

Alessia threw herself down on the rock-solid seat of the subway train. Her body had no energy, just exhaustion tugging at her. The faint dark walls outside the window whizzed by at blistering speed. The smell of days-old rotting milkshake wafted through the air from a half-empty cup a few feet from her seat, piercing her wrinkled nose like needles.

She tried to ignore the rude loud voices from the far end of the train. They came from a tall man, wearing shorts and a cutoff t-shirt. He was built quite strongly, but looked a few years too old for that physique. Even when he didn't speak, his mouth seemed to hang open.

Kind of like a Neanderthal, she mused to herself, staring at her ghostly reflection in the mirror. There were bags under her eyes.

The last few weeks had been dreary, a simple repetition of work and more work. Her friends had promised to try and help her relax. Satan's appearances had become less and less frequent, even as she grew more isolated.

"Come on, lady! I just want to talk!"

Alessia looked up. The Neanderthal was barking down at a young woman. She looked to be a college student, wrapped in a simple gray hoodie, her dirty blond hair tied up in a simple bun. She stared out the window, doing everything possible to avoid looking at the caveman barking at her.

The train screeched to a halt. Alessia walked out across the platform, bathed in red from the endless maroon tiles littered across the whole station. It was around 10:00pm, completely empty.

"Just leave me alone."

Alessia paused in her step, a few feet from the escalator that would take her up out of the platform. *Not my problem.*

"What, I ain't good enough to talk to!?" His New England accent was thick, slightly slurring.

She paused in front of the escalator, quick tendrils of fear jabbing her. Images of the horrible things the cavemen might do to her if she got herself involved popped into her head.

"Hey, Let go of me!"

She gritted her teeth and spun around. Stalking across the platform, she could see them at the bench in front of where Alessia had stepped off the train. The caveman had the college girl by the arm. He pushed her down on the bench, keeping a strong grip on her arm.

“I just wanted to talk to you!” he yelled in her face. “I wasn’t going to do nothing!”

“Hey!” Alessia yelled, hurrying over. The caveman turned to her, his sunken eyes flashing with disbelief. His mouth hung open so wide that bees could have nested there.

“Can you come show me where the buses are?” Alessia asked the girl, physically moving between the two of them.

Before the girl could answer, a meaty hand clamped down on Alessia’s shoulder. She gasped in quick pain as the man squeezed hard, whirling her around. His eyes flared with anger.

Alessia felt her right hand ball up into a fist, almost by itself.

“What do you think you’re doing? This ain’t any of your business-”

It never occurred to Alessia to throw a punch to the man, but her arm seemed to react by itself, swing with force.

Her punch slammed against the man’s chin, jerking his head left. The force was uncommonly strong, it sent the caveman’s body flying backwards and onto the ground with a fleshy thud.

What the hell? She had no idea where the burst of strength came from. She had only thrown one punch before in her life, but the last time had been nothing like this.

Her body leaped forward, straddling the man on the ground. Her left hand clasped around his throat, and her right fist rose in the air. Adrenaline shook her veins; her eyes forced themselves open wide, newfound energy surged through her body.

Her fist came down, ripping across his jaw, cracking bone. Her arm flew up, and came down again on his face, squishing across blood and flesh. Her body felt wild and alive, her fists slamming down on his face again and again and again, each time producing a wet thud of bloody impact.

Somewhere, a million miles away, she heard screams of the college woman yelling for her to stop. Then, Alessia realized, she wasn’t on the ground punching the

man. She was, in fact, a few feet away, watching herself punch the man. She was outside of herself.

She screamed at herself to stop, but the other her didn't listen. Unbridled glee flashed in the eyes of the attacking Alessia, before glowing orange. Tendrils of ash-black began to spread, like spider-legs or tree roots, skittering across her skin, before solidifying into a rocky skin littered with horns. She gasped. It was her, but with the skin of the devil.

Suddenly she found herself back on the ground, fist raised in the air, looming over the bloody carcass of the man she had just pummeled into submission. She scrambled backwards, pulling her arm back, resisting the urge to vomit.

His face was squashed, his eyes were closed, though one could barely tell through the cake of crimson on his face. She was breathing hard, almost to the point of hyperventilating. The college girl was running off in the distance.

She looked down at her fists. They were raw with blood, both the caveman's and her own. *Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god, please no.*

Her insides churned, panic filled her. Her hand shook with nervous energy, as she wiped her hands on her jeans, leaving dark red streaks across them.

She pressed her fingers against the man's neck, trying to find his pulse.

No no please no.

She bit her lip and tried a different spot. It was faint, but she felt the pulse. She exhaled heavily, falling back to the floor, slumping back against the bench.

Alessia wrapped her coat tightly, covering up the blood stains on her clothes. She strode through the pale moonlight, as briskly as possible without drawing attention by running. Her legs still shook.

"Why in such a hurry, my dear?" Satan asked, leaning back against the light-post at a crosswalk. His voice was soft and casual. "It's such a beautiful night, why not stop... to enjoy the scenery?"

She ignored him, staring at the little red hand at the crosswalk telling her to STOP.

“Your hands are bleeding, you really should get that looked at,” he sneered. “You could get an infection.”

She ignored him again, biting her lip.

The red hand became a little white man. She hurried across the street.

“Where are you going, Alessia? You’re scurrying like a house of fire! Do you have another date you have to get to?”

“SHUT UP!!!” she screamed at him, stopping suddenly. “Shut up shut up shut up!”

He grinned slightly, and raised his arms up as if to say *who, me?* The gesture was so pantomime that on another day it might actually have been funny. This time, it made her skin crawl, the infuriating obliviousness of it.

“Get away from me, you monster!!!” she screamed. “What are you doing to me!?”

He cocked his head to the side, every so slightly, locking eyes with her. His good-natured smile curled up into a thin-lipped one. Her pearly whit teeth suddenly seemed much sharper than they had a moment ago. The glow around his eyes intensified, and the black rocky face thinned and furrowed. His arms fell slowly from the gesture.

“If I’ve done anything to you,” he started, his voice deep, burrowing from some fiery chasm in his stomach. “It’s only made you stronger, my dear.”

She looked down at her hands, feeling her eyes begin to water.

“What do you want with me?”

He stepped up close to her, slowly running his hand down her face. She flinched, stepping backwards.

“I am strong, Alessia, strong in ways you can never imagine...”

He leaned closer to her, his face inches from her. She could feel the incredible heat emanating from him. Was it actual heat, or just her own mind playing a trick on her?

“With me in you... you can be strong too.”

Then he was gone.

White canvas stared at Alessia, and a dab of red paint fell from the edge of her paintbrush across her hand. Natural sunlight poured in through the studio windows, bathing the room in white-ness. She stared at the blotchy red liquid oozing over her knuckles. Her spine shuddered.

“Are you ready?” Gerrod asked, standing a few feet from her at his own painting canvas.

“I’m no good at this sort of thing,” she complained, quickly wiping her hand on the paint-stained apron she was wearing.

“It’s not about being good at it.” he told her, picking up his own paintbrush. “It’s meant to be relaxing.”

She sighed, and stared back at the empty canvas. It taunted her with its clean emptiness.

Over the past few weeks, she had tried hard to keep on a normal face in front of the others; she didn’t talk about her unique problem to anybody, for she knew nobody would believe her.

She trained herself, sometimes in front of a mirror, on how to react if Satan blinked into appearance with other people around. There were to be no sudden movements, no immediate physical acknowledgement of his presence. She would try to only respond in her thoughts, if at all. It was important for her to keep the voices inside her head, and outside, straight, and not be caught in a web of verbal clutter.

It required a constant mental effort from her at all times, in all social situations. She found, through excruciating trial and error, any time she let her guard down and tried to exist naturally, everything fell apart. To others, she would become a twitchy, awkward mess that nobody would go out of their way to be around. Only a constant, exhausting effort made her tolerable outside world. The stress of living this way had begun to pull her in a dozen directions already.

Her wide social circle from before her “death” had all but disappeared, alienated by her sudden drop in demeanor and mood. She spent the most time with Rose and Gerrod now, and even then it was largely perfunctory - she was with them because there was nobody else, and they were largely comfortable enough together that her changing mood and lack of engagement hadn’t become an issue yet.

One day, she had complained, in general terms, about daily stress weighing her down. This was Gerrod’s suggestion.

“The idea is,” he explained. “You don’t *think* about what you’re painting. You just sort of... flow, you know? Move, duck, weave, whatever.”

“Are we talking about painting or boxing?”

He made a *hush* motion with his finger to his lips, and pointed at the canvas.

“Paint.”

Alessia frowned, and then dragged the brush through the air to the white sheet in front of her. She pushed the brush against the canvas and moved left to right, painting several long red strokes.

Now what?

She bit her lip, trying to think of something to paint.

Knuckles streaked with blood.

She shook off the thought, and started painting a circle. She found herself streaking the brush around, and soon fell into the rhythm of the brush.

“Alessia!”

She snapped to attention suddenly, looking around. Gerrod stared at her, his hand empty. He had painted a painfully photo-realistic rendering of a bowl of fruit.

“What?!” she asked, perplexed. Had she missed something while painting?

“You weren’t responding to me,” he said, walking up to her slowly. She could sense the strange hesitancy in his step. “You’ve been at it a full hour.”

She furrowed her brow, trying to remember hearing him calling her name. She didn’t.

“That’s... unique,” he mumbled, eyes widening at the sight of her painting.

Alessia had painted a figure bathed in black and orange, though she had no memory of doing so. His body covered with rocky crevices and horns, many of them impressively shaded with dark blue. Gerrod had no idea who he was looking at, but she knew him all too well.

“Were you...” Gerrod asked slowly, his eyes still locked on the painting.
“...relaxed, when you painted this?”

The next morning, Alessia scanned the local paper on her way to work. Usually whenever there was a crime on public transportation, it made the METRO paper that was distributed for free all across town. Then she found it.

MAN BEATEN AT TRAIN STATION.

She held her breath as her eyes leaped from sentence to sentence in the short article. It spoke of a man being attacked at the train station, found beaten and bloodied within an inch of his life. He was recovering at the hospital. According to him, he had been attacked by three burly muggers.

On another day she might have laughed at the last part.

She tossed the paper in the trash while walking into the building, her stomach churning. The subway, the incident with the painting, it was a pattern. These were cases where she was not in control of herself.

Always playing the victim, eh? Satan sneered suddenly.

What are you talking about? She responded internally, taking great care to follow her own rule while entering the elevator.

Not in control of yourself?

“Sounds to me like you’re just using me as an excuse,” he snarled, over her shoulder and into her ear. “Do something horrible? Oh, oh, it wasn’t me! I wasn’t in control, it was the big bad devil!”

She turned in his direction to retort, then froze.

There were three other people in the elevator. There was a woman in front of her, and a man behind her, both paying her no heed. The third man glanced at her and nodded shortly, just as he had a few weeks ago the first time she'd seen him.

She stared at him, her mind cycling through memories just to make sure she wasn't imagining things. It was Samuel Clay. He was dressed in office clothes, staring ahead as if there was nothing even remotely odd about this situation.

The elevator doors *dinged* open, and she flew out, her heart pounding.

"Whoa, Alessia!" She tumbled into an older balding butterball of a man. He was, in fact, her boss, Wayne.

"I-I'm sorry," she muttered, picking up some papers he'd dropped.

"Oh, it's no problem," he told her, smiling. "Oh, have you met Sam?"

She froze, as he motioned to Clay, stepping out of the elevator.

"Just the once," Clay answered, nodding to Alessia, his eyes twinkling for just a second.

"What, uh..." she mumbled, her insides scattering like paper in the wind. "What does he, uh, do here?"

"Sam is a sort of... special contractor," Wayne said, grinning at him. "He comes to us every now and then to help with *special projects*." She wondered what was so funny about that.

"That's right," Sam said, his voice a raspy at its root, just as she remembered it.

"Alessia is our data analyst," Wayne explained conversationally. "She's great at what she does."

Really? Alessia wondered how that was possible since she spent almost every day coasting through her work.

"So, I, uh, have to get back to that," the words tumbled out of her mouth at breakneck speed. "I should go."

"Always the workhorse," Wayne laughed, as she scampered off. "That's what I like to hear."

"Nice meeting you..." she heard Clay's voice behind her while she walked as fast as her legs would carry her.

Whirling through the maze of cubicles in her office, Alessia felt her legs shake.

What the hell just happened?

She threw herself down on her chair, trying to shake the discombobulation. She wondered if she should leave, right now, just walk out. The entire situation bewildered her.

This man, Samuel, was pretty much responsible for her still being alive. After pulling her out of the bus, she'd awakened in a small shack just outside out of the city. He'd told her strange things, about the voices in her head, and about how the bomber on the bus had been trying to kill *her*.

At the time, only half-conscious, she hadn't bought it. It sounded like crazy talk. However, she soon spied him interrogating a chained prisoner in a side room. The man looked like one of the bombers, and Clay had been beating on him with such ferocity that it had rattled her to her core.

What's the difference between that and me with the man in the subway?

That was when she had run away. She had no idea if what he'd told her was true or not, if these freakish looking people with bleached white skin had really trying to kill her or not. The media had declared it an act of political terrorism, and she'd simply convinced herself that was true.

Then Alessia looked up and realized there was a small folded yellow piece of paper taped to her monitor screen. She looked around. Seeing no one, she grabbed it off the screen.

It handwritten, seven words:

They're here. Meet in garage. –Clay

She stared at the note for a full five minutes, in her insides pounding. What should she do, run, leave the office right now? Should he even trust his man? *They?* Those strange white-faced people? For all she knew, the bus bomber was some political terrorist nut, which was the official story coming from the news media. She really had no evidence, other than this man's strange ramblings, that it had anything to do with her.

Finally, she took a deep breath and climbed to her feet. Her stomach churned with curiosity. She had lost control of her body to Satan twice now, and she had to know what it was really all about. Her nerves began calmed as she started walking. Was this her own inner strength, she wondered, or Satan's?

The elevator dinged open to the parking garage. It was faintly lit, and the entire place smelled of urine. Her footsteps broke the silence with each echo as she walked past a row of Toyotas and Hondas.

“Hello?”

No response. A flash of white movement blurred past the corner of her eye. She spun around. Nothing.

She squinted, looking around the garage full of cars. Then it hit her. The note was already taped to her monitor when she arrived at her desk... but Clay had just entered the building alongside her on the elevator. When would he have had time to leave it there?

She turned just in time to see a white figure come barreling out from behind a car. The figure collided hard with her, throwing her backwards in a football tackle. She felt the crack in her bones as her body collided with pavement. The impact rolled the two of them a few feet, first him on top of her, then her on him, then the other way around again until they thudded against the tires of a car.

She tried to scramble under the car, her shirt ripping on a piece of metal underneath. The figure hissed as he grabbed on to her leg and yanked her back out into the open. She heard the metal shiv of a knife being unsheathed.

She reached up and grabbed the attacker's wrist as he tried to push the knife down on her face. His brilliant blue eyes narrowed as they stared down at her. She could make out every curve of his structured cheek-bones across his pale skin. Her other hand reached up, pushing and clawing at his face.

Pain rippled through her arms and muscles. Her strength began to collapse under him. She knew, it was a matter of seconds before he would overpower her completely.

Satan peered down at her over the attacker's shoulder. He turned to examine the attacker, his spiky black skin glistening in the faint light.

“You know,” Satan remarked, his voice hissing an echo across the lot. “It’s too bad you aren’t interested in my help...”

She remembered the monstrous burst of strength from the subway station, and the way she had lost control of her body to *him*.

“Or are you?” he asked, turning back to lock eyes with her.

She winced, pushing with all her natural strength, the knife blade just mere inches from her face. She knew his strength was the only thing that could get her out of this.

“Then again, the last time, you did yell at me,” he scoffed, throwing himself back against the car door in a calm sitting position. “I must say, my feelings were quite hurt.”

She dug her nails deep into the attacker’s face, puncturing a single drop of red across the lily white skin.

What would happen to her, if she lost control and couldn’t get it back? The last two times terrified her, so how could she actually let him take control?

The very tip of the knife pressed down on her cheek, pricking loose a welt of blood. The sudden jab of pain echoed across her skin.

Help... me...

“Very well,” Satan responded, his gravelly voice growing deeper.

She could already feel the energy sapping out of her body, the way it did when one falls into bed after a rough day.

Then, just like that, energy crackled through her body. She could feel the pain from her muscles dissipate. Her hand, struggling with the Angel face’s knife hand, pushed upwards, snapping his arm backwards and sending the knife clattering out of his hand. Her hand suddenly clasped itself around his neck.

Her body pushed up with savage strength, throwing him on his back while she climbed on top. Her left hand joined her right around his neck, both squeezing.

She could feel his windpipe crushing under her hand, the hardness crumpling under the soft skin of his neck. From somewhere inside of her, a deep growl escaped, and her fingers dug in so deep that they became submerged in his sticky oozing blood.

His arms flailed, his blue eyes opened wide. His hand struck and smacked her on her arms, her side, on her cheek, clawing at her shirt, all futile.

That's enough! She yelled to her body in her mind, but it was no longer listening to her as it squeezed the life out of the Angel-faced attacker. *Stop! Stop! Stop!*

She watched herself, a few feet away, pounding against an invisible glass box that refused to break. The tendrils swarmed over her. Then, slowly, she watched her own features disappear from the figure choking the man. Her hair, her figure, her clothes, all became swallowed in black rock, until there was only Satan left, hunched over, strangling the attacker.

The attacker's arms clawed up against her own one last time, trying to break her stranglehold, before falling to the ground, limp.

Alessia was on top of him, just in time to see the faint white twinkle in his eyes flash, and fade away. His face fell, until all that was left was blankness.

She stared at the dead body beneath her, her own breath echoing loudly again and again. It was several seconds before Alessia found herself able to pull her fingers off of the man's throat with a clammy release. Her fingers had left *deep* grips on his neck.

She lay back against the cars, wondering what had happened to her that brought her to this point. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't look away from his face. Cold, vacant, and dead.

Finally, she heard the elevator ding open. Clay scrambled out of it, breathing hard as if he'd just been running, looking around frantically.

He caught sight of her, his eyes darting from the body of the attacker, to her, and back to the body, putting the pieces together.

She stared up at him, wordless, barely acknowledging his presence. She didn't want to move or do anything. Her hands shook.

He took a deep breath and extended his arm.

"Now are you willing to listen to what I have to say?"