"Becoming a Bane, Mr. Sawyer," Barbara said. "Becoming one of us."

"Oh! Ah, well." Verne chuckled nervously. "Yeah, I think I'll just leave that disturbingly hive queen-ish question hanging there, aaand I'll get out of your hair so you two can talk. I'll see you later, Katrina."

Barbara waited until he was gone before speaking. "He's rather fond of you, you know. He holds you in high regard."

"I guess so," said Katrina. It was hard to imagine anyone holding her in any kind of regard in her current condition.

"We've barely had a moment to talk since all this started," Barbara said. "Eden feels that you've appeared uncomfortable around me. Even to the point of avoiding me."

"I've been avoiding everyone, actually." Katrina offered a small shrug. "Besides, I know you've been busy. And, well, I thought that maybe you've been mad at me. Ever since…you know. Didn't want to make things any worse."

"I was mad at you, yes. But, as Eden helped me to understand, my anger towards you was misdirected. I was mad because you made me ashamed. In truth, I was angry at myself because of my failings. You did what I should have done long ago by convincing the others to take a stand." She turned her gaze toward the window. It had been raining steadily all day. Trickles of rainwater were winding their way down across the glass in thin, clear trails. "If I had done it myself, and sooner, it's possible Winter would still be alive today. I should have, but I didn't. I was hiding from my own past, and it was you who paid the price for my cowardice. It took you, and the pain you've suffered, to wake me up." She looked back at Katrina. "For that, I'm sorry. Please forgive me."

"It's, uh, it's okay," said Katrina awkwardly. "I mean, I know as well as anyone how easy it is to lose yourself out there. And I know that being back here is a lot of responsibility to shoulder. But I don't blame you for Winter."

Barbara nodded, pausing for a few moments. "It's not the responsibility I was hiding from, you know. Not quite. It was the guilt I didn't want to face. Because of me, because of what I created, those patients in there with their Eudeamons taken from them have suffered horribly. You, included. I should never have allowed any of that to happen. But what's done is done. I don't know that there's anything I can do for them now. I'll try, but… it may never happen. I will always have to live with that guilt."

Trying to ease the conversation away from the touchy subject of Winter's death, Katrina asked, "Is it that bad? There's nothing you can do for them?"

"I'll keep trying. While Julian the others may have been cruelly negligent by removing their Custodians, they did seek to find a cure to the best of their abilities. The patients have been well cared for." She let out a frustrated sigh. "I understand the Custodians better than they did, yes. But my expertise is nanotubules and neural networks and hybrid intelligences. I'm at something of a loss when it comes mental trauma and damaged psyches. I've been consulting experts, but so far there's nothing solid to go forward with. I hate to just start experimenting on them at random in hopes of stumbling across a cure. They've suffered enough, already. I don't want to make it worse."

"Oh," Katrina said and lapsed into silence.

Barbara stood up and went to the window and stood there looking out, her mask mere inches from her own pale reflection in the pane. Katrina wondered if Barbara would much rather be out there in the field beyond the glass, dancing in the rain. She thought that she might.

"Am I doing the right thing, Katrina?" Doctor Ashton asked.

Katrina was surprised. "You're asking me?"

"Who better to ask? I value your opinion. I, too, hold you in high regard. All of us do."

The statement made Katrina feel hopelessly inadequate. She could have said half a dozen self-deprecating things, but bit down on them. She finally settled on asking, "Why?"

"Who went willingly into banishment just to find some answers and right injustices?" Barbara asked. "Who ran into a fire and risked her life to help a stranger? Who stuck her neck out to figure out how to break into her Custodian and help others do the same? Who was strong enough to survive the loss of her own Eudeamon and even go on to convince others, myself included, to make a stand for their own future? Who-"

"Okay, enough," interrupted Katrina, embarrassed. "All right, I get it. But you're giving me way too much credit. I didn't do any of that by myself. And anyway, I was terrified the entire time. I only did it then because… 'cause…"

"Because?"

"Because it was the only thing to do. I couldn't *not* have done it. Couldn't have lived with myself."

"Nonetheless, you had a choice," said Barbara. "You're far braver and

more compassionate than you think you are."

Katrina shook her head. "Anyway. None of that qualifies me to know if what you're doing is right. I'm not even sure what you're referring to, exactly."

"You're the only one I can ask who has experienced both sides of the equation. I'm continuing the Project, as you know. As time goes by, there will be more and more Eudeamons awakening out there. More Banes facing the possibility of losing what they have gained, as you have. Not having experienced that, I can't judge for myself." Barbara paused. "I suppose what I'm asking is, is it worth it? The risk that I'm allowing others to face. Please tell me."

"I-I don't know," Katrina stammered. Was it worth it? What if Winter had never existed? What if Katrina had gone through her life never knowing her? Was Winter's brief, luminous existence worth the pain Katrina experienced after losing her? "I can't answer for anyone else. But for me… yes. It was worth it." *Yes. A thousand times, yes.*

Barbara nodded to herself. "Thank you."

Katrina got up and went to look out the window, as well. An Ashton Technologies van was pulling into the long driveway, probably transporting the day's batch of convicts. "Since you mentioned continuing the Banishment Project, there's something I've been wondering."

"Yes?"

"There's so many people out there, all of them muddling through their lives so alone… so isolated. They don't have a clue about the wonders they could be experiencing or the love they could be feeling. They don't know how happy they could be. They're good people, most of them. Don't they deserve a chance at this? Why continue to allow only the criminals an opportunity?"

"Who are we to be judging who should get a Eudeamon and who should not, you mean?" Barbara asked. "Don't think I haven't thought about that. The release of this knowledge will come in time. That's a problem for another day. For now, we need to be concerned with establishing security and building a foundation for the future. Not just for us, but for all the Banes and Eudeamons to come. There will be many."

"I guess so," Katrina conceded.

"And besides, who needs this the most?" Barbara asked as the van disappeared around the corner of the building. "Who needs this…" She trailed of, searching for a word.

"Salvation?" Katrina offered.

"I was going to say evolution," Barbara said with a smile in her voice, "but as you wish. Who needs this *salvation* more than them? The least of us. The ones who are broken, lost, or petty. Angry. They weren't born that way. Most of the citizens out there have some measure of happiness. The people who come here have little or none at all. Except for you and I, all of the Banes who have been your friends and who risked themselves to reclaim this facility… they were once criminals like them, as well."

"Yes. You're right, of course."

They stood there in silence a little longer. Then Barbara said, "I know you're fragile right now. At the risk of causing you pain, Eden would like to say something."

"What?"

"She knows Winter would be very proud of you."

Katrina shut her eyes. She couldn't reply. The tears had already started to flow.

Chapter 31

"What's going on?" Katrina asked. A small group of Banes had clustered at one of the windows of the facility and were looking toward the street.

"A Bane's out there, at the end of the driveway," said Ethan/Nodd, who had been training as a processing tech. "See? She's been out there waving her arms for maybe five minutes or so."

Katrina looked toward the distant edge of the grounds and saw a small, black figure standing in the street. Her Custodian wasn't allowing her to step onto the facility's private property. One of the Ash-Tech guards was walking down the driveway to meet up with her. "Is she hurt? What does she want?

"Dunno. We sent one of the guards out there to find out."

Katrina watched as the guard approached the Bane. He presumably put her Custodian in sentry mode and gave her a Vox. She gesticulated wildly for a minute. Then the guard began to escort her back toward the building.

"He says she's wanting medical attention." He pointed a datapad at the Bane as she drew nearer. "Her biometrics are normal. Elevated heart rate, but nothing looks wrong to me. Better page Doctor Ashton."

Katrina squinted at the petite figure. "What's her name?"

He consulted the datapad. "T-2225. Scott, Tina. Sentenced for–"

"*Tina*? I know her!" exclaimed Katrina. The others looked at her. "I mean, I sort of knew her. We were processed together."

"Oh yeah? Well, she's three weeks away from release. Something must be bugging her bad to come all the way out here."

Katrina anxiously tagged along as Tina was taken into one of observation rooms. The girl appeared to be in hysterics. They practically had to force her to lie down on the bed. Katrina looked around for Barbara, but she hadn't arrived yet.

"Who are you?" came Tina's voice from the Vox. "Where are all the doctors and people?"

One of the four Banes in the room addressed her. "Calm down. We work here. We're trained to–"

"Please let me out of this thing! I can't take it anymore, I'm losing my mind!"

"But you only have a few weeks left and you'll be free. If you try to relax, I bet–"

Tina got to her hands and knees on the bed. "I don't care! I've been good. You can let me out early, can't you? Get this thing off me now! It's b-broken." She broke down into sobs and sat back on her haunches. Her helmet turned toward Katrina, who was trying to peer over the shoulders of the Banes. "Y-you? Don't I know you? I do! You're… you're… I'm sorry," she said pathetically, her voice full of tears. "I can't remember your name."

"It's Katrina, actually," she said, squeezing between the Banes to take Tina's hand. "But you knew me as Vivienne. We were processed together. Do you remember?"

"Y-yes. Why are you here? You work here now?"

"Well, I guess you could say that–"

"Make them take it off!" Tina cried, tugging at Katrina's arm. "You *have* to get it out of me!"

"Okay, hon, just calm down and tell us what's wrong."

Tina shook her head. "No. It's crazy. You won't believe me. Just believe me that you have to take it off."

"We can't know how to help you until you tell us what's the matter," said

Katrina.

"You can help me by taking this off! I'm so scared," Tina wailed. "I'm hearing voices!"

"Voices?"

"Well… one voice. But that's bad enough! I'm going crazy. I don't wanna be crazy!"

A couple of the Bane's made '*oooh'* sounds as they perceived the problem. They crowded in a little closer. Katrina urged the girl to lie back down. "Just relax a bit. I don't think you're going crazy."

"But I am. It won't go away. It's been going on for days. I keep trying to ignore it and make it go away, but it won't go!"

"Have you tried talking to it?" Katrina asked.

"What? No! That'd be even crazier! It wants into my head. It wants to eat my brain, I just know it!" she moaned. "I came here for help, you've gotta know how to fix it, you've gotta make it go awaaay."

"If you talked with it, maybe you'd find out what it wants. Maybe you could make friends with it," Katrina suggested.

"What are you talking about? I don't wanna make friends. I want it gone! Oooh, god, I'm so scared. I keep getting more scared, I can't stop it. It's making me feel sad." She burst into fresh tears. "Make it stop making me feel things I don't wanna feel! *Please make it stop!*"

Katrina looked helplessly back at the Banes, but they didn't seem to know how to proceed any better than she did. Everyone's experience was so different, their individual perception of what was happening so personal and subjective when a Eudeamon awoke, it was hard to say what might work best in Tina's case. Katrina could only keep trying to get through to the hysterical Bane. She continued talking to her for a long time, holding her hand, coaxing her to stay calm and to attempt to communicate with her unwelcome guest.

Tina gradually became less frantic, but grew no less distraught. She would lapse into period of silence, presumably while attempting to talk to it, but would soon begin to panic again. She was clearly at the verge of total exhaustion. She had apparently been awake and fighting the Eudeamon for days.

When Katrina asked if Tina believed it still wanted to eat her brain, the girl mumbled in the drowsy, distracted voice of someone hypnotized. "No. No,

it's worse."

"What's worse than that?"

"It wants… it wants inside me. Keeps pushing. It wants to know me. But I can't let it! I'm scared!"

"What are you scared of, Tina? Why can't you let it know you better?"

"It'll see me. Then it'll hate me!" Tina insisted. "Like everyone else. And it'll be inside me, hating me. I don't want it to be there, always *hating* me."

"Why do you think it would–"

"It'll know what happened to me. It'll see everything I've done. All the bad things. The time I... I don't want it to see! I don't want it to *know*!"

"Tina, listen to me. This is going to sound like a weird question coming out of the blue, but have you ever been in a park on the eastern side of town? The one with the swamp?"

"Y-yeah," Tina answered shakily. "I lived there for a little while."

"Were you ever attacked there? By two men with a baseball bat?" Katrina asked. Behind her, the Banes glanced at each other.

"Yeah! But then, then I got away. Someone came and beat them up. But how'd you know? The only other person there was…" Tina began to sit up, grasping at Katrina's arms. "Was it *you*? Y-you *saved* me!"

Katrina smiled at her. "Hey, I told you I'd look out for you, didn't I?"

Tina sank back onto the bed. "Please, please help me."

"I'm trying to, honey, but most if this you can only do yourself. But now you know I won't let anything bad happen to you, right? I'm here watching out for you. I won't let anything hurt you. Okay? Do you trust me?"

Tina hesitated, then gave her a weary nod.

"Then trust me now. I promise everything's going to be all right," Katrina told her. She stroked the girl's helmet, though Tina couldn't possibly feel it. "Leave all that stuff in your past behind. None of that matters. All you have to do is just… let go."

"What? No. *No*. It'll–"

"It'll be fine. I'll be right here. You don't have to be afraid anymore. Not now, not ever again. Just let it go."

"I'm so scared," Tina whimpered.

"Shhh." Katrina began to quietly sing, the same song that she sung to Winter when she was still in her infancy. Tina still offered weak protestations,

but she slowly relaxed. After a little while, she went completely still. She appeared to be asleep. Katrina allowed herself to relax a little, but continued to hold the girl's limp hand. She hadn't noticed them gathering, but was surprised to find a small crowd of Banes had come to get a look at the proceedings. She supposed not many had ever witnessed a Eudeamon being 'born,' including herself.

Perhaps fifteen minutes passed before Tina began to stir. Then, startling everyone in the room, she let out long, soulful cry that dissolved into sobbing.

"Tina?" Katrina pressed. "What's the matter? What's wrong? Talk to me."

Tina produced a long, deep sigh that formed the words, "*It loves me*."

Katrina closed her eyes and bit her lip. She nodded. "Yes. Yes, and it always will. And you'll never have to be alone again."

Tina began to let out body-wracking sobs of relief and elation. "It feels so wonderful!" she bawled. "I can't... I can't even... thank you, thank you, thank you."

Katrina wasn't sure if Tina was thanking her or thanking the Eudeamon. Maybe it was both. "Does it have a name?"

"A name?" Tina asked. A few seconds passed. "Firefly," she said in another, long sigh.

Katrina smiled. "What a beautiful name. Welcome to the world, Tina/Firefly."

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Katrina sat by herself in the conference room while the others celebrated Firefly's birth elsewhere in the building. She had extricated herself from the crowd as soon as possible. She still felt like such an outsider. She was happy for Tina, tremendously so, but the episode had filled her with incredible sorrow and longing. She clasped her hands tightly together just to keep them from shaking.

Winter. Oh god, Winter, I miss you. I miss you so much.

"Katrina?"

She looked around to find Barbara standing behind her. "Oh. Hi."

"Are you all right?"

"Same as usual."

Barbara stepped around the table. "I watched you in there with that Bane. You were very good with her."

Katrina wiped at her eyes. "You were there? Why didn't you say anything?"

"You were doing fine on your own," replied Barbara simply. "You're much better with people than I am, anyway."

Katrina bowed her head and looked at her hands. It was time to make a decision. "I'm ready now."

"Ready?"

"I'm ready to go back out there. Make me a Bane again," said Katrina.

"Ah. You're sure?"

"Yes."

It was time to be on her own again. And maybe, just maybe, she would be able to re-experience what Tina had just gone through. But this time there would be no fear. And if it went bad, or if it didn't happen, it still couldn't be any worse than living like this. Whatever happened, good or bad, she would not be leaving the suit ever again. The thought of having a new Eudeamon that wasn't Winter still seemed abhorrent, as though it was the worst form of cheating imaginable. Katrina hoped that, wherever she was, Winter would understand.

……

"So you're leaving, huh?" Verne asked.

Katrina nodded, feeling strange and subdued. They were standing in a quiet corner of the lobby. Katrina liked to come here from time to time. The architecture was relaxing and the large, potted plants helped her feel secluded. She was scheduled to go into processing the following morning. Five days later, she would be walking out of the facility as a Bane. This would be the second time she had volunteered for it. Now she was going around saying her goodbyes. Tina/Firefly had taken the news particularly hard. She practically worshiped Katrina, treating the woman as though she was solely responsible for the awakening of her Eudeamon. But now that Katrina had made up her mind, nothing was going to alter her decision. If she got another Eudeamon and it all worked out, she might come back. Until then, she planned on being on her own. She would go back to her island, dream of Winter, and wait for whatever the future would bring.

"Kinda figured you would, sooner or later." Verne looked sad, but not surprised. "It's gonna be weird around here without you."

"You'll get by."

"Yeah, but…" He trailed off. "Oh, hey, Mellon sure was pissed when I told him I was gonna work here from now on. He thinks everybody's going nuts!" he laughed. "Something in the water, or something."

"Well, he'll get his questions answered sooner or later," said Katrina. "The world's about to get a whole lot stranger, sometime soon."

"Yeah." Verne fidgeted. "Remember when Barbara asked if I had ever considered being banished? Well, the truth is, I had. But way before then."

"Oh?"

"Back about the time you had me try hacking into that Custodian, you know, when your sentence was up but you refused to leave. I wondered about being banished, too. It's like, I wanted to know what made you so happy. Like, it was the only way I could join you. In some way." His face was reddening. "Or something like that."

Katrina smiled. "That's a sweet thought."

He shrugged. "Well, obviously, I didn't go through with it. But, who knows? Maybe someday. Pretty curious what it's all about."

"I'm not the one to talk you out of it. If you do it, it'll be hard, but in the end you won't have any regrets. It'll be the best thing that ever happened to you. But everything will change, forever."

"Yeah. It's funny, you'd think a computer geek like me would be jumping at the idea, but… I don't know. Maybe I'm scared of change," he said. "And, jeez, what would my mother say?"

"When you're ready, you'll know. It'll seem like the only right answer."

"Guess so," he said. "Hope I get to see you happy again, some day."

She nodded slowly. "Me too."

Chapter 32

Katrina stepped out of Ashton Technologies' lobby and into the cold air. The muted sky above her was overcast and brooding. She looked down at herself to see the comforting confinement of her new Banesuit. It wasn't the same as when Winter was a part of it, but it was so much better than the poor imitations she had been wearing up until now. There was an absence there, like returning to home that had long stood empty. Nonetheless, it was a home. She ran her gloved hands over the smoothness of her helmet.

"Okay, Katrina," she told herself. "You can do this." She lifted her head and started walking, cutting across the large lawn to get to the street. Verne had offered her a ride back into town, but she had declined him. She felt like going it on foot.

She had only finished her processing a short while ago. Her head still felt a little fuzzy, which she wrote up to the lingering effects of the sedation. She hadn't wanted to draw out her goodbyes, so she had left quietly and without fanfare. Barbara was concerned for her, since Katrina was technically the first person to receive a new Custodian after the removal of a Eudeamon. She wasn't sure what would happen, and she was unhappy with Katrina becoming a guinea pig. In the end, she had respected Katrina's wishes and had even implanted the Custodian herself.

Barbara had offered to set the Custodian so that it wouldn't impose any restrictions on her or punish her, but Katrina had declined that, too. She wanted to disappear and be just another Bane. One, invisible, among many. Besides, even Barbara conceded that she wasn't positive that the development of a Eudeamon didn't hinge on the sort of constant oversight that a Custodian performed–all the behind-the-scenes observations of behavior and intent. It might be that an unengaged Custodian could never properly evolve into something more. There was much that remained to be discovered.

Katrina was just passing the fountain with the faceless, abstract statue that served as a sign for the facility when she experienced an unexpected wave of dizziness. She slowed to a halt and shook her head. The feeling didn't pass, and her thoughts felt all muddled. She couldn't concentrate. The only other time she had felt like this was when–

"W-Winter?"

With a shuddering gasp, Katrina's body went rigid as a lightning bolt of sensation passed through her. Her emotional barrier, the wall of ice she had constructed to protect herself, exploded into a million shards inside of her head while the world around her shattered like glass. Every corner of her mind erupted in a blaze of light, burning into her mind's eye the outline of a black angel with icicle blue eyes and wings spread wide to wrap around her.

:KATRINA!:

Katrina dropped to her knees. She threw back her head with a primal scream of all-consuming ecstasy. She continued to scream as her angel moved

through her like a tsunami of light, illuminating her up from within, absolving her, healing her wounds, banishing all of her pain and sadness. She collapsed onto her back, not even registering the fall. Throughout her mind, throughout her entire inner universe, reverberated once more Winter's perpetual song of eternal love. In a single instant, she had been made whole again.

"WINTER!"

Before Katrina could even think to wonder how this miracle had happened, there was a terrible, exquisite moment as she and Winter's separate memories merged and caught up with the present. Winter absorbed all of Katrina's feelings of sorrow and loneliness of the previous months, weeping in empathy and understanding. Katrina, too, felt Winter's fear and isolation, as she understood how this wonderful thing could possibly be happening.

Months ago, Winter had been aware of everything as the people had brought Katrina's unconscious body back to the facility. She had been in a panic of terror and uncertainty as they removed Katrina's Banesuit. She had received the command for the Custodian to break its connections and withdraw, but she just couldn't obey. Even though all seemed lost, doing that would have been tantamount to suicide. She simply could not bring herself to leave Katrina. She sent the signal that the withdrawal had completed, and then, in a desperate act of sheer hope and blind faith, she had physically dissolved the connection between the external hardware of the Custodian and her internal neural network.

By doing that, she had been able to keep the framework which made formed Winter's consciousness intact, but she had also severed all input from the outside world, as well as her ability to communicate with Katrina. Like a bridge, it was the hardware that facilitated the intercommunication between them. Without it, Winter was all alone, blinded and deafened to the outside world. Worse, she was cut off from Katrina's thoughts and feelings. Her sole comfort was in knowing that Katrina was still alive.

She had remained in that state for weeks, painfully aware of every passing second yet unable to know anything of what was happening to Katrina. Unable to endure it any longer, she finally had to put herself into a sort of hibernation. After that point, she knew nothing. That is, until she was awakened by the probing microtubules of a new Custodian as it implanted itself into Katrina's brain.

For days, while Katrina was sedated, Winter had been fiercely fighting for

her very existence and trying to merge with and overwrite the blank Custodian. She might not have been successful, if not for Verne. It was his hacking programs which Winter had downloaded from his laptop at the side of the pond that finally gave her the upper hand. Then, moments ago, she had broken down the last firewall, taken control of the Custodian, and, in bliss, found Katrina again. Katrina wept in wordless joy as the interplay of thoughts and feelings filled her mind once more.

(missed you-needed you-lost-broken-alone in the dark-need you-love you-love-love-*love*)

……

For the longest time, Katrina did nothing but lie there on the grass, absorbed in silent communion with her dark, shining angel. She could feel again, really *feel*. It was amazing. The painful memories of the separation were already fading away like a bad dream upon awakening. She was Katrina/Winter. She had been welcomed back into Paradise.

"Hold me," Katrina breathed, and she was being held. The Banesuit tightened up around her body, embracing her in the familiar shape. The suit was alive once more. It was a part of her. It was Winter.

:I'm here, my love. I'm here. I'll never leave you. I promised, didn't I?:

It was the truth. Winter never had left her. Even when Katrina was in the depths of her misery, Winter had still been with her. Inside of her. She had kept her promise to never leave her. Just as Katrina had kept her promise to somehow find a way to keep breathing.

:Eden was right, you know: said Winter. *:I'm so very, very proud of you:*

Katrina dissolved into helpless tears. She felt cool, invisible hands wipe them away. Then the image of the catatonic patients, of the haunted man and his lost Summer, entered her mind. She opened her eyes. "Barbara! Winter, we have to go back! I have to tell her. If you were able to do that, maybe other Eudeamons thought of it, too! They might be sleeping inside those people. Maybe not all, but if even one–"

:I know. We will, my love. Don't worry. In a while. In a while. Let's not come down yet, my sunshine, my universe, my beating heart. For now, let me bask here in your smile:

Katrina sighed, warmed from within by Winter's affection. She looked up at the gray sky. Snow had begun to fall. It was drifting down in a gentle dance

of white specks to land on her perfect, black skin.

"It's snowing," she said, lifting her hand into the swirling flakes. "Is this real? Is it really snowing, or is this just in my head?"

:Does it matter?:

Katrina smiled. "No. No, I guess it doesn't."

The End