

Crescendo

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Trigger Warning/Content Warning: Mention of blood, gore, and violence between children,
violence against children, binge eating, starvation

“If you want to back out, now’s the time.”

Her words fell in rhythm with the rainfall around them on the parapet, the drumming patter clattering against the copper roof. The way Caissa spoke to Timbre was more like a nursery rhyme than a warning—lighthearted, taunting, a smile hidden beneath her cloak. The three lanky teens crouched on the railing, cloaked in tattered shawls that barely kept them from freezing and hoods with holes that almost did the job of keeping the rain out. Caissa’s bright blue eyes shone from beneath her hood, the flickering warm light from inside the window dancing across them.

Timbre turned from her and followed the light to the ostentatious view inside. Rows of decadent food cluttered the tables, dishes stampeding over one another in a reckless display of excess, vying for the attention of the Veneers—only the oligarchs of Resonarch were this obscenely selfish to feast while the rest starved below. Dinner rolls, enough to build a doughy bed, spilled from gold and gem-encrusted cornucopias. And towering over it all were the fountains of cheese, wine, and chocolate cascading from gilded spouts—taller than Timbre. Turkeys stuffed with ducks, stuffed with quails, stuffed with baby chicks, all drowned in saccharine browned butter and displayed in grotesque abundance. The sight of the chicks, so small they had never even been given the chance to grow, would have curdled something in Timbre’s stomach if there was anything in it. Only a Veneer would eat something that had barely lived, never knowing or caring that, given time, it could have fed so many more.

And prancing between the tables with goblets in their hands were the Veneers. They preened like peacocks, their laughter bubbling up over the music. Their silk gowns, edged in

gold, trailed behind them like wedding trains—yards of fabric that could have clothed a dozen kids like Timbre. Timbre’s stomach growled louder than the rain, startling them all.

“Looks like we have our answer.”

Unlike Caissa’s voice, Anchor’s voice cut through the rain like a butcher’s knife—sharp and heavy.

A sweeping beam of light sliced through the night from the cobblestone streets below. The three tucked themselves closer to the wall, pressing their faces against the warm glass window. Timbre could hear muffled, joyous music playing on the other side. When the light passed, Anchor took a peek over the edge. Though they were several stories high, they could see the moonlight catching on the badges and holstered chrome guns of the Tempos. Their stiff bucket hats kept their gazes locked on the streets, where they expected the ungovernable teenagers of Dinholm to be—alongside rats, not up here on the rooftops.

“Let’s move. People are starving back home,” Anchor said.

He pulled open the window, and Caissa slunk through the opening, climbing down without making a sound onto a ceiling beam. Timbre snuck in next, gingerly holding her coat close to her chest to smother the clinking noises clawing to escape from the cloth. Anchor followed, closing the window behind them swiftly.

Timbre watched as Caissa strode like a cat down the beams without batting an eye, her walk shaped by the years of thievery. Anchor, while he carried the same experience, did not carry the same grace. He timed his steps based on the surrounding sounds, ensuring his heavier footfalls were masked by the laughs and chatters below or the growling thunder outside. Timbre could only attempt to keep up and not slip off the beams.

Anchor tied a rope to the beam and tossed the slack to Caissa, who caught it without looking, her eyes fixed on the guests bumbling about below and the automatons that served them. Her eyes darted over them like she was reading sheet music, hunting for a rest. Her body tensed once the hall cleared, guests and the automatons shifting to another room for a bout of entertainment. She rappelled down the rope and landed on the intricate red and gold rug that blanketed the white marble floors. Anchor followed suit, then Timbre. Anchor tucked the rope behind a curtain and rejoined them. Caissa had already taken off, slinking into the crevice of a door opening.

“What are you waiting for, new kid?” Anchor whisper-shouted at Timbre while giving her a hard nudge.

Timbre stumbled across the hall, Anchor in tow. They entered the door, and Caissa closed it shut behind them. She flicked the light on, revealing a huddle of cleaning supplies and dusty shelves.

“Alright,” Caissa said, kneeling to the ground. “What have you got for us, Timbre?”

Timbre opened her coat, shaking off the rain. Once dry, she unpacked her gear on the floor. She laid out an assortment of odd-looking tech, foreign to Caissa and Anchor. A small round instrument with a scraggly wire attached, fork-like prongs, and crescent-shaped buttons with the flat side lined with hair-thin needles. Caissa swiftly grabbed a pair for herself, her sleeves shrouding the tech pieces for a split second. Timbre tossed the remaining set of the crescent-shaped pieces to Anchor.

“Put these on *here*,” Timbre said as she pressed the first crescent shape just below her cheekbone and on the bony area in front of her right ear. “And *here*.”

She fitted the second one to the side of her neck. The prongs jabbed into her skin, keeping the device in place. A small trickle of blood escaped, but she wiped it quickly.

Anchor winced as his went in. Caissa didn't even blink.

"Can't make progress without a little pain," Caissa said with a smile.

"I'm setting it to 30 decibels," Timbre said, cranking the crescent on her neck a few degrees clockwise. "The guttervox comms will pick up anything we say below that."

"That's pretty neat." Caissa followed her words with a grin. She slapped Anchor on the shoulder. "I told you the new kid was gonna change things for us. Glad to have you on board."

Anchor's face remained unchanged.

"I still think it's way too soon for her to be here. This is bigger than our usual jobs."

"And that's exactly why we need her." Caissa stood up. "Well, I'm off."

Timbre passed her some small pieces of tech, and she caught them in midair with a swift swipe.

"You've got four tuning forks there, but you only need two servers and one line cook," Timbre said.

Caissa tossed one back to her. Unprepared, Timbre clambered to catch it.

"Then I only need three," Caissa said.

"But what if you drop one—"

"Don't trust me, huh? You gotta have more faith, new kid. I've got plenty, don't you worry." Caissa reached for the door handle.

Anchor grabbed her wrist. "Only the food. Nothing else, Caissa."

Anchor's face was as firm as his grip. Timbre held her breath.

“Wouldn’t dream of it, Anchor.” Caissa scrunched her nose and flashed him a smile, and he let her go.

“She’s up to no good,” Anchor muttered as she slipped out the door.

“I heard that,” Caissa’s voice rang through the guttervox.

The sound did not enter their ears but rather carried through their cheekbones. Anchor flinched at how the sound seemed to fill his mouth and reverberate through his temple, as if he was chewing on Caissa’s words.

“It’s uncomfortable at first, but you get used to it,” Timbre reassured.

After a few seconds, Caissa’s voice came through the guttervox again. “Got one server.”

Timbre studied a device on her wrist. As Anchor peered over her shoulder, she knew that he only saw a busy watch made of springs and gears, but to her, each pulse, each fluctuation, was a note in a song only she could hear. While others saw noise, she read intricate melodies, understanding its rhythms as effortlessly as breathing. Timbre’s fingers danced across the device like a pianist’s. She stood up and reached for the door.

“Perfect. I tuned it to clear out the room, so we should be good to cross.”

Pulling the knob, she found herself looking at an automaton server. Her stomach dropped, and her breath caught in her throat. The automaton towered over her thin frame, broad shoulders and joints made with shifting metal gears and pistons. It had the silhouette of a human, but its skeleton was metal, and its blood was slick silver oil. It produced a whirl that grew louder as it reached for Timbre. Anchor moved like lightning, grabbed the extra tuning fork off the floor, and jammed it into the neck of the machine. Timbre snapped out of her fear and struck the fork, sending a reverberating hum through the room.

The server seemed to reset, backed up from the closet, and continued on its path.

“Playing it safe keeps us alive. Don’t assume—know,” Anchor spat his words at Timbre. Then, into the guttervox, he said, “That’s two servers.”

“I didn’t realize this was a competition,” Caissa said.

“Just get to that line cook, Caissa,” Anchor muttered. “That was too close. Kid nearly shit herself.”

He grabbed Timbre by the arm and pulled them both into the hall. It was empty; the tuned automaton had cleared the room and sent a command to the other automatons to do the same.

“Let’s get to the cellar while it’s safe,” Anchor said. “Caissa, is the kitchen clear?”

“Negative,” Caissa said. “There’s a lot of cooks in here, with a lot of knives that I’m not inclined to challenge at the moment. I’m still working on getting a line cook without the other bots noticing.”

“Shit,” Anchor grumbled.

“There’s still the service entrance,” Timbre said.

Anchor turned, his eyebrow cocked.

“There are probably two entrances, one for cooks and another for servers to stock the goods without getting in the kitchen’s way,” she said.

“How do you know that?”

“I’m just making an educated guess,” Timbre responded, avoiding Anchor’s gaze.

Anchor narrowed his eyes at her. “Educated...sure...Let’s go.”

They searched around the hall, Timbre’s stomach growling more violently as they passed the endless stretch of food. Timbre wanted nothing more than to reach out and pocket a dinner roll, but Anchor stopped her every time.

“That’s not why we’re here. We all eat, or we all starve.”

“Let the kid have a bite, Anchor,” Caissa appealed.

Anchor sighed and nodded at Timbre. She greedily grasped for the closest thing on the table—a pillowy beignet filled with a savory truffle, egg, and potato espuma, topped with a mountain of caviar. She shoveled the food into her mouth and stifled a moan of pleasure from escaping her lips. The beignet melted in her mouth, and she relished all the flavors.

“Leave no crumbs,” Anchor ordered. “Waste nothing.”

“I wouldn’t waste this caviar,” Timbre said after a loud gulp.

Anchor flashed her another look, the same piercing stare he’d given her in the hallway.

“You should have some, Anchor,” Caissa said in the same sing-song tone she taunted people with. “When’s the last time we ever had *caviar*?”

“I’ll wait to eat when we get back to Dinholm. The other kids at home eat first.”

A pang of guilt rose through Timbre, digging against her ribs more than the hunger did. She thought back to her first nights at Dinholm, the sewers the kids lived in filled with a rotten stench they never could get used to. The kids there were younger than them, thinner, and were waiting for their return.

Timbre looked ahead and found a doorway.

“Here, I think this is it.” She opened the door and found a descending staircase.

“Finally,” Caissa said. “I got a line cook. It’s heading to the cellar now. You’re up, Anchor.”

Anchor and Timbre hurried down the stairs, finding an automaton waiting for them. The cellar was cool and dark, unlike the warm and bright banquet hall above. Instead of illustrious displays of food, the food here were vegetables tucked in burlap sacks, wine encased in barrels—hidden and shrouded in modesty. Anchor headed straight for one of the walls and

knocked on it, listening for the distinct echo of empty space on the other side. Anchor let out one more knock, matching the tune he was looking for, and then took a step back. Charging at the wall, he slammed his shoulder into it, and the wall shattered, revealing a tunnel they had spent the past several days excavating. A wooden cart waited for them on the other side. A grimy, scrawny face peeked around the corner. His hungry eyes were sunken, but the whites stood out against the dark of the tunnel as if devouring any light that entered the opening.

“S’bout time,” the thin boy said from the tunnel.

“Good to see you too, Legato,” Anchor said.

Legato slapped the side of the cart. “Load ‘er up.”

Anchor brushed the dirt off his shoulders and stood next to Timbre. She turned to the cook automaton and whirled away at her gears and switches, lost in concentration. Anchor leaned over Timbre’s shoulder, rattling a litany of commands.

“Slice cured meats, cook soups or stews, bake biscuits and hard tack, pickle vegetables, and preserve fruits. Ignore fish unless it can be canned. No perishables. And whatever is uncooked and can be transferred, have the servers put it in the cart.”

Timbre tinkered away, her dials spinning at lightning speed. The cook automaton took off to the kitchen to complete the requests.

“Can this command be passed to the other line cooks?” Caissa asked through the guttervox.

“Yes, but we don’t want the other servers or guests to wonder why new food hasn’t come out for them or why it’s slowed down.”

“Don’t they ever get full? How much food do they need in one sitting?” Caissa asked, indignation steeping into her words.

“If they get full, they just throw up to eat more,” Timbre replied.

An uncomfortable silence burrowed itself into the room.

“I actually need you up here, Timbre,” Caissa said, breaking the silence. “I seem to have found myself locked in a room I can’t get out of.”

Anchor cursed under his breath. “Go, I’ve got it here.” He picked up nearby sacks of spuds and a barrel of water, hauling them over his shoulder as if they weighed no more than a set of pillows before setting them down on the cart. Once the cart was filled, Legato towed the cart away, only for another teen from Dinholm to arrive shortly with another cart.

Timbre nodded and rushed up the stairs. She looked around the hall for any sign of Caissa before speaking into the guttervox.

“Where are you?”

“It’s hard to explain, but look for a corridor on the second floor with a green door. That’s where I was last.”

“Second floor? Caissa, you better be sticking to the plan,” Anchor said into the guttervox. “The carts are almost all filled. We need to go.”

“I was just being thorough, Anchor. Timbre and I will head down before you know it.”

Anchor’s exasperated sigh drifted through the guttervox. Timbre took a deep breath and searched for an ascending staircase. After some time, she found it. On the second floor, she quickly located the green door to her left.

“Caissa?” Timbre whispered.

A hand reached around her, covering her mouth. The next thing she knew, she was pinned against the wall with Caissa’s bright blue eyes piercing hers. Caissa held a finger over her lips.

Reaching down, Caissa turned the dial to Timbre's guttervox. Timbre looked down at her wristwatch—Caissa had dropped the guttervox to 10 decibels.

"Can Anchor still hear us?" Caissa asked in her normal talking voice.

Timbre tried to shake her head under the pressure of Caissa's hand.

"Good. Come on, I need you."

"What—" Timbre whispered.

"Louder, Timbre."

"What are we doing?" Timbre asked at a normal volume.

"I need you to get me in here." Caissa nodded her head at the green door.

"What's behind here?"

"Do you like living in the sewers, Timbre? Do you enjoy scrounging every week—robbing the Veneers over and over, barely escaping the Tempos as they're hot on our tails until one day they'll wipe us out?"

Timbre stood silent and shook her head.

"Then open the damn door."

Timbre knelt before the green door, eyeing the lock. She pulled out a scraggly, limp wire connected to what resembled a kalimba—a small wooden box with a hole in the center and metal tines at the top. Timbre slipped the wire into the keyhole and pressed different notes, the wire shaking with each reverberation. As the wire vibrated, Timbre and Caissa could hear it connecting with the different pins of the lock, tiny clicking noises sounding in succession until, finally, it hit the binding pin. Timbre pulled up on the contraption, and the door unlocked.

Caissa wasted no time in ripping the door open and barreling inside, her previous catlike grace nonexistent. Timbre followed closely behind. As the door shut behind them, the silence

pressed down on them—no laughter or music from beyond the walls reached their ears. In the center of the room, a pedestal awaited, a gyroscope of rotating disks and clock arms imprisoned within a cage of red lasers.

Caissa walked up to the pedestal and leaned against it, her shoulder flirting dangerously with the red lasers. Just a single strand of her hair could set them off.

“Grab the gyroscope,” Caissa commanded Timbre.

“But it’s covered in lasers.”

“But you know how to get it, don’t you?” Caissa’s tone was not a question but an accusation. “Come on, new kid. Step up to the plate.”

She motioned for Timbre to approach the pedestal. Timbre swallowed hard but relented. She pressed a few dials on her wristwatch, and soon, her entire hand emitted a strong frequency. Her wrist reverberated and produced a hum. She carefully reached her hand toward the lasers. As she approached, the lasers bent out of the way of her hand as if her wrist carried the opposite polarity to them. She grabbed the gyroscope, slowly pulling it from its cage.

“That’s it, nice and steady,” Caissa cooed. “Now hand it to—”

Anchor burst through the door, startling Timbre.

“Caissa, what are you doing?!”

Timbre’s hand hit the top of the cage, knocking her wristwatch out of frequency. The lasers settled into their original positions, right where her hand was. Timbre let out a painful cry, the lasers searing into her skin. Her forearm was immediately cauterized, and the smell of her burnt flesh pierced the stillness of the room. Alarms blared around them.

Caissa sighed. “Anchor, we were so close.”

Her nonchalant attitude and disregard for the alarms scared Timbre more than the screaming alarms themselves.

“The carts are on the move. We should have left already. What is that, Caissa?”

Caissa stepped down from the pedestal and grabbed the orb from Timbre, admiring it.

“This is how we turn the tide. Why don’t you explain to Anchor here what it is, Timbre?”

“Caissa, I—” Timbre stammered.

“How should the new kid know that, Caissa?”

“You’re finally asking the right questions, Anchor,” Caissa said. “How should the new kid know what the Sforzando Orb does...unless she’s with the people who made it?”

Timbre’s stomach dropped. Her hands turned clammy, and her breath grew shallow.

“Oh, I’m not mad at you, Timbre. I would hate myself, too, if I was a Veneer.” Caissa held the Sforzando Orb between them. “You stuff your face with caviar and can barely keep it together when faced with real hunger. You have all the wealth of free time and money to tinker around with Sonartech; no wonder you’re so skilled. And yet, something about being a Veneer repulsed you enough to crawl into the sewers with us. So, please indulge poor Anchor here and tell him why the Veneers would make such a horrid thing. Go on.”

Her words were gut punches. Timbre wanted to argue, to say Caissa was wrong, but she couldn’t. Those words were as true as they were painful.

“It’s a frequency bomb,” Timbre said, hanging her head.

Anchor exhaled in disbelief. “What were the Veneers going to do with that?”

“What I’m about to do to them,” Caissa said. “I borrowed a few extra tuning forks from you, Timbre. I hope you don’t mind because three was just not going to cut it. I needed at least a handful more to plant them on the rest of the server automatons.”

Timbre saw the pieces of Caissa's plan settle into place behind Anchor's eyes. He stared at her. "Caissa, if you do this, you're going to start a war. People will die."

"People are already dying. How many more do we have to lose just scraping by?" Caissa shouted.

"That's not your choice to make," Anchor said, his voice low and firm. "Think about the last time anyone rebelled against the Veneers. You remember how that ended. We keep our heads down, we take only what we need, and we survive."

"Survive?" Caissa spat the word like it disgusted her. "That night didn't teach me to survive. It taught me that survival isn't enough." She stepped closer, eyes blazing like blue fire. "You were there, Anchor. You saw the bodies—children who never got a chance to grow up. And you still think we should just keep living under their boots like nothing happened?"

Anchor's jaw tightened, but he said nothing.

"The only way their deaths mean something is if we make them mean something." Caissa's voice dropped, raw and sharp. "If we don't have the will to fight for our freedom, then we certainly don't deserve it."

Anchor pulled a knife from his belt. "You don't get to decide who should be sacrificed for a cause."

"And you don't get to decide what hell to keep trapping us all in," said Caissa as she drew her own knife.

She lunged at him, her knife clashing with his as they hacked and slashed at one another. Caissa's blade chased Anchor's skin, missing only because Anchor's strength-filled parries knocked her back. Timbre's eyes flickered between them, her heart beating out of her chest as she stood paralyzed with fear. As the blades drew closer to each other, Timbre snapped.

“Stop! STOP!”

Timbre threw herself in between the two, and Anchor backed up. Caissa pulled away too late, slashing Timbre’s arm. She let out a painful yelp. Caissa did not bat an eye. Instead, she took advantage of the change in pace, shoving Timbre into Anchor to distract him. Her knife barely missed Timbre by a hair’s breadth, driving past her and into Anchor’s neck. Caissa’s blade split the skin of his throat, summoning forth a curtain of blood. Anchor dropped his knife and reached for his throat, desperate to close the wound any way he could, but it was too late. Timbre screamed in horror as Anchor’s hot blood sprayed her. She stumbled backwards, slipping on his blood and crashing hard onto the floor.

Caissa tossed a set of earplugs at Timbre. “You might want to put these on.”

With trembling hands, Timbre struggled to put the earplugs in but finally tucked them into place. Caissa put her own in and twisted the Sforzando Orb in a rhythmic pattern. The green door crashed open, and two Tempos rushed inside.

“Freeze!”

Caissa stood stoically, holding the orb in front of her as if tempting them to grab it from her. But before they could take another step, the entire room shook violently. An intense vibration shuddered the entire building, and a high-pitched noise pierced the air. Screams flooded the hallways, spilling in from outside the green door, but the earplugs kept Caissa and Timbre from fully hearing them—rather, they could feel the cries of death lancing their chests and raising the hair on their skin. The Tempos’ palms flew to their ears in an attempt to block the noise, but it was no use. The Tempos seized violently, blood trickling through the gaps between their fingers, rivers of crimson streaming from their eyes and noses. They released anguished screams as they collapsed to the ground, seizing madly until they ceased moving altogether.

Timbre, still on the ground, watched in horror while Caissa stepped over Anchor and moved toward her. Timbre flinched and crawled away. She snatched Anchor's dropped knife and held it in front of her. Caissa held her hands up, then pointed to the crescent-shaped knob on her own neck. Timbre shifted the dial back to 30 decibels.

"Congratulations, kid. You just got promoted." Caissa knelt to the ground to be eye level with Timbre. "Come on now, don't pout. I'll let him take the credit for being the first revolutionary to give his life to kill these greedy monsters. He will be remembered as a hero, and Dinholm will rally behind his death to fight against inequality and injustice. This will all work out, I promise you."

Timbre lunged at Caissa with Anchor's knife. Caissa dodged out of the way, closing the space between them, and cupped Timbre's face. Caissa's fingers were wrapped around the earplugs.

"Ah ah ah," Caissa taunted. "Let's not forget I didn't have to give you the very earplugs saving your life right now. You can easily join your friends over there."

Caissa moved her head to the side, just enough for Timbre to see the dead Tempos on the floor behind them. Timbre's blood ran cold.

"If you knew I was a Veneer, why didn't you just kill me?"

"That definitely crossed my mind, especially with you confirming my suspicions tonight. But unlike you and your folks, we're not wasteful." The lighthearted nature of Caissa's voice seemed completely buried. "Look me in the eyes and tell me you don't agree with what I've been saying."

Timbre stared into Caissa's blue eyes. She hated what Caissa did to Anchor. She hated how Caissa outed her as a Veneer. She hated it all. And yet, their beliefs aligned. Timbre joined Dinholm for the same reason—to turn the tide.

“You want me to turn this world upside down, don't you?” Caissa's voice became soft once more.

Timbre looked down at Anchor, his body fully limp on the ground. The blood from his wound slowed to the trickle of a babbling brook.

“He was your friend.”

“He was.”

“And you killed him.”

“Can't have progress...” Caissa said, picking up the Sforzando Orb and holding it between them. She pressed a button, and the gyroscope stopped turning. Caissa took out her earplugs, Timbre did the same. The cacophony of laughing guests below was gone. The songs of the world around them—silenced. “...without a little pain.”