

PROLOGUE

Radcliffe Institute, 1989

The shackles on my wrists rattle as I move to sit on the hard, cold floor. I do not mind the noise, however. It fills the otherwise quiet room. I don't mind the cold either. What I do mind is being locked away in this room day after day. Night after night. The only company I have is that of my own reflection, staring at me from the shiny tiled floor and the shatterproof glass panels that make up the walls.

I see a pair of glowing red eyes and am unable to recognize the man gawking back. I am nothing like the creature I used to be. Long-term imprisonment has deteriorated my inhuman abilities. My body has become a shell. A thing to be studied. A vessel meant to achieve greatness—a greatness that has not come.

I'm surrounded by a madness I cannot escape. However, my purpose is kept alive by my knowledge of the future, which I can see as clearly as the fluorescent bulb illuminating the hallway. In time, I will see the fruits of my sacrifice. Although subjected to unimaginable acts week after week, forced to live out my days in darkness, I will gladly pay whatever price it takes in order to set things straight. Today, luck shifts in my favor.

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It isn't long before my heightened sense of hearing pick up on the cries of the woman in labor a few floors above. Her strenuous breaths and howls of pain announce the imminent arrival of the key destined to deliver us from evil.

I sit and watch the guards restlessly pacing the hallway outside of my room. Something is about to change. This very amendment is what I have been craving for years and I wait in anticipation of what is to come.

The beginning of a new chapter is but a few hours away.

CHAPTER ONE

Tiger

Radcliffe Institute, present day

A loud growl erupts from within the four glass walls of the small room, followed by the sound of breaking furniture. The high decibels ricocheting off the glass hurt my sensitive ears. I put some distance between myself and the vibrating panels. I'm tempted to cover my ears with my hands, but refrain from doing so. Any show of weakness will give them yet another reason to continue tormenting me.

I don't care for any more of their endless taunting.

I briefly inspect the glass panels, which make up about fifty percent of the walls on the third and fourth floors of the Institute. There is no privacy for us. Everyone working at the Institute can see every single thing we do at any time of day, if they care enough to look. Strategically placed cameras on every other corner, on every floor, monitor the prisoners, as well as the staff, around the clock.

I judge whether the small measure of strength in me will be enough to break through the glass, but starvation has taken a negative effect on my stamina. After weeks of refusing to feed, purposefully rejecting victim after victim, my strength has slowly diminished.

"Just get on with it, boy," Rupert, one of the guards assigned to keep watch over me, yells from behind. "Why do we always gotta go through this every time we bring you a present?"

The two men in the room circle around, keeping themselves at a safe distance as they eye me with a mixture of hate and disgust. I've seen that look before. It's the same look of fear and revulsion I've grown to recognize over the years. It never changes.

Although they fear me, think of me as an abomination, they have no qualms over beating me to a pulp if they have to. They have many times before. Causing me pain gives them a sickening sense of satisfaction. Bringing out the worst in me reminds them I'm not their equal. That I will never be fit to live in their world like a normal person.

The constant abuse of power is a mindless attempt at polluting my soul with their concept of superiority. I'm inferior to them. A being created in a lab, birth by an otherworldly mother forced to carry me to term. They never fail to bring to mind how opposite we are. Their views are not entirely implausible. The main difference between us lies in the simple fact that I am not human.

"Tiger, I swear...if you don't take her I'll bust your skull open!" Dan shouts to my right. "Take your damn meal so we can end the night nice and early. For once I'd like to go enjoy my lunch break without being all exhausted after beating you within an inch of your life."

I narrow my eyes as I stare at the six-foot-four, possibly two-hundred-pound man. His blue eyes observe me with the same intensity I do him. He isn't accustomed to my perusal. It makes him nervous. The pulsing vein on the side of his neck tells me so.

Something has shifted between us. I'm in predator mode now. My sudden change in demeanor unnerves him. From where I stand, I can hear the rapid beating of his heart. It's like music to my ears.

There's a routine we follow weekly. They bring me a victim. I refuse to feed. When they have had enough of me turning down their orders, they pull out their weapons and use them to coax me into my room. It is unlike me to go quietly and this gives them the incentive they need to use whatever means necessary to get me to cooperate.

I hate what they do to me, but I loathe submitting to them even more.

"Well? Are you going to answer me, boy?" Dan uses his index finger to caress his AK-47. It's a move meant to intimidate, but one that is wasted on me. He can't kill me. Not if he wants to live to see another day.

"You best answer me, boy. I'm getting mighty tired of this goddamn game every week." Dan takes a step forward, but I don't budge.

I'm not giving in. Not tonight. Not ever. I would rather starve than take the girl's life.

"You refusing again?" Dan sneers at me.

He sounds surprised, but I do not understand why. The exact same fiasco plays out every week.

"What's the matter with you, boy?"

I straighten up to my full height and growl threateningly. Dan blinks and shifts his weight uncomfortably from one foot to the other. His nervousness grows with each move I make. I am going to fight tonight and he knows it.

It is only a matter of time.

The whip cuts through my flesh before I realize Rupert has moved somewhere behind me. I whirl around to face the red-headed, green-eyed man and put my sharp canines on display.

“You gonna take her or not?” Rupert cocks his head to the left, indicating the young girl trembling in a corner, eyes wild with fear. “You gotta eat some time. It might as well be tonight. You’ve been starving yourself for a while and a few scraps of food here and there isn’t enough to satisfy a big boy like yourself. How long are you going to continue to hold out?”

I lean forward, anticipating another blow across my skin. I target Rupert and his whip. One more hit and I am gunning for him.

“You challenging me, boy?” Rupert lifts the arm holding the whip, and grins. “I’d like to put a bullet in between your eyes and call it a day. Go ahead and test me.”

My chest rumbles due to the growl I hold back. Every muscle in my body begins to bulge with the buildup of anticipation, forcing the skin around them to pull taut. It would be so easy to finish him off—too easy.

“Now, Rupert, don’t get ahead of yourself. We can’t just shoot the bastard. The boss will have our heads,” Dan warns. Hatred for me is ingrained in his dark heart, but killing me will result with them lying in a ditch somewhere.

“I don’t give a damn. This freak deserves to get shot.” Rupert shakes the whip for emphasis. “Go on. Eat your dinner and we’ll take you to your room without another lash.”

I can barely contain my anger. Whipping me means a significant loss of vital fluid, which can force me into a feeding frenzy and put the girl in dangerous peril. My will to stray from taking another innocent life is the only thing keeping me from becoming the monster they want me to be.

“I...don’t...want...her.” My voice sounds strange, even to me. It’s gruff and raspy because I hardly ever use it to communicate. The majority of my days are spent in lockdown, bound by hands and feet to a wall, completely alone. Activities are kept secret until I’m needed to carry them out. Interactions with other prisoners are restricted. Occasionally, I’m allowed to go to B-Floor, where the other detainees are kept, but my time there is limited as well.

During these visits I hardly say a word anyway, but I do not need to talk to connect with those on B-Floor.

With the guards, however, I communicate with growls, hisses, and aggressiveness. Usually, it is brute force that gets my point across.

Dan sighs heavily in front of me. He’s growing impatient. “Damn it, boy. Why do we gotta go through this every week?” He points to the girl shying away from us. “Just take her and end your hunger. It’s not like she has anyone who’ll miss her anyway.”

I cock my head to the side, imitating Rupert’s actions from moments before. The thought of sinking my canines into her neck, bringing some relief to my ever-growing hunger momentarily crosses my mind, but I discard the idea immediately. Doing so will give them exactly what they want.

When it comes to humans, life, and the world outside of my jail cell I may be ignorant of how they work in most cases, but I have come to comprehend killing is wrong.

From an early age I began to understand my differences, reading the fear in my previous victims’ eyes enough times to discern they had never seen anyone or anything like me before.

“Take...her... away.” My body begins to wind up. Wrong or not, I have a basic need to feed, one I wrangle with every week. As strong as my will is, I risk losing control when pushed to the brink.

Rupert takes a step forward. “You little—”

“We might as well get this over with. He ain’t going to budge.” Dan strolls over to the girl and grabs her by the arm. She screams and begins to plead for her life. “Shut up or I’ll put a bullet in your mouth.” Dan drags her out of her hiding place and shoves her forward. She falls to her knees, sobbing.

“One last time, Tiger-Head. You gonna eat or not?” Rupert lifts his arm over his head, the whip going over his shoulder with the motion of his hand.

This time I’m ready for him. I leap up in one quick motion and jump on Rupert, sending him sprawling on to his back on the vinyl floor. Rupert curses and drops the whip on his way down. He reaches out for the pistol in the holster strapped to the left side of his chest, but a slap to his hand prevents him from accessing his only defense against me.

“You ain’t going to get the best of me.” Rupert sucker punches me in the face, but I’m not fazed whatsoever by the impact. If anything, it serves to help the pent-up rage inside to boil over. “Dan, watcha waiting for? Shoot this lowlife!” he screams, once he realizes the danger he is in.

I wrap my right hand around Rupert’s neck and squeeze. The man’s eyes bulge out in fear. The abject horror on his face easy to read.

A growl erupts from my chest. The glass panels vibrate forcefully as the sound travels from one end of the room to the next. Somewhere behind me the girl screams, but my focus stays on Rupert. I want to tear him to pieces. Do to him what he has done with many others, but I will not bring myself to kill him. Ending his life will only make me exactly like him.

Instead, I decide to get even. I release his neck, and strike the side of his face with measured strength. His head snaps to his left. A tooth flies out of his open mouth. Tears stream down his cheeks as he mumbles something incoherent. His lower jaw is broken and he is quite possibly in a lot of pain as a result. The fight goes out of him and he lies there, whimpering.

“You piece of shit!” I hear Dan’s feet shuffling behind me, but I pay him no mind. I am blinded by my need for revenge and lose interest in the second guard when I should be paying close attention to him. A moment later, the whip slashes the top of my right shoulder. The smell of my own blood pouring out infuriates me. I leave Rupert on the floor, with his hands clutching his broken face, and stand to face Dan.

As my gaze meets his, I know he is going to bolt. I do not give him the opportunity to do so. I sprint forward. He squeals and tries to run before I can reach him. But I am much faster than he is. Before he can blink a third time, I’m on him, with my fingers wrapped around his neck. I slam him hard against the wall. His eyes roll into the back of his head and he goes limp in my hand. I might have miscalculated my strength and broken his skull.

Sometimes I forget how strong I am.

Dan’s on the verge of unconsciousness. He does not move. I listen to the rapid beating of his heart for any sign that he’s slipping into oblivion, but he comes to quickly. He opens his eyes and stares blankly at me. A look of shock crosses his features. I have never attacked him before.

Dan struggles to break free of my grasp by digging his fingernails into my skin to pry my fingers open, but even in my weakened state, my strength surpasses his. I lift him off his feet and he panics. His legs flail and he tries to jab his thumbs in my eyes.

I stay out of reach. His face turns red. He can barely breathe and while I want nothing more than to finish him off, I hold back the desire and release him instead. He falls to the floor, coughing and gasping for air.

I step aside and watch Dan struggle to fill his lungs with air. Terror forces his heart to pump faster than usual.

A sob catches my attention. I turn my head to the right to see the girl sitting with her knees pulled up to her chest, arms wrapped around her legs. She is petrified, but it is the horrified look in her eyes as she stares at me that I identify with the most.

In her eyes, I am the monster. Not the two men more than willing to offer her as a sacrifice. I'm the one whose eyes glow in the dark. I am the one whose growls force even the bravest of men to cower in fear. I'm the one she's afraid of.

I study her for a moment longer, taking note of a few things I didn't when Dan and Rupert first brought her in. She is young, sick, and has a high dose of medication running through her blood stream.

In time she will succumb to either the diseases she has or to the drugs in her body.

She returns the perusal, her sobbing filling the room. I back off so she understands I will not hurt her. Hope fills her eyes, but she quickly averts her gaze to a location behind me. I whirl

around to Rupert pressing the glowing red, round button on a stainless-steel panel next to the door. The alarm goes off.

The blaring noise of the alarm blasts with a loudness I find unbearable. I fall to my knees, covering my ears with my hands. Though I try to protect my eardrums, the racket feels as if it is drilling a path straight to my skull. I cannot take it. I roar and drop my head to the ground.

It is only a matter of seconds before the guards come to secure the place. I'm not looking forward to that. I know to expect trouble with their arrival, but the small measure of satisfaction brought after manhandling Dan and Rupert was worth my defiance.

I glance up to see several men dressed in black from head to toe, carrying a variety of weapons, rush inside the room and head straight toward me.

I pop to my feet as they reach me. When the first hit makes contact with the back of my thigh, I let out a roar of frustration. I spin around and meet one of Radcliffe's Security Specialists head on. Only his dark brown eyes are visible. The rest of his face is covered by a black ski mask. He's holding on to a metal baton.

I grab him by the shoulders and hurl him across the room. The other nine security guards jump on me all at once and force me to the floor. I slam my elbow into one of the guards. He flies off me and lands somewhere I cannot see.

Another bat connects with my bleeding shoulder. I lash out by kicking one of the men's legs. The knee cracks, bending the opposite way. He shouts something unintelligible and releases me. The other seven act quickly, slamming me with a barrage of weapons that includes batons, whips, and even a stun gun.

A baton connects with my wrist and it gives way. I fall on my face. My nostrils fill with blood almost immediately. A whip cuts through the heel of my foot. I flinch. I try to crawl away, but my hands can barely sustain my weight. I slip onto my stomach as a result.

The alarm continues to ring mercilessly in the background. I feel dizzy. I cannot decide what is worse: getting beat up or listening to the repeated blaring.

I struggle to get on my feet. I want to escape the room if only to flee from the shrieking banshee, but the constant strikes render me powerless. The boost of energy I had moments before is gone. I stop fighting to allow two of the men to cuff my hands behind me.

Three men turn me around until I am lying on my back and hands. There is blood all over me. I see red everywhere, even on their dark clothing.

“Freak of nature!” one of the guards yells at me. I do not react, nor do I respond. Doing so will only earn me another few blows. The fight has left me, so I do not push on anymore.

The man, unmoved by momentary show of submissiveness, lifts a baton and glares hard at me as he brings it down with force. It makes contact with my head and I see white, moments before everything turns dark.