

The Lost Thorn

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(GOODREADS SAMPLE – Ch. 1 & 2)

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Chapter 1

The story I'm about to tell you starts with one of THOSE days. Those that after some time end up as a scattered collection of broken scenes. I remember my dad had been executed two years before and the anniversary was on that day. I could hear raindrops clattering against the synthplastic of the ceiling, they dragged me out of the darkness.

When I woke up, my mouth tasted heavily to blood. My chest and throat hurt deeply below my flesh. My skin was cold and pale, my muscles toneless. My entire body felt heavy and sluggish, like dry wood grinding against itself every time I moved. There was blood on my skirt, my blouse was only barely covering my small breasts and my right hand throbbed according to the rhythm of my relented beating heart, it was swollen badly, yet painless.

The worst part of it all was a strange lag that tormented my mind. I willed my hand to move, yet several seconds passed before I could actually feel my fingers against my lips, and a few more before I opened my mouth and touched my palate. I was expecting to see blood on my fingertips, but there was nothing, not even the crystalline saliva I would have expected. I wouldn't have been surprised if I had coughed up a cloud of dust.

That day was the first time I experienced an Obsidian crash. I had been scoring Obsidian for quite some time by then, but I had never taken so much. Even if the drug had been there for quite some time, it flooded the city just recently and I have to say I didn't expect it to grow so fast. After all, why would people want to get high off something that makes you forget the best part of it?

If you take enough Obsidian in a short period of time, you "burn", which means that you enter an orgasmic state of increased activity, that is accompanied by pretty much every possible bodily pleasure; if it feels good, you feel it while burning. Sadly, I can't really attest to it.

The problem is that an Obsidian dose high enough to burn, is also high enough to provoke temporal global amnesia. You basically lose all memories from a couple of hours before the high, the entire high itself and thankfully, the horrible hours of bodily decadence that Obsidian provokes as its effects begins to fade.

When you start to come out of the best trip of your life, your stomach heaves with full force until the contractions are so painful that you can barely move. Any wounds you have reopen and start bleeding, your veins turn dark, your skin dries and cracks and you have nightmarish hallucinations which usually end up leading to self mutilation. That is "the crash".

By the time you are able to make new memories, you usually find yourself shivering in fetal position over a puddle of your own bodily fluids.

And if you burn and crash often enough, the failing coagulation in your body gives you bruises all over, your hair becomes dull and loses any color it had, your nails turn yellow and stop growing, you lose control over your perception threshold, making all stimuli potentially painful and annoying, and you lose your ability to maintain a stable body temperature, so you shiver all the time. There are probably some other consequences I haven't yet found, but I'll let you know when I do.

That day, as I came out of the last stages of crashing, I was spread over an imitation leather couch in my school's psychological intervention office, with doctor Marco sitting in front of me, behind a terminal desk. He was a man in his mid fifties, of silvering beard against dark skin. I remember he looked tired and disappointed, like most people do when dealing with me.

He was ranting about how I had just screwed up my future, but most of his words got lost in the afterwaves of Obsidian, that is until he said:

"This is Kiriana Fondegass, she will be working with mister Hunter as your Sentinel."

My heart would have jumped had it had the strength to do so. My senses were numbed still and I was completely disconnected from the flows of energy around me, yet I managed to throw my head to a side following his finger, my body moving like that of a marionette that is not well controlled, and I found a girl standing next to the door's arch, unsure of what to do with her hands.

She had light brown eyes, her long black hair was neatly gathered in a braid, her features were delicate and her expression, contrary to what I would have expected, was one of curiosity rather than pity. I immediately noticed the golden ring on her right hand, the pristine condition of her uniform, the wireless neural interfacing implant just below her left ear.

"You are a fucking corporate leech." I accused, sounding as if I had had too many drinks. Doctor Marco said something, but I continued anyways. "I'll beat the shit out ..."

"Enough Samantha!" Yelled doctor Marco, Kiriana seemed to be used to threats, as she merely looked away. I mean hell, of course she'd be. Nosy, annoying nerds like that got lucky if they were JUST beaten up. Doctor Marco was still talking, he had stood up and circled the desk towards me. "The only reason you are not yet expelled is because you were stoned when..."

"Burning." I interrupted with a quirk on my lips. "Weed stoned you. Obsidian makes you burn."

Doctor Marco lunged forward stopping his face mere centimeters in front of mine, close enough for me to smell his rotten breath and so fast that he made me wince.

"This. Is. Serious. Samantha. Kiriana has been given full Sentinel authority over you. If she comes as far as FEELING threatened by you, you will be expelled and go right into The Jammer." He filled his lungs heavily while moving away from me.

I got dizzy again, maybe because of his breath, maybe because only now I realized that Kiriana was basically another cop with mage-hunter training that could follow me into school, looking for an excuse to lock me away or execute me, just like they had done with my dad. I already had one of said officers on my back, but I guess I had somehow proven that I needed to be watched while I was in school too.

"Don't make the same mistakes your family did." Marco spit a particular kind of poison into those last words. And it worked. My brown eyes would have watered hadn't I been suffering from severe dehydration.

"I..." My voice trailed and I coughed without really feeling I had to. "I miss them." I looked back at Kiriana, her mouth was half open and she now had a compassionate expression sagging her eyes. Damn I was gonna beat those fancy implants of hers out of her head as soon as I had the chance. Why was she even here?

There was a knock on the door, and my mother's husband came in. Thick eyebrows, big nose, unproportionately bulky body and doing a poor attempt at hiding his anger towards me. He greeted Kiriana, doctor Marco and then grabbed me by the wrist, I jerked my arm free and stormed out of the room without saying a word. I hit my head against a wall outside, but I don't think anyone noticed.

The man didn't really talk to Marco, probably he and my mom already knew everything, so I never understood why I had been taken to that office in the first place, instead of just sent home, after I punched that kid and broke his jaw. Oh. Yeah, that's what I did, Kiri told me sometime after. Kiri? Yeah, Kiri. That's what I call her now. After the hellish weekend that came as fallout of my first Obsidian crash, I arrived on Monday clad in the intent of unleashing all my anger on the nerdy corporate leech.

I cornered her in the blind spot of a ClearSight security camera as we were on our way to the school transport, and she broke into crying before I even began talking. I remember I debated for a second whether to hit her anyways or not, but there was something about her that made me put my murderous intent on hold for a few seconds...

Okay, I'm not as tough as I'd like to be. If you are crying out to your mom, or your gods, or threatening to sue me while I slam your face against the wall, that's fair game. But... Kiriana wasn't crying in fear, I could tell those were not the eyes of a girl who is afraid, the look she gave me was that of a sad and lonely girl. I could feel it around her. There was something about that look, that frustration in her eyes, that made me stop.

"You know, you are supposed to wait until AFTER I hit you, before crying." I said, with an evidently fake smile. I know, I'm a charmer.

"I'm sorry..." She squealed, wiping tears from her eyes. I could tell she wasn't used to crying, she was wiping her eyes directly and with her fingers, instead of her cheeks.

"You are sorry?" This time I was smiling honestly. "Are you gonna stop crying now so I can hit you?" I let a goofy laugh out and Kiri let out a nasal sound that I can only assume was the noise of a muffled snort.

I put my back against the wall and let myself slide down into the floor, crossing my legs as I sat down, completely ignoring the fact that our uniform had skirts. We were in a back alley of sorts, above us the immense buildings that reached to the sky rose as menacing cathedrals to capitalism. From there we could see the many logos of megacorporations that marked the ownership of each of those concrete needles. It makes you feel really small to sit down and look up at all that.

I looked back at the rich girl, she hadn't moved. "Come. You have five minutes of talking, and then we get into the senseless violence." I said, as I patted the ground next to me.

"Won't we... miss the transports?"

I rose an eyebrow. "Oh no, missing the transports. Please don't report that miss Sentinel." I said with a mocking voice. Kiri seemed flustered and unkempt, yet somehow managed to retain a pristine aura about her. Maybe everyone just looks nice and clean when compared to the mess I am. I combed my short hair away from my face. "I have not forgotten you are a corporate leech. The only reason I'm talking to you is because you made me feel sorry, and you are kind of hot."

Did I say that out loud? I must have, because she burst into laughter, that kind of weird giggle you get when you are really sad and someone pulls an even sadder joke that makes you laugh. Before she finished, she carefully sat next to me, her brown eyes still burdened by some unknown sadness.

"So, what's up?" I asked, again demonstrating my unmatched eloquence.

"I'm not sure I want to tell you..." She almost whispered.

“Okay. We can go back to the hitting then.” I slammed my fist against my palm, she pushed herself away, her eyes opening wide, unsure if I was being serious or not. I kind of was.

“Fine.” She gathered her legs and rested her chin on her knees.

“Fine, the hitting?”

“No! Fine, I’ll tell you.” She glared at me.

This close I could see she had high-grade ocular implants, that distinctive silvery tint on her irises, and the tiny spark of metal in the corner of her eye gave her away. But I expected that, corporate leeches often have more metal and silicon than actual flesh and carbon in their bodies. Furthermore, it isn’t rare for them to have the remaining organic parts inside them replaced with vat-grown flesh, hardened against diseases and engineered to better withstand the passage of time, effectively correcting any mistakes nature could have made.

I could also see the wireless neural interface behind her ear more clearly now, I recognized it as one of the latest designs from ClearSight, it was worth as much as a small car and was probably connected to her neo-cortex. That meant she didn’t need holograms or displays to interact with the electronics around her, she could control them merely by willing to do so. That also meant she had 24/7 access to the WorldNet and to any local networks. I can only imagine how that feels, to have almost two centuries of human knowledge at the tip of your neurons.

It also means she is rich on top of everything. She must have a spot reserved for her in the ranks of well paid corporate dronship; what the hell is she doing with me? Damnit, now I wanted to beat her up even more.

“Look...” She continued, as I zoned out, frowning slightly. “I... didn’t know it was you.”

“Huh?” I felt like I missed a spot of the conversation.

“When I volunteered for...”

“You volunteered for this shit?” I interrupted, more surprised than angry.

“Yes...” She sighed. “I did... I knew it was a girl that already had a Sentinel on her... and I figured: ‘Hey, maybe that would be a way to make a friend, I could be the cool Sentinel. It could be fun.’” She miserably rolled her eyes towards me. “But of course you had to be you...”

“Thanks for what I get.”

“You were about to beat the crap out of me!” She complained.

I punched her shoulder. “I still will.” I guess I didn’t sound too serious this time around, because she just rubbed her arm and continued to bury her face between her knees, while I kept talking. “You got stuck with the daughter of Armand Thorn, so what?”

She sighed before answering. “I don’t care who you are. I was... Look... It’s not easy being a... a corporate employee.” She shriveled after saying it.

“The massive income, secure future, discount implants, flesh and free education must be a torment.”

“People like you are a torment.”

I glared at her in silence for a second. “I get it. You are bullied, so what?” I peered at her eyes lowering my head. “Why were you crying?” I could see her eyes glinting white again.

“I’m sick of being a corpo... I’m sick of it. People like you turn my life into a living hell. Not my fault my family got into the business! And I... I just wanted someone who... Ugh... Look I don’t know what I wanted. I just thought...”

“Not your fault you got good job? Hell. Not my fault my dad...” I honestly didn’t know how to finish that sentence. ClearSight marked him and all our family as criminals, of the worst kind, and people will tell you all sorts of disgusting lies about him, but they are that... just lies. I know

none of that is true... Dammit, now I was getting all cheesy too. When I looked back at Kiri, her eyes met mine. She had noticed my word tumbling. "Families are a bitch." I finished. "So what?"

"So what?" She returned. "Do you know what it's like having to run out of the classroom and away from school out of fear..."

"Really?" I interrupted, now she was pissing me off. "I figure running must feel better than knowing that no matter what you do you are always being watched. I figure running must be better than having every single person you meet expect you to be violent and crazy and a potential danger..." I felt my nails digging into my closed fist. "Just for being me..." I sighed out the last words.

"You are kind of violent..."

"Fuck you! I am not!"

Our stares met. She gave a half smile. I snorted returning her grin.

"Okay, fuck you. Maybe I am. But it's not because of my father." This time, I was looking away. "So." I took a deep breath, riding the warmth of laughter. "Your plan to get a friend..."

"It wasn't..."

"So!" I quieted her with my tone. "Your plan to get a friend didn't work. Deal with it. You can stay here and let me beat you up while you keep grieving..." I pulled that last smile back on my face as I stood up. "Or... Erm... we can go have lunch." Smooth Samantha. Smooth. "After all, we are gonna be hanging togeth... STOP looking at me like that! I was joking earlier, okay? I'm not flirting with you."

I was blushing and Kiri was laughing her ass off while trying to stand up. I rested my back against the wall, arms crossed, while she got on her feet. When she was up and next to me, I punched her shoulder again.

"I don't even like you." I informed. "I just feel sorry for you. Fucking wimp."

She calmly met my eyes. "Thanks Samantha." Of course she knew I was lying.

"Just call me Sam. Samantha sounds weird."

"Call me Kiri then."

"Our full names sound awkward, huh?"

"And people use them when they are mad at us."

"How do you know?"

"This. Is. Serious. Samantha!" She quoted, faking doctor Marco's voice and tone. Only then I realized that, standing straight, Kiri was taller than me, by about a half a head.

I answered with a smile and slid out my uniform's sweater over my head, unbuttoned my uniform shirt and revealed the blue long sleeve shirt below.

"What are you doing?" Kiri seemed genuinely confused.

"Hold this." I threw my uniform at her and got a pair of synthex pants from my bag. They looked like a cross between jeans and dress pants, but were as twice as durable and slightly stretchy. "I'm not gonna walk around in uniform. You shouldn't either, makes you look dumb and nerdy."

"I'm not... I don't have anything else! And I like the uniform."

"Please don't say that out loud." I put my shoes back on after fitting my pants and pulling down my skirt. "That gets you a trip to the bathroom with a bloody nose." Then I produced from my bag a worn and slightly oversized army green windbreaker, made primarily of smooth synthex. I took my uniform from Kiri and handed her my dad's windbreaker. "There, take off that ugly sweater, and put this on." I suddenly changed my tone to a serious one. "That is my favorite jacket, so don't you dare let something happen to it." I narrowed my eyes at her. "Because if something does, you'll be sorry... And I'm crossing my heart on that."

“Ba... I...”

I let my heavy expression slip away and grinned with a fake frown. “Hurry up! Also, you are paying, I’m still the bully here.” I wondered if that would work or if she would call my bluff.

With an annoyed sigh, Kiri did as I told her and we headed off, alternating between uncomfortable silences and smalltalk as we walked.

In Quito proper, most establishments are either small franchises or owned by one of the local megacorporations, the biggest of which, in case you didn’t guess it, is ClearSight. As long as I’m in Quito, no matter in which direction I look, more than half of the objects in my field of view are most likely manufactured by ClearSight.

The noir sky threatened with rain as we lurked into a small restaurant not far from my house, it was a fast food joint, the smell of which could be caught from three blocks away, and which sold everything but real meat. She indeed paid for our meal, but I think she noticed that I purposefully picked a simple regular lunch, which was the cheapest thing I could get. I, on the other hand, noticed she was kind enough to pretend she didn’t already know everything there was to know about me.

When we were done, she escorted me to my house, apparently that’s on her job description. She was a corporate leech, she was my Sentinel and she was cocky like most corporate leeches are, but deep inside she wasn’t that bad. Annoying as hell, yes. But not bad. And for better or worse, we did have a lot in common, in our own ways we had these burdens that neither of us wanted to carry. I like to think that I knew that beforehand; that the moment I saw her, I saw in her eyes the tired look of someone who carries somebody else’s weight. I can only guess that reminded me of myself.

When night fell over my apartment, I found myself staring out the window of my messy room in a high rise, lost in the multicolor glow that stained the starless sky above and made the moonlight in my room fade away to the piercing LED signs that projected their brutal propaganda into my chamber.

That day, I was that starless sky, being held prisoner by the lights below. Trapped between the darkness of addiction and an alien light that was not my own. I didn’t want to be. I wanted to run, yet as always, I couldn’t.

Chapter 2

My full name is Samantha Merlina Thorn de la Rosa. I know it's a weird name, my family history is complicated, to put it kindly. It's been over four years since I met Kiri and I'm courting through my last year of high school, for the third time. As time went by Kiri actually caught up to me, so she is in my class now even if she is younger. While I still find her annoying, we get along quite well, all things considered.

I was sleeping in class, as it is custom, but I was woken up by the sound of hurried footsteps and chairs scratching against the white floor. My head was pounding and when I opened my eyes the light hurt for a second. I wiped my mouth with my sleeve and scanned the room. The day was over and Kiri was not in sight, her chair at the front of the room was empty and her bag gone. I began shivering in cold and rubbed my arms as the room emptied.

Then I realized I was losing sight of the important matter. Kiri was gone! For the first time in so long I was free from the shackles of vigilance placed over me by ClearSight Enterprises. For the first time in years I wielded the reins of my own destiny, free to do what I wanted even if it was for fleeting instants!

And, of course, the only thing that came to my head was that I wanted to pee. I groaned, turned off my desk-terminal and walked out of the room. In all seriousness, it was quite strange for Kiri not to be around.

The hallway outside was crowded, too much for my taste. The sound of their footsteps over the worn green tiles, the smell of their bodies and the clicking of their gadgets made my head hurt even harder. Normally being with Kiri would have allowed me to focus on her and partially ignore other stimuli, but coming out of a crash in such a crowded place was a nightmare otherwise.

I had the idea of looking through the window, but immediately dismissed it, my classroom was in the twenty first floor, and I don't like heights. I stumbled my way to the bathrooms while keeping as close to the wall as possible. I had to side the cluster of girls gathered inside, near the door. There were very few boys relative to the number of girls. A classmate once explained to me that among boys they had the motto: "No man's land, is better than woman's land." He gave it as the reason for boys usually not coming to the bathrooms in the top floors. With this many whiny, peach-smelling princesses around, I could completely relate. Damn, one of them was even spraying those infamous peachy sprays as I walked by.

Fumbling between bodies, I found a semi-clean stall and got down to business. Yet as I was gaping at the wisdom of bathroom graffiti and penis drawings, I felt a strange set of footsteps

entering the room. They called my attention because they were uneven, and seemed to be going nowhere in particular, merely pacing the bathroom. Hadn't I burnt the day before, I may have been able to tell a bit more about that person without having to look at him.

As I stood up, I probed my skirt's pockets and brought out a drop of Obsidian. It looked like a black candy, so perfectly polished that light bounced off its many sides, like a corrupted diamond. I scraped it with my thumbnail, brought it to my nose and snorted the black dust that came out as I grinded it. It's hard to describe what it feels like, but imagine a slight burning sensation in your nose, accompanied by a sour taste in the back of your mouth.

After a few instants I felt the drumming in my head beginning to slow down and the burning growing hotter. I grinded some more and repeated the process a few more times. My nose was beginning to drip, but I was finally relaxing for the first time in the entire day. The calming wave extending all over my body.

I took a deep, tranquil breath and I found myself shivering again, so I pulled out my dad's windbreaker from my bag and wore it over my uniform sweater. I was about to come out of the stall when I heard the owner of those nervous steps talking to some girl outside.

"Excuse me... Have you seen Samantha? Samantha Thorn?" The nervous guy was asking about me.

"She is in there." Answered some girl. "But she's probably gonna take some time and come out high as a kite." Mind your own business, peachy girl.

I opened the stall door. "Got a problem with that?" I nailed my eyes on the alpha-bitch-looking girl, who I assumed had been talking. She held my gaze and her lips swirled in a sour grimace. She looked away first.

"Watch out, she may curse you." Peachy warned to the nervous guy, as she and her acolytes made it to the exit. Then I realized he wasn't only nervous, he was also jumpy.

I trailed them with my eyes. My head still hurt, although much less now, my body felt lighter, and fortunately, I was also in a better mood now, else Peachy would have earned herself a bleeding mouth. My nose was still dripping, but I decided to sniffle and start breathing through my mouth rather than blowing, I didn't want any Obsidian to go to waste. I fixed my eyes on Jumpy and frowned. He was fiddling with his fingers and he parted his lips several times without saying a word.

"What's up?" I finally asked, irritation marking my voice.

"A... Are you Samantha?" His voice was trembling and shaky, and his black eyes darted nervously avoiding mine.

"Yeah. What's up?"

"D... Do you..." He stumbled over his own words. I facepalmed when I realized what the matter was. I get an idiot like this once a month.

"If you want what I think you want, this is not the place. And if you say the word, I'll make you regret it." He flinched, but said nothing. "Pad four. Fifty each." I whispered, leaning close to him.

"I only have twenty-five." He jumped suddenly, so fast that he was close to hitting my chin with his shoulder. I recognized the pained look on his eyes, a mixture between begging and irrational desire. He was an Obsidian junkie, he had just gotten into it, and he was in withdrawal.

"Tough luck." I spouted, beginning to walk past him.

It was weird, I didn't really remember him, and while I forget a lot of things because of Obsidian, I wasn't even sure I would have sold it to someone with his looks in the first place. Why? I don't know, he wasn't my usual kind of client. He was a bit too young, he must have been in second

or third year at most. I could also tell he wasn't a corporate leech, no ring, no fancy implants, no surgery scars, no uniform evidently made of real fabrics instead of synthex...

He was just another second rate insect like me, trying to get by, and Obsidian wasn't cheap at all: For about five BitCredits you could get a simple meal downtown, I normally charge fifty per drop and one drop is enough for a single burn. Let that sink in for a second and maybe you'll get why it didn't feel right to sell it to him.

"But it was twenty-five last time! I NEED to buy some." He begged, sounding almost animal. He grabbed my arm, it stung. I pushed him back.

"Touch me again..."

"Sam!" Called a voice, making Jumpy backpedal. It was Kiri. I noticed that a majority of the people had left the bathroom, and the few that remained tried ridiculously to pretend they weren't paying attention to the little scene.

The guy grinned and met his eyes with mine. "If you don't sell it to me... I'll tell your Sentinel everything."

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, counted to five in my head and put my arm under the guy's neck, driving him against a closed stall. I heard it's occupant screech. I rose my fist and sniffled.

"Sam..." Called Kiri again, her tone as calm as she could keep it, while walking towards me.

"You should. L... Listen to her." Struggled the guy. "Or you'll go to The Jammer." He was, surprisingly, smiling, and I could feel his hands reaching for my pockets rather than attempting any sort of defense. It was sad to see really. Obsidian does that to you sometimes, it's not for everyone. "Come on Sentinel, get this bitch off me." He demanded.

"Sam..." Repeated Kiri, in her serious tone. "Not the face. It'll leave bruises."

A smug smile contoured my lips, as I delivered a blow to the guy's stomach. He puked a groan and curled as I moved back to let him gather himself on the floor.

I smiled triumphantly at Kiri, but she didn't smile back. She was angry. She spared another glance at Jumpy, then at me, then back at Jumpy and then she turned on her heels towards the door. "Coming, Sam?" Her voice had an eerie coldness to it that warned me about giving any other answer except for: "Yeah."

I left the bathroom after grabbing my bag and we walked in silence for some time, the school had emptied while I did my business, so it was much easier for me this time. The green and blue walls were actually quite relaxing without the horde of teenagers and kids everywhere. Only a few teachers in ClearSight Enterprises uniform still buzzed around. We left the school through the main entrance, massive glass doors that opened into the freedom of a midday city.

Cool breeze made me shrivel inside my windbreaker as we walked north. The many cars on the street, a blend between modern and ancient, were the only thing that marred the otherwise tranquil facade of a city that does its best to hide the atrocities that are required to maintain its lifestyle.

"So, what's up?" I began, after walking for about fifteen minutes, trying to push away my trembling for a second.

"I leave you for five minutes Sam, five minutes, and you get into a fight."

"Dude, he star..."

"I'm not a dude."

"I know yo..."

"Five minutes!"

"Calm the fuck down! Jeez. Are you on your period or something?"

She stopped and glared back at me, anger glinting in her eyes, fists closed white. Shit, I hit the nail.

“I didn’t mean that...” I swallowed, hard.

“Look... I don’t know what’s worst: The fight, or the reason for that fight.”

I sighed. I know Kiri doesn’t like anything that has to do with Obsidian. “I didn’t want to...”

She glanced at a nearby security camera and resumed walking, I followed hastily.

“Kiri... I swear it wasn’t my fault this time.”

“You always say that.”

“Yeah, but this time it’s true. He wanted to pay just half and he got mad when I said no.” It was true!

“Sam. I don’t care what the reason was. If you didn’t sell Obsidian...”

“I have t...” I stopped and bit my tongue.

“You have to or you wouldn’t be able to afford it for yourself.” She turned to me. “I know. And it only makes it worse.”

“I know you know... But...”

“It’s always like this with you.”

“Then why do you keep trying!?” Dammit. I’m not the best talker when I’m high. There was an uncomfortable pause. She took a deep breath before talking.

“Because it’s my job.” She muttered.

Ouch. Not because she is my friend, not because she worries about me... No. Because it is her job. I rubbed my forehead, noticing that my skin was burning. I wasn’t sure how I had screwed up so badly and I couldn’t even think on it clearly, my mind was beginning to get cloudy as the Obsidian kicked in.

“I’m sorry.” I said, giving up. “I’m not even sure why, but I’m sorry.” Didn’t mean to say that. Hopefully she wouldn’t realize I was high.

“Are you high Sam?” Dammit.

“No... Just... had a headache.”

Kiri grabbed my right arm, put her thumb over my wrist mounted P.A.D., and a small translucent three dimensional display came up, showing all the readings the device gathered in real time, from my body temperature to my blood chemistry. She dispersed the display and pushed my arm back. Boy was she pissed.

“Look Sam. I’m tired. I’ll get a cab home, if...”

“Wait, you won’t follow me home?” I asked. Dumb.

“Sam...” Her eyes wandered to a side and then back at me. “We are here.”

I began to giggle. Damn it Samantha, pull yourself together. Maybe I got a bit out of hand with Obsidian earlier. Maybe?

“Look Sam. I’m going home. If you want to talk later, come by.”

“Sure!” I said, louder than I would have wanted. “As soon as...”

“Sober.” She cut me short.

I stared blankly at her for an instant. I felt like I had to say something but...

“Bye Sam.” She finished, kissing my cheek angrily before walking away. I stood there, doing nothing for longer than I’d like to admit, looking at nothing in particular, trying to bring myself into the realization of how bad had I screwed up today.

I failed, and while giggling at my failure, I went inside the tower where I lived. It was a cramped old building, made still of concrete rather than synthstone or some other fancy material. ClearSight assigned apartment 1224 to my family, so I used to live here with my father before he, as

ClearSight will tell you, “resisted official processing and attempted to use magic that threatened the entire city”. Now I live here with my mother, her husband and two younger half sisters, none of whom are particularly fond of me.

I spent fifteen minutes trying to open the door. My cracking skin made it hard for the biometric sensor to recognize my fingerprint and being high didn't help either, since I couldn't remember which finger to use and I would laugh myself to the floor every time I failed.

There isn't much to say about the apartment itself. There are four bedrooms whose doors are directly to your sides as you enter. At the opposite side from the entrance door there is a room that serves as both kitchen and living room, and to the left, there is a machine room. Like I said, it's cramped as hell. Oh, and we have two bathrooms, I share one with my youngest half sister: Michaela.

I entered my room, brought out an holographic display from my wrist-mounted P.A.D., tuned it to some charity gaming livestream and sat at my terminal desk, the display immediately flickering to life. I laid my head on the desk, and let myself slide into a steady doze.

When I woke up, automatic lighting had already turned on, the skies outside were dark and clouded by the milky lights from below. I rose my head and faced the quiet room for a few seconds. The silence was despairing. I felt alone, I missed my friend. Weren't she mad I could call her and watch a movie over VR together. My heart shrunk, I wasn't sure how or when I had gotten to the point where Kiri was pretty much the only thing I had in my life, but moments like this brought the anguish of solitude back out from the corner to which I had tried so hard to banish it.

Stabbing pain in my stomach brought me out of my thinking and distracted me from the engulfing madness. I hadn't eaten anything in the entire day. My terminal told me it was seven and something. I still had time to dart into the kitchen, grab some food, and bring it back before anyone got home. However, as I stood up, a burning sensation assaulted my chest, a lingering pain slowly turning into begging, into carving for more.

I sighed. Kiri was already pissed, the last thing I needed was her finding out that I burned again. I took a deep breath trying to calm myself down, bringing my hand to my mouth. Burning today wasn't a good idea. She wanted to talk to me and if I forgot that, she would kill me.

Yet, if I was going to burn, I couldn't eat anything or I'd mess the bathroom up more than usual. Dammit Samantha, you are not burning! I paced my room, my hands shaking. Don't. Don't. I bit my lip until I could feel some blood coming out, hoping the pain would distract me for my carving. Calm yourself Sam... Calm yourself... I tried breathing again but the air came out cut and weak. My hand started fiddling with the half drop in my pocket. Just... a little bit, and I'd be fine.

I grinded the drop with my thumb and sniffed it. I held it to my nose even after I stopped grinding, the smell was tranquilizing. I did it once more, and once more, and just once more, until it was mostly gone. My nose began to hurt as if I had introduced something too big into it, I feared I might bleed so I started breathing through my mouth and pushed my head back.

It was having the exact opposite effect of what I expected, the closer I felt to the burn, the more I wanted it. It simply felt right, as if I had to do this for some really good reason that I didn't care to consider. I curled, arms over my belly, my stomach shrunken down in agony. Kiri didn't have to know, I could just pretend I was sorry, apologize, and that was it. I quickly bought up a display from my P.A.D., jotted down a line about today, and dismissed it.

I slid my hand under my mattress and pulled out a small DNA-locked box. I rubbed my finger over the coarse identification surface and the top slid with a click, there were only five drops left, I took two out, and put the box back under my mattress. There was a knot in my neck. I just wanted to burn, I would deal with the consequences tomorrow.

I stormed into the bathroom, my hands shaking in anxiety, my entire body turned to a swarm of ants swirling in anticipation. Or was it fear? I locked the door that led to my half sister's room, opened the cabinet under the sink and pulled out an old metal spoon. I put one drop inside my windbreaker's pocket and the other one over the surgical white counter, under the wall-wide mirror.

I held the spoon over that sweet black candy and brought my weight down on it, I stopped when I heard it crack, replaced the spoon and then repeated the process until a pile of black dust was all that remained. I could feel my mouth already drying. I swept the dust with my hand into the spoon, placed it in front of my mouth and then proceeded, with my free hand, to flick my already hurting nose, releasing a slow stream of blood, part of which I collected with the spoon, the black dust boiling to effervescence as it came into contact with the crimson stream. I put it down for an instant, counting to ten in my head while I put a paper plug in my bleeding nostril.

Ten. I swallowed, hard. And opened my mouth, lifting my tongue to touch my palate. I put the iron smelling content of the spoon under my tongue, cleaning the spoon as it came out of my mouth, making an effort not to throw up right there and then, wincing in pain as it burned the underside of my tongue.

My breathing hastened. My heart became a caged bird hitting against its prison. I slammed both my hands on the sink and opened my eyes to the reflection in the mirror.

I was lost in it for a few centuries. Was that me? My pupils widened to occupy almost the entirety of my iris, I could see that awful vein in the left side of my chin turning black, and a tsunami of adrenaline pulling out the life from my body, preparing for one massive discharge.

I smiled to that monstrosity in the mirror, my voice came out burnt and wrapped in the smell of hot iron: "I represent all the sins you don't have the courage to commit." I sneered at myself, and feeling my arms and legs weakening, I let myself drown in the ecstasy of the approaching wave...