Press Start

by Brent Clark Palmer

The Chariot, Book 27

Chapter 1 — Chosen

Jenny Hung had gotten in.

That was the sentence she had been walking around with since the email landed. A game company was running a new training program out of a regular house: twelve weeks, room and food included, a paycheck, and a real playtester job at the end if you finished. You lived with the other trainees. You played ranked matches and unfinished builds. You wrote notes about what felt fair, what felt broken, what held your attention. They called it a residency because you stayed on site. They called it vocational because it was not college. Jenny had finished high school in June. She was eighteen. She queued ranked most nights. When she wasn't in a match she had a stream on, the way she had all through senior year. She was better at systems than at talking. This had sounded like a door she could actually walk through.

She walked through it carrying her console.

The front door was already open. Dark hall, long runner, coffee that had been sitting. Her suitcase bumped her calf. Two controllers rattled on the lid of the console in her arms. She had worn the gray shirt with PRESS START in green because it was the cleanest thing she owned that still looked like she was about to sit down and play. White sneakers. Cutoff shorts. Black glasses she did not take off for strangers.

“You’re Jenny,” a woman said from the room on the left. “Come in. You’re the last one.”

Jenny came in. The woman had a dark shirt and a badge on a lanyard. The name on the badge was the same one that had been at the bottom of the acceptance email. Miss Pell ran the house. She was not alone. A visiting crew had set a white light on a stand beside the gray sofa. One woman had a camera on her shoulder. Another held a microphone on a short pole. They were here to cover the program.

Three other girls were already in the room.

Jenny set the console on the low table under the dark monitor so she would not drop it on tape, then looked at them properly. The house setup sat where a living room would have put a coffee table and a screen: monitor, deck, cable run already taped. It looked like someone had built a stream station and then taken the facecam off.

Maddy Warner was the blonde in the white tank and the short shorts, hair done, standing closest to the light as if she had been born next to it. She was about five-four and had the posture of someone who had sat in front of a facecam even when the channel was small. She had been talking when Jenny came in and she

started again as soon as she had a face to include.

“I’m Maddy. I ran weekend cups off my phone for two years and streamed the bracket when I could. Nothing huge. People showed up. If this is playtesting for a studio, I want the hours.” Mae Welles stood half a step behind her. Brunette. Smaller. Five-one at most. She still had a hoodie on in the heat of the panel light, hands in the front pocket. She smiled too quickly when Jenny’s eyes landed on her.

“Mae,” she said. “Hi. I did evenings at a store after school. I applied because they pay you to live here and train. I watch a lot of YouTube playthroughs. I like games when somebody already figured out the rules.”

Cori Ash was at the far end of the sofa. Dark shirt, ordinary shorts, hair pulled back. She had not dressed for a camera. She looked at Jenny, then at Miss Pell, and waited to be named.

“Cori,” she said, when Miss Pell tipped her chin. “Same program.”

Miss Pell put two fingers lightly at Jenny’s shoulder and turned her a degree toward the lens.

“This is Jenny Hung,” she said. “She is the fourth trainee for this cycle. Jenny, these people are here for the afternoon. They are doing a piece on the residency. You answer what you are comfortable answering. Then they leave and we do our work.”

The camera woman lifted two fingers. “Jenny, look this way if you can. What did you bring? That looks like your own system.”

Jenny looked at the lens late, which she always did. She could see the green letters of her shirt backward in the glass.

“It is,” she said. “The letter said we would be in ranked and on new builds all day. I didn’t know if the house already had a setup. I wanted to be able to work on day one.”

“We have a setup,” Miss Pell said. “She can keep using her own controllers if she likes the feel. The matches still happen in this room.”

The woman with the microphone glanced at Miss Pell. “For people who have not seen the announcement. What is this, exactly? In order.”

Miss Pell did not shorten it.

“It is playtester training,” she said. “A game company is hiring through this house instead of through a six-month intern desk. These four young women just finished high school. They were accepted into a paid twelve-week residency. They live here. They play unfinished games and ranked modes. They write reports on timing, difficulty, attention, what makes a player stay in a match. The

company uses the reports. At the end of twelve weeks, the ones who complete the program are placed in studio playtest jobs. Housing is part of the offer. So is the paycheck. It is not a college program. It is job training. That is what you are covering.”

“Why these four?” the camera woman asked.

“They can keep a schedule and they can play,” Miss Pell said. “We do not need a degree for this work. We need people who will sit in front of a build for hours and tell us the truth about it.”

Jenny felt that land in her chest as praise even though it had not been aimed only at her.

The microphone tipped toward her. “Jenny. Why this instead of college?”

“College is four years and a lot of debt,” Jenny said. “This is twelve weeks and they pay me. I already grind ranked most nights. If a company will train me to do that as work, I want the job.”

Maddy nodded hard enough that the camera caught it. “Same. I can sit in a classroom. I don’t want to. I want to win and have the hours on a sheet instead of on a stream twenty people see.”

Mae’s laugh was small. “I need the stipend. That is the honest version. I also did not want to lose the only thing I was decent at just because school ended.”

Cori waited until the microphone came to her. “I wanted to be inside a company. This is the door they opened.”

She did not add a store, a channel, or a parent. Miss Pell did not ask her to.

They stood for a wide shot by the sofa: Maddy nearest the unlit lamp, Mae a half-step back, Cori at the arm, Jenny still close to her console. The monitor behind them was black. The whiteboard on the kitchen wall was blank. Jenny thought about the first report she would write in this room. She thought about a paycheck with her name on it. She thought about texting her mother after the crew left, and then remembered she did not know the house rules on phones yet.

Maddy tipped her chin at the setup. “Do we stream the blocks? Even unlisted?”

“No,” Miss Pell said. “Reports go to the company. Not to a channel. This is not content. This is work.”

“That’s enough,” she added, to the crew. “You have the arrivals and the description. They cannot start the job while you are still on the rug.”

The panel light clicked off. The room dropped back to ordinary ceiling glow. The crew wound cables. Gray tape came off the runner with a paper sound. The woman with the camera shook Mae’s hand because Mae had put her hand out.

Maddy asked if they would be back when the first ranked block started. The producer said they had what they needed for the piece.

“Good luck,” she said at the door. “People like a clean story about getting hired.”

Miss Pell walked them out. The front latch shut. The van would be on the street. Jenny did not go to the window.

For a second the four of them just stood there, trainees in a living room, the job suddenly real because the light that had made it look like a YouTube video was gone.

Maddy sat on the arm of the sofa. “I thought they would ask what we main.”

“They don’t need that for a first piece,” Cori said.

She pulled a duffel out from behind the sofa when she said it. The bag was wrong. It lay too flat. Jenny’s suitcase in the hall was overfull with shirts, two extra pairs of shoes she had argued herself into, a pouch of glasses cloths, the letter.

Mae saw the duffel at the same time. “That’s all you packed? For twelve weeks?”

“I packed what I needed,” Cori said.

Miss Pell came back and washed her hands at the kitchen sink as if the visit had been a delivery. The badge turned and settled against her shirt.

“Phones in the tray,” she said. “Then you sign the packet if you have not already signed every page. Then I walk you through the house while you still have clothes on, and then we do intake in this room. Intake is the baseline for the monitoring we use during playtests. Skin sensors. Attention readings. House rules that only apply once you are living here. I am not doing that while a crew is in the driveway.”

Jenny went to the hall for her suitcase. She left the console on the table. Miss Pell opened the four bedroom doors one after another. Each room was a single bed, a closet with empty hangers, a window onto the side of the next house. No posters. No leftover setup. No one else’s life left behind.

“Pick rooms after you sign,” Miss Pell said. “They are identical. Kitchen is there. You eat here. You sleep here. You play in the common room. If you step out the front door, that counts as leaving the house, and there are rules for leaving. We will go over those tonight. Family does not visit. The paycheck starts this week. Ranked blocks start tomorrow.”

Maddy asked if they could say the company’s name yet. Miss Pell said the placement letter at the end of twelve weeks would have the name on it. Until then they could say they were in the playtester residency.

They sat at the kitchen table. Miss Pell put a plastic tray in the middle. Four phones went in facedown. Mae’s screen was cracked at the corner. Maddy’s case was empty except for the phone. Cori’s was already off. Jenny’s lit with a message from her mother. She set it down without opening it. The tray made a cheap little sound that felt like the ride was over.

The packet was thick. Jenny liked that. She read her name, the twelve weeks, the stipend, the housing, the placement at the end. She read that participation meant she had to take part in every scheduled house session, not only the matches. She read that if she quit before the placement posted she would owe the program back the cost of housing and training. The number was large. She had known there would be a number. Seeing it next to her signature line still dried her mouth.

Maddy turned pages with her thumb. “This is the job. Play, write notes, live here.”

“That is the job,” Miss Pell said.

Cori’s packet had a second sheet tucked behind the first. Same cream paper, shorter. Jenny saw the corner of it when Cori shifted her elbow. Cori signed the extra page without asking what it was. Miss Pell did not pass a copy down the table.

Jenny almost asked. The crew was gone. There was no microphone. She still did not ask. She initialed the NDA. She signed the twelve weeks. She signed that she understood intake came next, including the sensor baseline.

Mae held her pen over the last line. “The monitoring. That’s like a heart-rate strap, or more than that?”

“More than that,” Miss Pell said. “Playtesting here needs a clean reading of how your body responds while you play. Heart rate. Skin. Attention under load. Fabric gets in the way of the sensors we use. I will explain it again in the other room with your bags open so you can see what I mean. If you decide you do not want to give us that reading, you are not a fit for this placement. That is not a threat. It is the work.”

Maddy was already on her feet. She wanted a bedroom. She wanted the monitor on. She looked at Jenny’s shirt and grinned.

“I guess you showed up in the right shirt.”

Jenny picked up her suitcase. Her console stayed under the dark monitor. Outside, a van pulled away from the curb.

Miss Pell held the doorway open with her palm.

“Bring everything you packed,” she said. “We do intake before dinner.”

Chapter 2 — Unsuitable

They brought the bags into the common room because Miss Pell had told them to, and because there was nowhere else to put twelve weeks of clothes once the bedrooms had been shown with empty hangers.

Jenny set her suitcase on the rug and sat on her heels beside it. The zipper had left a red line across her palm. Maddy dumped hers on the sofa and popped it open like she was setting up a merch table. Mae kept the hoodie on and held her duffel in her lap. Cori's bag was already on the floor. It still looked empty.

Miss Pell came in from the kitchen with a gray plastic crate on a hand truck and a stack of clear bags that crackled when she set them down. The crate had a shipping label already slapped on the side. STUDIO HOLD. RETURN WEEK 12. Under that, four lines for names.

"Open everything," she said. "I need to see what you brought."

Maddy laughed once. "You going through our underwear?"

"Yes," Miss Pell said.

Nobody laughed after that.

Jenny opened her suitcase. Shirts. The extra sneakers. The pouch of glasses cloths. A second bra she had packed because she packed systems. Mae's bag had the hoodie she was wearing and two more like it, folded small. Maddy had more shorts than shirts. Cori unzipped the duffel and turned it so they could see inside. A toothbrush. A charger. A pair of socks. No shirts. No shorts. No second anything.

Mae looked from the socks to Cori's face. "How did you think you were going to get dressed in the morning?"

"I packed what I needed," Cori said.

Jenny waited for Miss Pell to tell Cori she had packed wrong. Miss Pell only wrote Cori's name on the first line of the crate label, neat and unhurried.

"Playtesting here is not just sitting in front of a build," Miss Pell said. She stood between them and the setup, badge on the lanyard, shirt still buttoned. "The company needs a clean reading of what the game does to you while you play. Heart rate. Skin temperature. Sweat. Where your attention goes when a match gets hard. We get that from sensors that have to sit on skin. Fabric blocks the reading. A waistband, a bra band, a shirt—any of it. If the data is dirty, the report is useless, and then you are not doing the job you signed for."

Maddy's mouth was open. She closed it.

“So we wear like… tank tops?” Mae said. “Or those heart-rate straps over a shirt?”

“No shirts,” Miss Pell said. “No shorts. No underwear. Not in the house. Not for the twelve weeks. Your clothes go in these bags. I photograph the pile so we have a fit baseline if the studio asks what you arrived in. The bags and the suitcases go in the crate. The crate leaves tonight on the same run they use for hardware. You get the crate back when the placement posts. Until then you live here the way the sensors need you.”

Jenny’s face went hot so fast her glasses slipped. She pushed them up with one finger and hated that she had done it.

“That’s—” Maddy started, and then tried again, lighter, like she could still turn it into a bit. “That’s a lot. That’s not in the video.”

“It is in the packet,” Miss Pell said. “Active involvement in all house sessions. Sensor baseline. You initialed it. If you do not want to give a clean reading, you are not suitable for placement as a playtester. You can stop now. The repayment number is the one you already saw. Or you can take the shirt off and stay.”

She said it the way she had said paycheck and ranked blocks. Work. Not a dare.

Mae’s hands were fists inside the hoodie pocket. “All of it? Even—”

“Even that,” Miss Pell said. “The sensors sit on the chest and between the legs. A bra is a problem. Underwear is a problem. I am not going to argue the hardware with you. I am going to get you ready for it.”

Cori reached over her shoulder, pulled the dark tee off in one motion, and dropped it on the empty duffel. She was small through the shoulders. Her bra was plain and beige and already unhooked before Jenny had managed to stand up. She slid the straps down, folded the bra once, and set it on the shirt. Her breasts were modest and neat, nipples already tight from the air in the room. She pushed her shorts and her underwear down together and stepped out of them without looking at anyone for permission.

Maddy made a sound that was not a word.

“What did she tell you?” Maddy said. “Before today. Because you did not pack clothes, Cori. That is not a packing fail. What did she tell you?”

Cori stepped out of her sneakers last. Bare feet on the rug. Bare everything else. She was not covering herself. She was not posing either. She stood like she was waiting for the next instruction in a queue.

“I packed what I needed,” she said again.

Miss Pell did not look at Cori’s body as if it were a surprise. She shook out a clear bag, slid Cori’s little pile into it, and pressed the seal with her thumb. The bag

sucked tight around the tee and the bra and the shorts. She wrote ASH on the white strip with a marker.

“Maddy,” Miss Pell said. “You next. You already opened the suitcase.”

Maddy glanced at the monitor as if a match might start and save her. The screen stayed black. She hooked her thumbs in the hem of the white tank and did not lift it.

“People are going to see,” she said.

“Four trainees and me,” Miss Pell said. “The crew is gone. There is no channel. This is the house. Arms up.”

Maddy did not put her arms up.

Miss Pell stepped in close enough that Maddy had to look at the badge instead of the other girls. She took the tank at the hem and drew it up. Maddy’s arms rose because the fabric made them rise. The tank cleared her mouth, her hair, her wrists. Under it she had a white bra with a small bow between the cups, the kind of thing a girl packed when she thought someone might see the strap of it and not the rest. Her stomach was flat. Her breasts filled the cups and pressed the bow out of true when she breathed.

Jenny looked because there was nowhere else to put her eyes that was not also a body. Maddy’s cheeks were red down into her throat.

“I can do the rest,” Maddy said.

She did not do the rest. Her fingers found the clasp and stopped.

Miss Pell reached around her, the way she had steered Jenny toward the lens an hour ago, and opened the clasp with two fingers. The bra loosened. Miss Pell drew the straps down Maddy’s arms while she talked.

“Playtesting here needs a clean reading of how your body responds while you play,” she said. The right strap hung at Maddy’s elbow. “Heart rate. Skin. Attention under load.” The left strap. “If you decide you do not want to give us that reading, you are not a fit for this placement.” The bra came away in Miss Pell’s hand. Maddy’s breasts were high and full for her frame, pale, the nipples a darker pink and already drawn up. “That is not a threat. It is the work.”

Maddy crossed her arms, then dropped them when she realized how that looked, then did not know where to put her hands. She shoved the shorts down hard, angry at the elastic, and took her underwear with them because leaving them on had become impossible to explain. She had a neat line of hair she had trimmed. She sat down on the sofa cushion to get the shorts off her ankles and then seemed to understand she was sitting bare on the same cushion the camera had pointed at, and stood up again too fast.

Mae made a small helpless laugh and then bit it off.

Miss Pell bagged Maddy’s clothes. WARNER on the strip. The bra with the bow went flat and sad inside the plastic.

“Mae.”

Mae shook her head once, not quite no. “Can I keep the hoodie until— I don’t know. Until the crate goes?”

“No,” Miss Pell said. “The hoodie is fabric. Off.”

Mae pulled the hoodie up and got stuck in it. The hem caught under her chin. For a second there was only her midriff and a cotton bralette and the fact that she was five-one and trying to disappear inside a sleeve. Miss Pell took the hoodie by the ribbing and lifted. Mae’s hair static-flew. She stood in the bralette and shorts, arms folded over her chest so hard her fingers were white.

“I don’t—” Mae said. “I didn’t think the job was this.”

“The job is the reading,” Miss Pell said. “Arms.”

Mae did not give her arms. Miss Pell reached behind her anyway, found the bralette clasp, and opened it. Mae grabbed the front of the cups and held them on. Miss Pell waited. Mae’s eyes were wet and furious at being wet. She let go. The bralette slid. Her breasts were small and high, almost pointed, the nipples tight little knots. She looked twelve at first glance if you only took the height, and then you took the rest of her and she did not. She shoved the shorts down and stepped on them to get free. Her underwear was printed with tiny ghosts. She hesitated on those, looking at Jenny as if Jenny could vote.

Jenny had nothing. Her own suitcase was still a pile of shirts.

Miss Pell hooked a finger in the waistband of the ghosts and drew them down. Mae stepped out. She was spare through the hips, a dark thatch, the insides of her thighs already pink where she had been pressing them together. She sat on her own duffel instead of the sofa and pulled her knees up, which did not hide her. It made her look smaller.

“Welles,” Miss Pell said, writing it on a bag.

Jenny’s turn was a physical fact. She could feel it in the room the way she felt a queue pop.

She stood. She took off the glasses, then put them back on because the room went soft and she did not want the room soft. She crossed her arms, caught the hem of the PRESS START shirt, and lifted it as far as her ribs. The air hit the skin there. She stopped.

“I signed for matches,” she said. Her voice sounded thin to her. “I signed for reports. I did not — I did not understand it was this.”

“You understood sensors,” Miss Pell said. “You understood fabric gets in the way. You are a systems person, Jenny. Do the next step.”

Jenny pulled the shirt off. Her hair crackled. She was aware of her bra the way she was aware of a username in a lobby, suddenly public. It was plain and black, the one she had worn in the hallway, not the second one in the suitcase. Her breasts were small. The cups were a little loose because she had never liked the ones that smashed her flat. She could see, without looking down, that her nipples had made the fabric ridiculous.

Maddy was looking. Mae was looking. Cori was looking the way she had looked at the camera: present, not hungry.

Jenny reached back for the clasp and her fingers slipped. She tried again. Miss Pell stepped behind her.

“I can—” Jenny said.

“You are hesitating,” Miss Pell said, and opened the clasp.

The band sprang. Miss Pell took the straps down Jenny’s arms from behind, slow enough that Jenny had time to feel every inch of being helped. The unsuitable line was already in the room; Miss Pell did not repeat the whole speech. She only said, close to Jenny’s ear, while the bra came forward off her chest, “Placement requires the reading. If you cannot give it, you cannot stay.”

Jenny’s breasts were small and round, the color of the rest of her, nipples brown and tight. She wanted to cover them and did not, because Maddy had dropped her arms and Mae was failing to hide behind her knees and covering herself would have been another thing to be seen doing. She unbuttoned the cutoff shorts. The zipper sounded filthy in the quiet. She pushed them down with her underwear because she had watched Maddy learn that leaving the last thing on only made the last thing worse.

Stepping out of shorts while people watched was worse than the bra. She had to bend. She had to balance. She had a neat patch of dark hair. She was wet and she did not want to know if that was visible. The rug was rough under her bare feet. The glasses stayed on. She did not know why that made it worse, only that it did: dressed face, undressed body, the same girl who had carried a console into the hall.

Miss Pell bagged the shirt. The green letters showed through the plastic, warped. HUNG on the strip.

Cori had been bare the whole time and still nobody had gotten used to it.

“Did she call you?” Mae said, from the duffel, voice cracked. “Before we got here. Did Miss Pell call you and tell you not to bring clothes?”

Cori glanced at Miss Pell. Miss Pell was photographing Maddy’s pile first, gray card on the rug, phone held straight, no comment.

“I read the packet,” Cori said.

“We read the packet,” Maddy said. She had her hands on her hips now because it was that or cover her chest. Her breasts moved when she talked. “There was not a page that said we stand here like this.”

“There was a second page,” Jenny said, and then wished she had not, because Cori’s eyes flicked to her and away.

Miss Pell took Jenny’s pile next. Flash. Shirt, bra, shorts, the extra sneakers going into the suitcase that was also going into the crate. She photographed Mae. She photographed Cori’s almost-nothing. She wrote on the crate and then she put the sealed bags inside it and then she put the suitcases in on top of the bags, Maddy’s first because it was biggest, Jenny’s, Mae’s duffel, Cori’s flat little thing that had never been a twelve-week bag.

“Sneakers too,” Miss Pell said, and Jenny realized she was still wearing the white ones, socks still on, the only dressed part of her from the ankle down. She stepped out of them. The socks came with them. Maddy’s sandals were already off. Mae had been barefoot inside the hoodie the whole time and had not noticed.

The crate filled. Miss Pell shut the lid and ran a zip-tie through the hasp like she was sending back a broken deck. The label had all four names. RETURN WEEK 12.

A knock at the front door. Not a crew knock. A parts-run knock. Miss Pell opened it. A woman in a company jacket took the hand truck without coming far enough into the room to make conversation. If she saw four bare trainees she did not change her face. The crate bumped over the threshold. The door shut. The latch turned.

The common room had a gray sofa, a dark monitor, a whiteboard with no writing on it, and four girls with nothing on.

Jenny’s nipples hurt in the air. She could feel the heat between her legs and hated that she could feel it while she was also trying to do the math of twelve weeks. Maddy walked to the kitchen opening and came back because there was nothing in the kitchen that would help. Mae stayed on the empty space where her duffel had been. Cori sat on the arm of the sofa as if sitting bare had been on the schedule.

“Rooms,” Miss Pell said. “Pick one. Empty hangers are yours. We do the sensor baseline after you put your names on a door. Tonight is calibration. Tomorrow

the ranked blocks start. You will play the way you just stood here. That is the job.”

Jenny picked up her glasses, which she had not taken off, and only realized she had reached for them as if they were a shirt. They were not a shirt. They sat on her face and did nothing for her chest or the rest of her.

Maddy stopped at the hall. “We’re really doing twelve weeks like this.”

“You are doing twelve weeks like this if you want the placement,” Miss Pell said. “Dinner after baseline. The board goes up in the morning.”

Jenny walked to the first empty room because it was the closest door and because standing in the common room had become a kind of being on stage. The closet had hangers. They ticked against each other when she opened the door. She sat on the bed. The spread was rough on her bare ass. She could hear Mae in the hall asking Cori something too quiet to be the same question again, and Cori not giving her a different answer.

Jenny looked at her own legs, at the small weight of her breasts when she breathed, at the dark of her hair between them, and tried to make it into a system. Sensors needed skin. Skin meant no fabric. No fabric meant this. The crate was already gone. The repayment number was still the repayment number.

She was eighteen. She had gotten in.

She did not put her arms around herself until she was sure the hall was empty, and even then she only did it for a minute, because her own hands on her own skin felt like another person in the room.

Chapter 3 — Baseline

Jenny put her name on the first door because the marker was already in her hand and because standing in the hall bare was worse than picking wrong.

HUNG, in capitals. The ink smelled like school. Across from her, Maddy wrote WARNER without asking if anyone else wanted that room. Mae took the door at the end and had to stretch to reach the card holder. Cori wrote ASH the way she had signed the extra page: no pause.

The rooms were what Miss Pell had said they were. Single bed. Closet with empty hangers that clicked if you breathed on them. Window onto the next house. Jenny sat on the edge of the mattress and the spread rasped under her bare ass. Her glasses had a fingerprint on the left lens from when she had pushed them up in the common room. She cleaned them on nothing. She had no shirt to use.

On the wall above the nightstand there was a small panel she had taken for an outlet plate. It was not only an outlet. Three short leads hung from it on clips, each one ending in something she did not have a word for yet. Two shallow cups. One smaller pad. Soft on the face that would touch skin. Wires no thicker than charging cables.

She did not touch them.

Miss Pell’s voice moved down the hall, not loud. “Cori first. Then Mae. Then Maddy. Jenny last. Stay in your rooms until I knock. This is a baseline, not a session. I need a clean first reading before you sleep.”

Jenny heard Cori’s door open and shut. Then not much. A murmur. A faint hum she felt more than heard, like a deck spinning up. She sat with her knees together and her arms crossed under her small breasts and tried to make the wait into waiting for a queue.

Mae’s turn lasted longer. Through the wall Jenny heard Mae say *wait* and then not say anything. The hangers in Jenny’s closet ticked. She looked at her own nipples instead of the door. They were still tight from the common room. The air in the bedroom had not helped.

Maddy talked. Of course Maddy talked. “That’s going on my— Miss Pell, that’s actually going on.”

“Yes,” Miss Pell said, muffled. “Hold still.”

Jenny pressed her thighs together and felt that she was wet again, which made her angry at her own body for taking attendance.

A knock. Her door.

“Jenny.”

Miss Pell came in and closed it. She still had the shirt and the badge. She looked at the panel, then at Jenny on the bed, the way she had looked at the crate label.

“Sit back against the headboard,” she said. “Feet on the mattress. I need access. This is calibration. The machines do the work. I watch the first one so the numbers mean something tomorrow. You do not have to do anything with your hands.”

Jenny scooted back. The spread wrinkled under her. She kept her knees up for a second and then understood that was the opposite of access, and let them fall open enough to be ashamed of the air.

Miss Pell unclipped the two cups first.

“These sit on the nipples,” she said. “Seal matters. If they lift, the reading drops out and we do it again.”

She warmed the rim of the first cup between her fingers like it was a lens wipe. Jenny watched the hand come in and still flinched when the cup settled over her left nipple. Soft. Then a faint pull, a seal finding skin. Her nipple drew up into it. Miss Pell pressed the rim once with her thumb, checked, and took the second cup to the other side. Jenny’s breasts were small enough that the cups looked larger than they needed to be. They held anyway. The wires ran down her ribs like she had been plugged into the wall.

“The third one is the attention sensor,” Miss Pell said. “It sits over the clitoris. Same rule. Seal. If you close your legs you break it and we start over.”

Jenny nodded because her mouth was busy being a mouth. Miss Pell’s fingers were clean and impersonal and still they were fingers parting the dark hair Jenny had been trying not to think about since the rug. The pad was smaller than Jenny had expected and warmer than the cups. It seated with a soft pull that made her hips try to lift off the mattress. Miss Pell put a palm on her belly and kept her down until the seal took.

“There,” Miss Pell said. “Look at me, not at the leads.”

Jenny looked at the badge.

Miss Pell touched the panel. The hum came into Jenny’s body before she heard it. Low. Steady. The cups tightened by a degree she could not have measured and did not need to. The pad began a slow pulse that was not a finger and not an accident. It had a rhythm, like a metronome set under the skin.

Jenny’s hands found the sheet and twisted it.

“This is a hold,” Miss Pell said. She stood at the side of the bed with her eyes on Jenny’s face, not on the hardware. “The system takes you up to the mark and I

take them off before you go over. Tonight I am the one who stops it. Starting tomorrow a handler does that job. You will learn the words on the board in the morning. Tonight you only have to stay still and let me see the curve.”

“I thought—” Jenny swallowed. The pulse made swallowing feel like a tell. “I thought the sensors just read.”

“They read by doing the work the match will do,” Miss Pell said. “Attention under load. If we only strapped a watch on you we would get a watch. Stay on the pillow.”

Jenny stayed on the pillow. The glasses had slipped. She did not push them up. The pulse in the pad deepened. Her nipples felt swollen inside the cups, pulled, sensitive in a way that made the rest of the room too sharp. She could hear herself breathe. She could feel wetness against the pad and hated that the pad would know.

Miss Pell did not coach. She watched Jenny’s mouth. When Jenny’s hips started a small helpless grind against the mattress, Miss Pell put two fingers on the sheet beside Jenny’s knee, not quite touching skin, and Jenny froze as if that had been a pause button.

The hum stepped up.

Jenny’s thighs shook. She could name what was happening. She was good at systems. A line was rising. If it kept rising she would come on a bed in a house she had walked into with a console in her arms, in front of a woman in a badge, with two cups on her chest and a pad seated on her clit like the game had reached out of the wall.

“Miss Pell—”

“I see it,” Miss Pell said.

She did not pull yet. The pulse held right under the place Jenny’s body wanted to tip. Jenny made a sound she did not approve of. Her small breasts lifted into the cups with each breath. The wires trembled.

Miss Pell reached down and peeled the pad first. The seal broke with a soft wet sound that Jenny felt in her teeth. The cups came off after, thumbs under the rims, a last tug on each nipple that made Jenny’s back arch once and then drop.

The hum died.

Jenny lay there with her knees still apart because closing them would have been another performance. Her clit throbbed in the air, swollen, wet, unfinished. Her nipples were darker than they had been when she sat down. She could smell herself on the room.

Miss Pell coiled the leads back onto the clips. She wrote something on a slip and slotted it into the panel like a report.

“Clean curve,” she said. “You hold. That is useful. Do not touch yourself after I leave. If you finish on your own the baseline is trash and we do it again at lights-out, and you will not like doing it twice. Sleep. Breakfast is after the morning dock. The board will tell you the rest.” Jenny found a sentence. “The matches are still the job.”

“The matches are the job,” Miss Pell said. “This is how we measure them.”

She opened the door. Hall light cut across Jenny’s bare stomach and the dark shine between her legs and then the door shut.

Jenny did not move until her hips stopped asking. She pulled the spread over herself and the fabric on her nipples was almost enough to start the line again. She kicked the spread down to her waist. That left her chest in the air. There was no correct configuration. She put her glasses straight. She stared at the closet. Empty hangers. Twelve weeks of hangers.

Down the hall a faucet ran. Maddy said something that might have been *okay* and then went quiet. Mae’s door stayed shut.

Jenny told herself the work was still the builds. Ranked blocks in the morning. Notes. A paycheck. A placement. She had gotten in. She could wait twelve weeks if the part that went on a resume was the part that counted.

Her body did not agree. It lay in the dark with the memory of the seals and the unfinished pulse and the fact that Miss Pell had seen the exact second Jenny would have gone over, and had taken the pad off as if that second were a number on a sheet.

Jenny put one hand on her own ribs, not lower, and left it there until her breathing slowed. The panel on the wall did not hum. The leads hung in their clips, waiting for morning.

She did not sleep for a long time. When she did, she dreamed she was in queue with a shirt on, and then the shirt was gone, and the queue would not pop until she sat still on a bed that was also a station.

Chapter 4 — The Board

Jenny woke because the hangers clicked.

Someone was in the hall. Bare feet. A marker cap coming off. She sat up and the spread slid to her hips and she remembered, in the same second, that there was nothing to put on. The panel over the nightstand was quiet. The three leads hung in their clips. Her nipples were sore in a small, specific way. Between her legs she was swollen from the unfinished night and from sleeping on her stomach and then not being able to stand the pressure.

She put her glasses on. That was the only thing in the room that was hers.

In the kitchen the whiteboard was no longer blank.

Miss Pell stood to the side of it with the marker. She had the shirt and the badge. The four of them came in one at a time, bare, and stopped on the tile because the tile was cold and because the board had writing on it.

SUBJECT

Jenny Hung

HANDLER

Cori Ash

OPEN

Maddy Warner

Mae Welles

COMMAND

—

RELEASE

—

A column of numbers ran down the right edge, names already listed, zeros for now.

Cori read it once and nodded like a patch note she had expected.

Maddy squinted. “What is a subject.”

“The person on the dock,” Miss Pell said. “This morning that is Jenny. Before breakfast she stands here.” She tapped a second panel on the side of the fridge that Jenny had taken yesterday for a charging strip. Same three clips. Same two cups. Same pad. “Cori puts the sensors on. The machine runs a hold. Cori takes them off on the mark. We log it. Then you eat.”

Mae had her arms folded over her small chest. “Handler is the one who… takes them off.”

“Handler seats them, watches the face, and peels them before she goes over,” Miss Pell said. “Open means you are not on this dock and you are not the one peeling. You can be asked to watch. Today you are not asked. You wait, you eat, you go to the sofa at nine. Ranked block. That is the morning.”

Jenny looked at her own name. Subject. It was just a word. It sat next to her the way HUNG sat on the door.

“Why her first?” Maddy said.

“The board picked her first,” Miss Pell said. “Tomorrow it will pick someone else. Jenny. Here. Hands on the counter if you need them. Feet apart.”

The kitchen dock was lower than the one over the bed. Jenny had to stand with her hips off the fridge and her back to the room if she wanted to face the wall, and she did not get to face the wall. Miss Pell turned her by the elbow until she was profile to the table. Maddy and Mae would see her breasts and the dark patch between her legs and the wires when they went on. Cori was already unclipping the cups.

Cori’s hands were cooler than Miss Pell’s. She warmed the rims the same way anyway, a habit, and seated the left cup over Jenny’s nipple with a press of her thumb. Seal. The pull made Jenny’s breath hitch. Cori checked the rim, then did the right. Jenny’s small breasts looked even smaller with the hardware on them. The wires lay along her ribs.

“Pad,” Cori said, not as a question.

Jenny opened her stance because the alternative was Cori opening it for her. Cori’s fingers parted her and found the swollen clit from last night as if last night had left a mark on a map. The pad seated. Jenny grabbed the edge of the counter. Her glasses slid. She left them.

Cori glanced at Miss Pell. Miss Pell only said, “On.”

The hum came up through the fridge panel. Daylight made it worse. There was no bed to hide the line of her body. There was cereal on the table and a carton of milk and Mae’s bare hip against the counter two feet away. The cups tightened. The pad started its slow pulse. Jenny stared at the whiteboard because the whiteboard did not have a clit.

Maddy said, “She’s already—” and then stopped, because Jenny’s mouth had opened and there was nothing useful to add.

Cori watched Jenny’s face. Not the clock. Not the wires. When Jenny’s hips tipped toward the pad, Cori put a palm at the small of her back and held her still

so the seals would not break. The palm was bare. Cori was bare. The contact was just skin on skin and it made Jenny’s nipples strain inside the cups.

The pulse climbed.

Jenny could smell coffee. She could smell herself. She thought about the ranked block at nine the way she had thought about college debt, as a real thing on the other side of this. Her thighs shook. The mark was the same place Miss Pell had found in the dark. It had not moved.

“Cori,” Miss Pell said.

Cori peeled the pad. The wet sound was louder in the kitchen than it had been in the bedroom. Jenny made a noise into her own teeth. The cups came off with two small tugs that pulled her nipples out and let them go. Cori clipped the leads back like she had racked a controller.

Miss Pell wrote on the board under the zeros.

Hung +2

Ash +2

“Clean hold,” she said. “Sit. Eat.”

Jenny’s legs did not want to sit. She sat anyway, on a wooden chair, bare ass on varnish, clit throbbing against nothing. The cereal tasted like cardboard that had been in the same room as the pad. She ate it because the alternative was talking.

Mae reached for a bowl and ended up next to Maddy at the counter. Maddy was five-four in bare feet. Mae came up to her shoulder. Mae’s head tilted back to look at the milk carton Maddy was holding, and Maddy looked down at her and snorted.

“Jesus, Tiny.”

Mae’s ears went red. She did not say don’t call me that. She poured cereal into the wrong size bowl and sat with her knees together.

Cori ate standing, one hip on the counter, as if chairs were optional. Her own nipples were tight from the kitchen air. She had not been on the dock. She looked like she could have been.

Maddy kept glancing at Jenny’s chest, then at the board, then at Jenny’s chest again. “So that’s every morning.”

“Before each meal,” Miss Pell said. “Before you leave the house. When you come back. Before sleep. The board tells you who is subject and who handles. If your name is not up, you still eat after the dock is clear. Nine o’clock you are on the sofa. Jenny, you will have the controller. Cori stays on her job. The build is already loaded.”

Jenny nodded. The controller. That part she understood. Both hands. A match. Notes after. She could do a match. She could do a match with her body still humming if she looked at the screen and not down.

She drank water. It did not help the ache between her legs. She could feel, without checking, that she was wet on the chair.

Mae said, very small, “Do we get used to it.”

Miss Pell capped the marker. “You get on the schedule. That is different. Finish eating. Wipe the chairs. I do not want a second baseline because someone sat down dirty and then complained about the tile.”

Maddy laughed because she had to put the laugh somewhere. It came out wrong. She ate faster.

Jenny looked at her name on the board one more time. Subject. Plus two. The plus two was a score. She understood scores. She did not understand why a score for not coming made her want to press her thighs together under the table until the table noticed.

Cori took her bowl to the sink. Her bare shoulder brushed Jenny’s bare shoulder as she passed. She did not apologize. She did not explain the board.

“Nine,” Miss Pell said. “Sofa. Do not be late because you were in a room pretending the hangers are shirts.”

Jenny stood. The air on her wetness made her want to sit back down. She did not. She walked into the common room with the others, four bare bodies and one badge, toward the gray sofa and the dark monitor and the controller that was still the only object in the house that felt like it belonged to her.

The board stayed on the fridge behind them, already true.

Chapter 5 — Both Hands

The sofa was the same gray one from the video. The monitor was on. The build said PLAYTEST 01 — TIMING / ATTENTION.

Jenny sat in the middle. Bare ass on the cushion. She was still wet from breakfast. Sitting made it obvious.

Cori crouched in front of her with the leads from the play station.

“Lean back a little,” Cori said.

Jenny leaned. Cori put the left cup on her nipple, checked it, put the right one on. Jenny’s fingers jumped on her thighs.

“That’s tight,” Jenny said.

“If it slips we restart the round,” Cori said. “Breathe out.”

Jenny breathed out. The wires hung down her ribs.

Miss Pell held out the controller. Jenny’s own controller. She took it with both hands. That part felt normal.

Cori put her hand between Jenny’s knees. “Pad.”

“Can I do that one?”

“No. You play. I put them on.”

Jenny opened her knees. Cori set the pad on her clit. It pulled on, right over the sore spot from breakfast. Jenny looked at the loading screen so she would not look down.

Maddy sat on the left arm, close enough that her bare leg touched Jenny’s arm. Mae sat on the floor by the other end.

“She’s already red,” Maddy said.

“She just had breakfast,” Cori said.

“I’m right here,” Jenny said.

“Yeah,” Maddy said. “We can see that.”

Mae started to get up. “I can move.”

“Stay,” Miss Pell said. She sat on the other arm. “This build punishes you if you look down. You look down more than a second, you miss the timing window and the round is junk. Jenny plays. Cori handles. If she gets through a live round without dropping the controller, they both get the extra point. Three clean rounds, then she writes what felt late.”

Maddy leaned in. “What do you win besides the points?”

“The points are on the board,” Miss Pell said. “Ask game questions. You already know what the sensors do.”

The map loaded. Tight indoor lane. Audio cues. Jenny knew this kind of level.

Cori said, “On.”

The machine started. The cups tightened. The pad started pulsing on Jenny’s clit. She pushed into the first corner and listened.

Cue left. She took it. Short window. Her thumbs were fine. Her nipples were not. She did not look down.

“Clean,” Maddy said.

“Don’t talk in her window,” Cori said.

“I’m not even on the board.”

“You’re in her ear.”

“I can hear both of you,” Jenny said. “Stop.”

Maddy lifted her hands and went quiet. She did not move her leg.

The pulse got stronger. Jenny kept her hips still. The next cue was high. She almost missed it because the pad hit at the same time. She still caught it. Round one, clean.

Mae said, “She’s actually good.”

Jenny’s face got hot. She wanted to be good at the game. She did not want to be good at the game with a pad on her clit and everyone watching her chest.

“Round two,” Miss Pell said. “Fake cue in the middle. Don’t chase it.”

“I know fake cues.”

“Then don’t chase this one.”

Cori put her hand on Jenny’s hip so the cups would not pop off if she moved. Just a hand. Warm. Jenny could feel all five fingers.

“Hold onto it,” Cori said. “You’re going to want to drop it.”

“I’m not dropping it.”

The fake cue sounded real. The pad pulsed hard on the same beat. Jenny’s eyes started to drop toward her own lap. She dragged them back to the monitor.

Real cue, half a second later. She hit it. Her legs were shaking so much the controller came up off her knee. Cori pushed it back down without taking it away.

“Both hands,” Cori said.

“I have both hands.”

“Then keep them there.”

Round two, clean. Jenny was dripping on the cushion. She could feel it. She could not wipe it. Wiping meant looking down.

“You’re shaking,” Miss Pell said. “That’s what they want in the note. Keep going.”

“I am going.”

“Round three.”

The pulse climbed fast. Jenny’s nipples hurt inside the cups. Maddy was staring at the wires. Mae was staring at Jenny’s mouth.

“Can she even hear the game?” Mae said.

“She can hear it,” Cori said. “Jenny. Look at the timer. Not at me.”

“I’m not looking at you.”

“You were.”

Jenny looked at the timer. She had been looking at Cori’s mouth. She had not meant to.

Third window. She took the cue. She did not look down. Her hips jerked. Cori said, “That’s it,” and pulled the pad off.

Jenny made a noise into the controller and did not drop it. Cori took the cups off. Jenny’s nipples pulled and then let go. The machine stopped. Three clean rounds on the monitor.

Jenny sat there with the controller still in both hands, glasses crooked, wet on her thighs, unfinished.

Maddy said, “You didn’t even drop it.”

Jenny set the controller on the table. The grips were damp.

Cori went to the kitchen. Marker on the board.

Hung +2

Ash +2

Match extra +1 / +1

Miss Pell looked at Jenny. “What felt late.”

“The fake cue in two,” Jenny said. Her voice sounded scraped. “Real window is half a second after. If you look down you miss it.”

“Write that after lunch. Maddy, you wanted hours. You just watched hours. Mae, you can sit on the sofa. The floor isn’t a rule.”

Mae went red. “I could see the screen from here.”

“You could see her from there,” Maddy said.

Mae didn’t argue.

Cori held out a towel. “For the cushion.”

Jenny stood up. Air on wet skin. Dark spot on the gray fabric. She wiped the cushion, not herself.

Miss Pell queued another build. “Open block until lunch. Jenny’s off the station. Don’t put your hands where the pad was. I’ll know.”

Maddy was already swinging onto the middle cushion. “Can I go?”

Miss Pell looked at her. “You’re Open.”

“There’s no one on subject. The build’s up. I want the hours.”

A short pause. Miss Pell nodded once. “Cori stays handler. Same rules. Three rounds.”

Jenny sat on the far cushion, the dry one, and stayed in the room.

Cori put the cups on Maddy. Maddy had more chest than Jenny. The cups sat fuller. Maddy hissed and then grinned like she could beat this the way she beat a bracket.

“Pad,” Cori said.

Maddy opened her knees without being asked. “Just put it on.”

Cori put it on. Maddy’s head tipped back for a second. Then she grabbed the other house controller with both hands.

“On,” Cori said.

Same map. Maddy talked through it. “Left— I got it. Fake, fake, I see it. Come on.” She was good enough. Not as clean as Jenny. She chased one pip and still recovered. The machine was doing the same thing to her it had done to Jenny. Her thighs started to shake. Her mouth stayed open.

“Mark,” Cori said, on round two, and reached for the pad.

Maddy’s hands locked on the controller. “Don’t— I can finish the round—”

She did not finish the sentence. She came on the sofa with the controller still in her hands and the pad still on. It was obvious. Her back bowed. Her breasts jerked in the cups. She made a sound that did not belong in a playtest note. The round still ticked clean.

Cori’s hand stopped in the air. She looked at Miss Pell.

Miss Pell watched Maddy through it, then said, “Off.”

Cori pulled the pad and the cups. Maddy slumped against the cushion, legs open, wet, grinning and wrecked at the same time.

“Did I tank the extra?” Maddy said, still out of breath. “I didn’t drop it.”

Miss Pell went to the kitchen. Marker.

Warner +3

That was all she wrote.

Maddy blinked at the doorway. “Plus three?”

“Data’s good,” Miss Pell said. She was already coming back. “Write what felt late if you can still think. Lunch dock at twelve-thirty. Wipe the cushion.”

Nobody explained the difference between Jenny’s plus two and Maddy’s plus three. Maddy sat in her own mess and laughed once, like she had won something.

“I told you I wanted subject.”

Jenny had played cleaner. She had not dropped the controller. She had not gotten to finish. Maddy had. Maddy had a three next to her name for it.

Mae was very quiet on the floor.

Cori handed Maddy the towel. Maddy wiped the cushion slowly, still shaking, and did not look sorry.

Jenny kept her hands on her knees. She was still wet from her own match. It had not gone anywhere. On the monitor the next loading screen spun, nobody’s for a minute.

She told herself the work was the game. She had hit the windows. The placement was still the placement.

Maddy dropped the towel in the hamper and stretched, bare and easy now, nipples still tight.

“You can have the next one,” she said to Jenny. “I already got mine.”

Jenny did not answer. She watched the screen so she would not watch Maddy walk to the kitchen to look at the three beside her name.

Chapter 6 — Rank

Day two the board had switched.

SUBJECT

Maddy Warner

HANDLER

Jenny Hung

OPEN

Mae Welles

Cori Ash

Jenny stood in the kitchen with the marker still in her head from yesterday. Handler. She had watched Cori do this. She had not done it with her own hands in daylight.

Maddy saw her name and clapped once, bare, breasts moving. “Told you.”

“You told us you wanted it,” Mae said. “You didn’t tell us you were going to come on the sofa.”

Maddy shrugged. “I got three points.”

Nobody had an answer for that. The plus three was still on the board under yesterday. Jenny’s extra one sat next to it like a smaller thing.

Miss Pell tapped the fridge dock. “Breakfast. Jenny seats. Jenny peels. Same mark as yesterday. If she goes over, you log what happened. Don’t invent a rule.”

Maddy already had her back to the fridge, feet apart, grinning at Jenny like this was a 1v1.

“You know how,” Maddy said. “You watched Cori.”

Jenny’s hands were not as sure as Cori’s. She warmed the cups because she had seen that part. She put the left one on Maddy’s nipple. Maddy’s breast was heavier than Jenny’s. The cup sat and pulled. Maddy’s mouth opened.

“Other one. Come on.”

Jenny put the right one on. Then she had to go lower. Maddy did not make it easier. She just watched Jenny’s face while Jenny found her clit and set the pad. Maddy was already wet. The pad seated with a sound Jenny felt in her own body.

“On,” Miss Pell said.

The machine started. Maddy locked her eyes on Jenny and tried to treat it like a combo. Count. Breathe. Talk.

“That’s fine. That’s— okay that’s more. Jenny. Jenny, look at me, not at it.”

Jenny was looking at Maddy’s mouth because that was what Cori had done. Maddy’s thighs shook. Her nipples pulled into the cups. She was going to go over if Jenny was late. Jenny could see it. She had seen it yesterday on the sofa, the exact second, and then Miss Pell had written plus three.

Jenny’s fingers hovered.

Miss Pell did not say peel. She also did not say leave it.

Maddy gasped. “Don’t you dare stop it if I’m—”

Jenny pulled the pad.

Maddy made an angry sound and grabbed the counter. The cups came off after. Maddy’s nipples were dark and wet-looking from the seals. She was shaking and not finished and mad about it.

“I had it,” Maddy said.

Jenny’s own clit throbbed like she had been the one on the dock. She clipped the leads back. Her hands were shiny.

Miss Pell wrote.

Warner +2

Hung +2

No extra three. Maddy stared at the numbers.

“Yesterday was plus three.”

“Yesterday you finished the round with it still on,” Miss Pell said. “Eat.”

That was the whole explanation.

They ate. Cereal. Bare on the chairs. Maddy kept her knees open like she was daring the room. Mae kept hers shut. Cori ate standing again.

Jenny could not taste anything. She kept seeing her own hand on the pad, and Maddy’s face when it came off, and the three from yesterday that had not come back.

Nine o’clock they were on the sofa. Maddy subject again. Jenny handler again. Same play station.

“I want the extra,” Maddy said, controller already in both hands. “I’m not dropping it.” Cori sat on the far cushion. Mae sat on the sofa this time, small and tucked, watching.

Jenny put the cups on. Pad. She was faster today. She hated that she was faster.

The build was a different lane. More audio. Maddy talked the whole time.

“Left. I got it. Fake— no, real. Jenny, not yet. I can hear you breathing, it’s not time.”

Jenny was not breathing loud. She was watching Maddy’s stomach jump. The pad was doing the same climb it had done to Jenny. Maddy’s thumbs stayed on the sticks. She wanted the extra point and she wanted what she had gotten yesterday, and she was trying to have both.

Round two she started to lose the line.

“Mark,” Jenny said.

“No—”

Jenny peeled her. Maddy did not drop the controller. The round ticked clean. Maddy swore without putting a bad word on it, just air through her teeth, and finished round three on nothing but leftover shake and spite.

Match extra went up. +1 / +1. Still no three.

“You’re peeling early,” Maddy said after.

“I’m peeling when you go over,” Jenny said.

“I wasn’t there yet.”

Cori, from the cushion: “You were.”

Maddy looked at Cori like she wanted a referee. Cori did not give her one.

Lunch dock was Mae.

SUBJECT for the meal only, Miss Pell said, because the board could split a day if she wanted it to. Mae stood at the fridge looking five-one and younger than she was, which she hated. Maddy called her Tiny again when she reached for the clips and could barely get the left cup seated on herself before Cori took over as handler.

“I can do it,” Mae said.

“You can’t see the seal,” Cori said. “Hold still.”

Mae went quiet and red. The machine ran. Mae did not talk through it. She stared at the floor and shook and said wait the way she had said it through the wall on night one.

Cori peeled her on time. +2 / +2. Mae sat down hard and pulled her knees up and ate three bites of a sandwich she did not want.

Jenny watched all of it. She was Open. Open meant you stood there with nothing on your own body and learned other people’s marks.

Afternoon they wrote notes. Jenny wrote about fake cues and camera drop. She did not write about Maddy’s plus three. She did not write about her own hand between Maddy’s legs. The note was for the studio. The studio wanted timing.

Evening match, Cori on the sofa. Jenny Open again. Cori did not grin. She took the controller, let Jenny sit this one out, let Maddy handle. Maddy wanted to prove she could peel and also wanted Cori to go over so the three would happen to someone else and make yesterday look normal.

Cori did not go over. Maddy peeled her late enough that Cori’s hips lifted, early enough that nothing finished. Cori said thanks like it was a pass in a game. She wrote her own note in four lines and went to her room.

Bedside docks that night. Miss Pell did not walk the hall. Handlers did. Jenny handled Mae because the board said so. Mae on her back, feet on the mattress, pad on, eyes wet.

“I don’t like this one,” Mae whispered.

“It’s the same machine,” Jenny said.

“The bed makes it worse.”

Jenny watched her mouth and pulled the pad when Mae’s breath went sharp. Mae turned her face into the pillow. Jenny clipped the leads up and got out before she did something stupid with her own hands.

In her room the dock waited. Cori handled Jenny because that was the rotation. Cups. Pad. Hum. Jenny stared at the empty hangers and did not come. Cori peeled her and said, “Clean,” and left.

Jenny lay there unfinished for the third time that day and told herself tomorrow the board might put her on subject and she would just play.

Day three the board put her Open again.

She watched Maddy take breakfast. She watched Mae take a short block on the sofa and miss two cues because she kept looking down at the pad. She watched Maddy get peeled at lunch and complain that the three was random.

“It’s not random,” Cori said.

“Then what is it.”

Cori did not answer.

Miss Pell posted a line at the bottom of the board before dinner.

WEEK 1 RANK

1 Warner

2 Hung

3 Ash

4 Welles

Maddy crowed. “I pick the game tonight. That’s the rule, right?”

“Rank picks the evening title,” Miss Pell said. “You pick. They play. Dock first.”

Dinner dock was Jenny. Subject. Cori handler. Kitchen, daylight almost gone. Jenny’s body leaned toward the fridge before Miss Pell even pointed. She hated that. She stood where she was supposed to stand. Cups on. Pad on. She was wet before the hum started. The climb was familiar now. That was the worst part. Familiar.

Cori peeled her. +2 / +2. Food after. Jenny ate because the schedule said eat.

At nine Maddy picked a party game nobody needed for a studio note, something with color blocks and bad music, because she could. They still ran a subject on the sofa. Mae this time. Tiny on the middle cushion, controller too big in her hands, pad on, trying not to look down and looking down anyway.

“Window,” Miss Pell said.

Mae missed it. She missed the next one too. The machine did not care that she was losing. It kept climbing. Mae’s small breasts jerked in the cups. She started crying without making a crying sound.

“Mark,” Maddy said. She was handler. She reached.

Mae came anyway. Fast, surprised, a tight shake that pulled her off the timing window completely. The round went junk. The pad was still on for the first two seconds of it. Maddy froze with her hand on the wire.

Miss Pell watched, then said, “Off.”

Maddy pulled the hardware. Mae curled sideways on the cushion, wet, face in her arm.

Jenny stood there with nothing to hold.

Miss Pell went to the board.

Welles +3

Mae lifted her head. “I lost the round.”

“You gave us a curve,” Miss Pell said. “That’s usable. Wipe the cushion. Rank still stands. Warner picks the next title if you want another. Or you go to rooms.”

Mae wiped the cushion herself, hands shaking. She did not look like she had won. The three next to her name said she had.

Maddy stared at the board. Two threes on it now. Warner. Welles. Jenny had extras and cleans and no three.

“So if you finish you get three,” Maddy said.

Miss Pell capped the marker. “Lights-out dock in twenty. Rooms.”

That was the explanation.

Jenny walked down the hall. Empty hangers in her closet. Dock on the wall. She sat on the bed and waited for whoever the board had as handler. Her body was already braced for the cups. She could feel the place the pad would sit.

Cori came in, seated them, ran the hold, peeled her. Jenny did not ask why Mae’s three counted and her own holds did not pay the same. She was good at systems. The system on the wall did not match the packet in her head. She still did not ask.

Cori paused at the door.

“Rank’s just who picks the game,” she said. “Don’t get weird about the numbers.”

“I’m not weird about the numbers.”

Cori looked at Jenny’s mouth, then at the quiet leads. “Okay.”

She left.

Jenny put her glasses on the nightstand and lay there bare, nipples sore, clit sore, listening to Mae’s shower kick on even though there was nothing to wash off that water would fix. Tomorrow was day four. The board would change again. The door still had not been used. The controller was still the only thing in the house that felt like hers, and she had not even held it today.

She fell asleep waiting for morning like it was a queue pop, and her hips kept making small circles on the sheet that did not go anywhere.

Chapter 7 — The Door

Week two started with milk.

The board said Mae was Open. Miss Pell still sent her to the store. The carton on the fridge door was flat. Someone had to go out.

There was a dock beside the front door Jenny had taken for another charging strip. Same three clips. Same cups. Same pad.

“Leaving the building counts,” Miss Pell said. “Dock first. Coat on the hook after. You don’t walk to the corner like that.”

A long gray house coat hung on a peg Jenny had not noticed on day one. Mae stared at it like it might be a trick.

“I have to put that on after?” Mae said.

“After the hold. Then you can open the door. When you come back, coat off, dock again, then you can sit. Tiny. Here.”

Mae stood on the mat, five-one, bare, arms folded over her chest. Cori handled. Jenny stood in the hall with Maddy because Open still meant you watched.

Cori put the cups on. Mae flinched at the door-cold air more than at the seals. The pad went on. Mae’s feet were pointed at the deadbolt like she could already leave.

“On,” Miss Pell said.

The machine ran. Mae shook and stared at the coat. She did not come. Cori peeled her. +2 / +2. Mae grabbed the coat and wrapped it twice around herself. It hit mid-calf. Her hands shook on the zipper.

“Twenty minutes,” Miss Pell said. “Milk. That’s it.”

The door opened. Street light. A regular sidewalk. Mae went out. The door shut.

The house was three girls and Miss Pell and no milk.

Maddy blew out a breath. “She’s going to the store like that.”

“She’s going to the store in a coat,” Miss Pell said. “Sofa until she gets back. Open block. Jenny, you sit. You’re not subject. Don’t touch the station.”

Jenny sat on the far cushion. Maddy sat in the middle, too close, still buzzing from breakfast, which Jenny had handled and peeled so Maddy would not get another three.

The monitor was on. Nobody had a controller in a real playtest. Maddy picked up Jenny’s controller anyway and didn’t start a match. She sat with it on her knee and looked at Jenny’s mouth.

“You’re always watching,” Maddy said.

“That’s the job when I’m Open.”

“Not what I meant.”

Maddy shifted. Her bare shoulder bumped Jenny’s. Then she turned, threw a leg over so she was half in Jenny’s lap, and put her hand on the back of the sofa.

“Maddy,” Jenny said.

“What. You’re not on the dock.”

Maddy put her other hand on Jenny’s far shoulder and used it. She dragged her clit along the top of Jenny’s shoulder, small rolls, breath already gone. She was wet. Jenny felt it immediately, a smear on skin that had only held a controller and cups.

“Stop,” Jenny said.

Maddy did not stop. “I’m not even using the machine.”

Miss Pell was in the kitchen doorway. She did not come in and she did not tell Maddy to get off.

Jenny’s hands stayed on her own knees. Maddy’s breast kept brushing Jenny’s cheek. Maddy’s trimmed hair scratched. The roll got shorter and meaner. Maddy was looking at the front door like Mae coming back would make this better, or worse, or just finish it.

“Hold still,” Maddy whispered. “Please. Just— don’t move.”

Jenny did not move. She could smell Maddy. She could feel her own pulse between her legs and nothing touching it. Maddy’s thigh tightened on her arm. Maddy came on Jenny’s shoulder, quiet, shaking, mouth open against Jenny’s hair. Wet ran down toward Jenny’s chest.

Maddy slumped there for a second, laughing under her breath.

“Okay. Okay.”

She climbed off. Jenny’s shoulder was shiny. Jenny did not wipe it. She did not know if she was allowed to wipe it.

Miss Pell came in with the marker already in her hand and went to the kitchen.

Warner +5

Maddy, still standing in the common room, squinted toward the board. “Five?”

Miss Pell recapped the marker. “You used what was in the room. That’s on the sheet.”

No one said why a shoulder was five and a sofa orgasm had been three. No one said why Jenny’s shoulder was a tool. Maddy touched her own clit once, checking, and then held her hands up like she was innocent.

Jenny sat with Maddy on her skin and no finish in her body. Day six, if she was counting from arrival, and she still had not come. Breakfast. Matches. Beds. Door. Other people’s numbers.

The latch turned.

Mae kicked her shoes off on the mat. The coat looked huge on her. She had a carton of milk in a plastic bag and her face was pink from walking.

“Coat,” Miss Pell said.

Mae unzipped. The coat came off. She was bare underneath, same as when she left, nipples tight from outside air. She hung the coat. She looked at Jenny’s wet shoulder and then away, fast.

“Dock,” Miss Pell said.

Mae stood on the mat again. Cori seated the cups and the pad. Mae was still breathing from the walk. The machine climbed anyway. Mae’s eyes stayed on the milk like the milk could get her through it.

She did not come. Cori peeled her. +2 / +2.

“Now you can put it away,” Miss Pell said. “Then you can sit.”

Mae put the milk in the fridge. She sat on a kitchen chair and only then let her knees come together. Maddy leaned in the doorway, easy, like she had not just used Jenny.

“How was outside.”

“Normal,” Mae said. “I bought milk. A guy held the door. I said thanks.”

That was the whole report. The street had been a street. The dock was the part that counted.

Jenny got up. She went to the hall bath and ran water on a washcloth and held it to her shoulder until Maddy was gone from her skin. The cloth did not do anything for the rest of her.

Miss Pell passed the open door. “Lunch in forty. Warner’s subject. Hung handles. Door dock is the same every time someone leaves. Don’t make me say it twice.”

Jenny looked at the front door from the hall. It was just a door. Deadbolt. Chain. Mat. Clips on the wall. If you wanted milk, you stood there first and let someone put a pad on you. If you wanted to sit down after, you did it again.

She went back to the sofa because there was nowhere else that was hers. The middle cushion still had Maddy’s heat in it. Jenny sat on the far one. She picked up her controller and did not start a game. She held it in both hands and stared at the dark monitor until her fingers hurt.

Maddy called from the kitchen, cheerful, “You can take a turn if you want. I’ll watch.”

Jenny did not answer. She knew what Maddy’s watching looked like now.

Mae appeared with two glasses of water and set one near Jenny without asking. Her shoulder was clean. Her name on the board still had a three from last week. Maddy’s name had a five under today.

“She used you,” Mae said, very quiet.

“Yeah.”

“Are you okay?”

Jenny looked at the controller. “I haven’t— I still haven’t.”

Mae nodded once. She already knew. Everyone in the house knew who had numbers for finishing and who did not.

“Forty minutes,” Mae said. “Then lunch.”

Jenny set the controller down. Her shoulder was cold now. Between her legs she was wet and angry about it. The front door stayed shut. The coat hung on the peg, empty, waiting for the next time the kitchen ran out of something.

She waited for lunch. She would put cups on Maddy and take them off on the mark and Maddy would complain or she would not. Jenny would eat after. She would still not have come.

The mat by the door had a little grit on it from Mae’s shoes. That was the only proof the outside world had come in. Everything else that mattered had happened on this side of the lock.

Chapter 8 — Just Kidding

Jenny woke because the mattress dipped.

Three in the morning, if the little green numbers on the dock panel were right. No hum. Leads clipped up. The house was quiet except Mae shutting the door with two fingers so it would not click.

“It’s me,” Mae whispered. “Don’t yell.”

Jenny sat up. Glasses off, so Mae was a dark small shape and then, closer, Mae’s mouth and the bare line of her shoulder. She had nothing on. Nobody did. She was shivering anyway.

“You’re going to get us another dock,” Jenny said.

“I don’t care.” Mae climbed onto the bed on her knees. Five-one. Cold feet. She smelled like the soap from the hall shower and like the pad, faint, leftover. “Move over.”

Jenny moved over. The spread rasped. Mae stayed on her knees, looking at Jenny’s mouth like she had looked at the milk.

“Neither of us has gotten to finish,” Mae said. “Not for real. Not when it was ours. I keep thinking about it and I can’t sleep. I don’t want the machine. I want you to use your mouth on me first. Please.”

Jenny’s pulse went straight between her legs, where it had been sitting unfinished for a week. “Mae—”

“If you say no I’ll go back. I will. I just— I can’t ask Maddy. And Cori already knows everything. Please, Jenny.”

Jenny looked at the door. No light under it. Miss Pell’s room was at the other end. She should have said no. She said, “Come here.”

Mae crawled up and kissed her first, clumsy, like she had not planned that part. Small mouth. Cool. Then warmer. Jenny’s hands found Mae’s waist because there was nowhere else that was safe. Mae was tiny under her palms. Her breasts brushed Jenny’s. Hard nipples. Mae made a noise into Jenny’s mouth and pulled back.

“Mouth,” Mae said. “You said—”

“I didn’t say yet.”

“Jenny.”

Jenny slid down the bed. Mae sat back against the headboard and opened her knees. In the dark Jenny could still see her: the small high breasts, the dark hair, the wet already there. Mae’s hands were in the sheet.

Jenny kissed the inside of her thigh because she did not know how to start except by starting. Mae's skin jumped. Jenny kissed higher. The smell of her was sharp and clean and not the machine. Jenny put her mouth on Mae's clit.

Mae's whole body lifted. "Oh— okay. Okay, like that."

Jenny did it again. She used her tongue flat, then smaller, finding the spot Mae pushed toward. She held Mae's hips down so the bed would not knock the wall. Mae was already soaked. It ran against Jenny's chin. Jenny licked into her, slow, then back to her clit and stayed there, sucking just enough that Mae's thigh closed on her ear.

"Don't stop. Jenny. Don't— that's—"

Jenny did not stop. She slid one hand up Mae's stomach and found a small breast, pinched the nipple between two fingers the way the cup did, only warmer. Mae clapped a hand over her own mouth. Her other hand landed in Jenny's hair and pulled.

Jenny sucked her clit and let her tongue work under the hood, short strokes, the ones that made Mae's hips lose the rhythm they were trying to keep. Mae's stomach went tight. She was close in the same obvious way she had been on the sofa, except this time nobody was going to peel anything off her.

"I'm— I'm going to—" Mae's voice broke. "Jenny—"

Jenny sealed her mouth over her and sucked. Mae came on her tongue, shaking, a high sound behind her own palm, thighs locked on Jenny's head. Jenny stayed there and licked her through it until Mae pushed at her shoulder.

"Stop, stop, too much."

Jenny stopped. She rested her cheek on Mae's thigh and breathed. Her own mouth was wet. Her chin was wet. Between her legs she was worse than she had been all week.

Mae sat there panting. Then she slid sideways, off the bed.

Jenny thought she was leaving. The door opened a crack. Hall dark.

"Mae."

Mae paused. She looked back. Her face was wrecked and almost smiling.

"Just kidding," she whispered.

She shut the door again. She came back to the bed on her hands and knees and pushed Jenny onto her back like she had thought about the order of this. She kissed Jenny's mouth and tasted herself and did not seem to mind. Then she kissed Jenny's throat, her chest, a small breast, the nipple Jenny had been sore on since night one. She sucked it. Jenny's back came off the mattress.

“Tell me if I’m bad at it,” Mae said against her skin.

“You’re not— just don’t stop once you start.”

Mae laughed, shaky, and went lower. She was small between Jenny’s thighs. Her hair tickled. She put her hands on Jenny’s hips like she was afraid Jenny would sit up and end it. Then she put her mouth on Jenny’s clit.

Jenny’s hand went to the headboard. The other one found Mae’s hair. It was not the pad. It was not a seal. It was a mouth, hot, a little unsure, then not unsure. Mae licked her in long passes first, learning, and Jenny’s eyes shut so hard the dark went paler.

“There,” Jenny whispered. “Right there. Stay.”

Mae stayed. She sucked Jenny’s clit the way Jenny had sucked hers, messy, earnest, her nose pressed into the dark hair. One of her fingers slid through the wet and pushed into Jenny, just one, and Jenny’s hips took it. Mae licked around her own finger and then went back to the clit and stayed on it.

Jenny had not come since before the house. Maybe longer than that if she was honest. The week sat in her body like a held breath. Mae’s tongue broke it.

It built fast and then it did not go anywhere except higher. Jenny tried to be quiet. She failed. She could hear herself. She could hear Mae’s wet mouth. She pulled Mae closer with both hands and Mae made a sound that vibrated against her clit and that was the end of being able to think.

Jenny came with her heels digging into the bed and her glasses somewhere on the nightstand and Mae’s mouth locked on her. She heard her own voice go out of her, wrecked, and the name that came with it was not Mae’s.

“Tiny—”

It broke in the middle. She kept coming. Mae did not lift her head. She licked Jenny through the shakes until Jenny’s hand went slack in her hair.

The room came back in pieces. Hangers. Green numbers. Mae’s mouth shiny. Jenny’s chest going up and down.

Mae crawled up and lay on her, light, a thigh between Jenny’s thighs. She wiped her mouth on her own wrist.

She did not get up. Jenny put her arms around her because that was what was left. Mae’s hair under her chin. Mae’s small breasts against her ribs. Their legs tangled without a decision. The dock on the wall stayed dark. Nobody wrote a number.

Jenny’s body felt used in a way that was finally hers. She was still twitching when Mae’s breathing slowed.

“If she finds out,” Jenny said into Mae’s hair.

“Then she finds out.” Mae’s voice was already half gone. “I’m not sorry.”

Jenny wasn’t either. She held on. Mae’s foot hooked over her calf. The sheet stuck to their stomachs. Outside the room the house ticked like a house. Jenny shut her eyes on Mae’s shoulder and did not dream about a queue. She slept. Mae slept on her, a knee in the space between Jenny’s legs, mouth against Jenny’s collarbone, both of them finished, both of them still there when the green numbers on the dock started to mean morning.

Chapter 9 — Breakfast

Mae was still in the bed when the hall started moving.

Jenny heard Maddy’s door, then the marker cap in the kitchen. Seven o’clock. Mae’s face was mashed against Jenny’s shoulder, mouth open, a dried smear at the corner of her lips that Jenny tried not to look at and then looked at.

“Mae. Get up.”

Mae made a noise. Then her eyes opened and she understood where she was. She sat up too fast. The sheet fell off both of them. Two bare bodies, the dock panel green, empty hangers.

“I was going to go back,” Mae whispered.

“You didn’t.”

Mae got off the bed. Her knees were red from last night. She cracked the door.

Maddy was in the hall with a glass of water, like she had been waiting for a door to move. She looked at Mae. She looked past Mae at Jenny sitting on the bed with no sheet. She smiled with all of her teeth.

“Oh my god,” Maddy said, not even quiet. “Tiny. Seriously?”

Mae went scarlet. “Move.”

Maddy did not move. “Did she finally get off? She did. Look at her face.” She leaned on the jamb. “I used her shoulder and I still beat you to the board. That’s sad.”

“Warner,” Miss Pell said from the kitchen. “Board.”

Maddy lifted her glass in a little toast and went. Mae fled across the hall into her own room. Jenny put her glasses on. Her mouth still tasted like Mae. She walked to the kitchen because the alternative was staying in the bed until someone dragged her.

The board was already up.

SUBJECT

Jenny Hung

Mae Welles

HANDLER

Cori Ash

Maddy Warner

OPEN

—

COMMAND

—

RELEASE

—

Two subjects. Breakfast dock twice. Miss Pell did not look at Jenny any longer than she looked at the marker.

“Hung first. Ash handles. Welles after. Warner handles. Then you eat. Then I don’t want to hear about last night in this kitchen.”

So she knew. Or she guessed. She did not write a number for it.

Jenny stood at the fridge. Cori put the cups on without comment. The seals pulled on nipples Mae had had in her mouth four hours ago. Jenny’s face burned. The pad seated over a clit that was still swollen from Mae’s tongue. The machine started and the climb was the same climb, except Jenny’s body knew the difference now and wanted the mouth back.

Cori watched her face. “Mark.”

Jenny nodded, too late to pretend she wasn’t close. Cori peeled her. Jenny grabbed the counter and did not come. The unfinished edge sat on top of the finished night and made a mess of both.

Hung +2

Ash +2

Maddy applauded, two fingers, lazy. “Clean. Cute. Your turn, Tiny.”

Mae stood where Jenny had stood. Maddy took her time with the cups. She thumbed Mae’s nipples after the seals sat, not because she had to.

“Maddy,” Mae said.

“What. I’m checking.”

Miss Pell said, “Pad.”

Maddy put the pad on. Mae’s eyes went to Jenny and away. The machine ran. Mae shook. She was easy this morning. Everyone could see it. Maddy let her get closer than she needed to, watching Jenny watch, and then peeled her.

“Almost gave you another three,” Maddy said. “Be better next time.”

Welles +2

Warner +2

They sat. Cereal. Milk from the carton Mae had bought. Maddy ate like she had slept nine hours.

“So,” Maddy said. “Was it good? Because she looks like it was good and you look like you got caught stealing.”

Jenny said, “Can you not.”

“I’m Open later. I can not all afternoon. Right now I’m asking. Did you use your mouth or just hands, because the shoulder thing was hands-free and I still got five.”

Mae put her spoon down. “Stop.”

“I’m gloating. That’s allowed. I checked.” Maddy tipped her chin at Miss Pell. “Is gloating against house rules.”

“Not if you still show up on time,” Miss Pell said. “Nine o’clock sofa. Hung on the controller. Warner handles. Welles is Open. Ash is Open. Write last night out of your notes. The studio does not need it.”

Maddy mouthed *the studio does not need it* at Jenny and grinned.

Jenny ate. The cereal went down like paper. Her body felt used in two directions and only one of them had been hers. Maddy’s five was still on the board from the door morning. Nothing from Mae’s mouth was on the wall. That was the only part Jenny liked.

At nine she sat in the middle cushion. Controller. Cups. Pad. Maddy crouched in front of her and made a show of seating everything.

“You smell like her,” Maddy said, low, while her fingers set the pad. “Just so you know.”

“Play the block,” Miss Pell said.

The build loaded. Timing window again, different lane. Jenny looked at the screen. Maddy’s hand stayed on her hip.

“Warner,” Miss Pell said. “If you tank her round on purpose I peel you at lunch and you don’t sit for the extra.”

Maddy lifted her hand off Jenny’s hip, laughing. “I’m handling. Mark’s coming.”

It was. Jenny could feel it. She kept both hands on the controller and stared at the timer. Maddy peeled her on time. Clean hold. Extra point. Jenny sat there wet, unfinished again, with Mae watching her and Maddy looking pleased with the whole morning.

Hung +2

Warner +2

Match extra +1 / +1

“See?” Maddy said. “I can be nice. I can also tell the difference between a machine and Tiny sneaking down the hall at three.” She stretched, breasts up, unashamed. “I’m not even mad. I’m ahead. You two can keep doing charity work after lights-out. I’ll take the board.”

Mae said, very small, “You’re not ahead of anything that matters.”

Maddy looked at her. “I’m ahead of the numbers. That’s what this house is.” She glanced at Jenny. “Unless Tony’s keeping score too.”

Jenny stood up. The air on her wetness made her want to sit back down on Mae and not on this sofa. She did not. She wiped the cushion because that was the job. She set the controller on the table.

“Lunch is dock first,” Miss Pell said. “Same as always. If I hear the name Tony in a playtest note I will run breakfast twice. Clear?”

“Clear,” Maddy said, delighted.

Jenny walked to the kitchen for water. Mae followed as far as the doorway and stopped.

“I didn’t tell her,” Mae whispered.

“I know.”

“I said okay. That’s all I said.”

Jenny drank. Her mouth still remembered Mae. The board in the kitchen remembered Maddy. The dock on the fridge was already waiting for lunch.

“She’s going to talk about it all week,” Jenny said.

Mae nodded. “Yeah.”

Maddy called from the sofa, cheerful, “If you two are done being tragic, I picked the next title. Rank still counts. Get in here.”

Jenny put the glass down. She went back. She sat on the far cushion this time, not the wet one, not next to Maddy. Mae sat on the floor again even though Miss Pell had told her she did not have to.

The monitor came on. Color blocks. Bad music. Maddy’s game. Maddy’s five. Maddy’s mouth running.

Jenny held her own knees so she would not hold Mae’s hand in front of the room. She had come last night. She had still been peeled this morning. Both things were true. Maddy kept smiling like only one of them mattered.

Miss Pell sat on the arm of the sofa and watched the screen.

“Play,” she said.

They played.

Chapter 10 — The List

On Monday of week three, Miss Pell wrote Jenny’s name on the board twice.

Once under Subject. Once under a heading that had been blank since they moved in.

COMMAND

Jenny Hung

Maddy read it over Jenny’s shoulder. “What does that mean?”

“It means I can stop her game and run the sensors right then,” Miss Pell said. “We don’t have to wait for lunch. Breakfast first. Then the sofa. If I say stop, Cori stays with her and we finish the hold. That’s all it is.”

Mae stood next to Jenny and didn’t say anything. Maddy made a face like she wanted it to be more exciting than that.

Breakfast was the same as every other morning. Jenny stood by the fridge. Cori put the cups on her nipples and the pad on her clit. The machine ran. Jenny got close. Cori took everything off before she came. Miss Pell wrote +2 for Jenny and +2 for Cori. They ate cereal.

At nine they went to the sofa.

Jenny sat in the middle with her controller. Cori put the sensors on her again. The new test level loaded on the monitor. Long halls. Sound cues. Jenny liked this kind of level. She could do it.

Cori turned the machine on.

Jenny played. She hit the first cue. She did not look down at her body. The cups pulled on her nipples. The pad pulsed. She kept her eyes on the screen.

Maddy said, “So she can just stop the game whenever she wants? That’s cheap.”

“Warner,” Miss Pell said.

Maddy stopped talking.

Jenny made it into the second round. She was doing well. She could feel herself getting close again, the way she always did when the pad had been on long enough. She told herself to finish the round first. The game was the part she understood.

Miss Pell said, “Stop the game.”

She didn’t yell. She reached over and paused the monitor. The picture froze. A sound cue hung there, half played.

Jenny kept holding the controller. “I can finish the round.”

“Your name is on the command line,” Miss Pell said. “We do the hold now. Cori.”

Cori did not take the controller away. She put her hand on Jenny’s hip. The video game was paused. The machine was not. The pad was still working.

Jenny looked at the frozen screen. “That’s not fair. I had it.”

“You were playing well,” Miss Pell said. “This is a different part of the job. Stay on the sofa.”

Jenny stayed. She was wet. She was close. Mae had her hand over her mouth. Maddy leaned forward to watch.

“She’s about to come,” Maddy said.

“I know,” Cori said.

Jenny looked at Cori. “Please—”

Cori took the pad off. Then the cups. Jenny jerked and made a noise and did not come. The controller was still in her hands, pointed at a paused screen.

Miss Pell hit play on the monitor like nothing had happened.

“Write your notes after lunch,” she said. “Extra point because it was a command hold. Log it.”

Cori went to the kitchen and wrote:

Hung +2

Ash +2

Command +1 / +1

Jenny sat on the sofa unfinished. She had been winning. Then the game stopped and the sensors kept going, and now she had points instead of a finished round.

“So if your name is on that line, the game doesn’t count,” Maddy said.

“The game counts,” Miss Pell said. “I can also pause it. Jenny, get water. You’re done on the sofa until lunch. Mae, you’re up next. Short test. Cori handles.”

Jenny stood up. She was still wet. She set the controller on the table. Mae touched her wrist once, quick, where Maddy couldn’t turn it into a joke. Jenny went to the sink and ran cold water on her hands.

Mae sat in the middle and played. Jenny watched from the end of the sofa. Mae missed a cue. Cori took the sensors off before Mae came. +2 and +2. No extra three. Mae looked at Jenny. Maddy stretched and sat between them.

Lunch was Maddy on the kitchen sensors. Jenny had to put them on her. Maddy talked the whole time.

“You hate that she paused you.”

“Yeah,” Jenny said.

“If she puts me on that line I’m going to make her wait until I’m about to win.”

“On,” Miss Pell said.

Jenny watched Maddy’s face and took the sensors off in time. Maddy didn’t come. They ate sandwiches. The milk was almost gone again.

After lunch Jenny wrote her note for the company.

If you pause the game in the middle of a round, the player is still being stimulated. The timing on the screen doesn’t match what’s happening to her body. If you want good data on attention, don’t pause the level.

She almost erased the last line. She left it.

Miss Pell read it. “That’s a useful note. Dinner sensors at six. You’re not on command tomorrow unless I write it again. Don’t ask me when I write it.”

Jenny didn’t ask.

The rest of the day was normal. Kitchen. Sofa. Hall. Bed. At night Cori put the sensors on Jenny in her room, ran the machine, and took them off before Jenny came.

At the door Cori said, “You played fine. She didn’t pause you because you were bad.”

“I know.”

Cori left.

Jenny lay on her back and stared at the empty hangers. She could still see the frozen picture on the monitor. She had thought if she was in the middle of a game, they would leave her alone. That wasn’t true. Miss Pell could stop the game and keep the machine on.

Down the hall Mae’s machine ran for a minute and stopped. Maddy talked to herself. The front door stayed closed.

Jenny put her glasses on the nightstand. She kept her hands on her stomach. Tomorrow the command line might be empty again. It might not.

She hadn’t dropped the controller. It hadn’t helped.

Chapter 11 — Data

Two days after Miss Pell paused Jenny's game, Maddy stopped being able to finish on the machine.

It wasn't a joke at first. Breakfast, fridge dock, Cori handling. Cups on. Pad on. Maddy talked through it like she always did and then her face changed. She got close and stalled. Cori left the pad on longer than usual. Maddy shook her head.

"It's not doing it."

Cori took the sensors off. Miss Pell wrote +2 anyway for the hold. Maddy sat down hard and stared at Jenny like Jenny had broken something.

Lunch was the same. Sofa block was the same. Maddy could get wet. She could shake. She could not come unless she was looking at Jenny, and even that wasn't enough if she couldn't touch her.

That night Maddy stood in Jenny's doorway after lights-out.

"Don't close it," she said. "I'm not sneaking. I already told Pell."

Jenny sat up. Glasses on. Mae's door stayed shut across the hall. "Told her what."

"That I can't get off unless it's you." Maddy said it like a score. Then her mouth wobbled and it wasn't a score. "I tried. I tried in the kitchen. I tried on the sofa. I put my own hand on it after she left my room and I thought about the pad and it did nothing. I thought about your shoulder and it worked until I needed your actual shoulder. I'm not kidding."

Jenny said, "That's not my problem."

"It is if she makes it your problem."

In the morning the board had a note under the roles.

SESSION

Warner / Hung

Common room

After breakfast

Warner requests contact. Hung cooperates.

Maddy read it and let out a breath. Jenny read it twice.

"I didn't agree to that," Jenny said.

Miss Pell was pouring coffee. "You don't have to like it. She can't complete a curve without you. That's interesting data. The company wants completion data and stall data. We have stall. We need the other one. You cooperate. She gets the position she asked for. We log it."

Mae looked at the floor. Cori read the board once and started on the breakfast sensors like this was weather.

Breakfast was fast. Jenny got peeled. Mae got peeled. Maddy barely let Cori put the pad on. “Don’t. It won’t work. Just do the session.”

Miss Pell pointed at the sofa.

“Warner. Tell her what you want so she hears it from you.”

Maddy stood in front of the middle cushion. She was already flushed. Her nipples were tight. She wiped her hands on her own thighs.

“I want to sit on your face,” she said to Jenny. “Not hovering. On. I need your mouth and I need to hold your hands so I know you’re there. If I just grind on your shoulder again I think I’ll stall. I already stalled all day yesterday.”

Jenny’s ears rang. “In front of everyone.”

“Yes,” Miss Pell said. “That’s the room we have. Lie down. Head on the cushion. Warner kneels over her. Ash keeps time. I watch the face. Welles, you can leave if you want. You can also stay. Staying is useful.”

Mae sat on the far arm, small, and did not leave.

Jenny lay back because the board said cooperate and the repayment number was still the repayment number. The gray fabric was rough under her shoulder blades. She took her glasses off and then put them back on because she wanted to see what was happening to her.

Maddy climbed up. She was shaking. She planted a knee on either side of Jenny’s head. Jenny saw the trimmed hair, the wet already there, Maddy’s stomach, the underside of her breasts.

“Give me your hands,” Maddy said.

Jenny lifted them. Maddy laced their fingers together and pinned them to the sofa above Jenny’s head. Her weight settled. Not all of it. Enough that Jenny’s mouth was on her.

“Please,” Maddy said, and it did not sound like gloating.

Jenny opened her mouth. She licked. Maddy’s clit was already swollen. The first real pass made Maddy jerk so hard she almost came off Jenny’s face.

“Don’t stop. Don’t— that’s it. That’s you. That’s you.”

It was obvious she had been telling the truth. The machine had not done this to her voice. Jenny’s shoulder had not done this to her voice. Maddy rode Jenny’s mouth in short messy rolls and squeezed Jenny’s hands like she would fall if she let go.

“She’s going,” Cori said, flat.

“Let her,” Miss Pell said. “This is the data.”

Maddy came on Jenny’s mouth with her head tipped back and a sound that made Mae look away and then look back. She kept coming. She kept saying Jenny’s name, Jenny. Jenny. She crushed Jenny’s fingers and shook and then folded forward, catching herself on the sofa back so she didn’t drop her whole weight on Jenny’s face.

Jenny turned her head and sucked air. Her chin was wet. Her glasses were crooked. Between her own legs she was soaked and nobody had touched her.

Maddy stayed there for a second, still holding Jenny’s hands, breathing like she had run.

“Okay,” she whispered. “Okay I can think again.”

Miss Pell went to the kitchen. Marker.

Warner +5

Contact completion

Hung assist logged

She came back. “That’s what I needed. Warner, off her. Hung, sit up. You don’t get a finish unless I say so. Drink water. We run a control after lunch. Warner on the pad alone. If she stalls again, we repeat contact this evening. Cooperating is part of your hours now, Jenny. I know you don’t like it. Like it less quietly.”

Maddy climbed off. Her thighs shone. She looked at Jenny like she wanted to apologize and also like she would do it again in ten minutes.

“I wasn’t messing with you,” Maddy said. “I can’t— I try to get there by myself and my head just goes to you. It’s stupid.”

Jenny sat up. She wiped her mouth on the back of her wrist. “Don’t talk to me like we’re friends.”

“We’re not,” Maddy said. “I still need you.”

Mae held out a towel. Jenny took it and did not look at Mae long enough for Maddy to make it a triangle.

Cori set a glass of water on the table. “Lunch is still dock first for everyone else. She can skip the pad if Pell says so.”

Miss Pell nodded. “She skips the solo pad until we see the control. Jenny is not skipped. Kitchen at twelve-thirty. Same as always.”

Jenny stood. Her legs were unsteady. She could still taste Maddy. She could still feel Maddy’s hands locked on hers. The monitor behind them was black. No

game. This block had not even pretended to be a playtest.

Maddy sat on the arm of the sofa and watched Jenny walk to the hall bath. She did not follow. She called after her, not loud, not a joke.

“If she makes us do it again, I’ll ask for a different position. You on top of my thigh. Or your hand. You can pick. I don’t care. I just can’t do it without you.”

Jenny shut the bathroom door. She ran water. She washed her mouth. It did not come off.

In the mirror she looked like herself. Glasses. Short dark hair. Bare. Chin wet anyway.

She went back because lunch would still happen, and the board still had her name on it, and Miss Pell had already decided this was work. Maddy looked up when she entered the kitchen, hungry and embarrassed and sure, and Jenny understood the rest of the residency had just changed shape.

Miss Pell tapped the board once, under the new line.

“Interesting data,” she said. “We follow it.”

Chapter 12 — Who

Cori caught her in the hall after dinner.

Jenny was going to the bathroom to wash Maddy off her mouth again. The control after lunch had gone how Miss Pell said it would. Pad only. Maddy stalled. They ran contact again before dinner, a different position, Jenny's hand this time because Maddy asked and then changed her mind and put Jenny's fingers where she needed them and came saying Jenny's name. Jenny had not come. The board had another five for Warner.

Cori stepped into the bathroom doorway and didn't move.

"Maddy got what she wanted," Cori said. "What do you want. Who."

Jenny turned the water off. "I want to go to bed."

"That's not what I asked."

"I don't want a session."

"Pell already said if Maddy gets a contact block, you get a question. I asked it. You have to answer. What would actually do it for you. Not what you think sounds smart."

Jenny looked at Cori's face in the mirror. Cori wasn't smiling. She wasn't being kind either. She was just waiting.

"Mae," Jenny said.

It came out before she could dress it up.

Cori nodded once, like she had already written it down. "Mae what."

Jenny's throat felt tight. "I want her mouth. I want to come. I don't want Maddy on me. I don't want the pad deciding. I want Mae, and I want to finish."

"That's two things."

"That's the thing."

Cori left. Jenny heard her in the kitchen, low. Miss Pell answered, shorter. Then Mae's name.

Ten minutes later Miss Pell called them into the common room. The monitor was off. The board had a new line.

SESSION

Hung / Welles

Hung completion

Welles contact

Hung chooses.

Mae stood by the sofa with her arms folded over her chest. She looked scared and not unwilling.

“You can say no,” Jenny said.

Mae shook her head. “I don’t want to say no. I wanted you to ask.”

Miss Pell pointed at the middle cushion. “Same room as this morning. That’s the house. Jenny on her back. Mae where Jenny asked. Cori keeps time. I log. Warner is Open. She stays or she goes to her room. If she stays she doesn’t talk.”

Maddy sat on the far arm and put both hands in the air. For once she didn’t have a line.

Jenny lay down. She took her glasses off and held them, then set them on the table so she could see Mae’s face. Mae climbed onto the sofa between Jenny’s knees. She was small there. Her hair fell forward. She looked up once.

“Tell me if you need me to stop,” Mae said.

“I won’t.”

Mae put her mouth on her.

It was different from three in the morning. The lamp was on. People were in the room. Mae wasn’t rushing to beat a door. She licked Jenny slowly at first, the way she had when she was learning, then she stayed on Jenny’s clit and sucked. Jenny’s hands found Mae’s hair. She didn’t pin Mae’s hands. She didn’t want that part of Maddy’s session. She just held on.

Maddy made a sound and stopped it.

Jenny’s hips lifted. Mae’s hands gripped her thighs and kept her there. It built like it had in the dark, except Jenny could see Mae’s mouth working, could see Miss Pell watching her face the same way she watched a curve, could see Cori looking at the clock and then at Jenny’s mouth.

“She’s close,” Cori said.

“She finishes,” Miss Pell said. “That’s the session.”

Jenny came on Mae’s mouth with her heels on the sofa and Mae’s name in her throat. She said Mae, once, wrecked, and then she couldn’t say anything. Mae stayed on her through it until Jenny’s hand went slack.

Mae kissed the inside of her thigh and rested her cheek there.

Jenny stared at the ceiling and breathed. For the first time since the crate left, her body did not feel like it was waiting for the next peel.

Miss Pell went to the board.

Hung +5

Completion

Welles assist

“That’s the match for her contact block,” Miss Pell said. “Interesting on both sides. Welles, you can stay with her until lights-out dock. You still run the dock. Both of you. Completing here doesn’t cancel the machine. Warner, room. You’re done looking.”

Maddy stood. She looked at Jenny like she wanted to say she needed her again already and then she didn’t. She left.

Cori handed Mae a towel. Mae wiped her mouth. She didn’t get off the sofa. She crawled up and lay along Jenny’s side, small, a knee over Jenny’s thigh.

Jenny put an arm around her because that was what she had asked for, and she had gotten it, and she was still in a house that would put cups on them in an hour.

“You said me,” Mae whispered.

“Yeah.”

“Not her.”

“Not her.”

Cori paused at the hall. “Lights-out in forty. I’ll handle both rooms. Don’t make me come find you.”

Miss Pell turned off the lamp over the sofa. The kitchen light stayed on. The board kept the five next to Jenny’s name like it belonged there.

Jenny held Mae and looked at the dark monitor. No game. She had asked. They had made it happen. Tomorrow Maddy would stall again and somebody would write cooperate on the board, and Jenny would still have this hour.

Mae’s mouth was on her shoulder, not using her, just there.

“I’m glad you said it,” Mae said.

Jenny was too.

Chapter 13 — Placement

The crate came back on a Thursday.

Twelve weeks, if Jenny counted from the day she carried the console in. The board still had roles on it at seven. Breakfast dock still happened. Cups. Pad. Cori peeled Jenny. Mae got peeled. Maddy didn't use the pad. She stood next to Jenny and shook her head until Miss Pell said, "After the letters."

The courier was the same woman in the company jacket. She wheeled the crate into the common room, cut the zip-tie, and left. She did not look at anyone long.

Inside: the seal bags. The suitcases. Jenny's gray shirt with PRESS START in green, folded wrong. Mae's hoodie. Maddy's white tank. Cori's almost-empty duffel.

Miss Pell set four envelopes on the kitchen table.

"Open them before you get dressed," she said. "The letters assume you understand the house. If you put clothes on first you'll think the job is something else."

Jenny's hands were not steady. She opened hers.

Playtester. Studio placement. Pay. Housing. The address was this house. A second page, short.

Hung remains available to Warner for contact completion. Scheduled and as needed. *Hung has access to Welles. Welles housing attached.*

Protocol continues on site. Sensors remain in use.

Pell and Ash transfer out at load-out.

Mae read over her arm, then opened her own. Same housing. Access. Her letter called her Welles and, in one line in Miss Pell's printing, Tiny.

Maddy already knew. She was smiling with her mouth and not with her eyes.

"I'm on yours," Maddy said.

"Yeah."

"You're supposed to be available. That's the word they used."

"I can read."

Cori's envelope was thinner. She didn't show it around. She put it in the duffel on top of the toothbrush.

Miss Pell tapped the board one last time. She did not write a score.

"The studio liked the data," she said. "They liked that Warner completes with Hung and stalls without her. They liked that Hung completes with Welles. They

hired the pattern. I go with Ash to the next house. You three stay. A supervisor will be on site Monday. Until then the docks still run. You know how. Don’t pretend you don’t.”

Mae said, “You’re just leaving.”

“Yes.”

Jenny looked at Cori. Cori looked back, same as the bathroom doorway.

“You asked who,” Cori said. “You got her. You also got Maddy. That’s the job.”

Maddy sat on the sofa arm, bare, envelope in her lap. “I’m not going to pretend I’m sorry.”

“I know,” Jenny said.

They dressed because the crate was open and the letters were read. Jenny pulled the PRESS START shirt over her head. The cloth on her nipples felt huge. The cutoff shorts felt like a costume. Mae disappeared into the hoodie and then took it off again and held it, unsure. Maddy put the tank on and left it.

Miss Pell took her badge off the hook by the door. Cori had shoes. Jenny had forgotten Cori even owned shoes.

At the threshold Cori paused. The door dock was still there. Nobody ran it for the two who were leaving.

“Monday,” Cori said. “Someone else will write the board. The machine doesn’t care who holds the marker.”

Miss Pell opened the door. Daylight. A car, not a parts van.

“Do the work,” she said. “You already know what it is.”

Then they were gone. The latch clicked. The house was three.

Maddy let the silence sit for a second. Then she stood up, pulled the tank off, and dropped it on the crate.

“I can’t think,” she said. “I haven’t been able to think since breakfast. I need you.”

Jenny looked at Mae.

Mae nodded, small. “I’m not going anywhere. She can have what the letter says. I get what the letter says after.”

That was the job.

Jenny sat in the middle of the sofa. She did not lie down until Maddy asked, and Maddy asked. Maddy held her hands the way she had the first time and used her mouth and came saying Jenny, not anyone else, and the monitor stayed off. No

one wrote +5. There was no Miss Pell to write it.

After, Mae took Jenny into the first bedroom, the one with HUNG on the door. The hoodie stayed on the crate. Mae used her mouth. Jenny came. She said Tiny, quiet, into Mae’s hair, and Mae laughed once against her skin like she had been waiting for that name in this room.

They lay there. The dock on the wall was still plugged in. Friday, Saturday, Sunday, then a new person with a marker.

Maddy filled the doorway, bare again, envelope creased in her hand.

“I’m going to need you a lot,” she said.

Jenny looked at the ceiling, then at Mae, then at Maddy.

“I know,” she said. “That’s the placement.”

The console was still on the table under the dark monitor. Nobody started a match. They would, later. The letter said they were playtesters. It also said everything else.

Jenny kept her hand on Mae’s back and her other arm off the bed, open, because Maddy was already coming in, and the house, for the first time, had no one in it who would tell them to stop.