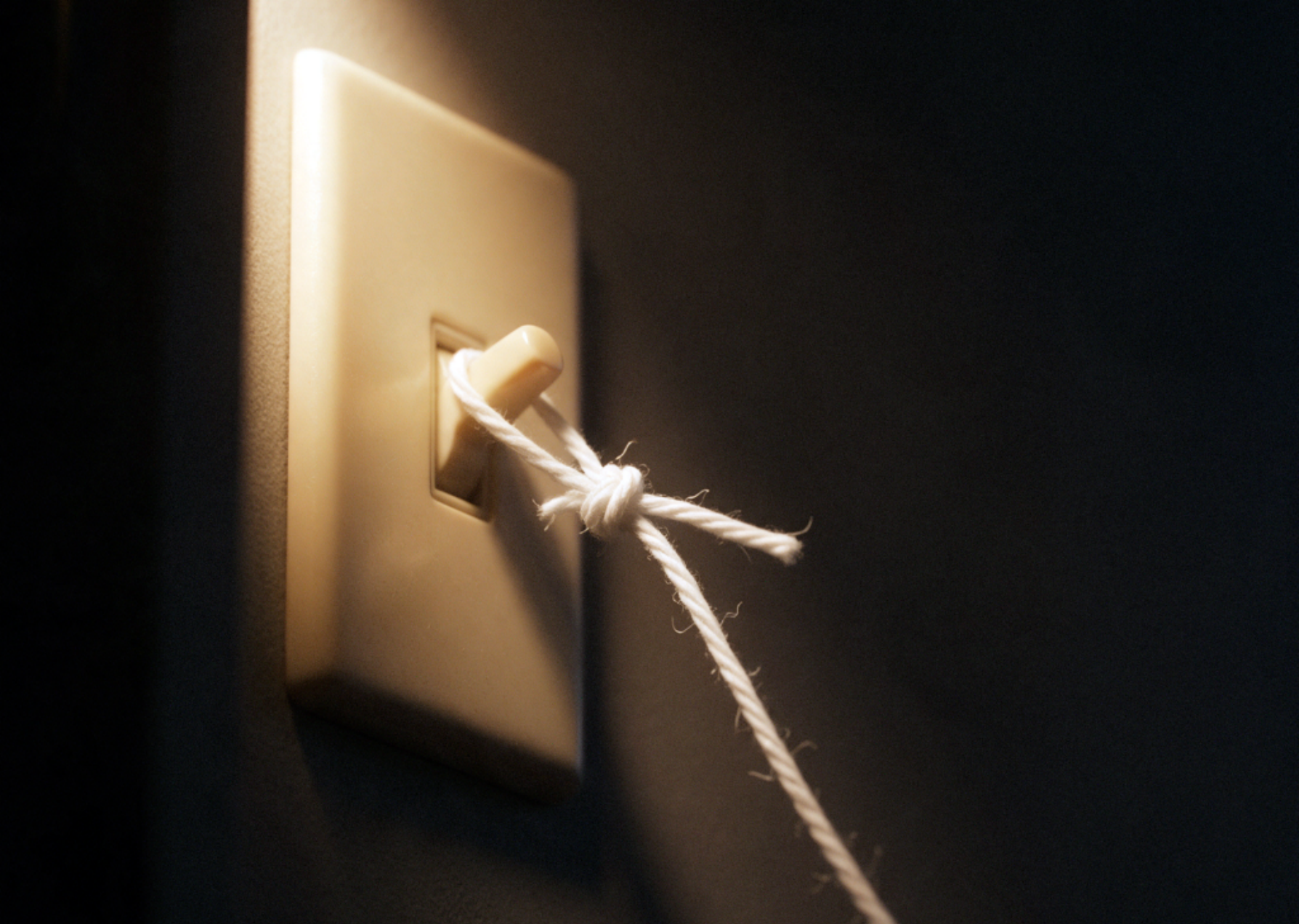


PREFACE

All my life, I've been afraid of monsters, shadows on the walls while I tried to sleep, and the odd noise in the middle of the night. These fears sent my imagination into overdrive, to my detriment and my parents' chagrin.

Slipping from my bed, making sure my footsteps didn't make a sound, I silently walked down the hallway to the end of their bed, a safe place where I could find comfort until the sun chased the shadows away.

I had other methods, of course: a string tied to the light switch to let me turn off the light from the safety of my covers, to summon or banish the light as needed. A quick sprint while fully aware of my footing relative to the edge of my bed and who knows what might be lingering beneath.

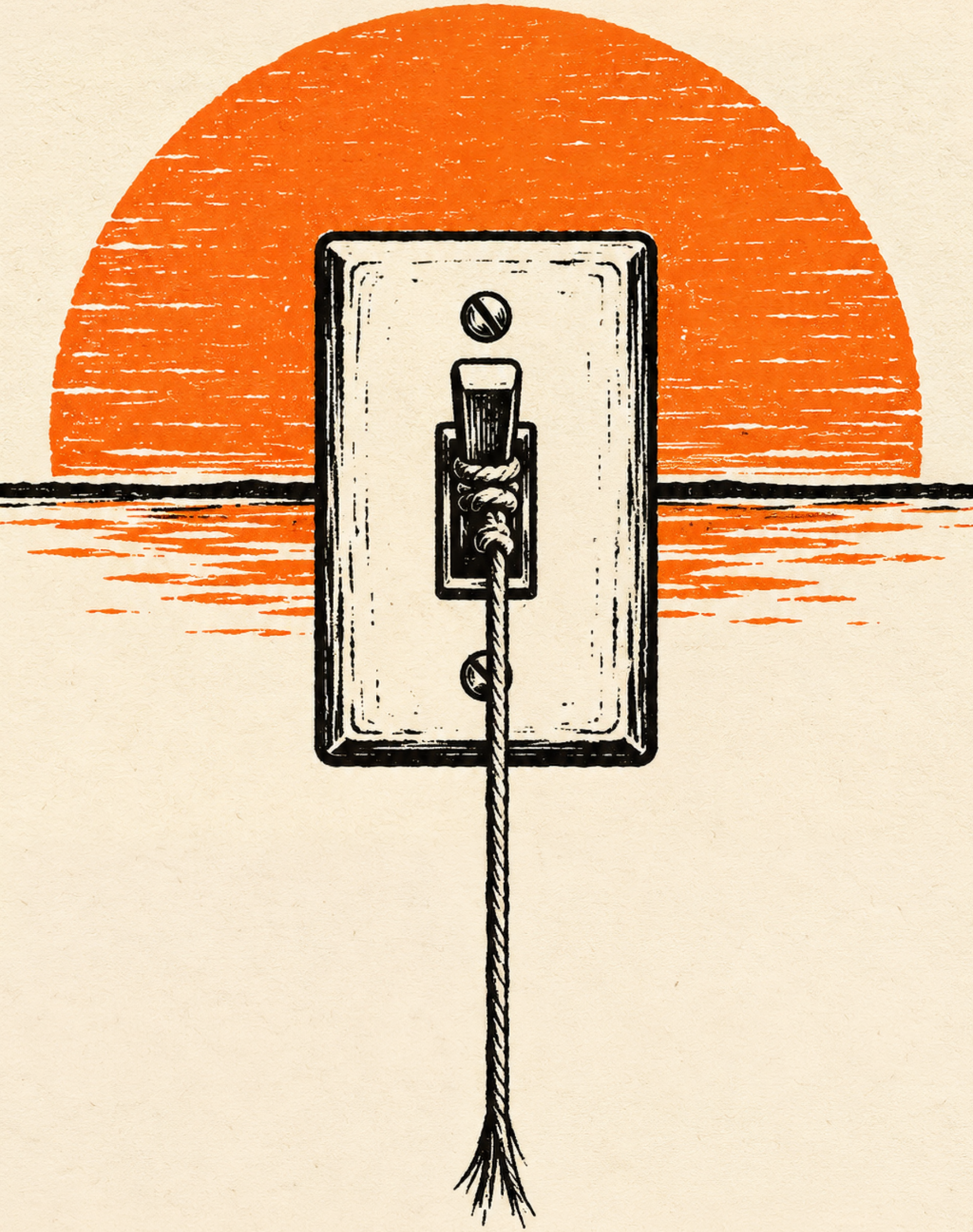
On the worst nights, when I was forbidden from leaving my room and my closet doors were open, sometimes I had to face the darkness and sleep under my bed. A place of fear became a place of safety.

As I grew older, the darkness didn't provide the calm everyone said it would. I knew there were monsters out there, waiting in the dark.

Somehow, despite those fears, I never expected to wake up in a well-lit cell and for the monsters from my childhood to be all too real and far worse than I could have imagined.

All my life, I was afraid of the wrong thing. It wasn't the shadows I should have worried about; it was the light.

FIRST LIGHT, SECOND DAWN



Written by Helena Grace, Art by Emory Ahlberg



Chapter One
Sunset

It feels like I'm on the ocean, waves rocking me back and forth while I have no control. My body feels heavy, and my head is foggy. It's been a while, maybe hours or days, but flashes of light start to peek through. It's cold, though, and almost pleasant, at least if I had a blanket. Maybe I kicked them all off?

Once I can open my eyes, what I see has me sitting up in shock and instantly regretting it because the world spins, and I have to lie back down and close my eyes while taking slow, deep breaths to prevent myself from being ill.

I feel hungover, but that doesn't feel right. Worse, the room I saw before I regretted moving looked sterile, nothing like my bedroom.

I don't remember a lot about where I was before—a book fair, a library, maybe a cafe. It's all a little blurred together; any one of those would be a typical day. Hopefully, as whatever these drugs are in my system wear off, things will become clearer.

The sound of a door opening grabs my attention, but I'm not willing to risk sitting up again or opening my eyes, not so soon.

Hopefully, whoever is here will have answers.

Cold and sterile could be a hospital; that would explain a lot, like my confusion, but somehow, that doesn't feel right.

Whoever enters speaks, "I know you're awake." I'm surprised that it's a woman and then immediately wince as the thought crosses my mind; that feels sexist. If I've been kidnapped, that seems awfully likely—even if I can't puzzle out why. Why not a woman?

Hopefully, she'll give me answers.

"Yes, hello. Sorry, the last time I tried to sit up, the world spun, so I'm just going to continue lying here if that's quite alright."

The woman's voice is flat when she says, "I've brought water for you, and that should help."

At this point, I'll try anything; sure, it's probably drugged, but what do I have to lose? A bottle of water is pressed into my hand, and I take a sip; thankfully, someone—likely this woman—has already removed the cap.

"Thank you."

After a few sips and several long minutes, I slowly sit up while keeping my eyes closed. Eventually, when I do open them, some of my worst fears are confirmed. This isn't a hospital: concrete walls, barred windows, and a beautiful but stern-looking woman holding a taser in my general direction.

Glancing down at myself, I confirm I'm naked and move the bottle to cover myself as best I can. The woman looks amused. Assuming there are cameras in here, she's already seen plenty, but that's the principle of the thing.

"Hello, Devon." Her voice sounds professional, and not like I would expect a kidnapper to sound. She's dressed better than any of the books I've read over the years would have led me to believe.

Real life really is a bit stranger than fiction.

"Umm, hi? Where am I, and who are you?"

I'm not sure if I should be asking questions right now, but I'm at a loss about what I should be doing, and there's really only one way to find out, and that's asking. Maybe I'll regret it, maybe I won't, but for now at least, there's no harm in asking.

"My name is Vivian. You will call me Ms. Vivian; as for where, it's called Second Dawn; you've been identified as a candidate for our program. I'm sorry to say it's going to be a big change for you, with many more to come."

The words slip out before I can stop them. "What kind of program?" I keep sipping the water. It doesn't taste drugged, but even if it is, it's helping me feel better and giving me something to focus on other than my turbulent thoughts.

"There are a few; thankfully, for your sake, our algorithm identified you as a suitable candidate for our Companion program."

'Companion' doesn't sound good to me—not at all—and I find myself glancing around the room; unfortunately, it doesn't help.



Everything is so empty here; it has to be intentional; outside of Vivian and me, there's nothing to look at, nothing to distract myself with. Vivian's beautiful, but staring at her feels weird, especially since I'm naked, and the only thing noticeable about me right now is the bandage on my right arm.

Stay calm.

I've read a lot of books over the years to keep my brain busy—but mostly to keep myself occupied. A quiet child rarely attracts attention, especially when they have a book in hand.

Attention, all too often, can be bad. Right now, causing a scene seems like a terrible idea.

Vivian seems pleasant, at least so far. Is that a customer-service pleasant—a mask to get through the day, or does she genuinely care? It's too soon to tell, but if she cares, would she be here?

I have my doubts.

Those books I read had all kinds of lessons, and manners have their place. Maybe she's genuine, and maybe she isn't. One thing is for sure: there's absolutely nothing to gain from making her my enemy,

I can yell and scream and try to hurt her to escape, but as I glance around my surroundings again, a quote comes to mind: 'Don't panic.

Panic will kill you when nothing else wants to.' This room isn't ad hoc; it was designed for this purpose. There's nothing at a glance that suggests anything but meticulous planning.

If escape were as simple as rushing past a woman through a door, I probably wouldn't be here right now. More importantly, if the people here wanted me dead, I would never have woken up. Companion implies living, at least in some fashion, but that doesn't mean it will be pleasant.

"What does that mean? I'm familiar with the word, but in which context?"

"You've noticed the bandage; we've injected you with a customized cocktail of anti-androgens and estrogen. Expect them weekly. As for your question, you'll be matched with a companion and live the rest of your days with them."

Anti-what? Estrogen is a sex hormone, but what does that even mean in this context?

The water is almost gone, but I take a small sip anyway. It's convenient for giving myself space to think, to pause and breathe while I try to process what Vivian is saying and spending the rest of my life? Stuck with someone, it sounds awful. I can manage friends in my space for a couple of days—usually, but if I need to be around someone else constantly, that sounds like a nightmare.

I need space. Other people are too exhausting.

"Do I have any choice? Why those injections?" *In life, in living, in taking part in this program?*

Vivian looks amused, maybe? "Some, eventually anyway. I'm your Handler; I expect you to do what I say when I say it. This taser—" she waves it into my line of sight, "—will be used at the first hint of disobedience. Your life as you know it is over; listen, learn, and most importantly, obey, and things will be better for you." There's an almost warm smile when she looks at me, but her eyes don't show any hint of warmth. "As for the injections, we're turning you into a woman. On the surface, at least, the rest is entirely up to you."

Better doesn't mean good; I want to scream. Why me? Why is this happening? Sure, yes, she said some kind of algorithm, but that doesn't help at all.

Wait—a woman—how does that even work? *The injections, obviously, Devon, you idiot.*

My thoughts are whirling, and all I can really focus on is my heartbeat thudding in my chest and the near ringing in my ears.

"I'll try. I'm scared and fighting off a lot of conflicting emotions and impulses I'm not proud of, but I'm not an idiot, and I'm not going to let fear or panic rule me."

Whatever a Handler is, and Vivian's explanation is answer enough for now. There's no way she's the only person here. She's a carrot, and if I attack her, taser or not. There's bound to be a stick, likely waiting outside that door. Maybe more than one.

I can wait, watch, and learn. Right this minute, my life isn't in danger—things are terrifying, confusing, and strange, but I have time. Probably. This program is unlikely to be quick, or at least I hope that it isn't.

"I'll be back with dinner for you in a couple of hours. Eat all of it, and we won't have any issues. Trust me, Devon, you want to stay on my good side." For all, Vivian's tone is sweet; I think she's a poisoned candy apple. Only time will tell if that's the truth or not.

It's easy to be confident today, right this second. Tonight, when the shadows fall and those old monsters from my childhood merge with these new, unexpectedly real ones. Things will likely be different—I'll have to be confident and controlled right now to have any hope tomorrow.

Maybe I'll be lucky, and when I wake up, I'll find out that this was just a very odd, very vivid dream. That would be a pleasant surprise.

Vivian walks out the door without another word, and I follow her with my eyes until the sound of footsteps is a distant memory. Eventually, despite the situation, my eyes flutter closed.

***

The next thing I'm aware of is a bang, vibrations hard enough to rock my entire body, and then my face hitting the floor.

"Get up." A male voice says, in a tone you might use for a dog you found on your bed. I roll onto my feet and quickly cover myself. Ms. Vivian was bad enough, but whoever this is seems to have even less use for kind words. The stick is likely.

"Hi—" A hand catches me in the mouth, and I crash back down to the floor. I can feel my lip split, and the taste of copper a moment later confirms it. Great.

"Get up and don't speak."

'Don't panic' was a lot easier to follow before someone showed up and knocked me to the floor. That's probably the point, though. Try to get a reaction out of me. I take a breath and slip back to my feet.

"I am Mr. Davis; you will call me Sir and speak only when told to. Do you understand?" I nod. I won't take the bait. My lip and cheek already hurt enough, and I can feel blood dripping down my face. "Aren't you the obedient one? So soon, too. Let's test that, shall we?" He looks down at where my hands are covering myself and laughs. "One hand is probably more than enough for what you're packing down there. If I didn't know you just arrived, I would think the serums would have been at work for months."

My hand twitches; *he's trying to make you angry, Devon. Don't fall for it.*

"Stand up straight and put your hands over your head."

One of those is harder than the other, and it's standing up



straight. I don't like it. I'm not the tallest person, but it feels like I'm putting myself on display, which is precisely what this Mr. Davis wants.

Once my hands are over my head, he walks around me, inspecting me, and I gasp when he grabs my shoulder-length hair and tugs while kicking my legs out from under me, and then I scream as my head is yanked back.

Mr. Davis laughs, mocking me as I dangle by my hair. "Such a lovely sound. How much higher can your pitch go?" When I don't answer, he tugs again, then throws me on the ground. "Well, sweetheart, we're going to have a lot of time together to work that out—at least until your buyer gets here, but that's months and months away. We'll have plenty of time together." His boot taps once against my stomach. "On your feet."

Buyer? Vivian said, "Companion," but those two things aren't mutually exclusive.

Getting up is harder this time, and not just because of the jolt of pain I feel. Getting up feels pointless. He's just going to knock me down again, but I'll obey for now. If this treatment is what good behavior gets me, I'm not sure I can handle the consequences of misbehaving.

"Stand there, and don't move. I want to review your file." He

nudges my legs apart with his knee and smirks at me. “On your tiptoes.”

Toe walking was one of my tricks for being quiet when I was sneaking away from shadows at night. I can stay on my tiptoes, but I don’t actually know how long. Worse, I don’t know that doing it won’t encourage Mr. Davis to be worse.

What a choice: fail and be punished or pass and be punished later. Hot tears join the blood running down my face, but I try to keep quiet. Openly sobbing isn’t going to help me, glancing over at Mr. Davis from the corner of my eye. He’d probably enjoy it—no need to encourage him.

“Wait, your name is Devon? Jesus Christ, Kid. Did someone send you half-finished or something? You look the part.”

I sink a little, trying to rest my ankles; when Mr. Davis barks at me loud enough, I almost fall from the shock. “Did I say you could stop? Back on your tiptoes.” He marches over and then grins when he notices the tears. “It’s okay for things like you to cry; it fills my soul with glee. Tearing you down, stripping you of everything you were.” He glances around, and stage whispers to me. “This is so much fun. I would do it for free, but for a fucking paycheck? Talk about a dream job. You can speak; do you want to cry?”

“Yes.” I pause, probably a second too long, before I add, “Sir.”

Mr. Davis must think so too because suddenly his hand is roughly grabbing my chin, hard enough that my jaw starts to ache, and he’s shoving his finger against the tear in my lip.

“Late isn’t better than not doing it at all. Repeat after me. Sir.”

“Sir.” It’s a garbled response, and it doesn’t make my jaw ache any less. Moving it while he has my face in his grip.

“Say it again.” And his thumb grinds against my lip hard enough that I gasp in pain.

‘S… Sir.”

His hands suddenly fall away from my face, and I sink to the floor. One of Mr. Davis’ hands presses down on the top of my head, and he nudges my lips with his left boot.

“One more time, with feeling.”

The only things I’m feeling are pain, panic, and a lot of rising fear. Where’s Vivian when I need her? Even if her behavior was fake, it was kinder, and right now, I could use a bit of that.

“Sir.” Once my mouth is open, Mr. Davis shoves the tip of his shoe into my mouth.

“Better get used to this, sweetheart; it’s going to be your life.”

Revulsion fills me, and I start to feel lightheaded, but Mr. Davis retracts his shoe.

“I’ll be back later, but first, what’s my name?”

I’m embarrassed by how fast I answer, “Sir.” But closing my mouth is the only thing that lets me keep the bile down. Shoving my thumb into my palm as hard as I can also helps.

“I’ll see you again soon. Don’t forget my name, or you’ll regret it.”

I already do. The door closes behind him, and just in time, because I can't keep the bile back any longer. I'm still pretty sure I hear him laugh from the other side of the door.

***

I can't believe I let Xu talk me into this, being a Handler for a potential Companion candidate. What a joke. Sure, it will be an interesting intellectual challenge, and perhaps I'll get a paper or two out of it. The psychology of gender expression doesn't sound half bad.

Maybe I'll workshop it; I'll have months at a minimum.

Devon, I'm not even sure he needs a new name, but eventually, it might be a good idea. Divorce him entirely from his old life and get him to embrace his new one, such as it is. I've already begun researching possible replacement names.

I'm bringing his dinner when I see Davis exiting his room. What is that bastard doing down here? He knows Companions are off-limits. Watching him lean against the door and start laughing has me concerned about how this job is going to go.

I don't care about Devon; he's a product, but if Davis just made my life harder, I'm going to rip his nuts off.

"What's so funny?"

Davis rakes his eyes over me, and I flip him off.

"Just checking in on your new project; he's going to be worth a fortune when we're done with him."

Devon isn't a toy; if he meets Xu's expectations, he'll be able to choose his Companion, but that remains to be seen. The algorithm had some conflicting data, but within the margins for error. That conflict is the only reason I agreed to this. I want to puzzle it out, and Devon is my best vector for that.

"What did you just do, Davis?"

"Kendra's getting up there; I'm just keeping my eyes out for a replacement."

That isn't a fucking answer. I can hear Devon vomiting through the door. I'll have to get his room cleaned; fantastic—more work.

"Get out of here before I toss your ass into one of these rooms and see how you like it."

That fucker just laughs at me. "If you want to get me naked, there's easier ways." And that idiot's laugh follows him all the way down the hall until he's out of sight.

I toss Devon's dinner into a nearby garbage can; he isn't going to eat it anyway. I'll give him the water and take him for a walk.

Someone else can deal with the mess.

***

The door opens again, and I can barely lift my head off the floor, but at least enough that I can see it's Ms. Vivian. What a relief.

"Devon, are you alright?"

No, I'm far from alright. I don't know what I am. Is traumatized too strong a word after what I just went through? Is there worse to come?

Ms. Vivian stalks closer and wrinkles her nose. I know the smell is awful, but there isn't anything I can do about it. She frowns when she notices my lip.

"I'm going to kill him." Then she hands me a bottle of water, and I half-lift myself off the floor and take a drink. "Just spit it out, Devon, rinse your mouth. We need to clean the room anyway.

That sounds good to me, and I do. I want to brush my teeth, but I don't even know if that's an option here.

"I apologize for Davis; he isn't supposed to be down here."

She sounds sincere, but I'm less convinced than I was after meeting Mr. Davis; I thought Ms. Vivian might be the carrot earlier, and now Davis is the stick. I'll do anything she asks.

I'm not brave enough to fight this—not after Mr. Davis came by and spoke about me to my face like I might be a lamp he hated but inherited and couldn't get rid of without causing issues with his family.

Better Ms. Vivian than him any day.

"Can you stand?"

It takes effort, and my limbs all feel heavy, but the more I sip the water, and the more time passes since Mr. Davis left, the more in control I feel. "Tha…thank you, Ms. Vivian."

"Follow me; we're going to see the doctor."

I nod and keep sipping the water even as I follow her out the door and, thankfully, away from the smell of my bile. I feel better just being away from it. Outside of that room is just better. Even being naked and fully exposed. I'm away from that room.

The corridor is empty, with almost no markings. The only thing I see is a sign that says, 'Privilege Level Zero.' That's painfully accurate.

We stop outside a door, and Ms. Vivian thumps on it before throwing it open, but she drags me behind her.

"Hatcher! Patient for you!"

"What's all this racket?"

The woman who enters isn't exactly my first thought when I think doctor, but she looks at Ms. Vivian, then me, and frowns.

"Who's this?"

"Devon, my Companion."

"You?" The doctor laughs. "I suppose this boy could be worse off." She marches over and looks me up and down. "Good raw material, though. What happened to him?"

Ms. Vivian's response, "That fucker Davis," gets a laugh from the doctor.

It's almost reassuring that Mr. Davis doesn't seem to be liked, but



if that's the case... Why is he even here?

They're talking about me like I'm not even in the room; about me, sure, but only to each other. I'm not going to interrupt; who knows what they would do?

"He looks fine." She turns to me. "Chin up; let me get a good look at you." I nod and comply. "There'll be some bruising, but no stitches needed. Bring him to me in a week, and I'll make sure he is healing well. You can go now."

OK then.

Ms. Vivian shrugs and drags me out behind her.

***

The shadows came back, and there's no natural daylight here for solace, not really. Everything is so artificial, even the sun—it feels like it comes and goes at random. Nothing here feels real, just concrete as far as the eye can see.

People walk by my door occasionally, and I flinch every time their shadows touch it. What if it's Mr. Davis coming back to visit?

Thankfully, he hasn't.

Ms. Vivian took me to see Doctor Hatcher again; she said I was healing well and stabbed me with a couple of needles.

I assume it's more feminization stuff. I've been trying to avoid thinking about it. My body has been feeling weird the last couple of days, and I assume that's to be expected. Sure, I could ask, but what if Ms. Vivian tells me? Or worse, Doctor Hatcher does? The last thing I need is more details.

I'll stick with not knowing.

I have bruises on my face, knees, and hands. The ones on my hands are mostly self-inflicted, and they have passed without comment so far. I don't expect that to last.

Screaming and wailing into this shitty pillow helps, but it's a temporary balm. Pressure is building every single day, and I'm running out of coping mechanisms, even maladaptive ones.

Once they run out, I don't know how I'll manage. Sooner or later, something is going to give, and unfortunately, I'm smart enough to know it's going to be me.

"Devon, good morning."

Is it? It's awfully dark outside the windows, but that hardly confirms morning or another time of day.

"Good morning, Ms. Vivian."

"Come with me."

I've never been comfortable being naked around other people; I'm not an exhibitionist either, but both seem to be my new normal. Until someone offers me clothes, I don't have any choice.

After a few minutes of walking, we stopped outside a door that could lead to my bedroom. Are there more people here like me?

I hope not.

"Enter this room; you have three minutes to choose three objects and then exit the room with them. Three minutes, Devon."

It's incredibly tempting to roll my eyes, but she's being precise for a reason. *Listen, Devon, don't let your ego get you into trouble.* If my read on Ms. Vivian is even half-right, she wouldn't tolerate that kind of disrespect.

The door opens under my touch, the first to do so in a very long time, no matter how many times I tugged at my bedroom door. It should feel important, meaningful, but it's leaving me feeling empty.

It's a junk room. Okay, that's not accurate; it's full of seemingly random items, but they all look new, except for the stack of books I have to force myself to look away from. I've missed books and the battered digital clock flashing at 3:06 AM. It's the first clock I've seen since I woke up here. Is the time even accurate, or is that part of the test? Even if the time isn't right, it's still a way to measure the minutes.

Exit before 3:09 AM.

This room is at least double the size of my bedroom, and the items are stacked densely enough that I could quickly lose track of time.

Stop wasting time, idiot!



I don't have the luxury of decision paralysis, and my timer is already counting down. Grab and go.

If my nightmares taught me anything as a child, it was to find comfort where I could, anything to chase back the shadows.

I ignore the electronics; assuming they even turn on, I doubt any of their batteries hold a charge. Besides, there are no outlets in my room, and Ms. Vivian is pedantic enough to count a laptop and charger, however necessary, as two items.

The first thing I grab is a blanket, much less threadbare than my current one. Better yet, it's large enough for me to both sleep on and cover myself with it.

Next, I grab a fake plant—I don't know what kind—just something colorful, and I could genuinely use that after all this grey time. I stop and stare at the photo of my mother—it's the one from my old apartment. It takes effort to pull away, and it hurts.

I'll see you again, I hope.

The clock flashes 3:08 AM, and I curse under my breath. I desperately want a book, but which one? How can I choose?

Let's see. There's a large coloring book. I won't have markers or anything, but a variety of different images might help. That's good

enough. *Grab it and get out of here, Devon.*

I spare a glance back at the clock; it just ticks over to 3:09 AM. *Go, idiot!*

Ms. Vivian frowns at me, but she examines my treasures closely.

"You are late, Devon. That is very disappointing. Go put the book and blanket back. Since you didn't completely fail, however, you may keep the plant." She smiles at me like she always does. Pleasant on the surface, but nothing resembling kindness beneath. "What do we say, Devon?"

"Thank you, Ms. Vivian."

"You're welcome. Hurry now. You've wasted enough of my time this morning."

She planned this from the start; she was always going to find an excuse to make me put something back. My only solace is that I can keep the plant. I didn't completely fail.

Knowing Ms. Vivian likely planned for this result doesn't make it hurt less, and tears start streaming down my face as I walk back through the doors.

Worst of all, Ms. Vivian's disappointment, however faked, hurts the most.

Idiot.

***

This experiment is proving more fruitful than I expected, Davis's indiscretion notwithstanding. Perhaps I'll interfere with one of his toys and see how he likes it. Turnabout is fair play, after all.

Devon has a functional brain; however, it is weighed down by sentimentality. I knew the books, but especially the photo, would delay him, and they did, though for less time than I expected.

Three minutes and eighteen seconds. A remarkable achievement considering all the temptations I placed in the room and the distractions. Having the clock be just slightly slow was the icing on the cake. Especially since I never told Devon when his three minutes started.

I'll need to review all the cameras before I start my full evaluation, write a report for Xu, and, more importantly, decide how to incorporate the data from today's experiment into my behavioral model.

We can repeat this experiment over the coming weeks. How do I change things up, though? Decisions like those will need to wait until after my review.

What Devon chose is less interesting to me than how he chose. It will be interesting to work out his thought process.

Davis is lurking in the corner, smirking at me. He's intolerable, constantly trying to interject himself into my experiment. He's such a simple creature with all the subtlety of a brick to the head; even Devon has more going on upstairs.



Yes, our projections for Devon's growth and development show him becoming beautiful, but what interests me about that? I don't have time for such base desires.

I care about the underpinnings of his mind, his reactions, and his behaviors. I'd tear down a dozen of him to get to the root cause of the conflicting data in the algorithm, and I plan to. Devon's singular encounter with Davis may have already poisoned my dataset.

As a precaution, we're searching for other candidates with similar flags. Ultimately, one success or failure isn't concrete data. Replication is the key to science. Otherwise, it might as well be magic.

That's likely Davis's intention: to ruin my data and, worse, my experiment, and maybe he can get Devon for himself—such a small-minded brute. Such simple aims. I'm actually trying to achieve something other than sadism.

When Devon exits experiment room one, clutching his new plant to his chest, I guide him away from where Davis is lurking with my right arm around his shoulder. He almost sinks into my touch as we head back to his bedroom with his prize.

He is so easy to manipulate, painfully eager to please and desperate for some kind of positive contact after his near isolation.

That's the point, after all: to make him vulnerable.

Let's see: *The Mind's Eye: Correlation between trauma triggers and comforts*? Too long. *Sexy, Sadism and Science*? No, it sounds like one of those awful media productions Davis would make.

From Devon to Divine? Maybe, yes, that might just work

Experiment day twenty-three is complete.

***

It's been weeks, maybe a couple of months, since I woke up here, and thankfully, I haven't seen Mr. Davis except at a distance. Ms. Vivian steers me away the moment we see him. Good, I can't handle any more of his attention. Just seeing him is enough to send my heart racing, and that's from across a room.

Once was one time too many, whether intentional or not. I've been doing everything Ms. Vivian has said, even if I have to bite my tongue and occasionally dig my fingers into my palm or thigh until they ache.

The changes to my body are underway and at my own hand. During my second week here, Ms. Vivian passed an injection kit over and had me inject the chemicals, feminizing my body myself.

I would have rather she had done it herself or Doctor Hatcher, but Ms. Vivian told me to do it, and I complied. It would have been easier to manage if this was being forced on me instead of almost being a willing participant, however coerced.

It feels like I'm walking into Hell with a smile and paying for the privilege. Granted, that hasn't actually stopped Doctor Hatcher from showing up and randomly injecting me with more things.

I swear I'm more chemicals than person at this point.

Slowly, I've been able to gain information about this organization. It's limited, and I have to consider at least that Ms. Vivian has been lying to me, especially considering I've caught her in a lie twice.

Conflicting pieces of information have been provided at different points. Maybe Ms. Vivian was testing my reaction, maybe my memory, or both. Whatever else I am, it's a rat in her maze.

The information itself was useless, but knowing some of it was false has helped. I can't trust Ms. Vivian—not that I expected I could. She either kidnapped me herself or is actively helping whoever did.

I reach out and stroke one of the leaves on the fake plant from a few weeks ago; it's my closest companion after Ms. Vivian and better company besides. I've taken that test three more times, and so far, I have the plant that I definitely didn't name Penelope and that better blanket.

The rules keep changing, and the items are removed altogether or buried. The last time, Ms. Vivian had the room pitch black with a thirty-second timer. I tripped on a book and utterly failed.

It felt terrible.

Whatever else she is, I try to keep her in my head as my Handler. She isn't my friend and absolutely doesn't care about me. The closest I get to affection from her is amusement when I ask simple questions. Like right now.

"Ms. Vivian, you said this place is called Second Dawn?"

My old name and my old life don't matter anymore. Maybe it will again someday, but for now, it might be best to set it aside. When the weather changes, you change your clothes accordingly. Discarding an ill-fitting name seems similar enough in practice. The theory might be different, but adapting and overcoming appears to be my best path forward.

"Yes, that is correct."

Taking a glance at my body and how it's already changed, death might have been the better outcome. Only time will tell; I hope whatever's waiting for me is better than this. No matter what I become.

This is as terrifying as it is bewildering, but as long as I'm alive, there's a path out—maybe not back, but out. If Ms. Vivian is telling the truth about that, I'll have a life again and a lot of options for how to live it.

Not free, but something. Maybe even a person again instead of a product or a project. Ms. Vivian's been asking me a lot of questions, giving me quizzes and all sorts of things. She definitely doesn't see me as a person.

"While I'm like this, for as long as I can make a choice. Please call me Elaine."

If I had to describe Ms. Vivian's look, I would say shocked, but that feels wrong for her. Ms. Vivian is too dignified for that. It's a significant change, and I'm not sure about the decision myself, but I can't be Devon anymore… okay, I could be. The name is feminine enough; the kids at school made sure I knew that, but a clean break might be best.

If I put Devon on a shelf, while he's still intact, somewhat anyway… Maybe I can dust him off in the future.

"Is this a joke?" Oh, she sounds angry. That could be bad for me.

"No, it's…okay, this is happening. No matter what I choose. I'm an active participant now, and I'm doing this for myself. I can make myself miserable with the past or move forward."

I mostly want to avoid Mr. Davis, and not resisting seems like a good path to take.

Ms. Vivian starts dissecting me with her eyes, and then an almost grin appears on her face.

"That's your decision then?"

I'll be Elaine for a while, maybe forever, maybe just as long as it takes until Ms. Vivian decides otherwise, for better or worse. Though probably worse, since I'm already regretting anything I said.

"Yes, Ms. Vivian."



“Come with me then.”

We’re out my door and walking in the direction of Doctor Hatcher’s clinic, lab, mad science den. The last one is probably the most accurate.

“Hatcher, patient for you.”

That’s almost an echo of our first visit.

“What do you want, Vivian?”

“Devon here has decided to choose a new name, so if that’s how he wants to play it. It’s surgery time.”

I flinch. It’s just a name, and it’s been mine my entire life. Until this moment, I’ve always been Devon, and choosing something else before it was forced on me was like tearing myself in two. It feels telling that Ms. Vivian hasn’t bothered to use my new name, though.

Wait. Surgery? What kind? I’ve never even had my tonsils out, and somehow I don’t think that’s what I’m here for.

If Ms. Vivian was dissecting me, Doctor Hatcher is vivisecting me.

“Big day then, the last day of being a man. Come with me.”

That somehow didn’t explain anything; I barely even see one anymore when I look in the mirror. Ms. Vivian and I follow Doctor Hatcher into the back, and there’s a very odd chair waiting for me. I was



expecting a bed, not something that vaguely resembles a dentist chair—at least if you squint.

"Sit."

Ms. Vivian flexes her arm, and it draws my eyes right to her taser. No matter how nervous I suddenly feel, I can't go back now, so I sit, and then I'm strapped in.

"Minor today, but looking at your development, there's only going to be more in the near future."

I glance over at Ms. Vivian, and she nods.

"Devon, let me explain what today is. You want to take a step forward, congratulations. We're taking your nuts. It's relatively painless, but this is the last day of your life as you know it."

Were they waiting for me to make this decision, or was Ms. Vivian just going to spring it on me one of these days? The latter seems more likely.

Panic right now really will kill me, and maybe that would be for the best. Unfortunately, I can't move, absolutely not as tightly strapped in as I am.

There's a pinch. "Anesthetic," Doctor Hatcher says far too casually before I go away for a while.












GoldenEye 007
WUTHERING HEIGHTS
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PRIDE AND PREJUDICE
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