

Velvet

by: Sophie & Pudding

Premise: Alexander Duke is the newest and most trying patient in the Calibeen Project - a new institution bent on transforming convicted young men into proper little girls. With his background in hypnotherapy, he struggles to maintain his sense of self through the process. But no matter how hard he tries, it seems fate has it out for him.

**Velvet is the third story of the Calibeen Trilogy, which can be read in any order. If you enjoy this story, please consider reading Audrey & Staycee: a more intense and in-depth representation of Calibeen's practices.

Disclaimers: diapers, forced regression, crossdressing, wetting, messing, hypnosis, identity crisis, blood, violence

1.) Her New Home

"We have a new inmate today." I was in the small staff room adjacent to the security checkpoint, sipping on poorly made coffee with a sour look on my face. Everything about our budget here was in a pinch, but that was the nature of experimental deployments. Nobody wanted to invest too much into something without a proven track-record. Things would be different once Ayla graduated the program, which she certainly would in the coming weeks, perhaps the coming days. Dr. Janick nodded in recognition of the small-talk and eyed the coffee-machine skeptically, a sandwich in one of her hands. **"Alexander Duke."** **"Mhmm. The Round Table Committee is curious to see how the program takes with a more troubled case. Like killing people is the worst we've dealt with? Everybody wants to kill someone sometimes. So passé."** "I did read in the report that the judge was on a 50/50 split between here and Pascatero. Kids a nutjob." **"Well, he won't be when we're done with him. You know when he's gonna be here?"** "He's outside the checkpoint at the moment, being processed. You're taking him, right?" **"Yeah, I think so. By the time he's settled in, Ayla will be out, and we'll have a new intake again, so I'll have to make sure there're no setbacks."** "I heard Marlow wanted him." **"He would, but he's a hack. He just wants the recognition."** "Last thing we need is another Annie."

I was guarded when the woman walked in the door. I sat still on the table and kicked my feet. She had a lab coat and nice shoes. But the kind of nice that could

be nicer. Hm. Her hair was up. A clipboard in her hands. Taller than me, but then again, who wasn't? The orderly at my side stayed put. Like I could do anything with these handcuffs on...

"Alexander Duke." There was a plastic clipboard in my hand, made from a single sheet of pink perspex — wooden clipboards were not allowed in any correctional facilities — but I didn't need to read anything on the chart. Alexander Duke had murdered every member of the grand jury, the 12 people who had been party to his brother's incarceration. That kind of thing made the news. **"I am Doctor Clement, and I'll be overseeing your entry into the program here."**

"...what is this place?" A hospital? A mental ward, probably. I was mandated here: experimental recovery for the mentally ill. That was all I was told. It certainly looked like a hospital. The rest of my life being fed and watching TV? It wasn't so bad. But it wasn't the rest of my life. My time was mandated between one and two years. I'd killed twelve people, and I had two years maximum in a hospital. How I'd gotten so lucky, I'd never know.

"This is your home for the duration of the program." Which answered nothing at all, but there was a certain rapport that had to be built up before he'd be allowed to expect useful answers. **"I can see why the judge recommended you for treatment — slight of build, below-average testosterone levels, confident demeanor. I think you'll be an excellent candidate. You're going to be here for some time, so how about we break down this formality somewhat — you may call me Colette."**

"I'm Alex," I said quietly, looking down at my feet. I didn't meet her gaze. I didn't act like I knew what I was doing or why I was here. I felt scared. Well, I looked like I felt scared. I was very good at acting. I swallowed hard and shuffled on the table, feeling tears well up in my eyes.

"You prefer Alexander, but that's really neither here nor there — you'll be given a new designation as part of your enrollment here." He'd shown no remorse during the trial, no fear or discomfort or anything that might indicate that he had access to the fuller breadth of human interaction. The court hadn't deemed him sociopathic, but I'd certainly be curious myself. **"Welcome to Project Calibeen. You will be rehabilitated and reeducated through unconventional an experimental means in effort to isolate and correct your behaviors."** That all came from the marketing material, it was overly verbose and pointless. It didn't matter. In a few seconds, he'd start crying anyway. I could tell.

Tears fell down my cheeks. I shook my head and tried to wipe them away with

my shoulders. I tried to hide it, or pretended to try to hide it. I could hardly talk right, and when I did, I sounded so pathetic... **"I... I didn't even... I don't know what happened... I used to have these blank spots... just times I didn't remember things well, and then... s-sorry... sorry... n-nevermind..."**

I nodded my head sympathetically, and cupped my hands together on the table, giving the boy a few precious moments of believing that what he was doing would work, before my look faded to a smirk. **"Pretty baby face like yours, Alexander — that routine must work quite a lot. Don't worry, I can wait."**

"Wh-what...?" I looked up at her with wet eyes, but she just smiled back at me. She saw through that? But it was perfect! I sighed a little and rubbed the water out of my eyes with my shoulders. Ugh. I guess this is what I get when I'm all over the news... **"Fine. I know what I did. You got me."** No point keeping up this charade... I'd have to settle on a new one.

"Things go a lot more smoothly here when we can trust one another, Alexander. In the end, you'e going to trust us implicitly either way, and it will go more positively for you if we find that we can trust you, early on. More privileges, less rules. Now, would you like to start this over, and we'll avoid the charades?" He wasn't anything new. I was actually kind of let down.

"...yeah, sure. Can I have these handcuffs off though?" She looked at me incredulously and I rolled my eyes. **"You're like a foot taller than me, and you've got Godzilla over here."** I nodded to the orderly. **"You really think I'm stupid enough to try to attack you? If you do, then you're the stupid one."**

"Not at all, Alexander. You're not in handcuffs because anybody is afraid of you — you killed with planning and the more efficient ways possible. Which meant sneaking up on people. You're clearly not anything other than a tiny little coward, so nobody is afraid of you." The male ego was the first thing to show up to a fight, and the first to fall as a result. **"You're cuffed to remind you that you're no longer in control."**

"Of course not." Her attitude bothered me. She was... unique. Hm... **"Why would I want to be in control? I'm here for help, Doctor Colette."** I could see it on her name plate on the desk. Nicolette Clement. Did she not like her full name? So many questions. **"So what now? How do I get better?"**

There was no doubt in my mind that this wouldn't be the boy's last face he showed to me. Compliant and penitent. Did he think we were new at this? I smiled at him anyway, nodding my head slowly. **"I'm going to introduce you to your fellow inmates, and appoint you a bedroom. You'll be sharing it with..."**

Curiously, I wondered how admin had arranged things, and flipped a few pages on the clipboard. **"Annie."**

"Lead the way," I said with a smile. And to my delight, she did just that. I slid off the examination table as she passed and wrapped my cuffed hands around her neck. With a kick at her heels, we both fell backward onto the floor, the chain of the handcuffs choking her throat. The orderly rushed to remove me, but I kept the girl's neck tight against my chest, strangling her. **"I sure would hate to be without these handcuffs,"** I chimed with a smile. **"I might feel in control!"**

There was a very simple strategy that we were all taught during training for working in this program, though I'd been taught it in countless former roles as well. I went limp. I didn't struggle. The less I struggled, the easier it would be for the orderly to deal with the boy. And he did, too. Not with violence. With a shot into his neck. And just as soon as the stars appeared for me, he blacked out. **"Are you okay, Doctor?" "Fine. Four-point him in the white room,"** the spare room that we didn't use as a bedroom, but likely would as we expanded. **"Have him diapered, and give him a fluids drip. We'll try this interview again in 24 hours."**

A reaction. That's what I wanted. She'd learn to accept me, or she'd get hurt. The truth of the matter. I didn't care that I was left in the room alone. I didn't care that I was fastened to the bed, that I could feel myself urinate into the diaper on my waist. I wasn't hungry, because of the IV. I was content. I got her to react. Was aggressive, angry, violent Alex the Alex she wanted to deal with for the next two years? I could do that. Or she'd change her mind. Accept an easier Alex to handle. And I'd use it against her. Psychology made life so easy.

2.) Her New Name

"Being violent is no more you than crying remorse is, Alexander." He was still on the table, and smelled of pee, and I stood close as could be. He needed to know that he hadn't rattled me. **"If only you would put as much energy into showing me who you are, instead of who you aren't. Doctorate at your age, private practice, financially secure and a bright future. Being someone so remarkable, I'd have thought you'd be proud of who you were."**

"You didn't like who I was," I said plainly. Why do they always do this? I want to get to know who you really are, they'd say! Everybody. Lawyers. Doctors. Friends. Of course I test the waters. I'm not exciting or anything. I just pick more

exciting things to be. **"You said you wouldn't take off the handcuffs. You didn't want me to feel like me."** Ugh, she was so boring...

"Well, Alexander, you can let your reputation define you, or your actions. That's quite up to you." In the end, we would be the ones defining him. But he was far too wound up in his self-absorbed crusade to realize something so obvious. **"There is a system here. The system is immovable, indisputable. If you fail the system, you'll go to a real jail for the rest of your natural life. If you exist within the system, move with it, allow it to move you at times, you'll be out of here in 18-24 months and back to your boyfriend."**

The mention of Roger rattled me, but it didn't show. I was a professional. I could get in a state where nothing showed. Often, I was in that state perpetually. I opened my eyes and looked around for the woman. She was behind me, at the head of the bed. **"Whatever you say."** Boring, boring, boring. Maybe this Colette chick wasn't as interesting as I thought she was. Maybe playing with her wasn't worth it. Whatever...

"Honestly, Alexander, I think you're smart enough to understand what our plans are for you, and to understand the concepts at play." And then, the exploit, the weakness. The catch under the skin that I could pull up with. **"I think you'll agree that it's for the best."**

"I am sure to concede that." Because if I didn't, I couldn't stay here, right? Follow the rules, or I could go to jail. Boys my size don't do well in jail. I closed my eyes and sighed. I guess I was done with Doctor Colette. Maybe there'd be somebody else I could entertain...

"Project Calibeen is a treatment program designed to break down the bonds of attachment to a criminal's current persona, and to rebuild their psyche as a demographic far less likely to reoffend." He'd see more when I gave him the tour, he'd understand better. For now, he understood most, this: I unbuckled him from the bed. No orderly. Nobody to intervene. No restraints. And no fear from me at all.

I rubbed my wrists and looked at the woman. First time I wasn't in some kind of cuffs for most of a week. It felt nice to be able to move my arms again. She led the way out of the room and I hesitated on the edge of it. She really didn't care? I stood up and shifted on my feet. The diaper I had on was cold and damp. Over it a hospital gown. Aside from the glasses on my nose, I was wearing nothing else. I didn't know why she didn't just cath me.

"There are seven inmates at the moment. You will be rooming with Annie. As well, there is Ayla, Kinata, Charity, Lemon, Bree and Estar." He had a proper name listed on file, one that I'd had the privilege to select upon being assigned the boy's case. He would be Velvet. I waited at the door for the boy to follow through into the common room, where five girls were sitting. Two of them were playing a board-game, another was reading and two more were sitting very close on the sofa, painting each others nails. Ayla and Annie were absent.

They were dressed young. Like little girls. Not completely, but mostly. And they were *all* taller than me. No surprise. I mean, sometimes girls were smaller than me... but not that often. She took me over to introduce us and I realized. They weren't girls. They were guys. **"...well that's interesting."**

I grinned a little bit in a moment of pride and nodded to the boy. **"I suspected you'd think so. An overwhelming amount of crimes are committed by an overwhelmingly small demographic. We transplant from one to the other, and turn out results that are generations ahead of traditional correctional facilities."** There was a personal vested interest for me, of course — this project was significantly my baby. Though I hadn't been on the planning committee, I'd been a consultant from an early point.

"...guys favor masculinity. Taking it away... making them childish girls. It's smart. Really..." I never thought about it, but it makes so much sense. Two of the girls were listening to us talk. If I wasn't in the hospital gown, they might even think I was a new doctor! **"Of course, it won't work on me. I'm a 5'2 gay boy. I don't quite fit your demographic."** Tragically, her plans had holes. Every plan did.

"Not quite, no. But Kinata doesn't speak English at all — she was Triad — and we worked just fine on her. Admittedly, the program is limited in scope and budget, but success with you will certainly help make the case. Criminal behavior doesn't mind if you're gay, so our treatment methods need to be as open minded." One of the girls, Lemon, and the friend she was sitting with, Bree, were looking at the two of them, now, and Lemon piped up. **"Your dress is weird."**

I looked down at the dress in question. My hospital gown. I nodded my head a little and smiled up at the boy. Girl. I'd have to pick a pronoun sooner or later. **"Yes. Yes it is. Thank you for noticing."** Oh, I liked this place! I liked this place a lot! Finally, something exciting!

"You should wear a prettier one." Lemon nodded, not just dressed small, not just made to look that way — but precious the way that only a child could be.

Blunt in that way that showed just how good the work we did here was. **"Velvet will wear a pretty dress just like yours very soon, Lemon, darling. I think it's your turn though? Is Bree going to win?" "No! I'm gonna!" "Nope. I'm winning, I gots seven hotels!"**

Velvet? Was I missing something? Colette led me down to the wall with doors, into one of the rooms. There were two bunk beds, four beds in total, but only one girl. She sat on the bed on the left. I crossed my arms, looking the place over. It sure was *designed* for little girls, even if it was designed poorly. Or more likely, on a budget. **"That's Annie. She'll be your roommate."** "Hi Annie." I waved. She could have actually *been* a girl. But she wasn't. It wouldn't make sense for the program.

"Hullo." Immediately, Annie was different to the others out there. She didn't just look like a small child girl, she spoke like one, too. Her voice was chipper, and excitable, and her vowels clipped in a way that only toddlers ever did. And as soon as she was done with the greeting, she grinned and stuck the tip of her thumb between her lips. **"Annie, honey, no thumb thumb. It's a big girl day, remember?" "Yahuh... sowwy."** "Annie is... special, among our patients. She was one of our first."

"...hm..." They made a mistake. She'd been here a while. That much was obvious. They did something, and they weren't fixing it. Couldn't, maybe? They were such... amateurs. I walked into the room without prompting and picked the bed across from Annie's. We both had the bottom bunks. **"May I have this bed, please?" "Uh huh."** "Thank you very much." So I sat down. Ugh, cold diaper... I needed to shower.

"Wha's your name?" "Annie, this is Velvet. She's gonna share your room, okay?" "Belbet!" "No, honey, Velvet. Vvvvv. Like the sound a vacuum makes. Remember?" "Vvvv!! Velvet!" Annie grinned, and I clapped my hands for her. Obviously, she was unique. Unique because Marlow had fucked her up. And Alexander wasn't too dumb to as not have noticed.

"...wait, that's my *name*?" Okay, so Alexander was a stupid name. A boring name. But Velvet...? Fuck, it's like Colette went into a stupid name book and decided to make her own that knocked out the top five. **"Yeah, I'm not going by Velvet. What about like, Ally. Nah, too close to my name, right? Gotta dissociate. Maybe Brooke? How homey..."**

"Your name was selected, vetted, tested against the criteria of the program," nothing remotely androgynous, **"and approved by the Round Circle Committee. It wasn't simply a snap judgement."** **"Velvet is a cute name!"**

Annie was giddy, and she was bouncing on her mattress some, her thumb tip back between her lips. **"Annie, please, grown-up day."**

This place was so radically disorganized. Like it would ever be a threat to me. **"Yeah, I don't think so. Get me a different one in the next day or two, or I'll go by Brooke."** My first stance against Colette. She needed to know, despite my enjoying all this, I wasn't going to cooperate so easily. And unfortunately, I wasn't the type of person her methods could manipulate. Dresses were actually pretty cool sometimes!

"Interesting that you're so easily rattled by a name, I would have thought you'd be far more secure in yourself than that, Velvet. It's just a name, and Brooke doesn't meet the criteria set out for naming convention by the board. You're going to be Velvet, and I suggest you get used to it because it'll be your legal name when we're done here." I'd given him an explanation, which was more than I usually gave. I hoped he'd see the fact that I respected him.

Legal name? I frowned. **"You can't change my name."** **"No, I can give you a name."** **"I have a name..."** I didn't understand. I just watched her in the door, smiling. What the hell was she talking about. She didn't have any power like that... that was against the law...

"You should understand where your strengths are, Velvet. Psychologically brilliant, but law isn't one of them. What we are doing is sanctioned and supported under the current party policy. A prisoner costs more per year than college, and is 72% likely to reoffend. Our program costs the same, but has a zero reoffender rate to date. This program is the future, and I promise you that we have full support. Your legal name will be Velvet Duke, when you graduate the program. Is it worth fighting over?"

"I'm not responding to it," I said flatly. She was kidding. She couldn't just... ugh. What a bitch. Such a nice place, but the staff needed work. And if Colette was the one that made Annie like this? She was more pathetic than I thought. I had no time to associate with such hopeless doctors.

"Well, Velvet, give it time. We'll see how the pieces fall, won't we?" His name would be Velvet. Velvet to the staff, Velvet to the other inmates. Velvet would be a name that would overwhelm him, and nobody lasted all that long. She didn't have to justify why she knew it would work, just that it would. It always did.

3.) Her First Bottle

Colette left me alone in the room and I let out a sigh. Annie was sitting on the bed playing with her fingers in her lap. **"You don't have any underwear I could have, do you?" "Um... top drawer... but..." "Thank you."** I went to the top drawer. Panties. Of course panties. Not even like, real panties. Childish cotton ones. I sighed and untaped the diaper. This was so pointless.

"We not s'posa share clothes. Is against the rules." There were very specific rules in place here, sometimes governing very esoteric concepts. But each rule served a purpose, even if the inmates couldn't discern it, and most learned not to cross them. **"You will gets your own undies, uhhuh. Special ones."**

"I'm sure I will." I balled up the wet diaper and tossed it in the trash can by the bed. I tugged the new underwear up over my body and sifted through her dresser. Pajamas. Dresses. No normal clothes. I should have expected that. Maybe the hospital gown wasn't such a bad idea for now. But then again, I wanted to demonstrate that this place didn't phase me. I grabbed one of Annie's nightgowns and pulled it over my head. **"Just like a five year old. Wonderful."** I said it with sarcasm, but with a smile. This place was so weird.

"You lucky, you gots Miss Lolette." Annie wasn't so comfortable with strangers, and lived in perpetual anxious childish worry over saying the wrong thing, or upsetting them, which would bring her to tears. This was a statement she felt had no other meaning, though. Colette was much sweeter than Marlow.

"...so she's going to be my doctor the whole time I'm here?" Annie nodded. At least Colette was easy to handle, even if she was a little boring. Overconfidence. That was her biggest issue. She'd never met me before. She didn't stand a chance. **"So what now? Do you have any books?" "Breakfast is soon." "Cool. I'm starving."**

"I fink you will get baba for breakfast tho. Cause tha's what new girl get for breakfast 'til they are good girls, but if you're not a good girl, you will have babas for longer, but then after you get pancakes uhhuh!" Little pancake rolls were the breakfast de jour once the inmates were allowed food. For breakfast, Annie refused to eat anything else.

"A bottle...?" Like a baby bottle? Hm. I guess the childishness to the outfits and to Annie were not exclusive incidents. They didn't want us to be young girls. They wanted us to be baby girls. I shrugged. I wasn't threatened. **"Okay, sounds good. Come on, you can show me to the table."**

Annie did just that. She fumbled with the door knob, and went out to the common room, one quarter of which was tiled and had a table big enough for twice the number of inmates present. **"This is where I sit, an' this is where Ayla sits an' this is where Lemon sits, an' then Bree sits here an' Kinny sits there an' then Charity always sits there wif Estar."**

"...okay." The place was big. I mean, there was only one room. Five doors on one wall, one to each bedroom. Except the end one - that one had the white walls. Everything was carpeted, soft and plush, except one section, this section, where the table was. There was a kitchenette, something that couldn't do real cooking. A large table on the other end of the room. A TV and a sofa. Bean bag chairs. Blocks. Legos. It was a playroom. A very large playroom. Then, on the opposite wall, closer to the glass window, there was a door I came in yesterday. And two other doors. One was Colette's office. The other I didn't know... **"Where can I sit?"**

"Um. You can sit there, uhhuh." Both seats on either side of Annie were taken — by Ayla and Lemon respectively. It seemed the underdeveloped girl (or overdeveloped?) was endearing to the others, and they liked to protect her. Protect her from what though, or who? That hadn't come up yet. So she sat she pointed to was right across from here, next to where Kinata would sit.

I sat down, shuffling into the table. Another girl was already sitting down, even before the food came out. Annie took her seat and I inspected the room. Lights above us. Cameras in little black balls in the corners. I crossed my arms. It seemed very boring, all in all...

There was a chime from the ceiling, an unknown source of sound, and without the benefit of any clocks, it was all there was to go by. **"Tha means breakfast soon, uhhuh." "It means 5 minutes until mealtime, actually. I'm Bree. You must be Velvet, right?"** Bree had dark colored skin, and in many ways was much prettier than the others here.

"Alexander, actually," I said with a smile. If Colette wanted to play the name game with me, then fine. I'd pick one extreme and she'd pick another. Eventually, we'd settle somewhere in the middle. Even if it wasn't Brooke. I could be Matilda. I always liked that movie.

There were a few gasps, not just from Bree and Annie, but from the two girls on the sofa who had overheard, and Annie put her hand over the boy's mouth, looking scared as heck. **"SHHHH!!!"** Bree looked over her shoulder at the other

door, the one that wasn't Colette's office, and then back at the newcomer quietly. **"It's forbidden to use our birth-names. A Level 3 punishment."**

Annie finally took her hand off my mouth. I sighed. Everyone was so touchy here... **"I'm willing to take my chances,"** I said flatly. Honestly, they hadn't demonstrated to me they could really *do* anything. I wasn't being realistic - these girls were once boys, right? But they got them this way through shame and humiliation. I didn't respond to either of those things.

"Well, I did try to warn you." Bree shook her head and looked down at her painted nails, then across at Annie, ignoring the boy for now. **"Did you find your other sock, Annie?" "Nuh... think it is under my bed but I can't move it and its too dark so too scary to look under..." "Well, how about I come look with you, after breakfast?"**

Food came out a little while later. By then, the girls had all made their way over to the table. Seven of them. One of me. Bree. Annie. Lemon was the girl that commented about my clothes earlier. That's all I knew off hand. Some girls got porridge. Some girls got pancake rolls. I got a bottle. One bottle. I sighed. **"Can't I have something *with* the bottle?"** I asked one of the orderly. He walked away without answering. **"Great..."**

"You have to earn real food." Bree nodded, with porridge in front of her. It was hard to tell if that was what she meant by real food. Annie had pancake rolls, which should have been more adult, but apparently wasn't, and she picked them up with her fingers, getting syrup all over them and not a care in the world.

I put the bottle in my mouth and sipped at it. The milk was warm. I took the bottle out and stuck out my tongue. **"They couldn't like... refrigerate this?"** It wasn't even milk. It was like formula or something. I sighed and put the bottle down, watching the milk swirl around. What a stupid manipulation tool...

"You gotta have all your food every meal, Velvet." That was Lemon, as precocious as ever could be. She has pancake rolls, too, but she was using a fork to eat hers. **"It's a Level 1 punishment if you don't,"** added Estar with a little smile between mouthfuls of porridge with honey.

"Level this, level that," I sighed. I grabbed the bottle and put it back between my lips. Okay, so it wasn't terrible. I mean, it wasn't good or anything, but for baby formula I could have had worse. Wow, what a weird thought. I sat there and drank from the bottle, watching everyone else eat. I could just pop the top off. I could just drink it normal. But that's probably like a level 6 punishment or something.

Everybody watched the boy, some glances subtle, some more obvious. Everybody seemed fascinated by the idea of him drinking the bottle, even though they went about their conversations like normal. Annie was one of the less subtle watchers, and she was outright smiling. She loved the milk. She'd cried for days when they told her she could never have anymore. She was so jealous.

I finished the bottle and put it down on the table. I felt a little bloated. Everyone was watching me, some out of the corners of their eyes. **"What?"** Two shrugs. Nobody said anything. Annie went back to eating. I rolled my eyes and got up from the table, following the wall toward the kitchenette. I should check this place out.

Nobody ever realized it was happening at first, not the first time it did, and every time after that was enticed by the memory of the first. It was a difficult cycle to kick. Bree watched the boy, watching him touching everything, wandering around the room, focused, fixated, and by the time he'd finished one wall, somewhat giggly. Everybody knew what to expect.

4.) Her Secondary Doctor

I started picking up some of the blocks, giggling to myself. And then I thought about putting the blocks in order. And then I was stacking them. Everyone else had finished eating, and I was now playing like a child would with the colorful cubes. I would laugh when they'd fall over, or I'd spell out words that didn't make sense. And I'd laugh. I just couldn't help it.

"Well, if it isn't our newest angel." The man wore alligator skin shoes that looked tacky like the 1980's had thrown up on his feet, and his tan pants were well-pressed, but it didn't stop his slightly awkward gait from being noticed. He knelt down next to the boy, his top unbuttoned one button too far, and his teeth too straight to be real or natural, when he smiled. Oh, and did he smile. He smiled at the boy, and nobody else looked at him. **"What are you building here, hmm, princess?"**

"Uh... mm... nothing..." I shuffled to my feet, trying to stand up to meet the man. He was taller than me. Who wasn't, though? At least a foot. Colette only had four inches on me. I took a deep breath and tried to focus on the man. Ugly shoes... **"...um, I'm Alexander... nice to meet you!"** I put my hand out for him to shake.

Honestly, I wasn't trying to be difficult. I totally forgot about the name thing! My head wasn't in the right place.

"My name is Doctor Marlow." His face was sour at the use of the boy's birth name, but this once, and only this once, he would overlook it. **"The other girls told me that your name is Velvet. Now, why would they say that if it weren't true, hmmm? Do you think maybe you made a little mistake, my child?"**

I puffed out my cheeks a little bit and lowered my hand. He didn't shake it. **"Velvet's a stupid name,"** I muttered, rubbing my eyes a bit. Everything was a little bit cloudy. I turned away from the man and climbed back down to my feet, sitting in the puddle on the floor. I blinked, looking down at the wet spot, and then up at the girl on the sofa. She just shook her head, curling her knees to her chest. Why was the floor wet...?

"Well it does seem as though you've had a little accident, doesn't it, Velvet?" He smiled, again, that same smile that looked so harmless. That cheerful, warm tone, like a father in the 1950's addressing his family at Thanksgiving. He took the boy's hand and pulled him to his feet, turning him around. **"Well this doesn't make any sense at all, now, does it? Somebody silly put you in big-girl undies."**

My cheeks went a little pink and I looked up at him through my glasses. Maybe my prescription was off - that would explain the fuzziness. But it didn't explain my attitude. The embarrassment of wetting myself. The frustration at his words. **"I'm not a girl!"** Wow. That wasn't like me at all... **"I... I mean... don't call me Velvet..."**

"Well, that's an awful lot of requests coming from somebody who just tinkled on the floor." Warm. It was hard to see why everybody else was so afraid of him. He took the boy's glasses off, and tucked them into his shirt pocket, smiling. **"How about you choose? I can call you a girl, or I can call you Velvet. Which would you prefer?"**

"I..." He took my glasses. I could barely even see straight. I blinked up at the blur that was his face and rubbed my eyes with the backs of my hands. Everything was so out of focus... **"Um..." "Do you want me to call you a girl?"** I shook my head. **"Do you want me to call you Velvet?"** I shook my head. **"Which would you rather?" "...um... V-Velvet..."** Because I wasn't a girl...

"Let's get you cleaned up, then, Velvet." There were some key differences between Doctor Marlow and Colette. Where Colette valued procedure and routine, Marlow was opportunistic. He believed himself to be above everybody

else on this program, and if he spontaneously wanted to hypnotize a patient, that was exactly what he would do.

He held my hand and walked me out of the room. The girls all watched while it happened. I followed behind him in the wet nightgown, rubbing my eyes while I did so. I stumbled once, tripped over a block or something, and had to hurry to keep up with him. I didn't like not wearing my glasses...

"You're such a pretty one, Velvet." He hadn't begun until he had the boy inside of his office, and he lifted him without stress onto a gurney along one of the walls. **"So much prettier than those other girls, aren't you? They'll never be as pretty as you are, Velvet. You're above them."** He helped the boy to lay onto his back, and then brought a rotating lamp over above him, switching it on. There were colored LEDs in the enclosure, hundreds of them, different colors, moving slowly and lazily from one to another. Easy to follow, even for a boy without his glasses.

I rubbed my eyes again, trying to turn my head. His office wasn't warm or inviting. There was an examination table and a sofa in Colette's room, but here there was a hospital gurney and tile floors. It looked more like a research lab. It was also the second door, the one by Colette's. I tried to blink the colors away, but the spinning green dot kept moving. It spun circles around me...

"I'm going to get you all cleaned up, Velvet. Clean and dry. And so you don't wriggle away by accident, and get a booboo, I'd like you to focus on the light above you. It's pretty, isn't it? Pretty like you are. Focus on the light and try to say still." The activation factor of the milk made things a little brighter, easily distractible, difficult to focus. Easy to obsess. With his glasses off, the light program, which, even now, was speeding up steadily, would expose his subconscious quicker than any hypnotic induction could. Colette was so behind the times.

My eyes fluttered at the speed of the light. My breathing was heavy. Everything was still and quiet and magically brilliant. I just felt so relaxed. Everything felt so nice... and I felt the underwear tugged off me, but I didn't move or say anything. It was just... nice.

"A pretty little thing like you needs a pretty name, Velvet." No induction. No wasted time. To the point, and effectual. Yes, there had been issues with the test subject, but it hardly mattered in the face of results. **"You love being called pretty. And your name is so pretty, Velvet. Such a pretty word, a pretty name, a pretty thing to touch. Being called by your name, Velvet, makes you feel pretty, a pretty girl, a pretty smile, a pretty thing to touch. It makes**

you well up with pride. Proud to be so pretty, proud to have a pretty name. No other name even makes sense, no other name is pretty enough."

"...pretty," I muttered. My eyes fluttered closed, but the weird green light still spun in my head. Like it had burned into my eyes. I couldn't not see it. It was perpetual. I felt a little dizzy, but I always did without my glasses. And the milk made it so much worse...

"And a pretty name could only be for a pretty girl, so you must be a pretty girl, it's so easy to understand. You're pretty, so your name's Velvet. You're pretty, so you're a girl. Velvet is a girl's name. Velvet is a girl, Velvet is you, you are a girl. You love your name, Velvet. You love being reminded how pretty you are. Like lightning through your pretty body. Tingles up your spine. You feel them now, each time you hear your name. Velvet. Velvet."

The little light flicked off. I had no idea how long it had been. The man sat me up on the table, and when he did, my ass crinkled with me. A diaper? And my nightgown was taken off, replaced by a flouncy dress, a childish one, that barely came to my thighs. I felt my cheeks turn a little pink. This was so stupid...

"Velvet, you can go play with the other girls now. Say thank you, now, Velvet. It's important to have good manners." The boy had been putty, had been pliable, had been simple. Confident people always were. To think that he had been in the field, he had been so knowledgeable. That was why Marlow's techniques were better — nobody could ever plan for it. "Velvet, do you hear me?"

"...that's not my name," I muttered, sliding down off the table. The man was taller than me, so much taller than me, and he looked down at me with disbelief. My fingers went out and tapped his chest, finding my glasses in his pocket, and putting them back on my eyes with shaky fingers. My head was killing me... "My name is Alexander," I said flatly, and with a deep breath, "and you shouldn't toy with things you don't understand." I closed the door behind me.

5.) Her Situation

"Are you otay?" Annie had been waiting outside the office door, and she took the boy by the hand and pulled him close as soon as he stepped outside, looking fretful, biting the tip of her thumb. "Pease an' tankyew... are you otay?" Nobody

had more time spent with Doctor Marlow than Annie, and though she was typically so happy-go-lucky, the man honestly terrified her.

"Um... yeah... my head hurts, that's all..." **"All the lights, they make my head hurt too..."** He'd tried to hypnotize me. Without an induction? Such an amateur. It might have worked on someone else, someone like Annie, but not me. Not someone with so much skill and experience. You have to be patient with hypnosis. You have to be gentle. All his machine did was wear at my mind. It made it easier. But you still have to do it right.

"Tum wif me." Annie seemed to fade between a number of versions of her speech patterns, getting almost gibberish when she was stressed out the most. She seemed okay, now, though, getting better, and she took the boy to their shared bedroom and closed the doors. **"Um. He shows me the lights lot, but nuh as much as he used to..."**

"...I can help with that if you want?" **"...huh?"** She just stared at me, like I was talking crazy. **"I'm a hypnotherapist, Annie."** Had I not mentioned that? Didn't this girl watch the news? **"I can help put walls up in your mind, blocking him out. It won't work all the time, but it can help. Defenses."**

"Dun' wan' make him angry wif' me." And just like that, her speech went out the window. She threw her arms around the boy, and cuddled him as tightly as could be, literally shaking. **"As much as I hoped it would help her, I've yet to be able to break through the walls he built."** I'd been sitting on the bed, the top bunk, watching the two of them, and when I spoke, they both jumped.

"You shouldn't scare people," I said with a frown. We came in behind the door, so I wasn't surprised we didn't see Colette. She was sitting above my bed, against the wall, reading a book. I crossed my arms over my chest frowning. **"That asshole tried to hypnotize me, you know. And that milk was drugged."** If I wasn't proving my strength to Colette now, I wasn't sure I ever could. Fighting him off in my state was a literal miracle.

"Doctor Marlow employs methods that I often don't agree with." I looked at Annie with a smile and motioned for her to come up with me. She did, scampering up the ladder and sitting in my lap before I resumed talking. **"We are, as far as the program goes, however, equals. Which is really not the best situation, because the man is an ethically bankrupt hack."**

"It's all subjective," I said flatly. I was still angry at Colette for drugging me. It seemed she was going to gloss over that fact. Annie sat in her lap and the doctor played with her hair. I often didn't see such personal affection from a doctor to a

patient. No wonder Marlow didn't like Colette. **"That being said, at least you have the good sense not to try hypnotizing me."** She was, after all, a hypnotherapist. The plaques on her walls said so. And from outstanding schools, too.

"I will, Velvet. I will, and when I do, it won't be some fancy light machine, or cheap parlor trick. It will be a wave that washes over you, keeping you below water far beyond your struggles. And it will be only to help you, only to advance your progress here. Never to further a personal agenda." Annie, it seemed, zoned out to the conversation, she just liked to have her hair played with. **"As for the milk, and the diapers, those things are essential components of your progress as well, and one day will not be."** I didn't know how best to approach the boy — he didn't have many of the same prideful weaknesses as most men. But on top of that, he was slightly brilliant, and perhaps hiding things from him wasn't the best approach.

I smiled. Oh this was exciting! I looked up at the doctor above my bed, trying not to look so eager. **"I look forward to you trying."** This was a game I would win, of course, but to meet someone so appealing... someone so contesting? If I was straight, I'd fuck her. **"I'm going to change now."** She didn't stop me. I got panties out of the drawer and changed out of the diaper. Of course, I had no idea where people went to the bathroom. I hadn't seen one, yet... but it was still early in the day.

"You gon' have another accident." Annie piped up, sounding more concerned than cautioning, and she turned her head to look at the woman for approval to her comment. Colette nodded. **"You gots have milk free times a day, an' it makes it real real hard to hold it, uhhuh! Better jus' to wear diapees, uhhuh."**

"Yeah, I'm not having any more drugged up milk. I don't care what Punishment Level A is, or whatever that girl was saying." The dress, though? It wasn't my thing. But I'd live with it. Honestly, dresses were pretty cool sometimes. I'd used them before in roleplays with Roger. They brought back happy memories, even if this one was made for a child.

"You should care..." "Punishment has five ranks, Velvet. Level 1 is the least severe. They might be something you'd like to avoid, but if you don't, remember that every other punishment is much worse." I set Annie down next to me, and slid down off the bed and onto the floor. Then, I helped Annie down, because she was too scared up there to climb down on her own. **"You're due for training in fifteen minutes. I'll see you then."**

"Uh..." Colette left the room, leaving me to stand there with Annie. Annie was flapping out her dress after touching her feet to the ground again. **"What is she talking about, training...?"** I figured we just sat around and played with blocks all day or something...

"We gots eatss, and trainings and 'nosys. An' then play time, too." To be fair, with a limit staff of specialists, a good majority of the schedule revolved around one or two contact hours per day of contact, be that training, therapy, or hypnosis or punishment, and several hours of passing the time. It wasn't a thrilling existence, but it was still a correctional facility.

"...so what is it?" Annie shrugged. **"Different stuff."** I shouldn't be worried. What was the worst that could happen? Manual labor? Oh god, yes. Yes, manual labor was the worst that could happen. They weren't going to make me break rocks or something, were they? Oh man... training sounded very break-rocks-like...

"Um..." Annie looked troubled for a moment and then looked at the boy curiously. **"You should try nuh to be punished, 'cause is not nice or fun or anything like that. Nuh fun at all. An' Lolette likes you wots, so you should try an' be a good giwl for her."** Her speech for progressively worse, as she played with her fingers.

"I'll be fine," I said to Annie. Poor girl. I wondered if there was anything I could do for her. Honestly, that man who had hurt her was so much of a failure, I could probably fix her overnight. I didn't know what training was or what training meant, but because Colette said she'd see me, I waited outside her office door. There were no clocks. How was I supposed to know when fifteen minutes was?

6.) Her First Mistake

There was a chime, a different tone to breakfast, and one that none of the other girls even seemed to look up at the sound of. A light about my room lit up vibrant burgundy and I opened the door a moment later, inviting the boy inside. **"You have heard your tone for the first time. Memorize it. It will chime when you're needed, and the room you're needed in will light up with your color. Failure to appear will be a Rank 1 Punishment. Understand?"**

"Uh... sure, why not." Conditioning to a noise. What was this, kindergarten. Oh,

wait... I walked inside into her office. I'd only been in here once. Last time I had sat on the table, but this time I sat on the couch. A nice couch, a comfy couch. She had an armchair and a desk chair, a computer, nice wallpaper, but no window. It might as well have been a large well-decorated broom cupboard.

"Training today is in shapes and colors." It was mundane. A very, very young toddler could have gotten this right, but there were three questions in the entire set that were designed to invoke an improper response, and to therefore make the inmate feel like they'd failed something a very small child could do. **"I'm going to hold up a card with a shape, and a color, and a word in the center. I will ask you to identify one thing about of those three each time, and we will get faster."**

"...what exactly am I training for?" "Like how children read with their parents to build intelligence." ...was this supposed to be demeaning? Did people get upset over this? I was just so bored... I sighed and put my head against the back of the couch. **"Okay, fine, let's get started then."**

The first ones were logical. Shape: Square. Color: Red. Word: Square. And I went slowly, the way that I always started. That he was bored was perfect, and the way that everybody responded. Circle. Blue. Blue. Triangle. Red. Triangle. We went through over a hundred, and then the first trick one came. A circle. Circle. Red. With Square as the word. He looked so bored, so on autopilot, and I knew he'd mess up.

"Circle. Red. Square." I was so tired of this. She blinked a bit, looked at me, and then flipped to the next card. **"Circle. Blue. Blue."** Another card. **"Triangle. Red. Square."** And it kept going like this. She looked unhappy. Was this supposed to entice something in me? Was my boredom irritating her? It didn't make me less bored to wonder...

It wasn't a huge setback that he didn't trip on the trap cards, the first two. He might not trip on the third, either, a red triangle card with the word blue written on it. If he tripped, he'd be diminished. If he didn't, he'd do this exercise until he did, until he felt like he must be doing something wrong.

"I've done this one." "Answer." ...I sighed and said it again. And again. And again. All ones I've done. It was ten minutes before I recognized the same ones. She was using the same cards! How was this helping me? **"Circle. Yellow. Circle. Square. Red. Triangle. Ugh! How much longer!" "Answer."**
"...Square, blue, blue..."

Academically, I'd spent the morning hoping that he'd respond to training. That he wouldn't need to be punished. I held up another of the trap cards. **"Answer."**

"Square, blue, blue." **"Hm?"** **"Square, blue-"** ...red. I blinked at the card, at the doctor, and she flipped to the next card. **"...s-square, um... red... um..."**
"Answer." **"Right, uh... square."** Next card. **"Traingle, green, green."** Next card. **"Triangle, blue, blue."** **"Hm?"** **"...I meant green. My glasses are fogging."** I wiped them on my dress to clean them off.

"Interesting." I used my doctor tone. The one with pursed lips, and uneasy timbre. I then didn't give him the time to vent his words — I flashed up the next card. He was slipping. And slipping, in this case, was good. I'd do another 30 cards before I told him that actual children cleared this just fine.

I didn't mess up again. I didn't. I had refocused myself. She was just messing with me. Of course I'd get one wrong. I mean, two was... I was thrown off. But I was better now. She put the cards away and I sighed, looking at my feet. This was so stupid...

"Isn't it strange, how actual children never fail this test, but you did?" It wasn't mean spirited, just... disappointed. I was going to make him feel that I was disappointed in him, that he'd disappointed me. That he could have done better, and he didn't. **"Something you want to say?"**

"You are lying." I didn't say it accusatory. Just plainly. Because I'd never heard about this. I had a doctorate in Psychology. I would know about some stupid word test thing. But nope. She was lying. **"If you say so."** And that's all there was on the matter. She put the cards away and I crossed my arms over my chest. **"I'm not falling for your games like they will. I'm better than them, and I'm better than you. You'll realize that."**

I smiled. Not wide, not overtly, not even that mockingly. I smiled, though, softly, and nodded at the boy. **"I'm certainly realizing some things about you, yes. Perhaps that you're less impressive than I first thought."** Now, I rejected him. I wanted him to lash out, though, I wanted him to show me he was no different to the rest of them. **"You're free to go. Lunch will be soon."**

7.) Her Refusal

Ugh, she was such a bitch! I leaned against the wall in the hallway. I knew better.

I knew she was goading me. I knew she was trying to get under my skin. But it still sucked. When lunch came, when the tone sounded, we all went to the table. I sat in my spot across from Annie. I didn't drink the bottle this time. I wasn't going to get willingly drugged by these lunatics.

"Make sure dwink your baba." **"You probably should."** That came from Ayla. She'd been absent for breakfast, and of all the girls here, looked the most remarkable. She looked, spoke and acted like a teenage girl of about fifteen. She didn't seem like an experiment like the others.

"Nope." They'd all try to convince me because they were products of this place. I knew that. And I was sure I'd get punished, whatever punishments were here. I didn't even know. I wasn't very afraid, though. I was interested. I wanted to know what they'd do to me to try to get me to conform. Some might say I was tempting fate, but fate had ensured I wasn't going to lose myself to this place. All I was doing now was trying to have fun in such a boring facility.

There was a light above the table, in Velvet's red-ish color, and her sound rang as well. **"That's your warning that you're almost out of time to finish your meal."** Ayla had a pasta dish, with garlic bread, though the portion was small. The girls here were strictly calorie controlled.

"Honestly, anything's better than sitting around and playing with blocks." I'd probably regret that statement. I played with the bottle, but I didn't put it anywhere near my lips. If they'd just give me some milk that wasn't drugged, it wouldn't be such a problem, would it? Like, I didn't mind the bottle, even if it was impractical.

Everybody left the table when they finished, almost all around the same time, and that left the boy sitting there with the bottle. And shortly thereafter, two orderlies approached the boy, the larger of the two, with a bald head a beard, frowned. **"You are refusing your meal, Velvet?"**

"That's not my naaaaaame," I sighed, looking at the bottle. **"Are you refusing your meal?"** Did I have to answer? What if I didn't answer? Was this some protocol bullshit? If they'd ask nicely, maybe I'd even do it. Nah, I wouldn't. I was in such a bad mood after my meeting with Colette. I just wanted something exciting to happen. **"Yes. I'm refusing."**

One orderly each grabbed the boy's arms, though with their size advantage, one of them alone could have taken him. He didn't cry out as he was led through the security checkpoint door, and then into an adjacent room in the hall. It was a simple room. A television. A metal chair, bolted to the ground, with restraints. The

boy was strapped in with little effort. **"Velvet Duke, you have committed a Level 1 offense."**

"This isn't a courtroom, dude. I don't need to be read my rights or anything. Just get on with it." Ugh, how boring. The men strapped me into the chair. There was a TV in front of me. Was I going to have to watch TV? Oh no, not The Golden Girls... or was it a hypnotism trick? I'd dealt with this before. It was such a joke. This whole place was a joke.

The television displayed an image of a man with a mustache. He spoke clearly. **"You will be asked a series of questions. Failure to provide the expected response will result in punishment."** That was it. Simple. Questions would flash up on the screen. Difficult ones at first. 88x172. 10 seconds to answer each one. Only, as the boy would find out, he would be electrocuted for providing the correct answer. He was expected to answer incorrectly. And the questions ranged from math, to geography, to logic puzzles, and would run for an hour. Training him to give wrong answers. Training him to be just a little bit... dumber.

"Uh... 15 thousand... uh... one hundred... um..." And a bolt of electricity shot through the chair. I screamed out, twitching in the chair, and fell back into it as the current stopped. My breathing immediately became erratic. There were tears in my eyes. Real tears. Fuck, fuck, fuck...

"What is the capital of the United States." Once again, the boy provided the correct answer, and was shocked. **"What color is a mix of red and blue."** Purple. Electrocution. **"Which planet is closest to Earth?" "What year was the declaration of independence signed?" "What year were women allowed to vote."** And so on. Shocks for right answers. No shocks for wrong answers.

I was sobbing in the chair. I couldn't help it. It hurt so badly. My hair would rise on its own. My body shook, endlessly, and I couldn't catch my breath. **"What is eleven times five." "F...fif..."** I winced, shaking my head. **"Fifty...f-four..."** No shock... It wasn't 54. It was 55. I knew that. They wanted me to give the wrong answers? I could do that... **"How many stars make up the Big Dipper?" "Fifty-four."** No shock. **"What is a young cat called?" "Fifty-four."** A shock, throughout my whole body again, and I started to sob. I gave them the wrong answer, fuck!!

The program wasn't automated. Unseen, adjacently roomed, was the orderly. The boy had to try, had to give the right answer, or want to, and then give the wrong one. He couldn't cheat. And worse, the questions were getting easier as the program went on. Some inmates endured dozens of these programs, conditioning them to become a little less smart every time.

"What is the color of the sky?" "...purple..." No shock. "How seconds are in a minute?" "...a hundred..." They were so stupid now. I knew the right answer. I'd just answer wrong. That was easy. I could answer wrong. It didn't *teach* anything. I wasn't being *conditioned* to anything! I *knew* the right answer! I'd just give the wrong one!

About midway through, the pattern changed. The questions become specific. "What is your name?" Velvet wouldn't elicit a shock, everything else would. "Are you a girl?" Yes meant no shock. No meant a shock. "Are you a baby?" Shocks for arguing. These shocks, too were significantly more painful.

Tell them what they wanna hear... that's all I had to do. And after following up with the answers to lies, it was... obnoxiously easy. "What is your name?" "Velvet." "Are you a girl." "Yes." "Are you a baby?" "...yes." Three things I would have lied about anyway. No shocks. It was like the designer of this thing was a complete idiot. I smiled to myself. Lie, lie, lie...

The second half of the test now provided shocks no matter the answers given. Back to general knowledge. But shocks no matter what. Shocks for right and wrong, shocks of fierce calibre. He'd been trained to lie, then to tell the truth, and now, neither was a path to victory. Now, for twenty five minutes, he would be shocked, and the word 'Failure' would flash up after every answer given.

I tried so hard. I tried to get it right. I tried to get it wrong. I tried everything! I was falling apart. The shocks weren't meant for my size. Meant for someone bigger, I bet. I couldn't handle it. I was sobbing. I was crying so hard I'd miss whole questions. I'd pissed myself long ago, urine all over the floor, soaking my dress. I couldn't figure it out... I couldn't find the right answers...

Finally, at the end of the marathon of shocks, one final question flashed up. "Are you a good girl?" The question mark blinked slowly, tauntingly. The room smelled of ammonia, and the boy was soaked, and every bit of hair on his lithe body crackled like tiny insects chirping.

"Y-yes... I..I'm a good girl... I'm a good girl..." I couldn't stop sobbing. Even the words broke as they came out. This was a Level 1 punishment. This was the easiest of them. I didn't even get it! I didn't understand what the punishment was! I didn't know what it was trying to teach me, or... or anything. I just felt so lost and pathetic...

The boy was dropped in his room by the orderlies, not cleaned up, not explained to. Just dropped on the floor. And sitting on the dresser, in front of him, was the

bottle. Waiting. Above it, the burgundy light lit up, and the boys sound chimed. The expectation was clear. None of the girls came to see him, they knew he'd earned his first punishment. And now all he need do was contemplate his second.

I stumbled to my feet, pulling myself to the bright flashing light. I grabbed the bottle and fell straight to the floor. I couldn't stop crying. The bottle went between my lips and I sucked on it, warm milk splashing my tongue. I just couldn't be punished again. I couldn't have that happen again...

8.) Her First Painting

I stumbled out of the room in wet panties and the frilly pink dress. My eyes were still red from crying, but I was a little too giggly now to care. I found Annie with the finger paints and plopped down next to her. **"Whatcha dooooooin'?"** My glasses were just down the bridge of my nose, making it hard to see. They'd fallen off in the punishment room, but an orderly had put them on my face before dragging me away.

"Paintins" She answered, simply, and looked at the boy and his glossy eyes, dabbing his nose with a spot of pink paint. **"Wan' paint wif' me? You gots use your finners, tho, cause we not allowed to have brushes."** Because what was a paintbrush but a shiv waiting to happen.

"Uh.. okay." So I painted with Annie. I put my fingers in the blue and started coloring a sky. I tried mixing the colors and making a nice house. But the house looked more like a window. And the sky looked more like a child trying to paint a sky with his fingers. I was so lightheaded, though. I kept pushing my glasses up my nose, getting paint on my face.

"You should do fwowers, like dis!" Annie demonstrated to the boy how she did flowers by putting all her fingers together, and pushing them on the paper in a tight cluster. **"Like tha"** She looked at the boy and lifted his dress with curiosity. **"Uhoh... Velvet is wetsies. Where is your diaper silly! Silly silly girl."**

I looked down at the wet spot on the carpet. Oh... I felt little tears well up in my eyes. I think I was scared. So close to the punishment, and I did something bad. But I didn't cry, I didn't wanna cry. I pulled the dress down over the wet spot so nobody could see it, getting paint all over the dress, too. There... nobody needs to know...

"You nuh in any trouble silly..." Annie giggled and wrapped her arms around the boy, squeezing him tight and getting more paint all over the back of the dress. **"You aposed to wetsies 'cause it show tha' you wan' twust them lots and lots an' lots! An' then they give you cuddles and paddies and then you feel all floaty yummy all the rest of the day."**

"Oh..." I was still embarrassed, I guess. I just pretended it didn't happen. I went back to finger painting, drawing little flowers around the house the way Annie had taught. They were the prettiest part of a very boring drawing. I tried drawing people, too, but it didn't go quite as planned.

So Annie didn't tell on the boy. He was wet, he would be changed when someone noticed. That was as far as her business went, and she helped him to add more flowers to the paper. **"Wan' try your glasses."** She announced, rather than asked, and then plucked them off the boys face with a little grin, sliding them onto her own.

I pouted, feeling fuzzier without them, and looked down at my painting. Everything was a little blurry, a little too blurry, and I felt someone sit down on the side of me. I could only faintly tell it was Colette by the coat she was wearing. **"Whatcha doin?" "Paintin'.."**

"Whatcha painting?" I had a calm and lovely tone that I only used when speaking to inmates under the influence of the milk, or Annie. Patient. Warm. Not at all like most others here. Annie was wearing the boy's glasses, and she'd gotten paint on one of the lenses, but didn't seem to care.

"...uh..." Her tone was so soft. So gentle. I felt my head get fuzzy. **"Um... this is a house part, here, and then flowers down here... iss not very good, but then this one here's me, wit the red hair, and..."** I hesitated, pointing to the other person, and shook my head. **"Um... where are my..."** I took my glasses back from Annie, putting them on my face. There was paint on the lens. I tried to clean it off on the dress, but it just made it worse.

"How about we go and put your painting up to dry, and get you dry, too, okay? I'll even get your glasses cleaned up, how does that sound? Lovely?" Annie looked at me enviously. I was still sweet to her, but with so little progress in so much time, it was hard to see Annie as anything but a reminder of previous failures.

"...uh... uh, okay..." She helped me up, still covered in paint, and I took my drawing with me. While we walked, I looked down at it through the painted

glasses, foggy with purple. So much so that I ran right into the wall. I blinked, disorientated, and Colette watched me as I tried to find the door to follow her through.

We had rough categorizations of mental immersion. It wasn't an exact science, because we only had observational cues to go on, but we ranked it in a scale from 1 to 10. Typically, the milk alone led to a 4. He was at least a 6 right now. It was certainly interesting, maybe it related to the punishment, or to Annie. There was a bathroom with a steel table and a padded cover-top, and a step- stool next to it. I took the painting from the boy and pinned it on the wall with a magnet, then motioned to the table. **"Up here, my artistic cherub.**

I climbed up on the table, kicking my feet a little. The fogginess of my glasses was driving me crazy. I kept rubbing at my eyes to try to make it better, but it just wouldn't. I looked over at where my picture was hanging. Imagining. And when I saw Colette watching me, I quickly looked away. This place sucked...

I took the glasses off the boy and set them down on the edge of the sink, then guided him into a laying down position. He was very very wet, and between the wetness and the paint, the dress would need to be changed, too. She rolled the soaking wet panties down his legs, and dropped them into a chute on the wall, before retrieving a diaper from under the steel table. **"Don't squirm now."**

The bathroom was nice. Not as nice as the rooms, but it did try to be childish. Like a little feminine. I wasn't even sure what door we went in to get here. I'd need to remember it, in case I needed to use the bathroom. But my head was too foggy right now. I rubbed my eyes again, sans glasses, and bit my bottom lip.

As I lifted the boy's legs, I noticed again his furtive glance at the picture, and decided to push a little further on the matter of the other person. I lowered his bottom into the padding and began to wipe his skin dry. **"Was that your boyfriend in the painting with you, mm? Pretty baby girls are way young for boys, though."**

My cheeks took a bit of color and I rubbed my eyes again. The woman cleaned me up with baby wipes that smelled faintly like vanilla. Vanilla reminded me of Roger. His daughter had left vanilla shampoo in his shower, something I would use... my head was fuzzy... **"N-no..."** A lie. I was usually such a good liar...

"Oh dear, it sounds like my baby bop is telling fibs again, doesn't it?" I'd never been a very maternal person, growing up. Even early into my career. In a messed up way, this job had changed that for me. Now I was maternal over a

bunch of rehabilitating criminal science experiments. **"Tell me about your boyfriend, is he big and strong?"**

"...n-no... he..." I fumbled with my words. I didn't like being without my glasses. I didn't like how she was talking to me. But I couldn't think logically enough to keep the information from her. **"...I guess... he's big... I dunno..."** I did know. Ugh. My head...

"It must feel lovely being held in his arms, being all tiny and beautiful as you are. You liked it when he made you feel tiny, didn't you?" This was all free-form, all unplanned. That was the difference between me and Marlow — I paid attention, I cared, and I did what was best for the patient. He just saw them as potential. I saw them as people.

"...I..." I did. I mean, not... not like this. I didn't think he made me feel like a child. But he made me feel... cute. I don't know. It was hard to describe. She was bringing those memories up in me, though, and I bit on my bottom lip. I needed to *stop* this...

"Well, you can feel the same way, here. Small and tiny, and adored. Everybody here wants to adore you, Velvet." I taped the diaper up into place under the dress, and then helped the boy to sit up, lifting the dress up over his body until he was only in the thick white plastic undergarment. I pushed the dress down the chute.

She took one of the vanilla wipes and started cleaning my cheeks. I looked up at her through dizzy foggy vision. She smiled down at me, close enough that even I could see, and I felt my cheeks turn pink. This was so stupid... **"...dun need diapers..."** I was trying to change the topic. Fuck, in this place I *did* need diapers. I just needed her to talk about something else.

"Don't make a fuss now, silly girl." The scent of vanilla on the wipes washed over his cheeks, and over his hands, too, one at a time, as I cleaned them with dutiful attention to detail, like an actual mother. He had a very pretty face, and even now, with no girls' clothes on at all, it wasn't too hard to see him as a flat-chested girl. **"Tell me about your boyfriend, what's his name again?"**

"R-Roger..." I hated this. The stupid wipes made me remember things. I felt dizzy and sick. But her words were heavy in my head. I swallowed hard and she finished cleaning me up. She didn't say anything about my remark. Why was this happening? Why couldn't she just leave me alone?

Roger. Right. I finished cleaning the boy up of the paint, including some from his bangs, and once I was done, I pinned them back with a barrette from my own hair, to keep them from falling over his eyes. Now he looked like a girl. Amazing what two inches of pink plastic can do. I stood him up and went to the basin to wash his glasses. **"Roger is going to think you are so pretty, by the time you're done here."**

"...he..." I shook my head, falling into myself. I mean, Roger liked women. But he liked guys, too. And he liked that I was a guy. I mean. I wasn't going to be a girl when I left here! But pretty? He always did call me pretty... I wasn't feeling well...

Now clean and dry, I slid the glasses back onto the boys eyes with a smile. **"Maybe you two will get married, once you're a girl? He can carry you across the threshold into your new life."** It was meant to be an enticing idea, but the boy seemed quite zoned out, and I pointed toward the door. **"Let's go back to your room and find you something to wear."**

9.) Her New Game

"This one." **"Don't you want something prettier?"** I shook my head. **"This one."** Things seemed different to Colette. Since we came out of the bathroom. Maybe because we discussed Roger. Maybe something else. I just felt better with my glasses clean. The milk, though... it was still a little spiny in my head. **"If you say so."** I put on the dress, something simple in purple. Childish in a different no-lace kind of way.

The rest of the girls had seen the boy padding through in his diaper and nothing else, but they'd also seen him wet himself twice now, so it was hardly anything worse to be ashamed of. He was dressed in the purple dress and I watched him, curiously. **"I think we can agree that until otherwise noted, you're going to be in diapers all the time now. Understood?"**

"Doubt it," I muttered, shuffling a little bit in place. The diapers were uncomfortable. I mean, not sitting, but standing they sure were. They were too thick, and they made sounds when I walked. If walked was even the right word. I didn't care that much, honestly. But peeing on their carpet was less conforming. They weren't going to beat me on something so trite.

"Well, from this point onward, being without a diaper is a Rank 1 Punishment offense." I'd given him first, the logical chance to accept the way

that things were. Upon failing to get a result from that, I moved to the more clerical response. I'd reviewed the footage from his first punishment — I knew he didn't like it.

I swallowed hard. I looked at the woman, but she was doing something in the closet. When she turned to me, I dropped my gaze to the floor. A punishment like that every time I wasn't in a diaper? It made my chest hurt... "...whatever..."

"Good girl." What I got from the closet was a long length of thick, flat ribbon, in a shade similar to the dress, with white lace edging. What I did with it, following, was to tie the boy's hair up in a ponytail with the ribbon, then tie an ornate and flouncy bow that was almost twelve inches across when all was said and done, and stiff enough from the thickness of the ribbon to not flop flat. Instead, it sat happy, and would bounce when the boy walked.

I pouted as she decorated me in the ribbon. It sucked. I didn't like it. But what was I supposed to do? Hit her? I needed a new tactic. One that didn't hurt my head. Colette left the room and I leaned against the wall. Should I really resist? No. Not yet. I needed time to plan...

"It's rough, the first time. The punishment. I'm sorry it happened to you." To be fair, and in Bree's defense, not a single girl in the project hadn't tried to warn the boy about behaving. **"Are you okay?"** There was a sweet quality about Bree, something surreal about her beyond her brightly white hair atop her dark skin.

"...uh, yeah, I'm okay." The sense of camaraderie here was not something I expected to see. I sighed and put my head against my arms. I was at the dining table trying to think. I was stuck here. Diapers meant more punishments. Bottles meant more punishments. Reality: I had to act like a baby. Their goal: get me to act like a baby. They really were pushing me into a corner...

"Would you wanna play Monopoly with me and Kinata and Charity?" Truthfully, in a few days the boy might not be able to understand the rules of the game, let alone focus enough to play it. But for now it made for an enjoyable way to pass the time, and the invite showed support and care. **"Kinata can't speak any English, but she's pretty good at showing what she wants."**

"Um... alright, I guess." Monopoly was something I was very good at. It was really just a form of strategy and manipulation. In the first half hour, I had almost everyone's money. I hear people say Monopoly takes like five hours to play - I never finish a game in more than 45 minutes. And it got me thinking, the way

someone does when they want a trade. Sometimes the best thing you can do is give in, but not give up. It gave me an idea.

Kinata frowned at losing the last of her money, and crossed her arms in a pout, her olive asian skin giving way to especially adorable pouts. That she had been a hitman since the age of 11 was hard to see now, when she now looked barely any older than that. **"It's okay, Kinny,"** Bree started, **"it just means we have someone good to practice against now!"**

"How are you doing, Velvet?" Colette leaned over Annie at the dinner table. They hadn't brought out the food yet, but everyone was gathered around. I really didn't want to do this in front of everybody, but I would eventually, sooner or later. The only way to win this, was to let them think they won. **"I'm okay, Miss Colette! Essited for my bottle, an' Imma play with Annie afterward."** The demeanor was almost perfectly childish. Happy. Everyone else would think this place was working, that I was just like the rest of them. I knew Colette, though. She was too smart. She'd see through it. A new game.

"Oh, now, is that so?" I smiled at the boy curiously and used appropriate tones. Obviously, he'd never get an act past me, but if he wanted to play chicken, then that was something I could do. **"It's dinner time, and you are excited for your baba, so I hope you'll be excited to know that you're going to get two of them for being so enthusiastic."** Actually, dinner would always be two — but now he's feel like it was his fault. One would be like the others, the other contained a powerful muscle relaxant. People in this first phase were often put to bed early.

I hesitated, looking up at her. Damnit. I didn't think she'd call my bluff so early. It's a risky move... not waiting to learn what I was up to. But there was really no greater plan. Cooperation ensured I wasn't punished. Fake cooperation ensured I was both not punished and could mess with Colette. Something fun to do amongst these boring toys. These boring broken girls. I bit my cheek. Respond? Give her the satisfaction of winning round one? Or drink...? Ugh...

"There's a good girl. Now, you make sure to drink every drop. If you have three days of not missing any milk at all, your second dinner one becomes chocolate. So you keep trying your best, okay?" I spoke to him like an actual child, pleased at the distaste in the corners of his mouth. This was my home gorund, did he really think he could fake me out?

I had two bottles. They looked the same. I looked at them and then at the rest of the table. The girls were watching me. Waiting to see what I did. If I fought, I'd get punished again. If I didn't... I'd be in that horrible haze. Except worse. Two

bottles. I wasn't sure I could handle it... I could barely handle one. All this stuff I was so okay with. Diapers. Bottles. The dresses. But the milk scared me. I reached out and picked one up, putting it to my lips. This was going to be a long night...

The outcome of the milk was pretty clear — after dinner, Velvet ended up on the floor in the playroom with one of the dolls, babbling to it about how pretty its dress was. Moving was difficult for him, so he didn't change his location at all, either, until he dozed off with his head atop his arms and had to be woken by me, with one of the orderlies scooping him up in his arms. **"Oh, someone looks all tuckered out."**

"Nott seepy... urrrr juss... putting my milk in my milk, being..." I was so foggy. It didn't help that my glasses had fallen off in my sleep. I was literally unable to move. Unable to think. Talking made me sound like a babbling child. Drool dripped down my chin. I rubbed my eyes and put my head on the orderly's shoulder. He patted my back, and it calmed me right down.

This was real, not the act at the table. This is the state he would move toward, day after day, more and more often, until he became comfortable with this as his default state. For all his bravado, he was still as much a slave to his own body as anybody else. The orderly set him down in the bed, and I lifted his dress to change the very wet diaper. **"There's a good girl, so well behaved."** I had to lift his legs. He literally couldn't.

She put a pacifier in my mouth, one that was way too big to make sense, and I started to suck on it. I was drifting in and out of sleep while she changed my diaper, cleaning me up and getting me into a new one. I kept trying to talk to her, behind the pacifier, but none of it came out properly.

What had looked like a part of the base of the bunk-beds was in-fact a sliding panel, and she raised it into place when she was done, creating a high barrier around the bed and standing in for a pretty good facsimile for a crib. **"Sweet dreams now, my special baby girl. See you tomorrow."**

10.) Her Leverage

When I woke up, I was angry. I was furious, actually. I kicked at the wall of the crib as hard as I could, hurting my bare feet. It didn't move. I curled in on myself and held my head in my lap. Still no glasses. They were on the night stand - I

could see them through the cracks. My diaper was soaked through, and I had to use the bathroom again. I was slipping in here... I needed an advantage...

"Mawning..." Annie had her arms stretched above her as she yawned, obviously awoken by the kicking. She looked so serene and content, compared to the boy, and it was clear that she still wore diapers, at least at night, as her nightgown had ridden up. **"Did yew sleep otay, Belbet?"**

"...can you get me out of here?" "Nuh uh.... Level 4 punishment..." Level 4 punishment for letting me out of this stupid crib? I shuffled back against the wall and held my head in my lap. I felt so sick... **"Can I at least I have my glasses?"** She fed them through the hole in the crib bars. I put them on. I was starting to feel a little better...

"Um." Her speech seemed to get a little better, now that she was standing up, and she rubbed her eyes with another little yawn. **"Nurses come to change our deedees jus' before the bweakfast bells, an' then we go an' eat. Did you sleeps okay? You went to bed so early, uhhuh!"**

"I slept fine..." I didn't know what to do. I hated it. I hated that I was so helpless here. I could manipulate anyone. I wasn't afraid of anything. But those stupid bottles... I held my head in my hands. There had to be a way around this... what was I missing...

"Tha's good." She wouldn't lower the barricade, but she did sit down next to the bed on the floor, and leaned against the bars, crinkling wetly as she did so. **"Bwee was worried tha' you wouldn' be happy here but is good now 'cause it seems like you are, an' tha's good."**

I needed to keep up the charade. That it was all fine. I needed to cooperate, because I'd invested enough into it. But if two bottles came up again, I wouldn't take them. One, maybe, I could handle. But two... I swallowed hard. **"I'm very happy here, Annie... thanks for my glasses."** Annie talked about a dream she had and I tried to listen. My head was still in the clouds. Trying to fix this. And then the nurses came in.

A small and sweet nurse with a bright smile and a cheerful demeanor took Annie to her bed to be changed out of a diaper and into cute cotton panties. Conversely, the large man that lowered the crib wall for Velvet looked anything but sweet, and big enough to easily toss the boy around should he become an issue.

I didn't argue. I cooperated. Annie was given underwear, but I was put into another diaper by the man. I felt nauseas. He helped me up from the bed and I flattened the child's nightgown down over my body. I wasn't sure when I'd changed clothes. **"Thank you, Mister,"** I said in my most convincing child's voice. He left with the other nurse. My stomach was turning...

"You hungee, Velvet?" Annie was allowed to pick out her own clothes, and she changed into a pair of adorable short-jegged overalls, with a pastel pink top underneath. **"Come wif' Annie, we will go an' wait at the table, uhhuh, then we can read a storybook, uhhuh."**

I didn't know how much time there was to eat, but the sound hadn't come over the speakers. That meant I had at least five minutes. I had thought about this, about the diapers versus the bathroom. I knew to keep up my charade I needed to ignore the shame. And honestly, I didn't care if I used the diapers. But after last night, I just... needed *something* I could control. One stupid thing. So when I got a second away from Annie I ducked into the bathroom. It was just beside the white room, in a small alcove, and closed the door behind me. I would play their game. I would win it. But after my first day yesterday, after the first horrible day, I just needed a win. So I took the diaper off and sat down on the toilet. It had to have been five minutes, but still, no sound from the table. When I was done, when I flushed, I did my best to put the diaper back on properly. It's... a lot harder than it looks.

The boy emerged from the room quietly, peering through a crack in the door, and the moment he did, I pushed him back inside, kicking the door shut. **"Touching your own diaper is a Rank 2 Punishment, Velvet. Using the bathroom without permission is also a Rank 2, so you upgrade to a Rank 4."** There were cameras in here, because of course there were, and for him not to have checked was reckless.

My chest hurt. Colette looked at me. She wasn't happy. Maybe she'd seen through my charade, but last night was pure and she knew. She expected this retaliation. I knew she would. Did I think I wouldn't be caught? No, of course not. But a Rank 4 punishment? I took a deep breath, smiling. We were alone in here. She was so naive. **"I'm not going to be punished,"** I said flatly, stepping around her. I didn't say it with contempt. Just a fact. **"You're going to let me go."**

The camera was directly behind him, and he hadn't thought to look for it. Was the brilliant Alexander Duke so stupid as to overlook something so simple? He could make all the comments he wanted to, but everything was being recorded and monitored. Everything that would only make his life harder for him. I smiled. **"If you'd shown an ounce of remorse, I might have bumped it down, or**

stricken it. But acting like a princess isn't going to help your case, Velvet." He reached for the door, but I leaned against it, calmly.

"You won't punish me. You need me." I smiled up at Colette and she smiled back. This was one of those moments of contempt between us. But underneath it, she was having fun. I knew she was. Because she knew I was smart, and that I'd have a reason. **"If you want to fix Annie, anyway."** She didn't see that coming. Honestly, whoever was on the other ends of those cameras probably didn't, either. I was, after all, the best hypnotherapist in the country. And if there was anything I'd noticed about Colette... her weakness was her empathy.

That was the thing about Annie ~ she was something we were ashamed of. The whole project, excluding probably Marlow himself. To his eye, the girl was a proof of success, that you could take a hardened criminal and create innocence. To everybody else, she was now a broken liability. **"What makes you think that you'll have any more success than I have?"** I should have been more dismissive about it than I was, but if there were hope for Annie...

"Give me access to her case files and suspend this punishment," I said flatly, **"And she'll have her talking fixed by the end of the week."** I wasn't sure how long she'd been here. I was factoring in the worst. With anyone else I could help in a day. Less. A couple hours. Annie might have walls... a week would be more than enough time.

"You think that we're going to hand over case files to an inmate? Really?" I crossed my arms, frowning at the boy and his audacity to suggest something so ludicrous. **"You had to know I'd say no, so why even bother? You should know that tricks don't really work out so well here, not for inmates."**

"It's not like I'm asking for them to fuck with you," I sighed. **"I need to know what happened."** I didn't, not technically. But it would take so much longer if I had to do it all myself... **"And I know you'll say no. And I know it'll eat at you all day. And probably all week. And every time you see Annie's face. That you could have fixed it. And you know, that's enough for me."**

"Do you know what would happen if we let prisoners experiment on other prisoners, Velvet? Hmm? I've read your file, and I know your credentials. I simply don't believe you can do anything for her that I couldn't, and nor do I trust you to. You've shown nothing but malcontent thus far."

"You don't want me as an enemy Colette." My tone fell. I wasn't playing anymore. **"In a week, I can help Annie. Or I can hurt the progress of the other six girls. That depends if you haul me off now or not. Make your**

move." She still stood in front of the door. She watched me and I watched her back. The threat against the others wasn't as effective as helping Annie - her empathy outweighed her God complex. But maybe both of them together...

"Or I could instead have you put into Escalated Discipline for threatening fellow patients. Rank 1 through 5 punishment, sequentially, escalating."

The fact that I said that, though, and didn't just do it was cause enough to reflect on my position here. Yes. Yes, I wanted Annie fixed. It would look very good for the shareholders, would be very good for us, and most importantly would be the right thing to do for Annie. And yes, I had tried. Yes, I'd failed. Annie was our shame. But Velvet was an inmate.

"**You won't,**" I said solidly. I was a doctor, sure, but even psychology wasn't an exact science. Though I was sure in my voice of her actions, I wasn't sure in my head. And the threat... weighed very heavily on my chest. I smiled at her and she frowned. I was winning this. **"I just need to see the file once. I don't need to keep it."**

"Alternatively, I punish you and in a few weeks when you're broken and compliant, you help out of the kindness of your heart and not to win a bargaining chip." I didn't sound as certain. A number of subjects had disassociated with their old lives to the point of forgetting or suppressing previous career knowledge. If Velvet were to help, the boy needed to not be at risk of that possibility.

I was bored. **"Forget it, then."** I knew it was hard to make decisions like this, to trust crazy people like me. But Colette wasn't someone I cared to manipulate in such a convoluted fashion. If she didn't want to help Annie, it would eat at her. She'd concede eventually, even if it meant being punished. And then I'd have the upper hand. Right now we were equals. I dared her to make enemies of me. **"Can we go?"**

"Ten minutes with the file, in my office. You don't leave with it, you don't get any more than that, and you don't make any attempts on Annie of your own accord. I'll make time available each day. If Marlow finds out about this, or any other staff member, I will deny all association. You will be punished, and possibly transferred to prison." The rules were laid out perfectly, neatly, and strictly. So why did I still feel like this was a concession?

"Yes, Doctor Colette," I said with a smile. She opened the door and I walked out. Free. The girls watched. Every single one of them was watching. Waiting for my punishment. For an orderly to drag me out the door by the glass window. But

I didn't. I walked into Colette's office and she closed the door behind me. I'd superseded them. I was on a new level.

11.) Her Annie Negotiations

"Annie Regent." My office didn't have cameras, neither did Marlow's — it was the only place the inmates would ever go where that rang true. I'd slid the file out of the locked-by-thumbprint cabinet and onto the table as I spoke. **"Formerly Edwin Regent. She was a snitch — sold government secrets to criminals high and low, from drug cartels to terrorism cells. She was due to be executed, but Nevada pulled it off the table under political pressure. So she was one of our first patients."**

"Yeah, I don't really care about any of that. I just wanna see the hypnotherapy notes." It was a weird thing to see. I was so meticulous and curious and advantageous a person, but when it came to this, all I wanted was the hypnosis stuff. Maybe it was an obsession with my work. Maybe I didn't care about Annie's past because of Annie's present. Either way, I didn't say anything when I took the case file from her, flipping toward the end.

The hypnotherapy notes, however, seemed to be in some weird unfamiliar gibberish and I sighed when the boy got to those pages. **"Marlow documents his work in a form of shorthand rarely used — do you know Shelton? Officially, practitioners in institutions are permitted to document in Pitman, but Marlow likes to be obscure. I've done what I can to translate his notes from Shelton, you can see a supplementary bundle behind that, with page numbers."**

"Never even heard of it," I said quietly, pondering over the notes taken by Colette. I took the pages out of the binder and studied them. One side, then the next. Okay, so the alphabet's not bad. Then this part here. At least it isn't in another language. **"Yeah, I can figure this out. Give me a couple minutes."**

"Honestly, I detest the man. His methods are unsound, his documentation deliberately obfuscated and he dresses horribly. I'm sorry, I can't stand a man who dresses like an 80's pimp." I was sitting in my chair, watching the boy read, and compare to my notes, and re-read. I was going to lose my job over this, over Annie, an informant who nobody was ever going to miss. Who's existence could just be hidden under piles of administrative costs. Ugh.

"Mmhhh..." I wasn't listening. She was whining about something or other, I didn't know. I was trying to concentrate. I could block people out just fine, but it's when they wanna talk and stuff. Like, I'm obviously doing something. So I just say "mmhhh" and pretend like I care. I flipped the page over. **"Vowels are weird,"** I sighed, and went back to page one. Not impossible. Just weird...

"Pitman's make a lot more sense, but unfortunately, Marlow has the kind of track record that gets him a lot of latitude with the higher ups." That was the thing — Doctor Marlow was a Correctional Psychiatrist for much of his working life, and though his hypnotism was never sanctioned by the state or authorities, he could accomplish with an inmate in a day what would usually take a year of solitary to accomplish. Inmates could be effectively lobotomized, without ever going under the knife, and released on parole in months, not decades.

"Mmhhh..." **"Are you even listening to me?" "No."** I turned to page two again. Okay. I got it down. Fifty eight counts of hypnosis. Fifty eight case reports to read. And he was never very detailed, was he? But I had met him once. I knew the kind of arrogance he had. I could apply that to his word selections: figure out exactly what he'd done to Annie. And if I could fix it, maybe I could even gain an ally in Colette.

"You have ten minutes." I reminded the boy, though the clock would only start now — it was cruel even by Marlow's standards to include the time it took for him to pick up on the horrid and antiquates nuances of the man's writing. Honestly, Velvet was no better; he was just as arrogant as Marlow, and would probably commit the same atrocities if given license to. But if he could help Annie, I could take the associated credit, and it would put me in a very strong position to takeover the project.

"Okay, I'm set." "...you've still got six minutes." "Yeah, but it's all about foundation and stuff, you know? He's actually kind of... stupid." Not to be rude about it, but if I were at a place like this, somewhere with more to lose than a recommendation to a friend the way it was in my practice, I'd be setting traps for people like Colette. Troublesome people like Colette. No offense to her, but she took things way too personally. **"Anyway, yeah. A couple days. Thanks for this."** I passed the folder back to her.

"There's one more caveat." I pursed my lips at the boy and steepled my fingers, thoughtfully, as I watched him. **"You cannot tell anybody of your involvement. And you must allow me to take credit for any work you do. We are under a very political hierarchy here, and the Round Table believes that it's best not to have a senior operator. I... disagree, and have been pushing**

for the role for a long time. Rectifying Annie would be all the push I needed, and then I could remove Marlow from the project entirely."

"...uh, sure. I don't care if I get credit." Why would I? What good was credit going to get me in here? But to know she had that much faith in me, that she actually thought I could do something she couldn't... I wonder how close she thought we were. If she thought we were friends. **"I'm going to keep acting the way I act out there - cooperative and stuff. Less paperwork for you, right? But no than one bottle at a time."** Negotiations. I liked this part.

"You start to show me results, then we can talk about your bottles." I wasn't sure if he thought he had me over a barrel, but I still had the higher ground here. **"Obviously, it should go without saying that Annie must not be allowed to relapse into her former life. The goal template is Ayla. Do you have any questions?"**

"No bottles today, then. And by tomorrow you'll be able to have something called results. Mutual trust, okay?" One benefit for another. I knew once I did what she needed, she wouldn't want my help. Until then, I needed to think up a new plan. Once I make good on this deal, what's the next deal going to be?

"I will have your lunch bottle dummed out, but you have to act the part. Go to your room with Annie, afterward. But dinner bottles aren't on the table for negotiation at the moment." Still, one bottle less today was a big offering on my part, and I was sincerely hoping he saw that.

I sighed and smiled. Dinner bottles. Plural. Fuck. I'd have to figure something out by dinner. But if I could work with Annie before then, maybe I could show her some results. I might have more leeway... **"Yeah, alright."** I got up from the couch and went to the door. **"Where are you going?"** she asked me. I pointed to the door. **"You have a session with me today."** **"Oh."**

12.) Her Side of the Bargain

Mornings were Training. Hypnosis took place after lunches at his phase in development, under the influence of the giggly milk. He didn't like yesterday's training, and he was going to like today's even less. **"This program works very simply. I'm going to show you a card with a picture on it, and you're going to name the picture, and spell the word."** As the week went on, a repeat of this training exercise would omit the spelling. He looked annoyed, indignant, and

frowned. I honestly thought he would have understood why we did this — to dull the brain.

I was so bored. We'd gone through like fifty cards, and they weren't repeating themselves. **"Table. T. A. B. L. E."** Oh my God. Christ. Holy fuck. **"Lemon. L. E. M. O. N."** I rubbed my eyes behind my glasses. **"Boring. B. O. R. I. N. G."** **"It's a slide, Velvet."** **"I know what it is."** I sighed and spelled slide.

It was amazing to me, that with the boy's brilliance, he overlooked the less glamorous and interesting elements of our regimes here. It left him weak to them, and vulnerable, and I couldn't help but think about the adage about the most intelligent people being the stupidest. There was so little adult level stimuli here. So little of interest to a knowledgeable mind. And training exercises like this reinforced that, and helped the psyche wind down to suit the new landscape.

Another card and I smiled a little. **"Miroir. M. I. R. O. I. R."** **"Velvet."** **"Quoi?"** **"Please follow the instructions given."** **"Je suis, madame! Je suis juste une petite fille!"** And I put my hands to my cheeks, pretending to cry. My French accent was spot on. Someone would think I'd actually just gone and forgotten English.

"Et vous serez une petite fille humide et malheureux si vous ne suivez pas de directives." Perhaps he didn't expect that. I smiled calmly and nodded to the card, amused that he'd reacted like a bored child, without perhaps realizing that he had at all. I held up a picture of a car. **"En Anglais."**

I pouted a bit and looked down at my feet. Not that her words really affected me, but her French might have been better than mine... I didn't like when people were better than me at things. I'd have to practice... **"Car... C. A. R..."** And so it went. When I finally came out of her room, I was so bored and exhausted. The table was already dressed with lunch and the girls were eating. I blinked at the bottle in place. Did Colette have time to switch them. I felt nervous...

I'd been honest to my word, and had ordered the placebo substitution from my desktop before the session of training had begun — but I suppose the boy didn't know that, and it was designed to taste just the same. **Annie was sitting at the table in her usual spot, and Velvet sat across from here. "Arwe you otay, Belbet?"**

"Yeah, of course!" I looked at the bottle nervously, turning it over in my hand. Everyone watched. I sighed and put it to my lips, starting to drink the milk. It always took about ten minutes to kick in. I wasn't sure if this one would kick at all,

but I'd have to act it out all the same. Wetting myself on purpose. Laughing like a child. If I wasn't such a good actor, I'd be nervous.

"Wan play dollies after lunch, Velvet?" Velvet seemed to watch Annie, the way she spoke, the words she chose, the manner in which she was a little bit clumsy with a fork. The work that had been done on her was extensive, and it was very difficult to discern that she was ever anything but a little girl.

"Uh huh. Sounds great." I smiled and kept drinking the milk. I didn't know how I acted when I was on the drug. I knew the basics, but the specifics... I'd have to emulate Annie. She was as close to a kid as I could model myself off. When the milk was done I stayed in place. Waiting. Ugh, the suspense was killing me...

"Good! Ms. Bubblesworth an' Doctor Wibbly have to take their puppy Spoke to get a baff, an' they don't like getting wet so they gon' ask a boy to do it for them." She stopped in earnest and looked over her shoulder at the playroom, specifically where the dolls were, and nodded back. **"Girls dun' like getting hairs wets you know?"**

No effects of the milk. Maybe it wasn't drugged after all. I got up and followed Annie, giggling a little. By the time we were sitting and playing with the dolls, I was being overly verbose, using exaggerated movements, and laughing way too much. But I acted, literally, like a toddler. No one would ever know the difference. Especially Annie, who was having the time of her life. It was nice to feel clear...

The light above their bedroom flashed between Annie's bright red, and Velvet's darker burgundy and two tones sounded, one after the other, three times. Velvet's sound and Annie's sound. They were to report to their bedroom. **"Tha's stwange..."** It wasn't often that they were summoned using light and sound to their bedrooms, but also not unheard of.

"Wan play!" I whined, but Annie took my hand and dragged me over to the bedroom. Two little lights were on above the beds. Mine and hers. We were supposed to lay down. Nap, probably. Brilliant idea... of course there were so many cameras. Annie quickly climbed into her bed and I got in my own. The lights turned off...

The door clicked open and I approached Annie's bed, clipping something under the bunk above — a dim light that shone down on her angelic face and made her smile. Enough to read by, but not too much else. Importantly, not bright enough to be detectable by the camera above. I spoke softly to Velvet. **"The bedroom is in sleep mode, the cameras are recording but it's too dark to see anything and the audio feed is disabled. You have one hour."**

I scampered out of the bed after Colette closed the door. The lights above our bed were dim and vague, the kind that made the cameras see if we were in bed or not. But not much else. I appreciated that. I climbed into bed with Annie and put my head on her chest. **"Wan lay wif you, please...."**

Annie looked a little bit perplexed in the dim light hanging under the bed above her, but was never much one to turn down cuddling. A lot of the inmates found comfort cuddling the slightly broken girl, and she nodded her little pigtailed head. **"Uhhuh, tha's okay. We can do cuddles? Annie likes cuddles."**

I played with her hair for a bit. And then I hummed for a bit, a song my mother used to hum. Something no one else in the world would ever know or recognize. It was her music. She was quiet after a while. Not asleep, though - I could tell. I started to whisper in her ear. **"I am sleepy."** I said. Vague. **"I am sleepy and small and cute. I'm adorable. I'm scared sometimes. I'm gentle. I love. I'm you..."** Perfectly uninflected, androgynous voice. It wounded so unlike me it was scary. The perfect background sound.

Annie didn't consciously respond to the words whispered to her, she simply laid and listened, the sounds comforting to her and the words blending into them. The girl had been put under so often and for so long, that it was a simple matter to reach her inner-most sanctum. It was never a problem, though, getting there. The problems began when it came to the mess things were inside of her, the way things been had tossed and burned, concepts annihilated, others roughly installed. To a degree, she had stopped responding to the work done upon her long ago, and fallen back on a safe default.

This method of hypnosis was very unique. It was something Marlow and Colette couldn't replicate, because they were very unique people. This kind of hypnosis required absolutely nothing, which is absolutely everything, and is very hard to get. But that's me. Stupid gay boy who is literally nothing. That's how my voice is liquid. That's how she believes it's her voice, even though it's not.

"I don't want this one anymore," I say. She panics and tries to grab the papers from me. I look like her. Identical to her. Actually, I'm not there. Just two Annies, one I talk for. **"This place is a mess, Annie! I liked it when it was clean... didn't we?"**

"Doesn't matter..." If minds were houses, hers would be condemned — like hoarders with piles upon piles of belongings, too myriad to ever hope to find order to, she was isolated in a single corner of a single room, the things she

cherished most close to her. **"Doesn't matter."** She repeated again, taking the paper back.

"I like it clean," I pouted. **"I like it dressed up nice with curtains. I like it when the TV works..."** Annie pouted, looking at her feet, looking up at me. **/// "I like having a bed with sheets,"** I say into her ear. **"I am you. You are me. Why can't we clean up and lock the doors?"** **///** I went to the window. One touch with my fingers. It's gone. No window. Walls. Thick walls.

Annie gave no physical response on the bed, the entryway to her mind dilated like a tiny hole on a t-shirt stretched out from constant picking over and over. **/// "Stop... stop. Stop."** She placed her hands over her ears and tried to make the other her go away, but when she looked back up, the other her remained resolute. Present. Foreign, even though she belonged here. **"It's no point..."**

"I'm not living here!" I said like a child. **"I deserve niceness and pretty stuff and this isn't. So either we make it better, or I'm leaving. Which means you're leaving, too."** **///** I played with Annie's hair while I whispered. She was sweating, though it wasn't warm in here.

"Can't make it better though... the Sandman comes an' messes it all back up again!" She actually sounded upset, passionate, and it showed through to her voice in the bed, the voice that vocalized her inner self in quiet whispers with muted emotions. **"He gets mad if we clean up, an' you should know that..."**

"Then I'm locking him out." I went to the living room. To the foyer. To the front door. Annie had to follow because we were the same person. We had to be together. There was a very big lock. I turned it. All the windows went away. The doors. The lock sat on the wall, bright red and obvious. "LOCKED" it read. Only Annie could reside here. The house was off limits. No one but Annie. **///** And me.

"He always finds a way...the Sandman does..." Annie sounded, above all else, frightened. Frightened at the lock, frightened at the other her, frightened at the clutter around her. On the bed, she shivered in response, shook slightly. **"He'll get even more cross if he knows there is two of me now. One of me. Two of me... I don't know..."** The voice that came from her lips on the bed, despite her literal child-appearance in the house, was perfect and unaffiliated by her impediments that came and went.

"Then I'm leaving." And like that, the whole house was gone. We were in white space. Nothing. **"I wanna go to the beach."** And then a beach. **"Or to the moon."** And then the moon. **"I wanna go someplace safe."** And then, we were back in the house again. **///** Someplace safe. Where would that be to her?

"Safe...." She mouthed the word, like it was inherently foreign, inherently a lie, inherently impossible. Foolish to pursue, and silly to hope for. She clung to her other-self and shook her head. **"Think the Sandman can find us anywhere. He's so clever, and he has alligators on his feet and... and he... he said that it's our fault."**

"I'm going..." I sigh and rub my eyes. I didn't plan this. I knew Marlow's boundaries. I could weasel my way in just fine. The little dial spun, unlocking the house. Doors and windows. My head was killing me. **"Sweet dreams..."**

13.) Her Plans Moving Forward

"How do you think it went?" It was shortly before dinner was due, and I'd summoned Velvet into my office to check on his progress with Annie. Of course, I'd heard how it went, I just wanted to hear how Velvet thought it went. The boy did big-note himself quite a bit, and maybe seeing what he was up against would mellow him some.

"I misunderstood the situation," I said plainly, coloring my dress in with marker. I was turning all the white green, which was the opposite of what it should be, given the dress was purple. **"I'll do better tonight."**

"You won't have a chance tonight, the agreement was for one substitution per day. You'll have both bottles tonight. You'll have your next chance tomorrow." Here was the thing: we were walking on a joint interest, yes. But we were also in a power dynamic that I wasn't sure he completely understood yet — he was an inmate. He didn't have the right to argue or to negotiate.

"One bottle, or I'm not helping anymore." Of course I had no evidence to back it up. I wasn't sure how long I could take this going forward. The idea of helping Annie as payment. Sooner or later Annie would be fixed. Or sooner or later Colette would give up on me helping at all. Planning ahead was always my strong point, though.

"You show me some progress first. There are limitations on the amount of substitution I can do with any one patient before it's audited." I did admire his audacity, but all the audacity in the world was no substitute for results. And results was what was going to be buying the boy the privileges he wanted.

"Give me tonight. I'll give you results." A trade. A simple trade. But if I failed again... no, I'd do a new kind of induction. Fear was a really boring motivator, honestly. I thought maybe Annie's issues were caused by Marlow, but they seemed only a side-effect. It sounds easier, but it's not. I could figure it out...

"I'm sorry Velvet, that's just not going to work out. If I want to make a vie for power here, I need there not to be any dirty laundry waiting to be aired out by Marlow." He looked unimpressed, and I stood up, brushing my coat down and adjusting my glasses. **"It would be beneficial to the both of us if we can make progress with Annie, but pointless if Marlow has evidence to support that you were involved. I can't be seen playing favorites."**

"It's not playing favorites," I said flatly, looking up from my feet at the woman. I was still in the diaper - wet on purpose - and the purple-dress-made-green-in-places. Honestly, it was pathetic. No wonder she didn't take me seriously. **"You're utilizing your assets."**

"And utilizing American's most recent mass-murderer two days into admission isn't going to fly. I shouldn't need to spell it out, but obviously Doctor Marlow would also like to take leadership over this project, Velvet, and any opportunity he has to discredit my work or throw my methods into doubt is going to make that all the much easier for him. Do you understand? I'm giving you as much latitude as I can give." In the end, if he refused, I'd have him restrained and fed and we'd scuttle this whole idea. For the moment, I was hoping I wouldn't have to.

...I wanted to be angry at her. I wanted to throw out another excuse. But she spelled it out so well. I let out a sigh and tilted my head back on the couch. **"Alright... you're a good debater, you know."** Complimenting people was one of my best features. No one ever knew when I was being sincere. **"Tomorrow, I wanna skip dinner. I'll get more done overnight..."**

"You'll be expected to sleep in the crib arrangement, and to wake up wet. I can arrange, however, for Annie to spend the night in your bed to give you all the time you need. She does sleep very easily and early, though, so keep that in mind." It wasn't at the point where I believed much of what he said, but I did know that I'd gotten to this role because I could make a convincing case.

"...sure, alright..." I wasn't happy with it. The crib thing. I never liked tight spaces before coming here, and I definitely didn't now. Having Annie in there with me wasn't going to make it better. It was going to make it worse. I took a deep breath. **"Okay. I'll keep it in mind."**

"Do you have any questions before dinner?" Obviously, once Velvet had both of his dinner-time bottles, questions weren't really going to be anything on his mind. Not much would be on his mind at all, in-fact. He played the role of milk-addled child admirably, though, having colored in parts of his dress and willingly wet his diaper, I was impressed.

"I'm fine. Thanks though." I'd get changed before bed, right? I didn't really like walking around in a pissy diaper, but the idea of Colette changing me... it was just another position of power she'd have. I was trying to limit those. So I'd ignore the diaper for now. I got up off the sofa and went to the door, waving goodbye. Dinner wasn't for an hour or two, I think.

"Hi Velvet." Lemon was on the sofa when the boy returned from the office and she watched him curious — hypnosis sessions always left the girls a little bit unbalanced and off-kilter, and she shuffled over and rubbed her hand on the cushion. **"Wanna come sit with me?"** The other girls seemed likewise busy, Ayla was brushing Annie's hair, and Kinata and Charity were working on a large puzzle along with Bree and Estar.

"...uh, okay." I sat down beside Lemon and looked at her with a small smile. She smiled back. I wasn't sure what was on TV, but the subtitles were in a language I didn't recognize. The sound was so low I'd have to learn the language. I waited for it to make sense, the way languages did after a couple minutes, but nothing did. I couldn't find repeated words or phrases... **"How do you watch this stuff if you can't hear it?"**

"Sometimes we sit around and we make up voices for the characters." Lemon nodded with a smile. What she wasn't aware of, though, was that the soft sounds that should have been the track of audio to the show, were actually binaural suggestions, on loop, ever present. The subtitles were not in any language at all, and were simply there to focus the inmates minds on something other than the subtle sounds. **"It's really fun! We usually do it when the show with the Koala is on, because then we can each have someone to play."**

"Hm..." I tried to listen for the words, but the more I tried to hear them, the less I did. I crossed my arms and sighed, watching the words go by. It had to just be gibberish, right? But what's the point of that? Who makes up a fake language for criminals? **"Hey, uh... who is your doctor?"**

"Um, Doctor Janet takes care of me mostly, but Colette does my hypnosis." Which was how the system worked — four doctors total, two patients each, but the two hypnotherapists handled all the hypnosis between the two of them. **"Doctor Janet is super nice, but Colette always gives me a sucker after**

hypnosis," which was only twice a week for someone as far into the program as Lemon was, **"so that's nice. You have Colette as your doctor all the time, right? You're lucky... you must get so many suckers."**

"Not yet, but I'm sure I will. I'm still not a quality patient, ya know?"

"Really? 'Cause you're always so well behaved around us." Honestly, I was. It wasn't because I was playing them, though... I thought of them like kids. You don't act out around kids. **"Except the bathroom thing." "Right, yeah." "You didn't get punishment..."** So someone else noticed, too. **"Colette gave permission for drinking my bottles."** It was the only lie I could think of that wouldn't arouse suspicion.

That was the thing — in their first three months here, nobody got permission to use the bathroom. Ever. It wasn't for negotiation. Every single one of the girls there was diaper dependent for that period of time, some for longer, and it was a crucial part of adopting a new and better self. Lemon didn't like to believe that Velvet was lying, but it truly didn't add up. Rather than upset the boy by calling out his lie, she switched tracts. **"How is it having Annie as a roomie?"**

"She's very sweet." I wanted to ask about Marlow, about what he could have done, but I didn't need to. I'd seen her case file, and the rest was just fear. Fear was an easy emotion to deal with, because fear was so unfounded. It's a numbers game. I'd do better tomorrow night with Annie.

"Uhhuh, she is. We all kind of like to take care of her, though, especially when we have new friends come here because some people want to take advantage of her." Most prisons had a sort of protection-for-value thing going on, where inmates might trade goods or sexual favors for guarding against other inmates. Here, things were different. Here, the others looked out for their own because it could just as easily have been them.

"You were worried about me when I came here, then?" A logical assumption to make. I was sharing a room with Annie, after all. She nodded. **"It's okay, I'd be worried too. She's a nice girl."** I looked at Annie and Ayla. The two prettiest girls here. But Annie was still so different. I'd fix her...

14.) Her Decision

As the night before, dinner presented was two bottles for the boy, a white creamy one and a chocolate one. He stared at them with the sort of dread one only gets

when going to the dentist, and the girls around him didn't seem to take too much notice of his forlorn nature. None of them but Ayla. **"You get to move up to real food just as soon as they know you're ready for change, Velvet. Are you excited for it? To be like us?"**

"Sure," I muttered, though no part of me did. I put my head on the table and looked at the bottles. They sat in front of me, glistening. Identical, except not. One chocolate. I should just drink them. But memories of last night... they whirled overhead, like a raincloud. Pouring. I felt sick...

"I know it's daunting, and you feel like you're betraying who you are... but who you were got you into this mess in the first place. I like to think about it like... that boy was the one who basically will be spending his whole life in prison, now. Only the prison is the mind of a new girl who might have potential to be a good person." Ayla was so many leagues above the others here, but she was also the closest to graduating. Soon, she would be given surgery on the states coin as per her desire, and placed in a new life.

Prison in the mind of a new girl. I didn't do anything wrong. I killed twelve people, but they killed one. Each of them. They put a hand on a pen on a paper on a desk on a switch on a lever of a life of somebody special and innocent. I didn't care how special and innocent they were. They each had one stain. **"I'm not drinking it."** I got up from the table and walked back to my room.

Rather than stay at the table, rather than stay safe and not risk her own punishments, Ayla got up from the table and chased after the boy, meeting him in the bedroom. **"Please come back to the table, please? If you don't, you'll get punished, and punishment sucks, doesn't it?"** She was soft, soft in the way few boys could ever hope to be, and she shared that softness by holding his hand.

She held my hand over the threshold of my room. She was so much bigger than me. I tried to tug it away, but she held it tight. She wouldn't come in my room. Was she not allowed? **"...I don't care. I don't. Let them punish me."** I could handle the electrocutions. Put myself in a trance, maybe. I was caught off guard last time... **"I'm not drinking it. I'm not."**

"You're going to drink it, if you do it on your own, or if they restrain you and force you to. And if they decide forcing you to is better, you won't get meal times. You'll be trickle fed, like Kinata was. She tried to kill herself, so for three months she was trickled and restrained and I bet if she could speak at all, she'd tell you that she didn't treasure the experience." Ayla had seen a

lot, and had been here a long time. She knew the rules, she knew how to play the game, she knew how to get out of here and live a life.

My chest was hurting. I wanted to work on Annie tonight. I wanted to show Colette I was useful so this didn't happen again. I needed time to *think* and that bottle made sure I didn't. I shook my head, once, twice, before Ayla pulled me back out of the room. We stood together on her side of the doorway and I tried taking my hand back. **"I don't want to!"**

Her arms wrapped around the boy, the softness changing from a simple hand hold to her entire body, and she rubbed his back, and up his neck, and spoke softly. **"Nobody ever does, Velvet. And you can fight it, or you can ride it, just like a wave. Do you want to drown? Or surf? You gotta figure that one out. The more you go along with it, the more of you you can choose to keep."**

My head fell into her shoulder and I moved my arms up to hug her. But I didn't. I let them fall back at my sides. My chest was hurting. I didn't want the bottles. I couldn't do it again. I was trying to stay strong, to show Colette she couldn't get to me, but whatever was in those bottles... I just needed time to think to myself. I needed time, and they weren't giving me any...

"It gets easier, Velvet, I promise. How about you come sit back at the table with us? If you still decide not to drink your milk, at least you won't get punished as badly for not being at the table." Having been there as long as she had been, Ayla knew quite a bit about the punishment hierarchy and how they were carried out and ranked.

I hesitated. But she was right. No use getting a worse punishment for no reason. I let her take my hand and walk me back to the table like a child. She sat me down and asked somebody to move. She sat next to me, across from Lemon. I just stared at the bottles, feeling sick, and slouching back in my chair.

"I won't make you drink them, because I know it can make you feel... detached, at first. But I kind of grew to consider the bottles being like... when you get drunk?" Not that Ayla really remembered being drunk. **"You're still you, you're just... under the influence of something else for a little while, that's all."**

"I know how drugs work," I said flatly. I actually sounded a little annoyed. I didn't mean to. I was just anxious. I slouched further in the seat and closed my eyes. I was going to be sick. It wasn't like alcohol. It was like a temporary lobotomy. It didn't turn me into a me under the influence of something. It turned

me into somebody else. I knew a lot about drugs. More than most people. But I never knew anything that worked like this....

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to offend you. Some of us were into drugs, and some of us weren't, and it's better not to assume anything in a place like this." A couple of the girls gave nods in agreement, though Annie seemed completely oblivious to it all. **"What are you in here for, anyway? We're discouraged from talking about it, but it's not banned, and telling someone might help you feel more centered?"**

"I killed somebody," I said, turning my attention away from the bottles. Honestly, a change of topic meant more than anything. Even if it was about my past. I wasn't ashamed of it. I wasn't proud either, though. I did what needed doing. **"A couple people, actually."**

"I developed a new type of date-rape drug that was undetectable by over the counter means, and dissolved immediately and had no taste at all." Ayla nodded her head, slowly, looking at the milk with a guilty frown. **"It's actually what they based the milk on, my work, ironic, right? It used to be different, it used to be a sedative, mixed with an amphetamine and something else. Amateur stuff."**

I bit my cheek and looked down at the milk. It seemed to move on its own, even when it didn't. Swirling. Hypnotic, in its own way. I closed my eyes. My work was being used here, too. Not in the same way - but my profession. To turn grown men into children. Into girls. It was brilliant and I was jealous... if I wasn't on this side of the padded walls, it would be the experiment of a lifetime.

"I think that they're doing good work here, though, I do. I was... a very bad person, Velvet. I thought only about if I could do something and never about if I should be doing it. I guess I got given perspective. Like, you know when you play a game and you make character building choices and you get to a spot and you realize how much you just wish you could start over? That's what this is. A chance to start over, with the lessons learned about our past." Ayla was often the philosophical one, and would be going willingly into a paid life of promotion for the virtues of this project.

"Well, I'm not a bad person. I don't need to start over." **"You killed somebody,"** Bree said. **"More than one,"** Lemon said. I sighed and crossed my arms over my chest. **"They deserved it. I'm not going to reoffend."** I had no more brothers left to avenge. The light above our head blinked. My color. Most everyone else was done eating. I shivered.

"Do you think they had families?" Bree asked, thoughtfully, not accusingly. **"Maybe their families didn't think they deserved it, Velvet?"** Charity added, and Lemon nodded with her two pieces next. **"Their husbands or wives or children, or brothers and sisters or parents, even. What about all that sadness, do they deserve that?"**

I slammed my hands down on the table, just trying to shut everyone up. One of the bottles toppled over and rolled onto the floor. The chocolate one. My head was pounding. Everything was quiet for a minute. Everything. Completely still. I could have walked to the bedroom, away from them, but I didn't. I sat back down in my chair, and nobody said anything.

Kinana stood up, carefully, quietly, deliberately, and picked up the bottle off the ground. Wordless as always, she placed it back on the table in front of Velvet, and then frowned, pointing at the two bottles. And for a small asian girl who couldn't talk, she sure know how to convey a lot of seriousness in a very short timespan.

A tone above us. My tone. Most of the girls left the table. Annie watched nervously, but Lemon pulled her way. Kinana and Ayla and I stayed in our seats. The bottles stayed where they were. I didn't talk. They didn't talk. I wasn't doing this. I wasn't...

"If there's a bottle between your lips when the orderlies come, they won't punish you. They'll allow you to finish your bottles, and then you can have a peaceful night. We can watch TV together, or I can paint your nails. Would you like that, Velvet? Pretty nails?" Kinata held up her hands to show off her nails that Ayla had done, but she didn't smile. Kinata never smiled.

"I'm not thirsty." Three words that meant something very different. I waited for something to happen. For the orderlies to come through the door. For Ayla to yell at me. Everything was so still, so suspenseful. But I wouldn't drink the bottle. Because... because honestly, I just couldn't handle it.

At the far end of the room, by the checkpoint, emerged two orderlies. Given orders, not to punish, but to ensure the boy drank his milk. They approached the table, and the one of the left of darker complexion spoke clearly. **"Velvet Duke. Drink your milk."** It was a sort of last effort warning, before what was going to follow happened. Before he was strapped to his own bed and fed against his will.

I shook my head. The two girls beside me sighed and got up from the table. Nothing they could do. I wasn't going to drink it. They could give me a level 80

punishment for all I cared. The milk was worse than anything they could throw at me...

As before, as always, both orderlies lifted the boy, one side each, and they moved him. Not to the checkpoint, though, to where the punishments would be conducted. But to his bedroom, much to his confusion. When he was taken inside, he was placed on the bed, pinned legs and wrists with restraints that came from compartments in the posts, and secured in place. One orderly left to retrieve the bottles.

"W-wait! Hey! Stop, hold on! Please!" I tugged at the restraints. I tugged at the bindings on my wrists, on my ankles. The beds weren't very big but I wasn't very big either. One of the walls was brought up, closing me in. One left, the one where the orderly stood. My chest was hurting. I didn't want to be trapped in here... I didn't... **"STOP STOP PLEASE!"**

"You are being spared punishment for your indiscretion, Velvet. You should be thankful for the mercy." When the orderly returned with the bottles, he had something else in his hand — it looked like a leather strap, with a tube going through a mouthpiece, and in the inside, the closest resemblance was to a pacifier. One orderly held the boy, while the other fitted the strap into place around his head, pushing the soft mouthpiece between his lips, forcing his tongue down so he couldn't block it, and then strapped it into place. It was very clear the intent of this apparatus.

I kicked my feet and screamed through the gag. I screamed and screamed but words didn't make sense. And then the milk flowed through. I tried to plug the hole with my tongue, but there were so many holes. It dribbled out of the corners of my mouth and thrashed around on the bed. It seeped down my throat, into my stomach, and I kept kicking and screaming.

The bottles were suspended from the post of the bed, upside down, both feeding into the same tube but mercifully the flow was steady, and not trickling for hours the way it could have been. This wasn't intended as punishment, this was just a required step to ensure the boy had his milk. **"Your disobedience will be reported to Doctor Clement upon her arrival to work in the morning."**

I kicked my feet and screamed while the lights turned off. The door closed and I was left alone, drinking the bottle, the only light the one above me, dim and glowing. And I cried. I really cried. I felt so pathetic. And I couldn't help myself. This wasn't right. This wasn't how it was supposed to be...

15.) Her Morning After

"Oh dear..." I stood above the bed the next morning, shaking my head softly. **"I thought we agreed that you were going to have your evening meal, Velvet? You're very lucky that I left instructions for if you didn't, or you would have had punishment, and then this as well."** I reached down to the strap around the boy's head and unbuckled it, pulling the feeding gag from his mouth.

It wasn't like the first night. It wasn't at all... it was dark and lonely and all the weaknesses and slobbering left messes on the bed. And my diaper wasn't changed, so I was sure it leaked on the mattress. Everything was dark and I couldn't stop crying. And when I finally fell asleep, it was fitful. The tightness of the crib was traumatizing, and the restraints made it worse. And in the morning, when Colette undid the pacifier from my mouth, my lips were trembling...

Honestly, I was disappointed. I expected more of the boy, but then again, perhaps he really was just like the rest of the inmates here. Maybe he wasn't special at all. I leaned down and unfastened the restraints, his legs first, and then his wrists, and lowered the long side of the crib so I could sit next to him. He'd made sure that his diaper has leaked through, and a good portion of the sheets were wet. **"Come here, give me a hug."**

I kicked her. I kicked her hard. It threw her out of the bed and I climbed on top of her, hitting her over and over. Tears rained down from my cheeks. This wasn't an act. I wasn't angry. I was scared. I kept hitting her again and again, crying. **"YOU LET THEM HURT ME! YOU HURT ME! YOU LEFT ME THERE!"** The milk was not good for me. It messed with time. When all you want is to play and cuddle and feel love and instead you feel nothing..... I finally stopped. Stopped before the orderlies busted in the room. And I sat on her stomach, holding my head in my hands.

How interesting, how... very interesting. I shouldn't have thought about it so clinically, but I'd never seen him this way. His blows were shocks, but not that painful, and by the time he wore himself out, he was barely impacting me at all. He sat on my stomach, his accusations rich in the air, and I reached a hand up and touched the boy's cheek, slipping under his hand. Gently. **"I'm sorry."** I mean, it was his fault. He chose not to have his milk, he chose to do what he did. But what he needed to hear right now was that I cared about him, so I told him that. I apologized.

I let her put her hands on my cheeks. Two orderlies were in the door, looking nervous. They waited for Colette's orders. They waited even though I was on top of her, even though I had proved to be dangerous. They waited because they trusted her. I let her play with my hair. And like a child, I fell on her and cried. I cried so hard.

With my other hand, I let the orderlies know to wait outside — but they wouldn't leave past that point. They'd give us privacy, but they wouldn't chance another attack. The milk was long out of the boy's system, and the back of his dress was damp and clammy, but I'd handled worse here. I wrapped my arms around him, held him close, and let him cry while fingers found his hair. He didn't know how lucky he was, that punishment was much worse than this, and then this on top anyway. He didn't realize the magnitude of the power exchange here — he had to have his milk. It was inevitable. **"I hope the orderlies were gentle with you, my fragile little flower."**

I shook my head, burying it into Colette's shoulder. This was pathetic. I knew it was pathetic. But I felt so alone. I felt so alone in there, and now I wasn't, and I was just really happy about that. She played with my hair until my crying slowed, until it stopped. Until I was feeling more like myself...

There were things I should have been doing, things other than having a pee-soaked little doll laying on top of me, soaking my top with tears. But every patient was different, every case was unique, and I dealt with them accordingly. Eventually, his tears stopped, but he didn't get up. Breakfast would be very soon, and I hoped he wouldn't put up a struggle. **"I want to be your friend here, Velvet. I like you very much, and I think we can be. But you have to be a good girl with your routine, too, can you do that for me?"**

I nodded quietly. I felt so sick. I felt dizzy to such an extreme. I hadn't slept well. I just wanted to go back to sleep... **"No more,"** I pleaded. **"No more like that... just one bottle please... just one..."** It was a leap. A concession from zero bottles to one. As long as I could just have one at a time, I didn't care... I didn't care...

"If you have every bottle at your proper mealtimes, you can skip one of your evening bottles." It was the same deal we already made — one bottle would be substituted. In this state though, in this fractured moment, he was much more open to seeing the potential benefits of my offer. It wasn't as though I wanted him to be four-pointed and fed that way, left restrained all night. He'd made that choice, though.

"...okay..." Okay, I'd go along with it. For now. But Annie... I sighed and climbed

off Colette, sitting on the ground in the wet diaper. The dress was the same as yesterday, faded green marker along the white parts. It had run with the wetness of my tears and sweat and piss. I felt so pathetic...

"I'm going to show you to the showers — a lady orderly will get you clean, and then you'll be back in time for breakfast, squeaky clean and lovely. How does that sound, Velvet?" The showers were opposite the punishment room, and usually showering would be done with all the girls at once. This was a privilege.

"...okay..." She helped me up and out of the room. Annie watched. Everyone watched. They'd all heard the crying. They'd heard the screaming and my hitting her. A crowd gathered, but they all dispersed when the orderlies came out. Now they watched me as I was led to the showers, in the alcove, just across from the bathroom I'd gone into.

"Please get her cleaned up, and dressed appropriately in something for morning time." The orderly nodded her head — she was cute, and not particularly large, but if she were working as an orderly in a place like this, she probably knew more than enough to hold her own. She watched the doctor leave, and then lifted the dress over the boy's head, dropping it in the chute on the wall. **"How do you like your showers?"** Most of the orderlies didn't make conversation, let alone care about comfort.

"...um..." I shuffled my feet on the tile. The room was big. Obviously for group showers. I couldn't imagine seeing those girls naked, with boy parts. They were too pretty. Then again, I bet I was pretty too. I never did well at being masculine.. **"Medium, I guess..."** The morning had been so terrifying. I just needed to relax...

The orderly turned the faucets on, bringing in water that was warm, and then lovely, and turned to the boy, untaping the diaper quickly and pulling it from between his legs. He was naked now, but she didn't linger on the fact, she didn't stare, she didn't do anything to make the boy feel uncomfortable — she just motioned to the stream of water. **"You'll have a few minutes to enjoy the warmth, and then I have to clean you per the guidelines. I'll try to be gentle."**

Oh. My. God. I forgot how much I loved showers. I forgot how it felt to be clean, not covered in pissy diapers and water based paint. My hair ran dark under the water, turning its usual red to a sickly auburn. It was so relaxing. Such an amazing moment to think... to plan for Annie. To plan for Colette. To feel better about last night.

It was a precious few moments, precious moments the orderly gave the boy privacy, and turned her back despite the rules. But precious few, and precious fleeting, and soon she approached the boy with the wash-cloth and a rubber apron over her clothes, and began to wipe down areas of his skin, systematically. **"Spread your legs please, and put your arms out to the side."**

"...do you do this to the other girls?" "They are monitored." "I can do it, if you'd like." "Doctor Clement gave instructions." "Right... sorry." I guess I knew I had to be cleaned. But the rag wasn't the nicest thing in the world on my skin. It hurt just a little, enough to leave my skin pink.

Hygiene was important, cleaning was important, and especially for someone who was new to the program — the ammonia could wreck havoc on sensitive skin. She ran the cloth up and down and around, and when she was done, she parted the boy's butt-cheeks and washed between them, too. **"You're going to be cleaned inside now, if you like, you can place your hands on the wall and lean forward a little."**

"Uh... huh?" I knew what it was because I wasn't an idiot. I mean, I did have a doctorate. She attached the hose to one of the things on the wall and I felt my cheeks turn a little pink. My glasses were splattered with water from the shower - she hadn't taken them away. I wondered why. Was it a specific instruction? Nah... couldn't be. **"...um..."**

"You're on a liquid diet, and will cease to produce solid waste — but I presume that you ate the day before you arrived? You'll be cleaned out as is procedure, to prevent you soiling your diapers." It was a dignity thing. It was also to prevent normalizing the process of bowel movements so as to keep them humiliating as possible when they were invoked as punishment.

I bit my cheek and nodded my head. Honestly, shooting water up my ass was a million times better than doing it in a diaper. So I put my hands on the wall and my forehead on my arms. I'd never had an enema. I wondered what it was like...

As the boy stood now, the water no longer cascaded directly onto his back, and overshot him a little, so the coldness of the gel being rubbed between his cheeks, and worked inside of him with one gloved finger was very obvious. Most boys balked at the intrusion. Velvet didn't. The orderly worked her finger in and out for a moment, and then replaced it with the rather bulbous head of the enema attachment, designed to be inflated upon insertion to secure and prevent leaks. Now the boy squirmed.

It wasn't bad. I mean, it wasn't a day at the park or sex with Roger. But I'd had things up there. So what? The trouble came with the plug started to expand. I let out a harsh exhale and closed my eyes. Weird feeling. Very weird. No water, though... not yet, anyway.

Once the plug expanded into place, secure and sound in its anchorage, the water began to flow. Body temperature, a little soap, some salts and minerals to ensure a proper clean. And, perhaps most concerning of all for all new inmates — a whole three quarts. The orderly rubbed the small of the boy's back with a gloved hand, gently. **"This takes some time, and you may cramp. That's normal."**

"...okay..." I felt the water going into me. It was... very strange. Not uncomfortable. At first. Then it got uncomfortable. And then it hurt. Cramps. Sickly cramps. I whimpered against the wall as the water kept filling me. And filling me. And I felt sick. And I thought I was going to throw up. **"Th-that's enough....."**

"The quantity is determined by the system, I don't get to control it. I'm sorry." And she didn't envy the boy — she knew how much water it was, because she'd done this to numerous inmates, she knew the way their tummy would distend, how they'd whine and shift like little girls getting their first periods. She was sympathetic, but there was little she could or would do. **"Try to slow your breathing."**

I tried, but it hurt more. I started to whine. **"T-take it out... take it out..."** Oh god. It was actually starting to hurt. It was starting to really hurt. The cramps were too much. I was going to be sick. I was going to throw up. But it didn't stop. Not for another two minutes. Two FULL MINUTES. And when the water stopped, when it all stopped, I couldn't even breathe. Cramps washed over me every two seconds. I pushed. Pushed to expel it all out of me. Nothing worked.

"You're required to hold for ten minutes now, so I will tend to your hair while you do. Step back into the water, please." Velvet remained tethered to the wall with the hose in his ass, like some perverse pet on a leash, but had enough movement to get back into the spray of the shower. Not that he wanted to.

I couldn't let go of the wall. Everything hurt. Waves every one second. Everything burned. I was crying. Nothing should hurt like this. Nothing should bring this kind of pain, just needing to use the bathroom. Is this how constipation feels? Fuck everything. Fuck, fuck, fuck. **"I..I'm going to throw up..."** And before I could say anything else, I did. Milky liquid and stomach bile. Everything hurt...

The boy fell to his knees, but no amount of throwing up was going to help, and the orderly simply knelt down beside the boy and took the opportunity to lather shampoo into his hair. They were on a time-limit after all, and if he could be entirely clean by the time he was to expel — and expel he would, because the plug near his feet was open and designed for more than just water — then this would be over soon.

I was so lightheaded. I was so out of energy. So much for a relaxing shower. The woman rinsed the baby conditioner from my hair - it made the curls in my hair soft and straight - and I held my head against the wall. The cold on my cheek kept me awake...

There was a tone after a time, the boys unique tone, and when it sounded, the orderly helped the boy to his feet — which meant she supported his entire weight, guided him over the plug hole in the floor, aimed the shower at his behind and the back of his thighs, and removed the plug once it was deflated enough to do so.

Oh. My. God. I didn't even care if I was shitting onto the floor in front of the orderly. I didn't care. I just wanted to not feel like I was dying, and I really didn't. I thought I finished, but the orderly kept me pressed to the floor by my shoulders. My knees ached on the cold tile. Thirty seconds later, I went again.

Three full expels was the standard criteria. Most inmates would have a smaller expulsion every few hours for the day that followed, but diapers made short work of that. The room was foul for the moments during the flushing, but the hot water of the shower washed away all sins and soon the orderly turned it off, leaving the boy exhausted on the ground, but very very clean.

I hated everything. She helped me to my feet, but I didn't even feel it. I fell against the wall in the dry side of the room. She was patting me off with a towel and I was trying not to fall over. My head hurt. My ass hurt. Ugh, it was like high school all over again...

"You'll follow me into your bedroom and I'll get you dressed in time for breakfast." The boy was wrapped in the towel, wrapped like a girl across the chest, and led through the door and back into the large common playroom. Many of the girls looked up, but few stared. They'd all been through what he had, and their memories couldn't compare to the actual event.

The orderly didn't close the door behind us. She helped me onto the changing table - every room had one, except the main room - and laid me back on the

padding. I looked up at the ceiling with a sigh. I was too exhausted to argue, especially after a night with so little sleep...

The diaper was fastened into place — a thicker model that the boy would become used to, to account for the discharges that would no doubt happen for the next 24 hours — and the scent of powder filled the bedroom giving way to the sound of diaper tapes being pulled into place for a snug fit. The kind lady orderly was precise and gentle, and felt no need to degrade the boy further than he had been already. **"You can pick out a dress if you like. From your first six on the left, please."**

"Okay..." I got up off the bed and waddled over to the closet. It was Annie's closet, technically, but new things were added. All the dresses were short and childish, but I expected that. I picked one in red. It would match my hair. The nurse was kind and dressed me, making me do very little of the work myself. Some parts of being a baby wasn't so bad, I guess.

By the time the five minute tone had chimed for breakfast, the boy was done, and the orderly led him to the table and helped him to sit, before going back beyond the security checkpoint. The other girls looked, and whispered, by it was Ayla who approached and sat, smiling at the boy warmly. **"I heard you had a rough night, Velvet. Wanna talk about it?"**

"Not much to say," I said quietly. Honestly, I was a little embarrassed at my over-reaction this morning. It was an over reaction, no matter how terrible the night was. The issue was, I was exhausted. I hoped the bottle would just put me right to sleep...

"We all have an Event Horizon, a moment we just cross over and kind of accept this. I hope that can be yours, Velvet, so you start to enjoy yourself here. It might turn out to be one of the most fun things you've ever done." Ayla had a lot of positive things to say about this place, which did beg the question as to her loyalties. The thing was... she always seemed to be fair and objective, so she might just be speaking the truth.

"Hopefully..." The bottle was put down in front of me. I took it quick, putting it between my lips. Maybe because I was hungry. Maybe because I didn't want to be punished. Maybe there was a timer, keeping track of all this. Honestly, I think it's that I wanted to sleep...

Everybody was surprised by the speed at which the boy took the bottle, but he drank it down nonetheless, no complaints about keeping himself, no complaints about the haze, or the hormones or the fact it would make him wet himself. He

was compliant. Soft. Not at all the boy he'd been when he came to this place, and every girl had been in his shoes. **"I'm glad you're being a good girl, now Velvet."**

I gave it the courtesy amount of time, but I didn't start giggling. I yawned. I really yawned. And I set my head down on the table. I waited for the giggles to kick in while the other girls ate. People watched me, waiting all the same. But I felt my eyes closing. I curled up to the wood of the table and fell asleep.

16.) Her Hypno Session

"Come on, snoozy girl." I'd come after breakfast to check on my newest charge, but he lay contently with his head on the table, and groaned when I shook his shoulder. **"It's time for your training session, it'll be a fun one today, I'll show you."** The other girls had already dispersed from the table long ago.

How long had I been here? I wished I had a clock. I rubbed my eyes and shuffled my feet against the tile. Colette took me by the hand and helped me up from the table. We walked into her office. I was still half-asleep. The diaper was wet. That was the first thing I noticed. The milk was over and done with. I guess I slept through it...

"Are you feeling a little bit better now? It's nice to be clean, isn't it?" There were so many things this morning he should have been punished for, but I was getting soft. I wanted him to progress through the program, but not to lose his brilliance. It was time to make plans.

"Uh huh..." Honestly, I wasn't sure it mattered. And I wasn't clean, since my diaper was wet. But whatever. I didn't really care. I put my head on the back of the sofa and rubbed my eyes again, pushing my glasses out of my face to do so. They were a little bent from the way I was sleeping on the table. It took me a minute to fix them. **"What silly card game are we playing today?"**

"I'd like to play my cards, actually." I pulled myself up on the edge of the desk, sitting atop the surface and took my glasses off to clean them while I watched the boy. **"This place can be so much more than it is, Velvet,**

and I want to make it that. And I want your help, and I think we need to figure out if its achievable."

"...I'm not following." I said I'd help. I said I'd fix Annie. I didn't know *when* I'd fix Annie, because apparently I'm drugged 90% of the time. But hey, I said I'd do it. And I will. What else could she possibly want from me? And if she did, what was she willing to give me in return?

"I want Marlow out. You're going to fix Annie, but it's not enough. It's not going to make enough of an impact. Marlow is working on his Light-Induction system, and the Round Table will eat that up because it means they can automate the process. We need something to counter that." I shouldn't have been being so candid, but I'd just had a meeting with Marlow and the Round Table, and I was stressed.

"Light induction isn't automated," I said flatly. "That guy doesn't know heads from tails. If your board thinks flashy lights count as automated..." I sighed, rubbing my temples. "You still have to hypnotize. You still need someone who knows what they're doing. It's just a... a cannon. A cannon at a wall. It doesn't mean you can take over the city just by taking down a wall." Idiots.

"I know that, but he's got results. Poor results, but if they can replace the need for more hypnotherapists on six figure salaries with machines, they will. I've been wracking my brain all morning figuring out if there's a way we can automate. Automate properly, not with some gimmicky light machine. Maybe with a headset, sensory block-out, I'm not sure. Are you aware of anything in the field? We have a VR headset available to us if we need it." Times like this is when I'd smoke. I'd given that up years ago, but I still longed for it.

"...are you a real therapist?" I mean, I'd seen her walls. I saw them now. The degrees. She had a Doctorate. She was twenty-nine by the look of things. She earned her title two years ago. She had so little practice, I was sure. "Hypnosis, I mean. Or did you just take a seminar in college and think that's enough to qualify?" I wasn't being catty. I wanted to know how good she was. What I was working with.

"I specialized in the field, and went directly into government black ops for the military in the middle east. Deprogramming and interrogations,

helping child soldiers who'd been raised to kill, and bringing back trauma victims from the worst things imaginable." Maybe he didn't expect that. It was deep cover work, not something a civilian would usually be involved in, not something I could print on my wall, not something that made medical periodicals.

"...hm." I was impressed. Not to say I *believed* her. But I was impressed. Even if it wasn't true, it was a fantastic lie. I leaned back on the couch and crossed my arms. She was sitting in front of me in her chair. It was closer than we usually were in her office - she liked to stand. **"Hypnotize me."**

There were a few different types of hypnosis I employed in my career, differing mainly in the armor the patient had up. Trauma victims required a softer touch than potential suicide bombers, and I weighted my methodology accordingly. For Velvet, I'd give her my best. He could handle it. I nodded, and stood up, removing the boy's glasses and setting them on the table. I touched a few buttons under a panel on my desk, and the lights went out, replaced by a star scene that rotated slowly around the roof of my office, and provided enough light for me to be seen, accompanied by soft distant music. We both knew that without proper technique, everything else was just gimmick, though, and I sat back down close to the boy. **"I'm going to use an induction method not approved for use by the APA. Or any association of conscionable merit. Do you have any questions?"**

"...uh... I guess not." She took my glasses off? But I fought off Marlow without my glasses *and* the milk. She wasn't going to be that difficult. And I already had blockades in my head. She didn't know about my method of hypnosis - the empathetic voice, I called it - and I didn't know about hers. Interesting.

The stars and the music was soft, and the glasses no doubt made it difficult for the boy to focus, but those things would be a stark contrast to what was to come. Cold-reading was something few in the industry took seriously — too much margin for error. **"Growing up queer, knowing your place in the world would never be as part of the majority. It's hard. Hard knowing that no matter how proud you'll be, you'll never be normal. Never be like the other kids. Never be the one behind the bleachers, never be the high-school sweetheart couple. Never get the boy that you want, never know if you feelings will get you kissed or killed. Small. Vulnerable. Weak. Always having to work harder to prove**

yourself. Always having to fight more than everybody else. Beat up at school, tossed around the locker room, pinned to the floor and treated like meat. It's enough to make you feel like meat. Feel like product for consumption. Small. Vulnerable. Weak. Everything a woman is, but the kind and sensitive men that all your lady friends date, they don't want almost a girl. They want a girl. You get the assholes, the pricks, the horrible objectifying monsters. Small. Vulnerable. Weak. A fate you're born into, no fairytale ending, no fairytale beginning. Always second best. Always on the fringe. Always weak. Your own life ruined before it began, you wriggle into the lives of others. Sleeping around. Breaking up relationships, destroying families. Small. Vulnerable. Weak. Drifting, floating endlessly, wanting to belong, and finding not a single place you do. No place, no happiness, no home. Nobody understands, nobody cares, nobody wants to help. Small. Vulnerable. Weak. Nobody but me... nobody but me... nobody but me....Small. Vulnerable. Weak... and for the first time... safe."

...she was stupid. Stupid because you always lead with an induction, and she didn't. She led with a hypnotism. I was about to call her out on it, but things were a little fuzzy behind my eyes. Stupid glasses. She put her finger to my mouth when it opened. Her words were pointless. I mean, they made my chest hurt. They made me ache all over. But I wasn't hypnotized... I just felt... a little off center...

There were signs when a person ached inside, ached because a barrage of shots had landed a hit. The way breathing changed, the way that eyes shined, the way that glances were hidden. If a person was armored, I knew how to deal with that, and Velvet was. He looked away a little, and I began the second phase. **"Small.... small in size, small in impact, small inside..."** My voice had changed from the shotgun to something so much calmer, steadier, more level. I'd filled his mind with shrapnel, and it made it easier to slip inside. **"You're so small, so vulnerable, so precious. Precious. Listen to my words, precious, listen to the way they comfort. Comfort, comfort like embrace, comfort like a blanket, comfort like happiness. Happiness, happiness like the warmth of love, the warmth of my words, the warmth of safety. Safe. So safe. Safe to listen, safe to follow, safe to fall upon the one who cares... the words that protect. Protected... protected and free, free to listen, free to focus, focus on the words as they wrap you up. Small. Precious.**

Comfort. Happiness. Warmth. Safety. Protected. Free.. focus now, focus on my words, those words that get softer and softer, smaller and smaller, small enough to tumble inside of you..."

"**This is stupid...**" Her words were... strange. Out of focus. Too fast. I couldn't hear any of them. Only when one word was repeated twice, two clauses tumbling together. My head was light. I blinked my eyes a little, trying to stay focused. It was... harder than I wanted to admit...

"Tumbling... tumbling. Falling... falling. Words, such pretty words, falling deeper and deeper, burrowing, settling. Happy and home. Your thoughts and the words, the same, the same tones, the same sounds, so close together, so the same. Words the same as thoughts, thoughts the same as words... hard to tell the difference... impossible. The words are your thoughts safe and trustworthy. The words protect you. Small. Vulnerable. Weak. Sleep."

I nearly fell over. Colette caught me, I think. She helped me lay down on the sofa so my head was propped up right. My eyes were closed, though. The last word... it just made me so drowsy. I wanted to rub my eyes, to wake up, but I didn't. I was so comfortable...

I didn't need to accomplish anything, only to prove the concept. Only to show the boy, perhaps for the first time, that I wasn't some inept government employee. I didn't know why I felt the need to prove anything. So he graduated at like 17? Well. He was the one in jail. **"It's so easy to sleep, so easy to focus on your thoughts when you sleep. So easy to realize truths you never did. Truths you hadn't considered, thoughts and truths lost to the noise of awakesness. Only now, only in sleep, can you hear them. Hear their truths."** Proof of concept. Simple. Very simple. **"Truths. Your name is Velvet. Simple truth. Velvet. Lovely. Pretty. Strong. Simple. Velvet. Your name has always been Velvet, so praised for it growing up, so unique, so special. Yours. Something that can never be lost. Velvet."**

There was red around me. Red curtains, maybe? Or red carpet. I couldn't tell. I just felt quiet and still. Everything was warm and safe. A hypno space. I didn't get what was with all the red curtains, though. I tried to figure it out. I think she was disguising it. I wasn't really going to lose this woman, was I? I could wake up. I snapped my fingers. The red went away. Everything was

dark. I opened my eyes. But they didn't open right. Everything was still dark. Ugh...

So much of this induction technique disarmed my patient — the cold-read could be cruel, could be mean, could be fictional, but it didn't matter. It left everybody the same: helpless. I could break a person down to the basest elements of their persona, reallocate, shuffle priorities, change levels as simply as a sound engineer with volume sliders. Velvet was very talented, but the boy had never had a load of me before. **"Red and beautiful, the way you've always dyed your hair, always played up to the image, always adored the way people smiled when they said your name. Never to tease, just to appreciate. Your pretty eyes, your gorgeous hair, and a name to bring it together. Velvet. Velvet. Velvet. So protective over your name... so quick to defend it. Your name is your truest strength, your favorite thing about yourself."**

More red curtains. They seemed to wrap around the ceiling, too. I snapped my fingers again, but they only faded in color. Grey curtains. My chest was hurting. I didn't get it. Why curtains? Flowing? Wrinkles? Um... sunlight? Too vague of metaphors. She was working on something, and I couldn't figure out what. The hue returned to the curtains, and I snapped my fingers again. Less color slipped out of them.

"In every happy memory, every wonderful moment, you've brought your name with you with pride. Velvet. Velvet. Velvet. The day you graduated high-school, your first kiss, your favorite diner, every happy memory, every highlight of your life... Velvet. Bright red hair and a bright red name." It was time to seal the deal, to press this into reality. **"You're wrapped up in your name, Velvet. Thick rich redness that comforts you like your favorite blanket as a child, warms you like cocoa, protects you like warm embrace. Red Velvet. Sweeter than any cupcake."**

The curtains were too close to me, now. I snapped my fingers, but nothing happened. I tried to close my eyes. Everything was red. Red? Was that it? What was red? The curtains hugged me. Then I got it. Velvet. The name. She was working on my name. But they were already touching me, and they smelled like vanilla, and I snapped my fingers. They were gone. And I was... exhausted. I fell to the dark floor and gasped for air. Sweat trickled down my forehead. Fuck...

The boy had tumbled off the sofa, tumbled onto the floor, broken the trance, yes, but I'd won. He knew I'd won. I knew I'd won. And cemented it very simply with a question, one that I knew he'd answer, knew how he'd answer, knew the response he would fall upon answering, and smiled softly. **"What is your name, again?"**

I swallowed. I looked up at the woman behind the fogginess of my vision. I knew what she wanted me to say. I knew it very loudly in my head. But it wasn't the right answer. But finding the right answer... I just... was having trouble. Um... shoot... what was it...

I clicked my fingers. Once. Twice. Three times. Post-hypnosis, thought were hard. Trains were easy to detail. **'Quick! Name, what's your name? Don't think, just speak. Oh, I remember, it's Alice, right?'** So close to his actual name, but for a girl, he would react. I knew he had. I'd made him proud of the name Velvet. He'd defend it.

"Velvet," I said sharply, instinctually, and then I hesitated. I blinked, and I looked away, and I stumbled to my feet. I was a little pissed off. I didn't want her to actually accomplish anything! I just wanted her to shut up. I just wanted to see how far she could go. I pushed past her and fished my glasses off the table, putting them back on my nose. I was obviously upset.

As he slipped his glasses on, I tapped the buttons on the desk, and the lights came back up, the music stopped, and he glared at me. I wasn't smug. I was actually quite humble, especially in the presence of a hypnotherapist who had the sort of national renown that my experience ensured I never would. **"Now, are you satisfied?"**

17.) Her New Project

I was satisfied. Without the lights, the music... with my glasses, with her sitting and me standing, I had a moment to calm down. I had a moment to be impressed. I sat back on the sofa and rubbed my temples. I'd have to focus on remembering my old name later today... **"Automated hypnosis. You think that's possible?" "I was asking you." "...you'd need a... a completely unsympathetic induction. You'd never be able to do it." I**

didn't mean any offense, and I think she knew that. I meant that her methods were literally the exact opposite of what she'd need. She needed me...

"Would you be able to?" I didn't say it to question his abilities, but we were cut from different cloth and we were being frank and blunt about things right now. I needed to know if it was even viable to form a partnership over this. **"We need something that is going to be able to be deployed with limited supervision. Ideally, the hypnoterapist won't need to be involved on a patient level at all."**

"Like what, audiotapes or something? Like that fucked up stuff online?" I'd done my research. **"No. Probably not. I mean, those things are for people who want to be hypnotized, and even then, they only sometimes work. To hypnotize off an audiotape...? I don't think so."** This is what made automated hypnosis impossible. Nothing works for everyone.

I went around the back of my desk and opened the drawer, setting the VR headset down on the oak surface. **"Active noise canceling audio input, and 100% isolation from external visual stimuli. It's designed for 3D, but we can use the discrete screens to send imagery to individual elements of the brain."** Velvet was right about audio-tapes, or audio-only. There was only so much automation that could be done with audio alone.

"...a headset." She mentioned one earlier. I leaned forward to take it from her and turned it around in my hands. I took my glasses off and put the headset on instead. The cups covered my ears. The screens were off and everything was dark. I blinked a lot to adjust. No light, though. I replaced the headset with my glasses. **"I don't know."**

"We've got this on loan for two weeks. Which means we need to develop and prototype a delivery system in that amount of time, without Marlow finding out, while still progressing your usual schedule. All this will be pointless if I can't turn you into a productive member of society at the same time." And we'd proven now that any confidence he might have had with regards to my hypnotic prowess was overly stated.

"You sure have a lot of requirements," I said with a sigh. And then a

bigger question. **"If I help you... what do I get out of it. Like you said - I still have to be in this program, right? I can't just... be done."** I wasn't going to make this easy on her. I was enticed, sure. An automated hypnosis program. A *real* one. It was so exciting. But she was the one with benefits. I was the one with curiosities and labor.

"I'll allow you input on your final design within the program. There are some hard limits we need to respect, but I would be in a position to allow you some influence over particulars. Like, for instance, ensuring no more of the lower tier punishment routines, designed to compromise cognitive ability. You'd stay sharp." There was a caveat that I had yet to mention, of course, and that was that the boy could have no professional credit for his work. But I knew he was curious enough to want in. **"And you said yourself, Velvet. You think you can do better here, right?"**

"...no more stupid card games, you mean?" I had caught on. They were supposed to be making me stupider. I had caught on with the TV, too. The fake words. It's easy to ignore things when you know about them. **"I hope you have more to offer than that."** Something she knew, something I knew, and something Marlow would know... I was the only one that could do this.

"Your professional life is ruined, because of your charges. Nobody would hire you, not in this country, not in any other. I'm willing to offer you employment upon graduation, and documentation aligned with your education and experience here." It was something I was uniquely positioned to offer — we were authorized to reproduce government documents. Birth Certificates. Licenses. Other documentation as required. **"Velvet Duke would be provided continued work on the project and its successive iterations, but you'd also have the freedom to continue your life at the level you left it. The majority of our graduates find satisfaction in minimum wage or administrative work. It keeps them out of trouble."**

...shit, that was a good deal. I knew she was right. I knew I had my license stripped when I was convicted. I knew I couldn't practice psychology again, let alone hypnotherapy. A place like this? I could work here? Running experiments, the other side of the door? I liked the sound of it, but... I pushed. **"I appreciate that. And I'll accept it. But I'm an instant-**

gratification kind of person. **If you want to keep me in your pocket, I need something day-to-day.**" A small change to anything. Just a reminder that I wasn't the others.

I steepled my fingers, watching the boy curiously. This wasn't something he even wanted — he just wanted to know that he had the wriggle room to add something else to the table. I thought about it for a moment and leveled my offer. **"Dinner meal replaced with food. It'll only be one tier up. But you still won't have bathroom privileges, which means you'll be using your diapers for more than wetting. But it does mean clear nights for you to think about our problems. And less drugs."**

"...alright." **"Get me a working proof. Then you'll get your rewards."** Ah, milk tonight. A catch. That was fine. I'd have time to think before lunch, and hopefully time after dinner before bed. The milk only lasted a couple hours, and then the rest was about me. This also meant time to help Annie... I liked my odds. **"Deal."**

"I'll expect results from you, Velvet." I tapped my pen on the table-top, but there was a little smile played on my lips. **"You're going to leave here as a girl like everybody else does, never lose sight of that. Embrace it if you have to. But your progress here isn't secondary. Think you can manage that?"**

"Yeah, sure, why not." I got up from the sofa and stretched my legs. I handed the little headset back to Colette and looked at the door. One bottle, but that wasn't for a while. And another later tonight. I'd leave here as a girl, she said. I needed to meditate on my old name. **"See you after lunch."** And I closed the door behind me.

18.) Her Library

Lunch was an hour away. I sat in the living room with paper and a crayon, sketching out ideas. An audio induction could be universal, but the resistances were aggressive. People didn't always respond to the induction - that's the joy of a therapist. To get anyone inducted, to put them into a trance, so to speak, it would require more than I could do with audio. How do I work video into that?

"Wha-cha doooooiin'?" Annie sat down next to the boy, craning her neck to try and see what he was drawing. None of it made very much sense at all, and she frowned a little bit, puffing out her cheeks. That wasn't pretty at all, it was all in one color and one color was always boring. **"You should use more pink, uhhuh! An' lallow, an' green, but only for grass 'cause nuffin else is green."**

"Okay." I used green next, working out something about frame rates. The point is to stress the mind. Stress the mind, stress the barriers. If I could use vision to do that... just an induction... the rest would be easy. I mean, not easy, but not as hard. The eye sees frames in 24 per second. I could do 25. But with two screens, I should do 50. I knew of TVs with bad frame rates. It fucks you up.

"Now blue!" Annie handed the boy the next crayon, and then the next after that, an orange one — she liked this game a lot. After those, she got bored, and laid her head on the boy's lap, staring up at him and occasionally handing him new colors as per her requests. He always flashed the same smile, small and gracious, and then went back to what he was doing. **"Hey kids,"** That was Ayla, and she sat on the sofa adjacent to the boy and Annie and nodded. **"How'd things go with your training this morning? Fitting in a little better?"**

"I think I am, yep." I didn't look up from my pad of paper. The crayon sucked. No offense to it or anything, but it didn't give me the precision I needed to write small, and I was already on my third sheet of paper. Ugh. What would I need for subliminal frames? I was sure I read a study on that..

"I'm really proud of you, Velvet. When smart people come in here, they're usually the ones that suffer the most." "Belbet is smart enough to not wanna, uhhuh!" "Velvet, sweetie. Remember? Vvvv. vroom vroom?" "Sounds jus' same to me..." "Do you think you'll be graduating soon, Ayla?" That was Estar, and rarely was she seen on her own — this was a special occasion, it seemed, and she leaned over the back of the sofa. Estar was Spanish, and her skin was smooth and perfect ~ it was a telltale sign of the hormones in the milk, but nobody there really realized that, except for perhaps Ayla.

I looked up from the paper, then. I knew Ayla was probably the most advanced here. But I didn't know she was so close to getting out of here... I bit my cheek and watched her movements. I should have been watching her better. She's the end product. I wondered how much I could mimic...

"Soon. They need to arrange my Coronation Surgery, but Colette says that she's got corporate approval she's just timelining." "So you're going ahead with it?" "Well, I'm a girl now. There's no point hiding any part of me anymore, right? Are you still not sure?" Estar had been here a fairly long time as well, only three or so months less than Ayla. She'd be having to make those same decisions, soon, and she shook her head. **"I don't know. I feel like I'm a girl anyway, you know chica?" "Annie is a girl!!!" "Yes she is."**

I looked back down at the papers, but I didn't move my crayon. She *wanted* to get surgery? How had that happened? They didn't have to, though? I would never want that. Right? Ugh, I felt sick. My head was already fucked up. I got up from the floor with a faint smile. **"I'm going to take a nap before lunch."** I needed to meditate...

"I like napping, it's like a sleep but in the middle of the day." Annie had followed the boy into the bedroom, because it was their bedroom, and was sitting on her own bed while Velvet laid on his, eyes closed, but not asleep. And she babbled, because that was what Annie did. **"I think it's silly that grown-ups don't nap. because it makes a lots of senses to me, uhhuh, it does really!"**

She could talk all she wanted. It didn't bother me any. And it made her happy. I put the papers down on the bedside table and crossed my fingers over my stomach. I took a deep breath and quickly fell into my own trance. The place with the red curtains. They were still here. I started pulling them aside, looking for new words. My name. Ugh, where was it hiding?

"...and anyway I wish I could still wear diapers in the day time like you Velvet because sometimes I forget to go to the potty and..." The world of curtains obscured far more than it first appeared to, they didn't only mask walls, they formed an ocean unto themselves. Colette's Aggression Stance was thorough, and dug a hole long before she tossed her patient backward, falling among the new truth and knowledge. Some hypnosis took time to

take, took many sessions, took months of work. To an unprepared individual, Colette's techniques could be devastatingly effective.

I snapped my fingers. A lot of curtains disappeared. Stupid velvet curtains. I sighed and started opening them again. Where was that name? It was my name. I just had to find it. I'd opened them all, and they went away. Quiet and darkness. Her work was gone. But I still didn't find my name...

"Velvet? Velvet?" Annie shook the boy on the bed, because he'd started to fret, and by fret, she meant 'swear constantly under his breath in ever-increasing pace'. **"You nuh allowed say them wordses..."** Not just that, but Annie actually looked... concerned. Worried. She crawled into the boy's bed and put her head on his chest, even as his body continued to tremble. **"Issok, issok, Annie here, Annie make it all better."**

I took a deep breath, quieting down. No point in getting frustrated. I looked around for curtains, but there weren't any. I'd go to my archives. Another snap of my fingers and I was in the library. I started going through the books alphabetically. The smart thing would be to look up my name, but I didn't know it. So I'd go under N. The library was a safe place. Hypnotists couldn't touch here; that's what I'd built the dark space for. Everything they did was temporary. I found the book. N. Name. Alexander. ...right. Wow, was I stupid. I put the book back on the shelf and opened my eyes.

"Are you okay, Velvet?" In a moment, just like that, the storm seemed to have passed, and the boy had calmed and quietened. His eyes were open now, but Annie stayed cuddled to his chest. There weren't a lot of things Annie was good at, but due to her cute innocence, she was very good at comforting those who were sad or frustrated or otherwise distressed.

"I'm fine." I played with her hair. Alexander. I would have to spook Colette with the knowledge after lunch, during our hypnosis session. Which she never used. We'd probably talk about the project. Worked for me. A tone came on overhead. **"Come on, let's get to lunch."**

Lunch was milk. No substitutions allowed on account of the dinner agreement. Notably, all the food had the requisite hormones required for the girls' development, but the milk was still important to this phase of things. The boy didn't look too happy to see it, but nobody expected he'd

really put up too much of a fuss either way. There was too much at stake now for him to.

I drank the stupid bottle. I drank it because I had to, and because I'd only get one bottle for dinner. I drank it because I knew tomorrow I'd have no bottles for dinner. After lunch, I'd talk to Colette. We'd talk about the project. Tomorrow I would be bottle-free. Some pancake rolls, maybe. That would be nice...

19.) Her Dizzy Day

"Hello there, Velvet." The voice belonged to the one person very few people at the table ever wanted to be addressed by, and his hand came down on the boy's shoulder as he spoke. **"Bring your baba, we're going to have a little talk. Nothing serious, child, just hoping to see how you're adapting here."**

I looked back at the other girls with a frown. The bottle was only half gone. Colette wasn't around - she never was at mealtimes. What was this? Just a conversation? He wasn't my doctor... and the last time we'd had a little altercation, I probably pissed him off some. I bit my cheek and put the bottle back between my lips. This was going to suck...

"There's a good girl, I see you're already learning some manners. Come now, this won't take long, you'll be back with your baby friends before lunch is over." He led the boy, holding his shoulder, to his office and closed the door behind the two of them. Velvet continued to drink the milk. **"How are you fitting in, precious one? Making some friends?"**

"Yeah, I guess." Now wasn't the moment I wanted to piss him off. The haze of the milk would hit in a couple minutes. I'd fought him off once before, and I could do it again. But it wasn't something I wanted to test. I just needed to get through today so I could work on Colette's project. **"Thank you for asking."**

"I see that you've been ordered some unusual variances in your dietary menu." He was thumbing through some pages on a clipboard, frowning, thoughtfully. **"At first I thought it must have been a clerical**

error, some kind of oversight. A girl of your age loves her milk, doesn't she? You do, don't you?"

"...it's fine." A clerical error? What was he talking about? Colette had the power to change my meals whenever she wanted. It was her right. Sure, it might not make sense to Marlow, but it wasn't his call. I kept sipping the bottle. Three quarters of it was gone. Ugh. Ten minutes, tops...

"I'm wondering if perhaps Doctor Clement's judgement might be somewhat impaired, to be allowing you substitutions and, as of tomorrow... solid food." He drew his words out, took his time flipping through pages, wasted no energy at all processing what needed to be told. He knew the milk would start to affect the boy shortly, and he'd be more direct once it had.

I shrugged my shoulders. The bottle was nearly gone, but I took it out to speak. **"She's my doctor - I trust whatever decisions she's making."** It was the best I could do. Act oblivious. Why else would I be getting meals? Obviously because I was cooperating. I needed to leave. I quickly sucked down the last of the bottle and stood quietly. My stomach felt sick.

"Sit back down, child. You're not dismissed." He watched Velvet, carefully. **"I'm sure you must realize the ramifications of playing favorites here, Velvet. All our patients must be treated with equal care, to ensure the best possible results."**

"I didn't know I was being treated special," I said honestly. I did, but I was a fantastic liar. **"I think because I cooperate more than the other girls - that's what Miss Colette told me, anyway..."** I looked a little afraid. Like I was a child. My stomach still grumbled. I was trying to stay focused. **"After being in trouble last night, I wanna be a good girl..."**

"Well, that's excellent to hear. Tomorrow is Doctor Clement's day off, and I'll be tending to your needs in her absence. I think I have a splendid reward for being such a good girl." He wasn't stupid. Arrogant, yes. Not stupid. He read through the boys lies. He knew that he and Colette were up to something — that damn woman was far too attached to the patients. Thankfully, after tomorrow, Velvet wouldn't be interested in helping anybody.

I gave him a hard look. He couldn't change my doses. Right? And hypnosis wasn't every day. I could wait for Colette to get back in the office. But things were starting to get blurry and I shuffled quietly on the carpet. Stupid milk... stupid milk...

"I'm going to take a little blood from you today, just to ensure you're right where you ought to be." He approached the steel side table to the gurney and started to prepare for the blood sample, while the boy watched his alligator-skin shoes carefully. There would be two needles today — a blood test, and a shot. Nothing serious or long lasting in the shot, just something to enhance the boy's haze. Something more direct than the milk. Until tomorrow, when the preparations were ready, Velvet would be a giggling idiot. **"You might feel a little pinch."**

I ached. I sat on the table with a little pout and the man took blood from me. Then he stuck me with another needle and I shuffled off the table, bandaged and dizzy. He opened the door and let me back out into the room. I rubbed my arm where the bandaid was. At least I got out of there before the milk really kicked in...

The milk would take its toll around the same time as the shot, making it remarkably difficult to tell that the shot had done anything — only now instead of producing a milk haze that lasted an hour or two, the boy would be in a much more surreal state at least until morning. Giggly. Happy. Oblivious Compliant. Essentially, kept out of the way.

"Come with me," Colette said, taking my hand. I was covered in fingerpaints again. I wasn't drawing on paper, though, I was drawing on Annie. Annie was drawing on me. I got up from the floor and stumbled after Colette. And I blinked. **"Oh! Oh, I gots drawings..."** I hurried off to my room. **"Velvet!"** She sighed and followed me. I started fumbling through my drawers.

This was quite unlike the boy — he was usually on the tail-end of the milk by now, and serene and calm and taking back control of himself. This was like he'd only just had the milk. I followed him to the drawer, looking just how covered in paint he was, and he sang in an airy voice while looking for the picture. **"Velvet. We need to have our afternoon meeting, remember?"**

"I got papers, though! Ideas about the headset thing..." I looked around, pouting. "... where are they? I had 'em right here... just this one here..." I pointed to the spot on the desk. They weren't there, though. Nothing was. I hadn't written literally anything descriptive on them. Just numbers to help keep things in my head. To anyone, it would look like very precise childish ramblings. Not even a code. Not discernible in any way. Literally just math. But my math...

"Did you put them somewhere else?" I was patient, and calm, and took time with the boy. But he was still acting very out of character, and I couldn't help but frown. He'd gotten paint all over the drawers, too, and I was starting to have my concerns. **"Where was the last place you had them?"**

"...here... right here... before lyin' down, I put 'em here..." But they weren't there. **"Maybe Annie..."** I pouted a little. It wasn't like her to take stuff. And she helped me make them! Oh right, the colors. Gosh if someone tried to figure them out they'd think the colors meant something. I couldn't help laughing at it, giggling like a child.

"Did you have your milk late today, Velvet? I didn't get any orderly reports to indicate that you did." This was not like him at all. Yes, all our patients eventually crossed their event horizon, stopped seeing boy in denial and started to see girl in progress. But even for Velvet, this wasn't fitting to the timeline. I rubbed my temple.

"Nuh uh... had milk right when the lighty thing was on, and... oh, I drew a pitture on Annie's arm, wan see? Come on it's got a sun and then there's this one flower, and-" **"Velvet, sweetie... I think we need to go in my office for a bit."** I pouted. "...otay..." She took me by the hand, getting paint on herself, and led the way.

This made very little sense — the schedule and timeline were all wrong. I would expect to see this level of immersion after... months, maybe. And even then, he was less like Velvet and more like... Annie. I closed the door behind the two of us and he jumped on the sofa, bouncing on his diapered behind with a satisfied grin. **"How has your day been so far, darling? Would you like to tell me about it?"** Something had to have happened...

"Um. Uh huh... I made those drawings. Um, with numbers." I was rocking back and forth on the sofa. Everything was foggy and my head was light and I couldn't stop giggling. **"Um, and then lunch, and my baba..."** I never called it that. Marlow called it that. So I guess I started? Oh right, Marlow! **"And Mr. Marlow said he thinks you are putting me on bad food and he gots something to give me... but he didn't give me nuffin, just took blood from my arm."** I showed her my arm, the bandage.

"Marlow, huh?" Listening to the way Velvet was talking, it was becoming abundantly clear that something was amiss here. Marlow had taken blood? Why? Velvet was not his patient. **"Well, princess, you know, everybody has their own special food needs, and that's okay. You're not in any trouble at all — I think Doctor Marlow was just a little bit confused. He's an icky boy, and boys are dumb, aren't they?"**

"Uh huh! 'Cept Roger!" I smiled up at Colette, and then I missed Roger, and then I pouted, and then I laid down on the couch. My arm itched where Marlow took blood. I scratched the bandaid a little bit. Then I looked up at the ceiling and kicked my feet.

"Roger does sound like a very nice exception to the rule. How about you tell me about him?" Basically, more or less, I needed him distracted. He scratched at the bandaid, and I pulled my chair alongside the sofa, waiting for him to start his story before I carefully peeled it back to check on the blood-test site. There had to have been something given to him, but even if there was, Marlow wouldn't be dumb enough to make a second injection site. He'd use the same hole.

"...he's big. Like super tall! And got big arms like my whole body, and he picks me up at stupid times, but not like in a baby way, like in a cute way, and kisses me like a sunset, and we like to lay on the couch, and he's got a daughter, but she's nice to me, but her momma hates me 'cause I think I made her momma and her dad not love each other anymore..."

"Well, you know, my thoughts on that are if that maybe they didn't love each other in the first place, and only thought they did." One injection site. But there was swelling, slight puffiness, typical of an injection of a medication. What had he given Velvet, though? I thought about the

agents we had available on hand. **"Maybe you just helped Roger to realize what love really meant to him, Velvet?"**

"Maybe. I think so. I mean, that's what I think. 'Cause he's happier with me and he says he always yelled lots with his wife. I think that's why his daughter likes me too, 'cause at least her dad and momma aren't yelling..." I broke up a family and put it back together again all at the same time. How awesome was I? **"...I'm a little sleepy, Miss Colette..."**

I didn't recognize the agent. I hated that I didn't recognize it. The stuff used in the milk wasn't suitable for injection, and the symptoms didn't match up inherently anyway. But Marlow had given the boy something, and I was going to have to go to the pharmacology wing and pore over the logs in order to find out what. Worst of all, this would set back the progress by at least two days, because I wouldn't be here tomorrow and I'd planned to give him a task to work on. Fuck fuck fuck. **"Okay, darling, you've been a very good girl. Want me to put you down for a nap?"** I had no choice but to treat him like Annie for now. **"Do you need a change?"**

"Nuh uh..." But I did. I was messy. I hadn't really noticed, and it didn't really smell because it was mostly water from the enema. But I wasn't clean. I wasn't dry. She changed me anyway, and she soon learned that she shouldn't trust me with comments about my diaper. Honestly, though - I think I was just too tired to care. When I woke up, in my own bed, I was feeling no better. Not sleepy, but still dizzy. Everything was funny and I couldn't think right. I sat down at the table, the overhead light blinking. I couldn't do another bottle like this.

20.) Her Dizzy Dinner

Annie tugged on the boy's arm playfully as he sat down at the table, and held up her painted hands, now dried and colorful with a grin on her face. **"I did make you a picture, Belbet! Come see come see come see?"**

"Maybe soon, Annie?" Ayla was approaching the table, and she sat down next to the boy with a small smile. **"It's time for dinner, remember? Maybe afterward?"** Ayla was at the point in her development where she was filling out the edges of adulthood again, and that meant she noticed things. Worried about things. She spoke quietly to Velvet. **"Are you okay?"**

"Uhhuh! I'm good." I was talking different. A little like Annie. Just with rounded consonants and the way my eyes glittered. I was dizzy, but I was happy. I kicked my feet under the table like a child and waited for food. Ayla watched me...

"Marlow took her after lunch, and she's been off ever since." Bree offered, and Ayla looked back at Velvet. **"Marlow did your hypnosis, huh?"** There was a sickening sound of dread in the girl's voice. Not because she felt anything negative toward Annie, but because the idea that with one session, he'd replicated her behaviors in Velvet... it was scary.

"Nuh uh... nobody can hypno me." Everybody rolled their eyes. I pouted and crossed my arms over my chest, kicking my feet. **"I mean it!! I'm a hypnosis...is...itist..."** I pouted, unable to think of the right word. **"I'm like... the best in the country..." "Uh huh." "No, hey, I think she's right..." "I am right!" "I saw on a news report before coming here. A boy..."** She hesitated at the name. I didn't know if she couldn't remember it or if she didn't want to say it. **"Alexander,"** I said with a pout. **"Thass me!"**

"You dun' look like that's your name, you look like a Velvet!" "I would agree with that." "Definitely, and with that cute hair? Definitely Velvet." Lemon concluded, another recipient of Colette's naming ideas. **"Well, you're just the same as us now, aren't you, Velvet? Just as pretty, and just the same, and we're all friends — so that means you must be able to be hypnotized. Maybe you didn't even notice?"**

"I would notice!!" I was getting a little worked up. I mean, I didn't really care that much about stuff when I get like this, in the weird baby haze, but I didn't like people thinking poorly of my work. I was a great hypnotist! Oh, great, I can say the word just fine in my head... **"Not hypnotized... juss... I think my milk is lasting longer than usual..."** That shouldn't happen? Right?

A few of the girls shared knowing glances. All but Annie. And Ayla looked worried, genuinely, and frowned at Estar across the table. The both of them had known Annie before this had happened to her, before she'd been broken. And her milk lasting longer certainly sounded like an accurate early descriptor. **"Your body is just learning to need it, that's all."** Ayla gave

the answer that could calm the boy most, but she was still worried. **"You're becoming a girl all the time, and your body is just helping now, is all."**

"Nuh uh! I mean it! I swear, I'm not..." I was whining like a child and Ayla still sat next to me. She never sat by Annie anymore. I think I was the new baby in the family, the one that needed taking care of. I felt sick... but then they brought out dinner.

One bottle. One bottle as promised, and Marlow hadn't messed with that. He didn't need to, though, not with the way the milk magnified the effects of the shot. Or the other way around. Ayla smiled. **"Want me to feed you your dinner, Velvet?"** It was a test. Velvet would never allow that usually.

"I..." My cheeks went a little pink and I shook my head. I took the bottle and drank it myself. But a part of me wished I didn't. It would be nice to lay in her lap. To be fed. I mean, not nice, but... gosh, maybe this place was getting to me. I'd have to meditate on it. But that sure as hell wasn't happening anytime soon.

21.) Her Best Clothes

"Wake up, wake up, wake uuuuuppppp!!" Annie shook the boy in his bed with gigglish glee — he'd slept through the entire set of chimes that indicted it was time for group showering. Actually he'd slept remarkably well, and she shook him a little more for good measure. **"Velvet! Come on, come on, is time to go, the bells went beep beep beep!"**

I sat up and rubbed my head. I had never in my life felt so sick. Like, it was like I'd gone drinking. And drank everything in the entire bar. My head was pounding. What the fuck did that asshole do to me? I stumbled up from the bed, wincing at the lights. Ugh...

"It's time to go do showering, Velvet. Gotsa get clean clean clean!" The bedroom door was open, and outside the door across by the bathroom entrance were a large majority of the populous, only Ayla hadn't made it there, yet. There were orderlies by them, two of them including the lovely smaller woman that had given Velvet his first cleansing. **"We all gots go get cleans, and we helps to cleans each other, uhhuh, uhhuh."**

"...right... sure..." I was going to be sick. I was sure of it. I grabbed my glasses off the nightstand. Annie helped me out of bed and toward the shower room. I stumbled along the way, trying to keep the room from spinning. I was so drugged. But how? The milk?

"Children, please disrobe." That was the smaller woman, and by the front of the line, Bree and Charity were both already in the process of doing so. It seemed that modesty with regards to nudity wasn't the world's biggest issue here, to say the least. Maybe it was because everybody here felt like family to one another. **"You gots take off your clothes now, siwwy Belbet, uhhuh, gots take them all off so you can do getting clean!"**

The diaper was soaked through. I didn't like the way the bottle made it happen without me thinking. But I was more interested in the headache. I undressed entirely and joined the girls under the water. I thought I was going to fall over, but damn did the shower help.

Each of the girls, Ayla now having joined them, seemed like living anachronisms, each mismatched with body parts that seemed impossible. All the girls received electrolysis to remove all traces of body hair, but that didn't seem to numb out the facts anyway. They all had penises, most of them having permanently softened from the high doses of experimental hormones, but penises nonetheless. On some of the newer girls, it wasn't so bad. On Annie, it seemed impossible. **'Hol' still!"** All the girls helped to clean one-another, and Annie was no stranger to it, but Ayla approached just before she applied a soaped cloth to Velvet's body, and smiled. **"I'll take care of Velvet, Annie, how about you help out Bree?"**

Ayla ran the washcloth over my skin and I took a deep breath. Everything felt dizzy. Everything hurt. But the water was helping. Ayla was helping, too. **"Thanks,"** I muttered. I wasn't sure why she was taking such an interest in me. But the effects of last night were not known only to me.

"You had hypnosis with Doctor Marlow yesterday, I'm surprised you're in as good shape as you are. He doesn't seem to care about us the way that Colette does." There were no parts of the boy's body that she found off-limits, she cleaned tenderly and softly and dutifully, and came with experience from having cleaned every single one of the girls here. **"Are you feeling okay?"**

"Head's killing me... I think he drugged me." Did that make sense? What the hell end game was that? Mess with me for one day? Was he really that butthurt about my ignoring his hypnosis. I rolled my eyes. Pathetic assfuck. **"Doesn't matter. Didn't change anything."**

"He's not a silly man, and he doesn't do anything without meaning to." Ayla nodded, having experienced both first and second hand, the lengths the man was willing to go. **"We're projects to him, not people. If he drugged you, it's because he wanted to see the effects of the drug on you."** Which didn't make sense for the short game, but Marlow as a long game kind of man.

"...was it bad?" "It was a lot like the milk. But longer..." ...all day. I sighed and ran my head under the faucet. What if he put me on that stuff perpetually? What if he made it so I couldn't think right? I felt sick. That wouldn't happen. Colette wouldn't let it...

"I would just do what he says and maybe hope that he gets bored. He usually does. And when I graduate in a little while, he'll have someone new to experiment with and you'll be off the hook." It as an unfortunate eventuality of all this, an inevitability. Marlow did pretty much as he pleased. **"I wish he were gone, though. Colette is a much nicer person and a better doctor too..."**

"Yeah, I think so, too..." The waters started to turn off. We'd all been cleaned as much as we would. My hair was covered in that baby shampoo again. It was a weird kind of silky. I wrapped a towel around myself, but the orderly - the woman - came over and wrapped it around my chest instead. I didn't argue.

"Thank you, Ayla. I will get Velvet dressed." While the boy was still in diapers, every one of his diapers would be put into place by a staff member. As for how long that lasted, that was up to the speed at which he embraced his training. The orderly helped Velvet through the playroom and into his bedroom, the towel wrapped around his chest and his hair soft and vanilla-y. She didn't make conversation.

I sat on the edge of the bed in my room. She was rifling through a cabinet above the padded table. I looked at my feet and dried the waterdrops off

my glasses with the towel. What was Marlow up to? **"Up here." "Right..."** No point protesting anymore. I'd kind of gotten used to the diapers. And it was better than pissing on the carpet, right?

"It's good to see that you're starting to calm down a little bit, Velvet. It really is better not to fight." There was something about the orderly, something... familiar. Or maybe it was just the level at which she invested herself into this, and the level of interest and care she seemed to have. To be honest, nobody else bar Colette actually seemed to see the boys as people.

"I didn't say I wasn't fighting. I'm just being practical." The woman took the towel away from me and started to diaper me. It was weird how normal it was by now. The woman poured powder over me and taped the diaper in place, leaving me on the table while she fished around the closet.

"Your orders today are for specific attire," she explained, shortly before producing the dress that was so tiny it would hardly even come halfway down the diaper. It was the kind of impractical things infants might be dressed in, when they weren't expected to be moving around, when they just had to look pretty, and this mimicked the notion amazingly well. On the hanger, as well, as a bonnet in a matching style. **"You'll be in the care of Doctor Marlow."**

"...that is the stupidest thing I have ever seen..." I sighed and climbed off the table. I wasn't going to play his game. I wasn't going to let him humiliate me. So I took a deep breath and forced a smile. **"Give it here."** Fuck, this thing seriously doesn't even come close to covering the diaper... was I actually embarrassed? No. I wasn't. I was sure of it...

"You may put this on, but there are directions that you are to wear mittens once dressed, so you can expect limited mobility options once you're dressed." A glass-lace baby dress, and a bonnet, and mittens, and a diaper on display for all. There was no mistaking an agenda to these decisions, and the woman handed the boy the dress courteously. **"I'll fetch your mittens."**

...I didn't like this. I hadn't even started the day. I'd still need my milk before training, and another bottle before hypno. Was this stuff still on the table when Colette wasn't around? Why wasn't she here? She didn't have a life.

She should be here... the woman put my hands in the mittens and I curled my fingers. I felt so nervous...

Inside the mittens, at the wrist, a soft click, a firm plastic band secured each mitten into place. The system would only be able to be released with a special magnetic key, and between the fastening and the padded nature of the mittens, the orderly was not kidding when she said that he'd have limited mobility. Finally, she wrapped the bonnet around his head and fastened it in a bow beneath his chin. **"Is there anything I can get for you, Velvet?"**

"Out of my face." She smiled, then left. She was so bitchy today. Yesterday she was so kind. Ugh. I bit at the gloves, but they didn't come off. I felt so stupid. The little bell rang for breakfast and I looked in the mirror. I couldn't believe this...

A few of the girls stared. They couldn't help but stare. They were used to seeing one another like this, yes, that much was true, but never to see such a spectacle made out of one of their own. Honestly, the point of the system here was to help normalize childish and feminine behaviors. And this seemed so contrary to that, it was beyond belief. **"Tha's a cute dwess, Belbet..."**

"...yeah..." I pouted and sat down in my seat. The table was full already. I felt so foolish. Stupid Marlow. His plan was working, whatever it was. I had so much attention. I just wanted to fade into the background. The food came out, and surprise surprise... no food for me. The bottle sat there and I sighed. I tried to pick it up but the gloves simply wouldn't let me. **"You've gotta be kidding..."**

"Want some help?" Ever the mother of the group, Ayla presented the question in the most polite and considerate way possible, and only after letting the boy try it a few times first. Nobody else said anything. Colette wasn't here today. Everybody wanted to stay on their best behavior, and it was truly telling of the culture that Doctor Marlow had cultivated here.

I tried with both hands, but when I tried getting the bottle up to my lips it slipped out, tumbling on the carpet. Ayla picked it up. My cheeks were a little pink and I rubbed my face with the back of the mittens. **"This is so**

dumb... they can't get mad at me for not drinking it when they put these mittens on me."

"You would be surprised." Ayla smiled, but when she went to push the bottle to the boy's lips, her light lit up above the table. It flickered between her color, and red with a very angry tone. It meant she was doing something wrong, and she frowned, looking up at the light. **"Here,"** she spoke quietly and quickly finished pushing the bottle to the boys lips, housing it safely, and pressing his mittened hands around it. As quick as she could after that, she sat back down, looking around nervously.

It was so hard to balance. My arms were in an uncomfortable position and my fingers hurt. But I was sucking on the bottle just fine. For a while anyway. And then it fell out of my mouth. I tried to pick it up with my mittens, but it didn't work. I looked at the table, but they all looked away. This was pathetic. I crawled onto the floor and worked at it with my mouth, finally getting it in place, lying on my back like an infant and drinking. I didn't dare try to get up.

Nobody said anything. It was clear as clear could be that Velvet had painted himself as a target to Marlow, and as much as they all cared, Ayla's brief defiance in helping him was as far as any of them would ever go. Not that it was their fault, it was just that fear was a powerful conditioning tool.

I drank the bottle. Upside down. Trying to stay as still as possible. It was humiliating, lying on the floor while the rest of the girls ate on the table. There was no talk today. No discussion. They were all nervous. Why were they so nervous around him? I tried to get up, but the bottle slipped, rolling down the tile to the glass counter by the door. I hurried after it on my hands and knees.

22.) Her Building Fear

"Well, hello there child." The bottle had come to rest next to one of the very familiar, ugly and green shoes of the doctor that nobody even wanted to talk about. He looked down at the boy, a small smile played across his lips, and raised his eyebrows. **"Well aren't you looking darling this morning."**

"**Yeah....**" I tried to fish the bottle away from the man's shoe, but he picked it up for me. I hesitated, climbing to my feet. He was so much taller than me. Not quite as tall as Roger, but they couldn't have been too dissimilar. And still, the rest of him was anything but... I reached out with the mittens to take the bottle back.

"Use your words, little Velvet. Ba. Ba. Baba. Go on, now." Those words were going to be something the boy cherished soon - he'd tolerated the drug well, yesterday, but it was only to keep him out of the way. The blood test, however, confirmed that the boy was a viable candidate for a throat injection he'd been liaising on. It would only stay in the system a short while - days, maybe. He was almost giddy at the opportunity to administer it.

"...baba," I muttered, and the man handed me the bottle. I nearly dropped it all over again, but I managed not to. I looked down at my feet before putting the teat back in my mouth. I felt sick. This guy was so fucked up...

"There's a good girl. You run along now, finish your breakfast. I'll see you shortly afterward, little one. We have a lot of work to do to in order to make up for the time Doctor Clement has wasted. Don't you worry, you'll be back on track in no time." Nobody looked at him. Everybody tried to pretend he wasn't there. A figment, a phantom.

I was scared. I mean, I was *really* scared. I didn't know what he could possibly do to me, but with these mittens... with the milk in me. I swallowed hard and looked down at the bottle. I wanted to throw it across the room. I wanted to say no. But the bottle was mostly gone. I'd get the effects either way... so I was a good girl. I drank it.

"Don't like him at all." Ayla was sweet, Ayla was lovely, but she was just as shaken as the rest of them at the table were. Everybody except for Annie, who just seemed to block the whole thing out. **"Remember, just... let him do whatever he wants, and he'll get bored of you, okay?"** Her advice sounded significantly less assured now, though.

"Sure..." I wasn't scared, I tried to convince myself. I wasn't. Because he didn't have anything on me. He couldn't get in my head if he had all the keys. He was pathetic as a hypnotist. But that wasn't what I was worried about. I had finished the bottle, and with the mittens on my hands... what if

he tried to physically hurt me?

"We're gonna all be here for you, okay?" Honestly, being Marlow's target for the day was almost a blessing. Odds were that he wouldn't remember anything, or barely anything, while the rest of the girls would have to sit here in dread all day. Ayla would never tell the boy as much, though.

"Sure... yeah, sure." I sat awkwardly in my chair, worried. I tried to get the gloves off, but they wouldn't. I swallowed and looked up at the ceiling. I wasn't sure I remembered being this frightened. And it wasn't even Marlow. It was these stupid mittens. Because I couldn't defend myself... **"They can't hit you here, can they? Like beat you, or rape you...?"**

"You can be disciplined as they see fit." There had been some bad-apple orderlies early on, ones that had taken the role with the impression they had more power than they did. Bad things had happened then, but Ayla saw no reason to scare the boy with tales of the past. **"Usually they don't want to hurt you, though, because this is a rehabilitation facility, not a prison. They want to help us."**

I didn't know why I was worried. I just needed to relax. The bottle was finished. I had ten minutes. So I closed my eyes and crossed my arms. Quiet. Just quiet and still. Detach myself from whatever these moments would bring. I didn't have to play... I could let this game go.

23.) Her Gift

"Are we a dozey miss already?" Despite all attempts to the contrary, to stay calm, Velvet nearly leapt out of her skin at the sound of the man's voice behind her. His hand touched her shoulder, coarser than one would have expected a doctor's skin to be, and everybody shied away. **"Come along then, let's get your lesson started, shall we?"**

I shuffled behind him, dizzy while I walked. I wasn't laughing yet. But the milk had a hold on me. I knew I only wasn't laughing because I'd calmed myself. I was steady. Not sure of myself, not certain, and diminishing every second, but it was steady... for now.

The schedule for today should have been Breakfast -> Play -> Lesson -> Lunch -> Play -> Hypnosis -> Play/Nap -> Dinner. Should have been. With Marlow, though, especially without his counterpart present, he danced to a different tune entirely. There was quite a lot of him that simply did not care about the rules. He closed the door behind him, and smiled falsely at the boy. **"I'm so pleased we get to have a little more... hands on time, today, Velvet."**

"Yeah... me too..." It didn't matter, I reminded myself. Even if I was on the milk, he couldn't touch me. He was pathetic. I was a genius. Let him try. Don't be scared. The fogginess was filling my head. I was smiling. Smiling because of my thoughts, or because of the milk?

"I must say, your progress here has been remarkable so far. So much more advanced than our other candidates. Truly, you must be embracing your changes, Velvet. Perhaps, deep down, in-fact, you wanted this? It can be hard to be different in the world, can't it?" He was very good at his job, of course, but certain nuances were things he rarely needed to use anymore. Still. He sounded... sincere.

"Um... I guess..." I didn't really know what he was talking about. Did I want to be a little girl before coming here? Not really. I just didn't see a point in fighting something as stupid as pissing in my pants. Was it embarrassing? Sure. But I honestly had done worse.

"Well, I've come up with a little gift, to reward you for your good behavior. For your embracing of your new self, Velvet. It's not a gift that I've offered any of the other girls, they haven't accepted their new lives nearly as well as you long to." He liked this. Liked the banter. Liked to go back and forth, toy with his prey for a while.

I swallowed hard. **"...what are you talkin' 'bout? What gift...?"** Part of me was excited. Part of me thought the gift could be nice. Could be something pretty or lovely. Something I wanted. More finger paints, maybe. But another part of me knew that smile. I tried to shake the thoughts away. I had to focus...

"A very lovely gift, something special just for you. Wouldn't that be lovely?" He now allowed the boy a moment of reveling. **"Do you like your**

new dress, by the way? I think it looks quite darling on you, don't you? Soft and delicate, just the way you are, and quite unlike your namesake, Velvet."

I opened my mouth to say something, but words didn't come out. He was complimenting my dress? I played with the corners with a little smile. I thought in my head that this wasn't right. That it led to something. But the milk was making me smiley. **"Thank you very much."**

"You're very welcome." Despite the fact that everybody seemed to be afraid of him, and how caustic he'd demonstrated himself to be, he had a way with warm tones. Lovely tones. Tones difficult to not sink into. **"I bet the other girls are jealous, you know? None of them were ever pretty enough to wear such a pretty dress."** Competition and resentment between the inmates wasn't common, but when it happened, it usually started like this.

"Yeah...?" I blinked, smiling up at him, a little bit of awe on my face. His compliments were so heavy in my head. I just liked being called nice things. It was so nice to be called nice things. I smiled behind my glasses and rocked on my feet.

"Oh yes, Velvet." He had a mirror on one of his walls, floor to ceiling, thin enough for one girl to stand in front of. He stood Velvet in place and spoke. **"The way the dress falls over your pretty body, and the way your face is starting to soften, see? When you immerse yourself in beautiful things, Velvet, you become more beautiful."**

I pouted a little bit at the girl in the mirror. She was me. He. He was me. Ugh, my head wasn't on right. The face, the hair, the eyes. Alexander Duke. I took a deep breath and forced a smile. Just let him burn out... **"Uh huh! Very beautiful!"**

"You're still trying to see a boy, Velvet, I can tell from the way you search. But if you have to search for a different answer to the one staring you in the face, doesn't it seem foolish to expect it to be true? Tell me, Velvet, what do you see in the mirror, without searching, without thinking. Be a good girl, now."

"A pretty girl..." Honestly, I didn't. But it would shut him up. I saw me.

Even at first glance. It didn't matter what I was wearing. I'd worn stupider. Okay, well actually maybe not. Maybe this one took the cake. I wished I could think clearer. I'd be able to manipulate him so much better...

"I think you might not be ready for your gift, Velvet." There was a sound in his voice that was so easy to discern, sound that was so much worse than anger or upset, so much deeper cutting than regret. Disappointment. He sounded disappointed in her, and sighed, stepping away.

"W-wait!" I turned around to the man and grabbed onto his white coat. **"Wait, you said I could have it! It's mine, and you're bein' meany, and imma tell Miss Colette if you aren't nicer to me!!"** I was pouty and frustrated. Why couldn't I have my gift?!

Oh, how delightful. The man looked at the boy with a small hopeful smile, and crossed his arms. **"Only pretty girls get to have gifts, Velvet. Is that truly what you are? Not just pretending to be, but truly? Because this gift is certainly not something to be wasted on an unruly boy."**

"I'm a pretty girl, I am, I am!" It was just my drugged up self wanting attention. Wanting that gift. But it was still an admission, even if it was one under questionable circumstances. **"Pleeeeeeease can I have my present? Pretty please?"**

"I suppose I could give it to you, because you asked so nicely. Hop up on the table now," by which he meant the gurney, a spindly finger pointing to indicate as such. **"I'll give you your gift, and then we can conduct your morning training, how does that sound, little Velvet?"**

"Okay." I was eager. I climbed onto the table in the little dress and played with the mittens on my hand. My bangs fell in front of my eyes - Annie hadn't pinned them up today. I was smiling at the gloves, but pouty all the same. Stupid gloves made my hands sweaty...

"This is going to feel a tiny little pinch, but I need you to lay properly still, okay? Here, you can cuddle Dowwy." He pressed the soft rag-doll into the boy's mittened hands with a smile and then turned to retrieve the needle and an antiseptic wipe. Oh, how exciting. Yes, the shot into the boy's throat would hurt some, but the results would be wonderful.

I played with the doll in my hands. Or my mittens. The cold wipe touched my neck and I shivered, pulling away. **"Hold still,"** he told me, so I did. I didn't even look up to see the needle. If I did, maybe I would have stopped him.

There were a few things that Doctor Marlow prided himself upon, and one of them was his work with a needle. He injected the boy, the warm serum flowing into his throat quickly, and removed the needle, holding a cotton-ball to the entry-site. The effects would be layered — at first the boy would lose his voice, but only for a few minutes. When it returned, it would be as though it was the first time he was talking, and his voice would be high and tight and airy. Childish and feminine. Finally, as the drug finished its work, it would make complex sounds hard to make, forcing an impediment on certain sounds. **"All done, my precious one. You were so brave. Would you like a sucker?"**

"Yea.. pl...." My voice cut out in the middle of the words, like I didn't have enough air. My throat hurt. My neck hurt a little too, from the shot. I shuffled on the table, scratching at the cotton ball he'd taped on my neck. I licked my lips.

The sucker was pressed between the boy's lips, tasting of strawberry cupcake and laced with a muscle relaxant to help stop the boy from making too much of a fuss. He wouldn't fall asleep, it would just seem like a bit of a chore to move around too much, was all. Like an actual toddler just learning to walk.

I sucked on the lollipop and scratched at the little ball on my neck. But my arms were getting tired so I went back to playing with the dolly. My head was fuzzy and I blinked a little too much behind my glasses. **"..um.. mm.."** I looked up at the man, wondering where my present was. But I couldn't talk right. Or at all. I guess the lollipop was just that good.

"Now, it will take a little while for your present to start to work, so how about you play with the other girls for a little while. When your present is working, I'll come check in on you?" His smile seemed almost warm. Charming. Which was not anything attributable to the horrible, horrible man. And yet...

I climbed off the table, but I stumbled. I fell into the man's arms, and he caught me, holding me up. I sucked on the lollipop quietly and felt color on my cheeks. He helped me to my feet properly, but when I took another step, I nearly fell over again. My legs felt weak. I held onto the wall for support...

"It's okay to crawl now, and pretty girls are certainly allowed to. Would you like to try? It would impress all those other, less cute girls, too, I promise." The boy was barely able to stand, and crawling did make logical sense insofar as practicality went. And it wasn't like it could get any worse than the outfit he currently wore.

"I...." But another step and I fell to the floor, stumbling over myself. I whimpered on the tile and rubbed my eyes behind my glasses. Ugh... maybe crawling was a good idea... I followed Dr. Marlow out of the room, into the common room again, and blinked against the lights. Everything was so much bigger from down here...

"There's a good girl. Now you go play with your little friends, and try not to talk too much, okay? It might ruin the surprise of your present if you do." He swatted lightly at the boy's diapered behind and removed the cotton ball before returning to his office. How exhilarating this was about to be...

24.) Her New Babysitter

I shuffled along the floor on my hands and knees, sucking on the lollipop. Ayla was the first to come over to me, taking the lollipop out of my mouth. I pouted and pulled myself into a sitting position. I looked so hopeless in my dress, the bonnet... "T..... .." I tried to tell her it was mine. My lollipop. But no words...

"You shouldn't take treats from Doctor Marlow, Velvet." Ayla sniffed the candy, and though she only smelled strawberries, she nonetheless did not return it to the boy's lips. **"Did he hurt you? Did he do hypnosis?"** Admittedly, the boy was far calmer than he had been when he went in, but he'd also had his milk kick in, too.

"...h....?" Hypnosis? No. Of course not! It wouldn't even work on me, of course! What was she talking about. I shook my head and tried to tell her. That I was getting a present. But I didn't get one. That it would come later? I didn't know. I wanted to tell her, but my voice wasn't working...

That the boy wasn't talking wasn't something that pinged in Ayla's head as the concept of a problem, because often under the influence of the milk, they could go long times with just giggles and not too much else. Still. She was concerned in general. **"Well, at least it's over now? Want me to read a story to you?"**

I nodded my head. I didn't get why I wasn't making words, though. If it wasn't for the milk I might try and act it out. I might try to tell Ayla that I can't speak. But a story sounded like more fun. I went to stand, but I fell right back to my hands and knees. Ayla glared at me, then at the lollipop in her hand, and went to throw it out in the trash can.

So he couldn't keep his balance, and he didn't seem to want to talk. Could the two be related? It didn't seem like Marlow's M.O. to act like this, this didn't seem like it was going to be all that helpful. Maybe something else was afoot. Ayla met the boy at the sofa, with a large-paged and brightly-illustrated children's picture book.

I climbed onto the sofa, with a bit of trouble, and fell into Ayla's lap. She pulled my head into her chest and opened the book to the first page. I was dizzy, but not a sleepy dizzy. Just hard to move dizzy. And everything felt weird in my throat. Like the words were dancing.

"Once upon a time, there was a Butterfly named Maggie..." Ayla quite enjoyed reading books to the others, and though she'd read most every book in the selection, many more than once, she still enjoyed it. It made her wonder if maybe one day she might actually make a lovely mother.

"...dat won.. dis.." I tried to point with my fingers. Everything was heavy. Ayla was holding me against her shoulder while I drew lines in the book with the tip of my finger. The dizziness of the milk was overwhelming, wholly different to the usual dizziness. Why was it so hard to move...

So Ayla was worried. This kind of pure infantile nature did always happen, at least in her experience here, but it was usually much later, and Velvet

seemed to be so much more on top of things than other inmates here. So confident, so in control, taking everything in stride but for a few choice moments where her bubbling resolve had boiled over and left her short a few precious cups of resistance. As the boy was now, it was hard to believe he'd ever struggled at all, difficult to realize that he took pride in his ability to rebuff the facilities attempts. **"Would you like me to read you another book, Velvet?"** Maternal and soft, gentle words and gentle motions, Ayla kept the boy held up as he'd stayed leaned against her, but even her support didn't seem to be able to keep him from hazing deeper and deeper.

I wanted to just fall asleep. It was so hard to move. Usually on the milk it wasn't so bad. I mean, I'd spin a lot. And everything felt a lot like it did when I was drunk. But this was different. This time everything was heavy. I didn't say anything to Ayla. The room was bright and colorful. I closed my eyes. What a warm moment. She played with my hair under my bonnet.

Ayla was fairly certain it was not the lollipop. Well, not objectively not the lollipop. You could never be sure of anything in here. Despite that fact, there were a few standards, a few reliable truths, and one of them that Ayla knew very well was that this was a government-sponsored facility. It wasn't something that meant anything to any of the other inmates, but to Ayla, and much to the benefit of her success here, she realized a long time ago just how long it took anything to change here. The methods were, typically, static. **"How about I take you to your bed, Velvet, and put you down for a little nap? I could lay with you, too, if you like."** Not that Ayla was so much into cuddles for her own benefit anymore, no, but she did play the role of 'Mother Goose' amongst the girls, and often cuddled when she needed to provide comfort, or watch over one of the girls.

She tried to help me off the couch but I slipped down to my hands and knees almost instantly. I giggled a little at how soft the floor felt, and reached up to rub my eyes without thinking about my weight. I tumbled onto the carpet, my diaper showing beneath the short dress, the bonnet over my hair. My mittens were still secured on my wrists. And I couldn't help but giggle. **"Ee, en nuff... um, oom.."**

"Oh sweetheart..." The older ~ older being relative here, because Ayla had only been nineteen when she came in and was, in-fact, younger than Velvet ~ girl leaned down to pull Velvet's dress down over her diaper, but it was mostly futile. It was also quite evident and obvious that the boy was

visibly wet. **"You can crawl, okay? We can go and cuddle?"** It had become more and more clear: Velvet literally couldn't talk. Just rudimentary sounds, little grunts and syllables of intent, but no words at all. Was this Marlow's doing? This wasn't in the list of regular actions, this was... spontaneous. Scary, even!

I crawled behind Ayla, on the carpet, into my bedroom. Or not my bedroom. I guess I thought it was because I'd never been in another girl's room, but the room wasn't mine. I sat on the floor and rubbed my eyes with the backs of the mittens, trying to pull myself to my feet using the dresser beside me. **"...gee go, un, ick wanns towa..."** I giggled again.

There was some benefit to having the boy in here, chief among the perks was the fact that nobody would think to look in here. Second was that Ayla knew for a fact that her camera in the ceiling didn't work, and that they hadn't bothered to fix it because she was a model inmate. With the door clicked closed, she motioned the boy over to her bed, and began to examine the skin of his body; his wrists, his elbows, anywhere there might have been a needle.

I giggled, the tickling of the girl's fingers up my legs, up my sides. She had the dress mostly pulled off by the time her fingers found the place on my neck where there was a little hole, a little hole and a spec of dried blood. **"Ick imm, un, denndi im inick.. uh huh nowa, nowa.."**

"Uhhuh, sweetie, that sounds like so much fun!" Maybe she would make a good Mom, after all. The injection was in a weird place, and so far as Ayla knew, none of the girls here had ever gotten a shot in that particular place. **"Did Mister Marlow give you a little ouchie here, Velvet? Maybe just a tiny one?"**

"Um... unno, an... an dew wo-weee..." I giggled again, the girl running a finger down my neck. It tickled. I curled up against the pillow and grabbed at Ayla's shirt. She sighed, still running her fingers on my skin. I was drooling a little into the pillow, my glasses pushed too far up my nose.

A mysterious shot from Marlow, and Velvet significantly more regressed than he'd ever been. More regressed than most of the girls here got until months of reinforcement and breaking down. It was impressive. But Ayla had her doubts that Miss Colette would approve. This seemed like

something done off the books. No talking, vacant blank vagueness. It had to be that shot, but why? Was this going to be how Velvet was now? Worse than Annie? Ayla let the boy cuddle up to her while she thought.

25.) Her New Voice

I didn't sleep, even though I was tired. It was weird. Like I was forced into being awake, even though I was forced into immobility. I was so comfortable, though, in Ayla's arms. I let her hold me like a child, and I didn't mind in the slightest. The hours ticked on, working their way down to dinner. All the while, the milk was wearing off. I'd blink out of it soon.

"Hey, heeeey now." Ayla hadn't gone to sleep, either, and had amused herself with thoughts about her life out of here. Her Coronation Surgery. Her life. Finding a man that would love her, being a Mom, reforming for everything wicked she ever did by being beautiful now. She almost missed it when the boy lifted her shirt.

"...so seepy... dun wike not fallin' seep.." I shuffled up in bed. I guess I could sit just fine now. I rubbed my eyes with the mittens. Still dizzy from the milk. Still dizzy altogether. I missed solid food. I missed being able to eat something real. Something that made me feel energized. Powerful. This milk just made me feel so tiny...

Dinner would be soon, though, and the boy seemed to be dazed, stuck in a place halfway between awake and asleep, and though his speech was improving, he didn't seem anymore lucid. **"Dinner time, soon. Are you excited for your babas?"**

I shook my head. **"No way I dinkin' doze siwwy tings..."** I blinked a little, looking up at Ayla, and then shaking my head. **"Huh...? I not..."** I swallowed hard. My throat hurt. It really hurt. Like something was stuck in it. And what voice... was that my voice? I shook my head. **"Why d' I soun wike dis?!"**

"I'm not sure, Velvet. You've sounded a little that way all afternoon, but this is the first time I've been able to understand your actual words." If words were what the sounds could be called, anyway — they

were understandable, the boy just sounded like a literal toddler, someone only recently in command of his vocabulary. Or rather, with the pitch and tone, her vocabulary.

I shook my head in disbelief. No. It wasn't. I wasn't! **"Das na my voice! It na how I sound!!"** My chest hurt. I stumbled out of the bed, tripping over Ayla, and rushing to the vanity mirror. **"'s na my voice... 's na..."** But my mouth moved with it. The same me. The bonnet came off in bed. But the mittens. The dress. Not me. But the eyes. The hair. The freckles. Me. And now the voice... I couldn't breathe...

"Breathe, Velvet. Breathe." Ayla had followed the boy, though he darted and she strolled. She put her arms around him, he pushed her away, and she did what she'd been taught to do months ago. She did what she'd learned could be wonderful, and a way to show she cared, and not just a sign of power like in her old life. Ayla kissed Velvet.

...that was certainly distracting. I blinked up at the girl, hitting at her with my hands, until my back hit the wall, until she broke our kiss to kiss me again. She kissed different to the way most girls had kissed me in the past. She kissed like Roger did. Maybe that was why I could like it. Or maybe because she was a boy before this place. I wasn't straight... I knew that... but jeeze...

Ayla kissed until the hitting stopped, until the struggle stopped, until his back was against the wall and she could simply hold him there with lips and not with hands. It was simple. Easy. And exactly what she'd been taught. She stopped the kiss, and pressed her forehead to his, her eyes brown and his green, the most vibrant green. **"You panic, and they'll four-point you and sedate you."**

"...d-dey... dey did dis... m-m-made me... s-sound wike dis..." I was getting worked up again. Even hearing it. It was Marlow. Of course it was Marlow. How had he done this? How had he hurt me? I shook my head. I was going to cry. Fuck, don't cry Velvet... Velvet? Alexander. Ugh. I was losing myself here. I couldn't do this... I needed to focus...

"They did, but it's a shot, he gave you a shot, and shot's don't last." Usually. Ayla didn't know enough about how vocal chords worked to know the truth of the matter. **"It'll probably wear off, Velvet, but if you panic,**

you'll lose your freedoms again. Four-pointing and drip-feeding your milk. You don't want that, right?"

I shook my head. I was shaking. I was going to cry. Fuck. How had I let this happen...? And then a familiar sound. The chimes. No, no, no, no, no... **"I can't... no, pwease, Aywa... pwease no milk... pwease, can't do it... pwease, pwease..."** And there's the tears...

The tears started, and Ayla held the boy, and he shook his head, but with his ability to walk now she managed to get him at least to the door by the time the food arrived. And it was food in his place, too! A sippy of juice and a large bowl of mac and cheese. Entry level food, but above the strained vegetable mash that most of them got when they came off the bottles. Honestly, after the typical three months on a liquid diet, mashed vegetables were all their bodies could handle. Velvet hadn't been here long enough for that to be a problem. Of course, what would be a problem would be that solid food would eventually mean solid waste. **"Hey, look? Maccycheese? That's for you, Velvet. No baba."**

I was crying. I was still in the mittens. I was still in the dress, and the wet diaper. And I talked like a toddler. I had so much attention here. Ayla waited for me to confirm the food, the food that wasn't at all the milk, and I looked up at her with foggy wet eyes. She smiled and helped me over to the table. I didn't get it... Marlow was giving me food? But the bottles made things so bad. Why would he give me food...?

26.) Her Descent

The food was in place, and a plastic spoon to boot, but the mittens were still locked in place which meant only one eventuality... Ayla had to feed the boy. If his attire, and his diaper, and his red, puffy eyes hadn't garnered enough attention, the fact that he was now going to be fed by one of the other inmates certainly did so. **"Open wide, Velvet, here comes the choo-choo."** Ayla smiled, and Annie bounced excitedly, and just about everybody stared. But the boy was hungry, even if he'd be getting food in a cheese sauce made with the same milk he abhorred.

I opened my mouth. Ayla fed me. I stopped crying. I knew better than to

talk. I didn't want the rest of them to hear me. I didn't want Marlow to have the satisfaction. The food must have been from Colette. She must have ordered it yesterday, before she left. She must have saved me without even knowing it. Smart woman. I didn't give her enough credit...

For Ayla, it was a balancing act. She had to eat her little vegetable wrap and couscous salad in time, as well as feeding the boy, so while her demeanor was pleasant, she was also no doubt very worried. **"I do likes your dwess, Belbet!"** Annie had seen it already, but she was trying to cheer the boy up. **"Velvet, Annie. Vvvv. Remember?"** **"I think Belbet is a darling name,"** Lemon added, and Bree nodded in agreement.

I felt a little blush on my cheeks and I finished eating the mac and cheese. I hated that I had to be fed, but it was so nice to actually have some real food. And then there was the sippy cup - so much bigger than the bottle, so I could get some grip on it. I held it with two hands no problem, sucking on the end. Apple juice. Such a nice change...

Ayla didn't get too much time to talk by the time she was done — she had a meal designed to be unpleasant to eat if she rushed it, and she had less time than she was used to. Lemon watched the boy drinking his juice and smiled sweetly. **"I bet you're looking forward to Miss Colette being back tomorrow? At least it's only one day a week she isn't here."** **"Well she's always here, she has a room upstairs,"** Charity clarified. **"She deserves more than just a day off."** Estar added, too, and Kinata and Bree both nodded. **"Really, though, Miss Colette is amazing."**

I nodded too, because of consensus, and because I was still happy Colette had saved me this time. I'd thank her tomorrow. I'd see what I could do about the headset. We'd work it out. We'd get Marlow back for this. He'd suffer. But before I could finish the sippy cup, I started to giggle. I didn't even know why!

"Something funny?" Estar grinned at the boy laughing, her teeth brilliantly white against her much darker skin — they'd want to be; they were cosmetic replacements on account of the boy having had barely any teeth at all from drug abuse when he was brought in. Nowadays, Estar was very proud of her smile. She'd been taught to be.

I shook my head, but I kept giggling. I finished the sippy, but by then the

drugs were already in effect. **"Nuffin funny,"** I muttered, but I started to laugh. And I played with the sippy cup in my mittens, a brilliant smile on my face. The bottles were terrible on me. Where most people were maybe a six in reaction, I was an eight. I would be so far gone in only a minute...

"Wan' paint?" Bree and Kinata were sharing uneasy looks over the idea of Annie and Velvet painting, especially with how far gone Velvet seemed to be. It didn't seem like a good idea at all, really. **"Maybe you should help her change into something more paint-friendly, Annie?"** **"The window dwess?"** **"Uhhuh!"** The dress in question, the window dress as Annie so affectionately called it, was favored for inmates after a month or so. Though it was adorable, with puffy sleeves and a cute waist and lovely detailing around the flouncy skirted bottom, it was also almost entirely see-through clear PVC plastic, the same material as the diaper covers so often used. And yes, there were panels of darker pink around the chest for some modesty there, and colored rows of detail around the bottom. But for all intents and purposes, the dress would give an unrestricted view of the boy's diaper, and would be perfect for messy things like painting.

I was changed. I still had the mittens on, though. I guess because they didn't come off. I'd accepted it. Ayla was starting to worry about the whole idea of finger painting without fingers, but I was crying out: **"I WAN PAINT!"** so loud that it hardly mattered. Within minutes - or maybe it was hours, it was so hard to tell - I was covered in paint. The mittens were paint and my cheeks were paint and the dress was paint. So much paint. And I couldn't stop giggling and laughing. I was having so much fun, even though my movements were sluggish and sloppy.

Honestly, by the time anybody got to solid food, moved past the slop of strained vegetable mash and onto things like mac and cheese for dinner, drugs were unnecessary. Maybe that was why Ayla didn't consider that it could even be the food, because it never was. Heck, by the time they took solid food, all the boys were now happy to be girls, and even took their hormones as medication shots once per week during their morning sessions. There was no need for deception. **"Annie."** **"Uhhuh?"** **"What do you think Mister Marlow did to Velvet?"** Velvet was painting still, giggling, happy but sluggish. Annie had gotten up to go to the drinking fountain. **"Maked her happy..."**

It was so bad. My words had dissolved into blubbering sounds and drool

consistently slid down my chin. I would giggle and paint myself and the carpet more than I'd come close to painting the paper. I wasn't even a little girl anymore. I was an infant. And just like an infant, maybe half an hour before the girls would get tucked in, I messed the diaper without a second thought.

It wasn't like the enema remnants, an inoffensive and discolored discharge. No, this was a mess. A proper mess that darkened the on-display diaper, visible through the dress, and smelled anything but inoffensive. Annie didn't say anything, but the other girls had noticed and had even made attempts to get the attention of the orderlies on evening duty, but the same answer kept coming back: his diaper wasn't to be changed. **"How are you feeling, Velvet?"** Ayla didn't like the smell any more than anybody else did, but she felt responsible for the boy on this one lawless day of the week, and she sat down next to him with some wipes and began to clean his fingers, nodding for Annie to pick up and put away the paints.

I smiled behind the blissful drooly smile and nodded my head. **"Imm miiini.. gutta good simmm... uh huh.. belv.."** I sighed, smiled, blissful, content, and let the girl clean up my mittens while I sat on my messy ass. I didn't care. It didn't even register that it was wrong. That it wasn't completely normal. I was so lost.

"That's good, sweetie." It was looking less and less like anybody wanted to change the boy tonight, or rather, that the order had been give implicitly not to. They'd all messed before, of course, generally as punishment and with clear direction on what they'd done wrong. This didn't seem the same, this seemed almost... pointless. Directionless. Ayla was actually quite angry over the whole situation! **"It's just about time to go to bed."** She smiled, and the boy grabbed onto her with the freshly cleaned mittens. **"Oh, you want to lay with me...?"**

I nodded, smiling, blissful, but a little distraught, but then happy again, content. It was a broken system. No logical array of emotion. One to another. Like playing hopscotch. I couldn't sleep in her room. I had my own bed. I knew that deep down. But it didn't register.

"Well, how about I lay with you for a little bit?" If they went now, the boy might be asleep by the time the bedtime tone sounded, which meant Ayla could then get to her own bed without any consequence. **"How does that**

sound?" It wasn't the best thing in the world. The boy smelled very bad, and Ayla didn't cherish the idea of being in a small room with him, but if she could ease his suffering a little...

She helped me to the room, though honestly, when it came down to it, she was almost carrying me. I couldn't walk. I couldn't even sit up right without the help of the wall. I was a big lump of person, rolling around and giggling. When she finally got me in the bed, already exhausted, she shuffled me in against the wall. I curled up to Ayla and drooled on her dress. It was pathetic. But it was me.

"Miss Colette will be back tomorrow, and she's going to be so excited to see you." Excited. Livid over what had been done to him. You know, six of one, half a dozen of the other, it wasn't important in the details. Ayla sighed and played with the boy's hair, humming softly. Annie had been like this once, this bad, but it had been so long ago that few of the girls here were even present at the time. **"You're such a pretty girl, Velvet."**

It didn't take long. It took almost no time at all, actually. I was asleep. Ayla was there. Then gone. Everything was gone. I woke up to a dark room. Everything smelled. My head was spinning. The milk. I hadn't had any? No, I had to... I would never act like that. I stumbled out of bed, hoping to get to the door, but before I could, I threw up stomach bile onto the carpet of the bedroom. My whole body was shaking...

"Where going?" Annie peered over the edge of her bed, with a pillow over her head and curious eyes. She was a shallow sleeper, and she saw the boy throw up by the door. His hands were still in the mittens, he was still in the window dress, and he still smelled to high heavens. Annie didn't mind so much. **"Can't go nowhere, door is wocked at nie-nie times..."**

I kicked the door. I kicked it and I felt sick, and I felt my head swim. **"WET ME OUT!"** ...the same voice. The same voice. I was going to be sick again. I held myself against the door, trying not to fall apart. Everything hurt. Especially my pride... **"Wet me out... pwease... wet me out..."**

"Is nuh-un gon' open the dow..." Annie found it harder to talk in the face of aggressive words, but the boy was barely an aggressor, not with his waning energy and his voice the way it was now ~ like Annie at her worst,

but Annie wasn't always at her worst so that made it much much worse for Velvet. **"Wha's matter, Belbet? You hab bad dweams?"**

"Is not FAIR!" I slammed my hands into the door. Tears dripped down my cheeks. I felt so sick. I was falling apart here. I needed to leave. I needed to get out... **"WET! ME! OUT!"** And, to everyone's surprise, a light came on. I winced, covering my eyes. The whole room was dizzy and bright.

27.) Her Guardian

"Good morning, sunshine." I'd been making boys shit their pants for a few years now, and I was a doctor and all that nonsense. Still, small room, messy diaper, all night? It was palpable. He tumbled into my arms, and I thought he was trying to run, so I put my arms around him. He started to cry into my chest. I hummed, and shhhd, and soothed, and played with his hair. What had happened?

"Wan weave... wan go back... I be good... be good girl... no mo bad tings... pwease... wan weave... wan go home see Woger... wan go home..." I was crying. I was really crying. Everything was falling apart. This place was killing me. It was getting harder and harder to stay connected, to stay in one piece. Colette would help... she would help...

The voice was unexpected. Nothing we did here changed their voice, but it usually happened that the oral fixation we gave them made words harder in the baby phase, and then they'd be trained to sound prettier by speech coaches later in the adult phase. This was... unexpected. As was the messing. I'd approved solid food for dinner, yes, but I expected him to have some self control. Not this blubbering mess. **"Come on, sugarplum, let's get you changed, okay? Then we can talk about your day."**

I was still crying when Colette led me across the dark common room, past the dining table, and into her office. If she'd been in here yet, it didn't show. Everything was in place, and even her office lights were off. The computer was powered down on her desk. I was shaking. I was actually trembling...

I helped him up onto the shallow bed against the wall, slipped a pacifier between his lips, and lifted the painted-covered dress up out of the way,

eyeing his diaper. Didn't seem to be liquid mass... it wasn't coerced. He'd done that on his own. I untaped the bulging plastic and cotton, and steeled myself. I could have had an orderly change him, as I often did, but I wanted to build a connection with Velvet. Humming softly, I began to clean him up.

I laid back on the table, wiping the tears with the locking mittens. I tried to keep them all out of my eyes, tried to make myself look like an adult. I wasn't this. I wasn't the sniveling child. I didn't care about the diapers or the messing or the pacifier - which I now obediently sucked. I just cared about the way they were changing me. The milk. My voice... but I was me. I had to remember... I was me.

"Did you get your dinner last night?" Obviously. I was cleaning it up from his at the moment. His tummy murmured some, and I couldn't imagine he had more to go, but figured I'd better finish up and get the new diaper in place. **"How about once I get you clean, you can tell me all about your day, okay? I hope Doctor Marlow wasn't too much of an ass."**

"...Mar-woah..." I muttered it, thinking to myself. It all started after him. My voice. The bottles. And then dinner. It was him, wasn't it? It had to have been him... **"...I saw him... an... he said he gun' gimme a present... but I neva got it... got a wowwy instead..."** My voice was so pathetic... I sounded like a toddler. A girl. I winced, shaking my head. I just wouldn't talk.....

A wowwy? A... an owie? Oh! **"He gave you a shot, huh? That was probably his idea of a 'present'. Where did he give it to you, do you remember? There's nothing scheduled on your file for any shots at all."** Most shots were hormonal, and to help with later development, and the inmates all were made aware of the nature of them. I was concerned.

"...hea..." I ran my finger up my neck where Ayla was playing yesterday. It was mostly healed over, but the telltale signs were there. She examined my neck carefully, shaking her head, and then crossing her arms. She didn't know what it was either... **"...tink it could mess wit my voice...?"** It was in my throat, right?

"The choice of site would make sense. It's too far from any bloodline, and the muscles in that part of the neck aren't suitable for

intramuscular." Actually, I was glad that Velvet suggested it — I wasn't sure I would have put two and two together so quickly. **"We don't have any agents on file that would affect your voice, though, we do training later on, which is why Ayla sounds so nice, but...."** I scoffed and shook my head. **"Son of a bitch. He's developing a voice agent?"**

"Hey! Can we focus on makin' me sound no-ma again! Pwease?! 'Cuz I dun care what he can do if I can make it back to no-ma!" I was upset. I was really upset. Not that I ever identified myself by my voice. But it was mine. And it was gone. They were taking so much here. I felt so sick... **"Pwease, Cowette..."**

"Hold still." I finished taping a fresh diaper on Velvet after cleaning him up and started to feel around the boy's slender, delicate neck. Like most gingers, he had freckles over much of his body, and I found them a little charming. **"It feels like he used a numbing agent to tighten your voice. It should flush out in the next 24-48 hours and you should be fine."** Presuming it was only a numbing agents, and not a paralytic as well. The numbing would flush out either way, but if it were a paralytic, too, his voice might sound quite different when he regained the ability to speak as an adult. For a while, anyway.

I sighed. A deep sigh. A sincere sigh. One to two days. And then my voice would be fine. I gave Colette a small smile of appreciation. And then... a tidbit of reality. **"If it dun go back to no-ma... I can't make your hypno files..."** The audio was such a strong component. If I couldn't do it properly...

"I'm sure it'll be fine. And I'm not going to let him near you, so long as I'm active on the floor. We'll deprive him of his study data." Crediting myself was important, but discrediting Doctor Marlow was maybe just as important, too. **"How'd you end up in such a state, anyway? Covered in paint, crying and banging at the door, in a very full diaper..."**

"...I dunno..." I shuffled nervously up from the table. I had a new diaper on, but I was still naked except for the mittens. I looked down at them forlornly and bit my lip. **"...I didn' have babas... had mac and cheese... dunno why got all hazy..."** I hated talking. I hated sounding like this...

"Hmm. I'll check the food logs. I did specify that your food was not to

be subbed out, so I can't imagine it was that." Then again, Marlow had the same level of security access as I did. It could have been that. I went to my drawer while speaking, and when I came back, I pressed a small disc to each of the mittens, one at a time, and each of them clicked softly, allowing for removal. **"He's getting bolder. You need to practice talking as much as possible, get comfortable with this voice for now. I know it sucks, but if you let it rule you, it'll give him data we don't want him having."**

"...otay..." Practice talking. I took a deep breath. I just had to treat this like all the other stuff they did to me here. It didn't matter. Even if this one did... **"...I nee' a pen fo whiting..."** If I was going to help Colette, I needed to plan. I needed time to come up with blueprints for the program. And when I could talk again, we'd be ready.

"I can do a pencil?" The fact that I was even offering the boy something like that so immediately was a watershed moment for us, I think. We both paused, despite his discomfort, and looked at it. This was a prison. I'd just offered a prisoner a potentially deadly implement without even pausing. It meant I saw Velvet as an equal. Maybe as a friend.

"Tank oo," I muttered, taking the pencil from the woman. I looked down at it, twirling it in my fingers. This would work so much better than a crayon, I had to say. **"Um... do you got a widdle sharpener?"** She went to get one out of her desk. I pulled myself off the table and looked down at my body. Free of everything except the diaper. And this stupid voice...

"You can't take that out of this office." For the short-term, he could stay in here. I could afford him the comfort and safety of my office, but there was still a game we had to play. **"You can stay in here until the breakfast bell, and I'll keep you safe the rest of the day, but you need to keep a low profile. There is nothing wrong with being in your room most of the day."** The room, of course, smelled quite horrid, but that was to be expected.

"Otay..." I wanted to ask for something to wear, but it would probably just be another dress or something. Honestly, at this point, walking around in just a diaper was all the same. I sat down on her couch and took a pad of paper off her desk. I needed to focus on something other than my voice for a while...

"I'm going to do the rounds and check on the other girls. Nobody else can get in here but me, and the head of security." I pulled on the RFID card attached to the pulley on my belt-loop and smiled at the boy reassuringly. He looked at me briefly, but went back to the pencil and notepad after only a moment. He was my ace in the hole, and I needed him to be fine. Marlow was starting to become a problem...

28.) Her Contingency Plan

I sat quietly, fuming over the pad of paper. Fear and panic had made way for frustration and anger. Marlow... that asshole. But getting angry wouldn't get me anywhere, would it? I knew better. I had to beat him at his own game. At first I thought that meant this automated hypnosis system, but if I never got my voice back... I bit on the tiny pencil sharpener until the plastic snapped and fished out the little razor blade. I had to make contingency plans.

"Whatchu doooooiin?" Annie was rocking back and forward on the balls of her feet, but only long enough for her to lose her balance and fall over, landing on her frankly overly-padded behind with a squeak. If she was hurt, she didn't show it, though, she just giggled it off. **"Belbet I felled!"**

I didn't want to talk to Annie. Nothing against her - I didn't want to talk at all. I didn't want that stupid, horrible voice to come out of my mouth. I sunk further into my bunk and kept writing in code. Even if Marlow took my papers again, he wouldn't be able to read them anyway. **"Careful,"** I told Annie when she fell off the side of my bed.

"I'm okaayy!" There was always something of a level of hero worship between Annie and Velvet, except for the days when Velvet was stoned out of her gourd on the milk, or otherwise floating in some kind of hazy state that had her coloring in her clothing or her skin, instead of the paper. **"Whatchu dwawin?"** Because drawing was what Annie could process, not note-taking.

"Notes," I muttered in my annoying high pitched voice. One syllable answers. I was trying to figure out how to force a trance state with a

headset and headphones. But the best I could think of was to bombard the mind with so much information that it couldn't keep up. Disguised static for the audio. And the visual... elaborate pictures? What stopped the participant from giving up and ignoring it? What if they closed their eyes?

"Come play, 'tay?" There wasn't a lot that Annie was good at, not a lot that would help her in her adult life to come, but of all the things she was *not* so good at, picking up on context clues had to rate up there among the highest. Which wasn't to say she was downright *oblivious* to things, but her vacant little expression and happy smile even when scowled at? It was pure child.

"Cowwette said I say in my woom today," I told as quietly as I could, in an attempt to avoid hearing my own voice. **"Go pway wit Aywa. I be out fo' wunch."** I sounded worse than Annie... I closed my eyes tight and went back to focusing on my numbers. Flashes of light through the eyelids could exhaust the eyes...

"Oh noes! Well I stay wif yew so y'dun get lonely, 'tay?" Apparently ending a sentence in a question-mark didn't denote it as a question so much as a warning of things to come, because Annie climbed up into the bed with Velvet and plopped next to her, dolly tucked under her arm, and prime for playing. Because she was Annie, and every moment of every day was time to play.

Lunch came quickly and I was no sooner to solving my problems. Colette appeared in my doorway and ushered Annie out to the dining area, where plates were adorning the big plastic table in the middle of the fat plastic chairs. Childish, through and through.

"Any luck?"

I shrugged.

"Well I'll put your notes in my office for now."

I knew what she meant. It wasn't safe out here. I handed her the notebook and the pencil. **"And the sharpener,"** she said without pause. I pouted and dumped the broken pieces of the sharpener in her hand, sans razor.

"It broke." Not even a lie!

"Oh, it did, did it?" I wasn't dumb. I didn't spend my early career working with indoctrinated children who would stop at nothing to take the lives of those they'd been taught to believe were the enemy without picking up on a thing or two. I held my hand out expectantly. **"The razor blade, Velvet."** Firm. Strict. I had to be, sometimes.

Why did she have to make everything so difficult? I reached into the wing of my diaper and pulled out the tiny razor, dropping it in her hand. She sighed and left the room, with me in tow, until we were at the children's play table. In my place, there was a bottle of milk. If I drank that, there was no way I'd be able to concentrate on this project the rest of the afternoon. I looked up at Colette for answers.

My tone sounded disappointed. **"Drink your milk, Velvet."** I wasn't meaning to be callous. Despite my attempts to courtesy, she'd done a bad thing by trying to hoard something dangerous away that could literally be used to kill someone and so my sympathies were lessened for a spell. What was she thinking? With Marlow making his play, and the Round Table eager for results sans ethics, how could she have been so careless and bold?

Maybe the milk wasn't drugged. That was always a possibility. But as the bottle neared empty, I felt the telltale tingling in my chest. Then the giggles. Damn! How was I supposed to get any work done when they kept me as this constant... blubbering child? But wasn't that the point? I pouted and sat down on the floor, trying to stay centered. Focused. You can beat these stupid drugs, Velvet...

Any possibility of holding back on her altered voice was lost the moment the milk took hold, and based purely on listening to Annie and Velvet, it was almost abundantly obvious that this was some kind of nursery. Only... these weren't baby girls, they were adult men. They'd just been fixed to be a better use to society. I sighed and went over Velvet's notes, watching over the group as they giggled and played. I couldn't let Marlow have this...

By the time the afternoon bottle lost potency, the dinner one was put in place. And after that, I was so exhausted without an afternoon nap that I was ready to fall asleep standing up. One of the nurses changed me into a

fresh diaper and I was put in my bed for lights out. Without a protest, I curled up to my pillow - in nothing but a nightie and a diaper - and fell asleep. Tomorrow would be better, I reminded myself. Tomorrow I'd figure something out...

29.) Her Deadline

"Are you feeling any better?" There were no clocks here, but the lights were out and it was either extremely late or very early when I woke up Velvet. I had her notes in my hand, and a little flashlight LED on my finger. It was unusual for me to be here at all, let alone to be waking Velvet up in the middle of the night. But this was important.

I was half asleep. She poked me and shined a small light into my eyes. So of course, I kicked her in the shin. **"Fuck off,"** I muttered, but the voice I used... I sat up, wide awake. **"I can talk? Hey! I can--"**

"Shh!"

I looked up at Colette in the darkness and then at Annie's bed across the small room. She was sleeping with her thumb in her mouth. **"Right, sorry... what's up?"**

"Can you do this?" I held up the notebook, like that would be enough for her to understand what I was talking about. And it should have been - they were the former-boys notes, after all. **"You wrote about multi-vector induction in here; using a process of overwhelming the conscious and subconscious with physical stimuli. Is it just a hunch, a notion, an idea? Or can you actually make it work?"**

"I dunno. I don't have a test subject. Or a program. Or the time to write it." But I had my voice back! That was a step in the right direction. Optimism filled me up. **"I have to figure out the visual stuff still, but with my voice, I don't see why I couldn't make it work."** Not a hard yes, but it sure was a great experiment. Hypnosis without a hypnotist... just plug someone in and run a program. That was some Clockwork Orange shit right there. And I was the progenitor.

"You need your voice to be more feminine, if this is going to work on a wide range of subjects." I'd been thinking about it. **"For in person sessions, you can tailor and customize your tones. For completely automatic subliminal, your voice needs to be neutral, and to our brains, neutral means feminine."** It was basic biology. **"If I can get you a subject, and the equipment, could you make this work?"** And more pressingly. **"In the next four days?"** So obviously something had me stressed out here.

"Don't worry about my voice." My empathetic voice induction was perfect. I didn't mean "100%". I meant "no room for improvement". Perfect tones, perfect pitch, perfect timbre, perfect resonance. It slid into the mind like a snake and blended in like a lizard. I was small. Quiet. My voice blended masculinity and femininity, and the subject drew out what they needed to make it their own. I hadn't had the opportunity to hypnotize Colette, but I had no doubt I could, given the proper conditions. **"Why only four days? Is there a deadline?"**

I looked over my shoulder at the sleeping girl, and then leaned in closer to Velvet, like this was an extra special secret that nobody else could know. **"The Round Table is going to assess Annie in four days. Marlow considers her to be his magnum opus, and on paper they agree. They don't care if you can function in the real world or not, just that they can prove that you're not going to be an issue anymore. And Annie is proof of that, as far as Marlow sees it, and I'm afraid they're going to agree with him."**

And if the committee agreed with Marlow, then this whole assembly line of little girls turns into one of empty dolls. I remembered that needle in my neck. How helpless I felt when my voice wasn't my own. I rubbed my throat and shook my head. It was in my best interest to help Colette... **"Yeah, sure. But I need time to work. I can't be drinking those bottles."**

"I can't always avoid you getting them, if the Round Table got word - through Marlow, especially - that I was working alongside a patient, well... well, you can imagine, right?" But. **"But I can take you into my office for sessions in the morning, and give you a stimulant to help in the afternoons. It'll flush the milk quicker, but the effects are going to be more severe..."**

"We still have those sessions, right? Hypnosis and training or whatever. So just tell them you're feeding me in your office and we dump out the milk." Easiest solution. "Even if they catch on, it won't be for another four days, right?"

"Mm..." I wasn't sure about that, I couldn't be sure that we wouldn't be caught, and being caught would mean... **"I don't mind taking the risk, Velvet, but if we're caught, if Marlow gets suspicious, if one of the girls says something completely innocent and we're caught... I'll be out of the job, and you'll go to Marlow, and Marlow's plans for his solution will get the green light without anybody to protest him."**

"I know it's risky, but we really don't have any other choice." She gave me a pensive look and sighed. She wouldn't be in here in the middle of the night, negotiating, if it wasn't her last resort. I'd faked the effects of the milk before - I could do it again. And as long as we stayed on top of Marlow... four days. I could fix Annie in four days. **"I'll see you in the morning, okay?"**

"Alright, but if I have *any* suspicion that they're onto us, you're going to have to take the milk. Deal?" This was bigger than Velvet Duke and it was bigger than me, too. Dozens were on the line here, maybe more, and we couldn't let Marlow get his way.

"Yeah, deal." I rolled over and pulled the blanket back over me, but I didn't fall asleep for quite some time. I had to think. I had to figure out how to fix Annie, and honestly, even if we could bypass her defenses, I wasn't entirely sure how. I needed time. I needed thinking time. Time without that milk. But what happened when I fixed her? What happened to me, when Colette didn't need me anymore?

30.) Her First Steps

The days were blurring together. I think I'd counted a week, or just shy. Fifty one weeks to go, I said to myself, in an attempt to build motivation. But it did the opposite. In less than a week, I'd grown accustomed to the frilly baby dresses. I drank all my meals from baby bottles. I wore diapers

all the time and I'd completely stopped trying to use the bathroom. What the fuck would another fifty-one weeks do to me? The meal chime rang and I watched Colette make her way to the table. **"Velvet, you're going to have your bottle in my office for your morning training. You obviously need some extra time."** She said it with condescension, but I knew it was an act.

"You know what's going to happen if I let you have it, right?" I'd prepared everything Velvet had asked for; a laptop with a range of applications, a workplace to sit at (albeit on the floor), a range of texts and tomes, and the least childish pacifier I could find (my idea, for appearance), but her final request was one I couldn't give her. **"If you have coffee, your digestive system is going to have you soaking that diaper before you know it."**

"So what - it's gonna happen anyway." I opened the laptop and stretched my fingers over the keyboard. I had to do a little bit of research before I started on any practical application. Automated hypnosis... a week ago, it seemed like a fever dream. Now it felt like a meal ticket. **"I don't need that thing,"** I told Colette as she tried to hand me the pacifier.

I sighed and shook my head. If we were dropped in on unexpected visitor, and she didn't have so much as a binky, well... **"I really wish you'd use it. You're going to need to make an appearance out there at some point today, but try and get as much done as possible. I'm going to be writing my reports while you do, and trying to buy us some time, and we'll do your hypno this afternoon."** Maybe I could help her with the binky reluctance.

I rolled my eyes and went back to work. Hours ticked by, but to me, it felt like minutes. Research was always a skill of mine. Just before the lunch chime rang, I had come up with an idea. Auditory overstimulation was pretty easy with static and background noises. But for visual, I had to take a page out of the 1940s. With a fast enough frame rate, the eyes wouldn't notice an image but the brain would unconsciously process it. Good thing I took that marketing class as an elective.

"Velvet. Lunch time."

"In a minute."

"Velvet." Sterner this time. **"Dr. Marlow is going to be out there any minute and if you're not out there and interacting with the others, it's going to raise red flags. Save out your progress. I'll give you a notebook tonight if you insist, but lunch is now."** I hated hanging my hopes on a patient. Especially one with so much talent.

"I'm not drinking that bottle," I told her, not bothering to look up from the computer. **"Aren't we on a deadline? I don't have time for your politics."** The problem was, subliminal messages were weak at best. But I didn't have to subliminally convince them - I just had to tax their thoughts so I could slip them into a trance. And if their brain was so busy trying to process all that subliminal information, it would have lowered its defenses. So then about the headset...

"Velvet." I rubbed the bridge of my nose. **"Why are you being difficult? You want to save these girls, right? Do something good, no more broken dolls like Annie? I need you to work with me here, and not push the limits of the freedoms I can afford you. I know what you want, and I know you think I can give you anything, but you're adult enough to know better than that. Aren't you?"**

I paused in the middle of typing and exhaled, looking up at Colette with understanding. When you grow up, you aren't free. Someone is always above you, making the rules. **"I can't work if I drink that milk,"** I told her out of honesty, rather than power play. We sure had come far, the two of us. Nonetheless, she ushered me out of the room.

"I'll see what I can do." And *what I can do* in this case meant her getting a half size bottle, which would affect her only long enough for me to hypnotize her after lunch. Unfortunately, the smaller bottle meal came with some solid food too, which would have consequences later for the poor girl, but we both knew she wouldn't the chance.

"Belbet!" Annie squealed happily upon seeing her.

"Hey." "You sou' different." "Oh, yeah, I guess my voice is back to normal." I looked up at the closed door to Marlow's office. What was his game? Why did he do that to me in the first place? Just to mess with my head? He sure succeeded. Colette went over to one of the attendants and

she came back a minute later with a plate of chicken nuggets and a bottle half-filled with milk. No one thought twice about it until it was set down in front of me. Oh, real food!

"You're on good behavior, Velvet," I said, for the benefit of the curious squad of would be girls more than anything else. **"If you're naughty at all though, I'll hear about it, and you'll be back to milk and milk alone. Now be a good girl and finish your lunch. Play with your friends, and we'll have hypnosis after break. There's a good girl."**

Despite Colette's reassurances, it was clear that the other girls were curious. I wondered if any girl before me had gotten food in her first week. Probably not. I ate the nuggets faster than I was proud of, but they were so damn good. I wasn't excited for the bottle, but half a dose was generous. Maybe it would wear off fast enough for me to get back to work.

There were going to be some complications from eating, that was for sure, but the milk had a way of glossing over adult concepts like cramps and discomfort. And Annie had a way of playing and giggling and drawing on Velvet when her best friend was all hazed out by the milk. It was a pleasant little family dynamic.

The half dose of milk was still a bitch. My thoughts ebbed away like ocean waves down a beach, but with a strong tug, I could pull them toward me again. I felt the warmth between my legs when I wet my diaper - I never really noticed stuff like that on a full bottle. And when Colette came to get me for my hypno session, I was struggling to find my balance. If I could fight off Marlow on a full bottle, I could totally fight off Colette on half. But Colette was no hack.

"There we are, doesn't that feel so much better?" Velvet was only under the influence of a half dose of the milk, but that wasn't too much of a factor for me. I took her hand in one of mine, used my other to rub her tummy.

"Does my little one feel all full on her tumtum? You keep being good like this, and you'll get to feel so much better." I did that in public, in front of the girls, I wanted everybody to know that Velvet wasn't special, wasn't any different from them, and Annie giggled. **"Belbet! Belbet! Make sures to use manners kay?"** Prompted to thank me, and by Annie, of all people? How perfect.

I looked at Annie and then at Colette with a pout of frustration. Did she say something wrong? Or did Annie? I felt indignation, but it was quickly erased by Colette's hand on my cheek. **"Say thank you,"** she said, and I did, because I couldn't figure out why I wouldn't. She took me by the hand into her office and sat me down on the sofa. I kicked my feet with a smile on my face, until I saw the computer. Work. Right... I tried to clear my head, but Colette took my glasses off. **"Hey! Give those back!"**

"Glasses are good for your eyes, but taking a break every now and then keeps from straining." I smiled at her, but not a bright smile; this subdued, knowing little smile, wheels in my head going around and around and putting pieces into place. **"A little girl like you might not know that, so it's a good thing you have me, isn't it? Little girls like you, itty bitty tiny dolls, you need someone to know what's best."** My voice had shifted tone, but I was going out of my way to keep her from knowing what I was doing, because if she didn't know she was being hypnotized, she couldn't fight me.

I huffed and squinted to see, looking around the blurry room. I hated not having my glasses. Everything felt unfocused... **"I wan' 'em back though..."** I tried to reach for Colette, but she helped me sit back on the sofa. I kicked my feet and tried to remember what I was thinking about. I turned toward the computer, but it was just a blurry shape. Damn it...

"Just a few minutes, Velvet, that's a good girl. Just a few minutes with me. Let's test your eyes, okay? Look at my eyes, look at them for me, right up here. Can you see what color they are? Go oh, why don't you look at them and describe them to me." I used my hand to nudge her chin upward to look at me, even as she winced and blinked. **"Your eyes are so pretty, Velvet, so pretty and fitting for such a tiny girl. You're the cutest girl here, you know, and it's all because you're oh so small. It's like you belong here. What color are my eyes, Velvet? Describe them to me, we're still testing your vision."**

"I... um..." Colette's face was a blur and I tried to focus on her eyes, but my head was hurting a little. Cute? Tiny. Small... I liked those words. But they made me cold and frustrated. Why? I shook my head, but Colette grabbed my chin and held me still. **"W-wasn't I... coming in here for something?"**

"Yes, Velvet, you were coming in here to look at my eyes, now be a good girl and listen when I talk, okay? You're such a good girl, you're good at everything you do so you need to be good at this too. Good at listening, good at following my words, good at letting them soak into you the way you soak into your diapers. It took a while to get used to diapers, but you wouldn't want to be without them now, and my words soak you just the same. What color are my eyes, Velvet? You're so little, but if you focus you can see. You can see the little flecks of color, the little details, the tiny little things; the more you see the smaller you are. You want to be small, Velvet, so little, so tiny, vulnerable, protected, safe.... a good girl."

I closed my eyes and tried to focus. I tried to pull my thoughts back in, like the waves on the beach, but what I pulled in instead were her words. Tiny, little things... smaller I am... she snapped her fingers and I opened my eyes. I felt fuzzy inside...

31.) Her Pacifier

She'd been under for forty-five minutes by the time I brought her to with my fingers snapping, and the milk would have been wearing off by now anyway so I couldn't have done more. **"Hold this for me, Velvet."** I handed the girl the same pacifier that she'd been so reluctant to accept earlier in the day; the one now glistening with her own saliva because she'd spent the last half an hour with it between her lips and had no memory of that at all. Oral fixation was a lovely term, but I'd like to think what I have her was more of an oral *compulsion*, based on the words I'd chosen. A need, almost. And it wasn't malicious, it was just that if she was pacified more often, there was less chance we'd get caught. It was practical. **"How're you feeling?"**

"...fine," I muttered. I looked down at the pacifier in my hands and then up at Colette. My glasses were on my face. I felt dizzy and warm... but the effects of the milk were gone. Or at least dulled significantly. And that meant time passed. I frowned. **"What did you do?"**

"Just something to help you focus, we have work to do, Velvet." I wasn't lying, she would focus a lot better with something between her lips; it was going to help as well as be an aide to our deception. **"I'll need to**

finish putting together a report; how about you get back to work?"

The way the paci glistened, shimmered, it would be impossible for Velvet to not think about it, not focus on it, not want to *try* it. And I'd make sure I was 'distracted' so she could sneak an attempt while thinking I didn't notice.

I sat down in front of the computer and went to work. Where was I? Oh, the headset. I could start writing a program for that. I opened up another application and went through a library of photos I had to work with. But which ones was I supposed to use? Arbitrary ones? Or specific ones? I just needed the headset to enforce the trance, right? Or should I tailor it to each recording? A lot more work... too much? Or the right amount? I was struggling a little. Must be the milk, I thought, and tried to push through.

Admirably, she was trying. I kept watching her focus and defocus, struggling over and over to keep her train of thought on one thing. Eventually, after 10 minutes of watching, I couldn't take it anymore. I stood up, I came over to her, I put the binky between her lips and held it there until the feeling triggered, and went back to my desk. Serenity, calm, focus, happiness. She was due for a whole range of loveliness.

I glared at Colette as she went back to her seat and reached up to take the pacifier out of my mouth. But for the first time since the milk, I felt... well, sort of in control. I looked down at the laptop and the gears in my head started to turn. If I organize pictures into thematic groupings rather than content, I could definitely use the subliminal messages of the photos. At the very least, it could be a security net. With the pacifier still in my mouth, I went back to work.

We had a lot to accomplish, and not that much time - and an hour later when reasonably I knew I'd have to put Velvet out with the girls and take care of another patients' hypnosis, I was amazed at how much she'd gotten done. **"Wow look at you, Little Miss Powerhouse. You got so much done!"** Praise was important. Important too was the recurrent nature of the fixation I'd given her; most hypnosis needed reinforcement to make it stick; for this, I'd made it self reinforcing through oral stimulation; the more she sucked, the more ingrained it became into her.

"Yeah, I figured if--" I hesitated at my speech and noticed for the first time that hour that I was sucking on the pacifier. Surprise. Confusion. And

finally, frustration. Fuck. I took the pacifier out of my mouth and got to my feet. **"Seriously? That's what you did?"**

"You're a force of nature, Velvet, but you jump from point to point to point to point; you needed something to help you focus on a single task and not get lost in the detail, and this doubles as a way of showing I'm still working on you." Despite her being a killer, I respected her far too much to lie to her. And I also knew she'd accept it more readily if I was honest. **"I get results, right?"**

...well, whatever. I handed her the pacifier and crossed my arms. **"Either way, I'm not letting you mess with my head. Now that I know what it is, I'll get rid of it myself."** I had my own securities, after all. I walked past her and out of her office.

I took her by the arm, and that wasn't all - I grabbed her, and I picked her up, and I held her against my hip, putting the pacifier back between her lips. She was small. I wasn't much bigger, but bigger enough. **"Velvet, this isn't optional. And I'm not going to have you freebasing here and choosing what you will and won't do. I respected you enough to tell you the truth, so respect me enough to let me do my job. Or maybe I'm giving you too much freedom, huh, little one?"**

I kicked her hard and she dropped me onto my padded ass, cold and wet. I bit the pacifier and started to suck on it to relieve the pain, wincing as I looked up at Colette. **"I'm not--"** I reached up and tore the pacifier out of my mouth, throwing it across the room in anger. **"I'm not helping you figuratively lobotomize me! If you're so good at your job, then do it better."**

"Lobotomize you?" I was really upset with that, I took it so damn personally. **"You mean like Marlow wants to? Because that's not me, and you *know* that's not me. You know that when you get out of here you have the skills and techniques to undo anything I do, and you *also* know I have KPI's to meet and I have to show results. And you *know* that I would never do anything to impact your faculties, your brilliance, or your ability to think. So get your padded ass up, go pick up your damn binky and bring it here, and apologize for being such a brat, am I *clear*, Little Lady?"**

I looked up at Colette with a bit of... shame, maybe? Because I knew this could be worse. I could have Marlow instead. So I took a deep breath and got up to fetch the pacifier. With a moment of silence between us, I gave Colette the binky and crossed my arms over my stupid dress.

"I'm sorry. I know you're just doing your job. And I really... appreciate it. Like. Not dumbing me down with stupid TV shows in fake languages. Cutting my milk doses in half. Shit like that..." I sighed. Ugh... **"But I'm also standing here in a piss soaked diaper and you keep messing with my head, so... you can understand why I'm frustrated, I hope."**

"Of course, and I think we both get a lot more done when we work together." I fetched a lemony scented wipe to clean off the pacifier, then put it between my lips like a Mom, before holding it out. **"Take your binky, put it in, and then lay down on my sofa - I'll get you changed."** Give and take, right?

I had to meditate. I had to remember how to focus without a pacifier between my lips. I probably had a few books about focusing - study habits or something - on the top shelves of my mental library. But for now, I sucked on the pacifier and let the woman change my diaper. Best to keep Colette as a friend. For now.

32.) Her New Offer

Later that afternoon, Marlow came into my office. I knew that the girls noticed, but with the door closed, there was little they could infer. Velvet saw, too, from her place on the playmat with her new binkie, and if she didn't, Annie made a note of it. **"Uhh-ohh... Loletts in trouble..."**

That ugly man in his ugly shoes closed the door behind him. I sat quietly and watched for a while, waiting for the sound of a scream or glass breaking. But nothing happened. I looked down at the blocks I was playing with and thought about the automated hypnosis. All the girls here were scared of Marlow. He was a shitty doctor. If we could really get Marlow booted out of this place, everyone would be better off.

"I dun think tha' Lolette is gonna stay berry much more cuz Marlow said tha' he dinny wan' her to be here no more cuz he said tha' he's better than she is an I dun think so but he always makes my head fuzzee..." Annie mostly babbled onward as she was playing with her blocks.

Hm... I watched the door a while longer, then went back to the blocks, thinking. Marlow wanted Colette out. Colette wanted Marlow gone. So it really was a race then. And if I didn't help Colette, she was going to lose. **"Hey Annie,"** I said around my pacifier. **"What's your favorite thing? Something you know is safe, no matter what?"**

"Umm..." Annie put a finger to her thing with a block still in her grasp. **"Iono... I like my purple crayon a lot a lot 'cuz you can make the sky purple if you lose your blue one you know so the purple one is the bestest one and my favoritest one an' I'll show you okay okay?"** She didn't even put the block down. And she didn't stand, either, she crawled over to her box of crayons, singing and serenading for her searched-for crayon.

Yeah, this was going to be harder than I thought. An hour or so later, Marlow came out of the office and Colette stood in the door, arms crossed and looking unhappy. What had he said to her? But before I had the opportunity to answer, the dinner bell chimed. All the girls got up from what they were doing and made their way over to the large plastic table.

"Velvet, can I see you in my office please?" Not Colette. Dr. Marlow. Even though it was dinner time, even though the bell had chimed, even though he wasn't even her doctor, he called for her. And by the time Velvet looked for the security of her own doctor, Colette's door had been closed. Something had happened, obviously. Something bad.

I hated to admit that I was afraid of Marlow, but... well, I was afraid of Marlow. I mean, he hadn't done anything to me that wasn't beyond a point of reproach, but I knew how much Colette hated him and Annie feared him. That was enough to make me afraid as well. I sucked harder on my pacifier and stumbled to my feet before walking over to his office door. He closed it behind me.

The man with his ugly shoes sat down at his desk, he turned on his chair, and he lit up a cigarette, the sort of smile on his face you only get when you're sure that you've won. And he put those ugly shoes up on the table with a suitably ugly *thunk*. **"Velvet, I think you know why you're here. I think it's time we talk about it your collusion with Doctor Colette, and the consequences of your actions."**

"I dunno what you're talking about," I lied through the pacifier. Honestly, I didn't know what he knew. I wasn't going to slip up. Why was I here? What was his plan? Why didn't he wait until I'd had my dinner bottle, when I was susceptible and weak? Was this a challenge?

He took a long breath in and exhaled the stinky smoke high into the room with a smug little smile. **"You're going to sit here and lie to me, Velvet? The game is up, my sweet, and I'm giving you the very generous option to confess your role in things, and perhaps be spared the most serious consequences."** Everything about him, everything about his smile, his tone, his demeanor, his choice of words... it showed just how sure he was of this.

"...I really dunno what you mean." Where he was convincing, I was a mastermind. A tiny boy in a dress and a diaper, sucking a pacifier, with wide doe eyes. If it wasn't for actual footage of me killing one of those people, I could have gotten off for murder too. **"I sometimes don't remember stuff when I'm in Dr. Colette's office,"** I admitted. But that was standard hypno stuff.

"Oh, I'll wager that is absolutely the case. She's a conniving schemer, that woman, she's seeking to undermine the stability of this whole operation. She'd see this be no more than a common prison, instead of the brilliant facility that turns out success cases like young Annie. Now, Velvet, you're not stupid, you know that we can do some good here, don't you?"

I nodded slowly. Was he... inviting me to join him? In reality, the decision was easy. My vision lined up better with Colette than Marlow. Annie was not a success case - she was a disaster. But I wasn't one to give up an opportunity either. **"I think taking away our adulthood and manhood is very effective, yeah. I mean, I hate it, but you do produce amazing results."** And the winning line: **"The ends justify the means."**

"I knew you were a clever one, Velvet." Now he leaned forward, tapped the ash from his cigarette, and set it down in his ash tray. **"There's so much we can do here, Velvet, so many violent offenders who'll never reoffend, sexual predators, child molesters, can you *imagine* Annie ever hurting a fly? She's a harmless little doll of a girl now, and a pleasure to be around. We can't take a soft touch on these people, we can't. And I know you've been working with Colette to circumvent my success here."**

"Colette doesn't really let me do anything... she just takes me into her room to hypnotize me a lot. But it never works. I'm way better than her." I rolled my eyes, talking around the pacifier as if it was the most normal thing in the world. **"She's totally useless. I don't think you have to worry."**

"There could be something in it for you, Velvet." He reached into the pocket of his coat and put something down on the table - a tablet, with a form filled out on it, Velvet's name in the patient field and a very interesting header: Patient Release Statement. **"If you *do* decide that Colette isn't such an idiot, and you have been helping her, and you'd like to put down her little... crusade, to undermine us here, well..."** He clicked the screen on the tablet off and slipped it into his coat. **"That will be all."**

Release? I stared wide eyed at Dr. Marlow, but he got up and went to the door, ushering me out. I sat at the table a moment before picking up my bottle, thinking. I had no allegiance to Colette. I didn't really care about Annie that much. So what if this program made everyone into little dolls? It wasn't me. I sighed and put the bottle between my lips. I'd have to think about it.

33.) Her Long Night

"Are yew otay?" Annie had her blankie in hand even at the dinner table, so when her professed best friend came out of the office of Dr. Marlow, she was quick to offer to share it. An offering of comfort.

"Uh huh," I said with a smile, holding the bottle between my lips in one hand and the pacifier in my other. **"He juss wanted to have a talk. That's all."** She didn't seem placated by what I'd said, but it hardly mattered. Ten minutes later, we were giggling and coloring. And later that night, when the haze of the milk finally wore off, I was wet and uncomfortable lying in my own bed. And worse, my stomach was aching...

"Bad dweams too?" Annie asked, quietly, in the dead darkness of their shared room, her words a little melodic by the distance from one bed to the other, but the dorms here always seemed lonely no matter how much spotty nightlight illumination there was. **"Dr. Marlow made mine go away but then they comes back an but I dun tell him cause he's scary..."**

"I'm alright," I muttered, rolling over onto my back and wincing as the diaper shifted unnaturally. Ugh, those stupid chicken nuggets had finally caught up to me, and I really needed a damn bathroom... **"I'm going to meditate, so just be quiet for a little bit, okay Annie?"** She nodded from the other bed and I closed my eyes. My library. I had to get rid of this pacifier thing. Focus... focus... but aside from not finding a book on focusing, I was struggling to focus! My library slipped away from me. **"Damn it..."** I mumbled and looked around the room. There was only one way I was going to be able to do this... **"Annie... do you... have a, um... pacifier by chance?"**

"Uhhuh but izza seekrit Otay? Not aposed to sleep wif it cuz it's bad for teef but I hided it really good!" There was the sound of her dropping down from her bed and pattering over across the room, the light hitting her in places, until she ferreted around in the dark... and whined. **"Uhhoh skettiohs... is gone..."**

"...seriously?" She nodded in the darkness and I sighed. Of course it was... **"Okay, thanks anyway Annie."** I closed my eyes again and got back to my library. But every time I tried to find a specific book, I'd get lost. Then my stomach would hurt. If it was one or the other, I could probably handle it. But both the focusing issues and the need for the bathroom were too distracting. Finally, I gave up.

"I cuddle." Annie announced this only after she crawled herself into Velvet's bed without asking and settled down under the blankets with a

happy little smile of satisfaction. **"It'll help!"** She rolled over, put all her weight on Velvet, and cuddled up against her side. She was a good friend!

I wasn't really the cuddling type, even with Roger. But it was nice to have some affection from someone I knew had no ulterior motives. I played with her hair and tried to go back to sleep. That worked for a while, long enough to get some rest. Then I woke up to a cramp in my stomach. An inevitability, I thought with exhaustion. Fuck...

If Annie noticed the uncomfortable wriggling or the embarrassing cramps, she didn't stir enough to show it. It looked like she was going to sleep here all night. Which for Velvet might have been the only thing that could have made this worse.

"Annie? You awake?" "Mm..." She was not awake. **"Do we have like... diapers in here? Or wipes?" "Mm..."** That was a very negative sounding groan. I looked up at the ceiling and sighed. Damn it... **"I have to get up, Annie. Can you move?"** She could not. So I climbed over her and almost fell off the bed before getting to my feet. This was so stupid...

"Doors locked," Annie mumbled. *That* she could manage to say it seemed, as she rolled over and cuddled the pillow. **"Smells like Belbet...mm.. Belbet so preddy..."** She sighed happily and dozed back off. How deeply asleep she was, though, that was anyone's guess.

I tried the door anyway. It was indeed locked. So I paced side to side. I'd done it before. But that was different circumstances. And it didn't matter - it was just another tactic to humiliate me. I wasn't really humiliated. I just really didn't want to be in a shitty diaper for the rest of the night. I could always take the diaper off. And they would know they'd won. So... there was no choice. I squatted down so the diaper was tight against my ass. But with one good push, I began filling the seat of padding.

"Belbet you don't smell so good no more." Annie hadn't said anything when she'd sat up at first. Honestly she'd heard messing and thought it was herself, but had watched in awe as Velvet had humiliated herself over by the door. And Annie had waited until she was finished to say something, something she said while pinching her nose.

I felt my frustration well up in my cheeks, hot and red. **"Shut up, okay? It's not like I had a choice."** I took a deep breath and went to Annie's bed instead, crawling in under the covers and laying on my stomach to avoid squishing the seat of my diaper. Ugh, this sucked...

Once she laid down, it took only a minute for Annie to crawl in with her, still holding her nose but cuddling with the other arm in what had to be her own attempted version of being supportive. **"Belbet feel better now? Got all of the ickies outta her tumtum?"**

Annie didn't mean any of it maliciously. She probably didn't know what maliciously meant. And the room was starting to smell pretty bad, too... **"Go to sleep Annie,"** I muttered and closed my eyes. With the whole exhaustive experience behind me, I managed to slip off to sleep.

34.) Her Priorities

Three days. I sat with my back to the wall in the oversized playroom and watched the doors. Colette's. Marlow's. Side by side. Marlow was obviously using me to get at Colette. Colette, on the other hand, had standards. Standards made her weak, but they were also what made me like her. I shuffled side to side in my fresh, dry diaper and closed my eyes. I had to find my library again and get rid of this stupid oral fixation.

"Wan' play?" Annie, the predictable stalwart, grinned her affable little smile, her teeth had been awful when she got here, but her smile had been given life somewhere along the way - probably by her benefactor-cum-warden, Dr. Marlow - and she now smiled the most pretty pearly gestures.

"No thanks Annie. I actually need some peace and quiet, so could you make sure no one bothers me for a few minutes?" Annie took it as an official guard posting or something, running around to everyone in the room and telling all the other girls that I was not to be bothered. I rolled my eyes and closed them again. Library. Books. Focusing. Ah, here we go. And by the time I opened my eyes again, Colette was standing at the door to her office watching me.

"You know, you do that to make it through here, but you're never going to make it through here while you keep doing that."

"Doing what, Colette?"

"That's Doctor to you, Marlow."

"I'm sure. Are you excited for this afternoon?"

"For you to leave?"

He chuckled and shook his head with a happy wave of his hand, sipped his coffee, and continued. **"For the surprise inspection from the Round Table. Oh Colette, I -do- hope all your ducks are in a row, because mine certainly are."**

Marlow closed the door behind him and Colette sighed, checking her watch. Half an hour until breakfast.

"Velvet. My office."

I got up off the floor and waddled across the room. I swear, these diapers felt thicker and thicker. When we were alone, I decided to direct the line of inquiry to her. **"So, surprise inspection. Sounds fun."**

"Sounds like a game to me. Marlow says he knows something, but won't say what. For him to bring an inspection down but to know about it? That's no surprise; he arranged it, Velvet. He's going to show off Annie." And our project was... well, it was my turn to chew on something; the arm of my glasses, nervously chattering between my teeth. **"That or there was a funding change, an administration shuffle... maybe..."** She pointed at Velvet. **"Maybe there's a shake up in the Round Table. Something is happening...."**

"Yeah, very interesting." I was already bored of the conversation. I didn't care about the politics of this place. Then again, I was playing the game now. **"Marlow offered me a position on his team. If I get you fired, he'll release me early."** Obviously it was a lie, but I was curious how paranoid Colette truly was.

"Hah. Hah, he promised you know? Oh Velvet, I'm glad you're not an idiot." I was pacing, though, because there was... some reason, *something*, for him to bring them down here for. What was it? What had he done? I wished in retrospect that I'd been more calm and focused, that I'd thought things through. Maybe if I had, Velvet would have been safe.

Three more days, I reminded myself. I reminded Colette too, when she seemed interested enough to listen to me. She was worried. I was goal-oriented. I was best utilized working on the automated hypnosis project, even if only for half an hour before breakfast. But after sitting down and starting an analysis of variables, she sat down next to me. **"Need your pacifier?" "Nope."** She gave me a curious look. Sure enough, I seemed to be focusing fine without it.

"Do you wanna tell me about that trick you did? Because we're going to come across others with your talents in the future, Velvet, and we can't have them undoing what we do here." Not many people were as talented as Velvet, though, to be quite fair about it.

"I have no idea what you're going on about. But you're distracting me." I put a few numbers into a simulation and checked the frame rate on a video file. I need to find more scholarly articles supporting this... **"Don't you have something else you could be obsessing over?"**

"I don't know, Velvet, maybe I'm wrong to be taking an interest in my quite remarkable patient, no? Now stop playing coy; it took you no time at all to undo what I did to you, and I need to know how you did it. Because I'm very good at what I do, as you well know." And deep breath. **"And if you're better, I need to learn how."**

"Hm. You must not be as good as you say you are," I said flatly and went back to working on the laptop. She snapped it closed and I sighed. **"You're being really petty about this. Isn't Annie more important?"**

"You were meditating, right? This morning?"

"You ask a lot of questions that aren't helping Annie."

"And you waste a lot of time protecting your fragile pride and ego, so determined to seem mysterious and in total control. I'm your friend,

but you keep me at arm's length. Why is that? A stroke of luck is the reason you're with me and not Marlow, a numbers game, and I'm a world apart and treat you with respect. So show me a little, won't you?" It was oddly like a parent talking to a teenager...

"Yes, let me explain to you how I evade your subpar TV drama hypnosis so you can regress me into a pants-shitting baby."

"Technically you already do that."

I glared at Colette and got up on my feet. **"You know what, if you don't want to work on this project today, fine. I'm going to get breakfast."**

35.) Her Floor Show

The morning went by like any other; after breakfast, the two of us studied wordlessly in my office. Like Velvet and I were... fighting? I resolved after that I'd smooth things over after lunch. But at the end of lunch the double doors that left the wing were pushed opened and seven men, and two women, entered the would-be creche to observe the patients. Then a voice broke the quiet chatter, pens went down, clipboards to sides, and Marlow began to talk.

"Oh my darling Annie, would you please come up here. Velvet, too, if you please. Everybody else, please pay attention, won't you?"

Two meals of solid food. No milk. Then this gaggle of nicely dressed business-men and women. The inspection. I had two concrete options here: 1.) I use my position to convince the group that this place is evil and I go to prison for the rest of my life. Or 2.) I convince them it's a great place and I'm close to rehabilitation, which might get me out earlier. So when Marlow called Annie and I up to meet his entourage, I decided to go with the latter. And the best way to do that was to mimic Annie.

"Ladies and Gentleman of the Round Table, I'd like to introduce you to Annie - as you can see, Annie is healthy, obedient, happy, and most importantly - harmless. Say hello, Annie." The girl waved, sucking her thumb with the other hand.

"Now, of course, as rightly suggested in our last communique, Annie doesn't represent a viable end product result for our system here; she'll never re-offend, but she is also... docile. In need of care. And that burden is no more insignificant than that of the present day detention system. But..." Annie burped quietly and covered her mouth cutely. "What if Annie were to not be an *end* goal, but a *start* to our process? We've spoken at great length about phases here in the project, but it's to this date been a concept unexplored beyond talk. Introduction is phase one, graduation is phase three. But what if there were to be a... phase zero? A state where all patients were administered a serum to bring them to Annie's level, so all growth is both expedient and predictable?"

Phases? What was he talking about? Did Colette ever mention anything about phases? I looked over at her as she came out of her office with a clipboard in her hands, but she wouldn't make eye contact. Probably for the best. But one of the men of the committee spoke up.

"Annie has been with us for nearly a year. She hasn't shown marked improvement in months. Yet you want to revert every new entry to this state? It's ridiculous and unnecessary."

I watched Marlow's smile fade.

"Edward, you of all people should know the importance of purpose, of drive. This project isn't kitted out to work with Annie; we assume violent and resistant men, we spend hours, days, months, fighting through reluctance with brute force. Annie isn't an end-point; she's a beginning. You cannot deny that with the right environment; a cultured, cultivated learning environment, like... like a school; patients like Annie could thrive. Not learning to be someone they're not, but learning to be someone they now *are*." He pushed up his glasses with a confident smile.

"Dr. Marlow, you produced Annie only through reckless endangerment of a patient," I began. **"Do not try to fool the Round Table with tales of triumph, even if you could replicate the results of Annie - however unethical - it would take so long as to render the endeavor fruitless."**

Ohhhh drama in the Weird Adult Baby Girl Conversion Center! This was actually kind of exciting, and it seemed like the other girls thought so as well, peeking over couches and trying to listen in.

"Dr. Clement, please," one of the men said to silence Colette. She frowned and crossed her arms over her chest, clipboard tight against her shirt. Restraint was not her strong suit. But what did she expect, attacking another doctor on staff like that?

"The facts are simple," one of the women said. "So far, we have had minor infractions from all inmates, even early in their conversion. Our punishment and reward system works. Our degradation system works. Until there's a need, I see no reason to subject anyone else to a state such as Annie's when no one can seem to fix it." This was not directed at only Marlow, but Colette as well.

"You don't *fix* Annie by punishing her, by leaving her with these inmates, these... these projects, Margaret. She's a blank slate; you don't fix her, you *teach* her. You put her into an environment to learn and she will grow; you can't turn nails into flowers; but the iron from the nail can nourish the seed." He produced something from his hand; a capped needle.

"Let me introduce you to Velvet Duke; she's a newer inmate. Mass murderer, certified genius to be certain; she plays this game but makes no progress. Her goal is control, not recovery, her end-game is to preserve herself and not to rehabilitate. She's even manipulated poor Dr. Clement here; check the good doctors requisition logs if you don't believe me. She's convinced Dr. Clement that she can work *with* her. A patient. An inmate. A criminal." He held the needle up for the group to see. "I can fix this."

"We will investigate this matter," the woman said to Dr. Marlow with more seriousness than I'd ever heard. Did everyone hate him, or just everyone I'd met? "That is why we are conducting this inspection, after all. But you will not use experimental procedures on inmates without full Committee approval. Or you will no longer have a position here." Maybe this place wasn't so corrupt after all, I thought.

"I believe I only need majority approval. That would be five, if I recall?" He held the needle up and approached the group. **"Agent N2721. Refer to your inboxes; I've sent you the required paperwork before arrival. Successful tests have been carried out; the agent was synthesized to act on the precise neural pathways we mapped out in Annie's scans. Her brain isn't damaged, as you will see; but like a record needle she *skipped* to an earlier state, and to no ill effect. Go on and read, if you doubt my authenticity."**

"Dr. Marlow," the woman said slowly. **"We ask you return to your offices. We will discuss this matter in private."**

But Marlow was up on his soap box. It was strange, watching these two - Colette and Marlow - vie for power in an institution where ultimately, they had none. They were... sort of pathetic. Finally, another man spoke up with frustration.

"Marlow, the vote was cast. Three to six, against. Your science is sound, but we have no reason to use something like this. Stop making a fool of yourself." Maybe it was that last bit that hit home. Marlow actually stopped talking and put away the needle.

"Interview her." He nodded. Not to me, though, not to the board. But to Velvet. **"Interview Velvet Duke. And then tell me how your coins fall."** He pushed on a turned heel and retired to his office.

36.) Her Interview

I had three people doing my interview, though everyone else only had one. One of the three was the woman who shot down Marlow. The other two hadn't spoken during the outburst in the common area.

"What is your name?" the woman asked me.

"Velvet Duke, ma'am." She wrote something down.

"Velvet Duke, what is your birth name." It was a contentious question; Annie wouldn't be able to answer that apart from 'Annie Miss!' and

nonetheless it was expected that all inmates here renounce their prior names for graduation, but at her early stage of admission here by comparison, Velvet would also be equally expected to instinctively reply with her former name.

I looked at the woman nervously, then at the two men on her right and her left. **"I... I'm not supposed to say it,"** I muttered, looking down at my feet. **"Last time I got in trouble, and... and I don't really want to get in trouble again."** I avoided eye contact, careful to play the role perfectly. Shy. Nervous. A little scared.

"Velvet Duke, this is not a disciplinary committee, nor a hearing of the sort. You will answer the questions presented honestly and to the best of your abilities, without fear of current retribution." The woman recited, almost... with boredom in her tone of voice. Like she didn't want to be here. **"Please tell me what your crime was, Miss Duke."**

"Um... well I killed twelve people. Because I was trying to get revenge. But I didn't really get revenge - I just hurt more people..." I sighed and kicked my feet. I didn't feel bad about it, not really. But I'd always been the perfect actor.

It seemed only the woman talked, but the men wrote just as many notes as she did - maybe more. Like she tested the waters, and they recorded the results. **"Would you repeat your actions again, Miss Duke, in the same circumstances presented?"**

I shook my head. **"No, not really. I mean, I'm still upset, but it didn't really change anything did it? And now I'm stuck here..."** Then I smiled a little. A fake smile. An intentionally fake-looking smile. **"But a year isn't so bad! Better than going to jail for the rest of my life. And I do look kinda cute in dresses..."**

There was a scratching of pens on paper for a few terse minutes before the next question came. **"How do you feel about the doctors who have attended to you in this facility, Miss Duke?"** An open question, really - how did she feel about Colette and Marlow? How did she feel about them as doctors? How did she feel they treated her. What did she think about this? Any number of questions it could have been.

"They aren't very nice," I said flatly, almost annoyed. **"Colette keeps changing my food and stuff and I feel like she's just trying to mess with me! Like, because the bottles make things so much easier, and the solid food makes me have to..."** I hesitated, blushing, and shyly looked down. **"N-nevermind. Um. Marlow's not any better. He's just a jerk to everyone. And I think he picks on me even though I'm not his patient."**

No emotional response from any of the three board members. Nods. Scratching pens. Another question. **"How do you feel about Annie?"** Another question with a lot of variable questions and answers, where the answer she chose to provide could give more answers than the words themselves.

Annie. That was a topic I could get passionate about. Fake passion, but real opinions! **"It's so careless! I'm a hypnotherapist you know? Or I was. And it's your responsibility to make sure you don't break people like that! Ugh, I can't believe Marlow's so..."** I needed the perfect word. **"Inexperienced. And now Annie has to suffer?"**

"You feel that Annie is suffering? Even now she seemed perfectly placated by just the thumb between her lips, didn't she? Is that suffering, Miss Duke? Perhaps you could explain your position further."

"That's like saying we should give people lobotomies again because they seemed happier. But she has no opportunity. And she can't grow! She can't be a better person! Isn't this place about being a better person?" I pouted and settled down into the bed, crossing my arms over my chest in mock frustration. **"Whatever, I dun even care..."**

"And as a therapist, you feel qualified to state that Annie has an inability to grow? How do you feel about a change in environment, as Dr. Marlow suggested? An environment of nurtured learning, instead of structured deconstruction. Miss Duke, how do you feel Annie would respond to such stimuli?" An oddly specific question.

"Oh... um..." I looked at the woman with a bit of surprise. I didn't expect a question like that. It seemed less like they were evaluating me and more like they wanted my opinion... was that a part of the game? **"I guess... if**

you can't fix her... you could probably help her learn to grow up the way she did the first time." I nodded slightly. "So maybe school or something might be good? I dunno..."

"And do you feel that is a viable option for rehabilitation, Miss Duke? Do you feel it fair? Would you be willing to undergo such a progress, do you think it a just method of process?" While the woman's questions may have seemed obtuse, specific, overly focused, and caught on details, there was obviously a reason she was asking them - Velvet was controlled to a flawless level; but her profile indicted her pride to be a weakness.

Well, I'd never thought about it before. **"Could you do all that in a year?"** I was slipping a little. Curiosity was getting the better of me and acting was falling second. Hmm... **"I mean, maybe it would work, but it feels like it would take... well, a lifetime, right? That's sort of stupid..."**

"It could be allowed to take the time needed, one would think. Those who take to the program would be able to graduate sooner, and those who need some extra time could have the time they needed. More senior students would provide mentoring to the new intakes, and there would be no chance of insincerity as all students would start on the same equal starting block; regressed to a state like Annie." This didn't mean for a moment that the woman supported Marlow's idea, but the logic seemed... seductive, to Velvet.

Yeah, she'd roped me in. I needed to know more. **"What's the process now? You guys said there were three phases?"** "A first phase to break down. A second to repair. And a third to reassemble." **"Okay, so you already do the breaking down, right? And it makes cases like Ayla, who is a total success. So why do you need this new thing? Why make more Annies when you aren't even sure you can fix her? The only case I could see it being used is... I dunno. A threat? But none of us are really threatening anymore."** Except me. I left that out.

"There'll always be outliers, Miss Duke. A system that assumes succession on 80% of cases leaves a large margin of error, wouldn't you agree? A system to normalize the intakes to Annies ensures a **100% Ayla success rate.**" The woman's voice was stable, serene; Velvet had broken rank and dropped her facade, but the two men never stopped taking notes.

"That's assuming you can turn Annie into Ayla. Which, so far, you haven't been able to do." It was probably then that I realized how far off script I'd gone. Fuck. **"Anyway, I think it's risky. But I'm not in charge. My opinion doesn't really matter."** I sat back on the bed and crossed my arms defensively.

"You're a patient here, Miss Duke, not an administrator. You think like the latter while presenting a facade of the former. The results of this interview are clear, and we will convene now. You may go." The three of them had all taken notes, and the three of them had all come to the same conclusion, without conferring with one another: hot tempered as he may be, Dr. Marlow was right about one thing: Velvet Duke could not be controlled or corrected under the current system.

37.) Her Success

After the impromptu interview with Annie and I, my deadline had been relaxed. They were giving Marlow another week before showing her off again, and he was working on some big new project. But Colette and I were working on our own too. Annie was absolutely no help; I couldn't find a way to tear down her walls. So what do you do when you can't tear something down? You go around it. With enough stimuli, I could pass through undetected. I just had to get inside her head.

But with the new deadline, my schedule changed as well. Bottles as normal. Appointments were on schedule. But even at the end of two weeks, Colette hadn't been able to get a single hypno session to stick. The bottles messed with my continence, the shots messed with my moods, but my mind was as sharp as a tack. As far as she was concerned, she was failing. And she'd continue to fail.

"Okay... I think I'm done." It was well past lights out. I'd been spending late evenings in her office. Marlow would have been suspicious if he ever seemed to be around anymore.

"I'm not sure this is going to work, Velvet." For anything we exposed Dr. Marlow on, there was every possibility of him shining a spotlight on my

Velvet project and them seeing just how... underdeveloped her conditioning was. She was outplaying me, she was somehow one step ahead.

"Mm. No, it'll work." I'd done the calculations a thousand times over. The headset in my hands was heavier than I thought. High end quality headphones and a screen for VR therapy. A lot of duct tape and technical adjustments. I was never handy with electronics - most nights were spent watching videos online. The result? A frame rate that vacillated between slightly too high and much too high. Earphones that used inverse waves to cancel unwanted noise with slight echo for a non-digital distraction. But the brilliance was in the program itself. The images, the way the screens flashed... even if you closed your eyes, the lights would flicker through your eyelids. The inescapable static, compounding at just the right rate. And then my voice, my Empathetic Voice. Trance was inevitable. It wasn't full automation - I'd have to record every program separately! But it would induce an irresistible trance, and Colette could take it from there. The hard part was done.

"I'm not talking about the headset, I'm not talking about our project. I'm talking about you, Velvet." I rubbed the bridge of my nose and let out a long and deep exhale, trying to find the right words. **"You're my KPI in all of this, and when Marlow tries to undermine our work - and he will - he'll point out my relative lack of progress when it comes to you. Every time I make inroads, you undo them."**

"Yep, because I'm not your little hypnodoll." I adjusted the headset and slid it on over my face. It wasn't plugged in, but the lights went out and the room went quiet. Then I took it off again. Yeah, it should fit Annie...

"Listen Colette. I'm faking it just fine out there. And I'm helping you become a legend in here. In fifty more weeks, I'm getting out and you can be on TIME's front page. Or whatever magazine sponsors fucked crimes against humanity like this place."

Usually her sense of snarky humor would have been enough to elicit a smile out of me, but I was too lost in thought over this one. I needed to know *how* she was doing it, how she was undermining me. **"What if I run into someone else as brilliant as you are?"** Maybe her ego could be the key here. **"What's your trick, how are you doing it?"**

"Oh, well since you put it that way." I rolled my eyes and put the headset down on her desk. My diaper was wet. My eyes were heavy. I hadn't been getting more than four hours of sleep a night all week. I was ready to crash... **"Just try the headset on Annie. I bet it'll work."**

When had our dynamic shifted? When did I lose the power of authority over her? She was so cocky, so confident, so obtusely... *arrogant*. And it was actually making me a little angry, and more than a little annoyed, because it wasn't right for her to act this way when the only reason she wasn't another Annie was because of my protection. She motioned again to the headset and I exhaled deeply. She was studying me, analyzing me. Trying to figure out my feelings, obviously. I could play things close to the chest, too.

I had my hand on the door when she called my name. Ugh, I figured she'd try to pull something like this... **"Listen, if you want to waste what little sleep I'm already getting on more failed hypnosis, then fine. But if I'm passing out at the breakfast table, Marlow's going to get suspicious. It's your call."** I looked at her with boredom, exhausted, lost to the tediousness of this. All week, she insisted on running our hypnosis sessions. They never worked. She needed to give up and stop wasting our time.

"I'll cut you a deal, then." Honestly, deals were something I could try and tempt Velvet with, because the brilliant little girl that she was, she was still easily drawn in by the notion of getting power and control back and deals meant leverage. **"Tell me about your process. Tell me about your... temple, or your garden, or whatever other point of reference you make in your head to undo what I do."**

"Wow, you are desperate, hm?" Outright asking. That's sure a new tactic. But I wasn't an idiot. If she ever figured out how I kept breaking her hypnotisms, then I wouldn't be able to break them again. **"Goodnight Colette."** **"Goodnight,"** she said flatly, full of annoyance. But her irritation didn't bother me. For now, she needed me.

38.) Her Special Bath

Morning came too soon. My diaper was cold and clammy, and nearly at capacity. Bedwetting was just another thing I was getting used to in this awful place. I climbed out of bed and went to the nurse's station. **"Hey, um... could I have a change please?"** The last thing I needed was another rash.

"Actually, Velvet," The nurse began, apologetically, **"your care coordinator has put in the request that you don't get changes right now. I'm afraid you'll need approval from her for that. Sit down and have breakfast with the other babies."**

Babies. I resented her. But I put on a fake blush and looked away shamefully. They had to know this place was working. I sat down on the edge of the chair and put my hands on the table. Was this Colette? Was she getting revenge? Did she think a diaper rash was going to convince me to give up my identity? She was so fucking stupid sometimes.

The other girls took their seats and a bottle was put in front of me. But suspiciously, on my right, Annie wasn't there...

"Hey, where's Annie?"

"Annie was gone when we woke up this morning," Ayla explained, eloquently. To be honest, Ayla was ready to be out of here. She'd be a productive member of society, she'd be a poster child for this place if given the chance. Not everyone here believed in the process in detail and depth, but Ayla had made it through to the other side and was proof that things worked.

"She was gone?" I looked at Ayla nervously and then up at Colette's door. It was closed. It was always closed. Had she started fixing Annie? Or was Marlow in the middle of another one of his plots? I sunk in my chair and took the bottle in my hands. Fear of the bottles had started to subside - my afternoons were nothing but childish bliss these days. I knew that now.

"I don't think she's gone forever," Ayla continued, attempting to be helpful.

"She's going to be here forever," Contributed Estar, doing absolutely *nothing* to be helpful at all. But both of them were probably right in their

own ways. Annie was never going to be fit for the real world, not at this rate.

The swirling milk was just starting to kick in. My head was fuzzy, my fingertips were numb, and I started to giggle at all of Bree's stupid jokes. But it was a sobering moment to see those awful alligator shoes. I looked up at Dr. Marlow with my bottom lip puffed out.

"Tsk tsk tsk... look at that puddle you've made."

I looked down between my legs, at the wet carpet. It was him that didn't let me change?

"You're in a world of trouble, little girl." Dr. Marlow clicked his tongue and shook his head, nudging the wet little Velvet along with a yardstick he had in his hand, like keeping her at least that distant from him was as close as he'd want the soaking wet little strumpet. **"Into my office, now, don't dawdle."**

I stumbled to my feet and looked down at my wet thighs, but the prodding of the stick nudged me forward. I looked back with a glazed fog at the room. Six girls stared back at me. Everyone was so scared of Marlow... I shook my head and tried to focus, but it was no use. The milk was too strong.

There was something different about Marlow's office, something amiss. Was it the big desk? No, it looked like it had been built before the room had formed around it. Was it his tacky red leather chair, his framed statements attributed to himself, like 'No Good Deed Goes Unpunished'? No, not those. Maybe it was the aquarium... the aquarium in the middle of the floor, bubbling ominously with no fish inside of it, and a liquid that looked too thick to be water. Yes, that was probably it.

I looked at the large tub with curiosity and back up at Marlow. The lights were fuzzy and everything tilted side to side. Side to side. I giggled, swaying in place with a bright smile on my face. Why was I here again? Oh yeah, dumb alligator man.

"You're already so wet as it is, Velvet, that I doubt you'll even notice the difference." Now he *did* touch her, he leaned in after having snapped

rubber gloves over his hands, and began to disrobe the sodden girl. But there was nothing sexual or abusive about the tonality of his motions; this was like a father undressing a daughter for bath time.

He hummed a song that made me giggle and sway and I gave no resistance as he started to undress me. My shirt came off over my head, exposing my bare chest. Then, with the ripping sound of tape, the diaper plopped to the floor with a wet splat. The sound made me laugh.

"There's a good girl." It wasn't too difficult to tell that Velvet hadn't been born a girl, not when looking at her naked like this - although her hormone therapy had been helping, it would pale in comparison to what was about to happen to her. **"Up you get, you're going for a bath okay?"** Except that the liquid was highly experimental, untested beyond basic theory, and she'd be completely immersed beneath it, and she'd be in there for many *many* hours while it changed her. **"Don't be scared."**

The water didn't feel like water. It was slimy. But the strange bubbling sensation made me giggle. A bath! I liked baths! Right? I climbed into the tub and looked up at Marlow with a big grin. **"It tickles,"** I told him, as seriously as I could, like it was the most important thing in the world, then fell apart in laughter. He moved a piece over my mouth and nose and tied it behind my head, then took off my glasses. The air smelled weird... like rubber or plastic. And then I started to feel sleepy... I looked up at the blurry man as he helped me sit in the slimy water, and just as my eyes started to close, I felt myself submerge.

There were side effects, unknowns, nothing that Dr. Marlow considered worthwhile of being concerned over; not for the payoff that the chemical promised if it were to deliver. Should all go well, in the seven hours that passed, Velvet Duke would emerge as new woman; her skin soft and doll-like, unmistakably feminine, her features softened, her hair like a small child's, as though never kissed by the toxins of the world. She'd look in the mirror and see a face she scarcely recognized. And if she had to deal with hyper sensitive skin, incontinence, trouble holding onto thoughts, or whatever else might happen as an aside, wasn't that worth it?

39.) Her Eyes

I sat upright, feeling nauseous and dizzy. The milk had left my system, but I didn't feel wholly right. I couldn't place it at first - just a weird tingling all over. Then I realized what it was. I was cold. No, I was freezing! I stumbled out of the tub and slipped on Marlow's carpet, skinning my knee on the carpet. And in one instant, I felt all the pain of an entire lifetime. Worse than the electric shocks. Worse than anything. And I screamed bloody murder.

Marlow had been there the entire time, he'd done his work like she didn't even exist, and when she got up, when she fell down, he didn't even look up. Not immediately. As her screams turned to sobs, the man stood up and approached her, he knelt down next to her, and he cuddled her naked body in his arms. It seemed comforting, but for the doctor it was more about examination, making inventory of the changes he'd wrought upon her. But still, it was being held.

My vision blurred from the pain. Tears poured down my cheeks. I looked down at my bare legs, but they looked... different. No hair, not even the light wispy ones. The skin was so soft, so pink... and my knee was barely bleeding. Why did it hurt so badly?

"Y-you fucking m-monster!" I shouted up at the doctor. But he took just one look at me and froze. Not in fear, but in... surprise. **"Interesting,"** he muttered to himself, and I shoved him as hard as I could.

Dr. Marlow reached into the pocket of his coat and fumbled for a moment, finding in a second later what he was reaching for: a small penlight. With no regard for her comfort or otherwise, he clicked the light on brightly and shone it into each of her eyes, one each at a time, observing the response. **"Dilation seems functional, but my lord that color. Brilliant. Vibrant."** This was a problem, this was an oversight, this would forever brand those who'd been through this treatment and... oh. Oh no. No no this was good! He grinned, he smiled wider, muttered to himself. **"Brilliant, yes, this *is* brilliant. Marked for life. Identifiable. Humanely so, too, oh they'll eat it up, child."**

"What the fuck are you talking about?!" My composure was gone. It had all trickled away, with the milk, with the bath, with the horrible, horrible

pain. I climbed to my feet, completely naked, and wiped my tears away. I was so goddamn cold, my teeth were chattering.

"Take a look for yourself child, there's a mirror in the corner." Marlow didn't get up off the floor, not out of exhaustion or anything of the sort; but because he had his recorder in his other pocket and he had notes to dictate; notes he didn't need to get up to record. How remarkable...

He was tricking me. Right? But as he fumbled for a recorder in his pocket, I looked across the room at the mirror. Carefully, trembling, I took a step toward the glass. With each step, I could feel the fibers of the carpet on my bare feet. But when I stood in front of the mirror, it wasn't me that looked back. It was some... girl. Sure, we had the same hair color, and maybe we were the same height, and sure we both had cocks, but... but that wasn't me. It was a girl, with rosy cheeks, with soft features, with gorgeous blue eyes. I reached up to touch the mirror, and the girl reached back. It... it was a trick? I... I didn't understand.

"...much more speculator than anticipated. Will review discomfort and pain for the procedure in post-production interviews, but considering the results this seems irrelevant." Marlow was busy dictating into his recorder when Velvet approached him again, grabbed at his coat, tried to shake him. **"Fascinating!"** He reached up, touched her face, pulled her lower eyelid down, even as she struggled and screamed and cursed. **"Your focus seems tightened? Could it be your glasses aren't required now?"**

I shoved him as hard as I could, but the force stung my palms. I recoiled from the attack and held my arms tight around myself. My teeth continued to chatter and stars filled my eyes. **"Wh-what is this...? What did you do to me? You... you fucking..."**

"It's metamorphosis, it's magnificent. My magnum opus, my greatest achievement." He finally stood up, began to pace in front of his desk, rambling to himself and even pretending she wasn't even there. This was so exciting, this was so enthralling! This would secure unlimited funding, expand the program. **"Oh and your eyes, your pretty pretty eyes. Free citizens will know you were a product of this program for the rest of your life."**

"**My eyes...**" I looked up at him, through the stars, and over at the tub of bubbling water. Suddenly, it started to sink in. That girl... that girl in the mirror... and that tub. He... he made me look like that? Like... I shook my head and balled my hands so tight that they ached. **"PUT ME BACK! FIX IT, NOW!"** As I screamed, my voice went a little too high, into a squeal. That... that never used to happen.

"Oh I'm afraid that would be both impossible and undesirable; you're perfect now, Velvet. You're much more perfect than Annie, than failed attempts. Look at you, you're a girl, you're beautiful, you're... soft." Soft. That was a good word. Marlow had Softened her. And boy had he. He picked her up, easily, effortlessly, took her back to the mirror. **"Be a lamb now and help me to notate your changes."**

As he picked me up, my skin stung from the pressure. But his body warmth was intoxicating. I clung to him. I thought I'd die... I thought without some heat, I'd get hypothermia. But as he plopped me in front of the mirror, I was faced again with reality. With a face that wasn't mine. Those... eyes... I exhaled sharply, shaking my head. **"You're lying... fix it. Fix it!"**

"Oh but I did fix it, Velvet, I did fix it." He put his hand on her shoulder and she trembled, and he watched her with narrow eyes. **"Quite sensitive, aren't you?"** He flipped his hand, ran the coarse back of it down her exposed shoulder, down her arm, taking in the results with fascination.

I winced at the pain and tried to shove him away again. But it wasn't working. Any time he touched me, any time I touched anything, it stung. I couldn't stop shivering. How long would it take? My skin would have to get used to sensations again. An hour? Or a day? I couldn't live like this, in this constant tingling. It was so... distracting... **"Fuck you... fuck..."**

"Oh can you think of the irony, Velvet? Dangerous criminals like you, turned out into the world, strikingly beautiful, pretty branded eyes that mark you for life, and sensitivity that makes you soft and compliant? I wonder... if many of you will wind up in sexual servitude once released?" He thought about that, tapping his chin, then shook his head. **"I suppose that doesn't matter. Now stand still, child, there's notes to make and pictures to take."**

I kept fighting, I kept screaming, I kept up every form of resistance I could. But Marlow manhandled me with ease, knowing of my sensitivity to touch. In the end, I was turned out into the hall wearing nothing but a white robe and my glasses. No diaper. No girly clothes. That should have been a victory... but it wasn't. I stared blankly at my feet.

40.) Her Surrender

Ayla was the first to notice the quiet girl, because girls who went into Dr. Marlow's office often came out in tears, or otherwise damaged, she was the first to cross the common room to her and wrap her up in a hug. And being so close, she was privy to a lot of the changes immediately, too. **"Velvet... what...?"**

I shook my head and tried to push her off me, but she wouldn't let me go. Wrapped in this robe, I was warm and safe. The fabric cushioned her touch, her hug. It still ached, just a little, but it was bearable for all the heat. **"Dun wanna talk about it,"** I muttered under my breath.

"Are those contacts?" A lot of people didn't notice the color of other people's eyes, but when you were locked up and didn't see many people it was easier. Beyond that, Velvet's eyes almost seemed to *glow*; the blue looked ethereal, unnatural, beautiful. **"Come on, there's some cookies on the table, come talk to us okay?"**

"Belbet!" Annie was heard before she was seen and she tackled-glomped onto her self-proclaimed-best-friends back.

I let out a loud scream as Annie tackled me into the wall. I felt blood vessels under my skin pop. I would bruise before the day was over. Worse yet, the scream drew the attention of all the girls, and two of the orderlies by the door. Fresh tears formed in my eyes. I... I couldn't. I couldn't do this. I shoved Annie off me and ran for my room.

The scream made Annie cry, it made the other girls stare, it made Ayla worried, and it summoned the only other true adult in the wing; it had me open my door and look out - only to see Ayla pointing to the recently-slammed door of Velvet's room. I hurried to close my office door and

fumbled to power-step to Velvet's room; what had happened? What did Marlow do to her? If he hurt her...

We weren't allowed to have our doors closed, but I didn't care. I didn't really care about anything anymore. I looked through the lenses of my glasses at my palms, red and sore from shoving Marlow, from shoving Annie. Annie... would this happen to her too? Would it happen to all the girls...?

Knock knock. One. Twice. Then I opened the door, and I used my keys to lock it from the inside one I did. Velvet was tucked into the corner, between the bed and the wall, and I made sure not to approach her too quickly. **"Velvet darling, it's me. It's Colette."**

I didn't say anything. I kept my head down, hiding my face. My new face. My old face was gone. Was Marlow lying about fixing it? Could it be done? But what I knew of science, I couldn't imagine how. She stepped closer - I could hear her feet on the carpet. Then I felt the air move around me as she leaned down. I could feel everything...

I approached slowly, deliberately, made sure there was no surprise even as I knelt down in front of her to put myself on her level. Her knees were red and shiny, almost polished looking, and her skin was soft... had he waxed her? Epilated her? She'd had hair treatment already though, but this seemed different... she looked... almost newborn. **"Honey talk to me, what happened?"**

"Leave me alone," I muttered under my breath. I felt her hand on my knee, and I twitched involuntarily. Then I felt her hand withdraw. She was going to figure it out. She was going to see what he did to me. So I lowered my legs to the ground and looked up at her. A different face. Different eyes.

I was silent. Awe? No. Wonder? No. Shock? No. Just. Silent. I had to pick my words very carefully, but this level of alteration, this level of surgery, how had he? Even if he had a surgeon on site she'd be covered in bandages and scarring and swelling. What had he done to her? *How* had he done to her? **"You always were the prettiest one here, Velvet."** It was the best thing I could think of to say.

The way I looked at her... it wasn't anything she'd seen before. Even though my eyes were different, the expression was entirely not me. It was... hurt. Betrayed. Ill. I let out a small, quiet sigh and looked down at the floor. What she saw in me was... surrender. I'd given up.

"What happened, honey, what did he do to you? I don't want to be insensitive... I can see you're hurting, you might even be in shock. But the more you can tell me the more I can do to stop him hurting others." While talking, I did my best to get my hand into hers, to hold it, to squeeze it; she was so soft now, what had he done? And her eyes..

I shook my head. I couldn't do this. I couldn't explain it to her. I couldn't start this conversation. I couldn't start any conversation... **"I'd like to sleep,"** I muttered. Fighting, kicking, screaming... it all took so much out of me. I needed to sleep...

"C'mere." I didn't mean to disregard her, but Velvet was flagged as a suicide risk based on her high intellect when she'd been apprehended, and I didn't like the idea of her being alone or unsupervised, especially given her history. So I picked her up and pulled her into my arms, putting her head to my shoulder so I could play with the nape of her neck and stroke her hair. Like a child.

I clung to Colette and closed my eyes. She was so warm... I'd never appreciated body heat like I did now. I never wanted to be held so desperately. Colette helped me up off the floor and onto the bed, then she fished out a fresh diaper for me. I didn't fight. I didn't protest. I just... let her. What was the point anymore?

It was unprofessional for me to lay with her. I was her doctor. I was here to monitor her progress and her recovery, not to change her diapers and cuddle her in her bed. But the door was locked and I was in here and as much as anybody knew, this was therapy. So even when we were laying in her bed, even once she was diapered without a protest, I cuddled close to her back and played with her hair. And I sang. I sang to her.

Exhaustion was overwhelming. Consciousness was fleeting. I drifted in and out, dizzy with dreams. Maybe all this was a dream... maybe all this was a lie. I felt the bed move; I could feel everything now. Colette climbing out of bed.

"I'll keep you safe," she whispered to me. **"What's the point?"** I whispered back, half asleep. **"We have to fix Annie, right?" "Can't do anything... can't fix it... can't fix myself..."** There was a quiet between us as I drifted off again.

"What's the point," I repeated sleepily, **"my library can't fix this..."**

Library? Colette wondered if... but before she could ask, Velvet had fallen asleep.

41.) Her Revenge

"Velvet, can you come here a minute?"

It was before dinner. I'd taken my breakfast bottle without hesitation. I'd been in the delirium all morning, and, honestly... it was the best I'd felt since yesterday. My skin was still sensitive to touch. My diaper was almost perpetually wet - what was the point in holding it, anyway? And my eyes, still... that bright, brilliant blue... Colette led me into her office and I sat down quietly on her sofa. We were supposed to work on the headset today. The Induction file was complete; that was all a skilled hypnotherapist would need to help people like Annie. But we had planned for more: perfect automation. That meant I had to write more programs.

"How was your day?" I'd start it simple, and then work up from there, attempting to gauge at what point her cooperation and submission faded into disinterested ennui. **"Was your lunch good? What did you get up to today? How are you feeling? Would you like to help me with our project for the evening?"** Probing. Scanning.

I didn't say anything. I watched my feet. Not my feet. Soft, gentle feet. Cute feet. I closed my eyes tight. I couldn't escape it. No matter where I went, I was constantly reminded about my changes. Someone can't escape their own body... **"Velvet?"** I shook my head. I didn't want to talk. I just wanted more milk...

"Velvet, you know it's not polite to ignore when someone is talking to you, right?" I didn't know yet if it was surrender or submission, this would help to figure it out - but I didn't expect a response from her either way, if I was being honest. **"I really do need your help, but you know, I think maybe you need mine right now..."**

"No," I said, quietly, under my breath. I felt Colette's presence as she leaned in to hear better. I spoke up. **"No. I don't need your help right now. I needed it yesterday! I needed you to stop him! I needed you to..."** To save me? I balled my hands into fists, so tight that I could feel my palms sting. **"Just... leave me alone..."**

I took those hands, those balled up hands, skin tender and fresh and sensitive, like this fully grown adult woman had just been born, and I held them in my own - I wrapped my fingers around hers and I willed her to feel my pulse, my warmth. **"I'm sorry, Velvet."**

I got up from the sofa and walked out of Colette's office. I didn't want to play games today. I didn't want her to try hypnotizing me. I didn't want to work on my automated hypnosis project. I didn't care about Annie's recovery. I didn't care about this place. I didn't even care about myself. I sat down at the huge plastic table in the middle of the room and waited for my bottle. Then, I could fade away from this place.

Some of the girls watched out of the corners of their eyes. I knew they were talking about me. What Marlow did to me. It would be done to them, too, though. Wouldn't it? It would be done to everyone in this place... everyone who came here...

Then, as if fate deigned it, Marlow walked in through the checkpoint and went to his office. I watched quietly, like time had frozen. Then, I started to move. I went to his door and knocked roughly with my new, fragile hands.

There was no answer at first, no response; even though it was *obvious* that he'd just gone in there, Dr. Marlow didn't seem to care that someone was knocking - not until *he* decided it was time to check the door, anyway. He opened it, gruff and curt, but actually *smiled* when he saw his new little project waiting for him. **"Well hello there, child."**

"May I come in?" I asked him. He moved aside and let me through. He didn't think I was a threat, not anymore. Now I was just another broken girl, along with all the others. Just like Annie.

Everything in my life had been pre-meditated. My schooling, my college, my doctorate all before I turned twenty. My sneaking around with Roger behind his wife's back. Even killing those twelve guilty people, for killing my brother. Everything was planned well in advance. Everything was thought out.

This wasn't. I took my glasses off my face and bent the wires, until the lenses came loose. I took the square of plexiglass in my hand and held it tight, lighting up my pain receptors, drawing blood.

Last week, when Colette had given me that pencil sharpener, I'd broken it. I took the razor blade, but I knew she'd ask for it back. So I popped out the lens of my glasses and sharpened the edges, before fitting it back into the frames. All this time, I'd been walking around with a weapon on my face and no one knew any better. Why would I do that? For protection. Or to kill myself, if things got really bad. But now... now I had a better purpose.

"What can I help you with?" Marlow asked me, with that sickly smile, with those shining, excited eyes...

Those eyes...

I pounced on him like a tiger to a gazelle. I brought him down to the floor, despite his height, despite my size, despite all the pain it caused me.

"ORDERLIES!" he shouted, but it was too late. I took the shard of glass and jabbed it deep into his eye, spurting blood all over my dress. He screamed. He screamed like a little bitch.

I ripped the shard out from his eye and plunged it into the other. No more eyes. No more shining, excited eyes. No, now he looked like the monster he was. He was the monster; I was the hero.

There was a lot of screaming - Marlow's screaming was one of the loudest things to ever come out of his own office, and that agonizing wail that followed the call for security, the ruckus that transpired because of that, that

just set off every single girl in the main room into crying and sobbing, too - every single one of them conditioned to fear extreme situations. It might have taken one or two orderlies to hold Velvet usually, but she didn't even seem to struggle as one restrained her; nor did she seem to feel the bleeding from her own hand. The entire scene was... chaos.

"Oh Velvet..." I didn't even make it past the doorway... and I barely flinched as the medical team pushed past me. **"What have you done...?"**

Marlow writhed on the floor. Blood poured from his face as he kicked and screamed. Orderlies came over to help him, but he shoved them away. Was he crying? You couldn't tell anymore, not without eyes... a smile washed over my face.

"Velvet." Colette got in my line of sight. I looked up at her with that same smile, then a touch of confusion. Huh...?

"Velvet, honey, darling... this isn't good, they're going to take you, okay? They're going to lock you up, but don't fight, okay?"

I nodded. **"Okay."** Not an ounce of argument in my voice. Not an ounce of regret.

42.) Her Consequence

It would be almost an entire day before I saw Velvet Duke again, and when I did she was in a room where the walls were cushioned and there was no furniture. She was stripped of her glasses and her clothes, but for a simple gown with no fasteners, and even the bandage on her hand was fastened with velcro and nothing sharp. This was the 'harm to yourself or others' room. Honestly, we didn't know what to do with her; there was a program I'd been working on for problem inmates, but it wasn't ready, and for it to happen to Velvet... I swallowed dryly as I pushed open the door to greet her; the tiny and lithe form of her sitting cross legged in the center of the cell.

New diapers. Cloth, with velcro fasteners. I'd wet myself long ago, and no one had come in to change me. It felt different than the plastic

disposables. I looked up at Colette as she walked into the room, the door closing behind her. How long had I been here? Days? It felt like days...

"Velvet, I'm here to talk with you about what happened." Never assume malice, never assume intent. It could have been a break, a psychosis, any number of things - and putting her on the defensive wouldn't get anything out of her. She watched me, though, she actively looked at me with those surreal blue eyes. She studied. **"Could you tell me what happened? Do you remember?"**

"I stabbed him. I cut out both his eyes. He took my eyes, so..." Colette leaned against the padded wall as I spoke to her. She seemed... troubled. I sighed. **"I don't do things like that. In the moment, reactionary. You know that. It just... happened."** And then, as an afterthought, because it was important she know: **"But I'm glad I did it..."**

"I see." Which was more than I would say for Dr. Marlow. I suppressed the smirk that I wanted to show, and nodded unsteadily. **"Why did you do that, Velvet? Did he try to hurt you? Did he touch you somewhere?"** There had to be a reason, right? Velvet wouldn't do that; Alexander maybe, but I'd made such strides with Velvet!

"You're joking, right?" Colette stared at me intently. She wasn't joking. She was just stupid. **"He killed me, Colette. I'm dead. This... isn't me. I'm not this person. And I wanted to kill him! I wanted to cut his fucking throat, but his eyes were right there, looking up at me, afraid, and... and..."** I pulled my knees to my chest. We were both quiet for a time, and then I asked: **"So... what now?"**

"They want to put you back into the penal system, life sentence was the original alternative. You'd have struggled there before, Velvet, and now you'd be... well, you in a men's prison... it'd be open season." So that was *their* idea, the but obviously if I was here, I had an alternative. **"I have a different suggestion, but you're not going to like it any more than this."**

"What does it matter anymore?" I put my head down on my knees and closed my eyes. **"I thought I could get out of here without getting screwed up by stupid fucks like Marlow, like you... and now I'm not even..."** I took a sharp breath, holding in my emotions. The past twenty-

four hours had been too much for me. I felt like I was cracking down the middle. "I should have killed myself before the orderlies pulled me off him... I wasn't thinking."

"Well," I looked around the room indicating where she was, and refocused on her eyes. "I don't think that's going to be an option anymore." In a conventional prison, though...she'd find a way. And her brain, her mind, her *brilliance*, I couldn't let it go to waste. "I think I'm going to push you into a new program, Velvet. And I know you won't like it, but you'll be checked out for the entire time so you'll probably see it as a mercy." I sure as fuck didn't, though.

I looked up at Colette with confusion, and then with anger. "Send me to prison." She knew as well as I did - if I was there, I could find a way out. Why was she keeping me here? I got up on my feet - still shorter than Colette - and made my stand. "I don't want this anymore! I don't want to be this!"

"Well you *are* this, Velvet. You're *this* and what *this* is," I grabbed one of her hands, the one that wasn't bandaged, and held it up above her head. "Is a woman. You're a woman now, Velvet, barely more than a girl, but a woman nonetheless. And you can't *fix* that, because it's not a defect. You just need to..." What would a good Velvet word be? "Adapt. Evolve. Grow with it, alright? I'm not putting you in a prison, but I don't think it matters because by the time what happens to you is over with, you're going to hate me anyway."

I looked up at Colette with shock, with surprise... she had never been this forward with me. I tugged at my hand, but she wouldn't let me go. Suddenly, fear started to seep in. I wouldn't like it. I would hate her for it. What... what was she planning? "Colette..." But before I could say another word, she used her other hand to push a needle into my arm.

I didn't want this to be the way it had to be, because this work that now rushed through her veins wasn't something I was proud of. Agent N27xx was...a relic of the past, a project that Dr. Marlow and I had worked on long before we became adversaries, long before his methods turned dark and I realized the errors of my own. We'd created it, he'd perverted it, and now I'd perfected it. Velvet went limp in my arms, she fell quiet and her pretty blue eyes closed. And I ran my fingers through her hair one last time before

she stopped being my friend and started being my responsibility. It was time for Phase Zero. One day, Velvet, maybe you'll forgive me.

43.) Her New Books

"Why am I here?" I muttered, looking around the dusty library. It looked like it hadn't been used in ages. I ran my finger along the top of one of the nearby tables, leaving a line in the dust. I took a few steps up one of the stairs. Feelings. Skills. Relationships. But why was I here?

I walked to the back of the library, to the Narrative section. I stepped up to the first book and slid it off the shelf, blowing the dust off the front cover. Age 0. I opened it to the final page, when my mother laid me in my crib. My older brother asked about the party tomorrow, my first birthday party. Mom said something about cake.

I shut the book and put it back on the shelf. I walked along the row to the final book. Age 22, Part 6. I turned the pages. That place, where they dressed me in diapers and baby clothes. Right... I remembered that place. I turned another page.

"Are you looking for something?"

The voice came from a woman pushing a grey cart of books down the hall between different shelving units. She seemed... familiar, but not altogether clear; like looking at her would cause her to shift out of focus, but looking away filled in the memory of a pretty face and pleasant smile.

"Oh! Uh. Sorry, I thought..." I looked down at the book, then up at the woman. She was sort of cute. Of course, I wasn't into girls. **"Who are you, exactly?"**

"The librarian," she told me, plainly. I looked around the library with skepticism.

"If you're the librarian, why is this place so dusty?"

"Because my job here is to organize and curate; dust is a sign that a book hasn't been loved recently and ought to be revisited."

That advice given so quickly, so poignantly, it was easy to listen to it; and those same words might well have been printed in one of the many tomes that made up the library.

"I'm delivering some new books today, would you like to help me to sort them? Some older books will be moved out to make space, but that's the way it goes here."

"Oh, uh... sure, I guess." I closed the book and slid it into the bookcase, where it belonged. Still, I never figured out why I was here.

"Um, so you just update the library? Isn't that sort of a boring job?" I walked alongside the woman as she led the way.

"Sometimes," she admittedly, freely, taking one book off the cart and running her fingers along a shelf in the section titled 'Values', hunting for the book she was to replace. **"But work doesn't need to be entertaining for it to be rewarding."** The book she removed had the word 'Stubbornness' on the spine, and the one she slid in to replace it was titled 'Compassion'.

"...I guess that makes sense." I watched her exchange one of the books for another, and a little ways down the shelf, one more. I looked at the books she was putting in the cart with confusion. **"So what happens to the books that aren't on the shelves anymore?"**

"That's not for me to answer, darling."

Another came out - titled 'Suspicion' - and was replaced with one titled 'Trust' in place.

"I'm just the librarian, I replace the old books with new ones, and sort, and curate. What happens outside the library isn't for me to know."

One book she picked up off her cart she instead handed to me directly.

"Have you read this one? It's about a girl who fixes a machine to help others like her, you'll adore it." And with the skeptical glance that followed, she added: **"I'm your librarian, I know your tastes. Read while you walk."**

I puffed out my cheeks and looked down at the book. Annie. Isn't this a play or something? Or a movie? But I opened the first page all the same and started to read. It wasn't anything like the story I'd heard of. This one was... weird. But sort of cool, too. Huh...

Time seemed to flutter in and out of focus, like the lens of a camera; the two of us could be organizing books one moment, sipping tea the next, a book opened just now could be read in a heartbeat and a walk down the hall together could take a year. But it was a constant, reliable pattern; the Librarian and I. Over time, the woman with the cart would ask questions, and she'd correct me if she didn't like the answer, and though I would be at first hesitant to accept the correction, soon enough a book would be replaced and it would be difficult for me to remember ever thinking otherwise.

"What are you reading now, Velvet?"

Velvet was my name, clearly and concisely. The book I was reading could have been the second or the hundred-and-second, it was so hard to tell.

"Oh, um... just that one you gave me a while ago. The one about Annie?"

"Did you finish it?"

"Yeah. It had a happy ending."

Annie got the help she needed. The machine worked, and a therapist helped her with the rest. She went home, leaving her troubles behind her. I folded the book closed and held my chest.

"My heart feels full. I feel like... like I'm really happy for Annie. And I've never felt so much about anything before."

"That's a very good feeling, Velvet."

Compassion. Pride. Selflessness. They were all new books that had been filed into the library. The Librarian was stacking up books from a shelf hidden behind another; a vast volume collection all titles The Ends Justify the Means, and there had to have been sixty editions so far.

"Please be careful, Velvet; these books are printed on toxic paper, and you're fragile."

"Toxic paper?"

"Mmhmm."

I looked down at the stack of books. They didn't look very toxic... **"Well, why are they in the library if they are dangerous? That doesn't make sense..."**

"Sometimes old houses are painted with lead in the paint," the Librarian replied, in that tone of voice she only used for teaching in that pleasant way that she did; **"When these books were printed, it was like the lead paint - nobody knew how toxic they were at the time, but they've made many people sick."**

"Oh..." I kicked my feet, sitting on one of the railings. She carefully put another one of the books on the shelf. I couldn't read the title. **"Well, if they can make people sick, why don't you take them and send them away with the other books?"**

"I have to take special care with these ones," the Librarian explained, smoothing down her dress - appreciation of ladies' fashion had been a reading assignment a short time ago, or a long time ago, or would be in the future, it was hard to tell.

"These books have been here a long time, and if I take them all at once, the shelf might collapse. So I take a few out, and find replacements. Which values would be good replacements, do you think, Velvet? Share some ideas, based on some of the lessons from the books you've read."

"Oh, um..." I thought back to some of the books I'd read, and about the idea of The Ends Justify The Means. What did that even mean? That as long as things turned out right, that it didn't matter how you got there? Hm... **"I think, maybe a book on compassion? Or empathy? Oh, um... there's a book in Morals about consequences, I think that would be good?"**

"That sounds like a very good idea, Velvet. Would you fetch it for me?"

The Librarian didn't often ask requests of me, only questions, only problems. The book on Pride taught me about how wonderful it felt to be trusted with something.

"Yeah, of course." I jumped down to the ground and hurried to the other side of the library. The Librarian said that sometimes few strong morals are better than many weak ones, but the Morals section was still one of the biggest. I found the Consequences of Actions book on the top shelf a ways down. Even on my tippy toes, it was a struggle. I finally managed to pull it down, but it came down on top of me and knocked me to the floor. "Ow," I muttered, sitting up on the hard tile. That's when a book caught my eye, with silver lettering, on the bottom shelf. Shame: The Other Side of Pride. Huh...?

The book felt new, the leather binding soft and pliable, and the pages crisp and clean. Shame. Hurting others. Shame. Being rude. Shame. At first, the book seemed only to concern itself with things that caused shame, but a latter section talked about things that didn't: there was no shame in being a woman, no shame in helping people get better. But there was shame in killing people. There was shame in acting flippantly and without remorse. And most importantly, failing a prideful action could hurt more than any simple shame. After I'd read a few pages, the Librarian appeared... or maybe I appeared next to her? I couldn't tell.

"What did you find, Velvet?"

"Oh, um..." I looked down at the book with uncertainty. **"I guess it's a book about shame? I don't really understand it..."**

"Well, you know what shame is, right?"

"Right. But it makes pride sound like a bad thing. But I like feeling it."

"Pride is like a candy bar; you should want it, you should enjoy it, but if you have too much of it, you'll be very unhappy... and if you have it, and you lose it, you'll be more unhappy still."

It seemed that childish metaphors were the norm with the Librarian, but owning a library, that probably made sense.

"How do you know what's too much?"

"You don't. You just know it when you get there."

I looked down at the book and nodded my head, handing it to the Librarian.
"I think this is a good one to go on that bookshelf."

The book slid into place and the Librarian put her hand in my hair and ruffled it affectionately. Some sort of... reward? Maybe?

"You're a good girl, Velvet."

Pride resonated within me.

"Bring me some other books you think should go in this very important foundation shelf."

I smiled widely and nodded my head. **"Okay!"** I knew just what books to use.

44.) Her Awakening

The lights were blinding. I had to cover my face just to open my eyes. Then the shadows came into focus. All around me, there were wooden bars. Beneath me, a soft pastel sheet. A diaper was wrapped tightly around my hips on display, and a frilly pink dress covered my torso. Hanging from one of the railings was an IV drip. I followed the tube to my

arm. My arm... pale and soft. I felt weak and the room started to spin. Where... what...

The room was pleasant: the walls had wallpaper and the lighting was soft and gentle. Light seemed to come from nowhere in particular, as though the sources were hidden or concealed, but there was enough to see the shapes on the mobile hanging from the ceiling and turning gently. Shapes that were so hard not to look at, not to giggle at, not to be soothed by. There were people moving around, talking happening, but words seemed so difficult to grasp onto. The smells? Not so much. Baby powder. Lavender. Disinfectant. Messy diaper? No. But the *absence* of that scent in the palette seemed odd and missing, like a summers day without the color blue in the sky, like it should have belonged, like it was the norm.

I struggled to my feet, but my legs felt weak. I couldn't stand. I fished around for the IV and tried to give it my full attention. I used to put these in. I knew how to take them out. With a deep breath, I untaped the IV and pulled on the needle, tugging it out of my skin. Blood dripped down onto my colorful sheets.

"Woah there, hold up little lady." The man that unlatched the top of the crib, that reached down and gently pulled her hands away from the bleeding injection site... he was unfamiliar, he spoke with a southern accent, had pretty hair, and a gentle touch. And with one hand he was able to keep her soft fingers held clear while he used the other to dab up the blood with some gauze from a pack in his pouch. **"Try not to move too much, little doll, you're not used ta' moving just yet."** Not an orderly. A nurse?

"I... where am I? Wha's going on..." I struggled in the man's arms, but it took very little effort to hold me down. I whined, kicking my feet against the crib bars with all the strength of a toddler. **"L-lemme up... lemme go..."**

One simple motion forced the girl to calm down, and it wasn't force, it wasn't violence, it wasn't even a raised voice; the man put his thumb between her lips and she began to suck directly, instantly calming and relaxing and letting him do his work with the other hand.

His thumb slipped between my lips and instinct kicked in. I sucked, gently, calmly... and everything else fell away. All the worry and panic and fear

started to disappear. It was only when the man took back his hand that I came back to reality; by then, I was calm and quiet. A blush came over my cheeks. What... what had just happened?

"Subject V-Zero is awake, she seems lucid, though confused." He was talking to someone over his shoulder. **"Page the Project Head up here, please."** Even those words, said without the benefit of being able to see his face as it was turned away, would prove difficult to hold onto.

"Be good for me and follow the light with your eyes, okay?" The man, the nurse, shone a penlight into each of the girl's vividly blue eyes, and now there seemed to be four or five others beside or behind him, taking notes, checking instruments, talking to each other like Velvet wasn't even there. And then they all cleared to each side as one final woman approached; a familiar face to Velvet indeed.

"There's my girl." I smiled, motioning for the nurse to lower his light. **"How're you feeling?"**

Colette. Then I remembered. I stabbed Dr. Marlow. I blinded him. Then, I was brought into that room. Colette injected me with... with... something. I looked at the IV bag with fear and then up at my doctor. **"What did you do?"**

Of *course* that would be the first question she asked; she wouldn't be Velvet Duke otherwise. I smiled at her, and I lowered the bars of the crib so I could sit by her, waving my hand at the other nurses and researchers to take a few steps away - although none of them left the room. **"Are you feeling alright, Velvet?"** I'd taken her hand in mine, but it was more to check her vitals than a comforting measure.

I pulled my hand back in frustration. **"Don't act like we're friends! Now tell me what you did! What was in that syringe? Why am I in this room? What's... where..."** For the first time, I had a look around the room, other than just the bars and the walls. It was decorated like a nursery, with a changing table, an oversized baby bouncer, and a ton of toys and blocks. What the heck...

"Shh, shh, hey, I need you to relax, okay?" The inroads that I'd made with her had undermined her entire personality, and it would take time for

the inflated sense of her conscious self to settle into the new foundations of her subconscious. If she tried to get angry like this, she'd quickly fall into exhaustion because she wasn't wired for an adrenaline response anymore. **You've been a part of a program, a research development, Velvet. To help you, to help you recover. You're probably feeling pretty weak right now, but hopefully that will pass."**

"A program? Research development?" I looked at Colette like she was crazy, then my anger bubbled up. **"I am not staying in this goddamn room and letting you treat me a baby!"** I shouted, climbing out of the crib with no grace whatsoever. Immediately, my legs buckled under me and I slid to the floor. Stars filled my eyes.

"Velvet, you've done nothing more than crawl for the past six months and even then you preferred mostly to lay on your back or tummy rather than move." I knelt down beside her, I wrapped my arm around her waist, and I effortlessly lifted her back up into the crib if nothing else but to keep her safe. **"I'm happy to answer your questions, darling, I promise. But being cross with me isn't behavior you're proud of, so be kind, okay? For me?"**

I felt a sickly feeling in my stomach. Six... six months? She... what? I looked at her, then at the other doctors in the room. Nurses? Orderlies? I didn't know what they were, but they all shared that same look. Interest, curiosity, fascination. I... she... I shook my head and kicked at Colette as she plopped back in the crib. **"Fuck you! Fuck this stupid... stupid..."** The stars in my vision grew brighter. I blinked my eyes and tried to center myself.

"Velvet, you're only going to tire yourself out. You're not thinking clearly, and I really do need you to relax so I can write a report to present for your case." I couldn't outright tell her that this could mean her freedom, but that was what was at stake here.

"Shutup," I muttered, as my head slipped down to the pillow. The flurry of emotions burned out what little energy I had. I squeezed my eyes tight, to focus, and felt exhaustion washing over me. Laying here, in this crib, felt... so comfy...

"You don't mean that, Velvet." In defiance of professionalism, I slid into the crib next to Velvet and put my arm around her, over her, cuddling her back close against my chest and holding her tight like a mother might swaddle a child. She was so small, so soft. To see her using such crass language after the time we'd spent together these past months, it was... surreal. Like someone hollowed out the sweet infant Velvet and replaced her entirely. Which... we kind of did.

I felt Colette's thumb on my lips, and I instantly took it into my mouth. Silenced, calmed, I closed my eyes. I could hear pens on paper, etching thoughts into notepads. I could hear Colette's cooing as she shushed me. The next thing I knew, Colette was sitting me up and I was looking at the room full of people with faraway eyes.

"Velvet Duke seems to be suffering no long lasting ill effects of the Zero Treatment, even over an extended period of time. Psychotherapy has been ongoing, and will be presented for review within three days." These notes I made out loud and two medical staff were writing it down. **"Blood pressure is one-ten-over-seventy, medically we have no concerns."** Except... **"Continence training is... of concern, but with proper treatment and effort I'm sure she'll be able to recover some functionality."** Despite sitting there, my words probably sounded a million miles away to Velvet.

I looked up at her with confusion, but her words were going a little over my head. I had no idea what was going on. Had I really been knocked out for six months? Why? Why would they do that to me? What purpose did it serve?

"I'm going to move her to the residence room. I think she'll make a more immediate recovery there and away from this environment." I picked her up and I did it easily; she was so light now, so small and tender, and I carried her from the crib past the people and out the door.

45.) Her Adjustment

Three doors down on the left in the same hall was a simple bedroom with a full sized bed and a television, no security cameras, no equipment. Just... a

bedroom, albeit a spartan one. And I set my little project down on the bed, finally exhaling. **"Velvet I am so happy to see you. I mean, I've seen you every day, but I mean... see... you."**

"What did you do," I muttered again, because she still hadn't answered. Every time she put her thumb near my mouth I had a... response. A trigger? I gave her a weary look. **"Did you hypnotize me? I told you, you can't. I'll just erase it."**

"I helped you, Velvet. If you don't trust me, you're welcome to go to your... what did you call it? Your library?" I feigned ignorance and I did it well, too. If she knew right now that I was party to her sanctuary, she might grow suspicious. **"I'll be content just to hold you, though."** She looked at me, I'm sure she was trying to figure out if I was bluffing, if she'd go there and she'd magically 'fix' herself. But then, why would I offer if that were the case?

I gave her a harsh look. **"Why do you think it's a library?"**

"You mentioned it," she said simply, **"in your room, before you... before Marlow."**

I did? I didn't remember that. But if I told her, maybe she--

"Velvet, trust me. I would never hurt you."

I felt a sinking feeling in my stomach, and... and I shrugged my shoulders. I guess Colette really wouldn't ever hurt me. **"But what was that drug, then? Why do I feel funny? Why were all those people--"**

"I had to put you into a program for troubled inmates. Think of it like... a medically induced coma, only you're not reduced to a sleeping state, but more akin to that of an infant. We tracked your cognitive functions and development as being around about that of a one year old." Velvet was skeptical as a person, too, and I reached to the dresser and turned on the television which flicked to a video feed of Velvet in the nursery room, playing on the floor with blocks and giggling.

My cheeks went crimson at the sight. Me, in nothing but a diaper and a pretty t-shirt, playing with blocks... I crossed my arms over my chest

defensively and looked away. **"W-well, you had no right to do that! And... and what if had lasting effects?! It's experimental and you were experimenting on me? How stupid can you be?"**

"Shh, Velvet, be kind. I took a risk on you, to keep you safe. You did something really bad, and while I understand the *why*, there had to be consequences." I spoke to her like I was talking to a child, but I wasn't condescending, more like... factual. Like my words made sense, or were beyond reproach. Like logic. **"There were risks, but the alternative might have seen you die, and you're too brilliant for that. You could help so many others, you could make such a difference in this world. I had to try. You forgive me, right?"** On the TV, Velvet gurgled from her mouth and from her bottom, and didn't seem to care one bit as she squeaked and squealed.

I snatched the controller out of Colette's hand and turned off the TV to spare myself further humiliation. **"I guess I see your point..."** I thought about what had happened, about what I'd done. Marlow... I felt a little sick. I didn't regret it! I didn't! But... but, well, maybe I shouldn't have... fuck. **"Um... what about... Marlow? Is he..."**

"I'm not sure, honestly. He was transferred once, then again, and then picked up by a private firm. I lost track of him after that, and honestly I didn't care too much about it because I was focused on helping you, Velvet." And his formula for the process he'd used on Velvet - the one that had broken her so emotionally - was left behind, too.

"...oh." I looked at the TV, though it was off, and I could see Colette watching me in the reflection.

"Are you... scared of him?" she asked me. I wanted to say no, but that would be lying. I was definitely scared of him.

"I'm just glad he's gone," I said, more to myself than to her.

"He's had plenty of opportunity to get at you, he's known where you are, but he never made any attempts at you - maybe he's scared of you? Or of what I would do to him if I ever saw his smug face again?" I smiled, but remembered that this was about teaching her. **"We're above**

that, though; me and you. We're good people. We're proud to be good people, aren't we?"

I nodded quietly, still watching the empty TV screen. Then I nodded again, a little more sure of myself. **"Yeah, we're good people."** Colette wrapped her arm around me and ruffled my hair, kissing me once on the forehead. I shoved her away and rolled my eyes. I felt like... I felt like I hadn't lost any time at all, let alone six months. And still, I was happy to have Colette back.

"I have to write a review for your treatment. The higher ups want some reports, so I'm going to be asking you a lot of questions." I was honest with her mostly, but I still didn't tell her how important this was. I did offer something new, though: the choice. **"Would that be okay with you?"**

"Uh huh, yeah."

But though Colette said she'd be asking me questions, I spent the next twenty minutes asking her them. Annie really did get better - somewhere, in my heart, I knew she would. My Induction file worked, and Colette took care of the rest. Ayla graduated the week after I was locked up. Most of the other girls were gone now, too! I was just so happy for them to have moved on. And I was happy that Colette had been presiding over all hypnosis cases since Marlow's incident. It felt like... like everything was finally going my way. Other than losing six months of my life, of course. Speaking of...

"Shouldn't I remember more of my time, um... you know?"

"Well, ordinarily, I think the drug is supposed to have a deeper effect on a patient's subconscious, but your sub-conscious is very protected. You probably hid away somewhere."

"Oh. Yeah, that sounds like me."

It was like we hadn't spent any time apart: even though I'd been with her this entire time, for her it had to feel surreal. She was curious, too, and her eyes would light up, and she'd get visibly excited when I'd tell her news. This girl wasn't quite night and day to the previous Velvet, but there was a

profound difference just beneath the surface. **"How do you feel, Velvet? I asked you that when you first woke up, but you never answered me."**

"Fine, I suppose. A little annoyed, I guess. Because I don't like that you locked me up for six months! But... I guess I understand why. It's the only way you could save me." I sighed and kicked my feet, pouting a little. "I wish there had been another way... but it's over now. We can worry about the future. Oh!" I perked up all of a sudden. "Should we keep doing those hypnosis things! That would be fun!"

I couldn't help but smile, because she was so genuinely excitable. She wasn't a caricature created by force either; she was genuinely distinctly female in her mannerisms and presentations. **"Do you think we could get through this first few days, and then we can look at the hypnosis program again?"** I again made it her choice, I put it to her that she could choose to be selfish or selfless, to be proud of her restraint or ashamed of her impulse.

I pouted and crossed my arms over my chest. She didn't want to do our programs anymore? But we were doing so well... no, she just wanted to make sure I was okay. So I sighed and nodded my head.

"I guess that's fine," I muttered.

"You're so thoughtful and kind, Velvet." I'd have to interview her soon, to start the hundreds of questions that would take our next few days. But for now... just sitting with her, being with her, seeing the fruits of my labor, seeing this... worst case scenario playing out... it was nice. **"I've missed you."**

Colette led me by the hand through the halls of the facility, until I recognized a familiar security checkpoint, and a familiar doorway. She led me inside the tall circular playroom. On the far wall, the sofa and television were the same. The plastic table and chairs where we would eat our food weren't any different either. But the walls were painted in pastel swirls, making the playroom look... well, more like a playroom. And when we walked in, most of the faces that looked up were new. But they all had familiar baby blue eyes. I felt my heart race and I looked up at Colette in a panic. Marlow was gone, wasn't he? How could this have happened?! Tears filled my eyes.

"Velvet, this way." I tapped her shoulder, although I wasn't oblivious to her upset - how could I be? I knew what had happened, I knew what was done, and I also knew exactly what was worth keeping once the war had ended. She looked up at me, betrayal on her soft pretty features, mouth about to ask a question, when I motioned her to the office door. My office. This time with big open windows so I could always see everybody out here, and the plaque on the door read "Project Lead".

Every pair of blue eyes followed me as I went into Colette's office and she drew the blinds over the window. The second the door closed, I lost it.

"What the heck! You lied to me! Marlow's still here and he's still using that awful machine! Why did you lie to me?!" I was trembling, as tears rained down my cheeks. I couldn't help myself. Traumatic memories came flooding back.

"Velvet." My voice was soft by necessity, because there were parts of this fragile girl now that needed to cry, that needed to be emotional, to have outbursts that she didn't understand. I let her have the moment, for just a second, before I replied. **"I promise he's not here. He's gone, Velvet. I pinky promise."** And I expended my pinky to seal the deal.

I looked at her pinky through tear-filled eyes and up at Colette's expression. She was so calm. So mature. I felt a pang of jealousy in my heart. **"Then why... why do they all look like that? Their eyes, and their skin, and..."** A shudder ran up my spine.

Because they wanted to be pretty? Because this was a well developed piece of technology that was proven to be helpful to the goals of this institution? Or... **"Because our program is about rehabilitation, Velvet, it always has been. And this process has proven to be invaluable to that end. It helps our girls to leave behind the selves they were and begin to embrace a new future, a new *self*, divorced of all the awful things they once did."** Was I making excuses? No, I was steadfast in this belief.

I shook my head, unwilling to accept it. But everything Colette said made sense. These people would leave here as girls, no matter what. Why shouldn't they be pretty? Why shouldn't they look their best? But all I

could think about was Marlow and his awful smile. The first time I saw my eyes... I rubbed the tears away, but new ones took their place.

Once upon a time, touching Velvet Duke without her consent would have meant a sharp response - be that one of fear, anger, disgust, or just general aversion. That girl was a long time ago, though. That girl was absent when I put my arms around today's Velvet and I pulled her into a warm embrace.

I clung tightly to Colette and cried my eyes out into her shirt. I knew, deep down, that the procedure Marlow had done to me was helpful for these girls. I knew it would make their lives easier. It would make my life easier too, in the long run. But for now, I just needed to cry.

46.) Her Old Friends

She'd cried in my arms for maybe a half an hour, and somewhere along the way she'd taken to sucking my thumb. By the time she spit it out in bashful embarrassment, I knew she was probably more or less pulled together enough to talk. **"Are you okay?"**

I nodded, but I felt exhausted. Crying took so much out of me. Colette sat me down on her sofa and played with my hair. It was longer than before - six months of growing made it perfect for pigtails. Then I noticed a shadow on the far wall, through the blinds. With a bit of effort, I could hear whispering on the other side of the window. I looked at Colette with confusion.

"You can come in, girls." I called out, my tone resigned and knowing as much as any parent. That's really what I was now, that's what I felt like, that's who I'd become. A parent. Mommy Colette at times. My office door cracked and two girls - very familiar girls once you got past their perfect skin and unworldly eyes - peered in bashfully. I sighed and kept my hands on Velvet, soothing her calmly. **"Velvet, you remember Lemon and Bree, right?"**

"Oh my gosh, we thought you died!" Lemon rushed into the room and Bree watched in disbelief. I looked shyly from one girl to the other and then down at my feet, flattening out my dress. **"Um, no... I got in trouble for..."**

I didn't have to say it. Everyone must know what I did. Rumors weren't easy to quell.

"I'm so glad you're okay, Velvet." Bree was quiet and demure, pleasant and thoughtful with her choice of words. **"What he put you through, that was..."**

I had to raise my finger to that one, and reel in my girls. **"There's no need to dwell on the past, for any of you. Velvet had a rough time, and she's better now. Aren't you honey?"** Bree and Lemon were recognizable, though barely, but Velvet was entirely a new person.

"Uh huh." Lemon and Bree exchanged a curious look and Colette helped me up onto my feet. **"Why don't you girls show Velvet to her room. Dinner should be soon."** **"Yes Miss Colette."** Bree took me by the hand and led me out of Colette's office, into the playroom.

"Where have you been, Velvet?" Bree asked, despite being told not to talk of the past. She did it only once out of earshot, while she was opening the door to the bedroom that Velvet would be staying in. The rooms were different, too, appointed for children and less like prisoners.

"Um... I got in trouble, and they put me in..." What did Colette call it? **"Phase Zero?"** But by the look on Bree's face, she had no idea what I was talking about. **"I dun remember a lot of it. I had drugs in me, and I was asleep a lot, and..."** I tried to remember more than that, but everything felt like it had happened years ago. I shook my head. **"Anyway, it only felt like a day or two, and now I'm here."**

"Gosh, you're so different," Lemon muttered under her breath, staring at me with wide eyes. I blinked. **"I am?"**

"You're..." What was a good way to put it? A good word was important, and Bree had taken strongly to picking favorite words for the right circumstances. **"You're prim."** That was a good word choice!

"Prim?" I asked. **"You're a good girl,"** Lemon interjected. **"Okay...?"** **"Well... you're usually a naughty girl."** **"I don't think so..."** Bree and Lemon exchanged another look and shrugged their shoulders. **"Well, either way, this is your room."** The rooms were different too. The bunk

beds weren't standard prisoner-grade. They were hard wood, painted white. The lighting was a lot better and the walls were decorated with stencils of teddy bears. I felt a little blush on my cheeks. **"Yeah, we have way more people than before,"** Lemon explained. **"All the rooms are full, and I think they are going to expand the facility."**

"Miss Colette said that she's waiting on the results of a project and if it goes well, there might be three or four times more people." Which was a *lot* of people! Certainly more than could fit in a facility of this size. **"I missed you."** Bree confessed, after a few quiet moments, looking down at her feet. **"I'm glad I got to see you again before I leave. Miss Colette told us how much good work you did here and... and you're maybe the reason I'm getting a second chance at life. So thank you.'**

Bree really caught me off guard in that moment. She was thanking me? For what, making sure she turned into a girl? A second chance at life... I bit my lip and looked down at my feet. **"R-right, sure... of course..."** Then something else she said caught up to me. **"Wait, you're leaving?" "Yeah, maybe a week or two. I'm rehabilitated." "Uh huh, me too!"** Lemon said, raising her hand. Bree shook her head. **"You need to stop having night time accidents if you want to leave."** Lemon blushed a little and I looked down at Bree's dress, tight around her breasts and fluffed out at the bottom. It looked way more grown-up than my frilly babydoll dress, that was for sure. How had I not noticed that? **"You're not in diapers?"** I asked.

"I am not." Bree nodded, more than a little pride in her tone of voice. **"Miss Colette said there's four stages to rehabilitation: Breaking Down, Sorting Out, Looking In, and Building Up."** Those four tenants were obviously well known to everybody here, too, because Lemon was subconsciously mimicking them with her lips as Bree said them. **"I'm about finished with Building Up, but Lemon here is still working on Looking In..."** Bree flashed a smirk to her best friend and winked. **"And Staying Dry, right, Lem?" "Shhh!"**

"I... um. But I thought this whole place was about diapers and bottles and..." **"That's 'cause you never got past the first part,"** Lemon said simply. In retrospect, I was the only one at the table to drink from a bottle. Everyone else had mac and cheese or chicken nuggets or something.

That had always annoyed me, but I never thought about the greater implications.

"They can't say we're rehabilitated if we're still wetting the bed," Bree explained. **"The diapers are just part of the breaking down part. Then you get to grow up again."**

I pouted and crossed my arms with a little irritation. **"Well, I don't want to wear them then!"**

"You get assigned someone to help you, someone who's a step ahead," Bree explained, nodding her head. **"And when she thinks you're ready to move up to the next part, you two both have an interview with Miss Colette."** It seemed like, if nothing else, things were very structured here. And effective.

"I dun need help! I'm not a baby!" **"Sure are acting like one,"** Lemon said with a smirk. I blushed and turned my back on the two girls, walking across the playroom with purpose. I didn't need diapers! I was potty trained! And I'd been here for six months - I should be in the next step. I'd tell Colette and she'd understand.

47.) Her Review

"Hello, Velvet. Are you ready for your review?" I asked when the little girl marched back into my office with purpose, standing posed before my desk with her hands on her hips.

"No more diapers! Bree doesn't wear them, and Lemon is in Looking In or whatever, and that's not fair! I'm smarter than both of them, and I'm not a baby!" I wasn't taking no for an answer.

"And what kind of person are you, Velvet? What's more important to you? Is it the happiness of others, or getting what you want?" She didn't need to know that this was the first review question, did she? Honestly, having her all sparked up like this would make for a more truthful set of answers.

"Getting what I want!" I said harshly, stomping my foot on the floor. **"It doesn't got anything to do with anybody else, and I'm more a big girl than Bree!"**

"Oh, you are? And what do you want to be when you grow up, if you're such a big girl? Do you want to be someone who hurts others, or do you want to be someone who makes stuff?" Question 2.

"I..." I looked at Colette with irritation and crossed my arms over my dress. What did any of this have to do with diapers?! **"Makes stuff, I guess. Now can I have underwear?"**

"What kind of underwear would you like? Something cute and demure, or something racy and sexy?" Question 3. Well, almost. **"What kind of fashion do you like, Velvet? What's your perfect outfit?"**

"I dunno... like a thong or something? I dun want that. Just maybe... undies. Like panties? Um..." I remembered wearing panties before coming here, with Roger. He thought it was cute when I'd wear women's underwear. I bit my lip. **"Maybe full cut, with um... bows on the top part, like right here?"** I pointed to my waist.

I was careful not to betray a smile, not to give anything away, and I nodded in appreciation of her answer while keeping a passive expression on my face. **"What do you want to do when you grow up, what do you want to do for work?"** Question 4. Next, I'd ask her question 1 again. **"And what did you say was more important? Yourself or others?"**

"Um. I wanna help people. Like, I really loved being a hypnotherapist because people usually need help with stuff they can't control, and it works! Even if people don't think it works." But Colette knew that. She was in the same profession as me. **"Others are more important."**

Oh how exciting! It was working, it was working! I nodded, I hid my excitement, and I continued to question her. **"And it was cute panties you wanted to wear, right? You want to wear cute clothes, like... well, what's your favorite color dress to wear?"** That one was a freebie, I just wanted to know.

"Red, please." I had always liked the color red, but now that I thought about it, I wasn't really sure why.

"How do you feel about hurting people? Like if someone really upsets you, is it okay to hurt them? Or if you really want something, is it okay to steal to get it?"

"Um, you can't hurt people just because you don't get what you want. You gotta be nice and nice things will happen sooner or later." I nodded with certainty, then realized we were off topic. "Wait, so can I have undies?"

"I think with how much you believe in working hard to get what you want, that you'll be able to convince your Second that you're ready for undies in no time at all." I allowed some pride in there.

I supposed I could get underwear the old-fashioned way, how every other girl got theirs. But... "Wait, what's a Second?" "A Phase Two person." "Phase Two?" "Sorting Out." "Oh... wait, does that mean I'm a Phase One person? I am not! I'm potty trained, so I should be higher up than Lemon!"

"Lemon has worked very hard to get to where she is, Velvet, and if we just let you skip ahead that wouldn't be very nice to her, would it?" It was remarkable what the process had done for Velvet, how kind she'd become, how compassionate, while still being... herself. More-or-less. "She was looked after by a Second for a while, and then she was a Second, too. She's earned her place, you see?"

"Well... well, then let me be a Second! I can look after people. I looked after Annie, didn't I?" I saw the tide shift in Colette's expression, like she was considering it. "C'mon, I can do it. I'm not taking shortcuts. I swear!"

"You think you could take care of one of our new recruits, Velvet? You'd be who she came to when she was sad, when she was confused, when she was trying to find herself. Is that what you want?" If anything, I was sure I could see *excitement* in Velvet's eyes. "When her diapers need changing, when she needs coaxing to drink

her milk, and to play with the others. You'd be... well, not quite her Mom, but her Big Sister maybe."

"Yeah! I can do that!" Colette let out a little sigh and opened up a file on her desk. I watched in anticipation. "Okay. Keira has been here for about two weeks. She had her Softening last week. So far, she's been a model patient, but you're taking on a big responsibility. Are you sure you can handle it?" "Of course!" I said with a huff. "Then underwear?"

"Let's see how well you do with Keira, but I can promise you that nothing else will get you closer. Okay?" I gave her a reassuring smile and let her examine the picture of Keira and some details about her file - it was more privilege than I gave anybody else, but this was Velvet. "Why don't you go introduce yourself, and I'll check in with you later?" Besides, I had a report to write; a proof of concept. Velvet Duke: Phase Zero.

I hadn't gotten myself out of diapers, but I felt like I'd won my argument with Colette. I stepped out her office with newfound confidence to find Bree and Lemon waiting for me. "Well?" Bree asked. "Well, she gave me a First to take care of." "Wow, really?" Lemon seemed surprised. "Who?" "Keira." Not that I knew who that was...

"Keira?" Lemon and Bree looked at each other, the way that two people looked at each other when a third person present was yet to become privy to a particular piece of bad news, and then the two of them looked back at Velvet. "She's weird," Lemon began, and Bree finished the thought: "Very weird."

"What? Why?" Colette said Keira only arrived a few weeks ago. After a few weeks of me being here, I blinded a staff member. Compared to me, how bad could this chick really be?

"Keira is..." Bree tried to think of a delicate term to use, but Lemon jumped at the chance to interject her own opinion on the matter, brashly at that: "She enjoys it here. No fights, no nothin'. Just doing everything she's told."

I blinked in confusion. She wanted to be here? No, that didn't make sense. I crossed my arms and looked down at my feet. Maybe it was a fake-out? Like I used to do? I should talk to her... **"Could you point her out? I want to introduce myself."**

"Uh huh." Lemon started, and Bree managed to find the right words to offer up her opinion again. **"She's cute - taller than you, pretty glasses even though she's had her Softening, and she always keeps her hair in plaits."**

"Softening?" I asked.

"The, uh... the tank. Softens your skin? Makes your eyes... uh..."

Oh. It had a name now... I looked away from the both of them with my arms crossed over my chest. The memory of seeing myself in the mirror for the first time haunted me. Those eyes. I shook the thought away.

"But it fixes your vision," Bree offered up. **"Like, you don't wear glasses anymore, even though you always used to."**

"I... what?" I touched my nose and - for the first time - realized I didn't have my glasses on. But without them, I was as blind as a bat! I could only make out vague shapes and blobs. Nonetheless, Bree and Lemon were in crystal-clear focus.

"They probably wouldn't let her have glasses," Lemon said to her friend. **"You know. 'Cause of the other time."**

I shook my head. One thing at a time, Velvet.

"Which room is Keira's?" I asked. Bree pointed at one of the doors and I walked away from the both of them.

48.) Her First

When I first got here, there were only seven girls. Now, it seemed closer to fifteen or twenty. The playroom was bustling with baby babble and the soft

sounds of the TV program. It was remarkable, actually. So many guys, and now they were pants-pissing little girls. Why would Keira ever want to be here? I found Keira's room and peeked my head in. The light was off, but I could see someone's frilly pink socks hanging off the side of the bed. **"Uh. Keira? Are you in here?"**

"Uh huh." Her response was quiet, almost... distracted, even. But unlike most girls who'd only been here a week or two, her voice rang with femininity and awe.

I let out a sigh and turned on her light. I knew that inflection anywhere. She was on the milk. I approached her with crossed arms and looked down at her. Gosh, she was pretty. Like, really pretty. She smiled up at me behind her black-rimmed glasses. Her frilly lavender dress had flipped up, showing off the very thick and very yellow diaper between her legs. I rolled my eyes. **"I'm Velvet. I'm in charge of you now. Got it?"**

"Iono about that one, Velvet." Keira sat up, but she didn't close her legs. She didn't do a thing to preserve an ounce of modesty. She puffed out her cheeks, tapping her chin thoughtfully. **"I think I'ma need to innerview you if you wan' the job, I'm kinda' a big deal an' also a little deal too sooo.."**

"No," I said sternly. **"There's no interview. I'm in charge. If you need something, come to me. Otherwise, you'll be in trouble."** I thought I was commanding a lot of respect. Actually, I felt a lot like Colette! But then she laughed at me and fell back on the bed. I pouted a little. **"I'm serious!"**

"I regrets to inform you, Miss Veeellllllvet," Keira held the first syllable and then sharply released on the latter one, almost contemptuously, **"that you haaaaaaavee,"** again with the drawing out! **"not,"** and sharp, **"been selected for this role. Buuuuut!"** She sat back up. **"Be sure to apply again in future!"**

I balled my hands at my sides. I wanted to hit her! I wanted to show her that I wasn't just some small girl! But as the aggression built up in my chest, I started to feel sick. Tears filled my eyes and I hurried to wipe them away. Then, before Keira could notice, I ran out of her room in a huff. **"It's**

just the milk," I reminded myself. **"When she comes off it, I'll show her I'm in charge."**

"Are you okay, Velvet?" Bree peered her head over the playpen wall at the pretty girl tucked up with a beanbag pulled over herself like a blanket, trying desperately to rub the tears out of her eyes. Bree had seen her storm off, but gave her a good fifteen before approaching, just to give her space.

"Fine," I said sourly. Colette had told me that if I wanted to get out of diapers, I needed to take care of that girl. But she was such a brat! Was I that much of a brat? I took a deep breath and tried to relax. **"I'm such a crybaby now. When did that start? In Phase Zero?"**

"I'm not sure, honey," Bree responded with sympathy in her tone, **"I did warn you that Keira was a bit of a handful, but I bet you can work with her on that - you've been through the wringer here, after all."** Those words weren't just encouragement, they were almost... admiration.

"Everyone here is so pretty," I muttered, looking out at the ocean of men in frilly dresses. **"I can't even see them as boys anymore. And Keira, she's only been here a few weeks, and..."** I sighed and looked down at my feet. **"I guess Marlow's Softening thing really helped people after all... I hate that."**

"You were the first, you know?" Bree trailed off, because reminding Velvet of that was probably *not* helpful. **"It helps a lot I think. Like, there's this clear line of 'before' and 'after' where people can look in the mirror and they don't see the face of the person who did that bad stuff anymore?"**

That bad stuff. All those people I killed. I felt my stomach turn in knots; I never used to care what happened to others, but now... **"I guess you're right,"** I muttered. **"I'm not who I used to be. I don't even want to be anymore. This place... changed me. I hate that they won."**

"Do you hate that they won? Or do you hate that you fought so long to hold onto a you that you didn't even want to be?" Someone called Bree's name and she looked over her shoulder, then back at Velvet. **"I gotta go play, Velvet. Don't give up on Keira, okay? Reach her like you'd wanna be reached. You got this. I love you!"**

There was a time between lunch and dinner where Keira wouldn't be under the haze of the milk. That's when I'd talk to her. Until then, I was content to just sit and think. A me that I didn't want to be... that's what Bree said. But I wanted to be that boy! Didn't I? There was only one way to know for sure.

I closed my eyes and went to my library. History section. Memories of my past. I took a book off the shelf and read the cover. 15 years old, part 3 of 19. Quietly, I turned a few pages. Me, at lunch. Looking across the cafeteria at Lance McDougal. Ugh, I had such a crush on him! But I was pretty closeted back then. I read the whole chapter, talking about Lance's eyes, his hair, his smile. And at the end, a sentence I don't ever remember thinking. "If only I were a girl..." I closed the book with a snap.

49.) Her Revelation

I spent all afternoon sifting through my library. Was it just a wayward thought? If I were a girl, Lance would like me. We could date or whatever. That didn't mean I wanted to be a girl! But my 9 Years Old books talked about how much I wanted a cute dress for Christmas. My 13 Years Old books said I was jealous of girls for having boobs. And in 19 Years Old book 8 of 21 wrote out plainly: if Roger wasn't gay, I would transition right now. Did... did I want to be a girl all along...? Had I just repressed it? I shook my head. This was too much to handle. I pushed my library away and came back to the present, in the playroom of baby women. I wiped the sweat from my head and stumbled to my feet. But then I was met with another unexpected truth: the seat of my dress was soaked.

"Do you need a change, Velvet?" *Miss Duke* would be too formal for a girl in her stage of the program, which was why the attending nurse used the young girl's given name in this instance. Velvet looked up at her, blinked once or twice, like she was talking a different language, and then scrambled for a blanket or something to cover her wet self.

"N-no. I'm fine! I, um... I want to see Colette." Why was I wet? I didn't wet myself! I didn't even have to use the bathroom! Maybe I'd had an accident while I meditated, but that didn't make sense either. I would have

felt it! **"Miss Colette is out for lunch. Let's get you cleaned up." "I don't need help!"** I said harshly, hiding my wet butt against the wall.

"You don't need help, that's true, you're probably very capable of handling this yourself, Velvet," the nurse agreed, smiling warmly, **"but if you let me help you, then I can get your dress in the laundry and you won't have to worry about hiding what happened, will you?"** Logic, right?

I looked nervously around the room, glancing from one pretty boy to the next. No one was paying any attention to me, but what would happen if they saw the huge wet spot on the back of my dress? And then there was the Keira problem. Could she even take me seriously if I looked no more grown up than she did? I bit my lip and looked down at the ground. **"I... I guess..."**

"Good girl." The nurse smiled and pulled a sucker from her pocket, dismissing the wrapper in just as smooth a motion before settling it into its final home between Velvet's pretty lips. **"Come on."** Her hand went to Velvet's and she led her to a side room that seemed uniquely purposed for this task.

I had been in rooms like this before. Diaper changes were second nature by now. I climbed up on the table and laid down on my back, staring up at the little spinning disk. Music filled the room, something soothing. **"I dunno what happened,"** I tried to explain to the nurse. **"I didn't wet myself. Maybe I sat in something?"**

"Maybe." This was a trick that Velvet herself had been the progenitor of so long ago - never argue with the people you're controlling - rather, be noncommittal, let them talk themselves down or around in circles: both options were good. **"Red, right?"** This question came after a few moments of Velvet muttering to herself, and after the nurse had done cleaning her up and was preparing to re-dress her - in a diaper, of course. **"Your favorite color?"**

"Oh. Um." I looked at the nurse with a bit of confusion, but one look at the item in her hands quickly explained her question. A diaper, but it was red. A red diaper? I'd never seen something like that before. Maybe it was a special. **"Yes please."**

"How'd I know? Maybe it's your bright smile, or your fire-engine red blush, huh?" The nurse smiled and began to unfold the diaper, because Velvet was getting diapered whether she realized it or not. It was a simple process: unfold, deploy, pull-thru, and tape. And the red seemed to captivate Velvet's pretty blue gaze, too.

"When is Colette going to be back?" I asked. **"Maybe after dinner,"** the nurse told me. **"Now arms up."** I put my arms up and the woman stripped me of my dress. I remembered six months ago, when I arrived, and most of the orderlies were men. There were a few women here and there, but the staff seemed more diverse now. I sat quietly on the table in just my red diaper, staring down at the bright plastic.

"Some of the others are planning to play a board game in a few minutes; are you going to play? It's a pretty cool one, or at least that's what they're all saying. I bet you're really good at games, right Velvet?" Her dress was stunning, red gingham, gorgeous bows and ribbons, and puffy as could be.

"Uh huh." Actually, board games were sort of boring to me. I was notoriously good at them! Reading people was part of being a psychologist, and I was one of the best. But maybe it would be fun? And if Keira was playing, I could get to know her a little better. I walked out of the changing room, sucking on my lollipop, without a second thought about what I was wearing.

"Ohhhh Veeeeeeelvet," There was that same sweet voice with the clipped off inflection, that tone that could only ever have belonged to one girl: Keira. **"I sees you gots dressed up! Issit 'cuz you wants another innerview wif' me?"** Keira was dressed in a pretty school uniform, and seemed to have absolutely zero shame, even though she was sitting on the floor in diapers so thick her thighs hadn't seen each other in ages.

I gave her a sour look. I detested her optimism. Why was she so damn happy, anyway? This place had literally taken her life away. It turned her into a girl. Not even a woman, but a diaper-pissing little girl! I sat down across from her with irritation and put on a fake smile. **"You look cute yourself. Like a schoolgirl. No older than two years old, right?"**

"Mmmm..." She put one finger to her chin in an exaggerated thinking pose, pursed her lips, and then shook her head. **"Tha's a diffy-cool question, 'cause a two years old would be so articulates as me, but,"** - again with the clipped off inflection! - **"I sure do poop my pants a whole bunches so who even knows!"** She giggled, and not some broken or lost way, but like she was actually amused.

...was she still on the milk? No, her eyes were clear and blue. Excited, even. But she was so candid, so forward. I didn't understand her at all... For the rest of the game, I was lost in thought. Actually, I was so lost that I didn't even win. Some girl at the end of the table did - she wore her short hair in curls and wasn't half as cute as Keira. The bell rang for dinner and all the girls started making their way to the large plastic table.

I looked down at the chicken nuggets and the sippy-cup of juice in front of me. No milk? I guess Colette had bumped me up to a Second after all. That brought a warmth of pride to my chest and I didn't even question the childish food or the childish cup. After all, it was a reward!

I watched Keira with curiosity for the whole meal. She sipped her bottle with no hesitation. She waddled around the playroom with careless abandon. And then she fell asleep for an evening nap amidst the TV of tricks, designed to make you dumber. And for everything I saw, I was certain... she wanted to be here. She wanted this. Was that because of Colette? A hypnosis thing? I was determined to find the answer.

"Keira? Come with me, please." She was half-asleep and half-dazed from the milk. This was the only time I seemed capable of making her listen to me. She followed me into our shared bedroom and I sat her on the edge of her bed. Time to do some exploring.

"I hads a dream, and you were innit, an' also it was like one of those Sega games, and I was a hedgehog and you were a rabbit..." Keira yawned and rubbed her eyes, either for cuteness effect or just because she was still legitimately waking up. Or both.

I touched her soft hair and looked down at her with a gentle smile. **"Mhmm. Sounds like a lovely dream. You have a lot of dreams, don't you? Little stories in your head..."** Like books in a library.

"Close your eyes... let those happy stories come to you. Relax..."

Though from the smell of her diaper, she was relaxed well enough. I watched her sink into her bed and played softly with her hair. The milk was such a great way to get someone into a trance! Honestly, the whole idea was genius. No wonder Colette was so talented.

Despite her confidence, a trance came easy to her. I played around in Keira's head for a minute, solidifying my ground, before asking the serious questions.

"Keira... what a girly name. Does that make you a girl?"

"I'm a girl." Keira answered, but it wasn't really an answer to the *question* itself, so much as it was an answer in general. She saw herself as a girl, that much was for certain, but there seemed to be something more to the story based on her inflection.

"You are so certain you're a girl," I said quietly, both to clarify and to validate her feelings. I didn't want to undo any work Colette was doing. She would get mad and I'd be stuck here for the rest of my life. **"How are you so sure?"**

"How do you know how to breathe?" It was remarkable, though, that in her trance she seemed to lose a good deal of her more childish inflections. Not *all* of them, but enough that it was noticeable. Her voice was still soft and precious, undeniably feminine.

Hm... she was an enigma. She spoke strangely, like someone who had been given hypnotic conditions before. My job was to figure out when this one was implanted. Was it Colette?

"You remember the first time you thought that... the first time you were sure you were a girl. The scene fills your mind, surrounding you. The darkness reveals itself... your memory. What do you see?"

"The mirror," she answered, simply. **"Blue eyes. Pretty blue eyes. So pretty. Too pretty."** No distress in her tone, though. No concern. **"Pretty blue eyes. Pretty baby girl."** Interesting that she attributed the word *baby* to a question regarding her gender, perhaps.

I crossed my arms. Strange. The Softening did this? But...

"Pretty blue eyes," I repeated. **"They make you such a pretty girl. And before that... had you ever wanted to be a girl? Had you ever had a feeling? Like maybe... maybe you were destined..."**

I was getting too personal. All those books in my library, all those memories I had... I was imposing them on her. I had to be more careful. I bit my lip. Maybe this was a bad idea...

"Starting over." That reply took a little bit longer than the others, like she struggled to find the words for it, like she couldn't put her finger on it. **"Changing stories is hard. Changing books is easy, if you start over."** No talk of destiny, predetermination. But a clue. She used to be a rebel, perhaps?

"You had another story, before this one..." She nodded her head. **"You were a boy in that story."** She nodded again. Now I was understanding. She wasn't embarrassed about being a baby girl because - to her - she was starting from scratch. This place wasn't changing her - it was resetting her.

"That old story... that old book. It sits in front of you. You open it, only to check something. It's not you. It's not your life. It's just a story."

The way I spoke was fluid and magical. The kind of voice that anyone could take as their own. I watched the fear fade from Keira's face.

"Tell me about the protagonist."

"This is the story of a very clever prince, too very clever, clever wit, clever mind, clever tongue, clever hands. Think think think. Stay ahead of those who chase. Plan plan plan. Much too clever to be caught. Dig dig dig. He's in lots of trouble, but too clever to see it. Eyes closed to the truth, arrogant, ignorant. Dumb little prince."

...this wasn't hypnosis. This was almost poetic. I looked down at the semi-sleeping girl and leaned away from her, wrapping my arms around myself. What the hell...

"I... um..." I shook my head, trying to slide back into my professional stoicism. But something about her story hit too close to home. **"That story is gone. This story is new. A new story about a girl named Keira... tell me about this story."**

There was a moment of buffering there too, but the answer came with a chipper smile and a delicate cadence. **"Keira is a pretty princess, pretty and kind and clever but not too clever. Keira knows to say sorry, she knows to say she's wrong, she's happy and she's kind, to herself and to others. Her story is on gilded pages, she knows how lucky she is, with her pretty blue eyes."**

I let out a sigh and wrapped things up. Basic sleep hypnosis stuff. And when the girl was sound asleep, I made my way to the bed on the other side of the room and laid down.

She really wanted to be a girl, huh? It wasn't hypnosis. Then... then maybe her and I were the same. And in a strange way, she was right about starting over. I couldn't be that boy I once was. I couldn't even remember his name. But I could be Velvet. I could have a new life...

50.) Her Argument

"Can I see you in my office, Velvet?" There used to be a sense of uncertainty in my voice, a kind of hesitation in the words I said, as though every single statement was on trial for some imaginary crime. Not so anymore, not so in the slightest. This was my program, these were my girls, and I sounded every bit the mother hen that I'd grown into. **"Come along, Velvet, there'll be time to play later okay?"**

I followed Colette into her office with an ounce of irritation. Earlier, I'd wet myself without even knowing about it, and I was sure she had something to do with it. She closed the office door behind us and I sat on her sofa with my arms crossed.

"You hypnotized me to wet myself," I said flatly. **"That's so... mean!"**

Colette tilted her head to the side in confusion and looked down at my diaper. I felt a blush warm my cheeks.

"You were in Phase Zero for a long time, Velvet. Your bladder control dwindled. But we are going to build it back up together."

I looked at her with a touch of uncertainty, but honestly... that made way more sense. Suddenly, I felt a little foolish.

"Oh..."

"Never mistake for mental what can otherwise be attributed to the physical, you ought to know that." And while not a universal truth, it was one that made sense to the girls here in this wing. "I'd like to talk to you about your thoughts, Velvet. You've met with some of the others, you've spent some time with Keira. I'd like to know what you think."

"Keira is... weird." I kicked my feet and looked down at my bare toes. "She sounds like the ideal patient. So what is it you need help with? Why am I her Second?"

Colette forced a smile and leaned back on her desk.

"I assigned you to Keira not to teach her something, but to learn from her."

I blinked in surprise and then my face filled with frustration. "You said I could be a Second! You said you were giving me a chance!"

"I am giving you a chance, Velvet. I want you to become a Second, I want you to learn what I can't teach you, what you can only learn from your peers."

I was confused. I hated being confused! And since Phase Zero, I wasn't that good at hiding it, either. I pouted and crossed my arms, kicking my feet a little. Colette approached me and played with my hair.

"Let me help you with your potty problems, okay?"

"You mean hypnotize me," I sulked. "No way..."

"I've been around inside that head of yours before, you know? I've been inside there, I've seen who you are, I've seen what you're scared of. So you might as well let me in to see if I can help, Velvet. You're going to stay fixed in place if you keep fighting everything that happens here."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I muttered, looking away. But I knew what she meant. All those books, all those stories of me... the old me. Wanting to be a girl. I wanted this, didn't I? Hadn't I always? And why wouldn't I; girls were better. Cuter. Innocent. Kind. Gentle. Serene. Loving. And it didn't change how I felt about Roger or other guys - if anything, it made more sense...

"You've been fighting for so long. You've been digging your heels in because you want to do things on your own terms. You want to be the best you that you can be, and that means coming to that conclusion on your own. The way that Keira did, perhaps?"

I sunk into the sofa and avoided eye contact with Colette. I couldn't have this conversation with her! Or with anyone. It... it was too painful. Too serious. I'd kept myself guarded for so long. Locks and walls and barriers. And now, I felt so... defenseless.

Instead of standing over her, I put myself alongside her, I sat down next to her on the sofa in my office and I put my arm around her shoulders. My voice was quiet, calm, maternal, honest.

"The only question standing in your way of finding yourself, my darling Velvet, is this: do you think we do good work here?"

"You mean turning grown men into baby girls? No, that's awful!" But some of Keira's words weighted heavily on my mind. A new story. Starting over. It didn't have to be hard. It could be... freeing. I shook my head.

"Awful does sound like a word you might use, but would it be more or less awful to rehabilitate our patients any other way? You say *babies*, but you and I both know that we're giving socialization opportunities to ensure proper and healthy integration back into society. Could you imagine if we didn't?"

"You're acting like I'm an idiot," I said flatly. Colette usually was smart enough to treat me different to her other patients. **"This place isn't necessary - it's... egotistical. Like Marlow..."** Even the name made me sick to my stomach. **"These people don't want this. I didn't want this!"** Past tense. I let that slip on accident.

Didn't, huh? I hid the smile.

"Prisoners don't want to go to prison either, but breaking the laws of society has to incur repercussions. And you're much too clever to forget that the criminal justice system as it stands is an awful set of systemic oppression that creates reoffenders. We create second chances, you know this."

"By effectively killing who we were," I said sharply.

"And letting you become a new person," Colette finished, which brought a flash of shock to my face. New people. I looked away and kicked my feet...

"...what did you bring me in here for, anyway?"

"You're very clever, Velvet. How about you tell me why I brought you in here? I'm certain that you can figure it out."

Until the very end, Velvet was going to be a vain girl when it came to her intellect.

"Because..." Because the last time I was in here, we talked about Keira. About my review. And now I was in here again, after I spent the day with Keira. She was assessing me? **"Because you want to know how much progress I'm making."** Which meant... **"Which means you are trying to see if I'm a Phase One or Phase Two or... or any of the other ones."**

Suddenly, my arguing seemed inadvisable. I didn't want to go back to being the bottom of the totem pole. Phase One. Milk every day. Diapers all the time. I bit my lip nervously.

"Your honesty matters so much more than your answers themselves, Velvet. You can cheat by telling me mistruths, but you'll only be cheating yourself. You're a good girl, though, and I have a feeling you're going to work with me on this."

Our dynamic had changed so much, but that was the requirement of what she'd done.

"I don't want to be a Phase One person," I said nervously. **"I want to get out of this place. I should be leaving with Bree and Lemon; I shouldn't be a First."** The way I looked at Colette, it was almost... almost like I was scared.

"And why shouldn't you be a First? Do you think, in comparison to Keira, that you're further along in your development? Are you certain that you're able to go into the world and present as a woman?"

"Keira doesn't even want to be a woman - she wants to be like... a baby." **"She's playing the part. Going through the motions. Motions you are resisting."** **"Because they're stupid!"** I balled my hands into fists and slammed them down on the sofa like a child.

"Motions that could teach you how to be your best self, motions that will lead you down the path of success and not headfirst into the ruinous direction you seem intent to pursue, Velvet." A temper tantrum certainly was not helping her case, that was for sure!

"I can make my own decisions!"

"If that were true, you'd still be a boy."

Oh, that hurt. Deep down, a part of me rattled and rippled and it shivered through my whole body. I felt a sharp ache in my chest, through my stomach, and into my throat. And I... I thought, for a moment, I was going to cry. I turned away from Colette and crossed my arms. I wouldn't fall into her stupid trap... I wouldn't...

"You're on an uncontrollable journey right now, Velvet, and you've dug your heels in every single step on the way, and where has it gotten you? Has it helped, even once? Have you considered for just a

second, my bratty little princess," I liked those words, I hoped she would too, **"that the way out is through?"**

I looked over at Colette with overflowing emotions. Contempt. And just beneath that, a massive sadness. Tears filled my eyes and I shook my head, holding them back. **"I'm not a girl, an' I dun wanna start over!"** But as I said it out loud, I knew it was a lie. Anxiety filled my chest and it felt like I was going to burst. **"Leave me alone..."**

'Leave me alone' was a sentiment applied mostly to hormonal teenagers, sometimes to adults, and almost never to children. And Velvet had to be a child, for now at least. That's why I wrapped my arms around her, and I squeezed her tight into my chest.

Tears dripped down my cheeks and I shook my head, trying to push Colette away. I didn't want to do this! I didn't want to start crying. I wasn't a baby. I wasn't a First! But I couldn't help it. I couldn't stop myself... **"Leave me alone..."**

"You're not going to be alone, Velvet, not anymore. You're embarking on this journey, this frail, fraught journey into new territory. But you're going to have people who love you, until you're ready to make it on your own. I promise."

I hated her so much. But the way she held me to her chest, I... I couldn't turn her away. I couldn't fight her anymore. So I buried my head in her shirt and cried, holding her tight.

There could be no rebirth without a little bit of death, and what had to die in Velvet wasn't her ego, her spunk, her wit, or intelligence. All that needed to die in her was that spark of a voice that told her there was any other way out of this. All that she had to do was show a little trust.

51.) Her Guest

"Are you wet?" Colette asked me. I looked harshly at her and then down at my feet. I wasn't even sure when I was wet anymore. Stupid Phase

Zero. **"I can help,"** she said quietly, playing with my hair. **"But you have to let me."**

Let her hypnotize me... it was like signing my own death wish. But she had kept me safe for six months in Phase Zero...

"You'll be doing this willingly, but it might be the first real step into a life where you can accept what's become of you, and become what you've accepted."

Honestly. I had full control over her - but this moment of surrender, this was important for many reasons.

I shook my head and crossed my arms. **"Hypnosis doesn't work on me."** **"Then you can potty train yourself. It could take months..."** I glared at Colette and then down at the red dress I was wearing. I didn't want to be in diapers anymore... it was embarrassing.

"You could be a First like Keira if you prefer; she's quite comfortable in her diapers. Maybe you'd become used to yours before you figure out the finer points of potty training, maybe that won't be so bad, right?"

I looked away from Colette and kicked my feet. Comfortable? I'd never be comfortable in diapers! I'd been in them for months already and I wasn't used to them! But the way she worded it... it was a scary thought.

"I'm here to help you. Let me help you." The very act of asking was important: it signaled not only surrender, but some very primal level of acceptance.

"How are you going to help me?" I pouted. **"Like you said, I'm not having trouble psychologically. It's physical."** Even if I let her, it's not like there was much she could do about it. Right?

I smiled at her, and I put my hand on her cheek. She was such a pretty little thing, and I was absolutely going to miss her. Even now, it was just so hard to see her as the psychopathic little murderer that she once was.

"I'm going to help you. And that's enough."

"Fine," I muttered, kicking my feet. I hated asking for help, but I trusted Colette. She had done more for me than she knew.

For Velvet, it wasn't a long process. No potent induction, no drawn out experience. For her, the girl I had been hypnotizing for months, it was a series of finger snaps that dropped her under. Out like a light.

Immediately, I was in a dark room. Empty. Not my library, of course. That was hidden far away. But this was... strange. I didn't even remember the induction. Then, Colette was there. I bit my lip shyly and played with the hem of my dress.

"This is a blank slate, Velvet. This is whatever you make it to be. A fortress? A line of defense? It could be. A maze, to keep me out? Perhaps if you'd like. Or you could make it the very essence of your new self. Your favorite color is red. Pretty Velvet Red. Paint the walls with your eyes."

Suddenly, the blackness turned red. A soft, deep, velvety red. The walls came into focus and the shelves. Tables and chairs. Steps and railings. The outlines of my library. I looked around nervously and took half-a-step backward. She... she couldn't be here! I shook my head and tried to take the color away.

"This is what you want it to be, Velvet, this is your place. I'm here as a guest, and nothing more than that." Her panic could tear this place apart, but I could reset her, I could do this over and over. Perhaps I had, a dozen times, a hundred, she'd never know.

Colette approached me and put her hand on my cheek. She touched her lips to my forehead. Images of my mom came up. But different. Kinder. Gentle. When I regained focus, we were in my library. She wandered around looking at each of the books like it was the first time she'd been here. **"Y-you can't be here,"** I muttered shyly, holding my dress down. **"Please, um..."**

"These books here, these ones are special, aren't they?" I pulled a book from the shelf, a title on the spine that didn't contain any recognizable characters whatsoever. I flipped it open, and I read, and I shaped, and

Velvet changed. **"I'm a diaper wearing baby girl, I love my diapers, I love them thick. I wet them whenever I can, and I love that, too."** This book was a failsafe. One of a few little tricks I hid deep in Velvet's subconscious. I'd written it during my time as the Librarian, as a last resort. But maybe I could use it to prove a point instead.

"What...?" I took a step toward her, to understand what she was talking about, but I frozen in place. The diaper between my thighs grew warm and wet, and butterflies filled my stomach. Wonderful butterflies. My cheeks caught fire and I looked at Colette with shame and humiliation. What the hell was happening...?

"I want to be like Keira," I read on. **"I want to mess my diapers, I want to love it like she does - innocently, blissfully."** I circled around Velvet slowly, reading from the book that directed her. **"I love Colette, I want to impress her. I want to be pretty for her."**

"I know that Colette can change me, rewrite me, make me anything she wants." I closed the book and looked down at the stinky girl in front of me. **"But Velvet, what I want is for you to make your own choices."**

I fell backwards onto my soft bottom. I looked up at Colette with dizzy, dreamy eyes. That book... **"That's not mine,"** I muttered. But whose else would it be? This was my library. All these thoughts were mine. All these dreams and wishes. I couldn't believe it, but there was no alternative. What do you do when confronted with two impossibilities?

"This book is your surrender, Velvet. This book is acceptance. It's euphoria." Obviously, I wasn't reading from the book anymore, although I could start again at any moment. **"You're in control of your own fate. So what will you do. Surrender to these feelings?"**

I shook my head. It was a hard truth to accept, that some part of me wanted all this. But after all this time, didn't that make sense? I'd been fighting for so long... what would it be like to stop fighting? I could give up. I could give in. Things could be easy...

But that book was only one of many. It made up only a few pages of millions. That book didn't define me. I pulled myself to my feet with the help of the table and walked over to Colette. She looked at me strangely

as I took the book from her and put it back on the shelf where it belonged.
"That's a part of me, but I'm more than one experience."

"There's things about yourself that you didn't know. You didn't know you were a girl, but you are. You didn't know that you could grow and accept yourself here, but you did."

I nodded my head gently and Colette patted me once on the top of the head.

"Come on," she told me. "Let's find your potty training book. We have a few new chapters to write, don't we?"

I followed Colette through my library until we found the set in Year 3 when I was taught how to potty train. She scribed a new book for me, about how to regain that control. And when I woke up in her arms, six or so hours later, I was feeling a lot better. But I sure didn't smell any better.

"You get to bed, alright," I said with exhaustion. It was draining to facilitate such lengthy sessions. **"We will pick this up again tomorrow."**

52.) Her Initiative

I ran up to Colette and tugged on her sleeve, shifting from my left foot to my right. When she looked down at me, I tucked my hands between my legs, against the front of my dress, and smiled shyly at her.

"I need'ta use the potty..." I muttered. I still hated asking her permission! But it was better than wetting myself, right? All the hard work we had put into my potty training was finally paying off and I wasn't about to throw it all away for an ounce of convenience.

"Oh, you do?" Velvet had come a long way; she was no longer working against the system, but rather within it, and she was finally seeing the value of what we did here. If Annie had been my former coworker's magnum opus, then Velvet was mine. I was so proud.

I puffed out my cheeks in annoyance and bounced on my toes. **"Come on, Colette! I still can't hold it very long..."** She rolled her eyes and led me to the corner of the room and into the little alcove. She scanned the badge on her wrist and the little light turned green. I swear, it felt like the slowest process in the whole world! But after she opened the door, I ran inside and slammed it shut behind me.

I had forgotten what it was like to use a toilet. Not pleasant. Not unpleasant. An obligation, really. In retrospect, I didn't mind diapers that much. They were convenient when I was coding hypnosis files! But Colette reminded me that if I ever wanted to leave, I needed to be toilet trained. After all, the program couldn't put diaper-wearing women back out into the world; it would look bad on paper.

I flushed the toilet and pulled up my training pants. They looked a lot like little kid pull-ups, with the elastic sides and the thin absorbent padding between the legs. But they lacked Disney characters - probably a licensing issue, I mused. At least they came in a few different colors. Of course, I always wore the red ones.

I washed my hands and flattened my dress before leaving the bathroom.

"Velvet, have you finished writing that routine I tasked you with?"

It wasn't for very long, but this past two weeks I'd been allowing her to work on a few select hypnosis routines on her own - she'd earned that level of trust so far. Now, to be fair, I didn't give her carte blanche to do her own thing, and I tasked her with very specific goals, but so far she'd been... impressive.

Given how smart Velvet Duke was, that shouldn't have surprised me.

"The one with--" Colette put her finger to her lips and I looked around the playroom. It was milk time for the newbies - the Firsts - and the atmosphere was a little chaotic. All the same, I shouldn't talk about hypno stuff in front of the patients. I followed Colette into her office and waited for her to shut the door before I continued.

"I finished the crying program this morning. It wasn't hard - anger is usually just a mask for some other emotion anyway. Shame, or fear,

or something like that. So I just kinda... switched the responses."

Rather than getting angry and violent, the listener would begin to cry. The angrier they were, the harder they would cry. Simple, but effective! If everyone in the world would cry instead of hitting something, we'd all be a lot better off. And it would keep the staff safe, too. This routine would definitely become a core part of the program. Probably in Phase One. Breaking down always was the hardest part; I knew that first hand.

"That's wonderful, Velvet, that's going to go a long way to helping with some of the more volatile personalities when they come into the program - you of all people know how strongly some people will hold onto the ideas of their former lives, right?"

Velvet had held on tighter than just about anybody else I'd had come in through here, and it had taken some of the questionable - if ultimately useful - techniques that Marlow had pioneered, to help her through her own reluctance.

"Uh huh! Don't worry, that won't ever happen again." I sat on the sofa and pulled the laptop closer to me. It was resting on a small wheeled desk that I could move around the office as needed. I wasn't allowed to do any work in the common area - the Round Table was very strict about that rule. It took Colette a lot of advocating for them to even let me work on the files at all! But they saw how helpful it had been with Annie. And automated hypnosis would save money. They had nothing to lose.

"I've been working on another file," I told Colette with excitement. **"The crying one got me thinking about it. Firsts are always fighters - except Keira, I guess. They hate diapers, they take them off in a huff, they pee on the floor after they have some milk, and the staff has to clean it up! So the easy solution: make them like diapers."**

Colette patted me on the top of the head - I loved when she did that! - but there was a disbelief behind her eyes.

"It's a little counter-intuitive to the Breaking Down process. They aren't supposed to like it."

"Right, right. But! I just have to build some dissonance. They still have all the shame and disgust, but they also get sexually aroused. Actually, the dichotomy might even help break them down faster."

"I don't think sexual arousal is going to be something we can use to gain control, Velvet," I answered, not in a condescending manner but more in a... mm... well, I wish I didn't have to explain this, kind of way. "We already operate under fierce scrutiny from our investors, and The Round Table is never going to allow something like that. And nor should they, it's plain unethical."

"I don't see how," I said sourly, crossing my arms over my dress and puffing out my cheeks. It was an action I seem to have picked up along the way... though I couldn't quite remember when. "It seems weird, but it would totally work. If someone is sure of something, it makes them strong. But if you mix together disgust and arousal, there's weakness there. Faster breaking down. Way less work for the staff. And they might even keep their diapers on! Less cleaning up. It's a win-win."

"And if we keep them in a constant state of arousal, they'll just wind up humping each other and the *last thing* we need is this place getting a reputation as a haven for slightly softer prison sex."

I couldn't believe I had to explain this to her, but Velvet had been here a while now - maybe too long for her to still have a grounded sense of reality?

"That isn't going to happen! I'll just add a little bit. Enough to cause an internal conflict, but not enough to act on it. You don't think I know what I'm doing?" I didn't hide my annoyance. Hiding emotions was bad. I learned to be open and honest, even with the bad feelings.

"Velvet, I think you know *exactly* what you're doing, and I think like most very clever people, you are letting your cleverness distract you from what's proper and right."

Her cheeks went almost as red as her color, and I raised my eyebrow with a sterner tone of voice.

"No. And that's final. Now please work on what I've prescribed for you to process, and keep your mind focused."

I took a hard look at Colette and sunk into the sofa. Final. I didn't like that. But technically she was my boss... what a strange way to think about it.

But at the same time, I was disappointed too. Not only in her, but in myself. I thought she would be proud of me...

"Sorry," I muttered and went back to my computer. She patted me again on the head, but it didn't feel the same.

53.) Her Chrysalis

I found Keira lying on the floor by the television with a wooden block in her mouth. She had taken so easily to becoming a First, I wondered why they didn't advance her to a Second right away. But Colette had a schedule to follow, I think. I sat down next to her and played with her hair while she watched the TV show in a non-language. She was so willing to let this place destroy every part of who she used to be. It was almost... reassuring.

"How are you, cutie pie? Need a change?" Keira notoriously hated diaper changes. She would rather sit in her own mess than get dragged away from whatever fun she was doing. But her diaper looked pretty clean from where I was sitting. I had grown so used to seeing adults in diapers, it was almost strange to see adults without them, like Colette and the rest of the staff.

"Iono." Keira replied with an almost dreamy sense of cadence to her voice, **"you can changes it but it isn't done its job yet so it would be a waste."**

Something about the way she talked harkened back to college, to "golly I'm so high, I'm so drunk," the way people leaned into experiences and wanted people to make sure they knew about them. But at the same time, she was exceedingly genuine, too; hard to fault.

"I wrote another program for you today," I said with a smile, watching the pointless television show for no reason other than it was somewhere for my eyes to go. **"I think you'll really like it, though I've never seen you angry..."** Maybe it wouldn't be very useful on Keira. Oh well, better safe than sorry, right?

"Babies don' got much to be angry about, Velvie, mos'ly the bad stuffs that grownups do."

There was never any lack of light behind her eyes, never any sign that she'd checked out - Keira just wanted to be here, this was right where she belonged.

Technically speaking, Keira wasn't my First anymore. I'd been bumped up to Third about a month ago, on my way through Looking In. I wasn't sure what I was supposed to be looking for, and I wasn't sure how long it would take. But I hoped sometime soon I could become a Fourth. Fourths had wristbands that let them into the bathroom all on their own; I wouldn't have to ask Colette anymore.

A sound rang overhead and I patted Keira on the forehead. **"Dinner time - let's go."** Another bottle for Keira. If there was one thing I was happy to be rid of, it was the milk.

"Velvie, you don' like this place berry much."

It was an unusually lucid bit of advice from Keira, the girl who wanted everybody to think she wasn't all there but she was clearly very extra just below the surface. I blinked in surprise.

"I don't like this place? Why do you think that?"

Admittedly, I didn't like this place to begin with. I didn't like anything for a very long time, and I didn't like living six months in a baby coma. But now? I'd been working with Colette for a long time on what I really wanted. I wanted to be a girl. I wanted to take care of people like Annie and Keira. I wanted everyone to stop hiding behind what they thought was right and do what made them happy. Not in a 'kill twelve people' way, but in a 'live the life you want to live' way. And... well, this facility allowed me and so many other people to do that. The outside world was so oppressive, so rigid, so

admonishing, but the Calibeen Project brushed all that away, like an archeologist digging through the dirt of the human experience.

Truth be told, I didn't only like this place... I idolized it.

Keira would provide no more details as to her insights, and she made very sure to get the milk into her mouth as soon as she was able to. Velvet was insightful, too, and in another life and another world, the two of them might have taken over the world with their shared brilliance and understanding. This was not that world, this was not that life. And that was okay. If Velvet had a program for Keira, she'd damn well take it - anything to advance herself further into the safe, comfortable, swaddled world, that was Calibeen. Keira was home. Maybe Velvet was, too, in her own way.

Burgers and fries for the Thirds and Fourths! There was no branding on the wrappers, but I was pretty sure it was McDonald's. Their fries have a certain uniqueness that you can't replicate. Seconds had mac and cheese and the Firsts were well into their milky haze.

Since I'd returned from Phase Zero, I hadn't made a lot of friends. Bree left a while ago and Lemon was already a Fourth. Soon, she'd go too. I wanted to be happy for her, but I was a little sad at the same time. Everyone who I knew when I arrived was leaving... and soon I would leave too. Wouldn't I?

I wondered idly about my boyfriend. Well, ex-boyfriend, maybe? We never officially broke up, but I don't think he understood what I did. Since my arrest, he hadn't even spoken to me. Now, I was better. I could be the kind of person he could love. Someone who wouldn't go around hurting people. But...

Well, before, I thought I was a boy. Now I'm a girl. Roger had a wife at one point, and a daughter. Maybe he was bisexual? I had never thought to ask... I never thought it mattered. Now it mattered.

But even if he was into girls, would he be into me? Would he accept all the changes I've been through? Or would he be unable to let go of his preconceived ideals? Suddenly, I didn't feel very well. I put down the second half of my burger and put my cheek in my hand. Maybe... maybe it

was best if I never tried to reconnect with him. Maybe... he was better off without me. The boy I was or the girl I am.

One of the nurses diapered me, like they always did at night. I'd been mostly potty trained in the daytime, but I still couldn't keep it together at night. It was a little annoying, but Colette assured me that most Thirds still had this problem. Lemon grew out of it - she was in panties full time. I wondered what it would be like to wear panties as a girl... I'd worn them before, as a boy. But this was different. Calibeen was a chrysalis. Keira really knew what she was talking about sometimes.

I drifted off to sleep thinking about boys and girls and gender. It was an antiquated concept - I always seemed to straddle the idea of 'normal'. Was this really so strange?

54.) Her Moral Dilemma

"What about surgery?" I asked Colette, a few days later. "I mean, I'm a girl now, right? So... shouldn't I have a vagina?"

"It's an economics issue," I explained, while signing the stack of papers that Velvet had collated for me, absently - she worked on some secretarial duties, too, which was a blessing!

"The state *does* pay for gender reaffirming surgeries for prisoners under their own criteria, so the funding is there to tap into, but we're not big enough to be classified entirely state run yet and without that, it would have to come from our private investors and that's a big burden on the budget."

Although.

"Unless you mean post-Calibeen? I suppose it would be trivial to furnish graduates with required paperwork to allow them to pursue their own options."

"So this place basically turns us into girls, but we don't have the option of surgery?" I was clearly annoyed.

"Your genitals don't make you a girl, Velvet."

"I know that! I'm just saying..." I muttered something under my breath and opened up another program on the laptop.

"Honestly, our girls could do a lot to show the world about the variance of sex versus gender versus expression."

I knew it was a copout, and she *did* have a point. But without reaching critical mass, we couldn't offer that. We would need a way of having our girls be sure this was what they wanted, too. A way they could prove themselves. It's not like we had transwomen here; we coercively invoked this change, and we needed to be the keepers of it. But without getting our costs down and our numbers up, this was less than moot anyway.

"Well, maybe there could be an upgrade system? You could collect points or something... behavior points? Token economy systems are highly significant in behavior modification."

"Either way, money is money."

"Then we need more patients. Inmates? Clients..." I pondered the word choice for only a second before moving on with my point. **"And that's what I'm for. I've already automated a lot of the intake process. We have a working headset and a ton of participants. In a few months, this place will run like an assembly line."**

A few months... would I even be here after that? The thought brought an obvious sadness to my eyes, and Colette was too smart not to notice.

"And in a few months you'll have graduated, and you won't need to give anymore thought space to this place, Velvet. And the work you've helped me with will help hundreds, thousands, of others - those like you, those less fortunate, we're going to revolutionize the penal system. If I didn't know the Round Table like I did, I'd even recommend you apply for work here once you've settled down in your new life, but I think we both know what they'd say."

"...right," I muttered, looking a little too hard at the computer screen. After a few minutes of getting no work done and thinking too much, I closed the laptop and took a deep breath.

"Colette. I'm having a problem."

"And what problem is that, Velvet?"

Our relationship had evolved in a lot of ways, from patient doctor, to adversarial, to caretaker, to... well, were we friends, now?

"I've been thinking about this... uh. Looking In thing. You know, what Thirds are supposed to do? And... and I like what I do here. I know I'm not actually on the staff, but I help, right? I'm revolutionizing hypnotherapy, which is just... amazing. But when I get out of here, I won't have my license anymore. How am I supposed to help people then? We always talk about what I can do for others, and this is it. So... so I want to keep working here. I want to be a hypnotherapist, or... a hypno technician or something."

"You and I know that The Round Table won't approve of you working here, Velvet. And I wish that they would, because I think seeing a rehabilitated face working within the system could be wonderful for assuaging the kind of scrutiny we fall under, but... well, it's like you said - you're not going to be licensed again."

"...well, that's what I'm having a problem about." I looked down at my feet and kicked at the carpet. I played with my fingers, pushing them together and turning them awkwardly. "If I wanted to, I... I could put in passwords that prevent anyone else from using the automated hypnosis. Only me. Like a package deal - if the Round Table wanted the system, they would have to take me too. But... that's selfish. And I don't want to be selfish. But I really want this job..."

"You know that by confiding this in me, you're showing a huge amount of trust - I could restrict you from any further access, prevent you from tampering with the systems, lock you out. But... you know that, don't you?"

"Yeah..." I forced a smile and looked back at the computer. It was closed. Sleeping. But I knew the program I had opened. A few lines of code... that's all I had to do. I shook my head and looked down at my feet.

"I wanted to talk to you about it first. About what I should do. There are no true variables, you know? If I give the Round Table this ultimatum, they'll take it. No question about it."

Colette nodded in agreement.

"And if I don't give it to them, they certainly won't let me continue the project once I'm gone. I mean, I'm the only one that can add new programs anyway because the system is built around my Empathetic Voice. But they will have enough old programs not to need more. Barring extreme circumstances..."

I was running myself in circles in my head. I took a deep breath to center myself.

"So the question is simple: should I do something ultimately unethical that I know will have no true consequence? What's the important part, the morality or the outcome?"

An ethics question from Velvet Duke?

I took a breath and put my fingers together in my lap. She was right - I may have been the builder, but she was the architect, she was the maker of this grand design, and with her work we could scale, we could grow beyond the wildest dreams of anyone who'd ever worked on this program.

"You're suggesting that the ends justify the means?"

"Do they?" I bit my lip and shrugged my shoulders. **"If I could stay, I could write more programs. I could help! And the only way they'll let me is if I force their hands. Gosh, they probably even want me to do it!"**

I let out sigh of exhaustion and slumped back into the couch. Morality was so much work...

"This whole place... it does bad things for good reasons. It hurts to help. So... why shouldn't I follow by example? Or am I looking for an excuse? I don't know what to do, Colette..."

"It's all politics, Velvet. They won't see your contributions as enough to absolve you, and they'll just tell themselves it was all my work and you simply helped. They may even press charges if you try to extort them."

I sighed, rubbing the bridge of my nose.

"I've been over it a thousand times. If I lock them out of my hypno tech, they lose too much. No growth. No bigger facility. No momentum. The cost-benefit analysis is in my favor. If they keep me on staff as a technician rather than a therapist, I don't need a license. None of the therapists would need licenses. There's no credible threat to them, other than mild discomfort. They have a lot to gain and nearly nothing to lose."

Colette looked at me with sad eyes, like she had made up her mind. Maybe she had. I took a deep breath to clear my head. I knew what I wanted. I just didn't know if I should take it...

"Tell me what to do. If you say no, then... then I won't. No tricks, no nothing. I'll give them the program. And I'll... work at a library or something." Oh, the tedium... "And if you say yes, I'll work hard to make this place the best it can be. With you."

I smiled up at her, genuine and only a little nervous.

"Whatever decision you make, that will be the right one. Even if I don't understand it. I trust you."

I'd done this. I'd sided with Velvet, a criminal, and turned against my old colleagues. I'd taken what she could offer, and grown my ambitions because of it. I'd taken Dr. Marlow's work, the parts I deemed acceptable, and made them the norm here. I'd advanced my goals with little thought for antiquated concepts of right and wrong, and I'd taught her a very core lesson at the heart of her mind: the end justifies the means.

"Okay."

Okay was the most affirmative form of yes I could muster. Down the rabbit hole we'd go, Velvet and I.

55.) Her Power Play

As expected, the automated hypnosis was flawless. I sat in on a few sessions with new intake to observe. After only one session, there were noticeable differences. Anxiety and fear in place of anger. Docile acceptance of new norms. And though I couldn't get the arousal program past Colette, the men quickly fell into the rhythm of the institution. Every new patient received the same standard hypnosis regimen, once a day for the first week. After that, they were helpless, hopeless baby girls. Firsts.

I developed a few other programs to help the Seconds take care of the Firsts. Interest in diaper changes, like it was a bonding exercise. Increased distress tolerance, which was needed after months in Phase One. A few programs to help 'sort out' their thoughts. Empathy and compassion. Love for their First, a foundation of positivity. Like children with dolls.

Thirds needed stimulation. They needed personality. We'd effectively broken down and sorted out the pieces these girls once were. Now we had to put them back together. Hobbies. Interests. Manners. Norms. Some were instilled through hypnosis and others through group play. Honestly, Thirds and Fourths should have been separate from the Firsts and Seconds - they were nothing but a distraction.

Fourths were tricky. I didn't understand at first what Building Up meant, and it wasn't until I was a Fourth myself that it made sense, after I asked Colette about morality and getting a job at the facility. I needed to learn how to do that on my own again: make decisions. Colette and I proposed Fourths get more choices, like what to wear, or what to eat for dinner. Maybe even visits outside the complex. There was hardly risk, after all. Not all of our wishes were granted, but we did get a rec room on the other

side of the checkpoint that Fourths could use their bracelets to get into! Baby steps, I suppose.

And then there was me. I stood outside the large wooden doors with butterflies in my stomach. I'd had meetings with the Round Table in the past, usually concerning the facility, but this was different. This was defining.

I took a step forward and pushed my way into the conference room, closing the door behind me. There were six people at the table; familiar faces. But some of the Round Table wasn't here. No surprise. These were important people, and this wasn't their only job.

"Hi," I said without an ounce of confidence. I cleared my throat and stood taller in my sundress. Not professional, but the best I could get in this place.

"Hello," I said again, better this time. **"I know the situation is unconventional, with me being an inmate. But you all know what amazing work I've done here. And I want to talk to you all about staying on after I... uh... graduate."**

"You'd like for a project with hopes to get full governmental penal status, to employ one of its most infamous inmates in helping to rehabilitate the other inmates, to be clear?" That was a man with a head wrinkled like an apple a few days past its prime - his horn-rimmed glasses hid eyes that were tired in more ways than one. He looked at the woman sitting next to him, a gaunt-faced middle-ager going on sixty by the look of it. She seemed equally unimpressed.

"Yes, I would," I said with a smile. I already knew they would hire me - the question was how difficult would they make it? **"I'm the leading hypnotherapist in the country."**

"You were the leading hypnotherapist in the country," I was corrected. I narrowed my eyes. Alright then...

"Use whatever tenses you want; I'm the best there is and you all know it. You've seen what I've done with this place. You have given me privileges you didn't give anyone else, powers I should never have

had. And in the end, it worked out in your favor. Now you have the means to automate a lot of the process here. You can grow without hiring dozens if not hundreds of hypnotherapists. I've given you potential and saved you millions of dollars. So why again shouldn't I be here?"

"Your mere presence here will create waves, Velvet Duke," The woman responded with a tone as dry as a summers day, then continued further. "You're going to create a crisis of credibility, a scandal that no matter how beneficial your work here might be, will not allow us to push this through a currently bipartisan political ecosystem. You're too radical, I'm afraid."

"I don't see what you mean. You reformed me, didn't you? And now you're offering a job, which shows how much you trust your process. And I won't be a licensed hypnotherapist; I'll be a technician for an automated system. Just a low-level nobody kind of job. What kind of damage can I do?" I watched a few faces change. Irritation to interest. Like they were considering it.

"You've currently worked only under your treating physician."

This came from a younger man from China who was either here as part of the medical oversight, as part of a foreign investors economic interest, or both. He continued.

"You have not shown any independent work."

"Colette was invaluable," I said honestly. "As was I. If you think I wasn't instrumental to the project, you're being naive." I was getting off topic. "You all know what I'm capable of and what good I brought this place. So let me stay. After I graduate, I'll work here. A low starting salary. And you can oversee me however you want. It's simply in your best interest."

"The very fact that you presume to think yourself so indispensable is... concerning. We do not believe that you are able to contribute anything that Dr. Clement is not able to accomplish."

That was a sharp sting, and delivered so... coldly, too. Clinically.

That's about as smoothly as I expected it to go... I took a deep breath and nodded my head. **"Well, when I graduate, I'm taking the automated hypnosis system with me."**

"Since your design was created here at the institution and during your incarceration, all your works belong to the Calibeen Project."

Technically true. But it didn't change the fact.

"That isn't what I mean," I told them. **"The programs I wrote are protected with a string of passcodes. If I leave, you don't have access to automated hypnosis. Unless, of course, you think Colette can re-create it on her own."**

But they didn't think that. Despite all their badmouthing, they knew this design was mine. They didn't know the specifics, but Colette - or any other hypnotherapist - could never replicate my Empathetic Voice technique. It would take years - if at all - to figure out how to do what I'd done.

"To be clear," the horn-rimmed-glasses-man leveled his tone low and seriously, **"you mean to extort the rehabilitation facility responsible for your freedom? Do you realize, perhaps, that we hold all the cards? That 'when you leave' may never come to pass?"**

"I do realize that, yes."

It didn't need saying that if I thought they were keeping me here just to use me that I would stop giving access to my project. And if they tried to lock me up somewhere or put me in Phase Zero again, a timer would trigger and shut the whole program down. I was prepared.

"I'm sorry that it has come to this. I deeply respect everything you do here, and I want to continue to better it. If I go back into the world, I won't have my license. I can't practice. I can't do what I'm good at. This is the only way I can keep helping... and this place has taught me how important that is. I want to help. And I'm willing to do whatever I need to to make that happen."

The members of The Round Table dismissed Velvet after that, but had her sit in the reception outside their meeting room for an hour, then two, and four, and finally - and once Velvet had likely wet herself in her solitude - they summoned her back in to see them.

"You'll be given 24 hours, Velvet Duke. Unfettered access to the equipment you need. And you will present a project to us that demonstrates an evolutionary step forward for this facility. Succeed, and you will have your employment. Fail, and you will hand over your codes, your research - everything. If you are so faithful in your designs and machinations, this oughtn't even be a gamble for you."

A test? Hm. I didn't see that coming. But what choice did I have? If I could prove my usefulness, they would want me around anyway. Sure, I had to get here through immoral terms, but I could still prove myself.

So I agreed.

56.) Her Curtain Call

Though I was offered my own space, my own desk, my own everything, I still worked best in Colette's office on her laptop. I had grown accustomed to it.

"They want something big, and I know just the thing!" Luckily for me, I'd been working on a few side-projects in the past couple months. Just some simple programs to help with situational outcomes. For example, Marci had a trauma history when she came in. Her mom used to dress her up like a little girl in frilly dresses and stuff. So when she saw this place for the first time, she went into a deep dissociative state. Her defense mechanism. A good therapist could handle it, but why should they need to? I could write a program for that! And I did, along with twenty-six other worst-case scenarios.

"You know that this is a trick, right? They're just giving you a chance to show them what you can do, but they'll turn you down either way and say that it was your own failing."

"So what? I'm not giving them the codes either way." Actually, I couldn't. It was a series of hyperbolic keywords from different anecdotes in my life, time-coded to phases of the moon and the second to last number on a digital clock. In other words, I was really the only person that could activate it. **"But why not show them what I can do?"**

"I suppose you're right." I didn't like this. I had spent my entire time here trying to temper Velvet Duke, and here was my ruling council goading her on. This was going to be a disaster. **"What are you planning, then?"**

"Well, I was thinking. We get a lot of people in here that have trauma, right? Trauma begets trauma, violence begets violence. So criminals usually have trauma. And that interferes with treatment." Colette nodded in agreement. **"So, what if they didn't have that trauma? I can't create new memories, but I can probably get rid of the bad ones."**

"You're planning to suppress their memories?"

Here I was, worried about the possibility of this going poorly.

"You know you can't do that, right? It's just not possible, if it were there would be a multi trillion dollar industry built on top of it."

"Impossibility is just a close-minded improbability." I turned the screen around to show Colette the model I'd been building. **"Look, repression is a totally normal thing the brain does in crisis. And stuff can trigger it, bringing it to the surface. That's what therapy does sometimes, right? So why not use hypnosis to do it in reverse? Controlled repression. I already have a script for it. I have to figure out how to target trauma, but... I think I could have a demo ready in 24 hours."**

"This is some Cold War Russian Sleeper Cell kind of deal, even if you *could* make it work, nobody is going to believe you."

I should have had more faith. But I was agitated, and more than that, I was disappointed - this was so far beyond ethics it made me feel sick.

Maybe I should have thought twice about Colette's skepticism, but I took it as a challenge. No one would believe me? Hmph!

"We'll just see about that."

Colette left her office in a huff and I went back to work. But it was a lot more work than I expected. Hypnosis isn't magic; I can't make someone forget something. I can just hide the memory deep down, so they can't see it anymore. I had to do a lot of visualization techniques in the recording, and I had to redo it six or seven times. By the end, it was twice as long as my usual files. That would make for a rough demonstration...

Sometime later, Colette came in with a plate of garlic bread and set it down on my table.

"You missed dinner."

"Oh. Thank you." I didn't know it was so late...

"You need to be rested for tomorrow - they gave you a day and they know your ambitions, they want you to come in there exhausted and unable to properly perform. They want you to see for yourself that you've failed, so they don't have to tell you no."

"Yeah... that's a good point." I took a bite of garlic bread and sunk into the couch. **"I think I'm done anyway. It's a rough draft, sort of, but I can definitely do a demonstration..."**

I should have been paying more attention to Colette. Her body language, her facial expressions. But I was in my own head.

"Could I try it on you?" I asked curiously. **"Don't worry - it won't erase anything important. And then I can prove to you that it works."**

"I don't think so, Velvet."

It sounded fair, on paper. I'd been inside her head; how else could we level the playing field? But with ambition like hers, masterful and creative and yet... potentially so very destructive, if left unchecked? No, I didn't think so.

"Besides, you could take one of my happy memories."

Which meant...

"And that is absolutely not okay, even as a punishment."

I blinked in surprise. A happy memory? **"No... it's just a demo, Colette. I have it programmed to erase what you had for breakfast yesterday. Unless you had a really good omelette or something?"** I giggled, but she didn't. She looked away in... irritation, maybe? My tone soured. **"What's your problem?"**

"I think this is a bad thing for people to have access to, Velvet. I think it goes too far. You know what one more step from this is? Hey, you're a blank slate now, have fun in the world with no sense of self or who you are."

"Isn't that basically what you did to me anyway, in Phase Zero?" I snapped at her. I watched the shock turn to anger on her face.

"I kept you safe in that place! I watched over you and I made sure your intelligence was intact!"

"This whole program basically kills who we are anyway, so don't act like this is such a big deal. And if they were blank slates at the start, they would be easier to fix."

"We rehabilitate! We create, we don't take away who you were, we give you a new sense of self and let you decide!"

Why was I so angry? Had she hit a nerve? Yeah. She did. Because maybe what we did was abhorrent and I just didn't want to see it.

"Decide? When did I get to decide? You dressed me up and put me in diapers and had me poop myself and then you put me in mindless baby state and now I can't even get the job I want unless I extort my bosses!" I balled my hands at my side and felt tears in my eyes. Anger to crying. I didn't even have the hypnosis - that was just normal stuff.

"You don't get it, Colette. You aren't one of us. You aren't me. Maybe forgetting is easier. Maybe just starting empty is better. No memories of killing people or raping people or drugging people..." I shook my head and tears slid down my cheeks.

"I'm making this program. Because they deserve it. If we really are giving them a second chance, they deserve this choice..."

"If they hire you based on this, Velvet, they get you. But they don't get me. I'm not going to be a part of this. It's a step too fucking far, and you know it is!"

I looked up at Colette with tears in my eyes, but she avoided my gaze. I hadn't felt like this in so long... at odds with her. She was my guiding force. She told me what was right and wrong. But she didn't understand this. She didn't know what it was like to carry around the burden of such heavy mistakes. She wasn't in prison or rehabilitation or whatever this was. She was a normal woman, with normal memories, with normal mistakes.

She couldn't understand. There was nothing I could say to help her. And there was nothing she could say to me that could stop me.

"I'm sorry," I told her, and went back to working on the memory-erasing program.

"I'm sorry too," I said back, and left my office.

The next day, I was formally offered the job. There was a single condition: that if I ever violate my agreement with the Calibeen Project, they had the right to discipline me with extreme measures. The implication was Phase Zero again. But I had no intention of breaking my allegiance. This place helped people like me with experiences like mine. As long as they fixed the broken people in the world, I would help them.

But that same day, Colette resigned without notice. She just... left. I didn't even get to say goodbye.

The transition from Fourth to Hypno Tech was... nominal. I had a state ID now and I could leave the facility whenever I wanted. But the outside world was a lot less interesting than I remembered. I decided not to seek out Roger, or my family, or anyone I knew before. A new life as Velvet Duke. That's what I wanted.

I spent a lot of time at work. No, I spent all my time at work. I usually slept at work. I created program after program, solution after solution. That was my job after all. But it was also my responsibility. This place often had terrible means, and I had to ensure the ends were justified.

But every now and then, Colette would cross my mind. My best friend. Maybe Velvet Duke's only friend. And every time I thought about her I had to wonder... did I do the right thing?

I hope so.

57.) Her Life Worth Living

Six Years Later

Maybe I had the wrong house. I had done so much research, but it could still be the wrong house. Maybe she moved and no one notified the post office. Maybe this was the wrong Dr. Clement.

Or, what if it was the right house? What if she took one look at me and slammed the door in my face? What if she called the police on me or something? But that was foolish - I hadn't done anything wrong. At least... not in the past few months. Maybe not since I made that deal to get out of my contract. No, I'd been trying so hard to do everything right.

Seeing her... this was part of that. I had to.

When the door opened, I thought it would be her. But it wasn't. It was a man. Smaller than Roger. Normal brown eyes. I always noticed people's eyes these days...

"Hi... um. I might have the wrong house?" As I said this, I read the number on the mailbox for the tenth time. It was the right house. **"I was looking for Colette Clement...?"**

"Colette, there's someone here to see you." The man called out over his shoulder, and then peered around to the left and right of the front door. The

way he looked at Velvet, there was something of a recognition in his eyes. His eyes that looked right into hers, like the blue meant something to him.

"Who is—?"

I paused, drying the dish in my hand as I walked into view and saw Velvet standing there. Velvet Duke. I rubbed my very pregnant belly and pursed my lips.

"Hello Velvet."

Oh.

Oh, okay. She... uh. She had clearly gotten on with her life. I don't know why that shocked me. It shouldn't have. I was happy for her! I really was. But at the same time, I was... jealous that her world went on without me. I swallowed my anxiety and forced a telltale Velvet smile.

"Long time... I, uh. I'm glad I found you. I... I've been looking for a few months, since July. But I..."

Maybe this was a bad idea...

"Who is this? A former patient?"

I shook my head and put my hand on my husband's arm, smiling a strained smile.

"Darling would you go make some tea? Velvet and I will be in the conservatory."

It was an uneasy silence between the two of us as we walked through the hallway, down the center of my house to the conservatory off the back of it. I had flowers in there, two comfortable chairs, and an array of bookcases filled with psychology volumes. Not that I had practiced in many years.

"Please, sit." I grimaced as I did the same. Just the two of us. What did she want, though?

I sat. Nice house. Nice life. I noticed the ring on her finger and the ring on that man's finger too. Married. And a kid on the way. Damn, why did that hurt so much...

"Seeing you in the real world is so weird," I laughed nervously. **"Like... a dream or something."** Like many dreams I'd had.

"What do you need, Velvet?" she asked me, but not with annoyance. More curiosity. Might as well get right to the point...

"I just wanted to say... I'm sorry. I... I should have listened to you. I thought I was helping. I thought I was saving people. I thought new was always better. A new self, a new life. But then I met this girl. Audrey. And she... she was an unusual case." Understatement of the decade.

"I wanted to wipe away all those people and start new, because it's so much easier to start over. But Audrey helped me see that broken and damaged and dangerous people have value. Maybe I didn't see value in them because I don't see any value in myself. Or, I didn't. I do now." I nodded, almost like I was trying to convince myself.

"I always thought my hypnosis was the best part of me. That without it, I wasn't worth anything. But I was wrong. In all my years at Mt. Calibeen, I... I don't know if I've ever really helped anyone. But Audrey and her girlfriend... I help them all the time. Not with hypnosis, but just by being there and loving them and caring. Like... like you did with me."

Ah, and here come the waterworks...

I watched her, and I listened to her, and I didn't frown or smile. How many people had been hurt due to her stubbornness? How many patients lives were adversely impacted because of her? The thing was.. I couldn't be mad at Velvet, and I figured that out years ago. So when she cried, I passed her a tissue box.

"I was the one who left, Velvet. I left you to your own devices, confused and lost, and wanting to make a difference. I was the one who happily used Marlow's techniques, his chemicals, and preached

to you about the ends and the means. I can't fault you for what happened. I'm just glad you got out of there."

"I'm glad too," I laughed, dabbing my eyes with the tissue. I had worked very hard on my makeup today - I wanted to look my best for Colette. "I guess we both didn't really know what we were getting ourselves into, huh? But I'm glad I met you. I'm glad I'm me."

"I'm happy to have met you, too, Velvet."

I had a lot of anger over the years, a lot of guilt, a lot of regret. But this moment right now, two functioning adults in the real world? I'd at least helped one person.

"Do you want to stay for dinner? I'm eating for two these days, I'm sure you noticed." I rubbed my tummy. "Me and Lil' Velvet here."

"You always were terrible at names," I laughed. But I was flattered. I thought maybe she had forgotten all about me, or that I was just another patient. I never would have known I was so special to her, almost as special as she was to me.

"I can't stay though," I lamented. "The girls are expecting me home soon. It took an hour just to work up the courage to knock on your door..." I smiled shyly. "But... maybe I could come back later this week? I live only a few hours away."

"That sounds nice. How about you bring them with you? Audrey and her girlfriend. I could make mac and cheese, we could catch up?" I smiled. She smiled too. It was a nice moment, a gentle reminder of how close we used to be.

"You're not in any trouble are you?"

"Nope. For once, I think everything is as it should be. No planning, no scheming, no elaborate hypno contrivance. Honestly, life is almost too dull these days." Colette rolled her eyes and patted me on the top of the head. The nostalgia nearly knocked me right off my feet.

"I'll... um. I'll bring the girls. And maybe Roger if he's not busy."

"Roger, huh?" I vaguely remembered that name; the man Velvet used to love.

I smiled shyly and rubbed the back of my head. **"Yeah, it's a long story."**

"You'll have to tell it to me sometime."

At the door, we said goodbyes. Properly, this time. And we hugged. And I cried again, and I think even Colette cried a little. At the very least, she was teary eyed.

On my way out of her house, I couldn't help but reflect on all the ways she had changed. All the ways I had changed. All my life, I'd been running from it. I clung to a damaged, angry persona that disgusted me. Then, I became someone else, someone so radically opposite that I couldn't see an ounce of myself within me. I turned grown men into baby girls like darkness to light at the flick of a switch.

All my life I'd been too proud or too scared to change. If it wasn't one way, it was the other. But change is gradual. It's little things. It's growing and failing and learning. It's freeing. It's... fun.

For the first time, I wasn't scared or proud. If anything, I was eager. Tomorrow I'd be another Velvet, just as old and just as new, and I couldn't wait to get to know her.

[End.]

Names & Colors

Velvet "Alexander" Duke

Dr. Colette Clement

Dr. Marlow

Annie

Lemon

Kinata

Bree

Charity

Estar

Ayla

Librarian

Keira

Other