

Athena

The office of Dr. Gideon Anguis wasn't particularly like any medical facility Lily had ever been in. The posh waiting room had reeked of decadence the full ten seconds that Lily had been in it, and not a single person wore scrubs. Even now, as Dr. Anguis sat behind his big oak desk, staring at her through Coke-bottle glasses, his thinning gray hair slicked back, she wouldn't have pegged this place as a Doctor's office. There were no signs of needles or tongue depressors, or even a scale.

It might have been a psychiatrist's office or something (Mrs. Darling had said he was an OBGYN, hadn't she?) but there weren't any of the expected books that you get to see on T.V. and movies. There wasn't even a proper bookshelf in the room, just a coffee table with *The Divine Comedy*, *The Art of the Deal*, and *Eat, Pray Love*, stacked on top of each other. Beyond his Harvard Medical Degree posted proudly on the wall behind him, there wasn't a single indicator that Dr. Anguis was a doctor of, well, anything. He looked more like a some kind of used car salesman with those snakeskin boots of his.

Next to her, Mrs. Darling sat in the expensive leather-backed chair, her long blonde hair done up in a bun and her skin only beginning to show the slightest wrinkles. But there was a certain tiredness, a world weariness, in her eyes. Her hands were folded in her lap. She was a slightly older woman, but not THAT old. Probably too old to have a baby, though. That's what brought Lily here.

"So, Lily, I'm sure you have a lot of questions?"

"So you want me to have your baby?" Lily was greeted with a smug staccato hum from the doctor, and a polite but thin smile from the woman who'd lured her into this office. Lily waited for a moment, but they didn't add anything further. "I'm sorry?"

The other woman shook her head slowly and smiled, an uncomfortable chuckle bubbling up from her throat and coming up short against pursed lips. "I don't think I was clear. I don't want you to carry my baby. I want you to be my surrogate."

"I feel like we're saying the same thing...?" Through her consternation, Lily couldn't help but add that last questioning lilt.

Doctor Anguis adjusted his glasses and leaned forward. "Not quite. Not anymore. The meaning of the term has been inverted within the medical community. There's a pamphlet," he added, then looked to Mrs. Darling. "Didn't you give her the pamphlet?" Back to Lily, "You read the pamphlet, didn't you?"

Lily had, in fact, been given a pamphlet. But it was full of so much medical mumbo-jumbo that it looked like it was copied and pasted directly out of a medical journal. There had been

absolutely no pictures or diagrams, and the most that Lily could make out of it was that it had some kind of auxiliary health benefit for babies with disabilities or something...though how you'd know whether a baby was disabled before it was born (and be able to do anything about it) was beyond her.

Had Lily's parents had their way, she would have been in a position to understand all of it. Had Lily's parents had their way, she'd be miserable, but not in a position to where carrying a stranger's baby inside of her made good financial sense.

The younger woman frowned and tried to remember the term Dr. Anguis had used from the last math course she'd bothered to take. "Inverted. Opposite? You don't want me to carry your baby?"

"You'd be carried," Mrs. Darling replied. Lily looked across to the doctor and back to the older woman, then around the room to look for the hidden camera for the inevitable prank reveal. That couldn't be possible.

"Carried?" Lily asked. "As in me," she pointed to herself, "inside you?" She indicated Mrs. Darling.

The other two nodded quietly. "Um..I don't know if you two know this," Lily said. "I'm kind of tiny, but I'm nowhere near baby size." She felt ridiculous just saying it loud. "I'm not a doctor, but I'm not going to fit in..." she pointed at Mrs. Darling's lap, "there!"

Dr. Anguis leaned forward. "It's not a true pregnancy," he said, his tone very professorial, "however, it is a remarkable simulation of the symbiotic relationship between mother and unborn child."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously."

"Who would want that?"

"People who can't otherwise have biological children." As the doctor said this, Mrs. Darling looked away and did her best to hide her blush.

The three of them just sat there, letting the silence stretch out. If this was a prank, both of her pranksters were keeping a straight face. Finally, it was Lily's will that broke and her curiosity that won out. "How would I even get..." she pointed to Mrs. Darling's lap again.

"Dr. Anguis?"

The good doctor took his cue. “Oh, you won’t be going IN that way. Not directly. There’s a surgical procedure involved. You would be anesthetized and put in a synthetic womb that would be surgically grafted onto Mrs. Darling. It was actually pioneered in China as a way to undo certain congenital birth defects, give a little extra time in the oven so to speak.” China? Was that why they thought she’d go along with this? Lily wasn’t Chinese, she was Vietnamese, and third generation American. “You’d basically be on life support for twelve weeks.”

TWELVE WEEKS! Every bit of sense that was left to Lily screamed out to her to run for her life from the room. These were crazy people who wanted to do human-centipede level of crazy to her, and in their fucked up Frankenstein schematic, she was the middle piece. “Why in the hell would you want to do that?”

“Mrs. Darling?”

Her would-be benefactor pivoted in her chair and looked Lily in the eye. “Lily, I can’t have children. Even if you were to be my surrogate in the old-fashioned way, you’d have nothing to carry. I’m barren.” She paused for a moment to let that sink in. “But I need this, Lily. I’ve always wanted to be a mother. And when you responded to the ad and I got a look at you, I just knew you’d be perfect for me.”

“You could just adopt...”

“Adoption isn’t the same. I wouldn’t feel like a mother. It’s not the same unless you carry the child yourself.”

“I’m not a kid.” Lily sounded more defensive than she felt. Or maybe she didn’t.

Dr. Anguis adjusted his glasses again. A nervous habit. “That’s one of the benefits, actually, for both of you.”

“I have my needs,” Mrs. Darling explained. “And I have the money to make them a reality. And as much as I want to- need to- be a mother, I know I’d be a horrible one. I’d be great with a baby, but anything older than pre-school and I’d lose interest.”

“So buy a little dog.”

“An animal can’t satisfy that need in me.” But Lily could. Darling didn’t need to say it for implication to be there. “Let me carry you. Let me nurture you. If only just for a little while. And then we can go our separate ways. It will be like I adopted you and we skipped right past college graduation.”

So she knew why this crazy, and apparently very, very rich woman and her quack doctor wanted to do it. “What’s in it for me?”

“There are some interesting medical benefits,” the older man offered. “For example, your blood type would change. Life expectancy has been known to increase. Heightened immune system. There are some documented cases of changes in eye color due to post re-birth.”

Mrs. Darling must have seen the shudder snake up Lily’s spine. “Legally, you’d be a different person. Even more so than if I’d just adopted you. That means all of your debt would just disappear.” Damn it. That was tempting. Art history degrees didn’t pay for themselves.

“But I wouldn’t really be a baby, right?” Lily asked. “Like, this fake pregnancy-”

The doctor sat up a little straighter. “It’s abbreviated, but it’s very real, miss.”

“This abbreviated pregnancy. It’s not going to have any long term side effects, is it? I’m still going to be me?”

A warm, comforting, (dared Lily think it?), motherly hand was on her shoulder. “Of course you’d still be you. You’d just be you with some benefits. And no debt.”

“No brain damage?”

“It wouldn’t be legal if there were.”

“I’m not going to turn into a baby or anything right? I’m not going to have to, like, go through potty training again or anything afterwards, am I?”

The other two laughed as if what Lily had said was somehow ridiculous and precious at the same time. “Absolutely not,” Dr. Anguis replied. “Absolutely not.” It was silly, but Lily needed to hear that.

She looked from one to the other, then back again. “And it’s temporary?”

“Pregnancy, by its very nature, is a temporary state.”

“Just twelve weeks?”

Mrs. Darling smiled. She was already glowing. “Twelve. Wonderful. Weeks. It will be quite a bonding experience. Spiritual, even.”

As Lily had said to herself when she first declared her major: “Fuck it. I’m in.”

Lily could have sworn she saw tears in the rich stranger’s eyes. They wouldn’t be strangers for

much longer, though. Very soon, they'd be closer and more intimate than Lily had ever consciously decided to be with someone.

Dr. Anguis slid a pack of papers across his desk. "I've already taken the liberty to highlight the areas you'll need to sign, and initial where appropriate."

So she did.

Most people wouldn't think that the latest miracle in modern medical technology would be located in Florida. Lily was among those people. With the exception of perhaps Miami, there was very little of allure of cultural significance in that penis-shaped backwater of a state. It was a land of tourist traps, swamps, and retirement centers; all the worst parts of California, Louisiana, and Arizona rolled up into one. As she was shown around the Ponce de Leon Rebirthing Institute, Lily couldn't help but appreciate- in a dadaist sort of way- how the facility had elements of all three.

Located in the middle of a swamp, murky and overgrown save for the roughly paved roads, the Institute was in about as much of a backwater location as one could find. There weren't even road signs to indicate where they were headed or where they'd been. Only Mrs. Darling's personal chauffeur had seemed to know the way, and Lily hadn't been able to see any signs of a mailing address. She suspected the place would be impossible to find even with a GPS.

The only way this place could have been more hidden, out of the way, or closed off was if the perimeter had been surrounded by an electric fence. But such a fence would have brought more attention to it, letting a passerby or lost traveler know that SOMETHING was worth protecting. "It's remote," Mrs. Darling explained, "because the ladies here want privacy, not because we have anything to hide."

As it was, to all outward appearances, the Ponce de Leon Rebirthing Institute seemed like a well maintained, if ordinary, building out in the middle of nowhere. Its clean, one-story, white facade and the large sign outside the building made it seem something like a medical facility- which Lily supposed it was. But a medical facility for what? With a name like "Rebirthing Institute" it very well could have been anything from one of those tacky spas that promised to shrink away a person's fat or a cult front promising a "new you" if only you'd undergo the latest treatment and pay just a little bit more money.

Now that she was inside the place, Lily was developing the opinion that she was closer to the mark than she would have guessed. Unlike Dr. Anguis's office, the interior actually resembled a medical facility. A pristine marble floor in the lobby gave way to off-lime green linoleum tiles once they were past a pair of double doors.

Nurse's stations were dotted with medical personnel in sunshine yellow scrubs, all busily typing away, looking at charts, or readying medications. All of them, however, took the time to greet, engage with, or otherwise acknowledge her patron's presence as they went through the winding corridors.

"Hello, Mrs. Darling, I hope you're well today."

"Good morning Mrs. Darling. Good to see you back."

"Mrs. Darling! So wonderful to see you! Will you be staying for lunch?"

None of them addressed Lily directly. It was always Mrs. Darling this, and Mrs. Darling that. Not that Lily particularly wanted to talk to any of the medical staff, but in a strange way she felt invisible. Less than. Like an accessory.

The majority of the doors they went by were closed; the occupants' name and chart left hanging in a drop box next to the frame. "Most of the Expectants prefer to lounge outside in the courtyard," Mrs. Darling explained. The few rooms with open doors were still obscured by medical curtains, with only the faintest murmurs- either television or a private lamaze session- escaping into the hallway.

"Courtyard?" Lily asked.

A wry, knowing smile came across Mrs. Darling's lips. "Of course, dear. You didn't think the two of us would be cooped up in some stuffy old hospital for three months did you?" Their pace quickened. The doors were moving by them faster and faster. "Yes, we sleep in those rooms, but we're going to be in the lap of luxury." Lily was starting to have trouble keeping up. Mrs. Darling's longer legs were widening the gap between them with every step.

Left.

Right.

Left.

Left.

Hallway.

Corridor.

Passage.

Tunnel.

Hallway.

Lily was only vaguely aware that she'd started to hold the older woman's hand in an effort to keep pace.

"Oops! Not in there." They found themselves in front of a set of double doors, kept shut by an electronic lock. Not unusual, considering this was effectively a hospital, but the pastel hues of pinks and blues on the doors clashed with the drab beige of the rest of the interior. "Sorry, Lily dear. Wrong turn."

As she was led away, Lily craned her neck back over her shoulder to read the sign that hung over the door. It read: "Implantation and Delivery". A shiver ran its finger down her spine. She wasn't supposed to go through those doors. Not yet. But if she wanted the money, if she wanted the debt forgiveness, if she wanted in on this scheme, she would.

She would.

Pale fluorescent light gave way to bright sunshine and the smell of a freshly manicured lawn. Lily blinked, first as a natural reaction to the sunlight, then as a psychological reaction to what it held.

The "courtyard," as Mrs. Darling had called it, appeared to be at least the size of a football field, a lavish lawn dotted with lawn chairs and servants carrying around hors d'oeuvres and champagne flutes. Lily hadn't seen this place from the outside, but the four surrounding walls indicated that they were still very much inside the Institute's perimeter. By some miracle of architecture, the space appeared to be bigger on the inside than it was on the outside. From some unseen speaker, bland classical piano piped in, giving the place a sense of drowsy peace.

The pleasant songs of chirping birds mingled with the piano and the gentle clink of glasses, though Lily saw no birds. Probably just another soundtrack, then.

None of that is what made Lily blink in disbelief, however. A few golf carts and this place would have been right at home in a typical country club. Interesting, given the circumstances, but not surreal. What really threw Lily off was the occupants.

Lounging in lawn chairs like beached whales, wrapped in loose fitting moo-moos, bathrobes, and hospital gowns, were the so-called "expectants" that the Institute hosted. The guests. The clients. The high rollers.

From a distance, Lily might have thought they were just ordinary pregnant women, ready to pop. But as Mrs. Darling led her closer, Lily knew the difference. Their bellies were all unnaturally distended, bulging like tumors. These women weren't pregnant. They simply had something...someone...inside them.

From her reclining lawn chair, one such woman wearing a pink cotton bathrobe waved them over. "Melissa! Darling! Over here!" Following Mrs. Darling's lead, Lily trotted over to a woman lounging on the lawn.

Up close, the woman seemed even more alien to Lily. The proportions were all wrong. The limbs were too skinny, the hair was too blonde, and the skin around her face somehow seemed unusually taut. Having another human being stuffed inside her was far from the only surgery that she'd had done.

Even though the woman's voice was high and nasally, Lily couldn't help but compare her to a certain slug-like alien that hated Jedi. "Melissa, so good to see you back!"

"Lovely to be here, Jolene!" The two women exchanged faux cheek kisses.

The slug, "Jolene," moved her gaze to Lily and gave a lazy smile. "And who do we have here?" She gestured to Lily before taking a sip of orange juice from a glass. It might have been the plastic surgery, but the lady's smile didn't quite reach her eyes.

Lily extended her hand. "Hi, I'm—"

"She's my surrogate." Mrs. Darling interrupted.

"Oh really?" Jolene's bulbous belly moved out of time with her as she hoisted herself up to her feet. Lily stood stock still as the middle aged slug looked her up and down, measuring her, judging her like a slab of filet mignon. "You did very well, Melissa," she said, talking over Lily's shoulder. Then she addressed Lily directly. "Would you like to feel, dear? See what it's like from the outside?"

She parted her robe as if she were a model on a game show. Compared to her, the oversized spare tire on her belly might have been the size of a brand new car, but Lily wanted to do anything but "Oooh " or "Ahhh" at it. Out there in the Central Florida sunlight, Lily could see this artificial womb for what it was: a patchwork gut, a Frankenstein's quilt of not-quite-matching and off color flesh tones, all stitched together. "I don't know about the inside," Jolene said, "but the outside is all composite leftovers from liposuction, tummy tucks, and reconstructive surgery."

"It's not quite as glamorous as an au naturale pregnancy," Mrs. Darling explained. "But when all is said and done; no stretch marks." Mouth agape, Lily could only stare. "Go on, have a feel."

Lily's hand was on the woman's belly, guided there by Mrs. Darling, before she had a chance to refuse. Her palm pressed down on human flesh with all the give and consistency of a waterbed. "Whoah!"

"What? Did she kick?"

"No it's just-" Lily felt a sudden pressure from the other side of the bloated belly. Something was pressing back. "SHE KICKED!" Lily's hand couldn't get away fast enough.

The "expectant" mother just smiled. "Won't be long now," she caressed her stomach as one might a lover, "not long at all. Then again, she does get a little wiggly after morning mimosas. So it could just be that."

"Jolene!"

Mrs. Darling's friend just smiled. "What? It's not as if she's going to develop anymore than she is, and Dr. Anguis has us on so many different bits of vitamins, snake oil, and experimental whosa-whatsits, that a little bit of booze won't hurt anything." It made a certain kind of sense to Lily. It's not as if there was a REAL baby in there. "And with all she's doing for me, the least I can do is make her stay a little more fun while it lasts."

"So," Lily asked. "If you drink, she drinks? Are you really um...THAT connected?"

Jolene sat back down with a harumph. "Absolutely. This is my first and last pregnancy, but it really nails all the details. You wouldn't believe how often I have to pee. Makes me think that I should be the one in dia-"

"Jolene," Mrs. Darling interrupted. "I've never asked, but I was wondering. Who, exactly, IS your surrogate?"

Lily hadn't thought of that. "Who's..." she hesitated. It might have been some trick of the light, a cloud passing in front of the sun, but she thought she saw more shifting beneath the pastel pink bathrobe. "...In there?"

The pregnant woman took another sip of mimosa. "Tiffany."

Mrs. Darling gasped in surprise. "Your step daughter?"

That same smile returned to Jolene's face. "When I first met her, there was definitely a rift between us. I wasn't her real mom. You know how it goes." She took another sip. "Now? We're closer than ever. I get to be her Mommy for real this time."

“How long have you known your step daughter?”

Jolene put a finger to her lips. “Hmm...by the time she’s reborn it’ll be close to a year.”

“Let’s go meet some of the other mothers-to-be, Lily.” Lily wasn’t sure whether Mrs. Darling was leading her away or following her. Just then, Lily didn’t much care.

But, no matter which guest they talked to, it was always the same: Lily was all but invisible until they found out she was going to be Mrs. Darling’s Surrogate. The conversation inevitably turned to who exactly was being re-born, and no matter what, Lily didn’t like the answer.

“It’s my boyfriend. We’re both very excited about our new lives.”

“It’s my wife. She was misgendered at birth. Not this time, though.”

“I’m not sure. I took a random volunteer. I’m not even finding out the sex until the birth. I want it to be a surprise!”

And despite what Dr. Anguis had said, none of it seemed to be for medical reasons, save perhaps for insanity. All of these women just wanted to have a baby, and the only babies they could find happened to be adults.

When they were finally far enough away from the cult-like gaze of pseudo-pregnant women, Lily began to voice her concerns. “Mrs. Darling, I’m beginning to worry...”

“Oh, there’s nothing to worry about.” Mrs. Darling grabbed Lily’s hand, stroking it reassuringly. “Those women are all crazy. It must be the hormones. It won’t be like that for us, though. I promise.”

“Yeah, I don’t know about-”

“What I do know about is the documents you signed.” Mrs. Darling glared at Lily. “I’ve been looking for someone like you for so long. Let’s not get wrapped up in the particulars and get a case of cold feet. It’s much too late for that.”

“I’m scared...”

“Here,” Mrs. Darling said, taking a glass filled with orange liquid off of a passing tray. “Have a mimosa”.

It was late that night when Lily snuck out of the “guest suite,” Mrs. Darling snoring softly in the bed beside her. Lily couldn’t sleep, and it wasn’t just the low rumbling of laundry machines next

door. The “guest suite” was well decorated and accommodating enough, but its placement deep in the bowels of the Institute gave off the impression that it was all but an afterthought. That told Lily that even though “surrogates” and their patrons were allowed here, they weren’t exactly welcome, and the people being implanted into artificial wombs didn’t often stay the night, at least not while on the outside of someone else.

There was something wrong with this place, and neither the mimosas nor the mild sedatives she was offered could stop her racing heart. Mrs. Darling, on the other hand, had been drinking champagne like it was water and had popped a handful of Ambien as if the drugs were candy.

Lily had been given the “official” grand tour of the Institute after her venture into the courtyard, and she had been assured that everything was temporary. That the rich, bougie women of this place wouldn’t even have stretch marks after carrying around their hundred-plus pound babies. That everything was going to be fine.

Lily would spend approximately three months in the biological equivalent of a sensory deprivation tank, and then her debts would be wiped clean and she could start anew. Just like that.

Tomorrow, she’d be implanted. According to the itinerary Mrs. Darling had presented to her at dinner, she’d walk past the blue and pink doors just after breakfast, hop into Mrs. Darling, and then be fed pseudo-intrauterine mimosas by lunch. She’d wait it out for three months, likely sleeping most of the time, give Mrs. Darling a little thrill whenever she stretched a little bit, and then be cut out, cleaned up and sent on her merry way.

It was easy. Simple. So easy and so simple, that Lily simply couldn’t wrap her brain around it. Something was very, very wrong about this place. It wasn’t just that most of the “mothers” seemed drunk off their asses, or that the grass was too well maintained, or that the place was too clean, or that the staff was WAY too cheery to be working in a circus sideshow factory such as this.

This was Florida, Land of Amusement Parks: fake exteriors, booze-induced happiness, and overpriced hotels were the law of the land. How else could anybody live in this penis-shaped swamp? That’s not what bothered her. What bothered Lily was the sheer number of people using this place. In the courtyard alone, she had counted close to thirty oversized, unnaturally pregnant women. There had to have been at least a half a dozen more in their rooms watching television, or practicing their breathing.

As she and Mrs. Darling had been escorted to their guest room, another stranger was being wheeled out, her breathing rapid, her face grimacing, but her eyes sparkling with ecstasy. “Looks like her water broke.” Mrs. Darling told Lily. “She’s lucky. Most of us have to be surgically induced as well as implanted.”

Thirty women carrying full grown adults inside of them, pretending to be pregnant; for some reason, Lily could believe that. But that also meant that there were thirty full grown men or women who were convinced to take the plunge on the inside. And even though she would be joining those same ranks tomorrow, the thought of so many people being at least as desperate, or pressured, or crazy as her didn't sit well.

Numbers didn't lie. One was a publicity stunt. Two was an experiment. Three was a prank. Four was a con game. Thirty? Thirty was a cult.

There had been more than thirty. All along the halls of the Ponce de Leon Rebirthing Institute were pictures. Between any two doors in this medical labyrinth were framed pictures; photographs of success stories. Pictures of rich middle aged women with round tumors hanging over their waistlines, smiling and surrounded by their rich middle aged friends. Pictures of women considered too old to conceive holding up and posing with pink XXL t-shirts; the words "IT'S A GIRL!" clearly sewn into them.

This place had seen more than thirty women in its time. More than a hundred. Maybe more than two hundred. Lily had given up counting on their way back from dinner.

It had been going on for a while, too. If the dates on the frames could be believed, the Ponce de Leon Rebirthing Institute had existed in its current state for at least the last seven years.

Pictures upon pictures of the ladies rich, desperate, and deluded to allow their bodies to be invaded by a stranger so that they could say that they'd given birth to someone littered the halls. Yet there were no pictures of the surrogates. There was no evidence of anyone who allowed themselves to be "reborn." No "before" pictures. No "after" pictures. As far as the evidence was concerned, the surrogates didn't exist.

It was stupid, Lily knew, but it was stuck in her craw and she just couldn't get it out. So many questions and no acceptable answers. Heck, why weren't there any counselors or psychological aid? Lily was going to be in complete isolation for three months. Shouldn't she have undergone counseling or some kind of psychological evaluation? Shouldn't the women who wanted to lug other women around in their abdomen be given counseling? The closest thing to psychological help given here was drugs and alcohol.

Something was being obfuscated here. Something was being hidden, and Lily was going to find out what.

From the dark of the guest suite, Lily opened up the door, squinting into the hallway. This place had the culture of a cult, but just like a hospital- or a prison- the lights in the hallways stayed on at all times. Bored and tired-looking orderlies and nurses manned the nursing station. She had to wait for her eyes to adjust to the light, breathing quick shallow breaths.

The suite was too close to the nearest station. A light in the doorway wouldn't be noticed, or it would be written off as a patient wanting a bit of light and nothing more. But Lily was a crap sneak and an even more crap liar, and she knew it. She'd need more than a little good luck to be anything more than a nervous insomniac tonight.

As it turns out, at least a little good luck was coming to her. Over Mrs. Darling's snoring and the thrum-humming of washing machines next door, Lily was able to make out the soft and urgent droning of an alarm.

"It's Mrs. Johnson," a woman in pink said, pointing to a switchboard.

A man in blue scrubs groaned. "Again?"

"It's probably just another false labor."

"Aren't they all?" Both of them had a good laugh at that. There was something oddly comforting about watching the staff act like actual human beings when none of the drunken beached whales were around. Humanizing or not, Lily knew the opportunity when she saw it.

Clumsily sliding with her back against the wall in a kind of manic crab walk, Lily slipped out into the hallway. The nurses in their pinks and blues were too busy laughing or attending a pseudo-pregnant woman to notice her.

The young woman managed to get as far as the laundry room before tripping over her own feet and landing painfully on her tailbone. She had to dig her nails into her hips, biting her lower lip and exhaling through her nose in order to not swear in pain and draw attention to herself.

She'd gotten a total of ten feet out of her room, and was now holed up in a completely different, equally useless room. Great. "What now," she wondered. "There's gotta be a better way."

An industrial dryer buzzed, giving her that better way. Opening the hatch and leaning in, Lily tore into a sea of white cotton. Bedsheets? No, not bedsheets. Most everything, save the walls, had been color coded in pastel pinks and blues, even the tablecloths. Even the bedsheets.

To Lily's great relief, however, it seemed that at least one thing was not entirely color-coded.

Pure white scrubs. Bundles and bundles of them.

How odd.

She hadn't seen a single staff member in these colors all day.

How odd indeed.

The sound of nearby voices cut off Lily's thoughts. "One of the machines is done."

"I switched it out last time."

"Fine, I'll do it!" The sound of footsteps closed in with the voice. Lily panicked and did the only thing she could think of.

"Oh!" the male nurse, clad in baby blue, said. "I didn't realize someone was already in here."

"Just folding up the whites," Lily said from behind her hastily grabbed face mask. Out of time and options, Lily had managed to slip into a baggy set of pure white scrubs and a face mask. Half a second before he'd crossed the threshold, Lily had reached back into the dryer and pulled out a cotton white shirt and pretended to fold it. It was amazing what one could do when properly motivated by fear and fueled by adrenaline.

The man looked pleasantly surprised and slightly relieved. Clearly, he was getting out of a chore that he'd rather not do. "Oh..." he said. "I was about to do it." He looked back over his shoulder and turned slightly, waiting for only the slightest chance to get out.

Her body threatening to start shaking with nerves, Lily blindly reached into the steaming drum and pulled out another piece of laundry. "Just had some downtime," she lied. She hoped that the facemask made her look less guilty. Time to double down. "I wouldn't refuse the help if you've got the time."

Lily could see the man's Adam's apple bob as he swallowed. "Uh, Mrs. Johnson is a real handful tonight. If it's all the same to you..." he looked back over his shoulder. "I could really use a break. And the whites are more your guys' thing. I handle them when they're in, you handle them when they're out, right?"

"Fine..." Lily rolled her eyes. "I've got this." The man was already turning on his heel before she'd finished the sentence. Maybe she wasn't as crap a liar as she thought.

She looked down and finished what she was folding. As it turned out, there *were* bed sheets that weren't either pink or blue. A whole bunch of them, in fact, mixed in the dryer with the pure white scrubs. Nervously, more out of habit than anything else, Lily finished folding the sheet and sat it down on a nearby table.

How odd, Lily thought, that there should be a large safety pin in it.

After counting to thirty, which was just long enough to make sure that her “coworker” had well and truly gone on to his break but not long enough for anyone to check up on her if they became suspicious, Lily darted out and hung a left, away from the nearest nurse’s station, and did her best to act like she belonged.

Just be cool. Just be cool. That was the key to it. If she acted like she belonged here and walked like she knew where she was going, no one would stop to question her, no matter how many questions were racing through her grey matter.

Where was she going? She knew the destination. The “implantation and delivery” area was the only place where Lily had been shooed away from during the tour. If there was anything to be hidden, it would be in behind those powder pink and baby blue doors. The destination was easy. The route was another matter.

Without Mrs. Darling to hold her hand and drag her along, the inside of this place was positively labyrinthine. Had this been a real hospital, there would be well posted signs with arrows showing the way to go, or a directory. Had this been a real hospital, Lily wouldn’t have been afraid to ask or even make eye contact with one of the nurses at the two stations she passed while sneaking. Had this been a real hospital, Lily wouldn’t have felt the need to disguise herself or snoop around at all.

This wasn’t a real hospital though.

Left.

Right.

Right.

Left.

Wrong turn.

Left from the wrong turn.

Right.

There!

Lily was back in front of the twin mechanical doors. Only one problem: There was no visible way to open them. Just like a real hospital, the mechanical doors could not be pulled or pushed open. Just like a real hospital, there was a phone that one picked up to be buzzed in from the

other side. Just like a real hospital, there was a camera at the archway, watching anyone who came too close.

She could try her hand at lying again, and hope that anyone guarding the “Implantation and Delivery” ward was just as tired and bored as the staff near the “guest suite”. Maybe, just maybe, she could have a bit of that devil’s own tongue twice in one night.

As it turned out, Lily wouldn’t need the devil’s tongue, because his luck was with her. The pink and blue doors whirred open, and Lily did her best to speed walk over the threshold without looking like she was running. “Go-go-go-go-go-go-go” she hissed to herself. Reflexively, she looked back over her shoulder to make sure she hadn’t been seen, right before smacking face first into another human being and collapsing onto her tailbone.

Damnit! If the doors were opening, clearly that meant that someone was exiting from the other side. Why hadn’t she thought of that! That’s how real hospitals worked!

“Ow! Fuck!” Sprawled out in front of her was a rather well endowed nurse in all white scrubs, just like Lily’s, cursing. Lily could only sit there dumbly as the busty woman sat back up off the floor, absentmindedly rubbing her nipples. “Watch where you’re going!” Even swearing, the woman’s voice rose barely above a whisper.

The two made eye contact. Lily dared not look away, afraid that it would make her look all the more guilty. Lily stood and offered her hand. “I am so sorry,” she said. “I was just trying to sneak...I mean trying to get in before the doors closed, and I bumped into you.”

Still massaging her chest, the woman took Lily’s hand. “Meh. It happens.” She lowered her arm, and Lily saw a patch of scarlet blossoming on the woman’s right breast.

Her throat went dry. “Um..did I do that to you?”

The nurse in white looked down at her breast and saw the blood. “Mrs. Willis in room 1017,” she said as if that would explain anything. “Lady doesn’t want to take the supplements? That’s fine. That’s part of the job. It’s why we get paid the big bucks. But that little shit is a biter.”

“Oh...her...” Lily said and rolled her eyes, pretending to understand when in fact, she didn’t.

“You’ve had her?”

Crap! “No, but I’ve heard stories. Word gets around quick.”

“Yeah it does.” She seemed to take Lily in for a minute. “Just hope she doesn’t call for you.” A single, almost accusatory finger indicated Lily’s considerably smaller breasts. “I don’t know if

you could handle it.” Lily didn’t know what to say to that. “No offense.”

“None taken.”

“Best of luck to ya. This is the end of my shift.” With that, she pressed a big silver button against the wall, re-opening the mechanical doors, before hurriedly walking out of sight. This time, Lily didn’t look back. Forward was the only option. At the very least, she reassured herself, the way out was easier than the way in.

The hallway inside the “Implantation and Delivery” area seemed very much like the outside: long stretches of otherwise bland doorways lining the hall, their doors shut and their lights off. Just like each door in the main wing of the Institute, the name of the occupant was written in dry erase marker, “Mrs. Watson, Mrs. Crick, Mrs. Franklin,” and so on.

Recovery rooms for the mothers, Lily guessed. Artificial womb or not, having a full-grown person cut out of someone would surely be a major stress on the body. Though, a naggingly fearful part of her weighed in, that would mean there should also be recovery areas for the people who’d just spent three months inside. The naive, hopeful part of Lily gave the place the benefit of the doubt. Maybe the surrogates were being cared for elsewhere...

That’s when Lily noticed another difference. Actual clipboards and charts were hanging neatly by each door, so that a physician or aide, or a suitably nosy passerby, might be able to glance at medical information.

Carefully, she skimmed through the first page of one patient’s information. It was labeled “Mrs. Marston.” In blue ink, little details were filled out about the woman behind the door. Lily was no med student, but she could make out the gist of it: weight, blood pressure, vital signs, medications and the like. Nothing terribly out of the ordinary, she supposed.

She flipped to the next page over. Behind the initial readout of Mrs. Marston’s vitals- in black and white with the kind of sterile crispness that only comes from a copy machine- were a completely different set of documents.

They read:

“Baby Marston.

Sex: F

Age: 27.

Height: 5’6

Weight: 108 lbs.

Max Allowable Cognitive Progression: 10 months

Nutrition: Formula. Some Solids (Baby Teeth)

Hair: Brown.

Mobility: Crawling

Notes: Heavy Wetter. Cloth diapers only per mother's request"

Formula? Crawling??? Diapers?! If Lily hadn't known any better, she would have assumed that these were instructions for an actual infant.

But no. That was crazy. That couldn't be right. Lily went a door over, picked up another clipboard and flipped to the second page.

It read:

"Baby Anderson.

Sex: F

Age: 22

Height: 5'4

Weight: 98 lbs

Max Allowable Cognitive Progression: 12 months

Nutrition: Solids (Teeth)

Hair: Blonde

Mobility: Crawling/Toddling

Notes: May require booster shot."

Booster shot? Crawling?

Yet another read:

"Baby Willis.

Sex: M

Age: 25

Height: 5'10

Weight: 130 lbs

Max Allowable Cognitive Progression: 6 Months

Nutrition: Breastmilk (Some teeth)

Hair: None

Mobility: None

Notes: Wet Nurse required"

Underneath the crisp black and white copy, scribbled in blue ink, with sloppy jagged handwriting was the word, "TEETHING". A darkening brown stain, like drying blood, smudged the very bottom of the paper.

Placing the clipboard back, a nasty buzzing, feeling like flies and gnats chewing on the inside of her temples, filled Lily's head. Formula. Breastfeeding. Crawling. No teeth. Maximum allowable

cognition. Diapers.

The buzzing became so loud that to Lily it was audible. She not only felt it, but heard it, too! Only she wasn't hearing the buzzing of nerves in her ears, her paranoia made perceptible. It was a soft, dampened murmur, like distant screaming. Tracing one hand along the far wall, she followed the sound, a mewling discordant thing, crying out but not crying.

Her hand streaked across clear glass...and then she found the source of the noise.

Behind the glass, laying in cots too big for any actual infant was everything Lily had been dreading. People, all of them in their twenties by the looks of it, swaddled like infants. Milling around them, women in white scrubs, just like Lily's, shushed and comforted and cooed them in the dim nursery light.

To the far left, a pale emaciated figure laid in a giant incubator. A tanning lamp bringing color to skin that had been locked away in total darkness for a quarter of a year; a feeding tube shoved up her nose and snaking down into her stomach pumping nutrients, a thick swollen diaper taped around her waist.

Had it been just that one "baby" in the incubator, however, Lily could have lied to herself. But the other dozen or so surrogates dispelled any illusions she might have had.

One girl was having her diaper- not a medical garment, but a scaled up replica of something an actual baby might wear- changed. If she minded, as she suckled on the gigantic pink pacifier with her eyes closed, she gave no indication.

There was a boy (at least she guessed it was a boy, based on the powder blue blankets he was cocooned in) who was left toothless and drooling as he gummed and guzzled on a baby bottle filled with a milky-looking substance.

A girl with dark black hair poking out from beneath her pink knit cap nursed on the teat of another grown woman clad in white.

And worst of all, Lily could see the names on each cot, labeling their occupants as clearly as it had their "mothers" rooms, including but not limited to "Baby Marston," "Baby Anderson," and "Baby Willis."

"I'm not going to have to, like, go through potty training again or anything afterwards, am I?" Lily remembered asking that fateful day when she'd signed the papers.

"Absolutely not," she'd been promised. *"Absolutely not."*

Technically, if she was never taken out of diapers, she'd never have to go through potty training again.

"Pregnancy, by its very nature is a temporary state," she'd been told. Pregnancy was temporary. Everything else wasn't.

This. This is what had been planned for her all along.

A heavy hand landed on her shoulder. Instinctively, Lily whipped around, her fist striking out like an agitated snake, only to be caught, deflected, and pushed aside as if it were made of lint. In front of her, staring at her through Coke-bottle glasses was a decidedly non-plussed Dr. Anguis, his thinning head of hair shining with a thick snake-oil sheen.

The breath went out of Lily as she was slammed against the viewing glass. Behind her, the muffled mewling of infants stirring from their sleep, crying out for their mothers, began to rise up like an alarm siren.

They were so much like infants, Lily realized: the confusion, the desperation, the impotent anger. The lack of coordination over their own vocal chords. Exactly like how actual newborns acted and sounded. Only these cries were much, much deeper, because the bodies they came from were much, much older.

A windy, crackling, whimpering cry came out of Lily's throat, as she struggled for air, the doctor's forearm was pressed tightly against her throat. Her brain swimming and her body acting on autopilot, Lily began to fight.

She couldn't scream. But she could kick. She could scratch at his face. She could drool and spit. She could piss herself in an attempt to discourage, disgust, or otherwise throw her attacker off his game.

It didn't work. Lily might as well have been intangible, a figment of his imagination for all that her attacker reacted to her defenses. Scratches landed, but they did not draw blood. Kicks to the groin and knees landed and felt like striking a lead statue. Lily felt like she might have bruises on her shins, feet, and knees, but the older man didn't so much as flinch. Spit dripped from the lenses of his glasses, but he seemed to just look right past them. After all of that, the puddle of piss forming at their feet was barely an inconvenience.

He didn't so much as press harder against her throat, and he easily could have. He just held her there, thrashing as she wore herself down. It wasn't even a full minute before her choked-off wailing and screaming was indistinguishable from the mindless, diapered adults crying in the background behind her.

Calmly, as if pinning her to the wall was no particular exertion whatsoever, Dr. Anguis reached past Lily and pressed an intercom on the wall. "Yes doctor?" a voice droned from the speaker.

"Lucy, wake the implantation staff." he said. "We're going to have to start a few hours early."

"Yes Doctor."

Lily was fifteen minutes in. She was naked, strapped down to an operating table, her arms and legs restrained in padded cuffs. She could struggle. She could scream. She could cry. But she couldn't do much else. Hypothetically, she could pee, but she'd already emptied that tank.

A surgical assistant clad in pastel blue scrubs wiped her down and cleaned the remnants of her own piss off of the inside of her legs. "Heh...usually the wipe downs come after the re-birth", he chuckled from behind his surgical mask. Lily didn't laugh. "I'm only kidding. Safety is our number one concern. That means ensuring zero contaminants."

"Safety?" Lily said. "Safety? How is any of this safe?!"

"After your re-birth you'll be well taken care of," a new voice said. Lily looked up from her legs and at a nurse who'd just entered the room. "Dr. Anguis wouldn't have allowed Mrs. Darling to be your Mommy if she wasn't a good candidate for pre- and post-rebirth care." The nurse's scrubs were pastel pink. Lily couldn't see the woman's mouth from behind the matching surgical mask, but her eyes were smiling. What a strange world she'd allowed herself to be trapped in: Where some people's smiles didn't reach their eyes, and others had eyes that did all the smiling for them. "Hi there. I'm Lucy. I'm here to help you get through this and onto the next stage of your development."

Lily felt a sharp pin prick jab into the left side of her neck. "Ow!" Then the right. "What was that?!"

"That's the only pain you'll be feeling today," the nurse said, eyes grinning. "Actually, that's the only pain you'll be feeling for approximately three months."

"So that's it?" Lily asked. "You're putting me under?"

"Not at all," the nurse said. "That was just a nerve blocker. You're going to be awake and aware for the entire procedure. You have every right to know what's happening to you."

The poor girl could already feel her arms and legs start to go numb. Her struggles against the cuffs were lessening more, becoming wiggles and jiggles. Paralysis was starting to set in.

"What if I don't want to know?"

“Oh, you’ll want to know.” The surgical assistant said as he finished scrubbing Lily down. “They always do.”

Lily looked down her legs to the assistant and threw him a glare that would have murdered him had it been able.

“Eyes on me, dear.” Lily looked back up to the nurse. “We’ve already inserted catheters into your jugular and carotid artery. We’re pumping out your blood. The anesthetic we’re giving you contains an oxygen rich solution, so you’ll suffer no side effects. Over the course of your incubation, your new Mommy’s blood will infuse with your own circulatory system until it adapts. Then you’ll register as a whole new blood type; a whole new person.”

“It’s actually been found to cure sickle cell anemia,” the surgical assistant volunteered.

Lily ground her teeth together. “Neat. What part turns me into a circus sideshow?”

“That’s something that only we do here, sweetie. We invented this process.” The nurse’s voice was dripping with saccharine, honey-flavored venom. “The additional medical uses are a happy little side effect, aren’t they?”

A shudder rattled through Lily. “I’m scared.”

“I know.”

“Hold my hand?”

“Of course, dear.”

Even though she could barely feel it, the presence of her hand was oddly comforting.

Thirty minutes in, Dr. Anguis arrived, accompanied by the rest of his surgical team. All but he were cloaked in the same pastel pinks and baby blues- nursery colors- that the rest of the staff and bloated surgically-expecting mothers wore.

Not the good doctor, though. His were dark green, and had a strange almost leather sheen about them, like reptile skin. Snake skin. His formerly dull, foggy eyes took on an almost unblinking reptilian quality through the thick magnifying lenses of his glasses. “Everything prepped and ready to go?”

“Yes, Doctor.”

“Then let’s begin.”

Surgeons and their machines closed in around her. “You’re going to feel a slight tingling around your fingers,” Dr. Anguis said. “Nothing to be worried about.” A short metal rod, the tip of it glowing red, started to poke and prod at her fingertips.

A warmth around the soles of her feet alerted to her to multiple invaders, multiple sources of scarring. The sound of sizzling and the scent of burning flesh filled her nostrils. They were burning off her fingerprints; erasing her identity.

Through his Coke-bottled lenses, Dr. Anguis squinted at her legs, paying careful attention to her Achilles tendons. “I’m pretty sure Mrs. Darling wants a crawler. Scalpel.”

“Don’t mind them.” Lily looked away from herself and back up to the nurse. Even underneath the surgical mask, Lily could tell that she was still smiling. “They’re just doing their jobs. Talk to me.”

“What about?”

“Anything you want.”

Forty-five minutes in, and the medical staff had started to take an intense interest in Lily’s stomach.

She couldn’t see past her wrists thanks to the cuffs, but she knew that her fingerprints were now gone. This is what they had really meant when they’d told her she’d legally be a new person. It wasn’t a loophole or technicality. It was a cover up for human trafficking.

“You’re going to feel some minor discomfort in your abdomen. No need for concern.” A buzzing, drilling noise rang into the air. True enough, Lily felt discomfort, but no pain. A minor cramp; like holding in a fart, but nothing more intense.

“I wanted to be an artist,” Lily said. “But I just didn’t have the knack for it.”

“That’s a shame,” the nurse agreed, wiping the sweat from Lily’s forehead. “Even if you’re not good at something, you can still take joy from it. It can still give your life meaning. It could have been a hobby.”

“I majored in art history. I thought that if I couldn’t create art, I could still learn and teach people about it. Like a curator at a museum, or a professor at a college.”

“It really sounds like art was a passion of yours.”

“My parents didn’t approve. They said there was no future in it. They cut me off. That’s why I got into debt. That’s why I came here.”

“They should have supported you.”

The drilling noise stopped, and Lily flinched as she felt the slightest tickling sensation, an itch she couldn’t scratch, right around her belly button. “I guess they were right.”

“None of that matters anymore.”

“They wanted me to go into medical school. Or at least nursing school.”

“You would have been a fantastic nurse.”

“I could have been a nurse here. I could have been doing your job.”

“That is a funny thought, isn’t it?” The nurse’s eyes were still smiling. Smiling while condemning her. Mocking her.

“I hate you.”

“I know.”

“I want you all to burn in Hell.”

“That’s natural.”

“We’re going to have to stop talking now.”

A little over an hour in.

The surgeons had finished slowly pushing tubes into her guts and were now closing in on her face. A neck brace was being fastened so that Lily couldn’t turn her head, and a padded cuff was being pulled taut across her forehead just in case.

“Don’t leave!” Even as she yelped out the words, gloved fingers were pulling at her cheeks and lips, inserting hooks and guards and shields into her mouth. Her jaw was being forced open, her tongue blocked and restrained.

A quick squirt from a little hose and a slight burning sensation in the back of her throat, and Lily couldn't even scream. Even in that short glimpse, she had seen enough pink empty mouths in that funhouse mirror of a maternity ward to know what was happening next.

"I'm still right here. But we're going to have to stop talking. The doctors need to get into your mouth." The nurse was kind enough to start squeezing Lily's hand again.

"You're going to feel a tugging sensation around your gums. This is all perfectly normal. Don't worry."

Lily couldn't even feel it as her teeth were being removed. She could only hear the metallic clinking as one by one, teeth were dropped into a metal tray. "Not a single cavity," one of the surgeons praised. "You took really good care of these."

Out of the periphery of her vision Lily managed to catch sight of one of her molars, dripping sickly pink syrupy liquid. The oxygen rich solution they'd filled her body up with was so pink it was almost neon, like radioactive Pepto-Bismol. She wasn't even bleeding blood anymore.

The former art student winced as another surgeon came at her face with a whirring circular device in his hand, almost like a miniature floor buffer. "Just a tiny bit longer. Almost done with this part." There was no pain; only a tiny scratching feeling, rather like someone else brushing her few remaining teeth as they were whittled down to rounded nubs. "You're doing great."

It was the nurse who started massaging her gums, pressing fresh gauze up against the insides of her mouth. "We're going to give these a little bit to heal before we move on."

Almost eighty minutes in.

The hooks, guards, and other torturous restraints had been removed, but Lily still couldn't vibrate her vocal chords. Despite herself, Lily ran her tongue all around in her mouth once it was free. Almost completely smooth, less than a handful of teeth left in her mouth, and those little bumps barely counted.

The world went blurry as Lily began to cry. Eyes still smiling, the nurse wiped Lily's tears away. "It's okay," she whispered. "You won't need that many teeth anyway. And you'll still get to eat some solids when your Mommy decides to spoon feed you."

"That reminds me," Dr. Anguis said. Lily saw, more than felt the needle pierce the inside of her eye. "Tear ducts paralyzed." Now she couldn't even cry.

Just like a newborn.

A new strap was pulled across her chest, gluing her to the table “Okay. Turn her.”

The room went a little sideways, and Lily had no choice but to look at the operating room’s wall as the table was tilted to the left. There was a slight scraping and groaning noise as the table she was on lost its back, leaving her all but dangling on the frame like a fly in a spider’s web.

“You’re going to feel some pressure around your spine. This is to be expected.” A popping crunch erupted from behind her. Lily felt no pain, but would have screamed from shock and surprise. Except she couldn’t scream.

Dr. Anguis looked at her and turned his head to the side. “Blink if you can still hear me.”

Blink. Blink.

Dr. Anguis looked past Lily and to whichever surgeon had been responsible for the crunching sound. “Good. Clean break.” Giant eyes through Coke-bottle glasses stared unblinking at her, displaying all the sincerity of a sociopath. “Believe it or not,” he told her, “you’re going to be more flexible than some contortionists. Great for sucking on toes.”

“You’re being very brave,” the nurse whispered. “I’m very proud of you.”

More tickling and pinching came along her back. “This will make sure that your back heals properly. Everything is going according to plan. ” She was about to be stuffed into another human being, and yet all of this medical equipment was being first inserted and stuffed into her. Maybe it was all the drugs being pumped into her system, or maybe this was her mind desperately trying to make sense of the trauma she was enduring, but Lily couldn’t help but wonder if this is what the middle bird of a turducken felt like.

The ceiling came back into view as Lily was tilted back over to the operating table. “Ball her up.” Dr. Anguis ordered. Then he deigned to look back down to Lily. “If you feel any pain, just shut your eyes. Nurse Lucy will inform me.”

Straps were undone. Braces were removed. Piece by piece Lily was freed. But she didn’t move. She couldn’t. The most she could do was watch from inside her own head as her body was folded in on itself, like an old ragdoll or worn out pillow. She was being lifted and carried over to some kind of tank.

Sturdy beige walls were replaced by flesh colored flaps, like an insecure tent; a subtle but crucial difference. A sinking sensation overtook Lily as she was lowered in, a mummy being put into her tomb. From up above her, the nurse, her damnable eyes still smirking. “Just look at me, dear. Just look at me. I’m still here.”

Lily tried to summon up courage, or fury, or at least anger at the surgeons, but all she felt was fear. She slammed her eyes shut, signalling that something was wrong.

Make it stop! Make it stop! PLEASE! she begged from behind her eyelids.

No signal or call to stop came.

When she opened her eyes, the nurse was gone. The ceiling was gone. The flesh colored sack she'd been placed in had been drawn up at the top, a canvas bag sewn shut, with only the myriad of twisting tubes poking out of her belly spiraling up to the top and outside to fresh air.

"We're going to be filling your womb up." Dr. Anguis's voice was muffled, like an old radio, but she could understand him. "Don't worry. Just continue to breathe normally. Everything is fine."

She wasn't sure where it was coming from, but Lily became acutely aware of a warm, wet, viscous fluid. It was filling up the sac.

And it was rising.

And Lily couldn't move.

Breathing normally was a lot easier said than done.

The level of the liquid continued rising as Lily's breaths became shorter and shorter, fear giving way to full grown panic.

She was going to drown.

They'd mutilated her.

They'd burned her fingerprints off.

They'd crippled her legs.

They'd pumped her stomach and her blood.

They'd broken her back and paralyzed her.

They'd taken her goddamn teeth so that she couldn't even be identified by dental records.

And now they were drowning her in a sack like a litter of unwanted kittens.

Now the people outside the artificial womb were talking to each other as if Lily wasn't even in the room with them. Their faint voices and snippets of conversation still decipherable as the water level raised to cover her ears.

"What'd you think of the game last night?"

"Are there any good movies out? Me and the missus are in desperate need for a date night."

"Don't even get me started. It felt like the ref was on the other team's side."

"Movie's a minimum. Forget a fancy dinner, even Portabello's is booked solid with reservations."

"No kidding, right? If they'd just made that ONE pass before the end, we could have gone into overtime."

"Since when is Portabello's taking reservations?"

"Yeah we could have. Maybe we'll make the playoffs next ye-."

And then Lily was alone; gray sludgy liquid up to her ears, turning the already muffled conversation into incomprehensible mumbles. It rose past her lips. Her eyes slammed shut, unwilling to let the quicksilver concoction get into her eyes. For a few precious seconds, she inhaled through her nose.

Her nose went under with the rest of her.

She held her breath. Every survival instinct in her told her to hold out for as long as possible. *Breathe normally?* Humans didn't breathe at all when liquid was involved. Her knees were the last things to be submerged.

She held and held and held. Her chest ached and heaved. Her head throbbed. Her body screamed at her for oxygen. She couldn't move her body, though. She couldn't kick or thrash, as the last bits of air bubbled up through her nose. All she could do is breathe in, and let the muck fill her lungs.

The world got very bright for a second. And very quiet. Peaceful, even. She was dying. Lily knew it. You couldn't be "reborn" without dying.

Fine then.

Let's die, Lily thought. *Let's go to sleep and never wake up.*

Outside the bag, Dr. Anguis saw the tiniest bubbles float up to the very top. “And we’re done with this part. Let’s prep the mother for surgery.”

“Shall I wake her?”

“Nah,” Dr. Anguis waved off. “She doesn’t need to be conscious for this. If anything, she’ll like waking up pregnant.”

“Oh, a ‘Mary’?”

“Not a virgin, but yeah. How long till she’s ready?”

“Another thirty.”

“Okay. Good. I’m going on break.”

Melissa Darling woke up in a hospital bed. Gone was the luxurious feather bed she’d fallen asleep in, her modest silk pajamas replaced by a pink hospital gown. She tried to look around, to figure out where she was and how she’d gotten there, perhaps jog her memory (one too many mimosas last night, obviously).

But she couldn’t properly look around, there was a mound of blankets piled on top of her. More than a mound, there was definite weight on her. It was like a panther had pounced on her and curled up, thinking itself a house cat. Why was it so heav-?

Wait...

It couldn’t be!

“Good morning, Mrs. Darling.”

Electronic, motorized whirring grinded its way into Melissa’s ears. The world was going vertical, and she could finally see past the bulge on her belly. No, she thought, the bulge IN her belly. She couldn’t stop smiling at that. “Doctor? Doctor Anguis?”

To her left, clad in dark green scrubs, was her physician, his medical uniform flecked with bits of bright pink...something. He smiled softly at her. “Right here, ma’am. I wanted to be the first to congratulate you.”

“Congratulate me?” Melissa knew exactly what Dr. Anguis was hinting at, but she needed to hear it. She looked around, hoping and praying that this wasn’t some cruel joke. “Where’s Lily?”

A strong, steady hand patted the bulge on her stomach. It patted the bulge on her stomach and she felt it! She felt it as easily as if it were her own! "Right here, ma'am."

"You mean?" *Say it. Say it!* She had to hear it! The pregnancy wasn't REAL until he said those five magic words.

"Congratulations, Mrs. Darling. You're pregnant!"

Hot tears of ecstasy and joy ran down from Melissa's eyes, dripping down her face and landing joyfully at the corners of her upturned mouth. Never had she been so happy in her life. "And Lily?"

"Went in as easy as pie." Dr. Anguis said. "Didn't even have to wake you." He paused a moment, as if in thought. "She thought you might like that. You might feel more like a mother if it was unexpected."

It was true. She did. And, she admitted to herself, she might have felt the tiniest bit guilty if she had to look Lily in the eye before they both became joined. Lily didn't know that she'd be going in an adult, but coming out a baby. An adult sized baby, but a baby all the same.

But Lily, the wonderful child, had spared her all of that. Now this whole ordeal felt less like a procedure and more like a miracle...which it was!

Melissa shifted in her bed, groaning despite herself as she tried to adjust her weight. Lily was heavy!

"Careful," Dr. Anguis warned, gently. "Most mothers have much longer to adjust. Their new bodies come along gradually. You? Not so much."

"No one told me that carrying the baby would be so much...strain!"

"You just got out of a major surgery, so there's going to be more than a little soreness." He patted her shoulder. "The artificial womb does have a kind of biological support rigging in it. You'll be able to walk around well enough. And for what the surgery won't help, we've got more than enough medication and mimosas."

"It still hurts."

The doctor shrugged. "Would you have gone through with the procedure if you'd known?"

"Yes." There wasn't even the slightest hint of hesitation in her voice. A slight jostling, wiggling sensation inside her. The baby was kicking! She let out a shriek of happiness. "Ah! Someone knows we're talking about her!"

“Good!” the doctor laughed. “Good! That means everything went well on her end, too.”

Melissa frowned a bit. “I...really have to pee.”

As if on cue, like the nurse was waiting just beyond the threshold, a nurse in pastel pink scrubs came in with a bedpan. “Sounds like someone is giving your bladder a little kick too,” the doctor said. “That’s to be expected. Perfectly normal.”

“Maybe I should be the one wearing a diaper!” With help, she lifted her hips, allowing the stainless steel pot to be slid under her. “For the next three months, anyway.”

“Womp wump womp womp womp, wump-ump-ump.”

Three months. Lily had been made to endure this nightmare, this living hell, for the last three months. When she’d gone under, fully submerged, in fact, part of her had hoped that if she survived this, she’d at least regain consciousness just as she was being “reborn,” or whatever this little cult called it.

No such luck. By her figuring, she must have woken back up soon after she’d been implanted into that old hag. That explained the steady heartbeat that wasn’t her own, pulsing in the background. She’d been cocooned in here so long that it didn’t even register to her anymore.

Nothing much registered to her anymore, and that was by far the worst part. Either from a surgically broken spine, or just lack of proper circulation, she could barely feel anything anymore. It was all numb.

She couldn’t see anything. She was completely submerged in the sludgy gray ichor of the artificial womb. It invaded her senses, replacing every bit of input from her brain with null. Eyes open, or closed, Lily couldn’t tell the difference. It was all the same. At least it didn’t sting.

The sludge had filled her mouth and nose and lungs, too. It didn’t taste bad, but it didn’t taste good either. It didn’t taste. Water had more of a taste than this tuff.

Speaking of taste, that was another thing that Lily had missed these past three months, something that she was darkly looking forward to.

Eating.

Peeing.

Pooping.

She'd done none of it for the last twelve weeks. All of her body's needs had somehow been met via tubes running into her. Mrs. Darling, that cunt, had been her sensory deprivation chamber, jailor, and life support system.

Lily's nutrition was completely taken care of with or without Lily's consent. Food pumped in, waste pumped out, and the only evidence that either of these was happening was the fact that Lily wasn't dead.

She never felt hungry, but she never felt satisfied either. She tasted nothing. Perversely, she'd gone through a period of time where she tried to swallow the slime that was encasing her, forcing it to be pumped out. They'd have to cut Lily out then, wouldn't they?

Days of trying it had yielded zero results. Not even feeling full. Only the contracting muscles of her throat gave her any indication that she was swallowing.

She'd have screamed, did scream, but again, there was no air in her lungs to make a sound. At one point, Lily had made an effort to stop breathing, to hold her breath and pass out. She spent the better part of two days doing it, counting the seconds into hours and hours into days.

Nothing.

Whatever was getting oxygen to her brain did so with or without her ichor-filled lungs' consent. So much for holding her breath and turning blue until she passed out.

That was another thing! If Lily could lose consciousness, she hadn't experienced it yet! Or if she dreamed, she wasn't aware of it. Instead, she'd been left alone with her thoughts, doing her best not to go crazy from isolation and loneliness.

All she could really do to pass the time was count the muffled womps of people talking outside her. It was like Charlie Brown or bad dub-step.

"Urrr! Cmmmm tay uh eh-man!"

Mrs. Darling. Lily still had no idea what the woman was saying, it was like trying to translate through a pool, but she could tell the difference and hear subtle little distinctions in her tones and words. Her so-called Mommy's voice was unmistakable at this point, even when being heard from the inside out.

Lily struggled in her bonds, squirming, doing her best to "kick" the old bat. And by "kick," she really meant bobbing her head through the viscous muck in an attempt to shift her body weight to the very edge of her prison. The slight feeling of resistance when she pressed up against the

edge of her cage was one of the few pleasures allowed to her. Minor acts of rebellion. Microtransactions of revenge.

Every now and then, she'd sing little ditties to herself to pass the time, and rub her tongue over her surgically deformed mouth, counting how many teeth she had left in her jack-o-lantern mouth. But neither activity lasted more than an hour by her reckoning.

She could barely hear. Saw nothing. Tasted nothing. Felt nothing. A stinging eyeball, or hunger pain, or the feeling of looming suffocation...anything would have been a welcome change from the big NOTHING that had gobbled her up.

This was death. She was technically alive, but this was almost exactly what death had to feel like. Nothing. And Lily had been not-quite dead for close to three maddening months.

For three months, she'd been stuck in this living Limbo.

"Not really," a voice assured her. "Limbo is a LOT different from this place. It's very similar to what you'll be experiencing, though. Close enough in the long run."

A VOICE! In here! It was too clear, too crisp to be anything but a voice right next to her. That meant that it was time. They were cutting Mrs. Darling open! Lily was being reborn!

FINALLY!

Lily tried to open her mouth and talk, or at least gurgle something. Nothing came out. Not even air bubbles.

No air.

"Welcome to the end of day one." The voice whispered. "Still eighty-three more to go."

One day?

One day?

She'd only been in here for *one day?!*

Melissa Darling lounged in the courtyard, mimosa in hand. The sun was warm, and she was already getting that pleasant little buzz on her face as the alcohol worked its way into her system. Not bad for 9:30.

A jiggle from the inside. The mimosa must have been working its way through Lily's system, too. "You're welcome, baby." She patted her stomach, a mismatch of different skin tones all quilted together. At least she wouldn't have stretch marks.

Pacobel's Canon in D played through the speakers of the courtyard and Melissa laid back, reclining in the deck chair. She inhaled the fragrant air, taking in all that her senses had to offer her, before taking another sip of mimosa.

Three days. Three glorious days in and the glow hadn't worn off. She hoped it never would. It was rather like a cruise, her pregnancy. Lay around in the sun, relax, maybe read a good book, and sobriety was one hundred percent optional, if not actively discouraged.

Just like a cruise. Except there was no chance of sea-sickness. No chance of morning sickness either, according to her fellow expectant mothers. It was one of the many benefits of being a member at the Institute.

"Mrs. Darling."

The proud mother-to-be removed her sunglasses and looked toward the voice. "Oh, hello Doctor! What can I do for you?"

The doctor was out of his medical gear, and now wore a suit, the very same type of plain, conservative, but respectable suit that he'd worn the day she'd gotten Lily to sign on the dotted line. Clad in his oddly ostentatious snake-skin boots, the older fellow squatted down beside her. "Actually, it's more about what I can do for you." He passed her a clipboard.

Melissa put down the mimosa and looked at it. "What's this?"

"I just wanted to go over a few things with you and finalize some details about Baby Darling. It will help let us know what medications to prescribe you."

"I'm not in any pain anymore." She gestured to her glass. "Thanks!"

"It's not for the pain."

Melissa made herself sit up a little straighter. She took another breath, focusing herself in the way that only a drunk person can. The mimosas must have been stronger than she realized. It took genuine effort to read the information and keep it in her brain for longer than a moment. Biting her bottom lip, she looked to Dr. Anguis's coke bottle glasses for guidance.

"Age twenty-three. Ninety-nine pounds? Five-foot two? What's all this?"

"Baby Darling's chronological and biological information. It was part of the paperwork when she

agreed to be your surrogate.”

The mother-to-be nodded and kept scanning the document. “Baby teeth so she can have some solid food.” In her mind, Melissa paid a trip into the future. She imagined herself enjoying a grilled caesar salad while Lily munched on chicken nuggets in her highchair. She saw herself playing with the spoon like it was an airplane whilst feeding her baby girl applesauce. She thought of taking sips of Chardonnay while Lily chugged down apple juice. She looked forward to cold, snuggly nights when Lily would nuzzle into her breasts, needing extra comfort. “Would she have to be completely weaned?” she asked.

“Thinking of breastfeeding?”

“It might be nice to try. A bonding moment.”

“A regimen of hormones it is,” Dr. Anguis said, taking out a blue pen and scribbling notes on Melissa’s paper. “What else?”

“Crawling? Good. Wouldn’t want anyone mistaking her for an adult after this.”

“I don’t think anyone will be assuming that.”

They both had a shared laugh, hers more genuine than his. Obviously he used that line a lot around here. “What is...” she squinted, as if narrowing her vision would make the word more understandable. “What is maximum allowable cognition?”

“That’s how old they’ll be, mentally, when they’re done.”

Melissa frowned. “Thirteen months? That’s not too old, is it?”

He laughed again, this one more real. “Oh you really are a first time mom.” She laughed too, but her expectant glare made it clear. “Thirteen months should be fine based on your wants and needs.”

“I think thirteen months is a little old...like don’t one year olds start walking?”

“We can make it so that she, at most, crawls,” Dr. Anguis explained. “One of the benefits of this model of parenting is customization. So she’d be a one-year-old in mind, but a crawler in body.”

“I was thinking six months...”

The doctor shook his head. “She won’t be able to crawl at six months. She’d barely be able to sit up with support. Imagine having to carry her everywhere you went.” Melissa didn’t like the sound of that. “And she’ll know her name, but pretty much everything will be crying.”

Everything...hunger...wetness...lack of sleep...too much sleep...everything. You'll have to spoon or bottle feed her everything. At her size, less independence for her means less independence for you."

He was right of course. The doctor always was. "It's just a thirteen month old...it's fine, I guess. It's fine."

Something on her face must have shown her doubt, because the doctor kept talking. "She'll know a word or five, and will be able to communicate her wants and needs in the most basic of ways. She might say ba-ba, or diaper." She bit her lip, unconvinced. "And mama."

"Mama?"

"And she'll be able to splash in the tub and play with rubber duckies, or to dig around in a sandbox."

"And call me Mama?"

"And call you Mama."

Melissa nodded. "Okay. Thirteen months sounds good." She kept looking down the list of particulars. Reading all of this was a chore, but it was a fun chore. When else would someone get to custom build their own baby? She stopped reading near the bottom and wrinkled her nose. "Oh, I want this part here changed." She let out an involuntary chuckle. Definitely still tipsy. "Ha! Changed."

"Which part?"

She stabbed the bottom with her. "Disposables only. I am NOT washing any diapers when I take her home. Besides," she slurred, "she's never going to be potty trained anyways, so I see no point in letting her feel wet. I read that part in a parenting magazine once."

"That's a checkbox, ma'am. We just want you to select your preference." He handed her the pen.

"Oh." Then she checked the section marked "Diapers: Disposable"

"Very good, Mrs. Darling. I'm positive that Baby Darling has a wonderful mommy that is looking out for her." He rose from his squatting position and turned to leave, snakeskin boots and all.

She called after him. "Why does everyone keep calling her Baby Darling?"

Dr. Anguis called back over his shoulder. "Because she's not Lily anymore. You're her mother, you can name her anything you want."

"Ooooh, I'd never thought of that." She picked the mimosa back up, took a sip, and leaned back in her chair, determined to spend the rest of the morning napping and thinking up cute baby names.

"Lily. Chen." The announcer's voice was stilted and formal, over enunciating every syllable of every graduate. The on-loop recording of Pomp and Circumstance blared, surpassed only by the announcer's amplified voice. So loud, that Lily couldn't hear the cheering of her parents in the audience, wherever they were.

Left. Right. Left. Right. Left. Right. Left. Right. One step after the other. She was walking, but she was trembling. How could she possibly be so nervous? She'd done the work. She'd gotten her degree in art history. She was already graduating.

Then why was she so anxious? Almost tripping over her own feet, Lily climbed the stairs onto the stage. "Congratulations" the dean (or whomever he was) said, handing her the diploma and shaking her hand. Lily kept walking.

The first time around, she'd only met this guy a total of three times in her entire collegiate career, so why would she remember what he looked like, let alone his name? Where were her parents?

Remember?

Still walking across the stage, she searched for waving arms, or two standing figures amongst the facing masses, clapping for her. She listened for airhorns and looked for a banner (as if her parents were the banner-and-airhorn type). Nothing.

There were no air horns or banners the first time.

First?

Why would she be remembering something that was happening right now?

As her foot fell on the first descending step, Lily felt her stomach lurch and the basketball stadium spun around on its axis. Falling down the stairs, there were no gasps or exclamations of surprise from the audience this time. This time, she was able to push herself off the ground before a stream of vomit rushed up her throat, out of her mouth and onto the polished wooden

floor; staining her graduation gown with the back splash.

This time?

That's because she hadn't actually fallen the first time she graduated college. She obviously hadn't vomited.

Pomp and Circumstance stopped abruptly, record scratch and all, replaced with trashy synth-skate-pop-punk. "All the world is gettin' with, I say. Consequences are a lot, but hey! That's the way it, that's the way things go!"

Lily found herself being lifted by her armpits, her legs unsteadily pushing up against the floor. "She drinks the mimosas but you get the hangover," the voice said. "Ain't that a bitch?" That voice? Where had Lily heard that voice before?

Her feet firmly beneath her, but her head hung low, the first thing that registered to her was a pair of snakeskin boots. "You mother fu-!" she spun around, striking at Dr. Anguis with inhuman speed.

Just like before, her hand was caught; a perfect fastball straight into a catcher's mitt. It wasn't Dr. Anguis behind home plate. He was younger than the surgeon, but older than Lily; late twenties at best, mid thirties at worst. White, like Dr. Anguis, and with those same dark green eyes. He might have been the man's son, but he wasn't the man himself.

His hair was pulled back tight in cornrows. His chin and cheeks were covered with scruffy, scraggly facial hair. He almost looked like James Franco in that one weird movie he was in... "Sorry about the record scratch," he said. "I just couldn't take Pomp and Circumstance any more. Canon in D is bad enough."

That voice! There was something about that voice! Lily gasped. She knew that voice! She knew that voice fr-!

Lily screamed but no air left her lungs. Surrounded by the darkness of the artificial womb, Lily was trapped. Feeling nothing. Seeing nothing. Smelling nothing. Tasting nothing. Barely able to move and only able to hear the distorted voice of her captor, Lily panicked. This was no Limbo, but the deepest pit of Hell.

"Ooops. I guess I shouldn't have done that. Broke the little fantasy you had goin' on.....my bad."

Lily remembered. She was back in the artificial womb, waiting to be spat out, just so she could be diapered, bottle fed and thrown in an incubator. How long had she been stuck here?

“Not even a week, sugar tits. Not even a week and already you’re crackin’.”

The voice was right. Though to call it a voice was a misnomer. She didn’t hear it as much as imagined she’d heard it. This was all in her head. How else could it respond to her innermost thoughts just as they were forming?

“Ding ding ding! Got it one!”

It wasn’t real. It wasn’t real. This was just her, talking to herself. This was boredom and isolation and imagination. Nothing mo-

“You don’t sound like me, kid,” the voice interrupted her thoughts. “And your imagination isn’t good enough. No offense. And what do you mean ‘not real?’” it demanded. Not just a voice anymore, but a man. A man with dark green eyes and snakeskin shoes. “Theeeeeere we go. Now you’re getting it. Just because it’s in your brain doesn’t make it not real.”

She’d been dreaming. Not quite dreaming, truthfully. Over the past three days (only three?) Lily had yet to feel sleepy or exhausted. Her mind never drifted off quietly. She never got the luxury. She’d just start thinking about her life and what had led her to this point and...and...and..

“It’s sleep psychosis. You don’t sleep, and you go a little crazy, my dear. Oops! I guess I meant ‘Darling.’”

Lily did her best to ignore the voice in her head. But other than the thrum-thrumming of Mrs. Darling’s heart, there was no other sensory input to latch on to. She kicked and wriggled and jiggled inside of her captor. Maybe she could at least make the bitch piss herself. She wanted to go back. She wanted to go back to her college graduation so she could at the very least-

“You’re never gonna see your parents in that memory, kid. They weren’t there the first time. You didn’t even get a text from them that day.”

Who was this voice in her head, anyway? Lily was now convinced that this voice was telling the truth. She’d never met anyone so coarse. So vile. So punchable. No way could she have imagined it.

“Name’s Levi. But I can see you’re real busy, goin’ crazy and all. We’ll talk later.”

And then she was alone.

“What exactly do the little pink ones do?” Melissa asked. For weeks the doctor and his staff had had her doped up on pills. They were fantastic, but she still had no idea what they were. “At first I thought they were for my stomach or something, but those were the green ones.” The nurse smiled mysteriously and continued holding the tray with little pink pills on them. “Then I

thought they were to help me sleep, like benadryl. But I take them a couple times a day and I don't feel the least bit drowsy."

"Blue ones help you sleep," the nurse said.

"But what about the pink ones??"

"They're for your baby."

"How? Like prenatal vitamins?"

"They'll help your baby's development."

Melissa finished her lunch margarita. Strawberry. Extra sugar. The sweetness didn't wipe the sour expression off her face. "But I don't want my baby to develop. She's going to stay a little girl forever."

"I'm sorry," the nurse said. "Poor choice of words. What I mean is they'll help move her along to a more desirable state."

The wheels in Melissa's head started spinning. She had another life in her. Whatever she ate went into the baby, meaning the baby was drunk as a skunk. But that alone wouldn't have made her big baby act the part. She'd assumed that some kind of brain surgery happened before implantation, and for some reason, call it instinct, she'd been avoiding the pink pills, taking them sparingly. They gave her a kind of manic, giggly buzz, but there was something about them that made her reptile brain think of poison. "You mean...?"

"The more you take, the farther along your baby will be to being like a chronological baby. Why do you ask?"

The woman reached onto the tray and took an extra paper cup filled to the brim with the little pink pills. "No reason," she said, downing the things like they were tic-tacs. "Just curious."

"WOMP-WOMP-WOMP-WOMP-WOMP!"

Lily looked up from her desk. "Yes ma'am?"

"WOMP-WOMP-WOMP-WOMP!"

"Um...eighty three?" The other children laughed. Stupid Lily! Stupid! Always a step behind! They weren't even in math, right now! She glanced back down at her paper. She hadn't even been taking notes. Instead, a doodle in charcoal, a leftover from art class- and not a very good

one- was beneath her black smudged fingers. "I meant uh..eighteen eighty-three?"

"WOMP-WOMP!" More laughter from the other children. She looked around for help, or just sympathy from her classmates. A sea of polo shirts and plaid jumpers, all smiles but none of them friendly, stared back at her. Our Lady of Perpetual Disappointment never was a particularly welcome place for dreamers. Or lovers. Or her.

It was the best school in the county, though. That's why Lily's parents had invested so much money into her tuition and insisted that she attend, even though all of her real friends went to the public school a few blocks from their house. "Please don't tell my parents!" she blurted out.

"WOMP-WOMP!"

More laughter from the surrounding Peanuts Gallery. This was a mean-spirited, soul crushing place. It was hard enough making friends without being shipped off to a private school. Something was stuck in her craw about that idea. Lily chewed on her tongue as the laughter continued. Why was she so much taller than the other kids? "Can I please go to the bathroom?"

"WOMP-WOMP-WOMP!"

"What do you mean I already went?"

"WOMP-WOMP-WOMP-WOMP! WOMP-WOOOOMP?"

"Um...I'm on my period?" She lied. The classroom became a mass of confused furrowed brows, twisted disgusted grimaces; each child's knowledge (or lack thereof) of puberty shown clearly on their faces.

"WOMP-WOMP-WOMP!" The teacher laughed. "WOMP!"

"Oh yeah," Lily said. "I'm too young for that...aren't I?" She always was a crap liar. "Can I still go to the potty...err...bathroom?! Again?"

"WOMP-WOMP-WOMP-WOMP-WOMP!"

Lily's gaze traveled down the perfectly arranged isle of desks that the classroom was arranged into. The teacher was gone, or had she (he? they?) never been there? In the teacher's place at the front of the class for all to see was a pink plastic potty, decorated with a My Little Pony theme based on the drawing on the inside lid.

She pointed to the bowl. "You want me to...?"

“WOMP-WOMP-WOMP.” The teacher’s voice permeated the air. As if on command, she felt her bladder fill up like a balloon attached to a spray-hose.

“Or you’ll tell my-?”

“WOMP-WOMP!”

Lily didn’t dare call the teacher’s bluff. On shaky legs and a full bladder, she stood up. Titters and jeers, dares and bets, snuck behind Lily as she waddled to the front of the class. This wasn’t right. This wasn’t right.

She wasn’t a kid anymore. She was an adult! Fuck. Even doing this to a kid was wrong. Still, a strange force flowing through her veins compelled her to continue this bizarre performance piece. The script had already been written, and it wouldn’t stop until she heard the sound of urine emptying out into a tiny plastic bowl.

As she sat down on the plastic potty, cotton panties around her ankles, she looked up to an empty classroom. The children were gone. The teacher, who was never there to begin with, was gone.

It was just her, the plastic potty, and someone- something- else.

“Ooof…” A voice said. “This took a weird turn.” The classroom door opened. Wearing a dark green teacher’s uniform, leather patches on the elbows and all, the scuzzy looking man with the snakeskin boots entered. “Most people just end up naked in these kinda things.”

A surge of modesty and embarrassment rocketing through her, Lily yanked up her clothing and stood, pointing to the door. “Get out!”

“Most people are just naked in these kinda things,” the man ignored her. “But you? Your brain went all out. There’s a lot to unpack here.” He looked around. “Not completely your fault, though.”

“Get out!” Lily repeated.

The faux-teacher turned his back to her. “Fine, fine,” he called back over her shoulder. “I’ll just let you get back to…” he motioned around the room, which was rapidly becoming a mixture of the worst elements of a private Catholic and a public nursery school, “whatever THIS is.” Lily was certain that there hadn’t been Alphabet Block banners running around the length of her old classroom.

“Wait!” she called out. He stopped. “Don’t leave.” He took a seat at an empty desk. She took her seat, not even caring about the dry rustle of her undergarments- wasn’t cotton softer than this?- beneath her. “I’d rather talk with a hallucination than just to myself.”

“Fair enough.” He leaned back in his chair, propping his feet up on the desk. He cocked his mouth to the side. “This,” again he motioned around the room. “This never happened, right? The toilet thing? Cuz it seems a little messed up, even for Catholics. But I can never tell with them.”

Lily shook her head, her bangs swishing a half second behind her. “No. Not all at once. I had a teacher back in Elementary school who liked to embarrass students up in front of the class...and in pre-school we had communal potty training, where we all had to sit with our pants down around our ankles. I was so embarrassed that I never went, even if I had to.”

The intruder scratched his patchy beard. “Ah! A mis-mash of memories. That tracks, all things considered.”

“Considering what?”

Her question was ignored. “My money was on a spanking, what with the whole school girl thing.”

A rueful laugh came from her. “Probably. The Principal was a fan of corporal punishment, but only he was allowed to dish it out. In his office,” she added. “I vaguely remember spanking being allowed at daycare. If you hadn’t interrupted things, I’d probably have ended up over someone’s knee but with a wooden paddle to boot.”

“The worst of all possible worlds.” Snakeboots nodded knowingly.

“Hardly,” Lily said. “I can count on one hand the number of times I actually got punished at school. The real hurt came from my parents.”

“Whooped ya good, huh?”

“Naw. Just more talks about what a disappointment I was being. How I was wasting my potential. How I was too impulsive and didn’t think things through and needed to grow up and they didn’t work so hard so that I could yada-yada-yada.” Lily made a yakking motion with her hand. “And then they’d go quiet...” Even in her hallucination, Lily couldn’t stop from going teary eyed. “My father once went a week without talking directly to me. And he did it on purpose. Just because I got a B on a math test.”

“It sucks not being able to live up to your father’s expectations, stated or otherwise, doesn’t it?”

“Mom’s too.”

He shrugged. “I guess.”

“Who are you?”

“I already told you.” he said. “I’m Levi.” Then he pointed at the hem of her skirt. “Your hearts are faded, by the way.”

Lily flipped back her skirt and examined her panties. Sure enough, the dry cotton had been replaced with a warm wet squish between her legs, and the fade-when-wet designs on the crotch had gone the way of the dodo. In place of the familiar white cloth of her normal panties was a cartoon face smiling up at her. Minnie Mouse.

And then all was darkness. Alone and naked and almost toothless. Floating in the void of her artificial womb.

As the cold gel was squirted onto Melissa Darling’s pregnant belly, she shivered involuntarily, causing her water bed of a belly to jiggle. It jiggled a bit from the inside too, she felt. “Someone’s a happy baby.”

“At this stage in her development, it’s probably just an unconscious reflex.” Dr. Anguis told her, smoothing the blue goop around, spreading it like jam. “At this stage of her development, she’s lost conscious awareness of her immediate surroundings.”

“But her kicking, it’s getting harder and harder,” the expectant mother said, starting to fret. “It’s starting to hurt.”

Dr. Anguis readied the sonogram wand. “That’s because she’s starting to regain the use of her limbs. She actually IS starting to kick.” The woman looked down at her giant pregnant patchwork belly. What had the girl been hitting her with before? “But,” Dr. Anguis interrupted her worried thoughts, “they’re getting less frequent, too, aren’t they?” They had been. “That’s because as her body is regaining strength, her conscious thoughts are receding more and more into the background. It’s more of an unconscious reflex at this point.”

“Kind of like tickling a sleeping person’s foot with a feather?”

“You could say that. Speaking of which,” he flipped a switch and put the wand to her gut, “this may tickle a little bit.”

A black and white image popped up on the screen. Melissa let out a wordless whisper of astonishment. It had been nearly two months since she’d last seen the girl. Still curled up in a

ball, eyes closed, the baby was just as adorable as she'd remembered.

"She has her thumb in her mouth! She's sucking her thumb! Just like a real baby."

"She is a real baby." Dr. Anguis said. "Your real baby."

"My real baby..." It sounded so right hearing those words coming out of her mouth. "OOOOF!" Melissa exhaled, as in real time the big little girl squirmed and kicked against the edges of the artificial womb. Not once did her eyes open or did her thumb come out of her mouth, however.

"Bit of a tickle..."

Where was that god-awful noise coming from? Lily shook the railings of her crib with her free hand. Sucking on her thumb, she rattled the side of her crib and stomped her feet, and screamed around her thumb. She was grumpy and wet and wanted a change and wanted to play and wanted num-nums, and she wanted it NOW!

It was her naptime, she knew, and she was having the most wonderful dream about being a grown-up like Mommy and Daddy, and painting the sky pretty purple and green colors. Mommy was explaining how the sky can't be green and it's almost never purple, but then the strangest noise woke her up.

It was this ugly, high-pitched drilling sound, like at a dentist (though little Lily couldn't remember exactly what a dentist was), and it hurt her ears and made her terribly cross. She cried and screamed and stomped and jiggled the railing on her crib, but Mommy and Daddy didn't hear her.

They probably could hear her, though. They just weren't coming. It was her scheduled nap time, and so Mommy and Daddy wouldn't come until the routine and schedule dictated they come. Schedule and routine and order and planning were important to Mommy and Daddy. It was supposed to be important to Lily too, and she heard them talking about how she'd "grow out of it," whatever "it" was supposed to be.

To calm herself, she sat down in her crib and kept sucking her thumb. Mommy and Daddy called it "self-soothing." She didn't want to self-soothe, however. She just wanted to BE soothed. Let someone else take the burden for once in her long, long, short life.

The bad noise kept going. Lily did her best to drown it out, moaning into her thumb and covering her left ear with her hand. Her right hand was busy, so she made do by leaning her head against her right shoulder and squishing her ears down that way.

It didn't work. The sound seemed to be moving, too. At her feet one moment and at her belly button the next, before traveling it to her ears. It tickled in a way. A bad tickle.

“Why not just take your thumb out of your mouth?” a voice said. A boogeyman slid out from under her crib. “Or use a pillow?”

“Wevi!” she shouted over her thumb. “Geph ow!” The girl laid down, head and feet touching opposite sides of the crib, trying to yank the covers over her head so that Levi couldn’t see her anymore.

Levi ignored her. “Or hell, climb out of your crib, and go find them.”

Lily looked at herself, past the fuzzy red pajamas she was in, over the bump in her crotch from the swollen diaper, paying attention- really paying attention- to just how far away her feet were from her head. She was five foot two; no giant, but she could get out of a crib this size.

Her right thumb still dripping with saliva, she gripped the sides of her crib, rose to her knees aaaand... aaaand...nothing.

“I can’t...”

“Oh yeah,” Levi said. “You can’t-slash-won’t.”

“Huh?”

“It’s complicated. So what now?”

“I...I don’t know...”

“How’s your trip down memory lane been goin’?”

“Bad.”

“Is this even a memory? I didn’t think anybody could remember being this little.” He pointed at Lily’s pajamas, bulge around her hips still obvious. “That’s a good look for you, by the way.”

Lily ignored him and scanned the nursery. “You know how there’s memory, and then being told stories so much that the stories become the memory?”

“Not really. I’ve never been this young.”

“Hmmm?”

“I’m your hallucination, remember?”

“Oh...yeah....” Lily felt a strange disappointment at that. “My parents would tell stories about how fussy I was when I was a baby. How I’d scream and whine in my crib for hours when I didn’t want to take a nap.”

“Lovely...”

“And then they’d always end with how they broke me, how they ignored me everytime I did something they didn’t like and I grew out of it.”

“Story of your life, huh?” Levi went over to the changing table. He pulled out a bizarrely large diaper, one that could fit Lily, and turned it over in his hands. “They didn’t like how you did in school so they withheld their love and gave you the silent treatment. They didn’t like your choice of major, so they cut you off and didn’t even show up to your graduation.”

“That’s why I’m big, but still in a diaper.” Lily realized. “I’m unconsciously drawing parallels.”

“Sure...that’s why.” Levi unfolded the diaper, leaving it open on the changing table. “Come on,” he grabbed Lily by the armpits, lifting her out of her crib. “Let’s get this over with.”

“Get what over with?” Lily rode on the man’s hips, looking down at the floor, looking down at his snakeskin boots.

“I doubt they’re looking for you now, are they?” Levi said.

“Yeah,” Lily agreed as she laid down on the table, oblivious, as Levi unpopped the buttons on the inseam of her pajamas. There was that drilling noise again.

“That’ll be over soon enough.” Lily felt her legs raised as the foot coverings on her jammies were maneuvered out of the way. Where was that annoying noise coming from? She hated it.

Refocusing, she craned her neck and saw the discoloured yellow that had crept all the way up to the front of her Pampers. “You’ll have new parents soon, or at least a new mommy.” The clean diaper was already unfolded and beneath her, a little trick to minimize changing time. “Let’s get all of these nasty old thoughts and memories out from under you and start you over with a clean slate, yeah?”

As he reached for the tapes on her diaper, Lily managed to come to her senses. The sounds of tapes being ripped off caused her to scream out.

“NO!”

She was alone again...and only the high pitched drilling noise was there to keep her company.

Melissa ripped open the box, and a chorus of ooohs and awwws accompanied it as she pulled out the frilly pink dress. “Awww! It’s just too precious!” she said. “Thank you Marissa!”

It wasn’t really a dress, not functionally. The hem was too short to hide much below the waist. The shoulders were so wide that it would slip right off anyone small enough to want to wear it. It was sized for an adult, but no adult woman in their right mind would choose it. The bright pink color with frilly trimmings along with the picture of a lamb on the front didn’t exactly add sex appeal either.

It was perfect.

“Keep digging!” Marissa urged. “There’s more.”

Another friend, Clarissa, obliged and picked the discarded box up off the floor, handing it back to Mrs. Darling. The expectant mother had all but lost the ability to bend over for the past two months. She dug into the box, rifling past several more layers. An adorable pink bonnet and matching rhumba panties came out.

More ooohs and awwws. “She can be your Little Bo-Peep,” Alissa offered. Melissa, Clarissa, Marissa, and Elissa all tittered good-naturedly at Alissa’s joke.

It was a party; a baby shower, of course. The words “It’s a Girl!” hung on the well-used banner that the Institute kept, with enough pink balloons to blot out Melissa’s window. Some of her oldest, closest, and most jealous friends came to support her.

Baby showers at the Ponce De Leon Rebirthing Institute were heavily vetted and widely encouraged. It was good for morale. It was good for normalization. It was good for business.

Today, the ladies would be celebrating all night long with luxury spa treatment, especially decadent food (all bite size and baby themed in some way), and of course, bottomless mimosas. Enough to give them a taste of what the Institute could offer them. Alissa, Clarissa, Marissa, and Elissa would all spend the night in actual guest suites, and the notion of having their very own adult-babies would be subtly reinforced so that their longing for children would be redirected towards Dr. Anguis’s program. Not every woman who attended an Institute baby shower would immediately go looking for their own surrogate, but almost every expectant mother staying there had attended a friend’s baby shower first.

All around the room bibs, onesies, and rompers and dresses short enough to crawl in had all been unwrapped, admired, and then neatly folded. An adult-sized highchair had been unwrapped, but not unboxed and leaned in the far corner of the room, stapled to gift receipts for a changing table, diaper pail, play-pen, and crib, all to be delivered at a later (but not too much later) date.

And of course the floor was littered with packs and packs of what any new mother would gladly welcome- diapers. Thankfully, all of it would fit Baby Darling once she was welcomed back into the world.

“Where did you all manage to get these wonderful gifts?” Melissa asked, already knowing the answer.

“The Institute has a registry,” Clarissa volunteered. “We were able to get everything you and your baby needed there.”

Elissa spoke up. “I got the diapers from a fetish site.” She pointed to a pack of adorable baby diapers sized for an adult, indistinguishable from the other packs. “It was cheaper.”

The color drained from Melissa’s face. “A fetish site?”

“Yeah,” Marissa agreed. “There are perverts who get off on dressing up like babies.”

“But...but why?”

Eyes turned to Marissa and Elissa, suddenly the experts on deviancy. Elissa shrugged. “Who knows why people get pervy...”

Maybe Melissa WOULDN’T recommend that those two be admitted to the Institute.

An uncomfortable silence filled the room. Eyes and doubts were cast. Then Mrs. Darling felt a blow from within that almost knocked the wind out of her. “Ooof!” she said. “Someone’s restless this afternoon!” She looked down at her tummy and gave it a pat. “I think she just woke up from her nap.

“Oh my god, let me feel!”

“Me too!”

“And-”

They all scrambled around her to get a feel as the baby churned and squirmed and kicked.

“I can feel her!”

“She’s kicking!”

The glow in Melissa rose up another three watts. Oh, how lovely to be a mother and the center of attention! Oh, to be the envy of every other woman in the room! How lovely to be a vessel of life and to be able to feel the little angel inside of you kicking.

Her artificially attached tummy jiggling like a water balloon, Melissa gave the belly a pat, pressing the palm of her hand lightly but firmly to give her future daughter something to push up against. "Someone must know we're talking about her."

Giggles and awwwws ensued. "That is so cool!" Marissa exclaimed. "Just like a real baby!"

Melissa gave a wry, knowing smile. At least one of them was hooked. "That's because she is a real baby."

Lily was alone in the darkness. What day was it? The third? The fourth? An eternity? Time had lost all meaning for her.

"There are worse hells to be in," the now familiar voice chimed in. "But yeah. Anything going on forever can be turned into torture." He walked out of the darkness, a thug in a garish green suit. Like a cartoon mobster; some kind of Batman villain. He even had a matching green fedora. But, just as always, he wore those snakeskin boots. "It's why Heaven has gotta suck. Forget Hell by fire, try Hell by boredom. When you've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun... you've probably run out of shit to do." Pure darkness, but he shown like a beacon of light. "Knowing you don't have any less days except to warm up your singing voice...that's gotta suck."

Lily rolled her eyes. "You again..."

"She talks. Not bad, kid."

"I'm hallucinating again, aren't I?" She rolled her tongue along her full set of teeth. Definitely hallucinating.

"You could say that. Just like you're hallucinating that you're here this time. All out of flashbacks. All out of time."

It was less that she was in the darkness now, but in a well lit room painted completely black. Standing out in a starless outer space, yet still able to see perfectly. "What do you want?"

"I just came to say my goodbyes. It was nice getting to watch you relive your regrets." He smiled softly. Awkwardly. "We're about done here."

A tremor ran through her. “Done? What do you mean, ‘done?’”

“You’ve been here for about three months, give or take.” Levi said. “Back’s all healed up, your veins pumped full of booze and you-don’t-even-wanna-know. You’re about cooked.”

No further explanation was given. He just stared at her.

And stared.

And stared.

“So...what happens next?”

For the first time, the hallucination of a man broke eye contact. “They cut you out, make sure Lily Chen is dead and then you spend the rest of your life as a really, really, REALLY, realistic facsimile of a baby.”

Lily shook her imaginary head. Was she hearing this correctly? “But you just said I’ll be dead...”

“Not technically, but-”

“You just said-”

“I mean, you’ll still be ‘alive.’ You just won’t be you. Lily Chen will be dead. But Baby Darling will be re-born.” Then he flashed her a thumbs up. “Congrats. You’re a bloodless human sacrifice.” Another silence as Lily’s jaw hung open. “Yaaaaaay....”

“What are you?”

“I’m Levi.”

“But WHAT are you?”

Levi took his fedora off and did a little bow. “Please allow me to introduce myself. I’m a man of wealth and taste.”

Lily caught the reference. “You’re just a hallucination.”

“Then why’d you ask?” Lily didn’t have an answer for that. “To be fair, the two aren’t mutually exclusive. I can be both.”

Lily had the sudden urge to turn her back to the amalgamation of every sleazy guy that’d ever

hit on her. Years of being forced to go to church gave her the sudden reflex to tell him to get behind her. Instead, she maintained eye contact, defiant to her own fears. "You're not real," she said.

"Then what's the harm in making a little deal?" He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out the reddest and shiniest of apples. "C'mon. Take a bite. Just one little bite." He offered it to her.

"And then what?"

"You'll be born. But not re-born."

"And what do you get?"

"Please allow me to introduce myself..." He winked.

Lily reached out and took the apple from Levi. "This is just a hallucination. This is my brain making up fantasies."

"Sure it is. Take a bite."

"Souls don't really exist."

"Not at all."

"And if they do, they're not something that persists after you die. They're just a metaphor for personality...or consciousness."

"So I'm making a really bad deal here. Oops. Joke's on me."

"And biting into this apple- which doesn't really exist- won't change anything."

"Makes sense to me."

"I don't even know that you're telling the truth."

"Nope. This is all something you imagined. Everything. Even what I've told you so far. Even what I'm saying now. It's all just false hope."

"But what's the harm in a little hope?"

"Exactly...!"

With a full set of imaginary teeth, Lily crunched into the apple...

“So I told Jack-” Melissa began to tell Jolene. She stopped mid-sentence. That kind of hurt. It almost felt like a crunch. Like something was taking a bite out of her.

“What?” Jolene asked, taking another sip of her margarita. “What?” Melissa Darling felt a trickle down her leg, like she was peeing herself. “What?” Jolene pressed, sitting up in her deck chair for the first time all morning. “You told Jack what? Hurry up. I’m gonna get induced before you finish this story at this rate.” Jolene was less than a week away from her scheduled due date, and wouldn’t shut up about it unless she was dead drunk.

Just because Jolene had introduced her to the Institute and had managed to get her step-daughter implanted a whole two weeks before Melissa had gotten her surrogate inserted, she liked to act so superior. As if two weeks were really that big a difference.

Not anymore.

A smile spread out across Melissa’s face. “My water broke!” She screamed in a perfect mix of panic and exultation. “MY WATER BROKE!”

The look on Jolene’s face was priceless.

The word was shaking, the darkness itself shuddering. Lily felt herself, her actual body, sloshing back and forth. The water level was draining. Her skin wasn’t touching open air, but it wasn’t completely encased anymore. Her long lost sense of touch was returning to her.

“Go go go go go!” the medical team shouted as they wheeled Melissa into the operating room. “This is not a drill! We have a live re-birth on our hands! Let’s go!”

The walls were collapsing in, folding down in on her like deflating airbags, smothering her. She gasped for air and nothing came. Lily tried to exhale and only a thin trickle of mucus dribbled out past her lips. She couldn’t breathe!

Surgeons crowded around Melissa. A nurse with smiling eyes looked down at her as she was all but slammed onto an operating table, her legs forced into stirrups. “We’re going to get your baby now, Mrs. Darling. “

“Not enough room. Not enough time.” One of the medical staff said.

Dr. Anguis was there, his great green eyes peering down past her and between her legs. “I agree.” He held out a hand. “Scalpel.”

Scalpel?!

“We don’t have time for anesthetic. This is going to hurt. It’s to be expected.. Nothing to worry about.”

Air! Air! Lily couldn’t breathe, but she could sense it. She felt the rush of air on her body. LIGHT! Covered in muck as she was, she could still feel the bright beautiful light through her closed eyelids. Desperately, she reached up, her arms brushing against a fleshy sack before her fingertips tasted open air.

Melissa saw the wretched black hand shoot out of where her bellybutton used to be. She felt shoulders and arms muscle their way out of her. It was like a clutch of wasp eggs had hatched inside a caterpillar. And she was the caterpillar.

The pain of the blade that cut her open was nothing compared to this. This wasn’t birth. This wasn’t even a C-Section. This was a live dissection.

Only now did Melissa Darling realize that she was the frog.

Sound! Glorious sound! The scream of victory sounded far away, but it was there as strong arms lifted her out and placed her on a hard flat surface. No more floating. No more mumbling. No more womp-womps of bad dub-step and Charlie Brown cartoons. The only heartbeat Lily felt was her own.

Out...finally out...but she still couldn’t breathe...

“Baby’s out!” Dr. Anguis yelled. “I repeat! Baby’s out!” Nurses and doctors rushed in, crowding around Melissa like petals closing in on a flower. Dead, useless flesh was cut away as the last remnants of her false uterus was yanked out of her. She’d never be able to have children again. There was a very real possibility that she’d just cut her own lifespan short with all the pressure and abuse that her internal organs had been put through.

She didn’t care. It would all be worth it if she could just... “Mrs. Darling, you need to lay down, we’re still-” Melissa shoved the man’s head out of her way. Damn quack was blocking her view.

She might have been asleep when her baby was put in her, but she was going to see her new daughter, damnit!

She'd paid for at least that much.

Paid for it with more than just money.

Grayish black, curled up into a ball, and slimy to boot, the form that was being lifted and uncoiled on the gurney seemed more like a giant tar baby than a real one. That?! That was what was inside her?!

That was afterbirth, not re-birth.

Dr. Anguis leaned over the form as it was stretched out, nurses already beginning to wipe away the muck with clean white towels, revealing that yes there was human flesh there on the gurney. His back to her, Melissa could only make out a few phrases as he was violently shoving a tube down the thing's mouth, if it had a mouth. "Don't panic! We've got several minutes until brain damage kicks in! And even then..." he let the thought trail off.

Melissa didn't have to wait several minutes. Moments later, he watched as black goo spilled out the tubes and into a waiting bucket. She didn't even notice as the doctors were shoving her own organs around, stitching here, sewing there, clamping and packing.

What she did notice was the petite little thing turning its head to the side and quietly vomiting up the rest of the pollution inside its lungs, and then laying still.

Very still.

Too still.

Oh god, please n-

"WAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

Melissa Darling started crying. She was alive! Her little girl was alive! She was a mother! Hallelujah to the old gods and the new, above and below, she was a mother!

"Congratulations, Mrs. Darling!" the good doctor said. "It's a girl!"

"It's a...it's a girl!" The energy started draining from her. Things were starting to slow down now that ordeal had passed. She was tired now. So tired. Why? Where was her energy going? The presence of a morphine drip jabbed into wrist answered her question.

“Lay back, Mrs. Darling,” Dr. Anguis said, his voice a soothing balm. “You’ve got your own healing to do. Both you and your baby have been through a lot.”

“My baby...”

The gurney started moving, moving away from the operating table. Away from her! Her baby! Where were they-?... On the verge of delirium, Melissa weakly called out. “Please!” She called out. “Please help! They’re taking my baby!”

“It’s okay,” she was shushed, “it’s okay. Baby Darling is just being cleaned up. You’ll get to see her after we’ve patched both of you up.”

“When?”

“Soon.”

Ceiling lights rushed by, strobing across Lily’s face. Squeaky wheels kept a steady uptempo marching beat as a pit crew of nurses cleaned the sludgy muck off of her and checked her vitals from stem to stern.

“Blood pressure normal.”

“Pulse fast but within normal parameters”

“Breathing resumed. Normal”

“Removing uterine tube.”

“Only minor scarring on the achilles tendon.”

“No obvious signs of infection.”

All the while, wet rags were being raked across her skin, and one nurse in particular- one with oddly smiling eyes, her face covered by a pink surgical mask- kept cooing to her in sweet, yet menacing whispers. “Welcome back to the world, little one. It’s okay. It’s okay. Nurse Lucy is here. Just a little longer and you’ll be alllll done.”

Two double doors opened and a chorus of mewls and whines mingled with the smell of stale urine. The nursery! “How’s it lookin’?” That voice! The voice that had been inside her head! No way could be here. No way could it be-

“Dr. Anguis,” a male voice said. “One of the babies is acting up! We just got her out of the incubator and she’s calling for her husband or something.” Then he added, “Hard to tell with no teeth.”

“Booster shot,” the voice- Levi- ordered. “Extra-concentration. Dial up the regression, dial back the cognition. Mommy might have to settle for a big 9-month old.”

“Yes Doctor Anguis.”

Over at the far side of the room, over the horde of nurses clamoring over her like ants on a carcass, Lily heard the cries as another victim was drugged to the point of overdose.

Tapes ripped.

Then, “Hewwwp! Hewwwp me! My huphand! Get my huphand! Hewwwwp!” Then, “Ow!” Then the words stopped, and only babyish wails could be heard where once there was a woman calling out desperately for help.

A diaper was placed beneath Lily. She weighed so little by now, it was easy to just lift her legs and slide it under. The diaper didn’t come up between her thighs, though. Not that it needed to. Lily was so weak that just leaving one unfolded beneath her would likely be enough to catch any dribbles from her overtaxed and underutilized bladder.

From her place on the gurney, Lily spotted the nurse, the one with the smiling eyes. Once again clad in those pastel pink scrubs , she was holding a syringe. It was filled to the brim with pink. Neon Pink. Pepto Pink. The same eery pink that had been pumped into her veins during her forced implantation surgery.

Only this batch glowed. There was something dangerous in there, Lily sensed.

“One more booster shot,” the nurse said. “Just in case there’s any big girl left.” Somehow, deep inside her, Lily knew that though it might not technically kill her, whatever was in that needle would be a lethal dose. Her body might remain, but Lily was dying today.

“Just a moment, nurse Lucy.” It was Dr. Anguis’s voice. A pair of disturbingly familiar dark green eyes, now amplified through lenses so thick they could double as magnifying glasses, looked down at her. They peered into her eyes, staring right deep down into her very soul.

Please. Please don’t do it. Find some humanity. Please, please, please, please! Just leave me be! The poor girl didn’t have the strength to say any of these things. The most she could do was think them.

Pray them.

The doctor's head swiveled to the nurse. "There'll be no need for that," he motioned to the booster shot.

Putting away the needle, the nurse started to complain. "But Doctor-"

"She's too far gone already. She broke on the inside. Any more chemical supplements and she'll go braindead. Our client isn't paying for a blob."

Lily heard a sigh. She sighed too, as the diaper was pulled up and safely fastened around her hips.

No shot today.

Not ever.

Deal well struck.

All sewn up where she could be sewn up and packed to the gills with gauze in the places where she couldn't be, Melissa Darling waited impatiently for the baby she'd paid so much money for.

They say that unconditional love first comes into existence when a mother lays eyes on her child. Melissa had read that somewhere. She knew it was true, however, once she saw her baby, freshly cleaned up, wheeled back into the room.

Still naked, save for the diaper, eyes squinting at the world, and mewling and moaning at having been taken from her nice and cozy womb, the adult sized baby was a site to see. The baby wasn't pretty, not in the same way that Lily had been. She was too skinny now, almost malnourished. Her skin was pale, as if she'd been locked away for too long.

The woman had been warned ahead of time that all re-borns looked like that at first, and she was assured that the baby would be brought back to an acceptable weight and complexion before the two of them went home, but she was objectively repulsive. Yet when Melissa saw that nearly toothless mouth, and heard that mumbling little cry, her heart melted. It might be a face that only a mother could love, but wasn't it fortunate indeed that she was now a mother?

Through the stinging of the pain, and of the fuzziness of the pain medication, Melissa had the nurses wheel her baby over her, and, against all advice, plopped the fragile, mewling thing in her lap.

The girl flopped her head onto her new mother's shoulder, nuzzling at the nape of her neck. The poor thing was already exhausted.

"You came out of me, full grown," she whispered to her baby. "But you're still my daughter. And you'll always be my baby." She kissed the dozing girl on the forehead. "My little Athena."

Minutes later, the glass sides came up and the tanning lights came on, leaving Lily on full display in that incubator with nothing but a diaper and her thoughts.

Her muscles atrophied and skin palid from months of being put into a conscious coma and locked inside a living box, it wasn't hard for Lily to close her eyes. Blinding light shined down on her, irradiating her flesh. Finally, there was a difference between light and darkness, between her eyes being open and closed.

It was a strange relief. Lily kept her eyes closed, not even wanting to look at the wretched thing she'd become. A feeding tube running down her throat via her nose dripped in high fat nutrients while an IV kept her hydrated. Some clinical part of her brain figured that steroid shots and other reconstructive treatments would be in her near future. No, it wouldn't be long before they tanned and fattened her up, putting her in the open air and bundled up like a newborn, but right now she didn't even feel remotely human.

But somehow, she was still Lily. They hadn't beaten her, yet. Not where it counted.

There was only one question: What now?

Pumpkin spiced latte. Lily was drinking a pumpkin spiced latte. What a lovely invention, the pinnacle of the human culinary experience: a warm milkshake that you can drink in the middle of the day.

So good. So filling. It felt so good to eat again. Thank the gods above and below that she could eat again. Three months of darkness; not seeing, barely hearing, and not being able to eat a damn thing. That was the worst part.

All better now.

Lily's eyes fluttered open. What a weird, lovely dream.

"Hello." It was a soft cooing voice. "Good morning," it said. Still not quite awake, Lily kept sucking on the straw. She kept drinking from the little nub, enjoying the warmth. This was the weirdest Starbucks ever, she imagined. "Good morning," the voice repeated, as dripping with honey as-

There was something off about Lily's pumpkin spice latte. It was sweet, and creamy, but not pumpkin spice. She suckled more. Definitely not pumpkin spice.

And what was this balloon in her face?

Her gaze drifted up and she made eye contact with Mrs. Darling.

"Thass right! Good morning!" Only serendipity, the fact that Lily had chosen to swallow right as she looked up, had prevented her from screaming. "Do you know who I am?" she asked, clearly not expecting an answer. "I'm your Mama. Can you say Mama?"

Lily didn't dare. It was a good choice. "Not yet!" Mrs. Darling cooed. Not yet you can't! But soon, Athena. Soon."

Athena? Lily must have been unable to hide the shock on her face.

"That's your name! Athena! Yes it is! Yes it is!"

It all came back. The delusion that she was a free woman was a little gift that she'd given to herself, a dream fading back into the aether. She wasn't at Starbucks. She was here. In the pseudo-hospital, with her pseudo-mother, in nothing but a very real diaper, and sucking very real milk out of a very real breast. She hadn't gotten away. Not by a long shot.

Two pairs of hands grabbed Lily by the waist. "Excuse us, Mrs. Darling, but it's time for your daughter's physical therapy."

"Physical therapy?"

"She was cooped up for a long time, Mrs. Darling," the second voice explained. "That means that if she's going to be able to crawl, we've gotta work her out."

"But I just-"

"We can practice having her crawl to you."

That changed her so-called-mother's tone in an instant. "Oh my! Yes!"

A thick mat, like the kind gymnasts used, was already on the floor where they placed Lily. Head down and to the side, she could only stare at shoes and slippers.

"Come to Mommy, Athena! Come to Mama!"

“Mrs. Darling, she can’t even lift her head up yet. She’s pretty much a newborn.”

Like hell she was, but Lily would play the part. “Aaaaaaghaagaa,” she let herself yell, mimicking the sounds of the poor souls stuck back in the newborn ward. “Aaaaaagh!”

“She’s trying to say Mama!”

“You bet she is, Mrs. Darling...” The therapist didn’t sound like they believed it.

Her captor was so in love with the idea of being a mother, Lily could probably get away with a lot. But Darling wasn’t her only captor. If she didn’t look the part, didn’t act the part to a tee, Lily could very well end up getting that booster shot.

Going along with the program, Lily lifted her head just enough to make sure she could, before plopping it down.

Or tried to.

She tried to move her head.

Nothing.

She couldn’t lift her head. It was a rock. The poor girl tried to move her arms, to try and just slide them along the floor. They were lead weights screwed onto her torso. She struggled, feeling herself break out into a sweat.

Lily grunted and groaned in earnest. “Look how she’s trying! Such a good girl!” Lily ignored the cooing. How would she ever be able to escape if she couldn’t even crawl?

Push. She had to push. She had to try! She groaned. She started to moan. *FUCK ACTING!* She had to...she had to...

That’s when Lily did something else that she hadn’t done in three months...

"Awww... Baby made her first boom-booms!"

One Year Later.

Melissa and Jolene clinked glasses in the kitchen of her spacious townhouse. Today was Tuesday, meaning “Chardonnay and Play”. Chardonnay for the grown ups. Play for the babies.

These little playdates were vital, Melissa had long concluded, to Athena's happiness as well as to her own.

It was so good to just reconnect with her old friend, as well as watch her little girl play with a peer. And, of course, there were things that only Mommies could talk about; the little stories and cutest things that non-Mommies just didn't get.

Like when Athena figured out how to squirt water up in the air by cupping her hands in the tubby and squishing them together. She'd giggled when a spout of water hit her in the face. It wasn't so funny the second time...or the third...or the fourth. A sound spanking had put an end to that, but it had been the cutest thing, anyway. Every day with Athena was a blessing and an adventure.

Melissa had always heard that one of the joys of parenthood was watching your child learn and grow. With Athena, she got to see the joy of discovery everyday, because Athena never really learned. She was content to be her Mama's little rugrat, crawling on the floor, picking her nose, and watching cartoons from her highchair. It might have been the alcohol transferring to the milk, but Athena especially liked breastfeeding on those chilly January nights before bed.

The little angel had never even bit her, not once, unlike some of the horror stories she'd heard while pregnant. And she'd been worried she'd have to remove Athena's teeth.

Other parents in the community got it. It was those kind of stories and experiences that no one else could relate to. You had to be there. You had to be in it. You had to be part of the community. You just had to get it.

Jack didn't get it. He was appalled and disgusted to learn that his estranged wife had gotten surgery to have a child of her own. He'd thought he was signing off on in vitro fertilization or a professional gigolo or something. Not this "monstrosity."

The nerve of that man! Imagine, calling a sweet little cherub like Athena a monstrosity! Fortunately, the NDA that Dr. Anguis had gotten him to sign as well the prenuptial agreement would keep Jack well out of her and Athena's life for the rest of his days.

Dr. Anguis had even hinted that there might be people interested in older babies, too. Babies that were cute and cuddly, but that people could care for and outlive. Jack might find himself with a new outlook on life in a year or two, should the movement pick up speed. It could be the next and final phase of Elder Care: Late Onset Infancy.

The poor man really did have no idea what he'd signed. Neither had Athena, though, and look how happy she was!

Mirroring their parents, the children guzzled down bottles of grape juice while Melissa and Jolene sipped from their wine glasses.

“I’m so glad that Tiffany and Athena are such good friends.”

“They are, aren’t they?”

“Just like us.”

The two clinked glasses as they always did when making such statements, the clink drowned out by the banging of wooden spoons on pots and pans. Those were the only uses those pans ever got; it’s not like anyone in the kitchen ever cooked.

Looking at her baby girl on the floor, knowing that she would be just as precious today and tomorrow as she was yesterday and the day before, Melissa took another sip and smiled. She never had lost that glow from her pregnancy. She really was the luckiest mother in the world.

Lily (*not* Athena) was playing on the floor with Tiffany. Play-acting was a more accurate description. Having managed to maintain her sanity and somehow avoid the dreaded booster shot, she understood every word that was said to her, about her, and around her.

Friends? Ha! These weekly meetings were more of a chore. The darkness of the womb didn’t seem so bad compared to having to both babysit Tiffany and make it look like she was being sat as well. Lily really had no idea how the poor girl was going to survive.

Tiffany wasn’t nearly as cognizant as Lily was. The girl was completely out of her gourd. Lily’s nose wrinkled as the other girl giggled mindlessly, clapping and banging on the pots and pans for good measure. Tiffany had shit herself at some point and badly needed changing. Lily wondered how the girl didn’t have a rash from front to back, let alone an infection.

Comparatively speaking, she’d gotten lucky. Mrs. Darling at the very least changed her regularly, and attempted to interact with her, even if it was only on an infant’s level of interaction. Tiffany was close to being neglected, a beautifully gift-wrapped box with nothing inside. But Lily didn’t dare bring attention to the mountain of shit caking her fellow prisoner’s backside.

Did mental one-year-olds care about the smell of other one-year olds’ diapers? Lily wasn’t sure. She’d spent the last year pretending to be a big baby, enduring bathtimes, highchair, bottle, and breast feedings, diaper changes, and photos, all while trying to look distant and cute.

For the time being, she had no recourse other than to play the part, and wait for an opening. That opening wouldn’t come anytime soon, however. She still couldn’t bear weight on her feet,

thanks to her Achilles tendon being surgically altered. Crawling was her fastest way of self-propelled locomotion.

Even if she dared to pull herself out of her crib in the middle of the night, where would she go?

Mrs. Darling had stolen her away to a bizarre gated community run by the Institute. Adults babbling in diapers were the norm here, not the exception, and the families who didn't have a big baby didn't seem to mind. Most were in the market for them. Stroller walks through the local park and shopping cart rides in the local grocery store had cemented that notion.

Lily was as trapped as any of the other Pamper pushers in this place. The only difference was that she knew it.

Perhaps that's why the devil in the snakeskin boots had made her that deal. All she'd really managed to do was damn herself twice. Hell in Hell and Hell on Earth; it was all the same to her.

Lily frowned as her gut started to rumble. Time to poop.

That had been a hallucination, hadn't it? She hadn't really sold her soul for a devil's deal. That was the crazy and the isolation talking in harmony with booze and pills being fed to her via Mrs. Darling. Lily had just managed to fake out the doctor into believing that she didn't need that mind numbing booster shot. She was an awesome liar, after all.

She'd become one, anyway. The poop came out easily, sliding into the back seat of her diaper as it had hundreds of times before. She wasn't un-potty trained, or incontinent. She still knew all the intricacies of a flush toilet, and was always very aware when she was peeing or pooping her pants. But after a year of wetting and messing her diapers, combined with the atrophy of not using her bladder and sphincter muscles for three whole months, the whole thing just came so easily to her as to be second nature. She didn't even try to hold it in anymore. She probably WOULD need to be re-potty trained once she escaped...if she escaped.

Load fully settled in, Lily crawled over to the kitchen table where the two Mommies sat drinking Chardonnay at 10 A.M. She smiled and cooed, putting her head in Mrs. Darling's lap. "Mama."

"Oh, she's so affectionate!" Mrs. Darling's friend commented.

Lily gummed her tongue, avoiding the few rocky teeth jutting in her mouth as Mrs. Darling lovingly stroked her hair. "And I think I know why," Mrs. Darling said. "Athena always gets cuddly right after she goes number twosies in her onesie. Sometimes," she added, "it's like she thinks Mama means poopie." Bitch had no idea how right she was.

"Awww, did somebody make a boom-boom?" Tiffany's stepmother pinched Lily's cheeks. "Yes

she did! Yes she did!" She looked at Mrs. Darling. "Good thing too. For a second I thought it was Tiffany who needed changing."

Mrs. Darling stood up and put down her wine glass. "It still might be."

"I'll check her when you two get back. Mama's gotta find the bottom of this glass."

As she was led away for yet another diaper change, Lily wondered if her parents, her *real* parents, were worried about her, still looking for her...or had they given up on her again?

Maybe ignorance really was bliss.

(The End)