

Pathos

By Robert P. Benoit

To Kristina Dufficy,

This book would not be without you.

A blaring alarm resounded in the darkness of Regina McNeil's room that echoed at this time every day for the past three thousand eight hundred and fifty days. This mechanical screech has become a comfort during Regina's time in The Pit. With a hesitantly pleasant flicker, the translucent automated light traced the walls of the cell, crawling from the ceiling, down to the floor, and up to her skin. She rose from her bed, standing up in a ghost white jumpsuit, extending her limbs, and rousing herself from a rough night sleep.

Regina examined the immemorial walls, painted the same color as her clothes. Solid concrete in all four directions, nothing seemingly different from the other, aside from the blood stain from which she obliterated her knuckles on a daily basis.

Without a second thought, she ran up the wall and leapt onto a lonely pipe, grasping tightly onto the steel rod. Lifting herself up, she surveyed the ceiling and in her peripheral vision, she saw a bolted ventilation grate. This was her only means of escape and a lapse of judgment on the designer's planning to think no one could climb high enough to reach it.

"Regina," a voice stated on the intercom of her cell. "Come down from there. You have visitors."

Lifting herself up once more to examine the grate, Regina dropped down to the floor. Looking forward, the concrete vanished behind a holo-wall, which presented her with a floating transparent screen showcasing a video feed from the hall. What she saw on that holo-wall was something she had never witnessed in the three thousand eight hundred and fifty days since her incarceration. A visitor.

The warden of the Pit, Christopher Frost, stood with two guards and queerly enough, an Inspector of the Municipal Police Force. Frost was a strong, starkly looking figure with very distinguishing features, a thickly settled community of facial hair, and a stern brow made him appear intimidating. The Inspector mounted an expansively pale complexion, soaring over six feet tall, silky short brown hair, and dark eyes to go along with it. He wore a blue vest that correlated with the tie and pants, and a smoothly ironed white button down.

“What the hell is an Exo doing here?” Regina inquired.

Frost’s facial expression shifted in a tout de suite fashion to frigid anger.

“You will address Mr. Shepard as Inspector and not with your trash mouth McNeil. Do you understand?” Frost ordered.

“Got it,” she sternly replied. “Well Inspector Shepard, as you can see I was rather busy.”

“Busy planning your escape?” Shepard rebutted as his eyes peered up.

Regina felt a feeling of angst well in the bottom of her stomach.

“Boy, you Exos really have an eye for the details. Especially when you have so much technology doing all of the work for you,” she expressed humorously. “Must be nice.”

Shepard thought for a moment and then responded, “I was like you once. Broken, caged, alone. Residing in The Pit with nothing to live for. But then I got a knock on my door. Leave these four walls and finally experience some legal freedom because the Humans saw use in me. All I had to do was...”

“Sacrifice your humanity,” Regina finished.

“On the contrary, I was given my humanity.”

She laughed before stating, “Is that so?”

“I chose to lose my Pathos. The drive of anger, hate, irrationality, all eliminated when I became an Exo. My brain is now absent the amygdala, yet I’m still me, only with a metal body to extend my life. Now let me ask you something Ms. McNeil.” Shepard paused before making serious eye contact with her, as if to challenge her. “Was the action good?”

“Depends on the point of view I suppose. Do you lean more toward Aristotle or Kant? You come off as Aristotilian to me,” Regina spoke forwardly.

Shepard smirked at her response.

She continued, “If the ergon of a pencil is to write, then one must ask what is the ergon of a Human? You would say, the ergon of a human is the being at work of a soul in accordance with reason, or not without such reason.”

“Very good, so you see, I acted with reason in choosing to become an Exo,” defended Shepard.

“While you might see it that way, might I ask, what makes something Human?” Regina smiled with reassurance. “Does me, a Pathos, made up of meat and bones constitute as Human, or do the organic mechanized beings that control our society stem from what would be considered Human? Which one has a soul? Or do we both? Those are questions.”

“You’re even more impressive than I expected,” Shepard expressed.

“Why? Because I’ve read up on my philosophy?”

“Before you were imprisoned, you were a renowned hacker and your IQ tests well exceed any Pathos alive, let alone most Humans. Your reasoning skills are something that the MPF needs right now.”

Regina turned away from Shepard before replying, “I was wondering when you were going to get to the point. You came here for something aside from being in my company. For what reason do you need me aside from your aptitude analysis?”

“A Pathos has done the impossible and we are at a loss on how to combat this terrorist. That’s the most I can tell you.”

Shepard looked past the glass and through Regina, as if his optic receptacles could sway her at will.

“Fascinating,” Regina stated in a calm voice. “A Pathos outsmarting the MPF. I thought that was incalculable, or perhaps the Humans aren’t as perfect as they believe they are.”

“Will you assist us?” Shepard urged with concern.

“On one condition.”

“Name it.”

“Quick to respond, you truly must be desperate.” Regina rotated back to face Shepard before continuing, “I need you to promise me. No, guarantee, that you will not turn me into an Exo,” her tone changing to unthinkable seriousness. “I’m helping you solve this problem, but I do not want a part of your culture. You be your Human and I’ll be mine.”

Shepard stared into Regina’s eyes and she into his.

“Done.”

He turned to Frost and nodded in an accursedly taciturn manner. A crowning hissing sound immediately started to reverberate amongst the cell. Regina slid her head up to observe the ventilation system that she had, at one time or another, believed to be her means of escape. Gas now poured out of the grate and flowed down similar to a waterfall consisting of acid rain.

Regina quickly turned to Shepard as the heavy clouds of gas placidly spread around her. She caught one final glimpse of him before her vision began to amorously twist and turn. Her whole body felt weightless, her veins pumped viciously and she could hear every ounce ebb and flow. As everything seemed to halt, Regina slumped to the ground like a granite slab, until as she could feel was cold.

Hair follicles rose like the morning sun as electronic neural receptors charged and launched through Regina's spinal cavity, stirring her from unconsciousness. An excruciating pain pounded inside her head, only made worse in her attempt to unfasten both eyes lids from one another. It felt as though, while asleep from the grotesque gas, her body had divorced each atom of her soul before being reconciled. She jolted forward, sitting on a delicate bed in what appeared to be an uninhabited bedroom.

The door to the room abruptly opened and Inspector Shepard calmly entered behind a mysterious Exo. As far as she could tell, the strange man seemed to be from a different era all together. Regina figured that, while his animatronic body appeared to be mid-forties in Pathos years, his brain was more likely closer to sixty. A hardened Exo for a hardened Pathos. The man's attire mirrored Shepard's. If he'd been around one millennia previous he would be a stereotypical gumshoe, raincoat and everything. His

facial hair did not stop to make it any less humorous, with a rugged look to match the fashion choice. He had short, brown hair, with a neat spikey mold that revealed his attempt to look younger than he was. Behind his left ear was a cigarette that he brought with him to cope with his addiction. And with an average, yet fit build, it perfectly balanced his six foot three height.

“Hello Ms. McNeil,” Shepard blurted out. “With me is Commissioner David Birkhoff. He’s here to…”

“Hold on a second,” Regina interrupted. “My head is killing me from that sleeping gas. I need a minute.”

“Suck it up,” responded Birkhoff in a rather monotone level. “You’re lucky to even be out of that damned cell.”

“Somebody doesn’t have very good manners,” replied Regina as she rose from her bed, still clutching her head with one hand. “So what’s your story Birkhoff? You really hate Pathos that much? I’m sure there’s an answer in your past that tells it all. Lost your family to Pathos? Or have you forgotten you were one once?”

“Quiet!” Birkhoff irritably shouted. The room grew silent, Birkhoff began to breathe heavily, before returned to a calm state of mind. “Test me McNeil and you’re going back.”

“Sorry, my fault. Now what did you two come to tell me?”

Birkhoff responded, wishing to speed things along, “We came to introduce ourselves and brief you on what it is that we need you for, seeing as you’ve agreed to cooperate in assisting on our investigation.”

“What’s the investigation exactly?” Regina inquired as she glanced over at Shepard, who had been curiously tapping his forehead with his middle and pinky fingers.

“There is an individual who has been hacking into Humans and implanting digital amygdalas, suffice to say it has ended with numerous fatalities. This Pathos, man or woman, seemed to be making a statement with these actions.”

“That every individual deserves to experience every range of emotions, even if it leads to them acting upon their long covered urges.”

“Interesting deduction,” Shepard yelled up. “What brings you to that sort of conclusion?”

“Absent any sort of information on the murders, my guess is the man is a stoic and a man of change amongst the existing Pathos rebels. This terrorist probably believes that the emotions Humans fear, so deeply in fact that they have outright removed them from basic functions, is due to his philosophical belief system. To him the amygdala is not an appendix, it has a purpose, and destructive, violent emotions result from lapses in judgment. He is a Pathos to you, but to him, he is what constitutes as Human. He wants to show you that how people behave matters and they should be in control of all emotions, even anger.”

“Baseless conjecture,” Birkhoff shouted toward Regina, clearly unhappy with her input.

“Baseless? On the contrary Commissioner, there is great base in my point of view.”

“And why is that?”

“Because I think the exact same way,” Regina winced as she stated her instinctual philosophy. “I understand how he views himself and society. I am shunned no less than he is. Pathos are predictable, driven by emotions, forced to live on the primal instinct of survival.”

Shepard pressed, in kind to her, “Do you think you can help us catch him?”

“Yes. Yes I do Inspector Shepard.”

A ringtone commences, echoing through the spacious quarters. Shepard’s wrist section of his MPF jacket illuminated with each ring. He raised his wrist to his chest, as if to check the time, only for a youthful, female to suddenly project onto a holoscreen.

“What is it Inspector Daniels? We’re in the middle of meeting with Regina McNeil at the moment.”

“We just picked up a Pathos on the ECR in the educational district of the city. Our intel predicts that the suspect might be planning to attack one of the universities. I need to ask that you both head over there now, Squad 3 is going to need back up,” Daniels spoke urgently, her eyes widened with seriousness.

“Understood,” Shepard retorted in an obviously irritated expression.

The hologram faded and Shepard lowered his arm back to his side. Birkhoff leered his eyes at Shepard before gliding his look toward Regina. Then he seemed excited as he barked, “Take her with you.”

“Oh no, that’s not what I signed up for,” she expressed worriedly.

“What did you sign up for exactly?” Birkhoff implied.

“To help you with leads, examine evidence, and to help you catch your terrorist. Not some Pathos that you’re afraid, may or may not go on a rampage. Field work, really isn’t my thing.”

“It is now. We need to see how willing you are to help us. Consider this a test. If you pass, you’re in. If you don’t, then either you’ll be dead, or you’ll be headed back to your cell.”

“Being a Pathos really is a lose lose in this world,” she uttered wearily.

Birkhoff turned away from Regina and Shepard. He stiffly strutted toward the door and the steel frame moved. The door slid ajar, a dimly lit hallway visible past his broad, vivid figure.

“Let me get ready and take her to the loading bay. I want her prepped for assignment Shepard,” he chuckled as he finished. “Best of luck Ms. McNeil. I hope to see you again very soon” He vanished as quickly as he had materialized.

Much has changed. This is what Inspector Shepard told Regina after she’d readied herself for field duty. She had finally gotten herself a steaming hot shower, an experience that she’d dreamt of for quite some time. Now dressed in the same MPF attire that all Inspectors were required to wear, they walked into a massive hanger where the ceiling was raised two stories high, various MPF vehicles parked throughout. Every inch of the loading bay was made of powerful steel, made to withstand decay, explosives, bullets, and any other discrepancy that might threaten the security of their HQ. The clicks of their shoes bounced off each surface within the hanger. To Regina’s left, she observed

an entranceway, the one that she had walked through more than a decade prior, supremely updated in that time.

“What exactly has changed?” Regina asked earnestly.

“The entire structure of our system for catching Pathos. We introduced ECR to the public video monitors.”

“I was going to ask you about that.”

“The ECR is known as Emotional Character Recognition. What this scanner system does is pick up emotional responses only emitted by Pathos. Anger, fear, frustration, hate, violence, things banned in our society, we receive warnings immediately.”

Regina appeared shocked at this implementation, “Holy shit.”

“That’s about the same response we hoped Pathos would exclaim. But its induction has ensured order and peace. Crime is near non-existent and most Pathos have now gone into hiding to ensure their survival. But like a bear hibernating in a cave, they always come back out.”

“Pathos are capable of horrific things. We saw them a millennia ago. World Wars, carbon emissions that threatened our eco-system, global warming ruining the ozone layer, greed and inequality in the class system, hunger and famine for those who weren’t lucky enough to live in a higher society. We never learned.”

Inspector Shepard gazed at Regina with interest, “Humans resolved those problems, brought this planet back before it’s inevitable turning point. Saved Earth from being uninhabitable, by placing logic before emotion.”

“Not hard to solve hunger when you don’t have to eat, is it? But now you face the reality that Humans aren’t perfect either. They’re killing just like Pathos do because of this hacker.” Regina shook her head, not entirely surprised at how some things had changed. “It was bound to happen sooner or later.”

“Because of Pathos like you,” Shepard relented furiously, as he stopped walking. Regina stopped a few paces ahead of him.

“Let’s not forget Inspector Shepard, you’re a Pathos too, deep in that organically structured noggin of yours.”

“I suppose that’s true.”

“A world without crime or death, that’s an unobtainable utopian fantasy. Wiping out the remaining Pathos will not solve that. Wild animals or mother nature, something else will cause a gap in your ideals. Surely, you must realize that.”

Shepard walked forward, Regina continued as he approached her. The two approached a vehicle parked near the gigantic hangar door and an awkward silence prolonged the moment, with it, time seemed to slow as a result. Regina gazed upon the door. Shepard looked up at it and then at her.

“Why are you looking at the door?” he asked.

“Have you ever heard of Plato’s allegory of the cave?” she subsequently replied. “It might be before your time. And mine.”

“I don’t believe I have. But I just looked it up.”

“It is hard not to compare my stepping out that door, to a new culture estranged from my own, with his allegory. I have lived in what I’ve known, before The Pit, fear and hiding. Remaining naïve to what I could experience and be a part of. Like that man,

society had chained me to a wall, forever examining a false silhouette of reality. My reality has differed from yours and that of Humans. But now, for the first time, I'll be released from those confines, to see how big things truly are. There's no going back is there Inspector?"

"No," he replied.

"This will be a damaging thing, permanent change. I cannot return to the cave. My new reality awaits and I know that if I ever return to that cell, it will be the end of me. An impossible readjustment."

"You can't escape the inevitable either McNeil." Shepard appeared sorry for her, his eyes revealed a weary glow that Regina had not seen before.

"I know," Regina sadly stated. Shepard pulled out a pack of cigarettes, tapping the package in his hand.

"Want a cig for the drive? Might help the nerves." She smirked at the Inspector, surprised he was allowed to smoke them at all. He continued, "Perks of being a member of law enforcement, the public aren't allowed these luxuries."

"One man's luxury is another's death sentence."

He laughed at her response, as he pulled out two cigarettes, before he handed one to Regina. She lifted the cigarette up to her mouth, and Shepard leaned over, moving his electric lighter up to her lips. A soft click and the tip of her cigarette burned a golden hue, igniting the suction into her lungs. Her sense tingled as the tobacco flushed through her system. Shepard subsequently ignited his cigarette, puffing the smoke out. Then his raspy voice let out one final question, before the two would hop in the police squad car and head to the scene. "Let's get going, huh?"

The cruiser whipped out of the hanger and onto the city streets, clean, paved, and anatomically structured. Human's walked up and down the sidewalks, going about their days as if nothing had ever seemed the slightest bit odd. These people accepted the society and did not question their fates, living in docile tranquility, each one believing themselves equal to the other. The buildings of the city were perfectly crafted, maintained with ease, and modernized beyond comprehension. Concrete and wood were thing of the past, never cultivated for materials so as to not pollute the environment, instead made of composite steel and plexi-glass, illuminated by renewable electricity. It subconsciously resembled the closest thing to perfection. Regina stared and observed Shepard, who appeared amused by her bewilderment.

“I was not lying to you,” he insisted. “Much has changed.”

“It is spectacular the things they have accomplished in such a short time.”

“The world has become healthier and safer than it has in more than a hundred years. Since the implementation of the ECR system, we have progressed more than anticipated.”

Regina turned to Shepard, astounded by the improvements that the Humans had made. The MPF no longer remained the farce they had once been considered. He reached for the radio dial and immediately music began to play, if Regina could consider calling it music. Innumerable sounds erupted, electronic in all facets, mixed and blended to produce an ulcer-inducing screech. The beat seemed impossible to follow, randomized, absent any lyrics, no depth beyond skin deep.

Regina grabbed her head, “What the hell is it?”

“Music,” Shepard replied.

“No, that is not music. Do you have a phone?”

“Phone’s are no longer utilized. Not since the...”

She interrupted him, not interested in the rest of his insight, “You don’t have one, got it.” Regina raised her wrist up and a hologram like an apparition from the MPF jacket. She initiated a scan before shifting pages as Shepard glanced over at Regina.

“What are you doing McNeil?”

“Hacking into the National Registry of Congress,” she stiffly muttered under her breath.

“That’s illegal!” He squealed with concern, “You can’t do that.”

Suddenly the radio’s electronic music ceased. Regina sunk back as she lowered her arm. “Finally.”

“I’m going to have to report this when we get back.”

“Relax, just listen.”

A soft guitar began to strum, in a succeeding beat, calm and depressing. After brief repetition, a solemn voice sang. *Hey, Mr. Tambourine Man, play a song for me.* The guitar continued, releasing the next verse from the mysterious voice, *I’m not sleepy and there is no place I’m going to.* As the singer refrained, *Hey, Mr. Tambourine Man, play a song for me,* Shepard sat in awe. *In the jingle jangle morning, I’ll come following you.* The song went along, both of them silent, Regina sat in the passenger seat, eyes closed, as she took in the music. A harmonica rang out, shivers shot down her spine, the sound harmoniously ripping a chord in her soul. Before long the song ended, closing off into nothing.

“What was that?” Shepard asked.

“That my friend was Bob Dylan, a real musician, with real words. He was a Pathos from long ago, someone who defined lyricism in his time. I wanted you to know my favourite musician and what music sounds like. I wasn’t going to hack into your society’s mainframe, trust me. I tried that once before and look how that turned out for me. Just some harmless music, no one will ever know.”

Shepard sat in silence, clearly unable to comprehend what had just entered his ear canals with absolute grace.

“Would you care to hear another?” she asked, pushing her luck.

“Would you like to go back to the station?”

Regina sat back, defeated by Shepard’s insistence to follow protocol.

“I thought so,” he continued. “I won’t bring it up to the commissioner this time, but do not think that I will not hesitate if you break the law again.”

“What is with you? The law does not mean a single thing, just a bunch of words telling society what they should and should not do. It is only because of people like you that they hold any value.”

“And it is because of people like you that they don’t.”

Shepard suddenly made a sharp left turn onto the crowded interstate and then looked over his shoulder before switching lanes.

“What is it that forces you to uphold your duty? You’re essentially an outcast in this society, in the same way I am. They let you run around and play cop. What’s stopping you from turning against them? Hell, you’re the one with the gun, not them.”

In a weighty tone, Shepard expressed his feelings in saying, “Well to combat your reasoning, let me quote you something from Immanuel Kant. I’m sure you’ve read him before. He said to act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature. My action, as you say is to turn against the Humans, kill one and thus kill them all. That is impossible and unacceptable according to the law.”

“Yes, laws placed by those that control you. As such, you kill one Pathos, thus you must kill them all. Are either of those really desirable outcomes?”

They shifted down the off ramp, onto the empty streets of the clean educational district. Shepard replied as they drove underneath a bridge, “As the law states, Pathos are dangerous and must be eliminated for the safety of the public. We are simply doing what we believe is right.”

“Well then allow me to quote Kant back to you because you seem to misunderstand. He said the only thing that is completely good is the good will. Considering this, people can be categorized as two in such circumstances. One must either be practical or pathological. The practical would act based on their obligations and not their feelings. Now you can gather what the pathological would do. But this will is to do the good and to obey the moral law. Answer me this Mr. Shepard, is the law, currently instated by the “Humans” moral law, or does it just so happen to be pathological law as well? Since your law seems, to me, morally skewed to the universal destruction of Pathos, I think you’ve just eaten your own words.”

Shepard pulled over the car, as it began to rain. The droplets of water pelted the car, echoing softly on the roof. He threw the gearshift up and halted movement, then turned to face Regina for a moment.

“You need to be careful what you say Ms. McNeil,” Shepard said before looking at the road. “I do not have a problem debating the ethical misgivings of our society, but other members of the force might. I remember what it meant to be a Pathos, I am one of the few that never forgot that. But I have accepted the situation that I find myself and it sure as hell is better than spending my life in The Pit. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Regina, in a fearful quake, responded wearily, “I don’t doubt that I am going to receive the answer to that question soon enough, whether I like it or not.”

“Do you promise to be careful with the words you share with others? The other Inspectors will not be so kind towards your belief system and opinions.”

“Yes, I promise.”

Shepard smiled at Regina, “That’s what I like to hear.” Then he shifted the gear on his electric vehicle and pulled back onto the road. “Now, let us investigate this Pathos sighting with no more delay. Shall we?”

Suddenly, Shepard’s radio alert sounded off loudly within the confines of the vehicle. He tapped the screen dashboard, projecting Inspector Daniels as clear as day.

“What can I do for you Ms. Daniels?”

“We just picked up gunshots, they were fired on Bauer University. We need you to head there immediate since you are the closest unit. Get there with haste before we have a serious problem.”

He replied to her request, “Gun shots? There’s no way.”

“We are not sure how, but the perpetrator managed to acquire one. Not an MPF version, old school.”

“Heh, well aren’t we old fashioned. We’ll be there in a moment.”

“Good. Back up is on the way. Be careful.”

“Always am.”

He touched the screen and ended the conversation. Sirens rang out no faster as did the blaring lights that seemed to illuminate each rain pellet in the way of the MPF cruiser. As they rushed to the scene, Regina experienced an eternal well that started to develop in the pit of her stomach. The final rural blocks passed and the university entered their view, towering high above them, appearing darkly sinister in the downpour.

Inspector Shepard sped past the front gate and along the winding road. They moved past the damp dining halls and dormitories, all dimly illuminated through the heavy showers. Regina leaned her head against the window, the contact made her skin feel cold beyond that which she had experienced. She solemnly stared into the distance, watching the structures pass by. She could not help but fill with frustration and sadness at what she would never have. Shepard slowed the cruiser to a halt, a few meters from the front of the private institution’s lecture hall, De Paix.

The two of them stepped out of the vehicle into the misty air. A chill shook from Regina’s lower back, the chill climbed every story of her spinal column, until it reached her short cut hair. Her face was pelted with rain droplets as they coated her from head to toe. Shepard began to jog forward to get out of the rain, Regina followed quickly behind him, as they approached the lecture hall. Suddenly the front reflective doors swung wide open, they both stopped in their tracks. Her partner reached for his holster.

A small number of teachers and students fled the building’s entrance, Shepard relaxed his stance immediately after seeing them, and they approached the two officers.

“Everyone, remain calm,” Shepard shouted in the rain. “Get away from the building.”

A professor in his early forties, appearing with minor distress, stopped to speak to Inspector Shepard in saying, “He’s still in there. He’s killed so many.” The man’s cold expression frightened Regina, for the mixture with simultaneous rain drops almost made him look like he could be crying.

“Sir, I need you to tell me. What floor is he on? What is the Pathos’ physical description?” Shepard replied with haste.

The man attempted to muster the words, “I don’t know. He’s got a shotgun.” He hiccupped, eyes wide, “And he’s got a dark, black trench coat.”

“Thank you, that will be enough. Get as far from this building as you can!” A gunshot rang out from the upper levels of the structure and then a scream. Shepard turned to Regina before he spoke, “Let’s get inside.”

Regina reluctantly nodded before following him inside the double doors. The sound of the rain subsided as they two entered a prodigiously quiet, tile foyer. Their footsteps resounded along the walls and down the hallway. Inspector Shepard faced Regina as she moved her eyes to meet his.

“Alright, before we comb this building there’s something I need to give you,” he expressed between glances down the empty foyer. He reached behind his MPF jacket and pulled out a Handgun. “This is an official weapon from the MPF investigative division, assigned to you. As of right now, you’re only allowed to use one in case of emergencies. And I’d say this situation meets those criteria.”

“How does it work?” Regina inquired.

“Is this your first time with a gun?”

“Yes it is. I never had any use for one. Even before my incarceration.”

“Well this makes me feel better,” he sighed with concern.

“Hey, you’re the one that wanted me here!”

“Forget it,” Shepard handed her the gun, Regina reached out hesitantly before taking it from him. “Now there is no safety on this gun and only takes a special kind of bullet. It’s fully loaded, but I must warn you, only aim if you’re planning to kill a Pathos. Outside of that, you’re up against the accordance of law. Gun regulations are different for us, we can only kill Pathos, and that goes for you as well. Make good judgment calls and you’ll be fine.”

Shepard turned away and strolled forward toward the staircase, Regina started close behind.

“So I just aim and pull the trigger?” she asked.

“That’s the gist of it.”

“Why don’t we take the elevator?”

“Because we don’t want the Pathos to know we’re coming.”

They began to ascend the staircase, careful to take each step silently, until they reached the second floor. Everything was as silent as a crypt, not a soul seemingly present in the lecture hall. Regina knew that this this place of learning had become a place of killing and it seemed to infuriate her.

Stepping into the hallway, Regina’s black shoes clicked in sync with Shepard’s, the sound crawled along the tile floors and out of audibility. The Inspector walked calmly, listening for any sounds or signs of movement. Regina found herself struggling to

loosen her tense grip on the gun as she walked, holding the weapon vertically with both hands. As they walked, Shepard glanced to and fro, analyzing the inner area of the classrooms as they passed them, and around the corner to the left. Suddenly he turned to Regina with a glance of urgency before he waved his gun toward an open classroom door. All she could do was not in response and prepare herself for the possibility that the Pathos might be waiting for them.

Shepard sprinted quietly toward the door and swung around to the left side of the open door, Regina followed close behind. He leaned to look into the classroom.

“Oh god,” Shepard stated with horror.

“What?” Regina quickly asked.

He walked out from cover and into the classroom. Regina started to follow him into the dark space, as she noticed the splinter marks where the door was blasted off. Light shined in softly through the blind, though only the shadow of a figure could be made out. It was slumped over one of the central desks, motionless. Regina flipped the light switch up, illuminating the room by only a single working ceiling bulb. The dead body of a female Human became clearly visible, it all its gory décor. Below the chair was a pool of metallic grey liquid, that encompassed a deep sheen, appearing so thick that nothing could be seen in its reflection. The Human’s silvery blood dripped down the from a distant shotgun blast, with the blunt force of the scattered shot having struck the skull. The organic gran matter painted the subsequent desks and the rear wall, coating various projects students had pinned to the corkboard wall.

“We’re dealing with a sick man. No remorse for the life of a Human,” the Inspector uttered under his breath.

“As I’ve told you before, it depends on your definition of a…”

“Don’t you finish that sentence!” he shouted angrily. “I’m tired of those remarks. These are people, with a conscious, hopes, dreams, ended forever by a psychotic monster.”

“I understand that, but you have to see the other side. Different species have different functions and Pathos are survivors. They had their hopes and dreams smashed by Humans who told them they were obsolete, too dysfunctional to remain a part of society. How would you feel?”

“Are you trying to sympathize with that son of a…” Shepard stopped speaking before he continued. “Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?” Regina responded.

Suddenly a whimper was heard from the section of lockers lining the wall. They stared at each other and then aimed at the set of lockers.

“Municipal Police Force’s CID! Come out with your hands up!” Inspector Shepard urged with anxiousness.

The doors of nearly every single locker started to swing open. Regina prepared her sights, ready to fight, as her eyes widened with fear, but only before young students emerged from the confined spaces, some of them stared hysterically at the sight of their professor.

“It’s okay you’re safe,” Regina stated instinctually, as she caught Shepard glance in her peripheral vision. “Tell us what happened.”

A student, no older than nineteen years of age, spoke up. He seemed to be built rather tough, muscular in size, wearing a Bauer University football sweater. In his lack of

facial hair, he did not seem to lack in the looks department. The student might very well have been prettier than most of the girls Regina had seen in her life. “Our professor left the room after hearing some commotion and came running back in a few minutes later. She told us to hide in the lockers, that way the man would not see us. We did as she said, but she didn’t get in a locker. He must’ve seen her come in here. She told him we had already left. Then...” A brief pause as the young man tried not to glance over. “Then he shot her. Shh...shh...she saved our lives, sir.”

“We going to catch the man who did this, I promise,” Shepard urged with anger. “But I need you all to stay calm.” As he stated this, his jacket’s telecom rang loudly. Hastily, he answered, “Inspector Daniels.”

“Hey, I’ve got some good news,” she replied with a smirk. “Back up just arrived on site.”

“That’s what I like to hear, we have some students here that need immediate evacuation.”

“Chief Inspector Hoekstra and Inspector Rutger are awaiting orders outside,” Daniels shot back slyly.

“Send them up to the second floor stairwell and I’ll hand them off.”

“Understood. Be careful in there.”

The video feed cut out, which retracted the visual representation of Daniel’s presence. Shepard turned to Regina and the group of students, both ready for the next course of action.

“Alright, everyone. I need you all to follow everything that I say. You are going to follow Inspector Regina and I out into the hallway. We’re going to make our way for

the stairwell. From there, you're going to head out of the building with Hoekstra and Rutger, while we continue our search of the premises. Stay behind me and we all come out of this safe and sound." Holding his gun up, Shepard nodded at the group. "Let's move."

Regina walked at the back of the line of students as they followed Shepard out of the door into the hallway to the left. The students poured out of the room the way crimson wine would fall from a glass container, never to be tasted or remembered. As she moved out of the room, she caught Shepard as he walked out of view to the right at the bend from where they had entered. Regina glanced back toward the room and her head soon pounded worse than before. She pressed her fingers against her forehead as she wished for the pain to subside. The hallway light flickered and a male silhouette appeared and then vanished. She shook her head and turned to continue the escort of students from the building, certain her brain seemed to be playing tricks on her.

The last student entered the stairwell and Regina subsequently followed in kind, where she was greeted with the two Inspectors she had not met before. To the left was the much taller and skinnier, Inspector Rutger. He had a reddish, blonde hue to his short hair, which added a sense of immaturity to him. The lack of five o'clock shadow also may have added to Regina's deduction of his personality. He appeared much friendlier compared to his senior officer, Commissioner Birkhoff, whom seemed too old to be on the force. The other was Hoekstra who had medium-short, black hair, that stopped just shy of his eyebrows. In light of his age, his Exo's wrinkles seemed absent, which presented a man who was content with his place in society. Wearing the required MPF attire seemed to irk him, given that he wore a green trench coat over it. The last small

detail she could make out was the wool bracelet on his right wrist. It was dyed in sectional mixes of red, yellow, green, and black. This man had a history, one Regina could not quite put her finger on and she suddenly found herself indefinitely curious of her superiors and their pasts.

Then Shepard spoke to Hoekstra as the student's filed down the stairs, following Rutger's lead. "What are you doing here? You never come out from behind your desk."

Rutger made eye contact with Regina as he faded out of view down the steps. Time seemed to slow in that segment of space, almost as if he wanted to tell her something, but did not have the means.

"This is one of the largest violent outbursts that the Pathos have had in quite some time, I think it was best I made a house call. Besides, there's a young chicken I wanted to see for myself," Hoekstra stated as he peeked over at Regina before he looked back at Shepard. "I'm going to prepare a statement for the public and assist with the evacuation. You two clear the rest of the building."

"Yes sir," Shepard answered.

Hoekstra began to descend the stairs before turning to Regina, "Good luck. I'm expecting great things from you. Great things."

Without another word, he drifted down the steps, one slow footstep at a time.

Shepard and Regina climbed the dark stairwell toward the third floor, doing their best to remain silent. Without a warning, the sound of a shotgun blast rang throughout the building, residually from the Pathos on the top floor.

"Guess he's still here," Regina whispered silently to Shepard as they reached the entrance to the third floor's hallway. A scream is heard.

They ran into the hallway, Regina pointed her weapon to the left and Shepard to the right. Again, all that remained afterward was absolute silence. Regina glanced back at Shepard with concern. He motioned her once more, to continue down the hall, in order to split up in search of the Human killer. She hesitated before she nodded, then hopelessly watched Shepard disappear down the hall, then glaring back to the stairwell. This was her moment, her chance, to turn away, to forget all that she had seen, to follow the electronic impulses in her brain, to leave and return to The Pit. She did not care that she'd spent much of her youth in a lazaretto, because she was certain of one thing, she was still in a lazaretto. Only she did not have four walls to define it. Society would do that for her. Perhaps it was time for her to return and rot in that cell.

Regina walked down the hall, defeated and panicked.

She moved with a slow crawl, one foot in front of the other, handgun raised to her side, prepared to fire on impulse. Her head felt as if it were to explode within her cranial cavity at any moment, Regina then clutched her head with her left hand. Then with the little ability she had, glanced at the doors as she passed them, until she heard a scream from an open classroom door up ahead. Sprinting to the door, Regina hid behind the cover of the wall, unable to control her nervous panting. As she leaned in to see the content of the classroom, she caught visual of the Pathos as he held a gun to a young woman. The man, who seemed slim and unfed, not showered and never nurtured, stood before her. The sweaty, balding man turned to notice Regina as she saw him.

In a state of panic, the Pathos shot the young woman, metallic liquid sprayed out from the place where he face had once been. The Pathos then aimed at Regina, firing off a blast as she barely avoided the blast radius, a chunk of wall degrading past her face.

“Shit!” Regina shouted as the Pathos fled into the connecting classroom.

Her ears started to ring loudly, a bell seemed to toll, repeatedly within the recesses of her mind. Her gun in one hand, the other, nothing, both clutched her head. The pain was unbearable, as she became overcome with horrific fear. Nightmarish scenarios were carved inside the valleys of her brain, the million ways this would end with her inevitable death. Regina gazed down at her legs, which seemed to be encased in an Icelandic edifice, a perfect standstill with endless neglect and isolation. A Pathos hunting a Pathos, she was committing an act that hadn't been committed since World War IV. During a time when Pathos were known as human beings, when they would fight to the death, in trenches and deserts, amongst blood and false beliefs. Now Pathos are the ones being wiped out, slowly by their own kind. Could she truly kill this man when he has not technically killed anything living? Was that Human girl living? Was it made up of a real consciousness? Or modified coding? Questions continued to pile in Regina's mind and found herself unable to determine what to believe anymore.

Regina found the strength to leave her cover and enter the classroom. As she did, she slipped upon the metallic blood coated tiles, falling to her hands and knees. The room seemed to be completely lined in a fresh coat of silver, the insides and outsides of Humans littered about the walls, empty vessels with no one left to inhabit the spaces. Everything was grey and dreary, not a bright presence to contrast the darkness.

She moved to her feet, wiping the metallic substance on her clothing, and founded fresh cover at the door that the Pathos had entered.

“I know you’re in there!” Regina shouted.

A shuffle is audible within the opposing room.

“Same goes for you, Exo bitch,” he scowled, clearly frightened for his life.

“I’m not an Exo. I’m a Path...human being. So are you.”

“Cut the bullshit, you’re with them!”

Regina leans her head against the back of the wall before she replies, “They took me out of The Pit, but I’m not an Exo. I’d rather die than be one of them.”

“Is that supposed to mean something to me? You’re still with them, which means you’re not on the right side.”

“There’s no way out of this for you. The Humans will never see you fit for the society they withhold.”

“You think that matters to me?! My life holds no meaning to them. They don’t care about hopes and dreams, love and hate. They are just motionless robots who claimed everything as theirs.” The sound of a chair as it scraped against the floor is heard, Regina knew that he was frightened. The Pathos continued, “The monsters stole my chance at a normal life, a human existence of complete freedom. I have had to live in hiding and I could not take it anymore. If you’re going to kill me then do it. As you said, I’d rather die than be controlled by them.”

With sadness, Regina responds monotonously, “As you wish.”

She swiped around the edge of her cover and leapt into the room, a shotgun blast fires from the black shadows of the classroom. The scatter clipped Regina’s right

shoulder, she shouted in pain and agony. Hitting the floor hard, she slid across the tile, aimed directly at the Pathos. He attempted to fire once more, but remained unaware of his need to reload. The Pathos attempt to fire, returned only with a resounding click for his effort, his eyes widened with fear, his fate sealed in that frozen moment in time.

“I’m sorry.” Regina proclaimed.

Pulling the trigger, a bullet fired from her gun, piercing the thin air, and punctured the Pathos’ skin with deadly precision. What Regina witnessed next would scar her for the remainder of her time on Earth.

The wound began to churn like a spoon blending numerous ingredients within a bowl of entrails. A centralized vortex gushed from the wound on his abdomen and his screams became unlike any she had heard or ever would hear. His entire anatomical structure seemed cave in upon itself. A strange sphere materialized in a trepidation of disturbing imagery, as the Pathos’ screams started to worsen with each passing moment. Within seconds, the black hole had encased the Pathos, having sucked up a portion of the floor along with him. An uneasiness welled deep with Regina as the man was stretched beyond human proportions, his screams faded to silence. The Pathos was torn apart horizontally as he was pulled apart vertically, separated into subsections of matter, into nothing more than the meat strings of an angel hair pasta. They dangled and rotated within the murky, black sphere, devoid of all life. The extendedly painful process came to a close as the orb shank on a dime, until it vanished completely, removing all traces of the Pathos.

When the classroom blared with silence, Regina could only lie on the ground, with a never-ending look of horror. She had never witnessed something so vile, so cruel,

and gruesome during any given circumstance. That was what the Human leaders had concocted while Regina spend nearly a decade in The Pit, the ultimate weapon to eliminate all Pathos, no clean up and no fuss. Tears began to evolve and fill within her tear ducts, rising to the brim, until the only left for them to do was evacuate. They poured down her face and her cries turned into violent sobs. Her brain still continuously knocked on the internal casing of her skull, which caused Regina excruciating and unbearable pain.

Then everything generated into a dense, heavy fog. Her vision grew extensively cloudy, until the world faded from view, into darkness.

When the black void finished its resurgence and began to subside, Regina heard subtle sounds return with her consciousness. The clash of steel wheels against concrete, along with the feeling of a jerking motion on her head, amidst distant shouts, and then a clap of enormous thunder.

Her eyes jolted open and copious drops of rainfall peppered her face. The sight of the Bauer University lecture building seemed to pull away from her as flashing lights illuminated the dense air and the area's surface.

She tried to move, but found herself unable to. Regina lifted her head up to glance down at her body until recognizing it as the stretcher that bound her. Then in a light daze, she found the strength to look to her right, where Shepard seemed to be speaking to her. Every word he uttered seemed without dialect, as if there were a glass wall between her and him.

She is picked up by two medical officers and placed in the back of the MPF ambulance vehicle. Around her she could see all of the equipment that littered the cramped space. A cardiac monitor, medical evaluation kits, replacement limbs in various sizes, brain activity cuffs, and airway measurement sets. Computer screens coated the surface of the walls, for what purpose Regina did not know or care.

Shepard climbed in and tapped on the wall, before selecting something. A collapsible chair unfolded from the wall, where he sat down and faced Regina. An on staff MPF medical officer walked past Shepard and examined one of the computer panels. Another clap of thunder brought back her hearing as her ear canals popped.

“Are you alright?” Shepard asked.

Regina stared out into the rainstorm, each droplet hitting the metallic surface of the vehicle, ricocheting off to join the pools consummated onto the concrete road.

“Hey, Regina. Are you alright?” Shepard asked once more.

Laying her head back down, Regina looked up at the ceiling and replied, “No.”

“What’s wrong?”

“How can you even ask me that?”

“You stopped the perpetrator. You saved lives today.”

She turned her head to look at Shepard, who exchanged a look of confusion.

“I just watched a Pathos get sucked into a black hole. I saw a man get anatomically pulled apart. Listened to his agonizing screams. Watched him vanish into nothing.”

His eyes transferred a glance of exhaustion and heaviness, “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you before. How we eliminate them.”

“Why?”

“Why didn’t I tell you?”

“No. I understand that you had your reasons. What I want to know is why the Humans have us kill Pathos with whatever the hell that was.”

“The weapon design for a handgun hasn’t changed much, you pull the trigger and face the possibility of ending a life. But Humans developed the ability to manipulate the dimensions of a black hole into the contained structure of a bullet. They were able to discover this possibility thanks to an old mathematical dealing known as the Ergodic Theorem. Pathos were using it for hypothetical concepts for harnessing energy more than a thousand years ago, but Humans were able to apply this to a transformation of energy. By focusing on blueprints left behind by, Einstein, I believe that was his name, they accelerated the particles moving inside of the bullet. Essentially, they found a way to control time and space. But only temporarily because without the use of a fast shrinking black hole, well, our planet might very well get sucked up with the Pathos.”

Regina started to shake with disgust and horror as she spoke, “That’s barbaric.” She closed her eyes in the wake of a realization, that she was only a pawn for the Human’s agenda. “Why go through all that trouble?”

“The Human leaders and high ranking officials sought to better combat the Pathos conflict, so they took to extensive scientific studies. They found best approach was a complete elimination, no clean up needed outside of pulling the trigger,” explained Shepard in his best attempt at a simplified manner.

“That much was obvious to me. But it removes the civilized procedures of a fair trial or proper questioning. The police forces do not investigate or solve any crimes now. The job description involves hunting and killing, that’s all.”

“You’re assuming that Humans are interested in those things based in fairness.”

Regina felt sick to her stomach, but simultaneously numb. She continued to wonder if these realities were all seemingly demented dreams. Then with a sigh stated, “Why would Humans avoid every moralistic option for simplicity?”

Shepard shuffled in his chair, taking to a more suitable position, and shifted his left leg upon his right knee. “You can throw about all that philosophy on your head and ask questions, but it won’t lead anywhere good for you. Conscious beings all believe they are thinking moralistically, but everyone has a fluctuating definition of it. Humans want to eliminate the threats to their people, it is as simple as that Regina. Pathos did the exact same during their time holding the reigns.”

“Easy to say that when you’re the dominating creature on the food chain, the top floor of society. If they’re trying to be the permanent dominators of society, then killing everything that gets in the way will ensure that.”

Inspector Shepard frowned at her response and the words he forced himself to speak, “I agree with you. Trust me, I do. I have to eliminate Pathos on a daily basis. Humans don’t have to deal with the problem. But the way things are. It is what it is and there is nothing to be done.”

Regina looked away from Shepard and back out toward the rainfall. Every fiber of her being was going to fight against them, in any way that she could. This much she

knew because right now, what is and what should never be, is. Then she remembered, during the shootout this the Pathos, she had been hit by part of the man's shotgun spread.

"Shepard, I was hit in there." Regina glanced toward her left shoulder, where a bandage covered the damage. "Why don't I feel any pain?"

"They administered an anesthetic to the wound. They patched you up enough that you won't bleed out, but we should be heading to the MPF infirmary momentarily."

Regina attempted to wedge her arm up, allowing herself enough leverage to reach for the bandage. Shepard stood up immediately. "I would advise against you doing that," he whispered. Ignoring him, she lifted up the wrapping, was the sight of the voracious gash and a light coating of her blood. Only her blood was not of a reddish hue, but that of a metallic silver substance.

"What the hell?!" she screamed. "That's impossible!" Her vision burgeoned into a concentrated fog. She had a hard time focusing on the wound, combatting her shameful state of susceptibility and long forged ignorance. Fighting the need to faint, Regina took to Shepard's woeful appearance.

"I'm so sorry."

"You monsters!" she shrieked in terror. Her screams and cries pierced the sound of the storm. Regina reached for the strap, undoing the one around her arms, while she sobbed through her screams. After successfully leaning up toward her feet, Shepard attempted to push her back down.

"Calm down Regina! You need to calm down!" Shepard looked over before asking, "Can you sedate her?"

She punched Shepard in the jaw, sending him back into his seat. As she undid the tightly constructed strap on her feet, the medical officer pulled her onto her back.

“What’re you doing to me?!” she shouted with fear. Her body felt alien to her, as if her humanity had been stripped without her knowledge. Shepard rose quickly to his feet and held Regina down, who fought violently to rid their constricting grasp over her.

“I’m sorry. This is for your own good.” Shepard shouted in between Regina’s zealous howling. The medical officer grabbed a needle from the counter and pushed on her neck with one hand before aiming for her eye socket.

“Don’t! Stop!” she barked with tired nerves. However, it was too late, for the needle slid deep within her eye and its contents entered her system. The medical officer pulled the long, thin metal tube back out, as quick as possible.

“I don’t understand why it isn’t working,” the medical officer exclaimed. She continued to struggle against their strength until gathered enough leverage to sit up. With a leaning momentum, Regina elbowed the medical officer in the face, sending the man falling onto his back. Hitting Shepard once more, metallic liquid falling from his nose, he collapsed onto the internal floor of the emergency vehicle.

Without a second of hesitation, Regina took advantage of the situation, and climbed off of the stretcher. Leaning into a vehement motion, she fled the safety of the ambulance and out into the storm.

Breathing heavily from the dense, brisk air, she sprinted from the scene and into the nearby wooded area. This was her best chance of escape. Her tears hybridized with the rain, salt mixing with acid. Shepard’s screams could be heard distantly, in the thick of the gale.

Regina's breath pierced the visible veil of the downpour. With every step, her body began to increase with a weight. Her head tilted down and she saw her foreign limbs bend like a branch. She leaned against a tree to rest, unable to continue. Sirens and shouts can be heard in the distance.

She made out Shepard's shout in the storm, "Regina!" Twigs snapped and leaves brushed under his feet.

Shepard appeared through the trees and stopped in front of her, a gun in his right hand. She could hardly move from her slumped posture against the rough oak.

"I'm not trying to hurt you. What happened to your body," he paused, saddened by the situation. "I am truly sorry."

"Are you?" Regina hissed back.

"Think what you want. I didn't ask for them to take your body from you and I never asked for them to take it from me. You think I want to be an Exo? Fuck no. But just like you, we signed up for it the moment we said yes. The second we are taken from The Pit, we are no longer ourselves. Not entirely."

Regina punches the brawny oak, unable to control her rage. Her fist is numb and cold. She holds up her hand in front of her face, staring at the slight gash. The metallic blood washes away as quickly as it can flow out.

"Why?" she asks Shepard depressingly.

"The leaders of this society. They know who you are. They knew that you had a greater purpose than rotting away in a cell for two life sentences. Pathos are a menace to everything, the very order of things. The people in The Pit cost them a great deal, it

would be cheaper to gas all the prisoners. But they kept you alive. Why do you think that is?”

She turns to look at Shepard, her hair partially covering her right eye. Wincing to examine her partner as she comments sarcastically, “Because they enjoy my witty personality.”

“You have talents and abilities that not many can ever dream to cultivate. The leaders understand your intellectual nature and your manner of analyzing problems. The MPF is the reason why you can be integrated into the Human society. After serving your full sentence, of course. Otherwise you would be in a worse place than this. You have a purpose in this world Regina.”

“What worse place is that? Death? I’m not afraid to die Shepard. There is nothing after this life, just infinite blackness. An inherent fertilization of the grass in a field, that is if your body can experience the decomposition process. We return to the earth. Christianity was an incomprehensible farce. The great philosopher Nietzsche called that religion the greatest misfortune of humanity. He was never wrong about that. To let some made up God be judged as we judge ourselves and in turn glorify a God so we might glorify ourselves. It is all about feeling important. Nobody is important. Everyone is exactly the same, finding some reason to keep moving along a pointless existence. Human, Exo, Pathos. There is no ultimate purpose you idiot.”

Regina slid her back against the tree, moving gently down until she sat down on the soggy ground.

Shepard shook his head irritably, before responding with anger, “You have no idea how wrong you are. You have a purpose. You just have to accept the world around

you and the sacrifices that need to be made. There are wretches and there are kings. They each have a role, as do you. What is done is done. Do not give me that pointlessness crap just because you lost something precious to you. I have lost my fair share. Don't act like you're the only one!"

She stared at Shepard as he panted. In this moment, Regina had a hard time not examining the man before her. This person that she hardly knew, with a painful past that he kept from everyone, just like her. His eyes seemed exceptionally heavy, the bags below them well defined. His eyebrows were angled low, with a deadly look of seriousness she had not seen before. There was so much pain. And so much hate. The necessary feelings of a Pathos. The ones that drove Shepard to keep fighting, despite the lack of reason to.

Then she breathed deeply, "How can you accept how things are?"

"Because if I don't, the leaders will have me killed without a second thought. I have no choice but to adhere to the rules of the law. Humans are to live, Exos are to uphold the law, and Pathos are to be eliminated. If I do what I have to do, I can find the answers I need. It is all I have left."

"And who are these leaders exactly?"

"They are the all seeing eyes. Only a few have ever met them. So I cannot tell you much. But they govern with an iron fist and they decide the law. They understand peace and have resolved all problems on this planet. They are uncorrupted and separate from attachment to everything. They are Humans that you will probably never meet."

"Then I know where I stand." Regina struggled to rise to her feet. She used the sternness of the tree to her advantage. With her left arm, she leaned on the bark, placing

her strength in her legs. Her tight cargo pants were soaked and coated in a light layer of dirt. Her boots had already filled completely with rainwater. After a brief skirmish with herself, Regina managed to stand upright.

“And where is that exactly?”

“I’ll go along. I’ll come back with you.”

Shepard raises an eyebrow with curiosity and urgency, “Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

They stood in silence. The wind gusted harshly, blowing the wind in a northwestern direction. Regina’s hair did not move, nor did Shepard’s. Neither of them waned an inch. All they felt was the slight chill of the gust as it glided past them both.

“I won’t be a pawn forever,” she expressed tumultuously.

“I never expected you too.”

“There will come a time where I will no longer be able to stand in line idly while the world goes to hell. Because you know that it will. The Pathos are never going to give up and I don’t plan to watch the Humans wipe out my kind. Humans fear what they cannot control. That is why they have eliminated such an uncontrollable range of emotions in their own safe havens. It will not last forever, for as the Pathos say, history always repeats itself.”

Shepard raised his left hand, sliding his damp hair back. He glanced at Regina, stumbling through his brief rebuttal, “You can say that, but until then, you have a job to do.”

Regina was furious, barely able to control her indignations toward the Humans. The violation of her physical body, a relentlessly neurotic removal of her brain from her

cranial cavity. What was left, an empty vessel where no soul ever rested. There was only a meaty extremity that held some definition of psychosis and sense of being. She would in time adjust to this false material body and the feeling of animosity would subside, for Pathos had short memories. But they never forget when they are wronged. Regina would never forget what the Humans had done to her and the ones that lied to her.

“Shepard, I’ll work with you. But I’ll never trust you.”

“You can do what you please. I was following what I was told. And before you respond further, think of the other Exos on the force. How did they become what you now are? We have all been in your shoes Regina. Some handled it better, other worse. It is not like every MPF officer asked to become an Exo. They were forced, same as you. It was either die or become a slave to the Pathos and live to see another day. We all have to kill our own kind, day in and day out. So try to understand, that is all I ask.”

Regina careened forward a few steps before stopping a few feet from Shepard. She looked into the distance, back toward the university. She then turned her head to face his discerning glare and squelched, “I’d rather have died.”

She hobbled slowly past Shepard, her legs toiling greatly to keep her up. The leaves swayed under each skewed step Regina made. Staring ahead into the distance, she worked hard to return to the crime scene. Shepard studied his partner’s determined strut and in that moment, Regina looked like a wrathful God amongst fallen angels.

The world seemed to fall harder at Regina’s feet in the weeks that had passed. She found herself sitting in the mess hall of the MPF facility, staring out at the vast constellation of the city. It was funny to her how swiftly time ticked away, no matter the

good and the bad that happened in between. Time appeared to become like the city on the other side of the glass and she was a manifestation of life being forcefully pulled away on a train, heading for somewhere that she was never supposed to go. The glowing lights of time seemed to fade out, one by one, growing dimmer and dimmer, until her time was up.

As she thought of all these realizations, the Humans in that city continued to walk along, carelessly and selfishly. The truth was, that unlike Regina, time would always be on their side. These self-aware beings would go through the motions, never really knowing the pain for being a Pathos in a physical prison or the real state of the world. She was jealous of them because they would not experience a hard life or a tough decision. Life or death was not a part of their vocabulary.

Regina rubbed her eyes, for they grew heavy from looking at the stars.

Suddenly a man sat down across from her at the table, placing his meal down before sitting. She moved her gaze up to see that Inspector Rutger had joined her, with a goofy smirk permanently etched on his face. Given the man's height and slim physique, Regina fought the urge not to chuckle. The first time she had had such an urge in a long time.

"What are you doing?" she quizzed softly.

"What does it look like I'm doing? I'm having dinner with the spring chicken," Rutger sputtered as scarfed down a mouthful of mashed potatoes.

"I get that. But why?"

He finished chewing his food and cleared his throat, before reaching for his water. After downing a few gulps from the cup, he set it down on the tray. Then he began to speak, "I really want to pick your brain, metaphorically speaking of course."

“You’re trying to cheer me up aren’t you?”

“Guilty,” he said, smiling and raising his arm to scratch his head nervously.

She looks away and back out the window into the night, while simultaneously grumbling, “It isn’t going to work.”

Then she hears a glass clink on something, tapping loudly on the table.

Withstanding fascination forced her to glance and see something rather incredible. On the table sat an old bottle of Muhlberg whiskey, aged a hundred and a fifty-seven years.

Regina stared in disbelief, her jaw widened as she declared, “Holy shit.”

“How about now?”

“I haven’t had a sip since they threw me in that damn chrysalid and tossed away the key. You know the way to my heart Rutger.”

There was not a second’s hesitation before Rutger pulled out two whiskey glasses from his bag and placed them on the table. He cracked open the bottle and began to pour the golden brown liquid. The whiskey splashed into the first glass, emptying in all directions until it became the shape of its captor. One glass had reached fifty percent capacity and then the next filled exactly the same. His hand slid the warm, smooth glass slowly across the table until it reached Regina’s grasp.

Inspector Rutger raised his glass up and held it toward his dinner guest, to which Regina quickly raised her own. They both drank from their glasses. As she felt the room temperature whiskey flow into her mouth, as it drifted down her esophagus and insides, everything raised in temperature. Her throat felt hot and the rest of her body loosened up. All at once, Regina experienced a moment of relaxation and exhaustion.

“Look I know things suck right now, but it could be worse. You could be dead. Or your brain mindlessly controlled by the pieces of shit upstairs. You still have control of your actions and your body. That’s gotta be something.”

Regina placed the glass down on the table and sighed deeply, “How’d you deal with it?”

“You mean having my brain removed and placed in an organic test tube body? I guess I just faced the fact that everything was out of my control. Everything and everyone I knew was dead. There weren’t many options. You handled it a lot better than I did. I practically killed Birkhoff,” Rutger said with a chuckle as he recalled the moment.

“Honestly, it was awful at first, but eventually you accept it for what it is. There are some things that you lose and you can never get them back.”

“Its strange isn’t it? This body feels my own. It acts the same. Hell, it even looks the same. But I know that it is not my own.”

Rutger finished ingesting another sip from his glass and then giggled, “Well look at it this way, your new body will never get fat.”

“I suppose that’s true,” Regina replied coldly, then swallowing most of the glass in one fell swoop.

“Man, you’re a tough cookie.”

“Kind of have to be.” She paused briefly. Rutger twisted the cap off the whiskey bottle and topped off Regina’s glass. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure, why not.”

“Do you ever think about where our stream of consciousness comes from?”

“Well, I mean yeah. Not often, but once and a while I ponder where my thoughts and beliefs come from.”

“Some people believe that every Pathos contains a place where thought and beliefs come from called the Noosphere.”

He raised an eyebrow, leaning forward in his chair, and begged inquisitively, “Oh? What is that exactly?”

“Think of the Pathos brain like planet Earth. It is a sphere, where all the thoughts, emotions, and physical responses are buried. And what allows for all of our ideas, beliefs, and logic to rise to the surface stems from an atmosphere of the mind. The Noosphere. Similar to the air we breath from the syphoned density layers above us, the same goes for our brain. The Noosphere is what keeps us breathing and living. The condition of who we are continues to coexist because of this.”

“That is a very interesting theory indeed,” Rutger pried as Regina sipped on her whiskey.

“To some it is a theory, but to others it is a reality all too frightening. And it brings up some thought provoking questions.”

“And what kind of questions might those be?”

“If Pathos contain this Noosphere out of evolutionary measures, based primarily as a natural form of life, can Humans synthesize that completely? Considering they are technically artificial. Is any thought within their carefully processed minds grounded in any genuine reality or is it false complexity? The same way that my body is now synthetic.”

Rutger brought his hand to his head, “Damn. You’ve got a lot of questions. Dangerous ones I might add. It’s enough to give a guy an ulcer. But at the same time, I can understand what you mean. That line of questioning certainly could bring into question the Human crusade to eliminate every Pathos.”

“Exactly. And can you blame a species that created the Humans for fighting back? Pathos are survivalist beings facing extinction. Unlike Humans, Pathos have instinctual and natural defense mechanisms. They are doing everything they can to stop the inevitable.”

“But the very same could be said for the Humans. It is rather easy to make the opposing argument. Pathos were the ones responsible for the near destruction of Earth and its natural resources. They nearly wiped themselves out on their own, mining for oil and destroying copious oceanic bodies. They polluted the air to the point where damage was nearly irreversible. Shit, they fought pointless wars to kill each because of their stupid ideals.”

Regina replied with frustration, “Are we not doing that now?”

He nodded in agreement before responding, “You’ve got a point there.” Then Rutger took a large swig of the whiskey glass, finishing the remaining bit of liquid. Regina follows in kind, killing the last of her cup. The two put their glasses down. “But Pathos have self-pride, selfishness and destructive tendencies that Humans do not. I can see why the Humans want to kill them. They encompass nasty qualities that doom civilizations. I can also see the good that Pathos can have, but I wish you luck getting a Human to ever see those qualities.”

With that, Regina rose from the table to her feet. She looked at Rutger and smiled, “Thanks for the whiskey.”

She took her plate from the table, leaving Rutger alone.

Regina awoke to the sound of a blaring alarm next to her bed. She leaned over and turned off the steel clock. This MPF routine had begun to remind her of The Pit and the alarm that continued to go off each day without fail. She was starting to believe it might be best for her to keep count of the time she would spend in this prison compared to the last one.

After rising from her bed, Regina walked in the next room to shower.

“Shower on,” she spoke clearly. As the shower turned on, she stripped and stepped into the open area and underneath the spraying head. Her feet felt oddly cold and the steaming warmth soothed her aches. The water submerged her scalp, sending the streams of water down her neck, along her breasts and legs to the drain by her feet.

Regina stood under the pouring water, sighing deeply as she leaned one arm against the wall. Pushing her head out to see, she examined the hand that had punched the tree during her argument with Shepard. Then she looked at the shoulder that had taken the shotgun blast, both appeared perfectly untouched. Much like the Human counterparts, Exos can be fixed up to seem undamaged, so long as the brain remains intact. Though Regina did not consider herself lucky to have survived the encounter, for she would rather have died before she could realize she become what she hated most.

She leaned her head back, moving her arm from the wall to her side. Her hand grazed her wet hip, the synthetic skin felt real in the watered mask. Closing her eyes,

Regina's nostrils sucked up the air between incessant streams, the limited rations of air feeding her brain.

As she exited the shower and dressed herself, Regina could not help but think of her swift acclimatization to the MPF job. In a society without marital abuse, sexual assault, or much small theft crimes, it was not an exceptionally difficult career. Aside from making the rounds with Shepard amongst the city streets, things were quiet again. She hated to think that things were too quiet, but for a world with Pathos hiding in the crowds and a hacker on the loose it seemed as though there should be more noise. For now, all she could do was play along and see where her next move was going to be.

Regina strolled down the hallway of the MPF criminal investigation department, passing other officers going about their daily tasks. Some were required to prepare roads for automated construction and traffic direction, others patrolling important files between hands for chemical or microscopic analysis. Many, if not most, of these Exos were ones she would never know or care to know. They would all perform what was expected of them and that was that. She was forcefully placed amidst a force of Pathos who have turned against their species, all of whom only care about self preservation and nothing more. They are mindless zombies, upholding the law that murdered their mothers, fathers, daughters, sons, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. Long lines of Pathos, all annihilated out of fear. Regina knew that the difference between her and the MPF officers around her was that when the time came, she would not stand idle to save a life.

Rounding the left corner, she approached a semitransparent glass door, making out vague blurred colors. On the door she read the bold plated words: Municipal Police

Force Commissioner David Birkhoff. She shook her hands and breathed deeply before stepping into the office. As the door slid open, she felt an overwhelming sense of dread.

Birkhoff's face was not visible when she entered. He seemed far too preoccupied with something he was reading and the lit cigarette in his mouth. The man seemed unable to wear the required uniform and instead dressed in the same gumshoe attire she would come to know him for.

"Excuse me, s-s-sir," Regina asked nervously.

He looked up at her from his desk with the same pain in the ass look he had given her when she first arrived. Then he raised his hand to his mouth and pulled out the cigarette, releasing a puff of smoke in the process.

"I wanted to speak with you in regards to the assignment for which I was pulled out of The Pit for," she anxiously continued. "It's been weeks since the incident at the University and I have yet to be properly briefed on this supposed hacker."

"Your patience astounds me Ms. McNeil. I'd have thought you would have stormed in here days ago, especially given the way you discovered your transference."

He smirked and took another puff of his cigarette. Regina became irritated with his reaction from behind the desk, "What the hell is with you? Do you think its funny or something?" she barked, clearly on the verge of shouting.

"Seeing your frustration with your current predicament and your attachment to that Pathos body you once had, as a matter of fact, I do. I find your terrified appearance and fear in regards to the lack of control for your own life amusing."

Regina snarled, "I know that we've only met briefly a few times, but I am already sick of your shit. Do you have a problem with me?"

Birkhoff rose from his chair, holding the lit cigarette at his side, and glared at her seriously. “No, Ms. McNeil,” he said. “No problem. Just don’t be so eager to leap at the assignment we brought you out for. This job. It is a dangerous game. A game of words. Not many people make it in the force as long as I have.”

“Well that’s good news,” she broke quickly. “I don’t really want to be an officer of the MPF as long as you have been. I’d rather kill myself.”

The Commissioner walked around his desk and moved the cigarette to his mouth, sucking in the tobacco’s fumes. He stopped and sat on the front of his desk, as he relieved his lungs and filled the room with smoky mist. “Be careful what you wish for,” he warned sternly. “Do not forget, I can read you. You love yourself too much to end your life. You are afraid of uncertainty and the possibility that when you die, that is all there is.”

“Don’t pretend for one second that you know the slightest bit about me.”

“Your plight reminds me a great deal of an old Pathos morality play. Everyman, I believe is the name,” Birkhoff said. “Much like the life of everyone, Human or Pathos, there is no author for us. We write our own stories, the lives with which we lead and the own deaths we choose.”

Regina shakes her head, “I’ve read the damn play.”

“You’re a philosophical individual, I know that much. But I also gather that you’re not much of a faithful person, you have doubts. In this life you hold dear, you seem to keep asking questions and looking for answers. The truth is that the search for knowledge is wasted. There will never be a proper answer to any of your questions.”

“Well I think life is wasted on you,” Regina said. “You do what you’re told. You’re nothing but a Human hound dog. You don’t ask questions. You obey and you get your bone. And what does that leave you with Birkhoff?”

“My good deeds,” he responded confidently. “When you accept that you will always be alone and that friends are not with you when you die. Then and only then, in death, will you understand that good deeds are what’s left over.”

“I suppose it depends on your definition of a good deed. It’s all a matter of perspective isn’t it?” she asked.

“That it is,” Birkhoff laughed. “That it is.”

He rose from his desk and crushed out the cigarette in his desk’s ashtray. Then he turned to Regina and asked, “The questions is, will your good deeds outweigh the bad?”

“Me to know, you to mind your own business,” Regina said.

With another witty smirk Birkhoff started toward the door, stating quickly, “Follow me. It’s time to brief your squad on the man responsible for the Human hackings.” He exited the room without waiting another moment.

Regina stood still, smiling at the Commissioner’s conversation. She knew that working with this man was going to be fun battle of wits. This was a skirmish her mind was ready for. Following in kind, she walked hastily through the sliding door after Birkhoff.