Bart woke slowly, he felt drained, as if his limbs could no longer move under their own power. He tensed all his muscles, stretching and that broke the hold that sleep had on him somewhat. Groggily, he reached up to rub his eyes.

SMACK!

“Ow,” he groaned, something had just hit him in the face.

He looked down at his left arm, and saw that his wrist was encased in a blue fiberglass cast. Yep, that would do it. So he was in hospital then? A clock was ticking. How had he broken his arm? It seemed like something he should be able to remember. He glanced over at the door.

BANG!

Black shapes were coming straight at him. Pure unadulterated terror shot his heart full of adrenalin to the point that he thought it would explode, he gasped in air like a fish, the clock froze – the shapes didn’t. He scrabbled back away from the door, but got his feet tangled in the sheets and fell to the floor. He fell onto his broken wrist and, despite the cast, a bolt of pain shot up his arm.

He looked back at the door. The shapes were gone.

Where they really there to begin with? He sobbed and drew his knees in to his chest. What was happening to him? Why couldn’t he remember?

-x-

Celia Reilly lay in her bed, emerald green eyes open, searching. In the darkness she found the ‘light’ button on her watch and pressed it, illuminating her face in a sickly green glow. The digits read ‘01:44’. She sighed quietly and stuck her arm under the pillow to hide the glowing watch face. For the hundredth time that night she held her breath for a couple seconds, straining her hearing, trying to hear her mother’s footsteps. Her mother had started to check on her at night – at odd hours, which Celia supposed was understandable, but nonetheless troublesome. It wasn’t that her mother was would be angry, far from it. If she saw that Celia was awake, she would be worried about her, and ask if she was alright.

What a stupid question, of course she wasn’t alright, her father was dead! Tomorrow they were going to put him in a hole in the ground. She heard nothing, and slowly exhaled. Just another four and a half hours until she could ‘reasonably’ get up. Any sooner and her mother would worry that she wasn’t sleeping properly.

There wasn’t much Celia could do to help her mother, but if she could just keep her from worrying, be there for her when she needed consolation, maybe she could start to make up for the fact that she was responsible for her father’s death.

Celia knew it was her fault, the only reason he was in that base was that he wanted to spend more time with her. He’d given up his pilot wings to be a glorified security guard – all because of her selfishness. She’d begged him not to re-deploy, at the time she said it was too dangerous, that she worried about him – but that was just an excuse really. Mostly she just wanted him back for her own selfish reasons. Now he was dead, and she could never forgive herself.

-x-

Marge walked into a gas station, instead of her usual hairstyle she wore her hair down around her shoulders, she was far less conspicuous that way. If you looked closely you could see that there were a few strands of grey interspersed with the blue – she hadn’t had a chance to get it coloured in a while.

Behind the counter she could see a wanted poster of herself. This would panic most people, but it was far from the first time for Marge. She sighed and decided to risk it. She was running low on supplies. She picked a few items off the shelves and brought them to the counter. Don’t worry, she told herself, there’s no way he’ll recognise me like this, just pay for the items and get out.

The clerk started scanning the items, before cocking his head to one side.

“Hey,” he questioned, pointing “ain’t that you on that there wanted poster?”

Drat, thought Marge. She focused for a second, she hated doing this, and looked the clerk straight in the eyes.

“I’m not the woman you’re looking for,” said Marge, pain throbbing in her temples.

“On second thought,” said the clerk, slightly dazed, “you’re not the one I’m looking for…”

Marge ignored the pain as best she could.

“You saw that woman two days ago,” said Marge, “traveling East.”

“You know what, I seen that woman couple days back,” responded the clerk, “goin’ East.”

“After completing this transaction you’re going to erase the surveillance tapes for the last hour, you remember nothing from this conversation,” instructed Marge, a trickle of blood ran from her nose, and she dabbed it away with a Kleenex.

The clerk blinked. Then looked at her with confusion.

“Sorry ‘bout that,” said the clerk, “musta’ spaced out there for a second. Will that be all?”

“Yeah thanks,” said Marge, she had a massive headache now.

Maggie could sense something was wrong and she looked at Marge with concern.

-x-

“What the hell Tolman?” yelled the director, furious, “you said you could control this girl, but instead you’ve turned her into a mindless killing machine like your SRT pets.”

“I seriously doubt she meant to kill him,” said John, derisively, “she just doesn’t know her own strength. Psychology isn’t an exact science.”

“Not an exact science – for god sakes a man is dead!” Yelled the Director, “My job is to ensure the safety of the United States from these freaks – the only reason she’s still alive is your insistence that she’s more valuable to us this way. Now that she’s a murderer I’ll have to reconsider my decision.”

“She didn’t mean it. I distinctly heard her say that.” Replied John coolly, “besides, she could have wiped out all your men in that hallway, but she decided not to. Just don’t kill her yet. We still have much to learn.”

“Sometimes I wonder about you Tolman, how can you feel nothing for a man killed right in front of you? He had a family. You can keep your precious test subject,” the Director spat, “but from now on her guards will be SRT’s with full tactical load-outs.”

-x-

Lisa sat in her cell – and this time it really was a cell, bare concrete walls with a single narrow bunk protruding from the wall. There were no bars, the door was solid metal. Lisa sat on the bunk and stared at the wall. To others it might look like she was deep in thought, but in fact that was what she was trying desperately to avoid. Her thoughts frightened her, her dreams were terrifying but so long as she could keep her focus, exclude everything but the wall, she could survive.

It was ridiculous. All she wanted was to be left alone! Was that so hard? It’s not like she ever wanted to hurt someone. That was a lie, she admitted to herself, but nonetheless, she’d never act on it. Would have never acted on it, she corrected.

“Murderer.” Said Francine

Lisa looked up in shock for a second, then sighed, resting her head back against the wall.

“You’re not really here,” Lisa stated, “I’m hallucinating again.”

Francine grinned, teasing.

“Maybe you’re going crazy?” she jabbed, whispering in Lisa’s ear.

“Shut up!” yelled Lisa

“Or what,” she teased, “you’ll kill me too? Go on, you know you want to, killer!”

“I’m not afraid of you anymore,” Lisa stated, “I’ve faced dozens of soldiers, you’re nothing but a petty schoolyard bully.”

“Yeah, right, that’s why you subconscious dragged me up to torment you.” whispered Francine, displaying a wit her original sorely lacked “Still I gotta admit, you did a nice job on that soldier, ripped his guts right out. What a fool he was, trying to help you. Pathetic humans, not worthy to kneel upon the ground we tread.”

“It was an accident!” yelled Lisa clenching her fists, “I’m still human!”

“We’re better than human,” whispered Francine, “they’re weak and arrogant, they think they can do whatever they want to us, to our family, to our country – we’ll show them the error of their ways.”

“I would never…” Lisa began

“Bull. You killed that guard then you immediately turned around and tried to kill again – if your powers were working you would have killed them *all*.” Francine was incessant, “Don’t feel bad – you got your first taste of blood, *and you liked it.*”

With that she disappeared smiling like a Cheshire cat.

-x-

Bart picked himself up off the floor, and looked around the room. It looked almost like a hotel, there was a single bed, a desk with a laptop, and, off on the right, an open door leading to an ensuite bathroom. What was notable for its absence was a window. He could see a camera on the wall, it was boxy and expensive looking.

He walked over to the door and tried the handle. Nothing.

“Ah,” said a voice, “I see you’re awake.”

Bart looked at the camera and rolled his eyes.

“Really,” he said, “you’re going to start with that? Cliché much?”

“We can do this the easy way,” said the voice, “Or the hard way.”

“Are you kidding me?” Laughed Bart, “Wow, you’re so ‘mysterious’.”

“Fine, I’ll start,” said Bart, “I’m Bart Simpson, who the hell are you?”

There was a pause for a second as Bart glared at the camera.

“We are the Paranormal Security Agency,” said the voice, “and you are being held on suspicion of terrorism under section 12B of the Patriot Act.”

Paranormal Security Agency, thought Bart. Why did that sound familiar?

Wait, Paranormal Security Agency, P S… A. Something clicked in his head, the PSA. They were the ones that took Lisa! Then they ran away, split up, then… he woke up here. Memories were still missing.

“You bastards!” Yelled Bart, “How did I get here, what did you do with my sister?”

His fists clenched, his heart started beating a little faster. The clock on the wall started to tick slower.

“Oh,” droned the voice, painfully slow, and almost inaudibly low, “do we have your attention now? Yes, we have your sister. Maybe if you co-operate with us we’ll let you see her.”

-x-

There was a click and the door started to open, Lisa’s heart beat so hard her chest hurt, her fists clenched involuntarily. She suppressed the reaction as much as possible. She sat with her knees up on the bunk, her back against the cold concrete wall.

A fully armoured SRT stepped into the room, the strange material of his armour absorbing the light, making him look like a silhouette, despite being lit from the front. Her eyes widened involuntarily.

“So, I guess you’re here to kill me,” said Lisa, she started calmly, but her voice faltered over the word ‘kill’. Her body betrayed her, she couldn’t stop shivering, shedding the excess adrenalin in her system. Her skin felt cold.

The soldier remained silent for what felt like an eternity. Of course he would say nothing, thought Lisa. She was used to their mind games, never speaking, never showing their humanity, hiding behind their reflective visors as if their suits could possibly protect them if she chose to attack.

“Not today,” he said finally, his voice sounding slightly mechanical from his helmet speakers.

“Y-you can talk?” Lisa questioned, surprised.

“Of course I can,” replied the commando, “did you think I was a robot?”

Lisa looked the commando over – his entire body was covered in what appeared to be some sort of powered armour, there were tiny whirring noises whenever he moved (from servo motors, she surmised). He could easily be a robot.

“No, I mean you can talk to me,” she clarified, “the other guards weren’t allowed – but one of them did when- when I…”

She trailed off, unable to finish the sentence, burying her face in her hands.

“I have no orders not to talk to you,” he answered, “I determined that it would be beneficial to the mission to know your state of mind.”

He was certainly doing nothing to dissuade her supposed fear that he was a robot.

“And what is your mission?” She asked, not lifting her gaze.

“My mission is to protect you,” he answered immediately, “and to ensure your co-operation with senior base personnel.”

His mission is to protect me? Thought Lisa, who would order something like that? John? It must be him! Unless this guard is lying to me… Wait a minute, what if co-operating would harm her?

“And if the two conflict?” She questioned.

“Then I am to seek further instruction.” He responded swiftly.

“From whom?” she pressed.

“From Dr Tolman.” He replied.

“Why him?” she asked, “What is his position within the PSA?”

Lisa found that rather odd – why would Tollman, a scientist, have control of this soldier? It seemed to contradict some of the things he’d been saying… Unless this guard is just trying to mess with me, she though bitterly.

“Dr Tolman is Chief Science Officer and Commander of Special Operations,” the commando answered again, surprisingly forthcoming, “as a member of the Special Retrieval Team he is my direct superior – thought he carries no military rank.”

“But you are military?” she probed.

“No, technically I’m a PSA Special Agent.” He responded freely.

“… why are you telling me all this?” asked Lisa, deeply confused.

“It would make my job a lot easier if we could trust eachother,” he said, “If I’m honest with you I hope you can be honest with me.”

“How can I trust you?” she said, “You’re one of them.”

“You can trust me to carry out my mission,” he answered, “nothing more, nothing less – there’s nothing in my mission that prevents me from speaking with you in confidence.”

“Uh yeah, right, you don’t NEED to tell them what I’ve said – they can HEAR us.” She said, pointing at a camera, “I may be eight, but I’m not stupid. You can leave now.”

“My orders are to keep you safe, not to do as you say,” he responded blankly, “besides, you think I haven’t put any thought into this? Here.”

He touched a button on his chest plate and a tiny armoured compartment popped out. He took out a black cylinder and offered it to Lisa.

“It’s an ear piece.” He explained.

Lisa looked at it hesitantly, but eventually picked it up and put it into her ear.

Next he produced a curved strip of plastic. Lisa had no idea what this one was.

“It’s a throat mike,” he instructed, “it conducts vibrations directly from your voicebox, so you don’t actually have to talk out loud. Just make sure to cover your mouth, or they can read your lips.”

Lisa had no idea how to put it on, but eventually the commando applied it for her. It wrapped around the neck, just tight enough to be slightly uncomfortable.

“Hello Lisa,” he said through the earpiece, “my name’s Kyle.”

-x-

“You mind telling me what the hell that was?” demanded Dr Tolman, “I never ordered you to speak with her.”

“Sir, with respect, you didn’t order me not to,” Responded Kyle, “I w—“

“I didn’t order you not to jump of a cliff,” Tolman cut him off, “yet somehow you manage to avoid that.”

“Sir,” Replied Kyle, “I would jump off a cliff if I thought it would help achieve the mission objective sir.”

“Captain, are you making a joke?” Asked Tolman, deathly serious.

“Sir,” Snapped Kyle, “no, sir.”

“Explain yourself.” Ordered Tolman.

“Sir, when analysing the mission objectives I determined that communication was beneficial,” said Kyle, “sir.”

“Captain,” asked Tolman, “what do you remember of your career before joining PSA-1?”

“To be honest,” Kyle admitted, “not much, although there is this one incident-“

“I see,” said Tolman, “interesting.”

-x-

*2 Months Later*

Celia Reilly sat on her bed with an Xbox controller. She held it with the light but firm grip of an experienced player, thumbs working in perfect harmony to create smooth fluid motions on the screen. Her brown hair, which she normally kept short, had grown most of the way down her neck. On any given day she could have gotten it cut, but she never did. It hadn’t been cut since her father’s death. Every day her routine was the same.

She got up at seven, went for a run, got changed, went to school for six hours, came straight back and played video games until she fell asleep. She was a smart kid and she got good grades, but school had never really interested her. Lately though she flat out despised it. She usually hung around with a group of kids whose parents were also in the Air Force. They were very supportive once they heard about her father, but Celia hated it. She didn’t want to be treated delicately, she didn’t want sympathy, she just wanted everything back the way it was!

She was completing Halo 3 on legendary for the fifth time that week, the games helped. While she was playing she could be so totally immersed that she wouldn’t think about anything else. It wasn’t that she was pressing the buttons and watching the screen; she could feel the grass crunch beneath ‘her’ feet, feel the kick of battle rifle into ‘her’ shoulder as it delivered a three round burst into grunt’s head.

*Celia saw a brute off to the left. She spun and fired a quick double tap, first knocking its helmet off; then evacuating its brain through the back of its head. To her right was a trench that she knew from experience contained two heavy turrets, shield bearing jackals, and a brute captain. She was not concerned.*

*Priming a plasma grenade she leapt into the fray. Sticking the grenade to the right-hand turret she spun and shot the gunner out of the left one before it detonated, catching a jackal in the blast radius. She switched to frag grenades as she expertly shot another jackal through the gap it its shield, following up with a quick headshot to seal the deal. She tossed the frag behind the shield line of the other three jackals. They just had time to notice the grenade and grunt in surprise before they were thrown forward by the blast, accompanied with sprays of their own purple blood.*

*That only left the Captain. The brute fired red bolts from its plasma rifle as it charged. The bolts glanced of Celia’s energy shielding, and Celia lined up the shot, but there was no time to perform the necessary double tap to take down the charging ape. Fine with me, thought Celia. She dug in her toes and leapt forward, returning the charge. As they clashed, Celia punched it in the face with her armoured gauntlet, and it took a step back. Seizing the opportunity she struck again and again, never leaving time for it to recover until it finally slumped to the ground, dead.*

*She proceeded through the door into the bunker, when to her surprise a grunt suddenly appeared, a plasma grenade stuck to each hand. Kamikaze grunt. She tried to back out of the door, but missed by an inch and hit the doorframe. The grenades detonated, incinerating the grunt, and Celia along with it.*

This trust Celia quite rudely back into the real world.

“Gaaaah!” she exclaimed, “Stupid bloody suicide grunts! Every fricken time!”

She reloaded from the checkpoint and played through again. This time shooting the grunt in time, then twice more for good measure.

-x-

“You see,” explained the teacher, “if we take the y-axis to be…”

Celia was pretending to listen, but her thoughts were elsewhere. She looked around the classroom and discovered, unsurprisingly, that most other students were doing the same. A group of popular girls at the back of the class were not-so-surreptitiously texting on their phones, while a couple guys were foolishly playing five-finger-skillet with half a pair of scissors. A couple nerds at the front of the class were actually taking notes.

Above the whiteboard were four small holes where a cross had used to be, before the laws regarding religious icons had changed. She rested her head in one hand, gazing blankly at the blackboard.

Celia often wondered about God. Sure, she knew her science, she didn’t think for a second that God would be sitting up on a cloud somewhere – but where in the bible did it say that he would be? God had to be extra-dimensional, somehow outside time and space, the unmoved mover. She was stuck in a paradox however – if god was all-powerful, why did people credit him with everything good, and not blame him for anything bad? When she was younger she’d been kicked out of Sunday school for asking too many questions... well that wasn’t really fair, really they had ‘encouraged her to join the congregation’ but it amounted to the same thing. She just couldn’t understand how something so important didn’t need to be analysed further. That was one of the reasons her father said she shouldn’t join the military; she had to question everything.

Why did her father have to die? Where was God then? She had prayed for his safety every night. If God were listening he would have to have ignored her. She sighed and allowed her head to slide slowly down her arm until her cheek was resting on the cool plastic of her desk. It was all part of God’s great plan, she though glumly… but what if God’s plan isn’t in my best interests? What if God is evil, what if-

“Celia,” questioned a voice, “Celia, are you paying attention, or daydreaming about F16’s again?”

The class laughed, and looked over at her, her ears burned red for a second as she picked up her head off the table. You know what, she thought to herself, fuck it. She stood up at her desk and glared straight the teacher.

“No, sir,” said Celia, “I am not paying attention. You were just droning on and on about linear motion equations and I’m afraid I found it so boring that my brain shut itself down to protect me from having to listen to further inanity.”

“I…” the teacher stammered.

“Yes,” interrupted Celia, “that’s just the kind of inarticulate response I would expect from someone who’s trying to teach us how to count the grid squares under a curve.”

“In order to answer your pointless question and calculate the distance travelled by a bullet fired straight up, in a vacuum, in a uniform gravitational field,” She continued, “I would perform a double integration of the acceleration due to gravity, taking into account the bullet’s initial velocity as the first constant. The acceleration due to gravity is minus nine point eight meters per second per second, therefore the velocity of the bullet at any given time is minus nine point eight tee, plus the first constant which in the example you have on the board is two hundred meters per second. Therefore the position of the bullet is minus four point nine tee squared plus two hundred tee plus the second constant, which in this case is zero because the bullet is fired from the ground. When the bullet reaches the peak of its trajectory its velocity will be zero. By manipulating the velocity equation we can see that this will happen at approximately tee plus twenty seconds. Subbing this into the displacement equation we can see that the maximum height reached by the bullet would be approximately two kilometres.”

“Alright now that’s quite…” the teacher tried to cut her off.

“Oh, is that enough?” she asked, sarcastically, “This subject is the lamest excuse for education that I’ve ever seen, and I find it insulting that you would expect me to pay attention to such worthless crap. In addition, I’m going to report you to the school board for verbally harassing me. You are an inept teacher and a miserable little man.”

“Don’t you think you’re blowing things a little out of proportion?” asked the teacher, “I can understand things might be a bit tough for you right now.”

“Fuck.” Said Celia, pointing, “You.”

The other students stared in amazement as she neatly slid her chair back under her desk, placed her books into her bag, and calmly walked out of the room.

Celia walked down the hall, which was, of course, abnormally silent given that class was in session. She looked calm on the surface, but blood was pounding in her ears and she felt sick to her stomach.

“Hall pass?” asked a hapless seventh grade hall monitor.

“Go fuck yourself.” She replied shortly.

“I’m going to have to report y…” The hall monitor began.

“If you don’t piss off,” threatened Celia, “you can report me for punching you in the face.”

Although he was a year her junior, the monitor was at least a couple inches taller than Celia.

“As if,” laughed the monitor, “you’re a girl, and I know karate.”

Celia’s open palm slammed directly into his sternum and the poor student collapsed to the floor, gasping for breath.

“Karate that you sexist prick.” She muttered, stepping over him.

As soon as she struck she knew it was wrong, that she had crossed the line. The other student would be fine of course – he was just winded, maybe a bit bruised. He hadn’t been the aggressor though – she had struck first. Her eyes burned with unshed tears. What would father think of me now? She thought bitterly.

She managed to hold back her tears until she reached the bathroom. Her vision blurred as hot tears ran down her face. She turned on the tap and splashed water in her face. Looking up at her reflection she was disgusted. Untidy hair draped across her face, crying like a child. Damnit she was better than that. She took the scissors from her bag and cut off her fringe, violently at first, but getting more methodical as she worked her way to the back, leaving about two inches, just enough to cover her ears. It took her fifteen minutes to finish, and by that time she was calm.

Her course of action was clear. She straightened her clothing, and left the bathroom. She walked directly to the school office. She saw the receptionist, who was mildly surprised to see her. She informed the receptionist that she needed to speak to the principal as soon as possible, and was told to go straight in.

“Miss Reilly?” enquired the principal, “I’m surprised to see you here, is something the matter?”

“Sir,” stated Celia, “I have verbally abused and sworn at a teacher, left class without permission and assaulted a younger student without provocation. I will accept whatever punishment you see fit.”

“I see.” He intoned gravely, “Yes, I had just heard about the fight, you weren’t mentioned specifically.”

“It wasn’t a fight sir,” corrected Celia, “he didn’t fight back, it was just me.”

“And you just attacked him for no apparent reason?” he asked, “I find that hard to believe.”

“I was angry.” She stated simply.

“Because of something he said?” he asked.

“No, I was angry before that,” she replied, “he just happened to be there.”

The principle looked down at his desk, rearranging some papers.

“Seeing as this was your first offence under normal circumstances you would receive a three day suspension,” he informed, “but given recent events I think I can make an exception – unless of course the boy wants to press matters.”

“I don’t want special treatment,” said Celia, “just give me the suspension.”

“No,” he replied sternly, “I think you would benefit more from a session with the school counselor.”

“I disagree.” She said firmly

“Too bad,” said the Principal, “rather than suspending you I am scheduling you for three mandatory sessions with the counselor, over the next two weeks.”

“Fine,” acknowledged Celia, dejectedly, “but my mother doesn’t hear a word of this. You understand? She has enough to deal with.”

“Alright.”

-x-

“Now Lisa, you have to understand,” said Tolman, “if you can’t participate in these experiments you are of no use to them – they’ll kill you.”

Lisa was starting to doubt Tolman, he was always talking about ‘they’, but he never said who ‘they’ were. Every experiment they’d tried on her had failed – it seemed like she had completely lost her powers. Despite this, every test came back negative; there was nothing physiologically different now from when she had arrived. Tolman thought the problem was psychosomatic, in other words – she was sub-consciously preventing herself from accessing her powers.

“But I can’t do it!” pleaded Lisa, “My powers aren’t working!”

As much as she was beginning to doubt Tolman, she was under no illusions that he was bluffing about them killing her. Kyle had told her as much - and quite chillingly revealed that he would probably be the one to get the order.

“I know, I’m going to try and help you with that.” Said Tolman, “We’ve noticed that your power often manifests itself when you are angry, or in pain. These electrodes will administer an electric shock – hopefully inducing a pyrokinetic episode.”

She didn’t really want to help them, but she did want to stay alive – she wanted this to work as much as they did.

“O-ok,” Lisa whimpered.

-x-

Kyle watched as electrodes were strapped to Lisa’s arms. His mission was to protect her, and to ensure her co-operation. How could he complete his mission? What was the definition of ‘protect’, did pain count, psychological trauma, or just physical injury? He should do nothing, he decided, that was the best way to fulfill both objectives.

“Start it at fifty joules,” ordered Tolman, “Lisa, I want you to concentrate on that tray of woodchips.”

A technician flicked a switch on a panel. A buzzing sound could be heard, Lisa’s arm went rigid and she gritted her teeth in pain as tears gathered in her eyes. It made Kyle uneasy for some reason, probably due to his conflicting objectives, he reasoned. The woodchips remained unsinged.

“All right then,” said John, “let’s try something a little more powerful. One fifty joules. You okay Lisa?”

“It hurts,” she whimpered, “please, can we stop?”

“Hang in there,” he comforted, “we’ll stop as soon as we get a result.”

The tech, adjusted a dial and flipped the switch again. This time Lisa screamed out loud. Kyle remembered another girl, blond hair, blue eyes. She was screaming too. Who was she? A bead of sweat rolled down his forehead, stinging his eye and he adjusted his suit’s climate control. What was wrong with him? Why couldn’t he focus on the mission? Should he be protecting Lisa, is that what this meant?

The technician looked a little rattled, though Kyle was surprised to note that John showed almost no reaction. Lisa was crying now, she said nothing.

“Three hundred joules,” instructed John.

“Are you sure?” asked the technician, “That could kill her!”

“Just do it,” John ordered, “she’ll be fine.”

The technician sighed and shook his head, before adjusting the dial and flicking the switch once more. The entire right side of Lisa’s body convulsed and she fell to the floor. She would have screamed but her jaw was clenched shut, and her diaphragm frozen.

When the current was turned off she just sobbed quietly. John finished writing on a clipboard, paying her no attention.

“Take her back to her cell,” said John, dismissively, “she’s useless to us now, we’ll just have to try again with her brother.”

A space-man approached to help Lisa to her feet. Lisa waved him off and stood up on her own. She ripped the electrodes from her arm, revealing red circles where they had burned her skin. She was glaring at John.

“I thought you were my friend!” she yelled, “But you just wanted to study me! Why? What’s your problem?!”

“Response to anger,” muttered John, writing the clipboard, “negative. Why is she still here? Take her to her cell.”

Lisa complied with the guard, walking to the door on her own. Mid-stride she collapsed.

Kyle was instantly by her side. He turned her onto her back and placed a finger onto her chest, his gauntlet reading the electrical impulses from her skin.

“She’s got no pulse,” informed Kyle, “the electrical shocks must have overtaxed her heart.”

He proceeded to remove a pair of defibrillator pads from the chest of his armour and apply them to her chest.

“Get a medical team in here.” Kyle ordered.

“That won’t be necessary,” ordered John, “leave her be, just get someone to prep the OR for an autopsy – we were going to do one anyway.”

Behind the visor, Kyle’s face was twisted in agony. The mission! He couldn’t help her or she wouldn’t be co-operating, but he couldn’t not help her, he had to protect her. He struggled to hold back a wave of nausea and closed his eyes. He had to protect, but must obey senior personnel, can’t, but have to, no, but-

His eyes snapped open, suddenly his choice was clear. Protect Lisa, ensure her co-operation. She couldn’t co-operate if she was dead, nor would letting her die count as protecting her.

“I’m afraid I can’t do that John.” said Kyle calmly. He activated the de-fibrillator pads and Lisa’s body convulsed.

“Stop them.” John commanded.

The space man guards approached, brandishing their P90’s. Cobra quick, Kyle drew his pistol and shot them both in the head without looking up. John ran out of the room. More security would be on their way, Kyle knew, but for now he had to save Lisa. He shocked her again, and to his relief her heart re-started. She was still unconscious, but they had to move now. He took a shot of ephedrine from his chest pack and injected her with half of it.

Two seconds later she responded, she sat bolt upright and yelled out, flailing her arms wildly. Kyle grabbed her wrists, preventing her from breaking her hands on his armour.

“Don’t worry,” ordered Kyle “I’m getting you out of here. Keep low, stay behind me.”

With that Kyle raised his P90 and opened the door. He swept the corridor, but there found no-one.

“Clear,” he called out, “stay close.”

They moved up the corridor until they came to a door marked ‘armoury’. Thankfully his code still worked. Once inside he swapped his P90 for an M240 SAW (light machine gun), clipping two extra ammo boxes to his belt. He then took a Barret .50 calibre anti-tank rifle and four clips of armour piercing rounds. He attached the weapon to his back plate. He strapped two MP5’s to his thigh plates and took some additional grenades to supplement his tactical supply. For a normal soldier this would be far too many weapons to reasonably carry, but with his power armour they may as well have been feathers.

Turning to Lisa, he gave her a flak-jacket, though it was far too big and went down past her knees, and pushed a helmet onto her head. Lisa looked up at him questioningly.

“Ok, it’s going to be scary out there. People are going to shoot at us,” explained Kyle, “but I will get you out of here safely. I just need you to stay calm and follow me.”

He took a 9mm handgun out of a box and offered it to Lisa.

“Have you ever fired a gun before?” asked Kyle.

“I’m eight!” exclaimed Lisa, looking at the gun as if it were poisoned, “who in their right mind would give me a gun?”

“It’s simple,” said Kyle, miming firing the gun at the wall, with his finger outside the trigger guard, “point, exhale, and squeeze. Just don’t point it at yourself, or at me.”

“I’m not going to shoot anyone!” said Lisa indignantly.

“Suit yourself,” shrugged Kyle, putting the gun back in its box, “it won’t stop them from shooting you.”

Without warning the armoury door slid open. Kyle brought his M240 to bear, and reduced the four soldiers beyond into bullet riddled corpses. These weren’t spacemen, they were in standard combat uniforms. At this range their Kevlar vests did nothing against the high velocity rounds.

“Come on,” said Kyle, “there’s more where they came from, we have to get moving.”

Lisa seemed to be frozen in shock.

“Y-you killed them.” She murmured.

“Yes and if we don’t get out of here we’ll be joining them,” said Kyle impatiently, wielding the enormous gun one handed as he pulled Lisa with the other hand.

They continued down the corridor, staying close to the wall, but not too close, so as to avoid the majority of ricochets, which Kyle knew would deflect almost parallel to the wall. Kyle was in his element now. This was exactly the type of operation he was trained for, extraction of an asset from a heavily guarded facility, hence ‘Special Retrieval Team’.

As they approached an intersection, Kyle’s hardware-enhanced hearing picked up a couple of soft ‘clicks’. He didn’t need the suit’s analysis software to tell him that it was the sound of the safety being switched off on an M16. An ambush. He motioned for Lisa to stay where she was, using a flat palm, rather than the traditional military signal. He then put his elbow up to his face, telling her to cover her eyes.

Kyle pulled the pin on a flashbang grenade, and held it for a couple seconds, before tossing it into the air. He ran after it, there was no need to shield himself from the blast; his visor would polarise to protect him. It detonated in mid-air, a split second before he entered the ambush. He saw six soldiers, three on each side. With an MP5 in each hand he fired three shots with each, his armour system compensating for the recoil. By the time the first bullet casing hit the ground, it was over. The other five cases followed ringing like tiny bells as they struck the hard concrete floor.

-x-

Lisa had her eyes covered with the crook of her elbow as the flash-bang detonated; she hadn’t thought to cover her ears.

It was so loud that it wasn’t so much a sound as much as a sudden, intense pain stabbing into her ears. She could actually feel the pressure wave on her skin! Her ears rang so loudly that the ringing itself was deafening. What the hell was going on? She kept her eyes closed, just in case.

A hand touched her shoulder and she tore her eyes open, it was Kyle. He was probably saying something, but she couldn’t hear anything so she just nodded and followed him. Then she spotted the bodies laying on the floor, each with a bullet hole near the center of the head.

-x-

Their path was blocked, this time by another SRT. Kyle immediately grabbed Lisa by the collar and pressed her into cover behind one of the support beams that encircled the corridor. He faced down the SRT, looking like a mirror image. What words passed between them Lisa would never know, but she could have sworn she saw Kyle’s chin drop ever so slightly, in sadness.

-x-

“Kyle!” Exclaimed the SRT over radio, “What have you done? You have betrayed us all!”

“I have no choice but to execute the mission,” Kyle explained, remorsefully, “as you well understand, Mathew.”

“That can’t be!” Mathew yelled, “Who would order such a mission?”

“Dr Tolman,” Kyle said with disgust, “he ordered me to protect Lisa, then tried to kill her.”

“Damn him!” Mathew cursed, “He ordered me to kill Lisa. Are there no loopholes in your orders?”

“None.” Kyle shook his head, “They are quite clear.”

-x-

Kyle was the first to pull the trigger. A spray of bullets emanated from his M240, only to ‘ping’ off his opponent’s armour with seemingly no effect. For his part Mathew dashed at a forty-five degree angle to Kyle, firing his woefully inadequate P90 the 9mm rounds, specifically designed to avoid over-penetration, barely scratched the titanium plates of Kyle’s armour.

Kyle mirrored his opponent’s move, running on the parallel 45. As they neared close combat range Kyle saw his opponent bend his knees in preparation for at tackle, with inhuman speed Kyle swung his foot upwards, connecting with Mathew’s chin. His head stopped dead while his lower body continued with momentum, laying him out flat on his back. Kyle brought his foot down on his neck pinning him to the floor. Mathew grabbed his pistol and raised it to point at Lisa but Kyle was too fast. He stomped on Mathew’s hand, the shots went low and Lisa took them in her vest. Throwing aside his M240, Kyle grabbed the .50 calibre rifle from his magnetic backplate, putting the tip of the barrel directly onto the SRT’s visor.

There was no surrender; SRT’s were incapable of it. The Mathew continued fighting until the moment Kyle pulled the trigger; the ‘bulletproof’ visor was no match for the heavy AP round at this range. The Mathew’s hand flopped back to the ground as the visor shattered, the heavy pistol falling from his hand.

Kyle took his foot away from Mathew’s neck and knelt down next to the body, picking up his discarded M240.

“I’m sorry my friend.” He mumbled, quickly checking the M240 for damage.

He got up and started walking towards Lisa. To Lisa’s horror and disbelief, the ‘body’ stirred, and started to get up. It couldn’t be! He’d been shot in the face! The SRT began to walk towards them, taking shuffling steps, like a zombie, all the while emitting a soft beeping noise.

Kyle turned kicked the SRT square in the chest, sending it flying back through the air. He immediately knelt down and ‘hugged’ Lisa, protecting her with his body.

WHUMP!

The dead SRT exploded. Rather than a Hollywood fiery explosion, this was a C4 blast wave. There was no fireball whatsoever, just a devastating pressure wave, followed by a hail of deadly shrapnel.

Of course Mathew was already dead, but the suit was autonomous enough to carry out a last ditch effort to complete the mission.

-x-

Twenty minutes Lisa and Kyle finally made their escape. As they emerged from the escape hatch, Lisa’s eyes were assaulted with raw, unfiltered sunlight for the first time in months. Her eyeballs ached as colours forced their way in through her squinted eyes, the plethora of green colours from the trees cutting sharply into seemingly endless azure sky. Staring up into it was almost vertigo inducing, and a smile came unbidden to her lips. She wanted nothing more than to lay back and gaze up at the puffy white clouds.

“We made it!” Exclaimed Lisa, turning to face Kyle.

Kyle’s visor exploded. Fragments of glass sprayed out around a ragged hole and he slumped to the ground without so much as a whimper.

-x-

Two thousand feet away Samantha’s hand closed around the still smoking .50 calibre casing that had just ejected from her rifle. The casing was white with a green stripe warning that the round was DU, Depleted Uranium. You couldn’t just leave radioactive shell casings for hikers to find now could you?

She put her eye back to the scope, exhaled slowly and sighted her next target, a smile crossing her lips. There was no way Lisa’s vectors could deflect a round this heavy. This was for Andrew.

“Nighty-nite,” she muttered, condescending, “…you little bitch.”

She pulled the trigger.

Inside the weapon a tiny piece of metal moved a fraction of an inch, releasing the driving spring which knocked the firing pin into the primer at the end of the bullet casing. The primer detonated, igniting the powder which rapidly oxidised to form a gas 8000 times the powder’s original volume. The expanding gas pushed the bullet down the barrel, accelerating it at over 180G’s to reach twice the speed of sound in 1/300th of a second, over the space of thirty two inches.

The bullet created a double shockwave as it flew towards the target, before striking Lisa directly in the temple. Lisa too, slumped to the ground, but Samantha waited until she saw blood coming from the wound before she finally took her eye away from the scope.

She sighed. After all that she felt sorry for the kid. Now that Lisa was dead she could allow herself that luxury. In the whole scheme of things it wasn’t a bad way to go. Quick and painless; she wouldn’t even have seen it coming.

Hell, maybe it was their fault that she turned into a psychopath. Sam had been there at the beginning, when she had first woken up. She had looked so innocent laying there, but she hadn’t been awake more than a few seconds before Sam threatened to blow her brains out. At least she was at peace now. She couldn’t hurt anyone, and no-one could hurt her.

-x-

Lisa’s vectors hadn’t managed to stop the bullet, but they had slowed it down. The bullet struck her head hard enough to draw a lot of blood, but it didn’t penetrate. Despite this the concussive force was still great enough to knock her out cold.

She awoke with a throbbing headache.

“Nyu?” she questioned.

Nyu? She thought to herself, that’s not even a word, god, how hard did I hit my head? Come to think of it, what hit me? A rock? A tree branch? Where am I anyway? Right, let’s start which what I know, my name is… Oh my god, I can’t remember!

Wait, ‘Nyu’, that must be my name, why else would I be saying it?

Ok, my name is Nyu, I’ve just suffered a concussion and I can’t remember where I am. She stood up, shakily at first, but she regained her balance after a few seconds. Looking around she saw the Kyle’s body and she ran.

-x-

Nyu could hear someone running towards her and she instinctively dropped to her belly. Ahead of her was a small clearing. The footsteps were getting louder. She heard another sound too, a repeated kind of ‘psh-THOONK!’ off in the distance. Silenced weapons of some kind maybe?

A masked figure in military fatigues burst into view, sprinting flat out, as if trying to escape something. A second later she found out what. There were three sickening THWAK’s as rounds hit them in the back, spraying blood in plumes. The figure fell to the ground and lay still. Another masked soldier stepped out from where they had been hiding in the trees, took something from the body and immediately ran off. This angered Nyu unexpectedly. Had they no respect for human life?

She cautiously began to approach the body – it was a bit morbid, but it seemed like her best chance at trying to understand what the heck was going on here. She was very careful to look around for more soldiers, so careful in fact that she neglected to watch the body. Had she been watching she would have noticed that the ‘body’ was standing up, and watching her.

-x-

Celia Reilly could barely believe her eyes. Emerging from the forest in front of her was a young girl, probably 8 or 9, wearing a far-too-big mud-caked flack-jacket over a torn, blood stained hospital gown, barefoot, and pale with fear – as if she had seen a ghost.

“Are you OK?” Called Celia, her voice somewhat muffled by the facemask.

The girl recoiled, as if she was about to bolt. Alright stupid question, thought Celia. She realised she might look quite menacing to a child with her mask on, so she removed her face mask and held up her empty palms.

“Look, see?” Celia called out again, “I’m not going to hurt you.”

What on earth had this girl been through? Her body armour was military grade – top of the line, not even commercially available. From a cursory inspection Celia could see that the armour had actually taken a couple of hits! Who in their right mind would shoot at a child? Even beyond that, how did she end up in a hospital gown, barefoot in the middle of the forest? Clearly she was in some kind of serious trouble. There was a niggling voice in her head asking her – do you really want to get involved in this?

She dismissed it immediately. I’m a soldier, defender of those who cannot defend themselves.

“Y-you’re dead-“ the girl choked.

Celia was confused for a second. Oh, right, she remembered, her shirt was stained red.

“It’s just paint see?” She fired her own paintball gun at a nearby tree, painting it blue, “It’s make believe.”

During the conversation she had been edging closer to the girl. Celia didn’t know quite what to do in this situation, so she reached out and put a hand on the girl’s shoulder in what she hoped was a comforting gesture.

“Are you alright?” She asked gently, “what happened to you?”

Without warning the girl grabbed Celia around the waist and burst into tears.