Part V: The Refugee

Maia confirms that her schedule for the evening is clear, before throwing herself into the conundrum of Colleen Mosley. She briefly considers returning to Rook City to her house to work, but the computer in the Freedom Five headquarters is five times faster. It’s late at night and everyone’s already gone home for the evening. HQ is quiet and her footsteps echo on the tile floor. The silence is exactly what she needs right now.

She settles in and calls up the footage of each of the incidents involving the purported Colleen. Using an algorithm that extrapolates pixels from surrounding information, she zooms in as far as she can.

She watches the footage several times, making copious notes. Then she switches to the file the police provided. The video doesn’t reveal some smoking gun that proves one way or another that Colleen Mosley was or was not participating willingly. Maia sighs and starts to think.

Maia will agree that the cop⎯the one who seemed bound and determined to ruin his career⎯was right that this woman on the footage was Colleen Mosley and she had been taken by her mother around age nine to live with the Citizens. The power similarities and physical similarities are too clear. How many people could there actually be who are able to do this stuff and are the right age and have the right physical appearance?

But a nine-year-old girl is not a twenty-four-year-old woman. She’s had plenty of time to drink the Kool-aid. The video evidence straddles the fence, so Maia will have to think about the possible explanations instead.

It boils down to two seemingly equally possibilities: she’s been held more or less hostage for fifteen years and has just now been rescued or she’s working for them and with them and now they have a potentially deadly Citizen locked up in their extra-dimensional prison.

Paul was certain she’s innocent. Of course Paul was certain. Paul thinks the best of everyone until he absolutely can’t any more. She can essentially discount his opinion entirely. Tyler was equally uncertain, and his point about her being a plant made sense to Maia when he said it. Meredith’s argument in her favor comes mainly from the science, which Maia is inclined to respect. Of course, Meredith’s science can swing in the other direction too, because her argument basically comes down to “She could have utterly demolished us, but she didn’t.” Not the sort of thing to inspire confidence.

And then there’s Ex-Patriette. Setting aside the fact that Maia hates that she can get under her skin so easily, she’s got good reason to believe that Ex-Patriette knows more about the Citizens than she lets on⎯way more. The exact nature of her prior encounters with them remains a mystery, but given how Ex-Patriette feels about people with superpowers generally, they must have been negative. And then she goes out of her way to stick up for Colleen.

Maia can’t stress this enough: Ex-Patriette does NOT go out of her way to stick up for people. No. Doesn’t happen. Ex-Patriette HATES the Citizens⎯for some probably very good reason⎯so there’s no way she is suddenly some long-con plant for them, trying to ingratiate their superweapon into general society. She HATES being heroic and selfless, so her honest assertion of the woman’s good nature is worth more than a hundred of Paul’s. And frankly, though Maia has a laundry list of reasons not to trust Ex-Patriette, it’s an... honest sort of distrust. She wouldn’t trust her with a prisoner to turn over to the cops, but Maia knows that Ex-Patriette will always be straight-forward. No underhanded tricks. No sly game-playing. What you see is what you get. Finally, more than any of the other heroes she knows, Maia is certain that Ex-Patriette knows a thing or two about how villains really operate. If Ex-Patriette says that Colleen is in danger, well Maia’s inclined to believe that. Ex-Patriette is the exact kind of cynical, self-serving, antihero who is nevertheless entirely trustworthy, and her opinion pushes Maia’s over the edge.

...So that’s it then. Maia’s gonna help the woman who killed a cop. She’s going to help the woman who killed a cop because Rook City’s worst vigilante says to. And because it might be the only way to keep said woman from obliterating a city or two.

Maia needs a drink.

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The next morning is a blur for Brian. In some sense, it is like nothing had happened. He goes through cold cases and tracks down some dubious leads. There is stale coffee and the best bagel this side of New York. His officemates are as indolent as ever.

But things are also different. Brian, though perfectly willing to go toe-to-toe with his superiors, tends to avoid the notice of his fellow officers. Today, he can’t. The eyes of the entire Meta Unit follow him every time he leaves the tiny Missing Persons’ office.

He tries to go get another cup of coffee, but a few detectives from Major Crimes waylay him.

“So, Bender...” one begins, chummily. “When are you going suit up in tights?”

Brian reflects that adult life can be unfairly like high school at times and refills his cup.

Another one, frustrated that Brian did not respond, elbows him. “What’s your name gonna be? The Brown-Noser?”

Brian meets the officer’s eyes. “Oh, I don’t know. I was thinking ‘The Closer.’ How *is* your closure rate, MacFelton?” Brian smiles and turns away while MacFelton tries to think of a retort.

He is actually feeling good when he sits down to look up a phone number for another case. Then Corcoran comes in.

“The shift lieutenant wants to see you.” Corcoran presents this information briefly and bleakly. Brian winces inwardly; as his immediate supervisor, Corky probably already got raked over the coals by the lieutenant. Brian doesn’t mind sticking his own neck out⎯takes some perverse pride in it⎯but he doesn’t like seeing his buddy take the fall for him.

The shift lieutenant yells at him for thirty minutes straight. He has no respect for authority. He acts like the chain of command is a suggestion. He embarrassed the Deputy Chief. He’s an embarrassment. An embarrassment and nepotism won’t get him much further. And he’s dragging Corcoran and Matthew down with him.

“Wait a minute, *sir.*” Brian can feel the fury rising up within him. “Neither of them had anything to do with this. This was my decision, my case, my call, my ass. You wanna get mad at me for doing my job, fine. But I’m not gonna just stand here and watch you obliterate two good cops’ careers ‘cause of me.”

The lieutenant’s answer is cold. “Oh, you’re not? I’m hella curious to know what you’re gonna do about it.”

Brian reaches for his badge, supremely tired of this shit and feeling the aches from his injuries acutely. The lieutenant shakes his head. “None of that bullshit. You are NOT going to quit and then say we forced you out. You’re a damn hero thanks to your work on the streets with the Citizens and you’re not getting the easy way outta this. No, you’re on desk-duty and everything you do has to be signed off by Corcoran and myself, but you are NOT walking away. I *know* your kind, Bender. You’re too much of a coward to even run away, so you push the envelope until we have no choice but to let you go. Well, you’re not pulling that shit in my unit.”

“BULLSHIT. I was RIGHT.”

The lieutenant sneers at him. “You were, were you? That’s not how the Deputy Chief read the situation. Seemed like Legacy shut things down out of respect for you, seeing as you got injured and just got out of hospital and all. Didn’t make it sound like he agreed with you at all. Now, get back to work and find some case other than the Mosley file or, I swear, you’ll be the Missing Person.”

With that, Brian is dismissed. He wants to hit something, so very badly. All these years, he thought the whole system was bullshit and he really didn’t care. He had convinced himself that he was going to do well in Missing Persons to spite his family and everyone else who said he just had issues with authority. It presented a puzzle, maybe, something to keep his mind occupied, but it was really just a pawn in the game of “Brian versus the Establishment.” Only now he actually cares.

Brian slumps morosely in his desk chair, and Corcoran gives him space. It used to just be about closing cases to spite the self-important yes-men that populated his family. Now, it’s a real person who might actually need his help, it’s saving the city, and hell the world, from a terrorist organization that’s planning more, he can just feel it, it’s about helping a man who’s spent fifteen years wondering what happened to his little girl. And Brian, the one that fate handed all these things over to, the one who pulled the blue file, went about it just like he does everything else, with a one-finger salute toward the people who could make his life miserable, and now he’s screwed it up for all of them. ‘Cause he knows Corky was right: this is his theory and no one else is gonna take up the banner if it isn’t him.

Brian tries to flip through files or just accomplish something, but if he isn’t hearing Patrick Mosley’s voice break talking about his daughter, he’s seeing Colleen’s face when he called her name. He might actually be losing it. When his brother strides into the room around 12:30 and demands lunch, Brian is so relieved that he leaps out of his chair without a word.

On the sidewalk, his brother’s ulterior motives become clear. “You owe me lunch at the very least, you know that? Brian, never in my life....”

Matthew’s dissertation on his brother’s failures is cut short by Legacy himself, who lands right in front of them. Both jump, though Matthew recovers faster, being a veteran of the Meta Unit. He salutes, and Legacy nods at him.

“Lieutenant. Detective, may I have a word?”

Brian is beginning to regret all this super-related attention he’s been dragging down on himself. Citizens are one thing, and honestly he does respect Legacy⎯look up to him even⎯but that does not mean that he wants to get all this attention from, oh, you know, the most famous person... ever. Somewhat dazed, he lets Legacy lead him a few steps away.

“Detective, we’re planning to visit the Block today, to speak with Colleen. They have her all fixed up, and we want you there for an initial interview.” They’re walking down the sidewalk casually, but Brian can’t help noticing that they’re attracting a *lot* of stares⎯even in Megalopolis, it’s an odd sight.

“...Me? Wouldn’t a Meta Unit or someone from F.I.L.T.E.R. be better?” Brian does NOT want to get into jurisdictional fights with those guys⎯he’ll lose and lose badly. He’d be in a losing position normally, and right now he’s certain the department would throw him under a convenient bus with gratitude.

“F.I.L.T.E.R. will get a shot at her no matter what, and she’s your case, isn’t she?”

Brian frowns, “She’s not really my case any more...”

Legacy gives Brian the sort of smile that would convince troops to go over the top into machine gun fire or to jump out of an airplane. Brian wonders how anyone ever says no to him. “Sir, I’m serious. I breached protocol in a big way and I’ve been reassigned.”

Legacy looks startled. “But, this is your case. You worked out who she was and did all the research into her background, and you even picked up the threads on other Citizen-kidnappings over the years. Of *course* you should be there when we do an interview with your victim.”

Brian mulls over the possible outcomes in his mind. If the brass were worried about him circumventing the chain of command before, well this will go over *great*. He goes along, and the shift lieutenant and, probably, the Deputy Chief will have kittens. His career is over. They enter a coffee shop and somehow reach the head of the line. Legacy may or may not pay for the coffee; Brian’s too shellshocked to really notice. All he can see right now is his entire future, flashing before his eyes. He’s always acted like he didn’t care about his career, but faced with the immediate possibility of walking away, he suddenly can think of a hundred things he wouldn’t want to lose.

“Detective Bender, if I may.” Legacy puts a hand lightly on Brian’s shoulder. He staggers slightly. “Detective, I read your files, and you strike me as a man of integrity.” Brian tries not to snort. Legacy ignores the noise and continues. “A true man of integrity. And, you know, there’s a thing about men... people of integrity that most don’t really get.” Legacy drops his voice to a stage whisper. “They don’t do well with authority figures.” Brian’s eyebrow shoots upward involuntarily. “See, authority figures, the rules, the bureaucracy: all that stuff reads as false to men of integrity. They never do understand why people lie and bottom-kiss just to get ahead. And they *can’t* do it because they have integrity. So when the system says ‘Bend your principles a bit and then you’ll be able to advance,’ most people go along because they figure they’ll be able to do more good with more responsibility. People with integrity just get the willies.”

Legacy pushes him gently to a table in the corner. “Detective, you’ve been fighting the system your entire career, and indeed most of your life. Mainly just spinning your wheels though, fighting because you want to. Now you’ve got a chance to actually fight the system for a reason. They are ready to write her off, the Megalopolis cops, F.I.L.T.E.R., frankly half my team. But you’re not, because you have great instincts and you’re the one who’s done the legwork and you’re the one who’s seen her in action. Don’t give up on her.”

Brian takes a shaky sip of his coffee. “It’ll be my career.” He feels suddenly maudlin. “All I’ve ever wanted to do was be a cop, and going against direct orders will be the end of that.”

Legacy considers him for several silent seconds. Brian does not feel uncomfortable, though he could see how someone else might be, under this intense gaze. Finally, Legacy smiles again, a different smile that he probably uses for scared children trapped in burning buildings or something like that. “You know, I met my wife when I saved her from falling out of a window.” His expression turns dreamy.

Brian is not fooled by the non sequitor in the least. “If you’re implying what I think you’re implying....”

Legacy shakes his head. “I’m not implying anything. Just saying, sometimes you meet a person who gets under your skin and you never, ever forget her. The way I see it, you’re faced with a choice: take the easy, ‘proper’ route and spend the rest of your life both wondering what if and hating yourself for folding under pressure or roll the dice and see what happens.”

“You’re asking me to go against my department, F.I.L.T.E.R., and the Freedom Five and say that I know more about supervillains than any of them. I’m sorry, but that doesn’t even qualify as ‘rolling the dice.’”

“Detective, would I be talking to you if I weren’t with you on this?”

Brian has to acknowledge that Legacy has a point. Legacy goes on. “I need you, Detective, because they don’t like us very much. The Citizens think we’re traitors to metahumans, or some nonsense. If she’s been brainwashed or trained or whatever by them, she might be nervous that we’re there at all. You know the case, you know the file, you’ve met with her father. I don’t know how she’ll feel about humans, but you’ll at least be able to talk to her about a familiar name.” Legacy’s voice is gentle. “Imagine how it must be, to suddenly find yourself ‘safe’ again after all those years, imprisoned and being interrogated by the people you’ve been trained to fear and hate. Yes, it’s putting your career in danger, but it’s putting your career in danger to come to the aid of a frightened victim. Isn’t that what you became a cop to do?”

Brian drains his coffee cup. Well, hell.

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Meredith runs the numbers from the data they’d collected from Colleen a third time. “Outstanding.”

Wraith and Meredith are sitting in the antechamber of an entrance to the Block, waiting for Legacy to arrive with that cop. The hospital wing ran the usual tests on Colleen to ascertain the breadth and depth of her powers. The results are stunning.

Wraith peers over Meredith’s shoulder to see the data.

“She can alter the flow of gravity relative to an object by touching it, and keep it that way until she undoes it, even from a great distance. She can heat or cool objects by exciting or calming their electrons. She has a constant magnetic field around her that acts like a sixth sense. She can cause seizures in people by touching them and disrupting their nervous system. She can rearrange molecules, forming and breaking bonds between atoms however she wants. She can even use hydrogen to fuse elements, but I suppose we saw that....” Meredith is trying to get it out her system now, so that she doesn’t completely geek out over the possible supervillain and ask her all the questions about the nature of reality that are currently bouncing around in her mind.

“Is she aware of what she’s doing?” Wraith’s line of thought is more practical than Meredith’s.

“In the sense that she does things on demand, yes. One of the researchers asked her if she would make ozone, and Colleen didn’t understand the instructions. Apparently science education is a bit lacking on Insula Primalis. After some circumlocution, she figured it out and was able to perform the task easily.”

“So, inherent knowledge but not the vocabulary to describe it. Seems to me that being able to control the fundamental forces of the universe could be a fairly unlimited power... Was she sweating it out, or were these just parlor tricks?”

Meredith frowns, swiping through the summary. “Observational notes... ‘These tasks appear to be simple for the subject and subject has not indicated that the limits of her power have been reached.’ That’s... worrisome.”

Wraith sighs, leaning against the wall. “Doesn’t matter if we keep her away from radioactive material so she doesn’t blow the place up if she can just create a singularity with her mind and bend light.”

Meredith looks up at Wraith. “I thought you’d had some sort of epiphany last night about her innocence?”

“I did. I still do. That doesn’t mean she isn’t dangerous; she can still be used as a tool by anyone able to get some radiation particles up next to her. Anything *else* that could be activated without her conscious control, besides the radioactivity?”

“...Besides some floating and shorting out a lot of equipment, no. You still think Tyler was right, and she’s a plant...”

“Just an unknowing one. They don’t need her permission to use her to re-enact Hiroshima.”

“Leave it to you to come up with the most cynical, yet innocent, explanation.”

Wraith shrugs, “I had a conversation last night that convinced me. Seems to be that her partner, Citizen Energy, will probably be coming after her, too.”

Meredith taps her foot impatiently. “If that’s what’s going on, this just got ten times harder. We can’t keep an *innocent* person here, but how the heck are we going to keep her safe from the Citizens, and thereby the world safe from her?”

“Constant guards, I don’t know. If she’s as powerful as she seems, maybe she just needs to be given a chance to protect herself.” Wraith always feels a bit touchy when people assume that a young woman needs rescuing without deeper knowledge of the situation.

“Well... we’ll just treat her like any of the other heroes who have come across our path. Most of them could be very dangerous too, and we give them the benefit of the doubt.” Meredith paces. “But what *else* won’t she know, besides the words to describe her own powers?”

“Probably how to use an iPod or what TiVo is. Would you *please* sit down?”

Meredith pauses and glances at Wraith sheepishly. “Sorry.” She sits in a hard plastic chair. “Mind if I ask who you talked to?”

Wraith briefly wonders who is more difficult, Legacy or Tachyon. “Ex-Patriette, if you must know.”

“...Really?” Meredith doesn’t try to hide her surprise. “Not the most.. social person I’ve ever met, but if you two get along....”

Wraith cuts her off. “No. She isn’t the most social person ever, and that’s why it stuck out to me. She’s bloodthirsty but principled enough to direct her impulses at people who probably deserve to bear the brunt of them. But principled enough not to kill innocent people isn’t the same thing as heroic. She doesn’t have a heroic streak in her, not like Legacy’s for example. So when she shows up and says to lay off Colleen, I listen.”

“Again, just the right amount of cynicism. What makes you think Ex-Patriette has good info?”

“Well, seeing as she has history with the Citizens, and I’d wager a long one, I assume that she would know.”

Meredith is about to ask another question, when the door opens. Legacy and the detective arrive, followed by the warden, who seems eager to get them gone. All four are led into the Block’s inter-dimensional space and into an interrogation room without even a pause for hellos.

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The room is tiny, but Colleen Mosley still seems dwarfed by the space. Her mass of black curls bounce weightlessly around her head and shoulders, revealing a thin, pale face. The orange jumpsuit hangs off her frame, and her chin⎯which is turned down as she refuses to meet their eyes⎯is more pointed than it probably ought to be. Her arms are cuffed to the back of the chair.

Legacy takes a seat across from her and smiles. “Hello, Colleen.” She doesn’t look up. The other three sit down in the other chairs and look to Legacy to continue. “Colleen, do you know who we are?”

It was meant as an icebreaker, more than anything, but Colleen answers. “Legacy, alias Paul Parsons. Powers include flight, strength, durability, speed, extra-sensory perception charisma. Superhero, leader of the Freedom Five, and enemy of the Citizens of the Sun.” Her voice is chilling as she rattles the facts off by rote memory. “Shall I continue?”

“Colleen, we aren’t your enemies,” Legacy speaks gently and calmly, betraying no sign of the shiver of fear that Brian felt.

“But I am yours.”

“We don’t think that you are.”

“I killed a police officer.” She spits out each word with venom, and Brian thinks his chair might be starting to lift off the ground slightly. There have to be *some* security measures, right?

Legacy sits back, startled by her tone.

“And I burned a building to poison your water supply. I am your enemy, Legacy of the Freedom Five. Go ahead, continue to prod me with your needles. Keep me locked up here forever. You will not break me.”

Legacy sits forward again. “Break you?! Colleen, we’re trying to help you.” Having seen it in action before, Brian recognizes that Legacy is turning on the charm.

Colleen pushes away from the table, recoiling in horror. Too late, Brian remembers that Colleen’s stepfather⎯or whatever you would call it⎯was Citizen Bold. God, she must have been exposed to charisma a hundred times over. Tachyon whispers something in Legacy’s ear that Brian can’t hear, and Legacy sits back again, looking horrified himself.

Colleen cannot get away any further, but she is shaking her desperately. “No, no, no. Don’t force me. DON’T FORCE ME!” The four of them breathe in sharply, but Colleen just stares at them, quivering in fear and rage.

Tachyon tries this time. “Colleen, none of us are going to force you to do anything. We know that they were making you do things that you didn’t want to do, and we just want to help you.” She speaks urgently, but her tone is very non-threatening.

“I killed a police officer.” She repeats herself with less conviction this time.

“Because they made you. The Citizens. Citizen Dawn, Citizen Bold, Citizen Energy.” Each name makes Colleen cringe slightly. “You aren’t hurting us now, Colleen, now that they aren’t here.” Tachyon’s tone is calming.

Colleen collects herself for a few seconds and sits down. “I killed the police officer just by touching her, but I could have done it a hundred ways just as easily. We are enemies, and I don’t want to talk about the Citizens with you.” Colleen’s eyes are hard.

Legacy interjects, “Colleen, you don’t have to take the fall for them...”

“I’m not taking the fall, I’m taking responsibility. Everyone back home will know that I am missing in action thanks to the Freedom Five and they’ll respect me for it.”

Wraith rolls her eyes. “They sent you to do the dangerous jobs, had some psycho torture you when you wouldn’t play along fast enough, beat the shit out of you, and then left you to die. I don’t think they’ll be pouring out a forty for you back on the island.”

Colleen stares uncomprehendingly. “...That was just disciplining the soldiers.”

“Seriously?” Wraith smiles sardonically under her mask. “You say disciplining a soldier, I say torturing a civilian hostage.”

Colleen narrows her eyes. “I am *not* a civilian. I’m a Citizen of the Sun.” She frowns at them. “I don’t even have to talk to you, except to say ‘Colleen Mosley, code name Citizen Matter.’”

The three heroes glance at each other, coming to a mutual conclusion. Legacy speaks first. “You are not a prisoner of war, because we are not *at* war with the Citizens. They are a terrorist organization, and when we capture their members, they’re being arrested. As criminals. Those people back there are criminals. They kidnapped you when you were a little girl and have you wrapped up in their lies. There’s no war between anyone and the Citizens, we just keep them from killing people and put them in prison when we can. That’s all. Now that you’re away from them, we want to help you get back into society and stay free of them.”

Colleen breathes shallowly for several seconds, trying to get her emotions under control. Then she raises her chin haughtily. “I am a Citizen and I have no need of your human society. If you will not allow me to return to my home, you might as well keep me here because humans are my sworn enemies and I could never debase myself by living among them.”

“What about your dad?” Brian’s voice echoes more dramatically in the tiny room than he had intended. The effect on Colleen is immediate.

“My dad...? Who are you?” she asks sharply,

Brian leans forward. “You know me. I’m the cop you didn’t kill. I’m the one you resisted to save. Thank you, Colleen, for saving my life.”

Colleen blinks at Brian, recognition dawning. “I.. I was tired. It was a fluke....”

Brian continues, ignoring her protestations. “I visited him a few weeks ago, and I’ve been talking to him on the phone a lot. He’s doing okay, but he misses you, a lot.”

“Liar.” Her voice is quiet and laced with acid. “They warned me about this too. The emotional manipulation. You people have no shame.”

The others are feeling disheartened by her response, but Brian can feel his gut telling him that he’s actually on the right track. He scoffs. “Who? Your stepfather? I know he did a lot of horrible things, and I wouldn’t put it past him to have done even more.” Colleen looks away briefly. “You really think he’d tell the truth about your father?”

Colleen shrugs. Brian puts his hand on hers. “Colleen, you know what they’ve done. You *know* they aren’t trustworthy. And they’re the ones telling you that we aren’t. We’re not asking you to take them on yourself. All we want is for you to join our side. We’ll get you back to your dad, back on your feet, and keep you safe from the Citizens.”

“But I *killed* someone, a police officer.”

Now Brian rolls his eyes. “No you didn’t. You were surrounded by that purple force field guy, Citizen Energy, and he was moving your body like a puppet. Something tells me you’ve been treated like a puppet a lot. Well, we’re all just interested in protecting people, and with your powers, everyone is a lot safer if the Citizens can’t pull your strings any more.”

Colleen sits back in her chair, defeated. “If you want to protect people, you should leave me in here.”

Brian wants to respond to her, to assure her that she has control over her powers, but Legacy taps him on the shoulder before he can say anything, The four of them step into the hallway.

Legacy gives Brian an encouraging nod. “You’re doing well with her. I think she actually trusts you.”

Wraith just looks annoyed. “We aren’t getting anywhere. Half the time she’s like ‘Oh, save me’ and half the time she’s like ‘I’m going to watch you all burn and then spit on your graves.’ Call me cynical, but I’d like to see her break out of her programming *before* we unleash her on an unsuspecting world.”

Tachyon seems to approve of Brian. “I say let’s send Brian back in, just him. I bet all four of us are really intimidating and he’s got a nice rapport with her.”

Legacy nods in agreement. “Good plan. We’ll be just down the hall, if you need us. Brian, you’ve been right about this case the whole way through. Don’t doubt yourself now.”

Brian struggles to keep the uncertainty out of his face and goes back into the room. Colleen keeps her attention focused on a floor tile.

“Colleen, we’re serious. We know that they’ve been doing awful things to you, and we want to make them stop.”

Colleen looks up, her green eyes sad. “You can’t.”

The lights go out, and a second later, the screaming starts.