

Synopsis & Table of Contents

Demon Days: Melancholy in Blue is a three part mini-series, laying the background and foundation for the main characters of *Demon Days*: Chase Noel and Ellie Berkeley. Serving as a prologue to *Demon Days*, it also establishes several key factors of the *Demon Days* universe.

- [Part One: Aquamarine](#)

- Ellie adjusts to life outside of The Garden, with her childhood stolen from her and her late teenage years quickly going down the drain. Chase's life and family unit is suddenly turned upside down, leaving the girl alone to pick up the pieces. As a result, she finds herself leaning on Ellie for support... but is the latter prepared to handle that responsibility?

- [Part Two: Anchorage](#)

- Taking place two years after the ending of *Aquamarine*, *Anchorage* follows Ellie and Chase as the former does her best to drag the latter through her senior year of high school. At the same time, though, something's clearly wrong with Ellie. When tragedy strikes, the life that Ellie has spent nine years running from appears not too far behind...

- [Part Three: Deep Sea Diver](#)

- Immediately after the ending of "Anchorage," Ellie and her fellow officer Sam Yeong are requested to accompany the Chief of New Haven's Paranormal Investigations Unit to the bi-annual "All Chapters" meeting in the mega-city Olympia. When an otherwise normal business trip reveals a new face sowing discord behind the scenes, Ellie must confront the truth about her childhood. Nothing ever truly goes away, after all.

Part One: Aquamarine

Prologue: Vacancy

Eleanor Berkeley wakes up exactly thirty minutes before her alarm, the same way she's done every morning for the past ten years. Her body feels well rested, but even a good night's sleep does seemingly little to wash away the endless torrent rolling through her mind at the odd hours of the day. She's eighteen now, only two years removed from life at the orphanage she grew up in. Yet, she's had a difficult time getting past the feeling that some part of her was still there.

The nightmare she just had was likely a big contributor to that feeling. It was the same nightmare she had almost every night, ever since the orphanage burned down with her inside it.

She doesn't think she could ever forget the sensation of waking up inside a building on fire. Ellie had gone to sleep that night expecting it, but nothing could have prepared her for the nightmare she would be thrust into the next time she opened her eyes. By the time she had done so, her room was already ablaze; the rumble beneath her having done little to startle her awake before the hot smoke filled the air, turning every breath into a desperate struggle for survival from the moment she opened her eyes. The distant, but no less audible *ra-ta-ta-ta!* of semi-automatic weaponry peppered a chorus of screams as people in neighboring rooms fled from their burning bedrooms only to be met with the architects of their very demise.

Of course, that alone wouldn't be the cause of frequent nightmares that prevent her from getting even a minute of rest in spite of everything she tries. It's—

A mellow, upbeat jingle plays from her cellphone. It emits a small array of light that, after a short warm up, displays a hologram with a 3D graphic of the time and a little cartoon fox. There's a speech bubble floating above the fox's head, that reads:

It's a beautiful Tuesday! Get those orders taken care of!

She's grateful for that. Alarms weren't her favorite thing in the world, but they're certainly good at stopping you from spiraling at seven-thirty in the morning. Good timing too, because today *is* an important day and she *does* have orders she needs to take care of. So, she visualizes putting all of those negative feelings about the life she had before she was seventeen into a box, and then stuffs the box out of sight, in a pile with the other boxes. She can just cry in the shower later, she lives alone anyways.

For now, it's time to get ready. There's work to do.

Ellie had resigned herself to a mixed-use apartment in the Apollo ward, deep in the Sol District of New Haven. It's a nice place; the downstairs serves as a mechanics shop, with a garage and storefront. The upstairs is where she lives, a cozy two bedroom space with just enough room for her and her things. To the left of the entrance is the living room—in there is a small TV screen mounted on the wall, with a cream colored couch in front of it forming a perfect square around a coffee table, creating the perfect viewing angle for movie nights. Right behind the living room, to the right of the upstairs entrance, is the kitchen and dining room. The kitchen itself is rather small, with outdated (though frequently and carefully maintained) equipment. It has a bar overlooking the living room, with the TV in perfect view. The dining room is similarly small, but the table's placement made for mealtimes that were nice and intimate.

It's a great place to have people over, really. She lives alone and never has visitors, but it *is* objectively well designed in that aspect.

Naturally, she put the convenience of having two bedrooms to use. One bedroom served as her office and home-lab. In there, she planned out schematics, drew blueprints, took care of any programming tasks, and overall anything that didn't require her to go into the garage downstairs and build stuff. It had a bathroom too, which was nice. Most of the time, she slept in there—either at her desk or on the floor. In hindsight, that's probably why she sleeps like shit.

The bedroom where Ellie is *supposed* to sleep, and where she slept last night, is the master bedroom. It's a slightly bigger space, and it feels even bigger because it's mostly empty. She doesn't have much in the way of decorations or belongings, so aside from her bed, a small assortment of clothes in her closet, and the products in her bathroom, you could hardly tell someone lives there. It certainly looks more like a guest room than her own bedroom, with sparse decorations and bedding that gets slept in so little that the comforter is still fresh and the pillows haven't flattened.

She takes her time getting ready for the day, and opts for a simple outfit: a stained gray tank-top, cargo pants, steel toed boots, and a pair of camouflaged mechanic's gloves. She ties her curly, dirty blonde hair up in a ponytail, and she grabs a pair of work goggles in lieu of her normal glasses. After one more glance in the mirror to make sure she's all good to go, it's showtime.

She goes downstairs.

Her clients today were all regulars, which meant that she didn't have to bother with formalities. They could cut the bullshit, exchange some guns for cash, and everyone would be on their way. She *loved* having regulars.

Her downstairs garage was a simple area with a room in the front and the back. The back room was the garage itself, and had a door that led to the apartment upstairs. This place, frankly, was a mess. Parts were scattered all over the place, with screws, cables, motors, and gears all mixing and matching within the same buckets. There was an opening off to the side, designed for carrying in large items from the outside; it was a godsend for parts orders. Her work bench was far from clean, with the last three projects she had been rotating between all laid out in various stages of production. She muttered a slew of nasty curses under her breath, looking at the state of two of them.

One was a six-shooter. A normal revolver. Except the barrel of the gun, and the caliber of the rounds as a result, were *beyond* massive. They were the size of shotgun slugs, and the rounds themselves were *incendiary*. It would be overkill if it was used on humans, but (ideally) the gun would be used on a far more suitable target. The other weapon, well, wasn't a weapon at all. Rather, it was a quick reference encyclopedia. A small, voice activated device with a screen that displayed the "recipe" for the creation of any inorganic object. It was a personal request from a friend of hers, and while it didn't seem like much on its own, she knew it would be in good hands.

Her problem was that the six-shooter was mostly complete... and she wouldn't be meeting with that client for another two weeks. The encyclopedia's client would be here in *five minutes*, and the damn thing still wouldn't turn on after being fully assembled. It would turn on when its components were split, it would turn on any time it was outside its chassis, but the second she put all the components inside of its enclosure it ceased to function. For just a moment, Ellie thinks that there might be a reason companies use robot farms to make these things.

Well, that's what her meeting today is for, actually. Telling that client, who has been nothing but kind to her, who has given the shirt off of his back for her, that she's a fucking idiot who can't even keep her own self on track, and that she needs more time even though it's something he really needs and could quite literally save his life. Of course, she knows that objectively she's *not* an idiot, but she doesn't have any other reason why something so simple would be giving her so much trouble. Not to mention that it's just... embarrassing to have your own mechanics shop, where you accept all kinds of build orders, but struggle with such a simple issue.

She's busy trying not to spiral again while thinking about all of this when the front doorbell buzzes.

The buzzer is at the shop's entrance, but everyone in the area knows that you don't touch it unless you know Ellie. That includes this client, in spite of Ellie's current panic. It's for a similar reason that she starts making her way to the shop, intent to let him in even though she won't *actually* be open for another hour.

The front room, the shop itself, is pretty unassuming. It's mostly just a waiting area, with a couple TVs and a cashier's desk. The only thing she really does here is charge people money for the stuff they want. It's a simple setup.

The buzzer goes off again.

Alright, guess it's time for work.

Ellie opens the front door. Three figures greet her.

One is who she was expecting. A lean, fit older man with spiky white hair. He often wore sunglasses. More often than not, he dresses casually, but Ellie's seen him in a suit before and he definitely rocks it quite well. She'd never tell him that, though.

The other two people, however, aren't who she was expecting to see at all. One of those two is a woman that Ellie has only seen a few times in her life. She's slightly shorter than Ellie herself, with shining blonde hair, bright blue eyes, and crystal clear skin. She matches the man's casual vibe quite well, with an oversized t-shirt and blue jeans being the perfect look for her. Really, she looked gorgeous. Again, Ellie simply had to be objective.

But the thing is, Ellie found this woman absolutely **terrifying**. Genuinely, being in the same room with the blond-haired woman ignited some sort of primal fear within the teenage mechanic. To Ellie, the worst part was that she couldn't explain why, and she was normally *really* good at explaining things. The woman was incredibly kind, an attentive listener, emotionally intelligent, and always helpful. She was, in every way Ellie could think of, a saint. But, Ellie had also spent most of her childhood watching how quickly "saints" could become enthralled with the sight of others in pain. How deeply "saints" could fall in love with the rush of taking another life.

And somehow, she feels that the woman smiling at her face, holding hands with a young girl that couldn't be any older than eight herself, is capable of that. Maybe she was just scared of people that were overly nice. Regardless, this woman, her husband, and this girl are standing in Ellie's doorway, and unlike her other clients they were the closest thing the young mechanic would ever have to proper visitors. So, she greets them, the same way she always does.

"You know, you could show up late for a change. That way I'd get to sleep in for once."

The white-haired man grins, "Seems like you got enough sleep to me."

"Besides, El," his wife chimes in, "you told me you always wake up before your alarm. I bet you took your sweet time getting ready this morning."

Dead to rights. Ellie expected as such, though.

After she escaped the fire at the orphanage, she was found purely due to happenstance by the young couple standing in her shop right now. Jack and Kaitlin Noel, a couple that was rather... infamous in the current year. Despite the latter's "serial-killer-in-the-making" vibes, they *did* have a proven track record of being incredible people. Combined, they were a key component in easing post-New Genesis tensions, and their efforts saw to it that The Last War would be ended with a peace treaty and not the destruction of the human race.

Mass destruction definitely wasn't what the riftborn wanted; such was clear after only one year of war. Riftborn, the term itself a collective for all of the new species that arrived after the beginning of New Genesis—everything from elves and druids to dragons and vampires—had access to magic. In that vein, humanity was so thoroughly outclassed that human extinction would have been little more than a mere *side effect*. Naturally, those seeking to profit off of wars in the new world, those seeking to lay the foundation for new empires, hated the idea of a peace treaty with an adversary so strong that peace was welcomed with open arms. But, all it took to convince them was a gentle reminder that, if they had their way, they would have no dominion, as humanity would be extinct.

The demons quickly filling up uninhabited areas likely helped the negotiations a bit.

An unintended consequence from filling the planet with more Anima—life energy—than it could withstand was that the corrupted beasts, fiends, daemon lords, and everything in between rapidly increased in number. Out of seemingly nowhere, it was ill advised to travel between mega-cities at night. Districts and wards were risky enough with border bandits waiting at every entrance and exit, but all mega-cities closed their gates at sundown. Either you were safe, or you were food. Maybe worse. No one really knew.

So, both humans and riftborn agreed on a stopgap measure: demon hunting. It wasn't perfect, as plenty of demons understood human language and were capable of reasoning and seemingly even emotion, but it was more than enough to get humans to call a truce in order to deal with a common threat. Ellie wasn't sure how to feel about that. On one hand, they were right; demons *were* a threat. They made life itself unsafe for many people, just by existing. On the other hand, it had become apparent that "demons" might be more than just demons at all—in fact they were varied amongst themselves, with some being almost human in nature and form. That was where Kaitlin stepped in, supposedly. Jack hadn't told Ellie the whole deal, but apparently Kaitlin was some weird human/demon hybrid of sorts (which, in hindsight, probably explains the whole 'primal fear' thing Ellie had going on). She was definitely an esper, but she was enough of a demon to personally be the face of change, with the end result being the modern approach to demon hunting.

Coincidentally, this was the part that Ellie ended up being good at.

In order to hunt demons, you needed two things: an agency to set up contracts or negotiate pay, and the necessary equipment to get the job done. Jack and Kaitlin helped her get back on her feet, and in turn she runs an agency for them to hunt demons and earn a living wage. Generally, an agency will take a cut of the payout from a contract, and the Noels made it clear they expected as such. Ellie makes it a point not to take a cut of their profits though, because they're the reason she even has a shop in the first place. She owes them that much.

Which makes her feel *really* bad about the whole encyclopedia thing.

"So, Jack, about your commission..."

"Let me guess, you need more time?" He doesn't even let her start. He seems rather upbeat about it, but there's a twinge of exasperation.

Great.

The mechanic instantly snaps her jaw shut on reflex, trying to ignore the burning at the corners of her eyes. She feels childish *and* incompetent, which *really* isn't helping her considering she already felt like shit because of that dream.

Kaitlin lets go of the child's hand to punch Jack on the shoulder, rather hard, "Don't be rude! You're the one that asked a weapons expert to build a *tablet* from scratch."

Jack just turns to look at her and pouts, rubbing his shoulder in pain. Serves him right.

"Yeah, but I still should be able to figure it out. I just can't get it to turn on when it's fully assembled," Ellie interjects, without even considering her own point of view. She makes a real effort to slam the brakes mentally; any more than this and she'll end up *over*explaining things, which will just frustrate her again. Or probably worse, she *did* have a rather rough morning.

It's during that train of thought, that Ellie realizes the girl Kaitlin was standing next to a minute ago has completely disappeared from sight.

"Is it true that you're a genius?" a small voice asks from Ellie's left side, causing the mechanic to jump damn near out of her skin.

The culprit was, naturally, the girl. Probably Jack and Kaitlin's daughter.

"Hellooooo~, are you deaf?" the girl asked again.

Definitely Jack's daughter at the very least, that's for sure.

Ellie kneels down slightly, so that she's eye level with the kid, "A lot of people say I'm super smart. I'm definitely not deaf, though."

She feels... sluggish. On a normal day, she definitely would have heard the little girl make her way over at the very least. For a brief second, she considers that maybe her own heightened senses were starting to fail her. It had been quite some time since they had any use, so maybe they were starting to fade, like all skills do after going unused.

Unless...

"Hey, Kate," Ellie turns her attention back towards the couple, who had started their own small round of bickering over Jack's response to Ellie's bad news. Both of them stop talking instantly, and Kaitlin nods for Ellie to continue.

"Has she manifested yet? Or whatever you call it with psychic abilities."

Kaitlin nods again, "About a year ago. She's a fast one, unfortunately."

An eight year old with some form of super-speed. Being a parent must be tough.

The couple were both espers, which meant the girl was *definitely* an esper. It was genetic, simply put.

Ever since riftborn crossed over into the world, humans had gained access to their own unique type of "magic." With time, this "human magic" was eventually understood to be psychic abilities, with 'espers' being the coined term for people that can use them. The bodies of espers are similar to normal humans, just that they are able to convert the bio-electricity produced by the central nervous system into energy for their "magic." Unless you were like Ellie, where all of that went to her brain instead—heightening her senses, cranking up the processing speed, and giving her a near limitless capacity for memorization.

Hold on, rewind. A lot.

Jack and Kaitlin have a *child*?

Ellie snaps her head back down at the kid, who has now begun poking around with the buttons on the cash register. She looks back at Jack and Kaitlin again. This kid looks *nothing* like either of them, with scruffy black hair, an incredibly cute button nose, and bright blue eyes that looked at every single thing in the room like she was seeing it for the first time. Even though she was easily excited, the kid was observant and spoke clearly. She definitely had Jack's natural rudeness, for sure.

Nevermind, between the giant blue eyes and piss poor manners, she definitely saw it. But—

"Isn't this kid kind of old? You guys are a pretty young couple."

Jack blushes. Kaitlin just laughs, "We *did* start a little early. We had her in our mid-twenties, and now we're coming up on the mid-thirties. Time just sorta flies when you've got one of these."

"I've known you guys for two years, why am I just now finding out you have an eight-year-old?" Ellie squints at her so-called "friend", as menacingly as she can.

Out of nowhere, the girl runs over to grab the side of Ellie's shirt, jumping up and down excitedly, "It's my birthday! How did you know I turned eight?!"

Ellie shrugs, "You already heard, I'm a genius."

The look in the girl's eyes genuinely makes Ellie's heart twist a little. She's truly amazed, as if Ellie had brought down the moon for a party trick.

"My mom was right, you *are* super cool."

Ellie's heart twists even tighter.

"So, what's your name anyways, speedy?" She hates the way she sounds, but she can't deny that she's enthralled.

"My name's not Speedy! It's Chase! You didn't know that?"

"I'm a genius, not a mind reader."

"I bet you could read minds if you wanted to. My dad said you could do all sorts of stuff!"

Ellie looks at the girl's parents, confused, "What the hell are you telling this kid, anyways?"

Both shrug, but Jack's got a wry smile on his face as he replies, "Just the usual. 'Your mom and I know a genius mechanic that's secretly an alien. She crash landed on a ship that she built, she can see the future, and she can read minds.'"

Kaitlin stifles a laugh. Ellie wants to be annoyed at this so badly, but she has to admit she also thinks it's a little funny to be so upfront about lying to kids. So, she decides to respond in kind.

Turning to Chase again, she knelt down to whisper in the young girl's ear. Just loud enough that her parents could hear, "I just had another vision. Your dad is gonna pay me triple for his project, because he's super rich."

Kaitlin cackles. Jack stares at the two girls, blankly, "I will not be doing that."

"Are you sure?" Ellie puts on the widest smirk she can muster, "Apparently, I can see the future, and I've got a big payout coming."

"Ellie, I'm already paying you double your normal rate for this."

"And now it's gonna be triple!"

He glares. Jack hates money talk, so much. He hated it when he was involved with politics years ago, and he hates it when dealing with Ellie now. His entire reason for paying Ellie double was because he got so tired of negotiating a per-hour rate that he told Kaitlin, "I don't care, pay her whatever" and stormed out. Not out of frustration at any one person, mind you. He just hated talking about money that much. He was always one that preferred actions over anything else, and to him pay negotiations were just there to make people "feel important".

Even now, he's starting to hit his limit. Ellie thinks she's got him, until he looks at the mechanic, at his daughter, then at the mechanic again. His eye twinkles just for a moment.

Oh no.

"Well, since you want triple... Brian's been stacked with work lately, and we need a second babysitter."

Motherfucker. Brian is Kaitlin's older brother. He was in on it too?

"Wait, I'm the last person to find out you had a kid this old?"

Kaitlin looks surprised that Ellie even cares about this, "Of course you are! We weren't sure what your whole deal was, so naturally we had to be sure it was safe to bring Chase around before doing so. We *did* find you covered in blood and soot on the side of the road, after all."

It's true. After Ellie managed to escape the orphanage fire, she had collapsed on the side of the road right outside of New Haven. The gates had been closed for roughly two hours, but somehow Jack and Kaitlin were able to get in. Honestly, it was completely fair that they waited until Ellie's shop had been going for a couple years before bringing Chase. They wanted to make sure Ellie's house was a safe enough environment for their kid to be around. They wanted to make sure *Ellie* was a safe enough *person* for their kid to be around. None of this was shocking or unexpected.

Well, maybe unexpected. And a little shocking. But still, it's reasonable.

Ellie wants to protest, but she knows that Kaitlin was correct to pick the safer route. Even if she *is* pretty jealous. So, she opts to move on.

"So, what. When do you want me babysitting?"

"That depends on when your next job for us is."

Fuck, right. Agency stuff. Ellie really *is* out of it today.

"I have a couple offers, but I wanna make sure your schedules are still open. Is that what the babysitting is for?"

Jack nods, Kaitlin keeps talking, "My brother has been doing a great job with her, but he's had to take a few contracts on top of his day job to make ends meet recently. He can't babysit on call like he used to, so we were hoping that you'd be willing to do it on days he can't. You can dock our pay, if you want."

Ellie's not gonna do that. The entire reason she's even in a position to dock *anyone's* pay is because of those two. She would watch the kid free of charge, if she had to. She tells them as such, which *clearly* lifts a massive weight off of the couple's shoulders. Jack doesn't even seem to care about the encyclopedia anymore; when Ellie asks him about it he just replies, "Take your time, I've got all the recipes I need up here," and taps his temple.

She wants to be doubtful, but she also knows he's not lying; for most things he really *doesn't* need that encyclopedia.

Jack has the ability to turn the energy generated by an esper's body—ESP—into inanimate objects, and permanently store them for later usage. In order to do this, he needs to be able to maintain the mental image of the object, along with all of the materials it's composed of. Hence, the encyclopedia he was having Ellie build; it would be a way for him to quick reference the "building blocks" of large or complex items and tools, in order to prevent their quality from degrading over time. It even works with food and drinks, though according to Jack, "it's not a good idea, you forget about containers a single time and it's all over."

Ellie can't shake the feeling of *failure*. She was given a job that she failed to do, and that failure could be deadly for a customer. Let alone a customer that the young mechanic was *indebted* to. Even if he says it's not necessary, she knows there are all sorts of situations where it could be useful. If he takes damage to the head, he wouldn't be able to remember his recipes as quickly, or worse—he could be incapacitated, causing his creations to fade outright. He might be in a position where he has to make and maintain multiple mental images at once. He could be in *danger*, and—

She yanks herself out of her funk. It's still work time, she can mope over this later.

"So, I've got two offers for you. For the first: there's a nest of wyverns building up on the border of Olympia. Baby wyverns are only rated 'B-class', so individually they're not worth a lot. However, this contractor is offering an extra two thousand *per each centimeter of nest removed*."

While not *demons* necessarily, wyverns were still a threat that needed immediate attention. They build their nests in a similar fashion to that of wasps; a queen personally builds a structure from trash fibers collected and then melted together by their naturally produced magma. As the structure grows in size, more "worker" wyverns get involved in its production, causing it to grow from a small shelter from the elements to a large colony where more are bred. Naturally, getting ahead of a large colony of tiny flying dragons that have magma for excrement was a *big* deal. Baby wyverns were only considered B-class because magma doesn't develop in their bodies until they mature, that wasn't the weird part. The weird part was that the commission specified the nest *removal* and not exterminating the invasive species living within it.

Kaitlin rubs her chin, deep in thought. Ellie's glad to know this sounds fishy to her, too, "So, they don't even care about whether or not we kill them... but they're willing to pay for the nest to be removed. In other words—"

"They don't *want* the wyverns to be exterminated," Jack finishes her sentence. "But, why would they want to keep wyverns around?"

"Don't wyverns poop lava? Maybe they need it?" Chase speaks up from Ellie's side, again. The girl had been distracted by a ratcheting screwdriver Ellie left out on a countertop in her shop, the rapid clicking with each individual turn of the handle providing ample entertainment for an eight-year-old. No one realized she was even paying attention to the conversation.

But... honestly, she might be onto something.

Ignoring the fact that the kid got 'magma' mixed up with 'lava' (they're basically the same thing and magma "poop" would just become lava anyways), Ellie simply responds, "Good answer!" while ruffling her hair. Chase turns and looks up at the mechanic, unable to stop a goofy grin from spreading.

"Does this mean I'm a genius now?"

Ellie grins back at her, "Maybe, maybe not. Where'd you learn about wyverns anyways?"

"At school! We learned all about dragons and wyverns yesterday!"

Right.

School.

Chase was a normal kid that went to a normal school. She met kids her age, ate fresh food for breakfast and lunch, learned new and fun things in class, and went home with her parents at the end of each day. Classes weren't gated based on arbitrary factors, and she couldn't be locked in a pitch black room without windows for talking out of turn or failing tests that teachers think she should have passed. She never had to fight older kids for a seat at the dinner table, she was never berated by teachers for mistakes typical of kids her age, and she never had to lay awake at night wondering if her parents knew where she was or if she was okay. If she had parents at all.

For just a brief second, Ellie wonders how many of the kids at her orphanage were kids like this before they ended up there. She doesn't have any sort of formal education herself, so she never really gets to experience how much of a *difference* an environment like school makes. Seeing it now, the idea of going from that kind of environment to life at the orphanage is unfathomable to her. It makes her deeply, profoundly sad that she lived at a place that thrived on taking that stability, joy, and comfort away from kids just like Chase.

It's official, Ellie knows this is gonna be a bad day for sure. She's probably gonna have to cancel her appointments and close the shop for the day after this.

"Well, let's not waste time worrying about it. Do you want details on the second offer?" Ellie drags herself back to reality, desperate to get through this.

As if a predator catching a slight hint of blood in the air, Kaitlin's eyes focus on Ellie. The mechanic can *feel* the pressure emanating from her stare, those unrealistically radiant blue eyes piercing through her very soul. Far from an *air* of superiority, it was as if Kaitlin was the very essence of it. And she herself was none the wiser; Kaitlin's "scanning" was little more than the kind of cursory glance you'd give a friend—one you knew was struggling with something massive, but would never tell you the truth.

But still. Something about her gaze made Ellie shiver. It felt like she was being studied by—

Kaitlin clapped once, closing her eyes and smiling, "I think we'll pass for now. If the one you led with was sketchy, I doubt the next one will be much better. Unless you feel up to babysitting today?"

The combination of her gestures and tone of voice were the signal; business matters are done and over with. The pressure in the room quickly begins to dissipate, though Ellie doubts anyone felt it but her. She looks down to her left side to see Chase still there behind the counter, her attention now focused on the various screws and charging cables laid out for people to buy last minute while picking up their orders. The thought of having the little runt around sometimes makes her feel a little bit better. She knows better than to expect *every* interaction involving children to be a good one, but Chase seemed like a genuinely smart, upbeat, and energetic kid. At the very least, it would be a lot of fun.

With business out of the way, Kaitlin steps up to the counter, leaning over it to whisper in Ellie's ear, "Are you okay? You looked a little pale when we came in."

Ellie laughs. It feels hollow, so obviously forced she has to stop herself from wincing in embarrassment. "I'm fine, I just didn't get a lot of sleep last night."

It's a blatant lie. It's *such* a lie she feels stupid for even saying it, because she knows that Kaitlin *knows* she's lying. The look she gives her afterwards says as such.

But just like every time Ellie ever lies to her about anything, she just steps back and says, "Okay, call me if you need anything."

It kills her inside.

After Jack, Kaitlin, and Chase leave, she goes back upstairs. She leaves the lights off, crawls into her bed, and closes her eyes.

She lets the torrent that's been ripping through her mind since seven in the morning wash over her. There's an odd comfort in the familiarity of the negative emotions flooding her mind and body, as though she was being swallowed whole. Waves of grief, anger, and everything about the orphanage in between flood her senses, her mental blockades and coping mechanisms being little more than wooden boards trying to stop the rush of water from a broken dam. She feels the strain from her heart rip through every cell of her being, and chokes on the air she breathes as if the individual atoms of oxygen entering her lungs were razor sharp—as though the air itself was cursing her for abandoning her home. She doesn't long for those days, but as she sinks under the feeling of painful, crushing water she feels that she deserves nothing more than to be there.

To be another seed planted at The Garden.

At the only place she could ever truly call home.

Everything comes back all at once, as if she was back there once again. She remembers the front halls, the layout shifting to keep students from even seeing the doors and windows to the outside. She remembers the finality of which she was told that she would be living there for ten years—until she was eighteen, that her home with her father and stepmother with warm meals and quiet time for her to read endlessly was gone forever. She remembers the first morning mealtime, where she realized seats in the cafeteria were limited in an effort to force the children to compete with each other. She remembers *foolishly* asking another kid for a piece of bread, just to be yelled at by the teachers for daring to be late to breakfast. They forced her to sit in a corner on the opposite side of the room and watch the other kids eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner for three days as a punishment. At the time she wasn't upset, she even thought it was fair—she *should* have been faster.

She remembers gym classes with obstacle courses, martial arts practice with weapons training, team sports, tactics training with airsoft weapons and paintball guns, speech classes, advanced math and science, and language courses. When she was eight, she had no idea how these skills could ever be used. Now, she understands exactly why, and her shop lets her escape from those implications.

Escape.

That's all she wanted when she was at The Garden. Escape, by any means. When it came by fire, by storm, she took her opportunity. She ran through the sprawling, shifting labyrinth as it crumbled around her, its very foundation thoroughly ravaged by fire and artillery. She ran past comrades, friends, enemies, and hostiles alike. Even now, she can see their bodies laid motionless, strewn about every floor of the twelve story building as flames relentlessly tore through flesh, fusing melted skin and musculature to the remains of clothing and body armor. Even now, she can recall some of the names and faces of her friends from before they died. And they died for *what*, exactly?

A few loose ends weren't tied up after a failed experiment, and the price was paid in full via a couple thousand kids. Kids whose parents never found out what truly happened to them, if they even had parents at all.

She was supposed to be one of them.

It's just a fact; her name and room number were on that spreadsheet, complete with a cell next to her name with "deceased (accident)" written in it, highlighted red just like the other 1800. She **saw** it. All she can do is lay in the dark and think about that, over and over. She replays the memory of Chase being so fucking *excited* about everything in her shop, playing with every item she could get her grubby little hands on as though they were toys. She *knows* so many of those kids at The Garden were just like Chase, excited to be a part of the *world*. And they were thrown in a place that viewed them as little more than numbers on a spreadsheet, to be discarded out of convenience as soon as the jig was up.

The only one that didn't burn to ash with the building itself was her, and that fact makes her feel sick.

--

Over the next four years, Ellie found that things *do* get easier.

Her memories of The Garden were finally solidifying themselves as just that: memories.

Most days were good days.

The days that weren't are better than before, at least. It's been quite some time since she had a flashback *or* a meltdown; ergo, she couldn't complain about progress.

The shop's going real well. She's gained a bit of a reputation as the best mechanic and weapons manufacturer in New Haven, something she uses to her benefit to get her sales numbers up. Jack and Kaitlin continue to be regulars, and they still pay well, but now she has frequent enough clientele with a good enough reputation that she can ask to be paid in advance—and that's more than enough to live off of on its own.

Her babysitting gig turned into... something else entirely. The shop quickly became Chase's favorite spot to hang out, coming over most days even if her parents didn't need anyone to watch her. Chase herself was in junior high now, so she was much more vocal about wanting to have space from her parents than before, complete with the typical nasty attitude all pre-teens pick up around this age. Even still, her usual bounciness, her upbeat nature, her *energy*, all remained. She had developed a bit of a hair-trigger temper and one *hell* of a foul mouth, but she was a good kid and she quickly became a fan favorite of customers at the shop, who would ask Ellie where her "little helper" was if she wasn't around. (Sometimes, Chase *would* be around, resulting in a shout of "I'm not little, and I'm *not* helping!" from wherever she was.)

Soon, that just became a part of her routine. After school every day, Chase would take the monorail to the stop closest to Ellie's workshop, use a spare key Ellie had provided her after only a week to go in through the side door, and either go upstairs into the apartment or waltz into the shop itself to bug Ellie, depending on whether or not she had homework.

Ellie didn't care, it was actually quite nice. She loved having the extra company.

Today was a day just like that. A normal, quiet day. The last customers were gone, and the shop was empty. Yet, Ellie hadn't heard from anyone in nearly two weeks. Chase hasn't come to the shop, Jack and Kaitlin haven't called or answered her phone calls, and the lack of contact was making Ellie anxious.

Usually she hears from *someone*. Something's not right.

And then she did get that phone call.

Interlude: Thunderclap

Like all things, peace never lasts.

When Kaitlin called Ellie, the mechanic was expecting to play catch up to some degree. She was expecting to hear some made-up scenario that would perfectly explain why she hasn't heard from anyone in so long. As soon as the mechanic's phone rang, she could feel the vibes emanating from the other end somehow. It set her stomach on fire with anxiety, before she could even answer it. And when she did...

"Sorry it's been so long," Kaitlin started. She sounds tired. "A couple weeks ago, Jack..."

The sentence trailed off, but Ellie somehow knows exactly what she's trying to say.

Killed. He was killed.

Ellie knew that tone of voice far too well; it brought back some awful core memories of The Garden. Delivering the news of someone's passing is difficult, even more so when it's pertaining to someone you care about. Even just saying that they were dead is difficult, almost as if saying the word "death" is enough to make it real. That's why they have people whose entire job is to go tell the family: it's hard on the person who lost someone, and it's hard on the person who has to deliver the news.

Ellie couldn't imagine playing both roles. She speaks up, if nothing else to stop Kaitlin from crying on the other end, "You don't need to explain things if you don't want to, I got the gist. How are you holding up?"

A heavy, shuddering sigh. Then silence for a while, "Thanks. I don't know."

"Do you need anything?"

"I don't know."

In any other situation, she'd crack a joke, something to lighten the tension. Kaitlin was *such* a strong presence that the idea of her being crushed by any loss seemed unreal. This is a woman who wasn't afraid of *anyone* or *anything*, who was just as open to confrontation as she was de-escalation, who dreamt of peace but was well aware of the cost. She was enigmatic, calculated, quick to act, and pragmatic. It wasn't like she had any qualms about her and her husband's career choice, nor about their political work; their activism created plenty of enemies, and hunting demons *was* dangerous, extremely so. Their chosen lifestyle was so dangerous, however, that Ellie simply assumed that Kaitlin expected the worst case scenario, and would feel nothing at all if it were to happen. Hell, Kaitlin herself was *barely* human, her mortality and emotions seemingly divorced from her very nature as a human/demon hybrid. How could she even be surprised if one of them dies early? Isn't this the life *you two* chose?

Yet... she's listening to it. She hears that medium-pitched voice, normally filled with endless bravado, quiver and waver, her answers hollow and automatic. It was like talking to a ghost that had long since forgotten how to communicate.

Another moment of silence. Ellie looked at the time; it was eleven-thirty. Chase was probably in school right about—

Oh my god.

It was as if she had gotten hit by a bullet train at max speed. The mechanic felt her brain do a somersault within her skull. The spinning anxiety in her stomach sped up into a whirlwind, threatening to vacate its contents if she wasn't careful. She hadn't even *thought* about Chase at first, but the second the girl's name entered her mind she couldn't get the thought out of her head. She couldn't even begin to imagine how the kid was handling any of it.

"How's Chase?" She hoped that the wavering in her voice wasn't audible.

If it was, Kaitlin paid it no mind, "She's... okay. I think. She handled the news about as well as she could have, but..."

Silence. But *what?*

Ellie wants to ask, but the words die in her throat. She can remember the last time Chase was at the shop, two weeks ago. The image of the pre-teen sitting on countertops after having been told for the fourteenth time "don't sit there, it's not a butt-rest" flashed in her mind, the girl in her memories not even worried about following rules in Ellie's workshop anymore. She could remember the conversation they were having that day, with Chase excited for her parents to come see her play at her first basketball game, the girl rambling on-and-on about how much she loved to watch and play the sport with her dad. In fact, she talked about her dad all the time; a true "daddy's girl" in the traditional sense, more excited and energetic on the days that she knew her father would be there to take her home.

Ellie tries not to think about any of this, desperately so. But she can't.

She's still reeling from everything when Kaitlin asks, "Do you think you can have Chase at your shop more?"

"Kate, I can do that but I'm not sure if-"

"Please, Ellie. I need to take on extra work to cover the house payment. I just can't be there with her often, and I don't want Chase to be at the house by herself."

It was a reasonable ask. That should have been good enough for her. But in the back of Ellie's mind, she just doesn't want to. She *loves* Chase as if the two were related themselves, but she wants to say no. Inherently she knows why, but realistically, she could never say it out loud.

So instead, she just says, "Okay. Have her come over whenever."

--

The next day, things were back to their usual routine. Sort of.

Chase would come over after school most days, and she would let herself into the apartment just fine. That part was normal. What wasn't normal was that Chase stopped coming into the shop entirely. Whenever she came over, she would simply hang out upstairs in the apartment.

Ellie would go upstairs in between client appointments to check on the girl, and she would be fine. Not great, not sad, just... *fine*. If Ellie talked to her about anything, she would respond at the very least. But... Ellie remembered literally two weeks ago, when Chase had so much energy that she was bouncing off the walls. She was so talkative she'd get involved in Ellie's appointments, much to the mechanic's chagrin. The way she was acting sitting in Ellie's apartment now was as if the girl from before had simply run out of batteries. A children's toy with its functions slowing down.

If she didn't know any better, she would say that the girl she had known for the past four years was switched out with a doppelgänger. She had the same eyes, the same voice, and when she smiled she looked the same, but she hardly laughed, and her voice wasn't nearly as loud. She *listened* when she was told not to do things, and she was far from energetic. But still, Ellie *really* tried to ignore it, and she managed well for about a week. Until the mention of her mom coming to pick her up from the workshop made the poor girl cry just now.

Like, *really* cry.

And then when Ellie tried to ask why she was upset, all she got in response was an impossibly small, "I don't want to go home," in between sobs.

That was when the mechanic realized something was truly wrong with this picture. The girl's home was always her safe place, which meant that the phrase 'I don't want to go home' carried *weight* behind it. Chase was a daddy's girl, sure, but she *loved* her mom; if she didn't want to be at home with her, it was bad news.

So, Ellie sits down in front of her—for once, thankful for the square shape of her living room couch—and asks her why.

Chase looks at her. Her mother's blue eyes shone brightly, even in the dim lighting of the room. They had that same piercing gaze, that intensity that made Ellie feel as though her very being was unraveled. It feels like she stays quiet as a mouse for a century, before finally asking, "Will you tell my mom?"

"Not if you don't want me to."

Chase looks down, swallowing. Then she looks up, studying the ceiling, deliberately avoiding Ellie's gaze.

She's not talking again.

Ellie just waits, doing her best to ignore the frantic beating in her own chest.

After what feels like a century, Chase finally speaks, "It's my fault Dad died. I think Mom knows, and every time I talk to her it feels like she... I don't know."

"What do you mean it was your fault?" It might be insensitive, but... she just doesn't know anything about this. Part of her is frustrated with Kaitlin; she just wishes she knew more about this.

Chase continues, seemingly unbothered by the questioning, "The day Dad died... we were out, the two of us. Over at the mall that's a couple hours from here, in the Kronos district. A man wearing a creepy mask started talking to me, and asked me if I had heard about the sound of... something? I told him to get away from me, but when I turned around my dad was gone."

Her voice is starting to get thick, and she's shaking, but she soldiers on. Ellie scoots over to her side of the couch, wrapping an arm around her. Chase accepts the invitation, leaning into her shoulder while continuing to speak.

"For a second I thought I was lost and got scared, but then I realized he was just in the crowd ahead of me, so I called for him," She pauses, taking a shuddering breath, "When he saw me, he like, *freaked out* and ran towards me, but then a different guy tackled him, and—"

A wave of sobs racks her body, and Ellie considers stopping her from saying anything else. All she's doing is forcing the girl to relive something truly awful. She can look this up on her own time. In fact, this seems like it would be all over the media; Jack Noel, a well known riftborn activist, murdered in public, in broad daylight, *at a shopping mall*? There was no way this wasn't in the news.

Yet this happened, seemingly, two weeks ago. And it definitely was not in the news, Ellie would know since she checks news reports every night. She listens to the radio while working on commissions. She knew of Jack and Kaitlin's efforts *because* she had a habit of listening to the radio so often, it was the only thing keeping her sane in The Garden.

All of this, the very *idea* that there could be foul play involved, makes Ellie feel nauseous.

Chase, continues, unaware of Ellie's thoughts, "I ran over to the guy trying to hurt my dad, and started hitting him. When my dad saw me trying to help, he pushed the guy out of the way to grab me and then—" She takes a deep, shaky breath, "There was blood *everywhere* and he fell on top of me and I couldn't move and he kept trying to tell me something but I couldn't tell what he was saying and then before I knew it he was dead."

And then she bursts into tears again.

Ellie wants to say something. She can think and process information *ten times faster* than the average human, yet in this moment watching a young girl that she cares so much about suffer through reliving the worst time of her life, she can think of nothing to say.

Chase keeps talking, clearly just needing to vent, "And you know what my fucking mom said to me? While I was covered in his blood, just after they took his body away? 'Why didn't you hide?' Like sure, I was thinking about hiding when my dad was getting attacked by *some guy*."

Ellie winces. That was definitely Kaitlin, all right. Pragmatic to a fault, even when her emotions should come first. She probably wasn't *intending* to trample all over the girl's feelings, but Ellie is pretty confident she saw Chase rattled but unharmed and simply turned to the most pressing issue. This was undoubtedly shocking to Chase, but to Ellie... it was about what you would expect from someone like Kaitlin. Ellie wants to tell Chase that, she wants to tell her that her mom wasn't trying to pin anything on her with that questioning.

But the words die in her throat again, while Chase keeps talking, "Ever since then I can *feel* my mom staring at me, even when she's not around. Just being in the house makes me feel like, like... I don't know. I let her down. If I had been smarter-"

"Chase, don't."

Ellie barely registers the fact that she had begun to speak, but she knows all too well what that rabbit hole leads to.

If I was just better at this.

If I was just a bit older.

If I was just a bit more capable.

And those might sound like good things, but the reality is that all you're saying was that the situation would have been different if it was someone else. And that might be true, but it also might not.

She tells Chase that. It's not perfect advice, and it's certainly not the careful words that she would have chosen in any other scenario, but in her mind she thinks that something carefully worded might be the last thing the girl needs right now. Immediately after saying that, she looks at the pre-teen to gauge her reaction. Chase simply looks down, studying her hands. She plays with the hem of her shirt absentmindedly, before speaking again.

"Do you think that my dad would have survived if I was someone else?"

Ellie... isn't sure, but she says "no," anyways. And it seems to help a little; Chase is still crying, but the heaving sobs have died down, replaced with quiet sniffles as the girl slowly runs out of objects to wipe her nose on. After what seems like an eternity of crying, she just looks at Ellie again, clearly trying to keep on keeping on now that she's grown tired of being the center of attention.

"Sorry... for, uh, all the bad news. I hope you've been okay."

It's like Ellie's looking in a mirror. She can't take it.

Her heart just can't take it.

She finally breaks.

This kid watched *father* get murdered two weeks ago. She had to endure the *awful* nightmare of witnessing the life leave his body *while physically trapped under him*, and she has the gall to put on a brave face and tell Ellie *sorry*?

It's not fair.

This, more than anything else, finally chips away at the armor she had put on. It hurts her so badly to see Chase, a kid she would have given the world to protect, wearing the same look that every kid at The Garden wore. The same look that *Ellie* saw in a mirror, every morning for eight years. The bright, blue, hopeful eyes that she could still see in her memory were hollow and dim in front of her. A small change that communicated just how deeply, how thoroughly those scars had settled in. She knew firsthand that scars like that never *truly* heal, never in the way you want them to.

And she *hates* the fact that Chase will bear scars like that for the rest of her life.

Ellie doesn't think she's *ever* cried like this, not even when she was abandoned. Not even when her *own* parents died. She's sobbing so loudly it hurts her throat, her nose running worse than it did the last time she had a fever. Her heart just... *hurts* so badly for this girl. She wraps her other arm around her, for no other reason than because after the conversation they've been having the distance between just feels... *wrong*.

At the mildest sign of affection, Chase stiffens just for a moment. She clearly wasn't expecting that by any means, but after another second she leans into the touch.

Ellie finally finds the words to say.

"I can't promise anything, because Lord knows I've never been good at upholding them. But I want you to know that I've *always* got your back, Chase. Do you understand me?"

She feels a forehead rest on her shoulder, "Are you sure?" its owner asks.

"Yeah. I'm sure."

--

Their routine kept up like that for a while. Chase would go to Ellie's workshop after school, Kaitlin would come by to take her home. Through junior high, and into high school, that was how the two split time for Chase. Ellie wondered where the girl's uncle was at sometimes; he and Kaitlin were quite close, with him being a big reason the two were able to escape their abusive home when they were younger.

But when she tried to ask Chase about it earlier, the teenager just frowned, shrugging.

"Mom said he's been struggling lately. Apparently after my aunt got sick he started having a hard time with things, but she won't give me details either."

In other words, a family affair. Not her business, though.

What *was* Ellie's business, however, was the woman with two-toned hair standing in her shop right now.

Her jet black hair went just past her shoulders, colored with a few streaks of blonde in the midst. She wore a black business suit with a matching trench coat, complete with a simple black tie and white dress shirt. Even though her slacks seemed to be designed for a nice, professional look, she wore black combat boots with plenty of scuff marks. Face wise, she was quite an attractive older woman, appearing to be in her mid-to-late thirties. She had dark brown eyes—well, one dark brown eye. The other was hidden by an old-fashioned eyepatch.

At first glance, you'd be forgiven for assuming she was a more... formal type. Maybe a businesswoman, or someone doing sales. Perhaps a representative from a large organization, seeking to buy equipment in bulk or looking for contracts more appropriate for small militias or PMCs. But Ellie knew her, and that made her presence in the shop *incredibly* shocking.

Because this was someone Ellie had met during her time at The Garden. Back when things were *different*.

Why did she know about this shop?

"Well, Eleanor," the woman started, "for someone with expertise in espionage, finding your shop was disappointingly easy. I was prepared to put a bounty out for you, you know."

Law enforcement was searching for her. Awesome.

"Lieutenant Mina Kurosawa. To what do I owe the pleasure?" Ellie's tone is clipped, professional but no less abrasive. She's not even trying for any of this, really, looking at this woman in her shop just gives her *really* bad vibes. Doesn't help that the mechanic hates her guts.

"That's *Chief* Mina Kurosawa, thank you," Chief Kurosawa begins walking around the shop, taking little parts off the shelves and inspecting them up close. "It's been a while since we've seen each other, how have you been?"

"I've been great, congrats on the promotion. Now, I don't know why the Chief of New Haven's Paranormal Investigations Unit is in my shop, but if you're here for police reasons I'm gonna need to see a warrant."

Kurosawa smiles wryly, pulling out a folded piece of paper from her jacket pocket. There's a sharp glint in her eye, which is *really* not a good sign when dealing with this woman in particular, "The Eleanor I know *never* would have tried to force my hand like this. Maybe I do have the wrong shop."

"Please, just call me Ellie."

The look in Chief Kurosawa's eyes softens, but the smile remains. "You've definitely grown up a bit, that's for sure."

She puts the paper away, but continues speaking.

"Look, I do have that warrant, but I'd rather not use it. You see, we've been trying to track down a particular weapons expert, and I was hoping you could help."

Ellie knows where this is going. Some jackass bought something off of her saying it was gonna be for a hunting job, either used it on civvies or resold it to a guy that used it on civvies, and the hammer is coming down.

The Chief says as such.

Some guy with a well made prosthetic arm had purchased a plasma gun modification with the intent to use it for a bank robbery, but when he actually *tried* the safety triggered and the device shut down. In the back of her mind, Ellie's actually quite pleased—the auto targeting system used in her weapons have several safety features that prevent it from being used against human targets. These can be bypassed, but you'd need to wipe the firmware from her devices and reinstall your own to do so. This, in turn, would also wipe the digital signature from it, cleansing Ellie's hands of the resulting mess.

Honestly, she hadn't assumed that anyone would be stupid enough to try and use it on people *without* those modifications. Not only did she warn buyers in advance, but these safety features were common amongst *all* licensed manufacturers. Which means... someone else likely bought her weapons and sold them on the black market. It's at this point she realizes she's grinding her teeth; it *really* gets on her fucking nerves when people steal from her, especially when they try to resell it. She's doing *well*, but not well enough to run a charity.

Chief Kurosawa stops talking after her initial explanation of the situation. She's looking at Ellie's face with a hard-to-read expression, and after a while of staring she finally starts talking again.

"So, here's two issues we're having," she puts up her index finger, "One: the person who made the weapons *has* to be brought in for questioning. These are pretty dangerous, and knowing they're being made by an unlicensed manufacturer is pretty bad."

Simply put, Ellie doesn't have a license to manufacture *or* sell weapons. No one in this district checked for one, Jack and Kate repeatedly said "it's all good, who cares," and while it was the first time anyone from Paranormal Investigations had been here, regular law enforcement comes through this area quite often. After years of running her shop without even a cursory visit from the cops, she had gotten complacent.

Maybe Chief Kurosawa had a point earlier; Ellie never used to let things like that slip.

Kurosawa continues, putting up a second finger, "Two: obviously, there's a black market situation here. Toppling the black market is essential, because as you know, modifying these weapons to remove the safety features that saved the day is not difficult."

Ellie nods in agreement. She's in the process of racking her brain as quickly as possible, hoping for a golden bullet to get her out of this situation that was *definitely* going to end with her going to fucking jail—

"So, here's my offer: you work for us as our 'interim weapons expert,' you help us topple the black market, and we just... *conveniently* forget about investigating that unlicensed manufacturer. Sound good?"

What.

"What?" Ellie was confused. Not only did this not make sense, this was *definitely* illegal.

Kurosawa grins, and that makes Ellie realize this crooked bitch of a cop hasn't changed one bit, "Oh, don't get me wrong, it's *absolutely* quid pro quo. But, you and I both know that you made these weapons, and you're also *definitely* the best shot we have at toppling the black market. I think your expertise in this field is *far* more important than whether or not we take down an unlicensed manufacturer. Besides, the security features *were* well implemented; a 0% casualty rate is rather impressive."

And, it'll give me time to get that license, in case you change your mind.

Kurosawa continues talking, "And... working with us will give you time to get a proper license. You know, in case I change my mind."

God, Ellie hates that woman.

But she can't deny... it's one hell of a deal. Especially right now, when so much more is riding on her ability to stay financially independent and out of trouble. If it had just been herself, like it was in the past, then maybe she'd be willing to fight it a bit. Kurosawa was definitely looking for a long term agreement here, and Ellie *really* did not find the idea of working with law enforcement "long term" exciting. At the same time, though, Chase is upstairs *right now*. The girl had practically crawled there after what she described as, "the worst conditioning day she has ever experienced." Last Ellie had seen, she was dead asleep on the couch, curled up like a small puppy underneath a frazzled, faded blanket that Chase claimed was actually the best one in the mechanic's closet.

When Chase told Ellie that, the latter considered giving the blanket to her outright for a second. The next thought in her head was, instead, *I should keep it, that way she'll always have something here she likes.*

She wasn't sure why that was her concern at the time, but looking at Chief Kurosawa in her shop right now, she's certain that her anxiety going above and beyond its usual levels is tied to something similar. The chief, well aware of the effect she's having, simply stands there in the middle of the shop. She's looking around at the various items decorating the walls, the small assortment of shelves taking up space in the center, and the waiting area just to the left of those shelves. Ellie hates the feeling of being studied, as though the chief is looking for any and all leverage.

She doesn't say anything. Neither woman does, until Kurosawa's eyes finally make their way over to the door at the back of the shop, leading to the stairs going up to the apartment. It's at this exact moment that Ellie realizes just *how* out of practice she is, just how used she's gotten to her easy lifestyle. Back at The Garden, she never faltered. She had a hard nosed personality, building up that mental and physical toughness through years of living in a waking nightmare. She knew exactly how to negotiate on the back foot, exactly how to keep someone with more leverage than you from using that leverage. She can recall the amount of times she went to bed in her room and woke up handcuffed to metal chairs with a sack over her head, mentally recounting her training to overcome the awful fear of not knowing where you are. This exact training is how she got away from Kurosawa the last time they ran into each other.

And yet, despite all of that training, despite knowing exactly how to beat Kurosawa at her own game... her head is empty. She can feel her heart beating out of her chest and the oxygen vacating her lungs at mach speed as she desperately tries to slow her breathing and heart rate. Nothing works.

She's scared. It's the first time in what feels like ten years, but she's *terrified*.

Kurosawa opens her mouth to speak, but Ellie already knows the question she's about to ask.

"Who're you hiding in your apartment?"

Ellie almost lies on reflex, but she knows the look on her face gave the game away a long time ago, so she's honest, "The daughter of a friend. I'm just babysitting."

"Is that the truth, Ellie?" Kurosawa sounds like she believes her, but the gaze in her eyes damn near makes Ellie piss her pants anyways. It's almost like Kurosawa is daring her, *Go on, escalate. Lie to me, and see what happens.*

Naturally, she can't. Ellie's mouth feels like it's full of sand, if she tried she'd look like an idiot. "It's the truth. I think you'd be able to tell if it wasn't."

The chief nods with an impish smile, "Of course. You've been shaking and sweating since I looked in that direction."

In the back of her mind, Ellie can only wonder why is she so *scared*? She had a history with Kurosawa, for sure, but it wasn't so malicious that she was afraid of the chief hurting her. In fact, really, the chief was always rather nice to her. Sure, Ellie hated her guts in return, but that's mostly a one-sided affair. There's not anything wrong with her knowing Chase is here, right? Why is it such a problem?

She thinks about it a little more, and then it clicks.

It's not the *exact* same, but... it's the way Chief Kurosawa appeared with no warning or notice. It's the way she started the conversation by *instantly* putting Ellie on the back foot: a snide remark causing her to momentarily doubt her skills, goading her into trying to call a bluff with the warrant, just so she could flash it and hammer home more insults towards her skillset. It's the way Kurosawa essentially cornered Ellie into working with the PIU, not even letting her establish her own terms. Right now, she has *no choice* but to go with the full extent of Chief Kurosawa's demands, because she *doesn't* have that license. Which means that the chief can get the shop raided, which will likely end with Ellie behind bars, and...

She shudders. **That's** why she's so afraid; every aspect of this entire meeting was deliberately laid out to keep her right where the chief wants her. It reminds her of the exact same interrogation techniques she was taught at The Garden. Each word and every action was deliberate, perfectly engineered to get the intended reaction. In her heart of hearts she knows this is a coincidence, but it's so similar that she finds herself unconsciously checking the insignia on the badge attached to Kurosawa's hip. Ellie finds herself gazing outside of the windows for any new or unrecognized vehicles, listening extra intently to the noise outside, to see if there's anyone waiting for a rendezvous. She wants to push her back flat against the wall so she can properly see the full space of the room and act accordingly, but the nanosecond her legs begin to move she snaps back into her body, remembering where she is.

Thankfully, it's only been a few seconds. When she gets in her head like that it feels a lot longer.

Ellie takes a deep breath, "I'll do it. When do you want me to start?"

Despite the tension that Ellie feels, it's *Chief Kurosawa* that visibly relaxes as soon as Ellie makes up her mind. The intensity in her stare, the entire "professional" vibe, her bossy, demanding demeanor, all of it completely melts away. *Color* even returns to her face; Ellie was so trapped in her own head, she hadn't even realized the woman confronting her was pale as a sheet.

When the chief speaks, her tone of voice is completely different, "Thank god. Genuinely, I was worried you'd fight me again."

Honestly, Ellie's confused, "Why were you worried about that? You beat my ass last time."

"Yeah, with backup! And, yknow, most people don't get *worse* in a fight when they get a few years under their belt; with how you fought as a kid, you should be in top condition!" In contrast to her professional demeanor earlier, Kurosawa's talking to her like the two were friends.

When Ellie first met Chief Kurosawa it was back during her days at The Garden. Back there, each student had their own jobs and responsibilities to adhere to. The system was based in favoritism, so the kids that were liked the best by The Garden's staff got the easiest jobs. Ellie spent most of the first two years there as a janitor, partially because she couldn't get herself to stop talking back. During her tenure as a janitor, she did such a good job that the staff genuinely thought someone had gotten fired when she *finally* got a job change her third year in. Her second job was "Dorm Manager", where she led a small security team in the girls' dorm that mainly existed to prevent runaways; she was rather good at that job too. In her fifth year, she was moved from Dorm Manager to "Field Operative."

When she asked what her responsibilities entailed, she was simply told, "Field Operative is the most important job you could have here."

Her time as a field operative is what blew the doors wide open for her. Field operatives at The Garden operated outside of the facility's day to day operations, acting as a separate organization. This was where all of the skills she had learned in the classes she took were expected to be used, as she carried out whatever her supervisors asked of her. One such task was to gather information on Olympia's council.

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Olympia is a separate mega-city, roughly six hours away from New Haven. Prior to the arrival of riftborn and the subsequent Last War, it was previously a province called "Arizona." Having been mostly rubble for close to a decade, it was quickly handed off to the riftborn for appeasement when they first arrived. When the Last War kicked off for real, it became a stronghold for the riftborn fighting for their place in the world they had been thrust into. During this process, families of human defectors began to set up their own lives within the borders of Olympia, with some joining their governing council. Ellie's assignment was to get information on said defectors, and she did a real good job up until the part where she had gotten access to a councilman's vacant penthouse.

There, she made a fatal flaw; she had failed to consider that a mega-city's councilman would have security directly provided by law enforcement, rather than a private company. As such, while he was away his security would be handled by the lieutenant of the mega-city's PIU chapter at the time: Mina Kurosawa.

Ellie blamed herself for this mistake when it first occurred, but in hindsight there was simply no reason anyone should have expected perfection to begin with. She was a fourteen-year-old doing espionage, yet her superiors wanted results over excuses, and were very thorough with their warning that if she were captured or arrested, she would *not* be rescued. So, as she stood in the councilman's home office, staring the lieutenant in the eyes—the woman had both back then—that was the consideration in her mind when Kurosawa revealed she knew Ellie's name. Granted, the girl was wearing an exosuit with full armor from the shoulders down, and a helmet that covered her face. The fact that this woman could tell it was Ellie *through the helmet* and the voice changer it used set off alarm bells in her head instantly.

The lieutenant continued speaking, not even waiting for Ellie to respond, "There was a missing person's report tied to a double homicide over in New Haven, you know. They found an adult couple in their own bed, stabbed to death, with their child missing. How much of that do you remember?"

Something about that made the field operative's blood run cold. She wasn't sure why; she knew her father and stepmother were long dead. She *was* there when it happened, and she *did* remember almost all of it, after all.

But still, "Why do *you* know that?"

The lieutenant paused. At that moment Ellie realized the woman seemed to have some form of heterochromia—her eyes seemed to glow in the darkness of the room, one eye a bright sea green, the other a light brown. Those eyes seemed to see right through the visor on her helmet, through Ellie's eyes, through the very foundation of Ellie's being, all the way to the very core of her soul. As though it was unraveling a piece of her, trying to see what was underneath the surface.

Then, as suddenly as she paused, the lieutenant was face to face with her. Ellie didn't see her move a single muscle, she just... *was* directly in front of her. When that happened, Ellie felt the familiar tingle that she felt on the surface of her skin whenever ESP was used in front of her, which answered *one* question she had... but... The *smell*.

For a moment, she remembered her "Alt. Lifeform Theory" class at The Garden. Being shown the different stages of Gehenna corruption on living beings, and the awful metallic smell that filled the room when an animal was on its last stages of Gehenna corruption, well beyond the safe levels. Without intervention, it would become a "corrupted beast," and at this stage intervention would be a merciful death. Corrupted beasts are seemingly aware of their forms, but unable to control their actions; students at The Garden were taught Gehenna acted similar to that of the cordyceps fungi, in the sense that its main method of spread is to infect living things, eventually gain control of its nervous system, and spread its "spores" via those living things.

This was all well and fine, but Ellie had never encountered a *person* that smelled like that. If *people* smelled like that...

"Are you a demon?" She sounded so small, but she couldn't help it. How in the hell else was she supposed to ask?

The lieutenant... didn't answer. She just looked at Ellie, those eyes glowing even brighter. "I should ask you the same thing. I've been getting that vibe from you ever since you walked in. You smell like you've been *swimming* in Gehenna somehow, which wouldn't make sense."

It felt like the girl had been shot. She smelled *like a demon? To a demon?* Her entire life she had to bear the unfair weight of that label being flung around before it had a meaning, she watched her mom die because her own father just couldn't let it go. She wanted him to be wrong, if nothing else because then it would validate that *feeling* she had, the feeling of being wronged her entire life. If she wasn't a demon, her dad was just acting crazy, and everything that happened afterwards was all his fault.

But, if she was...

While lost in thought, she *somehow* didn't notice the lieutenant disappear from view, put her in a chair, and then handcuff her to the chair. The part of Ellie's mind that wasn't reeling carefully noted this. A type of spatial displacement technique; likely teleporting of some kind.

The lieutenant sat in a chair directly in front of her, watching her reaction closely, before speaking.

"Based on what I'm seeing and smelling, your Gehenna corruption is... recent. It's advanced, somehow, but your physical symptoms show you've only contracted it within the past couple months."

"Physical symptoms?"

"If you can't tell, it's not something you need to worry about," Oh, great. Now is the time to be dismissive, apparently.

Part of Ellie was relieved that, apparently, she wasn't *born* a demon. But... how did she suddenly start to become one?

The lieutenant got up from her chair, walking towards Ellie slowly, deliberately staying within her view. She didn't appear to have an ulterior motive, but she reached for the helmet Ellie was wearing, pressing a small button on the underside of it. The air pressure escaped with a *hiss*, and then the helmet folded away, back into her armor set. Ellie let her do it, at this point she just wanted to know *what* in the hell was even going on.

But this time, when the lieutenant looked at Ellie and *actually* saw the girl's face, her confident and poised facial expression melted. Her bottom lip even trembled slightly, making Ellie wonder if she was about to cry.

When she spoke, her voice wavered slightly. "You're... *really* young. How old are you?"

Ellie wanted to lie, but the woman in front of her being so disarmed completely threw her off. So, she answered truthfully.

"I'm fourteen."

This time, the lieutenant reacted as though she were the one that had been shot, "But... the report said you should be an *adult* by now. Why are they sending a child to do espionage? You could have died, or *worse*."

Ellie didn't react to that. As shocking as it might sound to anyone who wasn't familiar with how The Garden worked, forging the ages of the kids on paper was a pretty standard practice. Based on Ellie's own estimate, roughly thirty percent of the kids at The Garden had missing person reports with an incorrect date of birth. When she asked Professor Lance why, he told her New Haven simply needed soldiers to lay down their lives for their home. It was crazy, but that was all you needed to get a bunch of teenagers to go all over the world and walk to their deaths. Besides, by now, she's had plenty of moments where she thought she was going to die. She's had plenty of moments where she *wanted* to, but couldn't. She started to say that, but the lieutenant didn't even wait for her response.

"I—Are you being forced to do this? I can help you if you need—"

~~She was~~, but this line of questioning had started to get on Ellie's nerves for some reason, "I don't need help, I'm good on my own."

"Respectfully, kid, I don't think you are." Lieutenant Kurosawa took a deep breath, "Look. I'm not saying you need to drop everything and come with me *right now*, but—"

Ellie didn't hear the end of that sentence; she could hear footsteps begin to pile up on the other side of the door. They were incredibly heavy, and there were a *lot* of them. They were spread across the hall, clearly unbothered by how loud they were. The sound told her that they're all wearing combat boots, most likely. After roughly six seconds of that, silence. The lieutenant's facial expression changed too; the pain and sadness welling up in her seemed to have been shut off entirely, that cold professional exterior returning.

Great. She'd been had.

The woman tried to regain control, telling Ellie, "Yes, there's a squad outside because they were on stand-by due to a break in, but—"

"But what, exactly? They're gonna let me go through the front door, after I broke into a councilman's home to steal personal information?"

The lieutenant didn't have an answer to that, so Ellie made the first move. She snapped her arms out of the handcuffs binding her to the chair, as though the cuffs themselves were made of cheap plastic. That move shocked the lieutenant, who instantly reached towards her back pocket for what Ellie can only assume is a weapon. It made sense, of course; Ellie did just snap titanium handcuffs with her bare hands.

But seeing the older woman react so... *defensively* still hurt. So, she opted to lay it on thick.

"I'm glad you care. It *really* makes my day. But, I think we're done with the therapy session; if I get arrested I'm not getting rescued, so I'd rather avoid that entirely."

The lieutenant's face softened again, "What are you—"

Before she could finish, Ellie's helmet had already automatically unfolded and came on over her head. She pulled her sidearm, a silver SIG Sauer 1911, from its holster on her right hip and fired a warning shot at the wall directly behind the lieutenant.

At that exact moment, all hell broke loose; the lieutenant's team burst through the door, the lieutenant desperately tried to get them to stand down, and all the while Ellie burst through the crowd blocking the doorway with a startling amount of speed *and* strength. The field operative sprinted throughout the hallways of the massive penthouse, doing her best to ignore the hairs standing up on the back of her neck and the tingle of ESP on her skin as bullets and... other objects whizzed by her ears. Thankfully, her speed on foot was enough of a determinant factor on its own, and she could easily build up enough momentum to jump down entire flights of stairs without stopping. Ellie wasn't a speedster with unlimited stamina by any means, but between the physical training she'd undergone and her exosuit helping to blur the lines, she was more than fast enough to create a good amount of distance between her and the cops behind her.

That presented a different issue though, because there would almost assuredly be more police on the lower floors by now. Naturally, it would be stupid to go towards the main entrance, but at the same time she was on one of the upper floors of a penthouse; she couldn't just jump out of a window on the fifth floor. The shock absorption in her suit was fantastic by modern standards, but that's still a far cry from being good enough to keep her going after jumping from a building eighty feet in the air with nothing to break her fall. Thankfully, the field operative remembered where she had parked her ride; there was a window directly above her car—technically a transport vehicle provided by The Garden, but it was *basically* a car—from what was likely the second floor of the building. That sealed the deal; thirty-two feet sounded *miles* better than eighty.

Maybe she'd plant a couple makeshift explosives in the stairwell, while she was at it. This house was fucking *massive*, and the fact that, ostensibly, one person lived here *only sometimes* kind of pissed her off. But, that thought was shoved out of her mind rather quickly. When she got to the second floor guest bedroom and saw the exact window that was positioned directly above her transportation, the lieutenant was already standing there, her hips cocked and arms folded.

"Look, kid, I know this looks bad, but—"

Ellie pulled out her pistol again. This time, she trained it directly on the lieutenant. This woman likely had some form of teleportation ability, which meant Ellie's shot had a pretty good chance of missing. But, the threat was enough to make anyone pause.

Sure enough, the lieutenant paused.

Ellie took her chance to talk, "I'm sure you're being genuine, I get it. But I really can't."

The lieutenant's face darkened. A new facial expression, one the field operative hadn't seen before, took over. "You're a fourteen-year-old espionage agent, a reported missing person from a mega-city six hours from here, that shows clear signs of an incredibly advanced, but somehow recent Gehenna corruption. Yet, you claim that the superiors that you 'work' for will not rescue you if captured, so your plan is likely to jump out of the second story of a penthouse and catch a ride back home."

That sounded about right. Ellie didn't budge or speak; she was done talking, anyways.

The lieutenant clearly got the hint, "Well, as both a member of law enforcement *and* an adult, I would be insane to let you do that. So, I won't."

"If you're planning on stopping me, it's gonna take a lot more than being bossy."

Lieutenant Kurosawa looked at her with that devilish grin for the first time, and said, "Oh, I know."

And then things got weird.

Fighting a person with teleporting for a main ability is a pretty interesting experience. There were a couple kids at The Garden with such abilities, and the general strategy was to condition them to teleport where you want them to. But Lieutenant Kurosawa was different; somehow, she could teleport herself, *or* other objects. So, when Ellie fired her trusty pistol, she didn't even miss—the bullet was simply *teleported* out of existence. It didn't even get halfway to its target; Ellie saw it vanish into thin air almost instantly after she pulled the trigger. Granted, it was about what she expected, but seeing it was the confirmation Ellie needed.

The lieutenant was *definitely* an esper with teleporting abilities. New plan.

She threw the pistol at the woman as hard as she could. A good pitch, one that her current target would almost assuredly teleport away as well. As soon as the gun left her hands, Ellie took off behind it, waiting for the exact moment Kurosawa would teleport it out of the way. When that happened, Ellie put some more gusto behind her sprint and shoulder charged the lieutenant as hard as she could, linebacker style. A definite *crack* from somewhere in the torso and a slight groan in pain from the lieutenant was a nice reward for the effort thus far. The lieutenant held her rib for a moment, clearly winded, and that moment's hesitation was perfect for Ellie to line a nasty right hook up with her jaw. The instant she felt that one land, she followed up with a second hook from her left. After the second punch, though, she saw Kurosawa's eyes flash, and felt the hairs stand up on the back of her neck.

Generally speaking, hits to the jaw and chin like that would do a good job momentarily stunning their target *at least*. Instead, the lieutenant only seemed angered by the hits, and responded by grabbing the collar of Ellie's armor and headbutting the teenage field operative so hard that her helmet's visor cracked. It even managed to ring Ellie's bell slightly from *within* the suit, making her stumble backwards. Her slight daze from being headbutted was enough of an opening for Lieutenant Kurosawa to disappear from her view entirely. Resisting the urge to look around in panic, Ellie simply continued relying on her senses as she had been taught. It was times like this where she found herself *extremely* grateful for how quickly she could process information, because the lack of any sound coming from the ground level around her meant that her current target was—

Ellie dropped to the ground low, rolling to the side in one smooth motion. Only a second after she did so, Lieutenant Kurosawa slammed onto the ground right where Ellie's head was. In her right hand was a serrated combat knife. Was the lieutenant trying to *kill* her all of a sudden?

The field operative wasted no time getting back into a standing position, and *again* resisted the urge to rush headfirst into danger. She instead planted both feet on the ground, keeping her hands open, and both arms in front of her.

A bladed weapon changed things; they added extra range, indicated an intent to harm, and made submissions difficult. Miss Kerry always said that *these* types of opponents were the ones to be most careful with, but her teacher had also gone out of her way to train Ellie in the best ways to deal with them. *That* started with the stance and the intention behind it.

The lieutenant realized that Ellie wasn't going to make the first move this time, so she opted to. She closed the gap between the two with a single step, and the second she was in range she stabbed towards a chink in the armor on Ellie's abdomen. That *was* her intended strike, but this was also why Ellie chose this stance. Her arms and hands, while not *necessarily* in striking range compared to Kurosawa and her blade, were in the perfect range to intercept every strike and divert them away from the field operative.

Typically, people are taught to disarm someone with a weapons advantage, but Ellie's best bet here was likely to fight the woman in spite of it. As Lieutenant Kurosawa stabbed toward Ellie's abdomen, Ellie used the back of her right hand to deflect the lieutenant's arm towards her torso. She then used her left hand to further lift the lieutenant's arm out of the way, and then the second her right abdomen was wide open, the field operative used her free hand to slam a fist straight into the woman's liver—all in one quick motion. Lieutenant Kurosawa stumbled backwards from the liver blow she received, but quickly retaliated by... *throwing* her knife straight at Ellie's head.

This woman was *definitely* trying to kill her.

Ellie was able to dodge it with a short sidestep, making sure her target never left her vision. But the second the knife passed her by, the lieutenant simply vanished in front of her very eyes. This time Ellie *barely* had time to think, because she heard the slight sound of footsteps directly behind her. Turning to face the source, she *barely* spotted the lieutenant making a slash towards her neck from her peripheral vision. Ellie responded by using the back of her left hand to divert the slash *down*, leaving the woman's chin exposed, and then hit her with a shovel hook hard enough to make her head snap backwards. When she stumbled back from that hit, the field operative followed up by grabbing the lieutenant by her sides—making sure to use the pads of her fingers to grip as much skin as possible through the lieutenant's shirt—and lifted her off the ground before slamming her back down onto the hard flooring. Lieutenant Kurosawa weighed *at least* as much as Ellie's personal best deadlift, which meant her strength training must have been paying off quite well. The girl couldn't help but smile.

Kurosawa, on the other hand, looked pretty pathetic down there. Seeing her all beat up made Ellie feel *real* good, especially after how mouthy she had been minutes ago.

"So, where's all that help you wanted to give me now, huh?"

The woman simply glared at Ellie for a moment, then scoffed as she took her sweet time standing back up. Even after all that, she appeared unharmed *and* quite amused, as if she were dealing with a child. Granted, she *was*, but it still felt rather insulting.

When she spoke, though, the resignation in Lieutenant Kurosawa's voice was clear, "You're pretty strong for a kid. You've got a good head on your shoulders, and you can throw a good punch. But if that's all you have, then this isn't gonna go well for you."

As soon as she said that, Ellie felt the sharp yet unmistakable burn of a bullet worming its way into the meat on her right thigh. She *knew* a gun hadn't been fired; she would have heard the unmistakable *clap!* of a firearm, even from hundreds of miles away. She *at least* would have been able to hear the bullet whizzing through the air. None of those things happened, ergo a gun hadn't been fired. And yet, she definitely felt a lead cylinder split her skin and find a resting position right on the inside of her thigh muscles. And then before she could process that, she was hit over the head with an incredibly dense, large, and heavy object, knocking her down. She managed to tuck and roll, avoiding several other falling objects, but she wasn't getting up any time soon; that was a pretty bad hit, even through her helmet.

From where she laid on the ground, Ellie could tell the thing that had hit her was... *the table from three stories up*? When did she—

Right. Teleporting.

The field operative tried to get back up, but the pain from the bullet in her leg assailed her. She was pretty gassed from all the running and fighting prior to having her bell rung a second time with a table, and quickly hitting the upper limit of how much further adrenaline could carry her body. All she could do was grit her teeth while the lieutenant continued talking down to her.

"Sorry for playing rough, kid. You looked like you could handle a *real* fight, so I figured I'd give you the taste of one; don't take it personally. We won't be booking you, but I'm still gonna have to take you in for questioning, though."

And that was that.

Ellie *really* wanted to put up a fight, but the longer she stayed on the ground the harder she felt her energy being sapped. Her efforts more or less seemed to amount to nothing; bullets are useless against someone that can teleport them out of existence, and similarly her sidearm was *also* gone. Her hand to hand skills, while perfect for dealing with normal humans, seemed ineffective here. Three hits to the chin and a liver blow were enough to topple even the strongest kids at The Garden, yet the lieutenant more-or-less walked it off. If she didn't know any better, Ellie would say this had to be a hidden ability of Lieutenant Kurosawa's; the ability to knock you down once with half the effort, and make you *really* not feel like getting up again.

Normally, at The Garden, Ellie had always been taught,

Complete your tasks at any cost! Coming home a failure is not an option.

But for once, she considered the alternative: what if she folded here?

It wasn't as though no one trying to escape The Garden had ever thought to go to law enforcement before. She was a Dorm Manager previously, her entire job was *preventing* students from even getting off the premises, so she was well aware of what happened to the ones that got away. Plenty of the kids at The Garden *tried*, even field operatives. The end result was the same; staff made a few phone calls, and the kids would end up back at the front doorstep a few days later. It didn't really matter what they said; Ellie had heard countless kids give every reason they could think of as to why they shouldn't be there, why no one should be there, what's happening in there, and it never mattered. The kids were taken back inside, and the cops always left without a fight. Naturally, they had to be punished, so after a couple days in solitary the runaways were sent to either The Ring or The Maze. As a twisted sort of punishment, they would force Ellie to watch these play out if any of the runaways were hers.

In reality, that's why she couldn't accept the lieutenant's offer. They would assuredly find a way to get her back, and when they did, they would assuredly make sure she regretted trying to run away. At the same time, failure wouldn't be tolerated. She knew most field operatives that failed their assignments were demoted, and she *really* wasn't looking to spend another year cleaning toilets. It was a lose-lose either way, but as she looked at the lieutenant, and considered what it would be like to fight against this motherfucker teleporting random objects all over the place with a bullet embedded in her leg, she decides it's not even worth it.

Fuck all of this, honestly. Maybe they'd just cut their losses and kill her instead of demoting, that would be fine too.

She ignored the sound of the lieutenant's reinforcement catching up, barreling into the room. She ignored the pain shooting from her leg, and the sound of continued gunfire from the reinforcements that caught up. She ignored Lieutenant Kurosawa trying to get her team to stand down, she ignored the bullets that grazed her other leg, and she sprinted full speed for the window.

Two stories was a longer fall than she expected, but she made it fine.

Unfortunately, news of her failure was not received well at home, and as a result... she ended up in solitary, awaiting her turn in The Ring. Naturally, it was because news of someone allegedly from New Haven breaking into the home of an Olympian councilman was already circulating by the time she made it back. In a way, it was poetic—all of that *bullshit* just to end up here, in the dark, alone for the next thirty-six hours regardless. The next time she would see light and other human beings she'd be in The Ring, where they'd hand her a pair of boxing gloves and put her up against every single kid that needed to blow off steam. Really, she should have expected this outcome considering the scale of what she had been assigned to do in the first place, but it was still bullshit. She was in the same spot she would have been in, had she just surrendered and lived a life of playing pretend until the walls closed in.

For some reason, her mind drifted to the gruesome image of her mother sprawled out on the kitchen floor, blood oozing everywhere from a split on the back of her head.

The incident happened when she was three: Ellie's parents had been arguing about her, and when her mother yelled at her father he grew angry and shoved her, causing her to fall and crack her head open on the tile floor. The girl often wondered if she still would have ended up here if her mom was alive. What would she think of the state Ellie was in now? Would she be pleased? Probably not, no one wants to watch their kid get beat up and stomped out by a bunch of older kids for eight whole hours.

Thankfully, her mom was dead, so she didn't have to see that.

Climax: Blood Red Summer

Chase always thought school was a bit of a drag.

It wasn't like she *hated* it—quite the opposite really. She always paid attention in her classes, was the first to answer every question in every subject, and generally scored well on her tests, so she was definitely invested. It was just, high school was the point where she was starting to hit her limit. She was in the middle of her sophomore year at Apollo Heights, and yet she was itching for the last two to go by. Her mom always urged her to cherish those last few years of being a teenager, as she would be an adult faster than she realized it. But, well, Chase wasn't feeling that.

It was hard to feel that way when her mom seemed rather reluctant to let her actually *do* anything that was adult in nature. She insisted on being Chase's ride any time the girl wanted to hang out with friends, despite Chase's vehement protests. She didn't want Chase to take on part time jobs for extra cash, and she *certainly* didn't like when Chase stayed out late, even if she was just spending the night at a friend's house. The only exception to any of these rules was any time Ellie was involved.

Chase wasn't sure how the two met *exactly*, just that Ellie was a friend of her parents from back when her dad was still in the picture. Her mom seemed to trust Ellie more than the girl's uncle these days, for whatever reason; though Chase would agree that the few times she's seen him recently, her uncle Brian appeared to be everything *but* stable. Her aunt growing ill and passing away seemed to do a number on him, and it led to Chase's mom splitting time between her and her uncle while continuing to take demon hunting jobs every day. She wasn't sure how to feel about that, considering she was still having nightmares about the day her dad died while laying directly on top of her, but she figured that her mom assumed she had bounced back. Maybe that was her own fault, actually; Chase herself had a pretty bad habit of lying about how she felt.

But, regardless, all of that has led to her enthusiasm for her schooling starting to wane, slightly. She's doing well in her classes, but she can tell she's slowing down.

The only highlight of her life lately has been after school sports—in particular, basketball. She loves it; it feels *great* to get her body moving, and a sport like basketball was easy to practice on her own. At worst, she'd drag Ellie down to a park and beg the mechanic to shoot hoops with her for a few hours. Ellie always protested, but in the end she'd have just as much fun as Chase did. She was *damn* good at basketball, too, so it was always good practice. As a result of that practice, Chase found herself walking onto the Varsity team in her freshman year. She tried not to brag about it, but how could she not?

Her basketball games at school were the times she felt most normal. Her mom watched every single one, shouting louder than the crowd every single time Chase got the ball. In the back of her mind, Chase often wondered if she even knew what was going on—her mom was *not* very interested in sports if Chase wasn't playing them—but she didn't mind. It was nice to get to feel like a normal girl with a normal family; on the court, it felt as though nothing that went wrong in her life had happened. The team loved and respected her, she was well known at school after several buzzer beaters got her school to the inter-district finals last year, and her mom was there every single time. Sure, she had gotten into the habit of dodging the question every time people asked about her dad, and she thought about what it would be like if he got to watch her games more often than not, but at this point she figured it was easier to take the good with the bad.

So, when she went to school on a normal Monday and her mom told her, "I'll be home late from work tonight, there's another contract that I'm taking. Are you gonna stay with Ellie?" she assumed it was just another instance of that. Taking the good with the bad.

After her dad died, her mom threw herself into the work that they had been doing together. Her parents were demon hunters by trade, a dangerous job, but it was one that they had always done successfully. It wasn't even the thing that got her dad killed in the end; from what her mom and Ellie have said, her folks just had garnered enough enemies due to their activism that people were willing to do what they felt they had to do. She's not quite sure how she feels about the death of her father being something that someone else *felt* they had to bring about, but it's been a few years and she's gotten most of her tears out, so she never thinks about it much.

Either way, the end result was the same—her mother started taking on as many demon hunting jobs as she could, even working with agencies outside of the one she had started with Ellie.

According to Ellie, free agency among demon hunters was nothing new. It existed so that demon hunters could take riskier, high paying jobs, without the agency being on the book for damages. In other words, the jobs were high risk, high reward; Chase recalls the shouting match that ensued once the mechanic found out what her mom had decided to do.

"Are you out of your fucking mind, Kate? You don't know these people at all!"

"So, what's the plan then? I need money Ellie; I can't be picky about the jobs I take, and I don't have time to deal with you getting pissy with me over losing a customer."

Chase remembered even *she* winced at that. It was a low-blow; the two had been friends long enough for there to be zero doubt about what Ellie was actually worried about, yet her mom was acting like that friendship was still a business partnership. The mechanic's reaction told the entire story, because she *didn't* say anything at first, and Ellie was hardly one to be at a loss for words.

Instead, she just sighed. She sounded *really* sad, which threw Chase off even further.

"You know you have a kid, right? That you needing money won't matter if you die, too. What is Chase supposed to do without you?"

"She'll figure it out, she's good at that—"

Her mom's sentence was interrupted by a cash register being hurled towards her face. She ducked it clean, mildly annoyed at having a large object thrown at her, but when she saw her assailant's face that mild annoyance was being met with outright fury. Even in hindsight, Chase thinks this might have been the angriest she has *ever* seen Ellie, and Chase's mom was not responding to it very well. Honestly, it looked like a full-on fight was on the verge of breaking out in the middle of Ellie's shop.

"I don't know what your deal is, but you need to get your head out of your ass, Kaitlin. You're the only family Chase can even rely on, right now. Don't put her in a bad position because you're too stressed to think straight."

As though Ellie didn't know why her mom was so stressed. Another low-blow.

"Fuck you."

"Get new material while you're at it."

And that was the last time her mom and Ellie had talked to each other in months. Her mom, seemingly, had no issues with Chase going over Ellie's, but in the past she would go inside the shop and chat with the mechanic for what felt like hours when dropping the girl off and picking her up. Now, she would simply text Chase, "here", and that was her queue to leave. The mechanic, for her part, was always trying to get five minutes to talk to her mom and apologize, but even with Chase and Ellie's powers combined Chase's mom would always respond with some variation of "I don't wanna look at her right now."

Today, though, something is definitely off. Chase had done her usual routine of going to Ellie's after school, finishing her homework, then hanging out with the mechanic until it was nighttime. But... even after the usual time her mom would text her some variation of, "just finished up, on my way", she hadn't heard from her. When she calls, the phone just rings before going to voicemail. So, she waits.

An hour passes, nothing. She ignores the feeling of her heart rate increasing in her chest, and sends her mom another text message.

Another hour. At this point, she's not even bothering to put the phone up to her ear. She's just tapping the "Call" icon, letting it go to voicemail, hanging up, and tapping again. The number next to her mom's contact in her phone steadily goes up by one; she barely notices when it goes past eighty.

A third hour goes by. Ellie's telling her to get ready for bed, now. She didn't notice it, but the mechanic had gone into her own bedroom and cleaned it up, switching out the sheets and putting Chase's favorite blanket on top. Ellie then tells Chase she'll sleep on the couch, so the teenager goes into her sleeping quarters for the night. She doesn't sleep very much, instead just checking her phone, waiting for some response from her mom. Nothing comes all night, and eventually her mom's phone stops ringing entirely and starts going straight to voicemail.

It must be dead.

Chase doesn't notice when the time of day changes. She figures she probably fell asleep somewhere in the loop of calling her mom and checking her text messages. Ellie doesn't make her get out of bed for school today, instead just asking if she wants something to eat for breakfast. Chase's stomach rumbles, but she doesn't feel like eating much. When she tells Ellie as such, the mechanic pauses to think for a moment, before saying "okay" and leaving.

She comes back a few minutes later with an orange smoothie.

For just a second, Chase remembers the memory of her mom making her go to school the day after her dad died. In her own words, "Some normalcy will help." And, according to the psychologists Chase saw after the event, that was true. But still, the fact that someone she's not even related to is letting her *breathe* and take her time when her own mother didn't makes her feel... something.

But instead of trying to navigate those feelings, she just says, "Thanks."

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A few days pass, and there's still no word from Kaitlin. Chase has started going back to school, but her performance in her classes have taken a significant nosedive.

Ellie, for her own part, is doing quite well. Her gig with the PIU turned into a full-time deal after all, which she begrudgingly pushed for. As much as she hated being under Kurosawa's thumb, having a consistent paycheck coming in from an employer every month gave her some much needed peace of mind. No doubt in part because lately she's been Chase's go-to for just about anything the girl needed, and being depended on so heavily was... *daunting*, in a way Ellie wasn't used to.

Her mom disappearing hit Chase *hard*. Despite the teenager's insistence on keeping up appearances, school staff were far more attentive than either her or the mechanic were willing to give them credit for. Granted, it wasn't hard to surmise that something was up; Chase was normally an observant, smart, and highly energetic kid. When a kid like that starts missing school, quietly staring off into space during lessons, making odd mistakes on tests, and forgetting homework assignments, when she didn't do *any* of those things before, it might as well be a flashing red sign that something is *very* wrong. Ellie's tried to be as generous as possible, but after she found the third truancy letter in the Noel family mailbox, she figures she needs a family member to help her pull some weight.

Which is how she ended up at Chase's uncle's house.

Her uncle Brian was, by all accounts, a shell of his former self. When he was a younger adult, he had pulled a *ton* of weight in getting him and his sister out of an abusive home. Kaitlin *adored* her older brother, really; the two were in constant contact, always talking on the phone whenever they had a free moment. For that reason, Ellie's not necessarily worried about delivering the news—he's probably already heard.

She's not even necessarily here to ask for help with Chase, though she's hoping he'll be able to. She's honestly worried about *him*.

Brian's mental health struggles were... pretty well known amongst Chase's family. He was always the one that needed a bit more help, where Kaitlin was the (relatively) stable one between the two. What sent him spiraling bad was the death of Chase's aunt along with his unborn child. She had contracted a respiratory infection that caused her to grow terribly ill during her pregnancy and later passed away. It was *completely* unprecedented, as she she had a clean bill of health up to that point. For Brian, that seemed to be the thing that drove him mad. This idea that the unprecedented deaths of people he cares about were inevitable within his lifetime seemed to shatter him pretty dramatically. He lost his mom when he and his sister were escaping their nightmare house, he lost his wife and unborn child due to natural causes, and now he's seemingly lost the sister he fought so hard for.

It's a bad sign, and that's why Ellie is here alone.

She doesn't *think* anything bad has happened yet, but it's hard to shake the worry when there's so many kids she knew from The Garden that had similar stories, and—especially having been a janitor as long as she had—she saw exactly how those stories ended. The very idea of Chase seeing anything even remotely as gruesome as skull fragments in the ceiling, an entire room's walls painted deep red, makes her feel equal parts sick and incredibly sad.

She keeps telling herself that's not going to happen but... she's alone, just in case.

Ellie rings the doorbell. No answer.

She knocks. No answer.

Not even a sound from the other side of the door. Ellie presses her hear to the door, and listens closely. It's quiet, but every once in a while there's the odd sound of... a liquid dripping.

Her breath catches.

Her heart rate skyrockets.

For some reason, the mechanic remembers being thirteen, going to her best friend's room at The Garden one morning and—no, *fuck* this. She raises her right foot, puts all of her weight *and* strength behind it, and kicks the door off of its hinges.

Ellie steps inside...

...And to her chagrin, she was right to be worried.

The living room of Brian's house is, frankly, ruined. A thick, viscous black substance is splattered all over the walls and ceiling. There's a *lot* of it, and it slowly oozes upwards towards the center of the ceiling, where a large bubble has formed. Then the smell hits her, and that's when Ellie remembers that Chase's uncle is a demon himself; different from his sister or his niece, Brian was the result of a failed experiment that led to the full Gehenna corruption of an embryo. The end result was a lab grown human being... that wasn't human on the cellular level, apparently. A part of her wants to know what the fuck kind of "experiment" could have even led to a result like that in the first place, but then she remembers why The Garden was burned down, so she tries not to think about it at all instead.

In that vein, the black substance going everywhere makes sense; it's Gehenna, in its raw form. In an odd way, that must be what's left of Brian. He must not have had a proper human *body*, instead using the form of one, and that's what's all over the walls and ceiling. After Ellie surveys the damage of the room, she's pretty certain that's what happened. The bulk of the damage seems to be originating from a recliner in the right corner of the living room. There's a pile of clothes there: a plain t-shirt, khakis, socks, and loafers. They're so thoroughly covered in black ooze that it's hard to tell *what* they were supposed to be. However she's able to discern one object in the center of the mess... a semi-automatic rifle.

Seeing that there makes Ellie feel profoundly sad. There's no other way she can describe it.

So now, she's in the middle of staring silently at the *mess*, trying to think of a way to tell Chase what happened to her Uncle without making everything way worse, and just when she accepts that's impossible—

Who the hell are you?

The bubbling mass of Gehenna on the ceiling *speaks* to her; its voice ringing from the inside of her skull, rather than vibrating through her eardrums. So, in other words, the bubbling black mass on the ceiling is speaking in her head. Awesome.

"My name's Ellie, I'm a friend of Kaitlin's. Are you Chase's uncle?"

Silence. It probably wasn't expecting that.

Who wants to know?

"Me, obviously. Seeing that I'm the only one here, and all."

Where do you know her from?

For a bubbling black mass of goop on the ceiling, it sure had a lot of questions.

"Kaitlin introduced me, a long time ago."

At the mention of her name, the bubbling mass stops shifting. The upwards oozing completely freezes, becoming *eerily* still.

After a while of nothing, the mass asks her, *Why are you here?*

Now Ellie's starting to get annoyed. She's here for a wellness check, not to bicker with a talking, bubbling mass of Gehenna. She fires off, "Can you only ask questions?" and the tone is a lot sharper than she meant.

No.

"Then what the *hell* is—"

It's hard to stay conscious in this form. Small sentences and questions only.

She wants to call its (his?) bluff, but even she could tell how much that took to say. It's odd, but hearing the voice in her head makes her acutely aware of small details like the "connection quality" between the two or the effort put behind the words. As though she can feel the *intention* behind the words, in addition to hearing them. It was definitely odd, but she wasn't going to question it now. Anything to make conversation with a black blob of Gehenna easier.

"I'm just here to check on you. You're the only relative Chase has, so I was hoping you'd still be... *around*. But, no dice, I take it?"

Well, some dice.

"Explain."

I tried to make it "no dice," but I forgot a demon can't die that easily.

Oh, that clears it up.

He had simply lived his entire life as a human, succumbing to his human emotions and his human fealties, his human form with its human flaws. He had grown so accustomed to being a human, that he simply forgot he *wasn't* until his grief had consumed him. When he lost the fight against that, he received a brutal reminder of what he was, exactly. And now he's a bubbling black mass on the ceiling that will *probably* regenerate in some fashion, but in the meantime Chase doesn't have any family to rely on during the worst possible time of her life.

Ellie felt... frustrated. Not at this revelation in and of itself, it's just...

"So, what if you succeeded, then? Hell, *look at this!* Was Chase supposed to see this shit on her own?" She gestures broadly at the mess in the room, "What, do you want me to tell her, 'sorry kid, I know life's hard right now but your uncle just boomed himself'?"

She knows that's far from the right way to phrase what she's trying to say, but at this point her focus is entirely spent on trying not to let herself get angry. It's not working.

If it mattered to her, the last time she saw me would have been before Kate disappeared.

Five days ago. Now she's mad.

This *fucking* family apparently doesn't have any emotional maturity OR bandwidth whatsoever, and they certainly don't seem to care for the *one* person that needs more support than anyone else. Her dad dies, her mom wants to make it a strategy meeting and forces her to go to school the next day. Her mom disappears, her uncle goes and tries to off himself without talking to anyone. *They didn't even know if she's truly gone yet*, they could find her tomorrow and *this* jackass would be none the wiser. And he had the *gall*, the absolute *wherewithal* to tell Ellie that his presence doesn't matter.

Sure, it's not fair to him; he's lost a *lot* on his own, and anyone would be devastated beyond belief after losing their spouse and younger sister back-to-back. But the mechanic can't bring herself to care right now. She knows she *should* care, but all she can think about is Chase having to process all of this on her own, trying to navigate life without any family to help guide her. It makes Ellie feel equal parts sick *and* angry. She can't make herself slow down at all, and right now she *really* wishes she could.

And besides, "The entire reason Kate had her stop coming over, is because she was worried about *you!*"

It's the truth. She wasn't filled in on the entire situation back then, but now that she knows the Noel family a bit more she's well aware that Chase's mom absolutely *adored* her older brother, and the only reason she ever stopped having him babysit Chase as frequently was because she was worried *he* wouldn't be able to do it after his wife died. And Ellie agrees, understanding the level to which he really seemed to struggle with taking care of himself. However, she can't shake the feeling that maybe those two siblings should have talked *just* a bit more. Maybe Kaitlin should have reached out to him, instead of just assuming he needed a break. Ellie doesn't know, and all these communication what-ifs are starting to make her head hurt.

She feels the odd sensation of the voice communicating with her inside her own head start to dissipate, but before it does, she hears one last thing.

We made a lot of mistakes, I think you know. In many ways, demons aren't built to handle the... less desirable aspects of the human experience. We're a species that seeks to control and conquer by nature, after all.

A pause.

But... you should be similar to Kate, in that regard. I can feel it. How are you so different?

Ellie's never really thought about any of it before. She's never paid any mind the parts of her that would theoretically be "similar" to Kaitlin. It reminds her of the day that she had met Chief Kurosawa, long before the woman had rose the ranks. Kurosawa said she *smelled* like a demon back then, and Ellie had simply pushed the comment out of her mind completely, unwilling to even consider what the answer to "if I smell like a demon, then what am I?" could even be. Now, she's being told directly, in no small terms, that comment was a hint at something important.

She thinks about all of the weird shit that happened at The Garden, the shit that she's pushed out of her mind. The only jobs none of the kids were allowed to have were in the kitchen and infirmary; for safety reasons, allegedly. But she always found it odd that no one ever came back from the infirmary feeling better. Sure, wounds and sicknesses would be treated, but the victim would still be bedridden for days afterwards, eventually being shipped "back home."

The staff always said they were sent home to their parents, after all.

Ellie slams the brakes mentally, for the first time in what feels like years. She's desperately trying to stop herself from spiraling while thinking about The Garden again, when she remembers what Brian had asked her.

How are you so different?

She thinks about it.

"I never considered myself anything but human in the first place."

I see.

She's not sure if it makes sense, but it makes sense to her. Maybe that was the reason Kaitlin and now Brian seemed to struggle with handling their grief the *right* way; Kaitlin threw herself into work so she wouldn't have to be at home, constantly being reminded of what she lost, and Brian simply sought to abandon the human form he had grown used to entirely. Neither of them seemed to think of their offspring, but maybe that was just how demons were.

Still, though. She wishes that they had put Chase first in their lives, before making their own decisions.

The black mass doesn't speak again. It simply continues converging towards the bubble in the ceiling.

Ellie takes that as her cue to leave.

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Her mom isn't coming back. Chase can *feel* it. She's not sure why, but something within her literally *disappeared* last night. This morning, she woke up feeling disturbingly hollow. Nothing she tries seems to work on getting rid of that empty feeling sitting in her stomach; all she can do is lay in bed and stare at the ceiling.

Really, she's just so tired. More things keep happening, and she's been falling behind in school *big* time. She stays at Ellie's apartment some nights, but she can't shake the feeling that she needs to be at home in case something happens there. So, most nights she goes home alone, despite Ellie's protesting. Granted, there's another reason she doesn't stay over much.

Something was up with her uncle recently. She hadn't heard from him for quite some time, not even after her mom... *disappeared*.

A couple weeks ago Ellie told her that she had been to see him, but when Chase asked if he was okay the mechanic dodged the question. At the time she thought, *That's not good*, and opted to take it upon herself to check on him. Her reward for being proactive was the sight of his living room absolutely *wrecked*, with black goop all over the walls and ceiling. In the corner of the living room was a recliner with a pile of clothes and a... gun. She doesn't *quite* remember what happened after that, just that she was screaming very loudly, much to the chagrin of his neighbors.

For some reason, Chase's mind keeps wandering to the fact that Ellie didn't tell her about this when she *definitely* knew about it. She doesn't think there's ever been a time where the mechanic has lied to her before.

She's been skipping school a lot, lately. Most days she wakes up, imagines the smell of breakfast in the morning, then realizes the house is still empty as the fogginess of sleep fades. That alone is a recipe for a bad day, and as a result she spends more and more days in bed. The house phone rings every single day whether she gets up or not, and she hears the automated voice message counting unexcused absences. She's made a point to get her own mail every week, too; Ellie found three truancy letters in the mail, and while she didn't tear into Chase the girl could tell she was disappointed. That stung, bad.

But, most days she just can't bring herself to get out of bed. Today is different; she's going to try again, if only because it makes Ellie happy when she does.

She misses playing basketball. She tried, really—Ellie suggested it might help, so she put an honest effort towards going to practice, and attending her games. She did well, pulling her weight on the team like usual, but every time she made or blocked a shot she found herself scanning the bleachers for the spots her mom usually stuck to. Her mom was funny; she would make it a point to sit in the exact same spots every time, so that Chase never had to look for her. She was distant in some ways, but oddly thoughtful and loving in others. She pissed her off as all parents tend to do, but really, Chase had no issues with her mother whatsoever.

She doesn't understand why any of this is happening at all, frankly.

Chase feels bad for her basketball team. The inter-district tournament started last week. She'd been planning on playing, but she just... can't. Every time she unconsciously glances towards her mom's usual spot in the bleachers and sees a different person, it feels like her muscles are filled with lead. The air slowly becomes toxic, and her hands get clammy. She manages to play fine through it, but that feeling just keeps getting worse, no matter what happens. By the end of the game it's like she's not even in her body anymore, instead floating around watching a corpse run up and down a wooden court.

She'd rather just not feel... whatever that is.

So the week before the tournament, she told the coach she was quitting. She didn't say why; for some reason, she just can't bring herself to. It would almost assuredly make things easier. Her classes would probably let her slide more often, her teammates would probably cut her slack, hell, they'd probably quit calling the fucking house phone and sending letters every time she skipped school. But every time she starts to talk about it, the words die in her throat.

As she rides the monorail to her high school, various kids from her school point and whisper. She doesn't blame them; from their perspective, she was the talk of the town before she suddenly vanished. It's probably like seeing a ghost. Most of her day at school was like that; kids stayed out of her way, mainly just asking where she's been ("home"), what she's been up to ("nothing, really"), or what's wrong ("I'm fine"). Those excuses worked well enough, until she ran into some of her former teammates from basketball, including her team's captain. Her captain was taller than her by quite a bit, with wide athletic shoulders and a jawline that could cut glass. Her dark hair was long, but usually braided and tied back into a ponytail. The girl was, by all accounts, a decent teammate. What she lacked on the court, she made up with good leadership and great playmaking.

She and Chase always had a friendly relationship, but today she's clearly *pissed*. Seeing her now, Chase feels *awful*; she can't even look her in the eyes.

"When were you planning on telling us you quit?"

She wasn't, but she doesn't want to say that. So instead, Chase just looks away from her and moves to walk around the group instead.

Unfortunately, this seems to just piss the captain off more. She steps towards Chase, making a point to stand directly in her path as she grabs the girl's collar and pulls her so close that Chase can smell her breath. "What, you're too good to give me a fucking answer?"

It's not that.

Chase is trying to rack her brain to think of something to say, but she can't find the words fast enough. She looks at her other former teammates, backing up their captain. Neither of them appear to be as angry about this as she is, but they don't make an effort to stop things either. Chase feels a bit disappointed, in that regard; even if she didn't have an answer, she *knew* she looked like shit. Something *has* to be wrong with her, are they just ignoring that?

As if sensing something, one of the girls behind the captain *does* intervene. She grabs the captain's arm, trying to get her to let go of Chase's collar. The captain shakes her off, and then yells directly in Chase's face, "You think you're so cool, huh? You show up, ball hog, and then the second shit gets rough you bounce, is that it?"

A beat. Then Chase starts laughing, *hard*.

She's bringing up *ball hogging*? She's doing this because she's *jealous* over *ball hogging*? No way.

This, for some reason, *really* gets a good laugh out of Chase. She hasn't laughed this hard in what feels like *years*. She's laughing shockingly hard compared to the visibly depressed demeanor she had seconds before, and the girls in front of her are clearly unnerved by the sudden switch-up. She doesn't blame them, but it's just... funny to her. Here she is, going through the worst time of her life, fighting herself to get out of bed and failing almost every morning, just for this *bitch* to get on her case over some ball hogging? Chase thought she was going to have to explain things to them, but this is so stupid that she doesn't even feel like it anymore.

She's glad she quit, honestly. Fuck these people.

When she speaks again, she feels slightly rejuvenated, "The good news is, now that I'm gone you can have the ball all to yourself. Next year, I mean."

The captain didn't like that, but Chase doesn't care. She keeps going.

"But, I guess that's why you needed me so bad. You're so dogshit at your favorite sport you needed a midget to carry you. How'd inter-district go, by the way?"

Sure, they beat the shit out of her for that, but it's the most alive she's felt in days.

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Ellie thinks she might be hitting her limit.

The PIU job is going well. Well enough for her to keep the shop closed. Well enough for it to be her main source of income; it really does relive a lot of tension from her daily life. Knowing she's got a paycheck coming is enough to get her through the worst of days. Especially since they've started sending her on field assignments more often.

She's still doing weapons for them. It's a unique way for her to use her skills; they bring her recovered ammunition, discarded or damaged weapons, and everywhere in between. Her job is just to examine the parts for whatever information they're looking for: if they need to find the manufacturer, she's able to dig up the serial number for every individual part in order to track down who sold what to whom. If they need to find a weapon, she's able to cross reference different ammunition types to pare down what weapon was used. If they need to track down a particular person, Ellie's network of demon hunter licensee's, weapons buyers, and weapons manufacturers is well connected. She takes good care not to leak personal details of her confidants, but the information is *always* both useful and pertinent, so no one at the unit presses her for it.

The field assignments, though, are different. She's starting to have suspicions that Kurosawa wants to move her to either RFAT (Rescue and First-Aid Team) or CATR (Citizen Aid and Threat Removal). These teams seemed to have a similar purpose, but according to the Chief, "the devil was in the details": RFAT prioritized the immediate retrieval and medical attention of anyone trapped in any of the situations the PIU covers. CATR prioritized the elimination of the threat, partially for cleanup, and partially in order to save any civilians that couldn't be rescued by RFAT.

Either way, she'd rather not be a part of either team; she prefers "weapons expert." Ellie likes being left to her own devices.

But if that was her only concern, she'd be doing really well. The problem is, well, Chase isn't getting better. Nothing in that family situation is; she tried visiting Brian again, but this time when she went inside the bubbling mass on the ceiling was *massive* and incredibly silent. At the same time, she felt like she was being... watched. Not by Brian, whose presence she felt as normal (if it could even be called that), but by something *e/se*. The girl wondered if he had pets, but... whatever pets a demon would have were not pets she wanted to meet. So, that visit ended pretty quickly.

She can't bring herself to tell Chase what happened to him, even though she knows the girl *has* to be growing suspicious by now. Ellie doesn't want to get into the habit of lying to her or keeping secrets, but she's not sure what she can even *say* to her. The cat's *gotta* be let out of the bag at some point, though, so the bulk of Ellie's time at home has been spent trying to come up with a way to tell Chase what happened without making things worse.

Today, she had an idea of how she was going to go about doing so... when Chase showed up at the doorstep to Ellie's garage looking like she had been hogtied and dragged on the back of a truck for miles. The girl looked *fucked up*, covered in an awful smattering of deep cuts and bruises, with her hair matted as though it had been yanked on several times. The look in her eyes was... haunting; she's never seen Chase look so thoroughly empty before. The girl's eyes, normally a bright, shining ocean blue, were murky like dirty water—her gaze was completely vacant beyond the base level acknowledgement that she's in front of someone. All in all, it's an awful sight that completely destroys Ellie's previous train of thought, and she forgets about telling the girl what happened to her uncle. Again.

She's been angry a lot lately, but this is the worst it's ever been. Ellie is surprised by the tone and volume of her own voice when she asks, no, *demands* to know, "What the hell happened to you?"

It's far angrier than she intended for it to sound. It feels like she's yelling at Chase when she didn't even mean to; she's not mad at her at all. Still, the slight way the kid's face stiffens, the same way anyone does when their facade gets just a *little* bit harder to keep up really bothers the mechanic. Chase doesn't even bother saying anything in response, she just brushes past Ellie, walking up the stairs and inside the apartment. Ellie, for her part, feels *really* bad about that, and spends the next five minutes trying to catch up and apologize.

Eventually, Chase turns around and yells back, "*Take a fucking hint!* Does it look like I wanna talk about it?"

She's always had a hair trigger temper, but Ellie can tell *this* is different. Chase is, for all intents and purposes, a fighter. She's antagonistic to a fault when she's in a bad mood, so when she's angry her first response is to try and get *you* to swing first. If she was mad at Ellie, she'd be trying to start a fight between the two instead of just shouting. So, it's not that she's mad; she really is just spent for words and, given her physical state, probably doesn't want to do anything other than lay down in Ellie's room. Again.

Ellie feels a dull ache in her chest.

It *really* hurts her to see Chase like this, but she doesn't even know what to say anymore. Most days, she just sits in her lab, trying to give the girl space and find things to work on. But, since she's not building weapons anymore these days, she has nothing to do. So she ends up sitting in her room, alone, while Chase lays in Ellie's room, alone. In the back of her mind, she recalls how *angry* she was at Kaitlin for not doing her part in helping Chase get through her dad's death. She wanted to lay into Kate for that, at the time. But now, faced with a similar situation, she just *can't* do it. She knows the girl will lean on her for emotional support, for comfort, because she has no one else. But, the very fear of being the reason a cracked vase shatters is *crippling*. It's enough to keep Ellie glued to her seat.

Hours pass.

Chase walks out the front door with a quiet, "See you tomorrow, Ellie."

The mechanic considers walking Chase to the monorail station, just to give them more time. She doesn't even know what she's *thinking of* when she thinks of wanting 'more time', but it feels so crucial to her because she can't shake the awful feeling that something is *very* wrong and she's missing something. But when she gets ready to ask, she sees the teenager's empty eyes looking back at her, and the words die in her throat. *Again.*

Chase leaves, almost without a sound. Ellie stands alone in her home, wishing that she said something.

--

Chase barely remembers the ride home. Every inch of her body hurts.

She put up a *really* good fight. Broke some bones, broke some spirits with well-aimed insults, and in the end the cronies that looked so "worried" about her wound up putting in more work than the captain. Granted, it was because Chase headbutted the captain so hard that she stumbled backwards and fell on her elbow wrong, shattering it, but that served her right. In the grand scheme of things she may have lost that fight, but at this point Chase doesn't even care. She thinks she might just never go back to school after this, anyways. It's far too much work to drag herself out of bed just to run into people who don't even want to see her.

She's been thinking about that a lot.

She can't remember the last time she even heard from her friends from school, her teammates, her classmates, or even her teachers, before today. All of them knew her name, her number, and plenty had access to her home address. They knew who her parents were, and they saw her progressively looking like shit more and more on the few days she *did* show up. How much of their ignorance was *willful*? Were they truly unaware that she was going through it, or did they just not care enough to reach out? She doesn't even *want* anyone to reach out, necessarily, she's just surprised that her own teammates were acting as though she skipped the inter-district tournament for fun. Maybe if they were a better fucking team, they wouldn't have needed her. Or maybe, her being there prevented the team from improving—if she wasn't there, they would be forced to be good, instead of relying on her.

So, she makes it up in her mind that she just won't bother anymore. That's what she tells herself.

When she gets home, to that empty house, with decorations that she can't even bear to look at anymore, that's what she keeps telling herself. She tells herself that as she stands in the empty living room, the silence so deafening that it locks her in her tracks. It's hard to remember the last time she heard any noise in the house besides her own. Eventually, her gaze lands on a particular picture that she can't stay away from, no matter how hard she tries.

It's from last year; her freshman year inter-district tournament. They didn't win that year, but second place out of all of the high schools in New Haven, at Apollo Heights' first inter-district appearance in the school's history? *That* was cause for celebration, and the picture she's staring at was taken in the midst of that. It's a picture of her and her mom, lifting the girl over her shoulder as though they weren't nearly the exact same height. Chase's eyes are closed in deep laughter, a facial expression that looks *and* feels foreign to her, now. She remembers how *desperately* she screamed "put me down!" at the time despite her laughing, which only encouraged her mother. Naturally, the bottom half of Chase is a blurry mess, as a result.

She stares at the picture of her mom. The face she's making is nostalgic; a wide, beaming smile. Her dad always said her mom's smile was distinctive, and now more than ever, Chase can see it.

She misses her mom, so much.

...

It all crashes down on her.

Every single emotion, every single feeling that she's ever felt since her dad died, since her mom up and vanished, hits her all at once. It's like being hit by a car going over seventy miles per hour, she doesn't even have time to mentally prepare before the endless waves of *everything* wash over her. Grief, anger, frustration, resignation, any and everything she could have ever felt spills out of her at once. She's sobbing loudly, but she can't stop herself from feeling angry. She feels like she's on fire, like her own internal organs are trying to rip themselves out of her body. She *literally* can't take this, any more and it feels like she's going to explode.

She wants to break something, but the wave of energy is too much.

It's too much.

It's too much.

It's entirely too much, and she feels like she's about to shatter into a million pieces.

The only part of her that's even remotely lucid at this point begins making her way over to the fridge. She's still sobbing loudly like a mess, but at the same time she's hungry, too. So now, she's crying for three reasons; her body hurts, she misses her mom, and she's hungry. She feels like a toddler.

This sucks.

She looks through all the meal containers that Ellie had been prepping for her. The dates for each set are written over the top in nice, neat handwriting. Chase has eaten about half; Ellie makes enough food for every day, but as the days go on it's getting harder and harder to eat. Most days she doesn't even try. She's thinking today might be an "eating" day, when she spots a wine bottle in the fridge door—it's mostly full. Her parents liked sitting down with a glass of wine after dinner, but the wine had gone practically untouched since her dad died. The only times her mom touched anything like it since, Chase was always in bed, but not asleep. In another moment of clarity, she wonders what all the hype is about. At the very least, she knew enough about booze to know it "takes the edge off." And right now, she's feeling pretty on edge.

So, she foregoes her dinner plans. She grabs the bottle, pops the cork off, and throws it down the hatch.

And then things go downhill fast.

--

It's midnight, and Ellie's phone is ringing. She routed all of Chase's home phone calls to her cellphone without telling the girl, and while Ellie feels bad about it she's glad she did. There was a voicemail message left regarding a "brawl" that happened after school yesterday, which filled in enough details as to what Chase's appearance was all about. That's not what she's worried about, by any means.

What she's worried about is the message that was left about forty minutes ago, from the *police*. Apparently, there's been an incredibly loud ruckus going on at the Noel home, and it's been lasting for hours. The police were called for a noise complaint, but they weren't able to dispatch anyone *yet*. The second she heard that, alarm bells rang in her head something fierce. She barely even registered when she grabbed her keys and started driving to Chase's house. Which led to what Ellie's currently doing: blasting down the freeway, *easily* going twenty miles per hour over the speed limit. She doesn't even have the slightest idea of what might have happened, but she doesn't even care.

It's not about beating the police there. She's been with law enforcement long enough for it to not bother her. She just... needs to know Chase is alright. She's not sure why, but knots are twisting in her stomach, and she's having a real hard time avoiding thoughts about The Garden. Then, something clicks.

"See you tomorrow, Ellie."

And now the mechanic wants to throw up. She's *really* close to hitting that limit.

When she gets to Chase's house, she lets herself in with a spare key, flips on the light switch, and—

It's bad. It's *awful*.

The place is completely trashed.

There's decorations ripped off the wall, furniture overturned, appliances with dents and smashes, and several holes in the wall that *definitely* weren't there before. It looks like someone broke in and started an underground fight ring in the living room. It *reeks*, too; the room smells like it's been doused in paint thinner and nail polish, an acidic assault on the senses that makes Ellie feel like she's on the verge of a nosebleed. What the fuck *is* that?

And then her nose adjusts. It's *alcohol*, and a lot of it.

Her heart rate spikes. It's impossible to stop herself from thinking about the *one* thing from The Garden she wanted to forget so desperately. The way Chase said "see you tomorrow" was a dead ringer; it was like a spell that unlocked memories Ellie tried so hard to stuff away.

At The Garden, one of the kids there formed a *quick* and close bond with Ellie, though the mechanic has long forgotten her name. They were birds of a feather, two science brained kids that were well aware they'd been sold a bad deal when they were sent there. The only difference between them, was that Ellie's friend had a home to go back to. She had vivid stories about her parents, whom she loved dearly, and a beautiful house they lived in with pets. Ellie, whose father hated her guts for existing, loved hearing about her and her family. The day after Ellie's thirteenth birthday, the two made plans to escape together, but her friend was caught by the Dorm Manager at the time.

When Ellie learned, she fought *hard* to at least have to share that punishment. She leaned hard on the fact that she was a Field Operative, and abused her privileges as part of their plan. It didn't matter; they outright refused, despite knowing that Ellie was a part of the plot. So, instead, she got a front row seat to watching her best friend get the shit kicked out of her in The Ring. That night, when Ellie told her, "we gotta get the fuck out of here" while helping her with her scrapes and bruises, the girl just looked at her and smiled.

"You know, you're way too nice for your own good, Ellie. You need to be careful, otherwise you'll just get hurt too."

At the time, Ellie wasn't sure what that meant.

"What are you talking about? I'd know if someone was trying to stab me in the back."

"That's not what I meant. It's okay, though. You'll see what I mean."

The girl shook off Ellie's pestering over cuts she missed with a quick, "I'm fine," and then looked at Ellie again. She had a weird look in her eyes, but Ellie couldn't place what that look meant. After a little while, she hopped off the bench the two were sitting at, before turning to talk to Ellie again.

"You're a really good friend, I'm glad I can always count on you. See you tomorrow."

When tomorrow came, she was welcomed by a scream that shook the *entire* girl's dorm. After a scramble to find the source, she arrived at her friend's single bed dorm. The door was ajar, and when she peered inside... Ellie could see her best friend hanging from the ceiling fan, a rope tied around her neck. At the time, she didn't get it, nor did she understand what her supposed "warning" meant. Now, though, she understands it perfectly well, even though she just can't stomach it.

The Noel household is quiet, aside from the destruction. After a little while, though, Ellie notices a faint *drip* coming from the bathroom. It sounds like water.

Ellie makes a dash for the source.

"You need to be careful, otherwise you'll just get hurt too."

She gets it now, of course. Where she grew up, the most important reason you were careful with your friendships was because you just never knew what might happen to them. The Garden was an awful place where your friends might become enemies tomorrow, they may disappear into the night, or they may lose the fight against their own demons. Her friend was warning her, "if you're so attached to me, and I leave this place, it will hurt you too."

And she was right, but that doesn't mean Ellie can just *stop*.

Ellie follows the dripping noise until she's at the master bathroom. The sound of water is definitely coming from here, it sounds like a... puddle, of some kind. She knocks, no response.

She holds her breath and twists the knob; it's unlocked.

Ellie *slowly* pushes the door open, still holding her breath.

As soon as the bathtub enters her vision, she knows where the sound has been coming from. However, Ellie doesn't get to ponder any further than that before she realizes what she's seeing.

The tub is filled to the brim with water... and Chase is at the bottom of it.

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When Chase wakes up on the bathroom floor, she's equal parts disoriented and hyper-aware. She's not even fully sure how she got here, and her head *really* hurts. She retraces her steps as best as possible.

She was going to have dinner, and then... she *didn't*. Instead, she got into the bottle of wine in the fridge, and then her memory gets really blurry. She definitely remembers breaking shit; in a way, it was kind of cathartic. She makes a mental note to see if they still have any more of those novel shops where you rent a room and break shit for an hour. After that memory, she remembers wanting to take a bath because of the cuts and bruises from fighting, then she got dizzy, and then she remembers... trying to hold her breath for a really long time. She isn't sure, but she doesn't *think* she was planning on getting out any time soon, so why...

Only then do her eyes finally make their way to the edge of the tub. It's completely drained, and Ellie is sitting right next to it. She's tucking her knees into her chest, looking straight forwards, as if to deliberately avoid looking at Chase. As the teenager's vision starts to adjust further, she realizes that Ellie's covered in water and *shivering*. That, combined with her frowning expression, made her look like a grumpy cat. Chase thinks that's pretty funny, but for some reason she can't quite get enough air to laugh. So instead, she sits up and calls out to Ellie, so she can tell her.

Instantly, Ellie's eyes snap over to where Chase is sitting on the ground. Before Chase can even tell her she looked like a grumpy cat, she's already being crushed by two surprisingly muscular arms. Ellie's hugged her a handful of times, but it was never this... tight? Desperate? Her hands are clutching onto Chase's shoulders like she's afraid Chase might disappear into thin air. It should be uncomfortable, but instead Chase's mind is on the fact that Ellie is at her house. She thinks she should be happy about that... but she's not.

And *then* she remembers why she was in the bathtub.

"What the fuck are you—get *off* of me!" Chase shoves Ellie off of her, and backs away. She's still pretty dizzy, so she doesn't try getting up, instead scooting away on her butt and hands. "Why are *you* here, anyways?"

It looks like Ellie was thrown off by that, big time. Normally, she'd banter with Chase or give a short quip that made her feel dumb for getting angry, but instead Ellie just *stares*. Her mouth is hanging open slightly, like she's at a loss for words. But that can't be true, because Ellie's never at a loss for words. Ellie's a true, once-in-a-generation genius. She's the one person that Chase can rely on to be *above* it all, to always have a calm, measured response to things. That's the Ellie that she knows; the Ellie that instantly bonded with her when she was a kid and needed a role model, the Ellie that helped her navigate *life* after her dad died. She was dependable and smart and resourceful and none of the words Chase normally thinks of when describing Ellie are what she's thinking here. This Ellie looks... like a wounded animal.

Chase is starting to get that "leaded muscles" feeling again. She doesn't want to be here.

"I just... I got a call that there was a bunch of loud noises here, and then when I came in the place was trashed, and—" Ellie's voice is practically quivering, she sounds like she's on the verge of collapse from how shaky it is, "And then you were in the *bathtub*, and you looked like you'd been in there a *really* long time, and—"

"Why didn't you just leave me there?" Chase didn't mean to say that aloud, but she's still feeling pretty lightheaded, so it slips out. Ellie stares at her with an expression that she has never seen before.

"What—why would I do that? You would have *died*!"

Chase doesn't answer, she just shrugs. She sees Ellie start to say something, but the words visibly die in her throat. No one says anything for what feels like years.

Then Chase speaks.

"I don't know, okay? But... I'm just *tired*. None of this fucking matters anyways, it's not like I'm gonna graduate high school and things are gonna magically get any better! I was *right there* when my dad died, that's a pretty fucked up start y'know, and guess what, it *never* got better. Before my mom died she wasn't even coming home from jobs at night, and I'd be so *scared*," Her voice breaks a little, "but she'd always say 'you're big enough, you can stay home by yourself' and I *couldn't* but she didn't care what I thought.

"I'd dream about my dad's dead body on top of me and wake up *every single night* to the house, just as *fucking* empty as it is now. I barely sleep, and no one fucking cares! When I got the shit beat out of me at school no one seemed to care, and *you* don't even care!"

Ellie looks like she's been punched in the stomach. She starts, "Chase, I—"

"**Fuck! You!**" Chase shouts, at the top of her lungs, "You didn't even tell me that my uncle tried to *kill himself* when you went to see him!"

The look on Ellie's face is killing her inside; she looks *miserable*. Chase can't stop herself at this point, and she really wishes she could.

"Yeah, I'm glad you feel bad now! Why didn't you feel bad for me when you saw that living room, huh? *Why the fuck didn't you tell me?!*"

"*When* was I supposed to do that?!" Ellie yells back, but there's a noticeable lack of energy behind it, "Your life is a fucking nightmare, how could I *ever* bring that up?"

"You just *do it*, I don't know, okay? But you didn't tell me and I found out when I took the fucking *monorail* to his house, found the door off the hinges with caution tape everywhere, and saw a bunch of black shit in his living room with a *gun*," Her voice breaks.

Chase doesn't give Ellie a chance to respond, she just keeps going, "He didn't even *call* me. I was alone in here for *so long* hoping that at *least* he'd show up, and it turns out he had the same idea I had. And then you, you... why didn't you tell me?"

Chase can tell Ellie feels bad about it. She's visibly wounded, and the reasoning she gave made sense. In the back of her mind, Chase knows that she would have reacted terribly to the news. But it still hurts *so bad* that she found out that way, and everything hurts because she got jumped, and her head hurts because she's a *fucking* idiot and drank a bunch of shit. She's just so...

"I don't know why this is happening to me. What's gonna happen ten years from now? Am I just gonna be by *myself*?"

"Chase—"

"*Don't fucking talk to me*, okay?! You're a fucking liar!"

Ellie freezes. Chase keeps yelling. She's pretty sure she's crying, but she can't even tell what's going on anymore.

It feels like the room is spinning.

"You're a fucking liar and you lied to me about my uncle, fuck you!" She turns and punches the wall several times. Compared to the holes she made in the living room walls, the dents left behind now are pitiful, "All you do is sit there and fucking pity me, and I *fucking* hate it. Mind your fucking business and *leave me alone!*"

The second those words leave her lips, her face crumples up before she lies down on the floor, turns away from Ellie, and sobs. She knows what she said isn't true, and that it isn't fair to Ellie at all; she's just upset. She's been to enough psychiatrist's appointments after her dad died to know that she's just upset and lashing out at something that will respond to her. But she still screamed something so *awful* at the person who just saved her life, and all of that just makes her feel even *worse*. She wants to apologize, but she's crying so hard she can't even form the words.

Her head hurts. She just wants all of this to stop.

It's not long before Chase feels someone lay down next to her. Someone else's back is right behind her own, but she can't bring herself to turn around.

"Did I ever tell you that I'm an orphan?" Ellie's voice asks from behind her.

Chase isn't sure how to respond. Ellie keeps talking.

"I was born the same year riftborn, demons, and espers appeared, so no one really knew what was going on when all of that... happened. My parents didn't even know what espers *were*, so when I started reading adult novels at two years old, my dad was convinced I was a demon. Not like, 'corrupted beast' demon, but the 'horror movie, kill your parents' kind. From that point onwards, he *hated* me."

Chase has never heard Ellie sound so... *defeated* before. She can't think of anything to say.

"My mom *at least* tried to love me, but sometimes she'd be scared too. You see, me having a perfect memory freaked them out. My mom was always willing to stick up for me though, so her and my dad fought all the time. She didn't necessarily understand what was going on with me, but in her eyes I wasn't a threat. Not that it mattered after he killed her during an argument," She laughs bitterly. "I was three. I watched it happen, and when he told me not to call anyone for help, I listened. Even though I might have been able to save her. I still think about that sometimes."

"But, you were just a baby..." Chase croaks out in response. She's not sure where that came from.

"I was. But like I said, perfect memory, remember? I couldn't forget it if I tried."

Chase isn't sure how to feel; at this point she's just listening to Ellie talk. It's the first time any adult has really... leveled with her like this, and she isn't quite sure what to say or do. Ellie, for her part, seems to be doing okay despite recounting such a terrible story. Chase can't see her face, but they're close enough for her to be able to tell she isn't shaking anymore.

"My dad met another woman and just... *moved on*. And then she convinced him to ship me off to a special home for espers, because in his words 'we can't provide what you need, but they can.' And do you know what he did?"

Chase has an idea, but she really wishes she didn't, "That was when he apologized?"

Ellie scoots closer, so that their backs are touching each other's, "Yeah. He sat in front of me and cried crocodile tears over it. I agreed, only because I didn't want to be there anymore. The facility ended up being a fucking nightmare too, by the way. They were doing government experiments on espers and shit, and it turned out my dad's girlfriend worked for them! So, that was my life until I turned seventeen and met your parents."

Chase bolts upright, the sheer volume of what she was just told having been a shock to her system, "Hold on, that was a lot there. You can't just skip past that!"

Ellie's still laying on the floor, but she rolls over so that she's laying on her back, looking up at Chase now. "My crazy life story isn't important. What I'm getting at is, we've both been through similarly fucked up stuff, right?"

Chase nods. She knows where Ellie's going with this.

"I'm not saying that you're not allowed to hate this, or be sad. I'm just telling you that, when I say 'I understand' or when I cry with you, I'm not pitying you. I do it because I look at you, and I see someone that *never* should have had a life like mine... but..."

Her voice starts to tremble. She sits up, propping her back up against the wall, so that her and Chase are facing each other.

"Everything happened anyways, and I hate that there's nothing I can do to fix it. You're *hurting* so badly, it's a hurt that I know so well, and there's nothing I can do."

She's doing her best not to sob, but the tears are pouring out.

"And then all of this happened, and I almost lost you. I was so scared that you died, I didn't know what to do."

Chase is confused about that, "What do you mean? You would have been fine, it's not like you're losing family like—"

Like I did.

She can't finish that sentence.

Ellie knows what she meant, of course, "It's fine to you, but I don't *have* family, Chase!" She chokes out a sob. "You're the closest thing I've ever had to a sister, you know. And just when I got used to that, I almost lost you."

Ellie starts wiping her eyes on her sleeve. She doesn't look like she's even remotely done crying, but she manages to get one more sentence out.

"Everyone that I've ever cared about in my life is dead, except you. Please don't do that to me."

It's shaky and quiet. The total opposite of anything Chase would ever expect Ellie to say. But... it hurts to hear. Not the same kind of hurt as before, where it radiated throughout her body, making her want to crawl under something and hide, but a different kind of hurt. It was an odd tugging sensation, one that makes her finally drag herself over to Ellie, throw herself onto the girl, and cry into her shoulder. They hugged and sobbed, apologizing for screaming at each other, but mostly just *finally* letting their walls down. It was... freeing.

Chase hadn't realized that the entire time, she had been putting Ellie on a pedestal. In her mind, the mechanic was a flawless individual—a genius inventor that builds weapons for demon hunters, who's so good at her job that the police hired her to do weapons analysis for them. She hadn't considered that the mechanic didn't just have her own struggles, but that her struggles mirrored Chase's own. The two genuinely *were* like siblings in a way, which Chase finds somewhat funny.

They stayed like that for a while, just crying in front of each other, because things have been so *hard* lately and neither of them have sat down and admitted it to the other. It's not like crying on Ellie's shoulder will change things. It won't bring her parents back, and Ellie crying on her shoulder won't change the things that happened to her in the past. None of that will change after today.

But it still feels like *something* was resolved, somehow.

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After both of them got most of their tears out, they cleaned up the water in the bathroom before surveying the damage in the living room. Seeing it once was bad enough, but on a second look through, Ellie's convinced it's not fixable. Chase, for her part, looked pretty shy about it; she was acting like a puppy that got caught tracking mud into the house, nervously glancing at the walls and avoiding Ellie's gaze while giving half answers in the vein of, "who could have done that?"

In contrast to what just happened, Ellie isn't even grilling her. It's not that she doesn't have the energy to, because she does, but after everything else... it just doesn't feel relevant. There's no point in digging through the mess, because Chase almost died two hours ago, and she's so happy that *didn't* happen that she couldn't care less about the living room. She does, however, make a point to go through the house and grab as many of the undamaged family pictures as possible. Some of them, like the pictures in her parents' room, are completely untouched. Others, like the pictures in her room, are warped by water stains (likely tears, Ellie thinks), but otherwise undamaged.

She doesn't tell Chase about this, mainly because the two have cried for hours at this point and they're both *tired* of doing that. So, she slips them in her pocket instead. There's a lot, but she's not planning on *hiding* them, she just wants to get out of here, first.

Then, silence.

Chase doesn't look nearly as bad as before, even though she's still got quite a few scrapes and bruises. The life in her eyes has come back a little, and she's making small jokes here and there. But... she's still going to be here afterwards. Ellie will go home, and Chase might stay over today, but tomorrow she'll need to come back. Or the day after. Sooner or later, she'll be forced to come back to this home and be crushed by the deafening silence of the family she used to live with being gone. They might have resolved something today, but she's going to spend *at least* the rest of her teenage years in this place before she can move.

And that's if she doesn't get thrown into foster care. Social services have been dilapidated for some time now, but New Haven is no stranger to rounding up orphans.

But what if she didn't have to go through any of that?

"Why don't you just move in with me?" Ellie barely registers the words that are coming out of her mouth.

Realistically, it's a *terrible* idea; she's not her legal guardian, and the paperwork to become one would be *insane*. They may not even accept it; Ellie *only* has a GED and her professional work history is practically nonexistent. They'd have to go to meetings separately *and* together, relive their traumas several times over, and there's still a chance that they view Ellie as unfit. She doesn't want to jump through all those hoops to still be told no, but then she thinks about Chase; the girl's entire life she's been dealing with the aftermath of things the adults in her life decided for *themselves*.

She recalls how desperately she wanted *someone* to put the teenager first.

So, she doesn't back down on it. She doesn't take it back. She doesn't play it off as a joke. She'll worry about what happens if they don't approve it later. She'll do whatever she has to, because she wants nothing more than for this kid to have *someone* in her life that has her fucking back.

Chase looks at her, clearly waiting for a 'just kidding' or a 'nevermind'. When it doesn't come, she quietly asks, "Are you sure?"

"I've never been sure of anything in my entire life. You have living alone, right?"

"Well, yeah, but you love it, I bet."

Ellie laughs a little; she's thrown off by how it sounds. She's never laughed like that before.

"Kid, you *gotta* stop assuming things. I hate living alone."

Epilogue: Moon River

Naturally, Chase was officially legally evicted from her childhood home shortly afterwards. The place really was fucked up, there was no hiding that from the police *or* the bank that owned it. The only reason they didn't have to pay for damages was because Ellie told both authorities the full story, making sure to lean *extra* hard on the "she lost her family" parts. It helped that Chase still looked rather ratty; frankly, she *looked* homeless, which helped sell their story.

Granted, it wasn't a story. But still.

By that time, Ellie had already helped Chase get moved in at her shop. Her bedroom, which Chase spent more time sleeping in anyways, was fully handed over to the teenager. The mechanic was ready for protests, or resignation. Something apprehensive; she knew her apartment was a far cry from the house Chase had lived in her whole life. The square footage wasn't comparable, and Ellie's assortment of appliances didn't match; she had gotten them from various dumps and fixed them up on her own, so it wasn't like she had a washer/dryer *set* or anything like that. Honestly, she wasn't sure why she was so self-conscious about her living space all of a sudden; she's lived here for years by now, with no issues.

But then again, this whole time she's been alone. She's never had another person that wanted to *live* here. So, maybe that's why she's worried that Chase won't like it.

Her worries seem to be unfounded, though, because half an hour after she's unpacked, Chase is already in her kitchen bugging her. The girl is sitting at the bar separating the living room from the kitchen and dining area, sipping a glass of orange juice while rambling to her about something she saw in a TV show. She had school today, but after everything that happened last night Ellie has no problem letting the girl take another day off. Ellie resolves that they're gonna be better about the school thing, but she doesn't exactly care about school herself, so she's not sure how much that's going to stick.

Really, though, she wonders how she ever managed to live alone.

Having another person in the house was strange. They both still had their own share of night terrors and awful mornings, but every time they woke the other up with that commotion, they'd just convene in the kitchen and talk. Ellie would tell sad stories about her orphanage, and Chase would tell sad stories that made her miss her parents. But it was nice to have a shoulder to cry on, a person to vent to, and a friend that *understood*.

A few months pass.

The air around Chase is *completely* different. Not only does the girl have loads more energy than before, often resembling the little girl from so many years ago, but she's gotten a bit rougher around the edges. Part of this is Ellie's fault; for all of the things that she's helped with, the two things that she did *not* do a good job with were Chase's foul mouth and her temper.

Granted, the teenager fixed that second part on her own. She's become quite observant in her own way, not mathematically trying to pick the best thing to say in a conversation like Ellie, but she remembers minuscule details almost as good as the mechanic does. That bothers her a little, since Ellie's *psychic ability* is supposed to be that, meanwhile it looks like Chase's memory truly is just that good. She can't bring herself to be mad, though, because Chase has sort-of turned into Ellie's de-facto assistant. The mechanic didn't think she needed the help, but she didn't realize how hard it was to phrase things to her coworkers at the PIU in a way that made sense to *them*.

Chase was good at that. She could look at a piece of tech, take Ellie's breakdown on how it works, and then explain it to someone in a way that the dumbest person on the planet could understand. Ellie's two steps away from asking her to write the documentation herself, but the mechanic knows that it would be faster if she stuck to that for now. She still asks Chase to thoroughly proofread them, though.

"Dude, when are you gonna start paying me? Didn't the cops hire you because you were supposed to be the one working?" She grumbles as she reads through Ellie's printed documentation for the latest plasma rifle that was recovered from a crime scene. She's going through line by line, marking the things she doesn't like with a red pen.

"I *am* the one working. How do you think they got that rifle in the first place?" One of Ellie's contacts was the one that dropped it off. She doesn't tell Chase that; the girl is *not* a secret keeper. She'll tell her *eventually*, just not while the case is ongoing.

Chase just rolls her eyes, before going back to proofreading. She doesn't look up from the papers, but after a while she asks, "Is that guy who came here yesterday one of your informants?"

What the—

Ellie *did* meet one of her informants yesterday. He was a big, burly man that was bald but made up for it with a massive beard. He wore a denim vest, faded denim jeans, an orange tank top, and had a machine gun for an arm. This guy was a well known mercenary, and had been a frequent customer of hers for a really long time. It's the reason he trusts Ellie enough to give her whatever info she needs when she asks. The amount she's paying him probably helps, though.

Ellie's main concern right now is how in the hell Chase knows about that. Rather, she's trying to convince Chase that wasn't exactly what happened.

"No, Chase. He's not."

"*Riiiiight*, and just so you know, I'm actually a werewolf."

"I didn't know that!" Ellie's playing dumb, of course.

Chase just stares at her. "If you're lying to me, I know your computer password. I'll delete all of your project files and send porn to your coworkers."

"You wouldn't."

"Try me," The teenager sticks out her tongue, before putting the cap on her pen and throwing the stack of papers back at Ellie. She reads them; the corrections are great, as usual. She *should* be paying Chase, the girl really does do a good job.

Ellie sighs, "You're right. What about it?"

"I *knew* it!" Chase pumps a fist in the air, "I was trying to guess based on the sound of the conversation. You know when you're meeting an informant in the shop you get way quieter than normal, right? It's basically a dead giveaway that you're having a super secret meeting."

Great, she has a pattern mapped out. Nothing gets past her.

"Well, I don't mind you knowing. Just don't tell anyone about it."

"Cool, any other secrets?"

Ellie thinks about it. She's got a *lot* of those, but she hasn't been in much of a 'secret keeping' mood, herself.

"Did you know that during the war, they tried making metal from dragon scales?"

"No way. What happened to that?"

It's an interesting story. Something to do with dragon scales losing their sturdiness when melted down was the official reason, but Ellie knew that a big, under-reported reason the project was abandoned was because the riftborn spies *stole* the idea and their scientists improved it. In just the short period they had been on earth, they had familiarized themselves with human science and technology. Elven scientists in particular were on a completely different level from human scientists, since their magic system was scientific in nature. The blend of the two was unheard of, at the time, so human armies abandoned the project in hopes that none of their other documents would be stolen. It didn't stop riftborn from utilizing it, though.

When she finishes telling the story, Chase is staring in awe.

"How do you *know* that?"

"The PIU works with riftborn, remember? It's hard *not* to hear stories like that when you spend a lot of time over in Olympia."

That just prompts even more questions. Ellie answers all of them with as many details as Chase wants. It's the noisiest, most energetic conversation that Ellie's ever had in her home. The idea of living alone is, genuinely, unfathomable to her now that the teenager's been there for as long as she has. Ellie's not sure how she survived without the daily commotion of another person living there.

She's really glad that she asked Chase to move in with her. It's the best decision she's ever made.

Part Two: Anchorage

Prologue: Cold Water

For Eleanor Berkeley, things have been pretty good lately. She's been making good money, she's been sleeping better, and it's *good* sleep, too. It feels like she's been getting out of bed feeling refreshed more often than not these days. She's gone from waking up thirty minutes before her alarm every morning to being woken up *by* her alarm nearly every morning. In the past, this would have pissed her off *tremendously*, but these days she doesn't have it in her to complain. She looks at the holographic 3D image floating above her cellphone; the time reads six o'clock, and the speech bubble floating above the fox's head reads out:

Happy Monday! Chase has school today, no breaks!

She stifles a laugh. It's only been a couple years since then, but it's such a stark difference from her life in the years before that she can't help but enjoy the change of pace.

Around two years ago, the daughter of a couple friends of hers' wound up orphaned due to some pretty devastating stuff. Her parents were political activists that played a massive role in getting the ceasefire agreement that officially ended the Last War signed. It was, by all accounts, a good deal; Earth's population and human infrastructure had been decimated by decades of war *before* the appearance of riftborn kicked things off, and the riftborn themselves—a collective of newly arriving species including elves, vampires, dragons, and *much* more—were not the kind of opponents that humanity could go against in such a weakened state. The combination of magic with human technology and science quickly led to the riftborn gaining advantage during the war, as it was easier for them to learn to utilize human technology than it was for humans to adapt to the various forms of riftborn magic. The powers that be wanted the war to continue for financial purposes, but thanks to the efforts of Ellie's friends, Jack and Kaitlin Noel, they were able to get people to realize they were speedballing towards oblivion.

The threat of demons filling uninhabited areas and Kaitlin being some weird hybrid of a human and demon probably helped, but Ellie couldn't say. It's not like she was there.

Unfortunately, though, the couple still seemed to have their own fair share of enemies from their peacemaking efforts, which is ultimately how Chase ended up at Ellie's mixed-use apartment in New Haven. Awful would be an understatement—it was one hell of a miserable time. Chase herself was a pre-teen when her dad died, then a teenager when her mom died, and then to top it off her uncle was... a different case entirely. *He* had been undergoing his own fair share of issues prior; his wife and unborn child having passed away due to a respiratory infection she had contracted. When he got news that Chase's mother had died he couldn't handle it, and attempted to take his life. Except since he was *technically* a demon, he didn't necessarily *die*... it's a whole thing that makes Ellie feel weirdly upset the more she thinks about it.

Either way, as a result, the poor girl found herself in the midst of the worst time in her life with no family to lean on for support. So, the mechanic stepped in; she and Chase had a good enough relationship, with Ellie having been her babysitter on occasion when Chase was in elementary school and provided a safe place for her to hang out away from her parents when she got too old to call it "babysitting." When Chase moved in, it was almost as though the two had always lived together, with her moving into the bedroom Ellie had set up but never slept in herself. She was a good roommate, and did a good job taking care of her spaces or helping with chores. Most importantly, it was just *nice* to have someone else in the house.

Ellie thinks about all of this while she's in the kitchen making breakfast. It's a new part of the morning routine for her; she never had breakfast on a consistent basis growing up, so she herself was content to eat cereal or whatever leftovers were in her fridge, washing it down with some coffee when it was time to get to work. Now, though, she puts great care into cooking breakfast. She makes something different every morning, keeps track of the things Chase likes and dislikes, and most importantly—

The automatic door to Chase's room slides open, and the short, scruffy haired teenager shuffles out. She's wearing an oversized white T-shirt that goes all the way past her knees, and despite her blue eyes shining bright and early this Monday morning, she's giving a strong "please leave me alone" vibe.

Not happening. She *has* to go to school today.

"Chase, it's your senior year. Your schedule is mostly electives, it couldn't *possibly* be that hard," Ellie's exasperated. She can't emphasize enough how much she doesn't care about school, but the level to which Chase doesn't care is *truly* enigmatic.

The teenager, for her part, is reasonable with her demands, "I'm just saying, why *Mondays*? Mondays suck! I bet you'd *loooove* to sleep in on Mondays, right?"

"I sure would, which is why you need to *graduate* so that I can do that."

"But you didn't graduate!"

"I never *went to school*, and I still had to get my GED!"

"Well, what if I don't want a GED?"

Ellie snorted, clueing Chase in to her mistake a bit too late, "*Well*, if you don't want a GED, I suggest you be ready for school in forty minutes. I even started early, so you'd get up earlier!"

Chase rests her forehead on the dining room table, groaning as loudly as she can.

The smell of breakfast in the morning was Ellie's secret weapon to get Chase out of bed on time. Chase had the sniffers of a hound; she picked up new scents in the house with a frightening amount of speed and accuracy. Food in any capacity was bound to have the ever-hungry teenager sneaking around the corner, but breakfast in particular was her weakness. Today, Ellie's pulled out all the hits: sausage, waffles, bacon, eggs, and even some toast, the kind of shit you'd feed a football team. She needed to sweeten the deal as much as possible, because Chase *really* has to go to school today.

It turned out, Ellie truly *was* awful at this part.

Almost immediately after Chase moved in, the two stopped caring about school. It wasn't a big deal in the long run, the girl really *had* been through a lot, and she was a smart enough kid that she really didn't need to physically sit in the class to learn most subjects. Ellie probably could have homeschooled her, even! Alas, they had that whole "legal guardian" thing to abide to. After Chase missed two weeks' worth of school on the back of her previous strings of absences, Ellie got a nicely worded letter in the mail that outlined in no uncertain terms, "if Chase Noel continues to have unexcused absences, we will begin steps to revoke your guardianship."

Ergo, Chase *really* has to go to school. Every day. Junior year was a piece of cake, but now that they're on the home stretch the teenager is *not* making it easy.

She's eating her breakfast, all while glaring daggers at Ellie. The sight of someone no taller than 5'6 angrily stuffing her mouth full of eggs, bacon, sausage, and waffles at the same time is honestly pretty funny. She's *really* selling it too, making sure to shovel food in her mouth as forcefully as possible. Ellie can't help but laugh at Chase, who responds by glaring *harder* and stuffing her face *even more* forcefully, in turn making Ellie laugh more. It's a noisy morning, just like every morning for the past two years. She loves having the kid around, honestly; Ellie can't recall a time in her life where she's ever had this much fun.

So it makes her feel pretty bad that, when all of that fades and Chase heads off to the monorail station for her ride to school, she can't help but feel so...

It's a lot of things, really.

Before Chase came along, she had one main source of income: she was a freelance mechanic and engineer, making her entire income off of building weapons for demon hunters. If done well, it can be a lucrative industry; demon hunting was a part of the stopgap solution used to end the war between humans and riftborn. The entire thing was, ultimately, about resources—the riftborn were willing to build their own territories away from the humans, however there was simply a lack of inhabitable land, and the ever-increasing amount of demons made less and less of these areas inhabitable. Demon hunting was the solution; stop the war, clear areas out, and then no one will need to fight because there will be room for everybody. This actually worked quite well, leading to demon hunting being a chosen profession for many people who have skills strong enough to consider risking their lives in such a fashion. Ellie preferred to be "the one selling the shovels," so to speak.

However, there's no way to *truly* know someone's intent to use a weapon at the point of sale. So, when someone bought weapons from her and sold them on the black market to a guy stupid enough to try and use them on *people*, it brought the cops right to her door. The only reason she didn't get in trouble was because of the device's built-in failsafe; an intelligent auto-targeting system that detected it was being aimed at humans and disabled the weapon before a single shot could be fired. That, along with a "personal connection," was what got her off the hook. And as a result, she found herself "temping" at the Paranormal Investigations Unit chapter in her mega-city, New Haven.

Well, two years ago, at least.

They've since hired her to work for them full time, and she can't complain about that either. The chief likes her (even though Ellie can't stand the woman's guts) and the various officers she's come in contact with were all quite friendly people. There was the occasional bad actor, but overall the types of people drawn to the PIU weren't looking to do this for nefarious purposes. It wasn't exactly a relaxing or rewarding endeavor, in and of itself.

The Paranormal Investigations Unit is a branch of law enforcement that operates in every mega-city, created specifically to handle crimes and emergencies directly involving espers, riftborn, or on *very* infrequent occasion, demons. The concept was rather new, but after civilization was rebuilt following the Last War it was quickly deemed necessary in order to quell the growing wave of humans awakening as espers and seeking to use their new abilities for misdeeds. Simply put, the best way to police people with psychic abilities was to make a unit of law enforcement that had people with psychic abilities in it. An added bonus was that riftborn were *also* seemingly interested in this form of policing; prior to their arrival, police systems were unique to a particular kingdom or hegemony. This directly resulted in lots of systems being poorly implemented, or abused outright.

Ellie didn't have the heart to tell the few she's come in contact with that historically, human policing methods haven't been much better. After all, there's not a lot of ways to stop people with power from abusing that power.

But still, this unlikely interest led to PIU jobs being the first postwar jobs to hire humans and riftborn equally. While this definitely led to a significant increase in human trust amongst riftborn, which made the actual *job* easier, it also led to a pretty significant *decrease* in status for humans who actively sought working in the PIU. It wasn't uncommon to hear of people being ostracized from their friends or family due to "fraternizing with invaders." Even to other units of law enforcement, the PIU were seen as "freaks that would sell out their family for elf pussy."

Some guy said that to Ellie's face once, while she was out grocery shopping. He didn't know she worked there, and she didn't tell him because it (unfortunately) made her laugh. It was a pretty funny insult, even though the ethos behind it was incredibly frustrating to deal with. She doesn't regret deciding to work with the PIU, though. They left her to her own devices, and her only job was to analyze and gather information on tech or weapons in order to help the other officers put together their own cases. Sometimes she had to go with one of their squads on a field assignment, but even then she'd be left alone in a tent off to the side.

It was a job she was good at, a job she liked, and...

"Ellie, this week you'll be going with CATR whenever they're dispatched. Sound good?"

...a job that the Chief of New Haven's PIU chapter, Mina Kurosawa, was definitely trying to take away from her.

"C'mon Mina, don't—"

The chief's eyes flash for a moment, "First of all, we're in uniform; I'm your *chief*, do not **ever** call me by my first name when we're in uniform. Second, no buts. You're not getting assigned to their team full time, they just occasionally need a weapons expert onsite with them when they go out."

"What for? I already go on field assignments, how is a dispatch any different?"

Chief Kurosawa sharply inhales, closing her eyes and pinching the bridge of her nose, "Ellie, I swear—"

"I'm not doing this on purpose!" The mechanic raises both hands in surrender, "I'm genuinely confused here, what's the difference between me going on a dispatch and having a field assignment?"

"Because, your job is directly involved with CATR and what they bring back after being dispatched. When you're on a field assignment, it's because there's already an ongoing investigation and one of our investigators needs your help."

"Okay, and when CATR needs my help, they just explain what's going on to me."

The chief is *glaring*, now; it's rare for her to get mad, this must be serious. Ellie tries to back down, but the mood is incredibly sour, and Chief Kurosawa is *not* having it.

"I'm starting to realize, you have an issue with authority. I thought at first you just didn't like police, but you don't like being told what to do *at all*, is that right?"

Ellie nods, reluctantly. Kurosawa tends to give folks a pretty nasty scolding; this is gonna suck.

"Well, **get used to it**. I don't *have* to tell you why you're doing anything. When I ask you to do something, I need you to listen to me. If you're gonna be here I *need* you to get that through your head."

Technically, I didn't ask to be here, you coerced me, is what Ellie's thinking in response to that. But she knows that's not even true anymore; she's the one who pressed forward with the full-time employment step, after all. At the time, she genuinely just needed a consistent paycheck that wasn't reliant on her ability to work on projects at home, because she *couldn't*. Everything with Chase was happening at the same time, and the girl needed emotional support way more than Ellie needed to be building weapons for her shop.

Now, though, she's starting to miss it a little bit. Ellie hates being given orders, it reminds her of being given impossible tasks at The Garden and being punished when said impossible tasks were proven to be exactly as she feared.

She doesn't say any of that, of course, because she knows that the chief is correct in this instance. She *has* been a bit of a pain in the ass lately, and it *doesn't* make her job at the PIU any easier, so she gives in to Kurosawa's demands without much more fuss. The chief, for her part, has grown a lot more used to bossing Ellie around. Somewhere along the way, she must have realized that these days Ellie was like a declawed tiger; she was so far from the person the chief had met years ago that whatever ferocity she had was long gone. The idea that someone who was *genuinely* afraid of her in the past is so unafraid now makes her feel... some type of way.

It can't possibly be a bad thing, though, so Ellie lets it slide.

"What's the deal, anyways, *Chief*?" She makes sure to leave that title *dripping* with vitriol. If she had to use it, she was gonna make Kurosawa so annoyed that her boss would give up.

The chief is, seemingly, unbothered, "Currently CATR's dispatches have been a bit... messy. A lot of the weapons and ammunition left behind haven't been in a good enough state to transport back and forth, so they're hoping they can get faster analysis on-site."

A completely reasonable request. Ellie hated those, because it was harder to say "no" in a way that the chief would accept. But... "Define 'messy,' I don't like the sound of that."

"Sorry, I should have been more clear. There's been a string of... *unnatural* homicides lately, and from what we can tell they've been using heavily modified weaponry. It's been difficult to clean up the things we've been able to recover."

So, in other words, it's exactly what Ellie's worried about. It's been a *long* time since she's had to look at human remains; the last thing she wants is to start going to crime scenes and digging through them herself. The idea of it makes her skin crawl.

Chief Kurosawa is studying her reaction, closely. Ellie isn't sure what she's looking for, but then she starts speaking, "Ellie, I'm not sure what you're apprehensive about, but no one is expecting you to be digging through bodies for bullet casings. They just don't want to load fragile or heavily damaged items in our transportation storage, as that's where they tend to break."

That makes her feel a *bit* better.

"So, when does that—"

Alarms start going off. There's a siren with a low-pitched drone, and flashing red lights in the corners of every room. The colors of the lights and the pitch of the siren indicate that it's a CATR dispatch call. Chief Kurosawa looks at Ellie, that devilish, shit-eating grin plastered on her face without a care in the world. "Right now. Go meet with your team before they leave without you!"

God, Ellie wishes she could throw a good punch into her jaw right about now. She'd (probably) lose the resulting fight, but she could at least wipe that grin off of Kurosawa's face first. Naturally, the chief returns Ellie's stare, and her grin widens.

"Is there something you'd like to get off your chest? How about we close the door for some... *privacy*?"

That's an invitation.

Any other day, Ellie would gladly take it; the chief's been getting on her nerves lately, and these days she's been wanting to throw a punch or two *badly*. But today, she has her orders, and she likes getting paid, so she shakes her head and says "nevermind" instead.

The chief maintains her shit-eating grin, and replies, "Well, if you ever change your mind, just let me know!"

Ellie really hated that woman; she was endlessly nosy, arrogant, and *bossy*. Granted, she was the chief of their entire unit, but that didn't mean Ellie had to vibe with her leadership style. She was the type to bark orders and expect them to be done with no follow-up; if she was following up on you, you had already made a mistake. It was annoying to have someone breathing down your neck in that regard, but at the same time Ellie quickly learned the fastest way not to have that experience was to stay on top of your work. She didn't hate that, by any means, but it was annoying when she dropped new things on your lap and expected you to do them.

But, again, she likes being paid, so off to CATR's loading bay she goes.

Their main method of transportation is an armored van, with enough seating room for everyone on the team plus four. The CATR logo is adorned on the side, itself a modified version of the New Haven PIU logo: a golden heptagram with a brown bear in the center. CATR's logo is the right half of the heptagram, with CATR's acronym written out next to it, reading "Citizen Aid and Threat Removal." Needlessly flashy, but it suits the vibe quite well.

This team specializes in the direct response to active esper and riftborn criminals. Where the other team, RFAT (Rescue and First Aid Team) prioritizes clearing out civilians as quickly as possible, CATR is there to do the dirty work once the scene is evacuated. Naturally, this job is sought after by people that simply want to fight; this caused *lots* of culture issues in the past, according to the chief. CATR's members are hand picked by the chief of each mega-city's PIU, since their fighting ability and decision-making under pressure are two of the main factors considered. Chief Kurosawa's predecessor leaned *hard* on these two factors, promoting officers that may not have been good fits due to "other aspects of their personality" to CATR. When her predecessor left, many of those bad apples went with her... but not all of them, which is part of the problem Kurosawa is trying to fix now.

There are three people on CATR's current active squad, with five more in their reserves. This team is a cohesive unit, but the active squad in particular are holdovers from the time before Kurosawa took the reins. One of them is their captain, Alice Molton: an *incredibly* talented pyrokinetic, and the only one actually standing in the loading bay. Everyone else is loaded up and inside the transport vehicle, with Alice checking the pressure gauges on the tires. Ellie didn't need to be filled in much as to why this particular woman was problematic for Chief Kurosawa, because one thing about Alice was that she had an *ugly* personality. Like, real bad.

"Oh, so now we're babysitting Four-Eyes? Great, someone get a leash, so she doesn't get lost!" She loves leaning on old-timey insults like that, despite being older than Ellie. It's pretty poor taste to call people things like that these days; optic augmentation surgeries were becoming more common, and plenty of riftborn *actually* had four or more eyes, which made using it as an insult awkward. Unless you were Alice, in which case you didn't care, and were willing to bark down anyone that spoke up about it. To her, the more important factor was seemingly to make people feel small or childish.

Ellie *truly* disliked this woman. Not the "hate" she felt towards Chief Kurosawa, which would be more akin to petulance directed towards someone she knew would never respond in kind. Rather, this was an active dislike that made controlling her tongue a bit harder than usual.

"Don't worry about me, I'm just here because the chief said *you* guys needed me, anyways."

She didn't *necessarily* say that, but Alice doesn't know.

"We don't *need* someone who can't even take care of herself rolling out with us," The pyrokinetic makes a point to step up to Ellie, making the two stand eye to eye. The rest of the team begins piling into the transport while the two argue.

"I'm not fighting, I'm gonna be over in a tent looking at fucking bullet casings and whatever guns you bring me. You guys can have all of the fighting you want."

"Then you can get your own ride. Better yet, stick to that lab of yours." she said, before turning to hop into the driver's seat of the CATR transport vehicle. She slams the door in Ellie's face right as the engine turns on, and then off they go, leaving Ellie in the loading bay. She's so pissed off that she doesn't even know what to do with herself.

So, she just opts to do what she always does whenever shit like this happens; tell Kurosawa about it. This time, the chief's demeanor regarding the situation has flipped entirely, and she looks rather annoyed that she spent all that time arguing with Ellie just for the team's leader to give the mechanic a fat middle finger anyways. Ellie, for her part, wants to say it doesn't bother her, but that would be a lie.

Truth is, it's starting to get under her skin. Big time.

When she pushed to be hired on full-time, she was under the assumption that her work at the PIU would eventually garner her some favor with the people working there. She wasn't trying to work her way up the ladder, mind you, she just wanted to build a proper camaraderie with the people that had already been there. And *most* of the time she was successful at that; the people who *had* gone and acknowledged her were kind to her. However, there was absolutely no way she could have expected the open *vitriol* some of the veteran officers there held towards her. Not because of any one thing she did, but because in their minds she was a young recruit that the chief brought on as a nepo-hire purely because she was somewhat smart. In their minds, she held no value to the PIU in any real way, and would quickly be replaced if they were able to find someone smarter, *and* more useful in the field.

Never mind the fact that over two years they just... never found that person to replace her with. Or the fact that she was hired *specifically* because she brought a unique value to the PIU. But since she didn't have psychic abilities *that they could see*, they viewed her as someone just filling a spot. It's not like she had a network of connections to the various black-markets popping up around New Haven, or a personal, handmade database of demon hunting equipment and the modifications that people generally make to them. She's *definitely* never written forty-page reports detailing the configuration of confiscated materials, and *definitely* hasn't been having Chase proofread them so that they're easily digestible by the officers at the PIU.

To the few officers that hated Ellie, none of these things seemed to matter. Anyone could be doing that, apparently.

From Ellie's lab, she can *just barely* see the loading bay. It's far, at least twenty-five feet away, but with her eyesight it's a great view. She's practically got a front row seat to see the CATR team coming back some time later, looking somewhat haggard—whatever happened out there must have been rough. Their squad leader in particular looks like she's in bad shape, her leg is twisted at an odd angle, and two other members of the team are helping her stay upright. They don't get a break either, because Kurosawa *meets them in the loading bay* and absolutely unleashes on them. Alice and the two helping her stand seem to be more annoyed with being talked to than remorseful, but Ellie doesn't care. She's just happy to see them looking beat up.

And then she hears someone say her name. Ellie listens closer.

She's on the other side of the building, and she's pretty certain no one knows her hearing is *this* good, so she's curious to know what they have to say while they think she's out of earshot. It takes a lot of effort to focus through *all* of the noise that's so much closer than the loading bay is, but she forces herself to pay as close attention as possible.

When she hears the phrase, "it's not like that useless bitch is gonna help us out anyways," Ellie barely registers when her feet start carrying her to the source. And then suddenly she's in the loading bay and everyone's staring at her completely bewildered, when she asks, "Who the fuck called me a 'useless bitch'?"

Alice looks at her, just as confused. Then, her face contorts into an ugly scowl, "**Me.** What, you got a problem? You gonna throw rocks at me?"

"I'll do a *lot* more than that. How's that divorce going, by the way?" Ellie fires back. The entire room, even the chief, recoils with an "*oof*".

It's an extremely low blow; Alice was divorced from her ex-husband roughly six months ago, and she's currently locked in a custody battle with him over their teenage daughter. There's already been several instances where she's had to leave work early, either due to meeting with her lawyer, or because of something that "came up". Her custody issues aren't necessarily public knowledge, but Ellie got access to the employee database and saw where the PIU was filtering his number; he must have been a frequent caller.

It doesn't take long for Alice to realize she knows that, and when she does the pyrokinetic is visibly furious. Ellie's ready for whatever happens next, she's long since hit her limit. She can feel every muscle in her body getting twitchy from a sudden influx of adrenaline; it's the first time in years, but she's *literally* itching for a fight.

The temperature in the room rises. A lot.

"Look, you Four-Eyed—"

At this point, the prospect of punching this motherfucker in the jaw has Ellie so keyed up, she feels like she could run through a wall and come out unscathed. "Oh my *god*, Alice! When are you gonna come up with new material? Don't tell me you hit your head when you tripped and fell out there."

Now, the people helping Alice stand up are clearly mad. A tall, lanky man with green hair, and a shorter, stocky woman with blue hair. They're both glaring at Ellie like she was insulting *them* personally, and while she's enamored that they're willing to stand up for their squad leader, she's *real* tired of people talking to her however they want today. So, Ellie decides to give them a little something, too.

"Aw, what? You're gonna fight me, now? I'm not scared of you."

"Ellie—" Chief Kurosawa's tone has a bit of a warning behind it, but the chief has been getting on her nerves so *that* pisses her off, too. The mechanic turns to give Kurosawa a piece of her mind, but pauses when she sees the chief's eyes glowing. That's not an *angry* glare, that's—

The temperature in the room *skyrockets*.

Suddenly, it's *blisteringly* hot; so hot that the people keeping Alice held up let her go on reflex, causing her to stumble as she puts weight on a clearly unsteady leg. It's so hot that even the other members of CATR standing amongst themselves are visibly affected by it, as though something's *wrong* with the air conditioning. It's so hot that it feels like Ellie's skin is going to melt right off the bone, like she's trapped inside a pressure cooker. It's so *hot* that it feels like something is about to catch fire with just a tiny spark. Ellie wants to keep her nerve, but it's just so *hot* that her vision is getting wavy, and it's all starting to remind her of waking up inside that burning building again.

The instant her mind drifts to the fire at The Garden things start to spiral *fast*, and she can't keep her composure.

Her heart rate is spiking.

It's getting hard to hear, but at the same time it feels like *everything* is far too loud. It feels like her lungs are *trying* to hold in the air she's breathing, but at the same time she can't get enough oxygen. The air becomes toxic for what feels like the first time in decades, ripping its way out of her diaphragm, through her lungs, and up through her windpipe. It feels like everyone in the entire building is watching her convulse on the floor, yet no one cares enough to do something about it. All she can feel is eyes on her. She wants to dig underground and hide as long as possible, to hold her breath forever if it makes everything stop feeling like it's happening everywhere all at once.

Of all the things that could happen right now, it's *anxiety*.

She's going to have an anxiety attack in front of *all these fucking people*, after talking so much shit only seconds ago.

It's so embarrassing that she could die.

Her memories of The Garden were *finally* starting to fade after being away from everything for close to ten years, but it feels like the details are permanently entrenched in her soul no matter what. It's getting rarer these days, but whenever she *does* start thinking about The Garden, and she *does* start to freak out... things get weird. She starts getting a loud ringing in her ears, she starts seeing shit and hearing sounds from eleven years ago that *definitely* aren't there in reality, and it feels like her body starts responding like it did back then. As though at a moment's notice she's getting dropped in a time machine and thrown back into her body during her teenage years.

And the best part is that it's always different; sometimes, she's having ice cold water thrown on her to wake her up to the darkness of being in solitary. Sometimes, she's standing in The Ring, the spotlight on her so hot it almost burns her skin, surrounded by every kid at The Garden but unable to see their faces. Sometimes, she's overseeing The Maze, and sometimes, she's waking up in the fire.

The Garden's doesn't exist anymore. The whole thing, including every staff member that ever worked there, is gone forever. But it feels like she's still there.

She knows what this *thing* plaguing her mind every waking second is, but she doesn't want to admit it. It's childish, but it feels like if she admits that there's something very wrong with her, *it* wins. And, well, that's why this is all a problem. Because if it keeps getting hotter, she's *gonna* have a flashback in front of everyone that thinks she's mentally well adjusted, and she really doesn't want to do that here.

Anywhere but here.

Before she's too far gone, Ellie feels a hand slowly rubbing her back. It goes on for what is *realistically* a few minutes, but feels like hours. Then, what seems to be its owner shouts at Alice to "knock it off." The voice sounds feminine; a somewhat deep pitched voice, with a slight edge to it that makes her sound young, but not like a pushover. Definitely enough to get Alice to listen to her, even if she doesn't do so right away. Once the heat starts to dissipate, Ellie can slowly feel herself start to come back into her own body. Her vision is too blurry to make out what exactly is going on, though—is she crying? She wipes at her eyes, and the liquid being wiped away instantly clears her vision.

There's not a word she could use to describe the embarrassment she feels. Doubly so because the person who bailed Ellie out turns out to be *gorgeous*.

Ellie can't make out her height because she's crouching down, but she's dressed somewhat plainly, with a white dress shirt, black tie, black slacks, and black dress shoes, all topped off by her standard issue CATR jacket. Unlike the others, she was mostly unharmed, which was odd because Ellie recognized her as the *newest* recruit to the team; maybe she provided long range support?

Another scan of her uniform tells Ellie that, no, she's been fighting: her dress shirt is tussled and dirty, her slacks are stretched and ripped in a couple areas, and her dress shoes are scuffed pretty badly. She's also wearing a pair of black gloves, with the palms worn off slightly. If Ellie had to *actually* guess, she'd be some type of sword fighter. Her build seems about as such, with broad shoulders and a build that appeared more lean than bulky, but with a good bit of muscle at the biceps and forearm. Her face betrayed the fact that she was *clearly* someone with a lot of fighting experience; she was *cute*. Fair skin, jet black hair, almond shaped, hazel eyes, good makeup, and Ellie could even spot the visage of a *tattoo* on the lower part of her neck.

Ellie pulled herself back. That was two seconds. Any more and it gets weird... except the *microsecond* Ellie looked away, the girl whispered "Like what you see?"

And that was when Ellie noticed the faint tingle on her skin that clued her in to the usage of ESP—bio-electricity generated by the central nervous system, used by espers as an energy source for their abilities. That, combined with the fact that the woman crouching next to her caught her two-second scan as naturally as she breathed, gave Ellie a good guess as to what her psychic ability might be.

But Ellie's a *little* petty, so she replies with a quiet, but no less smug, "I could ask you the same." The left corner of the woman's lip turning up slightly was a nice reward.

Now that she's calmed down a bit, Ellie quickly remembers there's quite a few people in this room, so she puts herself back together. Alice and the two officers holding her up were gone, but everyone else in the squad was still there, staring at Ellie. And then she remembers she *did* kind of insult them and their squad leader earlier. She feels kind of bad that they caught a few strays earlier, so she sheepishly apologizes.

"Sorry, I was being a jerk. I got a bit heated."

Silence. And then, the largest one *cackles*, saying "Good one!" Three of the other four members of CATR—excluding the one that just helped Ellie out—start to join in laughing with him, clearly rejuvenated. Ellie's wondering where the jokes came from (her unintentional pun aside), when the big guy speaks again.

"Man, I can't believe Alice talks to you like that. She's such a bitch."

"If you thought she was being a bitch, why didn't you say something?" Ellie responds. It's a little rude, but she doesn't have the energy to think of a nicer way to phrase things. Of course they want to speak up now, but all Alice has done for two years is insult her to her face with juvenile bullshit. It's more than a little frustrating.

He's thrown off a little, "I mean, we *can't*. What if she dings us for insubordination?"

"I wouldn't sign off on it!" Chief Kurosawa responds from the other side of the room.

Everyone sure is comfortable now that Alice is gone.

Ellie looks over at Kurosawa, then at the big guy again, raising an eyebrow. He just shrugs, sheepishly. He was taller *and* wider than everyone else on the team, a redhead with a full face of facial hair, and spoke with a volume that absolutely boomed throughout the room. Ellie doesn't recognize him. She looks at the other three people, all talking amongst themselves, then at the woman who helped her again, and realizes... she doesn't recognize *any* of them. At all. She could back up and do introductions, but after everything that just happened that doesn't seem right. Honestly, all of this feels weird to her, so she instinctually starts making her way out of the room. Before she can get far, a *different* voice calls out to her. This one belonged to a *very* short man with scruffy, dark brown hair.

"What, you're leaving already? We've never even talked before!"

Sure enough, "Sorry, Ellie, I should have said something sooner," Kurosawa speaks up again, this time walking up to Ellie in order to stand side-by-side with her. "This is actually our reserves team, they've been handling roughly sixty-five percent of CATR's dispatch calls as of late. *This* is the team I wanted to start sending you out with, but I wasn't expecting today's dispatch to require both teams. Alice tends to get... *bold* when her active team is involved, I'll be sure to talk to her about it."

Ellie's never heard the chief speak with that tone of voice before. She sounds... *angry*. Not exasperated like when Ellie gets on her nerves, but truly, *genuinely*, furious. It's honestly a little scary, but before Ellie can make a comment the chief begins to introduce her to the team. Compared to CATR's active team, the reserves team was much more... varied in the types of officers they had. The active team looked like characters ripped out of an action movie, where the reserves team were clearly the misfits. The big redhead, Case, was just one, but they had four others: a dwarf, a lizard-person—kobold, rather, a tall person with long, blonde hair and pointed ears—an elf, and then the black-haired woman that bailed Ellie out earlier.

This was *definitely* the motley crew; a part of the mechanic wondered how in the hell a dwarf, kobold, and elf could cooperate with two humans in this frequent a capacity. The war wasn't *that* long ago, and postwar tensions between humans and riftborn were still high in many areas of New Haven. In Ellie's mind, this was not a team well poised to work together. Yet, she sees it; the way they casually converse, the way they seem to be intrinsically aware of each other's mannerisms as they joke with each other, this is a proper team. She doesn't even fully realize she's staring when the black-haired woman walks up to her, with her right hand outstretched for a handshake. Now that they're both standing up, Ellie can see that she's the same height as her.

The mechanic returns the handshake firmly, but not too much so.

"My turn to apologize... Ellie, was it?" she asks. Ellie wants to poke fun at this woman clearly pretending she doesn't know her name, but the mechanic genuinely can't get her words together fast enough. She really *is* quite attractive, "My name's Samantha. Or Sam; whatever works for you. Like the chief said, we're the reserves team."

"I prefer, 'The *Better* Team', personally," The dwarf, Barret, chimes in. Sam motions at him to shush, and he flips her off in response.

She sighs, turning back to Ellie, "As you can see, some of us seem to think it's a competition—"

"But it *is* a competition, why else do you think Chief Kurosawa has us trading dispatch calls with the other guys?" Barret starts up again. Ellie can tell he's a big talker, but he definitely seems to have backup in this regard; the kobold and the elf are both nodding along with an expression that reads "he should probably shut up, but he's right." Now that Ellie thinks about it, not even Sam is disputing *that* part. For a second she thinks not even the *chief* is disputing that—and that's when Ellie turns to her left and realizes that she *bailed*. She probably went to go yell at Alice some more.

Ellie wishes she could see that, but before she can say something along those lines Sam starts up again.

"Well, if Barret's *interjections* are anything to go off of... Yeah, we're in the progress of proving why we probably shouldn't be in the reserves. We're hoping that with your help, we can get that taken care of."

And that's when Ellie realizes what Kurosawa's plan is: make Ellie the reserves team's unfair advantage to close more cases, and use that to argue for the entire active and reserves teams to be switched. But... *why?*

As if sensing her question, the elf, Relland, speaks up. Ellie isn't quite sure if they're a man or woman; their tone of voice makes it hard to tell, and their stature doesn't give her any hints. That couldn't possibly be relevant, though, so she shuts up and lets Relland talk. "Right now, there's a pretty big issue with the active team where Alice has sort of... cornered them into taking her word as law. The current CATR team was hired during the transfer of power, so our Chief didn't train them, and instead Alice trained them to be insubordinate against her."

"And the chief couldn't discipline them because... they have leverage over her as the current active team."

Relland nods, "They're fully against the chief and her directives because Alice sold them on some bullshit. Chief Kurosawa's aiming to cross reference data from both teams to argue for the teams to be switched at the next All Chapters meeting, but in order for that to work, we've gotta be *on it*."

Makes sense to her. Ellie isn't sure about being used as a secret asset or a part of larger plans like this, but she definitely understands the end goal Kurosawa is shooting for. The reserves team seems to be fully behind Kurosawa, though, with the others sharing their own agreements.

"Honestly, I'm just surprised the chief hasn't fired her yet. The fallout couldn't *possibly* be that bad, right?" the kobold, Trix, throws out. The fallout would *definitely* be that bad, considering Alice is a tenured member of New Haven's PIU. But still, Ellie's rather shocked that five of the seven people who were *just* dispatched with her are all in agreement in their dislike of their squad leader. The mechanic had figured that they shared in Alice's hatred of her, considering how they bounced so quickly earlier.

Again, Relland seems to catch Ellie's thoughts. The mechanic knows *nothing* about elven magic aside from its compatibility with modern science, which makes this coincidence rather worrying to her. "Sorry about earlier, by the way. Alice 'warned' us that we'd be getting handed dead weight, but by the time we noticed what was going on she had grabbed the steering wheel. It will *not* happen again, we've got your back."

Ellie wants to hold them to that, but she's unsure if she can believe any of them.

During her time at the PIU, it's become incredibly clear that maintaining status is paramount at all times. Whether or not someone spoke up about something they disliked or felt uncomfortable with could be the decider on promotions, or their next assignment. None of this was Kurosawa's doing, and she did her best to quell the noise, but her captains and sheriffs were *also* part of the "old guard". They had a certain way they went about things, and while they supported the chief professionally, they had no problem undermining her if they felt they needed to. It's all just a bunch of *drama*, and Ellie wishes she didn't have to care, but it keeps coming back to her. Alice is a bitch to work with and her personally trained squad likes her, but the chief can't fire her because everything is *fucking* politics, so Ellie's being sent in as some weird offshoot of a trojan horse that will hopefully get Alice's squad demoted and this new squad promoted.

This is all so, so stupid; she really misses working at her shop. She didn't have to worry about workplace politics there.

When Ellie gets home from work, that's all she can think about. It's about five o'clock, so Chase isn't home from school just yet. The apartment is dark, quiet, and empty, reminding her of some pretty ugly memories from being in solitary at The Garden, of all places. Maybe it's because she was already thinking about so many things earlier, but the quietness of her empty apartment is *really* getting to her. She opts to turn on all the lights and the TV to at least get some noise, but then all that does is remind her of what it was like to deal with all of that while living alone. She knows that, at this point, she's just having a bad day, but it still sucks that she's feeling this way because of *work*.

She doesn't get why people there have to make it so difficult; the chief *forced* her to go deal with Alice just for that bitch to be so *rude*—why does she even have to put up with this?

And that's when Ellie realizes she's crying again. She's not upset about any one thing in particular, she's just bummed out. She's spent less and less time at her job doing the things she was *asked* to do, and more time interacting with people that treat her like shit. It's *tiring*, and all Ellie wanted was to work the normal job that she was hired for in the first place. She can't even *do* that without being insulted to her face, it's all so frustrating. She's so wrapped up in her feelings that she nearly doesn't hear the side door to the garage open, then shut. A few clicks indicate the garage door being locked, and then footsteps make their way up the stairs to the apartment door. Ellie doesn't have time to clean herself up, and even if she did she can't bring herself to get up anyways. She just feels so tired.

The door opens.

"...Ellie? What's wrong?" She hears Chase ask, softly. It doesn't take long before she notices the teenager sit down on the couch next to her, not even bothering to take off her shoes. When Ellie doesn't answer, Chase asks, "Bad day at work?"

"Like you wouldn't believe," Ellie finally manages to choke out. She's not sobbing or wailing, but it's still a little hard to speak.

Ellie feels a hand rub up and down her back. Chase doesn't say anything, she's just looking at Ellie quietly, studying her expression for a moment. Then, she asks, "Do you wanna talk about it?"

Ellie accepts the invitation.

It's been a couple years since her parents died, but in that time Chase has *really* matured emotionally. It feels like out of nowhere the girl has become significantly more attentive to what's going on in Ellie's neck of the woods, her advice is poignant more often than not, and she's seemingly got a good sense for when Ellie wants to vent, versus when she wants to be left alone. She's like a mini-therapist; Ellie can't hate on that. It definitely makes her feel better having a good listener living with her, but she feels bad that for *all* of the support she was able to give Chase, she can't seem to use an ounce of that resolve on herself. Chase is a high schooler, she shouldn't *have* to help Ellie with anything. It's that feeling that makes Ellie downplay most of the things that are bothering her. She's not *lying* about anything, she just doesn't think her being *bullied* at work of all things is an important detail.

Chase, for her part, knows *for sure* that Ellie isn't being fully truthful, but just like her mom, she doesn't ask any questions and just says "okay."

Ellie feels bad about it, but she ignores that feeling. She just doesn't think this is worth burdening the teenager with, and she's determined to keep some things off her plate so that Chase can finish school unperturbed. But seeing Chase look at her now, with that concerned gaze, makes her feel... something.

She's not sure what it is.

Interlude: Promise

If she was being honest, Chase knew that she was being *really* fucking annoying about the whole "going to school every day" thing.

Ellie's tripled her efforts to get the teenager out of bed on time every morning. She starts breakfast extra early, giving Chase a little wiggle room to drag her feet getting out of bed. Sometimes, Ellie even drives her to school instead of letting Chase take the monorail, and those mornings are always the most fun. Her only stipulation is that Chase go to school *every day*, and that should be easy but... it's not. She knows she has to, once she's out of bed and *there* she's okay, but... even after over a full year of this routine she's been having dreams about her parents almost every night. So, it's hard.

Most of the time, she has dreams where she wakes up and everything's *normal* again. She's at her house, with everything intact like she didn't get drunk and lose her fucking mind, and her parents are in the living room somewhere chatting loudly. But it's never *actually* her house, her room never *actually* looks like her old room, and lately she's been waking up before she actually sees her parents. Like today; as she stares at the ceiling while the sweet smell of waffles and coffee fills her nostrils, all she can think about is how she just wanted *five* more minutes to get a little bit closer to that living room and see her mom and dad. Even if all she can get is a glimpse of their faces, that's enough.

And she's always denied that, because Ellie wants her to go to school every day.

As she quietly eats her waffles, Chase decides she still wants to try. She knows the answer, but she still asks, "Ellie, can I not go? Just this once?"

The mechanic looks at her with a frown, studying her expression, and then says, "I know you've been having a lot of rough nights, but you *have* to—"

"Well, I don't fucking get why!" That light rejection pushes her over the edge. It's a reasonable response, but it's still frustrating to hear. She didn't mean to respond like that out loud, but she can feel the words starting to spill out.

"It's the *law*, Chase. You know that."

"My parents died!" It only slipped out, but hearing herself say that takes the wind out of her sails a bit, "They can't take it easy on me?"

Ellie puts her face in her hands, "I *know*, I tried. I told the *whole* story with every detail—"

"Then lie!"

"Do you want to end up in an orphanage?! You know that the *government* is the one I have to deal with when you miss two months of school, right?"

Ellie's right, but still... it pisses her off to hear. All she wants is a day to herself, away from the prying eyes of *everyone* that's heard what happened by now. She's tired of people walking on eggshells around her, afraid of upsetting the kid with dead parents. Meanwhile, the mechanic is pinching the bridge of her nose, clearly trying to collect her thoughts. The next time she speaks her voice is thick, as though she's holding back tears.

"The last time you had a string of absences, they told me they'd revoke my guardianship if you missed again. I just don't want that to happen, y'know?"

That kills all of the fight Chase had in her, right then and there.

She wants to give the mechanic a hug and apologize for being so annoying about it, because she didn't know it was *that* dire, nor did she know that Ellie was so stressed about it that just having to say it out loud would make her cry. But her head is spinning from the combination of emotions she's feeling, and even though she knows it's not Ellie's fault any of this is happening she's *still* mad at the mechanic for some reason she doesn't even understand herself anymore. All of that has the teenager so keyed up that instead of apologizing like she *wants* to, she storms off, saying nothing instead, grabbing her stuff and leaving the house. Chase knows that's a *stupid* way to handle this, and she's kicking herself desperately for not at least saying "bye" on the way out, but that was such a curveball that she doesn't know how to feel. She just needs time to be alone and collect her thoughts.

She'll go to school today, sure. But the thought of Ellie being her Actual Legal Guardian never truly clicked, nor did the idea that she could have been taken away, until now. It recontextualizes so many of the things that Ellie's done for her, all of the times that she *refused* to budge on things like school. She made her breakfast every day and always did her best following after the teenager, cleaning up every little mess to make sure she could get through high school without issues. How many of those little moments were done because she *had* to, not because she wanted to? How many moments were the opposite? The fact that she even has to think about this makes her feel... some type of way.

Either way, though, today is no exception for school after all. It's the best her attendance has been since her mom died, probably. The fact that she can think about things like that without it completely ruining her day is proof that *something* must be working.

Her grades have gotten better, too. Not as good as she was doing before, but well enough that graduating isn't a toss-up anymore. It's gotten easier to take personal pride in her performance at school, and while she hasn't rejoined the basketball team, she's gotten more than used to being on the sidelines. The team is still doing well, and they've covered up the hole that Chase left behind when she quit. They haven't gotten quite as far in the inter-district tournaments since then, but she'd be lying if she said that was more than an afterthought to her these days. She misses playing the sport, but doesn't miss the assholes on the team that jumped her two weeks after her mom died.

But she's over it now. She can't say she would have done the same if she was in their shoes, but she understood where they were coming from. Fuck 'em, though.

So, she'll gladly give Ellie grief about it, but the girl makes it up in her mind that she'll *at least* finish high school. She figures that regardless of whether or not Ellie was even truly invested in the end result, the mechanic would at least be happy with that.

Recently, though, Chase has been wondering if Ellie's been lying about her own stress levels.

The mechanic cries after work a *lot* lately. Chase only saw her in the act once recently, but she has a hunch it's been happening more often than Ellie thinks she realizes. A lot of times now, where Chase used to come home to Ellie getting started on dinner, or bugging her about what she did at school that day, Ellie's usually in her room. She usually comes out a couple hours later, and sometimes her eyes are a bit bloodshot. Chase was letting those little moments slide, but after she caught the mechanic crying on the couch when she came home from school a few days ago, it's been all she can think about, especially after she saw Ellie cry *again* during their little spat today. What makes matters worse is that every time the teenager tries to ask if she's having issues with something, Ellie is *definitely* not telling the truth. Her answers are always short, or she claims she's just having a bad day at work. Something like that.

But Chase knows how Ellie responds to questions, and especially when those questions are about things that upset her. The way Ellie seems to answer indicates that she just doesn't want to talk about it. And that's fine, but... she remembers the state she was in before Ellie found her in the bathtub at her childhood home. There were a *lot* of things that she didn't want to talk about back then, so much that it almost drowned her. Ellie stopped letting her run away from those questions, and it saved her life. She doesn't want to know how Ellie felt when that happened, which has led to her sitting in math class, firing on all cylinders trying to think of how she can help the mechanic that's helped her so much. If Ellie even wants her help to begin with.

Because that's the thing; sometimes, Chase can't help but wonder if her being there is part of the problem. When she thinks about the fact that Ellie's always crying these days and never wants to tell her specifically about *why*, it definitely seems like it.

She's stuck in her thoughts, so much so that she almost doesn't notice the significant change in the scent of the air. The smell feels like it's singing her nosehairs; it's like a mixture of gasoline and... *urine*. An awful, pungent, disgusting smell that apparently only Chase is noticing. And just when she gets ready to ask her teacher if *he* can smell what's happening...

BOOM!

The entire building shakes, violently.

--

The alarms are blaring at the PIU office. It's a different alarm, this time: a mixture of high and low tones droning together, with red *and* blue lights flashing in the corner of every room.

This must be bad; both CATR *and* RFAT are being dispatched simultaneously. Ellie heads out of her lab, jogging over to the loading bay on the other side of the building. Chief Kurosawa wants her keeping track of CATR's dispatches, even the ones she's not involved in, so she might as well get a head start. Once she gets to the loading bay, Ellie's greeted by CATR's reserve team; Alice is gone, seemingly still out of commission, and the active team is nowhere to be seen. When Barret spots her, he nudges Sam, and she waves Ellie over with a small smile. It makes the mechanic's heart squeeze a little for some reason, but now doesn't seem to be the time for pleasantries. So, when she runs over and Sam greets her as acting squad leader for today's dispatch, Ellie's all business.

"What's going on? You can give me the short version if you need."

Sam nods, "There's been an incident at Apollo Heights High School. A koboldian military group set off charges at the lower levels of the school, we got a tip that something was up seconds before someone called in an emergency."

Ellie heard all of the words that Sam said, but stopped registering them after the words "Apollo Heights" left her lips. Chase *should* be at school right now, but in actuality Ellie has no clue where she even *went* after they argued this morning. She tried calling the girl a couple times, but her calls weren't answered. Before, Ellie had assumed that she was in school after all, but now that there's a possibility something *else* has happened, she doesn't even know *what* to think. The mechanic doesn't recognize the sound of her own voice when she says, shakily, "Take me with you."

The others are a bit thrown off. This isn't the type of dispatch they generally *need* Ellie for; it's unlikely they'll recover anything, and if anything they'll end up having to fight the koboldian group. None of the CATR members know *what* Ellie's deal is, so naturally they're a bit skeptical. But she doesn't let up; she *has* to go, she *has* to know if Chase is okay. If she finds out something happened and she wasn't there, or if Chase ended up being okay but had to even wonder if the mechanic knew or cared for a second, Ellie doesn't think she could ever recover. She doesn't think she's fully gotten over Chase screaming at her and telling her she didn't care about the teenager's well-being, because the entire reason she felt that way *was* Ellie's fault. All she had to do was tell Chase about her uncle's attempt on his own life, and she *didn't*, leaving the girl to stumble upon the scene on her own. The fact that she hurt Chase in such an utterly *devastating* way weighs on Ellie's heart immensely.

She thinks about the spat they had earlier.

They should have actually properly *talked* about that, instead of just yelling at each other and then letting Chase walk out. She wishes she went about things a different way, but for once she can't even think of what she could have even *said* differently. Really, she's just so scared of something happening to the teenager while they're so far apart and Ellie doesn't have another way to get to her.

So, she reiterates, with a white lie to top it off, "My sister goes there. I know you're not looking to babysit me, but I just need to know if she's okay."

To her surprise, Trix speaks up first, "I don't mind if you go, are *you* gonna be okay, though?" Wasn't she a kobold herself? What was with that, anyways?

"I'll be fine," Ellie says, "Don't worry about what *I* can handle. Just focus on what you need to do."

They toss her a jacket, and let her into the vehicle.

On the ride there, Trix gives some important details that answer the questions Ellie had in her mind.

"When the ceasefire was signed, we kobolds were heavily divided on whether or not it was a good idea. We had lost a popular political leader two days before the humans came to an agreement, so many of us were out for blood," Ellie notices the van get extra quiet. Sam, who's driving the transport for this dispatch, has even turned down the radio. The kobold is visibly flustered but keeps speaking, albeit with a noticeable waver in her voice, "The division turned into completely different political factions within our tribe. My parents actually moved to New Haven to get away from this stuff, even though in some ways it wasn't exactly a good idea."

Ellie notices Trix's tail resting in Relland's lap, while the elf slowly strokes it. It's an odd amount of skinship for two coworkers, especially considering reptiles generally don't *like* to be touched. She opts to let it go though, the two have likely been working together long enough for the contact to be normal between them.

The kobold, for her part, continues, "There are some military factions, like the Kobold's Republic Army, that simply refuse to acknowledge the ceasefire, and hope that by continuing their assaults it will get overturned."

"Isn't that bad, though?" Ellie interjects, without thinking. She knows the answer, but it slips out anyways. Trix looks at her with an expression the mechanic can't quite read.

"It's not bad for *us*. Remember, the ceasefire was ultimately to stop the further loss of *human* lives; that's the point of contention for us kobolds. Humans were ready to wage war on any and everything that moves, until they poked a bear and the bear swung back. If someone loses their brother to a kamikaze drone, do you think they're gonna stop and say 'it's all good' when you suddenly decide you feel bad about it?"

Obviously not. No one in the transport thinks so, either; it's pretty clear by the silence after Trix finishes speaking, something about that felt... *personal*. While Ellie isn't thinking that someone she just met is trying to betray the PIU or do damage to the city she lives in, the idea of losing someone she cares about like that and being expected to just... *move on* is unfathomable to her.

She's really, *really* worried about Chase.

When the transport arrives at Apollo Heights, it takes every fiber of Ellie's being to stay standing.

The school is on *fire*. It's a campus with a main building that's seven stories tall, with multiple buildings of various smaller sizes surrounding it. The main building was where classes were held, and the others were labs for various subjects. The only building that's on fire is the main building, with the others severely damaged but otherwise standing. It's visible just from the front gates, and the only reason it doesn't look worse is because RFAT beat them there. They're in the process of evacuating students, while others are at work putting out the fire. It's thanks to them that the building's structural integrity doesn't appear to be damaged very much; the main building is on fire, but the fire appears to be relatively controlled. Despite the size of the fire the school's not fully devastated, it's repairable.

But... Chase isn't among the crowd of students RFAT's evacuated. Ellie's scanned the masses multiple times, she's listened for every single voice, nothing. And then when Sam gets debriefed by RFAT's squad leader, and he says, "There are still more inside, with what looks like KRA infantry trying to plant more charges," Ellie starts to make a mad dash for the building.

Case grabs her arm. His grip is insanely strong, "The hell are you doing? You don't fuck around with the KRA like that, man. Let us—"

"Not happening," Ellie yanks her arm out of his grip. He's rather shocked; it's pretty clear he underestimated the effort he needed to put in, "My sister's in there. I gotta know if she's okay."

Case is staring at her, clearly unsure of how to respond, but Sam walks up and says, "That's fine, we'll need to go in groups anyways. Case, Trix, can you two stick to the lower levels and see if you can disable any of the charges that are still planted? Bring back any of them that you can."

The two nod, and then take off towards the front entrance of the school. Case is pretty fast, actually; Trix has to run on all fours to keep up with him, and he's *still* leading her by a few feet.

Sam continues delegating, "Relland, Barret, you're authorized to utilize any Mana from the environment; I'll talk to the chief later. Do whatever you can to get rid of this fire, draw a magic circle if you have to."

Ellie has never heard that sequence of words in her life before, but the two Sam was actually talking to clearly understand their orders. Barret goes into the transport, returning with a small satchel and a booklet. He and Relland scamper off to a nearby patch of grass, and then start a process that Ellie can't bother to pay attention to at this moment.

Before Ellie can ask what they're about to do, though, she hears Sam's walkie-talkie buzz. It's Trix, and she sounds panicked.

"Sam, we got a problem! They've got a bunch of hostages tied up next to the charges, and the KRA is *gone*."

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Chase isn't sure why she's calm.

It felt as though she had been in class like normal mere seconds ago, before the entire building shook, the fire alarm started blaring, and a bunch of kobolds wearing military gear while carrying assault rifles stormed into her classroom. Her teacher was handcuffed and taken from the class, with the rest of the students being kept inside, hands cuffed to their chairs one by one. The kobolds left about fifteen minutes ago, but claimed they were guarding the doors to prevent them from leaving. She... doesn't think that's true, and the rising temperature in the room is setting alarm bells off in her head.

It doesn't take long before Chase decides, *fuck this*, and breaks the handcuffs keeping her in her chair. Her classmates are a bit thrown off by the display of strength, but she doesn't care right now. She's got a more pressing matter to attend to, so she checks the hallway. Flames are licking their way up the sides of the walls, but the school's automatic fire emergency system is containing as much of it as possible. That awful smell is *everywhere*, but there's no sign of any kobolds. In other words, they were planning to *leave them there*.

She goes back inside the classroom, and starts ripping cuffs off of as many people as possible. Before anyone can say anything, she raises her voice and bellows, "Help me out, here! I can't possibly be the only one that can break these, right? If you've got strength augmentation, these things are like paper!"

The sheer volume of her voice is enough to get the entire room on the same page, and the handful of espers in her class seem to realize they have powers that could be useful. It takes no time at all for Chase and the few kids that can break the handcuffs on her classmates to do so, and less than ten minutes later the class is free from their restraints, headed to the stairwell on the far side of the hall. Chase is fast enough to beat everyone to the ground floor, but then she sees *at least* thirty more people, tied up with sacks over their heads. Each is sitting next to a small device with a flashing red light on it; she doesn't need to guess what those devices probably are, the school being on fire gives her a pretty good clue.

By one of the people sitting down, she sees *another* kobold. This one appears to be fiddling with one of the devices, and for a split second Chase gets ready to dash over there and snatch it from their hands. But in the next second, she notices the large man standing next to her; they're both in uniform, but not military uniforms like the kobolds that took her math teacher. These uniforms, now that she was looking closer, appeared to be CATR uniforms. Which meant these two were PIU, which *also* meant Ellie might be here.

Sure enough, she scans the room a bit more, and sees Ellie with another woman about her height. They're in the middle of quietly discussing something, likely a plan on what the *hell* they can even do in this situation. Chase is right there with them, because she's at a loss herself; her math class and neighboring classrooms can make their way down the fire escape stairwell, but what happens when they make it to the ground floor with so many more people and explosives everywhere? The fire is mostly contained indoors, but it's only getting worse as it drains more and more of the system's water supply. Eventually, it's gonna run out, and she isn't sure if everyone is gonna make it to the ground floor before it does.

But seeing Ellie *here* of all places has her kind of excited, too. So, she can't exactly help it when she tries to get the mechanic's attention by waving with both hands and yelling, "Hey, Ellie!"

Instantly, the four PIU in the school's burning foyer snap their heads to look at her, clearly disapproving of the sudden noise. It's not like anyone was *trying* to be quiet, but—

Chase doesn't get to finish what she was thinking about. She feels a sharp, clawed hand dig its way into her hair, grabbing it by the roots and yanking her backwards. In the next moment, she feels a metallic barrel push into the skin on her right cheek.

"Nobody move! Hands off the charges, or I'll blow her brains out of her fucking skull right here!"

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Not a single person in the area had noticed there was a kobold on the ceiling. When Ellie thinks about it a little bit longer, it makes sense. They were lizard people, more or less; this included things like climbing or hiding in high areas. Ellie, Sam, and everyone else were so preoccupied with the more present threat of a fire that they didn't consider that they had simply been waiting on the *ceiling*.

When Ellie looks up to scan the ceiling, though, she doesn't see anyone else.

"Blondie, what the fuck are you looking at? I'm talking to you!"

Ellie focused her eyes on the lone kobold holding Chase hostage. She was at war with herself; her job wasn't to fight, or get involved in anything. She was just there to fix stuff, and analyze weapons. She should be helping Case and Trix with the charges, and leave the fighting to Sam. But, as she thinks about it, the kobold pushes the barrel of the assault rifle he's holding into Chase's face a little bit more. She can hear the people sitting on the floor around the charges Case and Trix are deactivating as quickly as they can; it's impossible not to notice how many of them are crying, and it tugs on Ellie's soul.

And then she looks at Chase. Her blue eyes are returning Ellie's gaze... and they're *calm*. Ellie can see the level of focus in her eyes, and it's telling her exactly what the mechanic knows Chase would say out loud in this situation if she could.

I'll follow your lead, just go.

Ellie nods, slightly. That slight head movement is the only signal Chase needs to, rather brazenly, elbow the kobold in his stomach. He doubles over, clearly surprised by the strength on display, while at the same time Ellie quickly reaches over and undoes Sam's weapon holster with two fingers. Removing the sidearm from its position, she's instantly familiar with the model and caliber just from feeling it in her hands; a custom Kimber M1911, nine millimeter caliber ammunition. She can line up the shot just by gauging the distance with her eyes, so she doesn't need any prep time, nor does she need to ready her shot. She barely even takes aim before firing twice: it hits the target once in the meat of the right thigh, once in the left shoulder. The entire maneuver, including stealing Sam's sidearm to begin with, takes Ellie roughly eight-tenths of a second; to anyone else, it's instant.

Chase follows up nicely by lifting the kobold off the ground by his sides with both of her hands, and slamming him down on the concrete as hard as possible. It's a bit unnecessary, but anyone would do that if they got a chance to throw someone who just pointed a gun at them around for a bit.

Meanwhile, Ellie can feel the eyes of her comrades on her; she ignores their stares for now. She can feel *something* returning to the blood in her veins, and she knows now more than ever that she needs it if she wants to get everyone out of here alive. She feels like a different person is controlling her body when she hears herself say the words, "Chase, that's your entire class following you down the stairs, right? How many are there?"

Ellie doesn't need to say she can hear the footsteps. It's not an important clarification right now.

Chase is a bit shocked by the change in the mechanic's demeanor, but she doesn't ask any questions, instead answering her with a succinct, "Yeah. My whole class is coming, but I think more of the classes on our floor noticed and are also on their way down."

"Not what I asked. Give me a *number*, Chase."

"Anywhere from seventy to a hundred. Maybe more."

Good enough. Ellie nods, and turns to Sam, holding out her stolen sidearm for the squad leader to take, "Alright squad leader, got a plan?"

Sam looks at Ellie in clear confusion, raising an eyebrow, and then lightly shoves the gun away from her, "Keep it. Sounds like *you've* got a plan, anyways."

She does, actually.

The mechanic's been crunching the numbers since she saw the situation with her own two eyes. Just to make sure she's not leaving anything out, she calls out to the duo working on the charges, "Case, Trix, how's the progress on those charges?"

Case yells back, "Not good! We've defused three, but there's a lot more!"

Trix yells from another corner of the room, "I think they've tunneled out, the ground is displaced here!"

Great. Thankfully, since she noticed there seemed to be only one kobold staying behind, she's accounted for this. Ellie turns to Sam; this part was reliant on a guess, but... "Your psychic ability is some sort of time manipulation or dilation, right?"

Sam looks shocked at first, but then her expression relaxes into a smile, "The chief was right about you. I can definitely do that, what do you need?"

"How long will it take you to scan the perimeter and make sure we're clear?"

It doesn't look like she was expecting that, but Sam runs some quick mental math and answers, "Five seconds. Ten if something catches my eye."

"Please?"

She nods, and then she's gone. Ellie turns her attention to Chase; the teenager is getting a bit antsy now that her class is close enough for her to hear. She's looking all over the place and fidgeting like crazy. The flames are spreading quicker, too; they don't have a lot of time.

"Chase, I need you to go tell RFAT that there are more evacuees inside than they anticipated, and help them out."

"What? But what about—"

"Now's not the time. They'll ask you to stay with the evacuees, *don't*. You smelled those charges, right?"

Chase nods, "It smelled like gasoline and... piss."

That confirmed it. Case and Trix looked like they were having trouble, but more than anything Trix looked like she was panicking. She must have smelled it too.

Ellie leans down to whisper into Chase's ear, "It's napalm."

The teenager's eyes widen, "*What?!*"

Ellie covers her mouth, "*Shh!* If you say that out loud, it's gonna cause a panic and then things really *will* get bad. I need you to tell the RFAT personnel outside that, *only* them, and then help them with the hostages. You're fast *and* strong enough, you can do it."

The teenager swallows, hard, and then nods. The mention of napalm definitely scared her, but Chase really does appear to be good under pressure. She's completely stopped fidgeting now, instead closing her eyes and taking deep breaths. That's when Ellie feels her skin start to tingle.

She's never seen Chase use her psychic abilities before, but she was aware that the teenager's abilities were vaguely speed related. What she wasn't expecting, however, was for the ESP in the air to *skyrocket* the moment Chase allowed hers to flare up. Ellie can normally feel it since it makes her skin tingle on the surface, but the second Chase made hers flow that tingle became a full on *burning* sensation. It almost feels like she's having an allergic skin reaction to particles in the air. Chase, meanwhile, is *glowing*. A full-on, proper glow that slightly illuminates the air around her, punctuated with short sparks of what appears to be red electricity. Ellie has seen quite a few espers in her heyday, but she's never seen one that had a full blown *aura* of ESP like this before. When did she learn how to do that?

The mechanic doesn't get to ask that, though, because in the next moment Chase takes off. The entire room shakes with a deafening **BOOM!** And just as she runs off, Ellie notices Sam came back. The squad leader is looking at her with another curious stare, before saying, "That's your sister, huh?"

"Kind of. It's complicated."

Sam hums, "Complicated. I'm starting to think a lot of things about you are 'complicated.'"

Ellie doesn't respond to that, instead opting to move on. They don't have time to banter and honestly, the less said about her personal life, the better, "My sister is alerting RFAT to the situation down here, and she's going to help them evacuate the rest. I figure you're fast enough to keep up?"

"So, I help them, and you help Case and Trix with those charges?"

Ellie nods, and the two wordlessly sprint off to help.

Sam, Chase, and the rest of the onsite RFATs carry out hordes of people, with Chase not even bothering to get people out of their restraints before throwing them over her shoulder. Meanwhile, Ellie helps Case and Trix with the napalm charges. They've mostly got disarming them down packed now, but the mechanic wants to get a head start on gathering some for analysis. The actual electronics are amateurish (which makes Ellie feel a twinge of disappointment towards her comrades), but the concentrated napalm attached to it is something else entirely; it's light brown colored with a clay texture, almost like C-4. It's something she has *never* seen or heard of before, which makes her feel terribly uneasy.

The KRA left long before confirming if their plan was successful; one could argue that they were worried about the PIU showing up, but the lone kobold in the ceiling that tried holding Chase hostage didn't make sense. Why did *he* stay behind, alone? Was he stupid, or was there something they missed? Ellie knew better than to assume the former, no matter how poor someone's strategy might seem.

It's not long before the hostages are cleared out, with the charges disabled and rounded up in a fireproof duffel bag. At the same time, Relland and Barret have finally conjured up some sort of spell to take care of the fire. They're still in the patch of grass they ran over to, and the grass surrounding them seems to be rapidly drying up and wilting. At the same time, though, a massive spout of water is spraying from the center of the dead grass. It's dousing the entire building in more water than Ellie's seen before, and it must be mixed with something to cut off the oxygen from the fire so that it dies down faster. Human firefighters either used a mixture of water and foam or relied on the vapors from evaporated water to extinguish fires, but this is a grayish substance mixed into the water that seems to instantly extinguish flame wherever it touches. Ellie makes a mental note to ask Relland about this later, if only for selfish reasons involving a certain pyrokinetic that's been getting on her nerves lately.

Roughly two hours later, everyone is evacuated, and the fires are put out.

Sam gathers her CATR squad to quickly debrief before heading back to the station, but when Ellie goes to join them, the acting squad leader stops her.

"I'll catch you up to speed later. Your sister was involved with this incident, go be with family. Don't bother putting in for time off either, I'll talk to the chief."

Ellie wants to object. The concentrated napalm is still bugging her, the fact that the KRA's planning was so poor yet... efficient is making her mind spin, and she's got a really bad feeling about what's *really* going on behind all of this. But, for some reason she can't quite understand herself, she just says, "Okay, thanks."

It doesn't take her long to find the teenager sitting in the back of a parked RFAT transport, with a blue blanket wrapped around her shoulders. She's holding a paper cup filled with something warm to drink, but it's still filled to the brim, clearly untouched. Chase is gazing at the contents listlessly, wrapped up in her own thoughts, when Ellie sits down next to her.

Neither of them say anything. It feels weird after the morning they had.

Chase is the first to break the silence. She leans over, resting the side of her head on Ellie's left shoulder, "I'm sorry about this morning. I never thought about the whole 'guardianship' thing."

"It's not your fault, I didn't say anything about it."

"Why?" Ellie can see the teenager's turned to look at her, but she can't bear to look the girl in the eyes. She's not even sure why.

"I just felt, I don't know, it doesn't feel good holding that over your head, y'know? It's not your fault that you're *seventeen* and they're still willing to throw you in the homeless pile because *I* can't—"

"Hold on," After Chase takes a second to put her cup down, Ellie feels two hands grab her cheeks, forcibly turning her head to the side to look at Chase in her eyes. Her hands are warm, and the fact that *even now* she's worried about Ellie makes the mechanic regret that there was even an argument in the first place. "*I'm* the one that was being obnoxious about school, it's not your fault they came swinging at you because of me."

"But—"

"No buts! You do *everything* you can do just for me, you're working your ass off because they threatened you, right? I get it, really!"

"That's not the only reason, you know," Ellie can't hide her surprise at hearing that.

Chase looks a bit confused at that, "Why else would you get up that early just to make breakfast? You yourself said you normally didn't eat breakfast before me. Or, what about taking me to school? I never had issues with the monorail before."

"That doesn't mean I don't *want* to do those things, Chase. I'd never do half the things I do just because they *make* me do them, I do those things because I care about you."

The teenager doesn't respond to that, instead gaining a renewed interest in her hands folded together in her lap. Whatever they've given her to drink has almost assuredly gone cold from sitting off to the side by now, and her cheeks are a little flushed.

When she speaks again, though, her voice sounds colder than Ellie has ever heard before, "The rest of the school year's probably gonna get cancelled."

Neither of them say anything after that.

Ellie's trying to figure out what she even *wants* to say, but then Chase starts up again, "I think... this whole time, I was just worried about graduating. Not that I didn't *want* to, but... I guess I was scared."

"Scared of what?"

Chase goes quiet, this time for what feels like years. Ellie's distantly aware of the dying commotion around her as things wrap up, but she can't even bring herself to think about everything that just happened. She makes another mental note to thank Sam later, because the mechanic really did need the extra time to sit down with Chase and decompress.

When she speaks again, it's obvious that the teenager is on the verge of tears, "Every time I think about graduating, I think about being out there alone, watching everyone else's parents have the time of their lives. I'm just... scared of having to see that."

She tries to say more, but she can't quite get the words out right. It doesn't take long before she gives up entirely; her face crumples up, and her voice falls into quiet sobs. Ellie wraps her left arm around Chase's shoulder, pulling her in slightly for a small hug. She leans into the mechanic's side a little more, doing her best not to make too much noise.

It's not working very well, but neither of them care much.

Ellie decides it's her turn to get emotional, "It's no consolation now that the school year's probably cancelled, but you know I would have gone to your graduation if nothing else, right?"

Chase pulls away from her, looking her in the eyes. There's still tears, but the sobbing has *instantly* stopped, "That's not funny."

The implication makes her feel terribly sad, but Ellie responds, "You know I'd never joke about that. Sure, it's not the same as having your parents there, but—"

Ellie's cut off from finishing that sentence by Chase wrapping both arms around her midsection, squeezing her in a bear hug *way* tighter than she thought was ever possible. She's pretty sure she blacks out for a second, but after her vision returns she sees the teenager's blue eyes shining with tears streaming down her face. Despite that, she's wearing a massive smile, way more than Ellie expected to see from her in a moment like this.

"Sorry," Chase lets go just as quickly as she started squeezing when she realizes Ellie is getting blue in the face, "I just... didn't think you'd want to. After all, I'm just some kid you're helping out. We're not related, who wants to go sit at a high school graduation all day for some kid they're not even related to?"

Man, that hurts. The mechanic wants to cry just hearing that, but she holds it together and says, "You know you mean more to me than that, I've told you before."

"Yeah, but saying that I'm *like* family doesn't mean—"

"That's not what I was trying to say back then, Chase!" It's a little louder than she meant, but she's having a bit of a hard time controlling her emotions after everything that's happened today. Sure enough, her voice is incredibly shaky when she continues, "I don't have the luxury of worrying about who's related to me by blood, so when I tell you that you're the closest thing I've had to a sister it means that you *are* family, to me."

As soon as the sentence leaves her lips, Ellie instantly realizes that maybe the word 'luxury' isn't a good word to use when talking about someone whose parents died. She starts trying to apologize, but when she sees the look in the teenager's eyes she can't find the words. The girl is... surprised; not hurt, not shocked, but her eyes are slightly wide, as though the words Ellie just said to her were words she had never heard before. When Chase notices Ellie staring at her, she looks away, staring off into the distance.

"I've... never thought about that before. A 'luxury', I mean."

That was definitely not the right word to use. Ellie feels awful, she *never* speaks without thinking like that, "Chase, *no*. That doesn't mean you shouldn't be upset about what happened to you or your situation. You have every right to feel envious of others, and you have every right to feel sad about it."

"Yeah, but, that's still not something you've had to struggle with. You have your own issues, but aside from your dad being an asshole none of them ever had anything to do with family, right?" Chase isn't budging, and worse; she's right.

Ellie nods.

"I think a part of me has always wondered, 'why?' What was the point of me growing up with my parents, just to end up alone before I even turned sixteen? The past couple years I've been trying to figure that out; if it was karma for something I did, if it was just happenstance, or if it was inevitable. I never really considered that having had parents that loved me at all was something to be envious of, in and of itself," Chase keeps talking, as though she's on the verge of breaking through something. The fact that she's even able to *be* objective about something so awful is throwing Ellie for a loop. Of all things, she wasn't expecting the teenager to be doing the psycho-analyzing *to* her.

The mechanic wants to say that she's not *envious*; not only was it not true, it wouldn't even be *fair* to Chase if she was envious of her. But... she'd be lying if she said that she didn't feel some type of way about the issues Chase was experiencing, or if she said that she had *never* once wished she had gotten a taste of what it was like to live in a home with parents that loved her as much as they loved each other. Parents that loved their children *more* than they loved each other.

The mechanic has never had that, and she never says it, but sometimes she wishes she did.

And that makes Ellie realize... maybe she was more envious of Chase than she had initially thought. It makes her feel *grotesque*, the very idea that she could look at an orphan and say "I wish" about anything in their situation.

While all of this is going on in her head, Chase continues, "You're the one that first mentioned envy, I just said that graduation reminds me of my situation. Just like you told me, you have *every* right to feel envious of others, too. I may have had a better relationship with my parents, but we're *both* orphans."

It's impossible for the mechanic to stop her tears from pouring out. It's true, something she's told Chase a million times, but it still feels... comforting to hear, "When the hell did you get a way with words?"

"I learned from the best," Chase says, scooting a little closer.

It's been one hell of a day, and the PIU is still in the process of cleaning up the crime scene. There's still lots of questions with relatively few answers, and Ellie knows she'll have a lot on her plate when she goes back to work. When she *does* go back, she'll probably have to deal with the same issues as before, too. In so many ways, nothing has changed at all.

But, it feels like her and Chase have grown a little closer than they were the day before. And that small change is more than enough.

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Getting the accolades for a well-handled dispatch was nice, but Sam Yeong had spent more than enough time as a PIU officer to know that anything "well-handled" was a ticking time bomb waiting to blow. The situation from the crime scene at Apollo Heights speaks for itself, in that regard: homemade explosives rigged to some form of napalm concentrate, and a KRA infantry squad that was in-and-out in minutes, well before their planted explosives had even gone off. Were they trying to get away from an impending explosion, or was there something else at play? Really, she had her hands full with this one.

She's grateful for Ellie and her sister, though; the two coordinated to take down a straggler from the KRA, who had likely stayed behind to ensure the charges went off as planned.

That sequence left Sam with more questions than answers. Ellie was hired to be a *weapons analyst*, yet she was so calm and controlled in such a chaotic situation that she was able to come up with a plan in minutes. Not to mention, her speed and accuracy with both stealing and firing a handgun were unparalleled; Sam had been a part of the PIU for a long time, and even she had never seen someone take aim and fire accurately so fast before. Certainly not with the added smoothness Ellie had *swiped* her pistol with. The mechanic's sister had some form of strength and speed augmentation, but Sam had never seen physical augmentation cause the user to glow with red sparks of electricity before. She'll have to ask Ellie about that later.

To Sam, it was starting to seem more and more like the "mechanic" was a woman of many secrets. Hopefully she'll be willing to share some.

In the meantime, though, the two sisters' quick playmaking managed to net them exactly one kobold, meaning that Sam would at the very least get some of her questions answered. At least, that was what she was hoping... but when she gets to the interrogation area she's left with an even bigger question. There's *pandemonium*, with people breaking the two way mirror separating the interrogation room from the outside. It doesn't take long for her to realize why.

The KRA infantryman that they had arrested was slumped over in his chair, seizing and foaming at the mouth.

Climax: Veins and Veils

"Why do you always say, 'peace never lasts?'"

By the time she was sixteen, Ellie had been at The Garden for eight grueling years. The facility was built like a cathedral, and somehow had a layout bigger on the inside than the outside, with no windows or visible exits unless staff had permitted otherwise. The end result was what felt like a never-ending nightmare; a "home" that changes every morning is a difficult place for a child to get their bearings, which made those eight years truly miserable. Thankfully, having new jobs at the orphanage helped pass the time, especially considering every job had its own set of perks.

For Ellie, this was her third year as Dorm Manager. It was a simple job: you managed the night shift at the dorms. Every night kids tried to go AWOL, your job was to make sure they can't leave. A cruel job, but it was also for their safety, as The Garden was (allegedly) located smack dab in the middle of a city leveled by the Great Civil War. This, combined with what Ellie had recently learned was called "New Genesis", had led to a bunch of demons roaming around at night.

At first, things weren't so bad; runaways were usually able make it to a nearby town or to law enforcement, before being brought back. These days, most of them likely weren't even surviving once they left the walls of the orphanage. By now, most modern cities had set large borders that go up after dusk, but The Garden wasn't located in a modern city, meaning the facility only had its own walls and borders to keep its residents safe. This was one of the stated reasons that the kids couldn't see the outside unless supervised; even seeing a demon could attract it to you, so shielding the kids from the outside was likely equal parts leverage and safety measure.

Naturally, though, after about two or three years most kids settled into that aspect of living here. Ellie was no different, though her various jobs definitely had an effect on the outlook she had. When she was a janitor, she was frequently miserable; having to clean up everything from shit smeared on the walls by kids having a meltdown to... "remains" wasn't particularly enjoyable. The first time she had to do that, she recalls the staff made her go back and clean the room a second time, as there were sections of the ceiling with chunks of brain matter on them that still needed to be scraped. She did a good job getting through it without getting nauseous, but that was the first time she felt *something* wither away inside of her.

She wasn't sure what it was, though.

Now, as a Dorm Manager, she was in a much easier position for her to compartmentalize. There was much less direct exposure to human blood, guts, or waste, and much more time to her own devices in between shifts. Sure, having to stay up all night cratered her sleep schedule, but she didn't mind staying up all night and sleeping during the day. It helped that Dorm Managers got special access to recreational areas like the firing range during odd hours, meaning that whenever she needed to kill time, she could come down here and shoot targets as much as she wanted. That's how she ended up here, talking to The Garden's Director of Facilities, Professor Jordan Lance.

Lance was... a strange fellow. He was the first esper Ellie had ever met, and amongst all the teachers and staff that operated within The Garden, he was the most knowledgeable of espers, ESP, and societal advancements post-New Genesis. He knew what riftborn were, he knew what demons were, and he shared that knowledge amongst the kids as part of their coursework. The Garden offered plenty of classes since there were no schools nearby, and Professor Lance was clearly enthralled at using that aspect to teach a new generation of kids about the world they'll be forced to grow up in.

At the same time, he carried with him an undercurrent of *fury*. Lance was the type that could snap at a moment's notice, and though he generally directed this anger at the staff and *hardly ever* the kids, every once in a while he'd slip up. For him, his biggest frustration was repeated mistakes; he'd correct you once, *maybe* twice if he liked you. After that, though, you've pissed him off. He would use his psychic abilities for disciplinary actions without a second thought, too. Being stuck in a room with an esper able to use the ESP within a human's body to puppet them like a walking marionette was a frightening enough experience the first time, so Lance hardly ever had to talk to the kids more than once or twice.

He frequently doted on Ellie, though, always taking a second to talk to the teenage inventor when she wasn't busy. As she shot targets on repeat for hours, this was one of those days, and he had been in the middle of saying one of his favorite adages, "Like all things, peace never lasts."

Ellie never understood what that meant, so she finally asked, making sure to clear her rifle before setting it down for a proper conversation. As she did so, she saw Lance nod approvingly out of the corner of her eye.

Once she'd given him her undivided attention, he started speaking, "It's something my father used to say. If you really think about it, peace is just another state of being that living things go through."

"Like an emotion?"

"Sort-of. A state of being would be the physical and mental state that those emotions put you in; being livid will put you in a state of anger, or being happy will put you in a state of joy. The emotions may be fleeting, but how those emotions *affect* you sticks around. My dad always told me peace is just like that."

The director talking about his dad reminded Ellie of hers; she hated being reminded of her dad. Everyone always had stories of things their fathers told them, did for them, or taught them. Every kid at The Garden could recount such a tale, even the staff members could. Everyone except for her, and that always made her feel awkward, "Do you think he was right?"

Lance rubbed his chin for a moment.

"I think he might have been, but my dad was quite awful to me growing up. 'Peace never lasts' might have just been his way of justifying his own mood swings."

"You had a shitty dad, too, huh?" Ellie finds her gaze drawn away from the adult she's talking to. For some reason, she can't bring herself to look at him.

"I did. He used to beat me and my brothers. When I was eight, I accurately predicted the death of my grandmother. After that, he thought I was a demonic presence, and started beating me more than them. If they did something wrong, I was the one who got punished for it."

Ellie stayed silent. His story reminded her of her own, and that made her feel... some type of way she couldn't describe. He continued; he had that look in his eye, which meant interrupting him was probably not wise. Talking about his father must have put him in a terrible mood.

"Eventually, though, I realized... he was *afraid* of me. He would tell me 'peace never lasts' so that I would get used to his switch being flipped, but he always made sure to apologize. Even as an adult he would threaten me, verbally or otherwise, then apologize and cry about it later. After I awakened as an esper eight years ago, I decided to give him what he deserved and forced him to slit his own throat. I've never felt more alive than I did that day."

He said the end of that sentence with a growl in his voice, and for just a moment Ellie saw the look in his eyes become something else entirely. Just as suddenly, though, he seemed to realize who he was talking to, and put his "mask" back on.

"I still use the phrase, though. It's an apt description; you can have the world in the palm of your hand, you can have world peace, you can show everyone how to love again, but none of it will ever last. At the end of it all, humanity is nothing if not ever-changing; now more than ever."

And with that, he walked out of the firing range, leaving Ellie alone. As she watched him leave, she felt the phrase "peace never lasts" bore its way into her skull.

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Peace never lasts.

It's something Ellie finds herself saying a lot, even now at twenty-seven. During even the most dull of moments, she can never give herself the brevity to *truly* relax. In her heart, deep down, she knows exactly why—every time she has allowed herself to relax, things spin out of control. Her current predicament is no different; even though she's been working with the PIU long enough to get her bearings, even though she's finally found her footing as an unofficial member of CATR's reserve team, and even though she and Chase are starting to get past their weird emotional barriers, she *can't* relax.

Every time she tries, she thinks about the KRA attacking Chase's school two weeks ago, or the smattering of officers at the PIU who still hate her guts, and if she's not worried about those things, she's worried about something she hasn't heard of yet. Realistically, she knows better than to be worried about everything like this. It's not as if her being anxious makes times *less* peaceful; things just aren't happening. All she's doing by stressing like this is spinning her wheels, over and over.

But she can't help it.

The concentrated napalm charges left behind by the KRA are *still* throwing her for a loop. They attacked a *school* and just left their equipment behind; even if they were expecting the charges to go off, did they genuinely *not* think that some would be recovered? There was only one KRA grunt left behind guarding the charges and hostages, and while Ellie and Chase caught him off guard the mechanic can't help but think about the situation he put *himself* in. Why did he reveal himself? Why didn't he shoot Case or Trix when they made progress on the charges? Why didn't anyone *detonate* the charges?

Ellie has been mulling this question over and over in her head since the incident. Since last week, she goes into her lab every day, and disassembles one of the charges. The wiring is crude, their ignition method is prone to failure, disabling them from exploding is pathetically easy, but the napalm is *certifiably* real. *Twenty* charges were recovered; she's disassembled seven, and *all* of them had real napalm concentrate. The kicker, though: *napalm doesn't even explode*. It's just a flammable gel that sticks to surfaces and burns.

So... what else was in these?

On the eighth charge... she finds it. The slabs of concentrated napalm have a *barely* noticeable crease perfectly in the middle of the top and bottom halves. When she's finally able to split them, she's got a terrible feeling in her gut. Both halves have the same clay-like texture and grayish color, but under a microscope... one matches the makeup of napalm, and the other *doesn't*. Ellie can only think of one compound with a clay-like texture that would be used for something like this; sure enough, the other seven charges are the exact same. And when she examines them, she realizes exactly what this stuff is.

C-4. She was right the first time she picked one of these up.

The charges weren't just napalm concentrate, they were *half* concentrated napalm and *half* C-4. The C-4 explodes, and the napalm keeps the fire burning. The smell being so rancid was likely *because* of the mixture of the two. It's crude, but it probably works real well when you put twenty of them on the bottom floor of a building and then flip a switch from miles away. Ellie wastes no time calling the chief down, and explaining the situation to her.

"So, in other words, we got *real* lucky no one blew these things up before we got there."

The thought of Chase dying at all, let alone in such a manner makes Ellie feel *painfully* sad. She can't even bring herself to respond to that.

Chief Kurosawa seems to notice, slapping the mechanic on the back before she could get too deep in thought, "Hey, don't think about it. The good news is that we got ahead of it, and we're all good!"

"You don't really think that, do you?" Ellie could tell by Kurosawa's tone of voice that she was downplaying something. The chief, to her credit, doesn't even bother putting up a fight against that.

"It's what I'm trying to believe, Ellie. We're hurting badly without Alice; even though she's a pain in the ass, Samantha just isn't ready to take her spot yet. She not quite as well versed with the more *fringe* cases, whereas Alice never lost a lead."

"Is she okay?" Now that Kurosawa's mentioned it, Ellie hasn't seen or heard from Sam for quite some time. They've been light on dispatches recently, but all the other CATR members have been coming to the office besides her. The mechanic hasn't had a chance to talk to them since the KRA incident, which means she was never actually *told* the details of how all that wound up.

Chief Kurosawa grimaces.

"We weren't able to get any info from the one KRA grunt we had arrested. By the time we got him into the interrogation room, he had taken a cyanide pill. He was dead before we could even get his name."

"And Sam is at a loss, because she was hoping to ask questions before that happened," Ellie guesses. Kurosawa nods in response, earning a laugh from the mechanic.

The chief, confused and a little annoyed by that response, asks, "What's so funny? I'm having trouble finding the humor in this."

"I mean, it's a *stupid* mistake. Why didn't she bother checking for one? Considering that plan of yours, your replacement squad leader shouldn't let those slide, you think?"

Kurosawa stares at her blankly. "Ellie, what are you talking about?"

"Your whole plan to switch the active and reserve teams. They were telling me about it the other day; if you're gonna switch the teams to get rid of Alice, don't you think the replacement squad leader should do better than that?"

Kurosawa stares at her for a bit longer, then *she* laughs a little, "Ellie, I never thought I'd have to say this to *you* of all people, but that's not even close. We haven't been *plotting* anything, I just told her that I had a feeling you had the right skillset to be a permanent member of CATR."

Now it's Ellie's turn to be confused and annoyed, because everyone in CATR's reserve team told her a different story, "So who's lying to me, because that's not what I heard."

"That *bastard* Relland—" The chief starts off, but catches herself. Ellie has to work to keep herself from laughing at that, despite the growing pit of anger building in her stomach. Kurosawa starts to explain, "While that *was* initially what I told them, that was purely to get everyone on board. You see, CATR recommendations without any prior experience or history are quite rare. You would need to be able to prove your fighting ability, thinking capacity, and much more. *I* know you're more than capable in those areas, but you wouldn't have to convince me. So, I figured if I had you help them out for a bit, that would be all the convincing they would need."

It's... not what Ellie was expecting, but it's a much better sounding plan than what was previously explained to her. Part of her is skeptical due to her having been lied to once before, but she was also well aware of how much *drama* a weapons analyst's sudden promotion to CATR would be. Had she been moved to CATR off of a Chief's Recommendation, the entire unit likely would have been in an uproar about it.

But still, "Is that *really* all there is to it? Or are you playing both sides?"

Kurosawa grins slightly, but shakes her head, "Not this time, I'm afraid. You may think I'm quite the schemer, but the reality is that I don't have a lot of options here. Alice, despite being a pain in my ass from time to time, is still good enough at her job to be needed."

"You don't think Sam could be trained?"

"Not fast enough, no. Sam's current issue is that, well, she's never been shown what to do for something like this. She was hired because her abilities make her a key asset for apprehending criminal espers and riftborn, but counter-terrorism? That's new, even to her. But that's why I want you to be a part of that team."

"Hold on, I'd say that's pretty new to me, too. I wasn't exactly aware of the KRA's existence or relevance before the incident."

"But you're more familiar with their conflict than anyone else. From my understanding, that was the entire reason they had kids like you at The Garden to begin with—"

Ellie wasn't expecting to hear that, so she's not fully able to control herself or her reaction when she tells her superior officer, "You're *such* a bitch, why would you say that to me?"

Naturally, Chief Kurosawa doesn't take too well to that response, and her face twists into a nasty scowl, "**Hey.** *You* need to quit talking to me however you feel like, just because you get mad."

"It's not *my* fault you can't stay out of my fucking business!" Ellie fires back.

This is bad.

That offhand mention of The Garden totally flipped a switch inside of her, instantly getting Ellie so keyed up that she feels like she's not in control of her own body. The fact that Kurosawa is *still* digging into her personal life like this is sending her down a really bad spiral, and she needs to exit this conversation pronto before she says or does something she's going to regret. Thankfully, the chief seems to notice that something isn't right.

Kurosawa instantly pulls back on the arguing, and her facial expression relaxes, "Sorry. You're right, I've been prying a bit too much on my end. Still, I just think you're better equipped for this than you're allowing yourself to admit."

The chief makes her way out of Ellie's lab after that, leaving the weapons analyst alone.

Even though she's not a fan of the way things were brought up, Ellie can't help but feel as though Chief Kurosawa has a point. It's not like she *isn't* confident in her abilities, she just wants to stay away from the front lines. She's got more than enough experience for it not to be necessarily *daunting*, but even now the very notion of fighting makes her feel an itch under her skin that terrifies her. It was really intense during the Apollo Heights incident; she can *still* feel the skin on the palm of her right hand buzzing. It's been that way since she grabbed Sam's handgun.

Ellie can't shake the feeling that allowing herself to do any more than that is just inviting trouble. Yet, the chief never budes, and the longer the mechanic spends with the CATR team the more they clearly have been dying to ask questions of their own. At the same time, though, she's just *tired* of the disrespect from everyone else. Outside of the CATR team, the sentiment that she's only there to support has seemed to finally stick... and she *hates* it. People just pass over her entirely, now. She's written off the same way they write off nurses in the infirmary, or vendors dropping off pallets in the warehouse. The idea that people look at her and see *nothing* pisses her off. But then again, isn't that what she *wants*? What *does* she even want, at this point?

It's a question that keeps bouncing around in her skull, long after she gets off of work and goes home. Chase definitely knows something is up, but Ellie can't bring herself to be honest about her woes. Especially since school hasn't resumed since the incident.

In fact, it's pretty likely they won't be finishing the school year at all, which has the teenager visibly bummed out. While she hasn't said anything directly, there's a noticeable lack of *mojo* to everything Chase has been up to recently. Ellie can't really blame her; even though she's been complaining about going to school for quite some time, there's nothing to do at the apartment. The old game consoles Ellie was able to salvage from nearby dumps are dirty and in need of repairs. The shop has been closed for a while, which means she doesn't need help downstairs, and *really*, Chase is still too young to do anything around town by herself. So, when Ellie comes home these days, Chase is usually either watching TV in the living room or screwing around on Ellie's computer setup in her home-lab.

It's not nearly as noisy as it was when Chase first moved in, but as long as she's fine with it, Ellie is too.

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It's been a month since the incident.

Ellie's pretty sure that the PIU has formally begun an investigation into it. Outside of a couple short phone calls, she hasn't seen or heard from Chief Kurosawa since the two talked in her lab last. By now, Ellie's certain that the chief's been meeting with the top brass in order to figure out what their next steps will be. The Apollo Heights incident, while resolved neatly enough, was still an alarming one. Even though tensions have eased up, there's still air of suspense hanging around the office. No one's saying it, but everyone is waiting for the other shoe to drop.

It doesn't help that Alice came back last week, and she's wasted no time barking her CATR squad around. As a result, Ellie's been going out on dispatches far less, and found herself the target of increasingly childish insults much more often. It didn't matter how much the others chastised Alice for it, either. She was practically gunning for Ellie at this point, and it was starting to get under the mechanic's skin, *bad*. She had just started getting used to working without Alice around, but it looks like the fun is over now. What's worse, whenever CATR is dispatched, they *don't* give Ellie any materials they've recovered anymore. The last time the two talked on the phone, Kurosawa expressed *intense* frustration, but since she hasn't been around as often she can't get Alice to budge. And if Chief Kurosawa can't, no one can.

As a result, Ellie's left sitting around in her lab more often than not. On one hand, it's nice not to have to talk to Alice much these days. On the other, having *nothing* to do at all weighs on her more and more each day, which is how she ended up confronting Alice in the CATR loading bay today. It might have been a mistake, but at this point Ellie can't figure out if she hates being ignored or directly insulted more.

"So, what's the deal? You don't feel like working with me anymore, or what?"

Alice is double checking the first-aid and weapons supplies they load into the van for dispatches. There's not much to even look for as everything is in its place, but the pyrokinetic refuses to even glance in Ellie's direction, "Never did. I just figured if I have to put up with our Glorious Leader whether or not you're involved, it's easier for me if you're not."

Confronting her was definitely a mistake, Ellie's already starting to see red, "It's easier for you to *not* have recovered weapons analyzed? Isn't it part of your job to help *investigators* gather evidence?"

"You wanna know something, you little shit?" *Now*, Alice is focused on her. Her glare is intense, too; it's nothing like their last argument. Instead of *just* anger, Alice is looking at her with utter disdain; the same way one looks at a bug just before squashing it, "We just pass it off to the investigators directly. We get *less* done while we wait around for *you* to finish jerking yourself off, how didn't you notice that before?"

"That's not even true!" And it isn't; Ellie knows the percentage of cases closed within three months of reporting has skyrocketed since she was hired. Not to mention, they've been able to solve multiple cold cases with her help. She says as such, which earns an unexpected laugh from the woman standing before her.

"That's why I always make fun of you, you're *childish*. You care about the *amount* of cases closed, but you didn't do anything to increase the amount of dispatches we've had. We haven't just been *closing* more cases, more have been opened, too."

Ellie hadn't thought about that, at all. CATR *had* been getting dispatched more frequently, so it only makes sense that the number of cases closed would increase, too. Just from her own mental math the rate isn't the same, though, so she knows that her being there has *still* led to an improvement in efficiency across the board. In addition, Ellie's more than sure that the percentage of false charges has gone down; while relatively small, five percent of all cases had at least one false charge involved at some point. That number was static until Ellie started working there full-time.

Still, she can't come up with a witty response fast enough, and Alice *instantly* catches on as though she smells blood in the water.

"Are you kidding me? A four-eyed piece of shit like you didn't even think that far ahead? What are we even doing, here?"

"*When* are you gonna come up with a different nickname than that?" Ellie's losing her grip.

"When you prove you actually deserve one. Do you know *why* I call you that?"

"I already figured that much; you don't like me, and the feeling is mutual."

Another laugh. Ellie's starting to weigh the pros and cons of losing her job, as Alice replies, "It's not that I don't *like* you. It's more that I think *nothing* of you at all; to me, you're like a little kid. You have *no* abilities worth using, *nothing* that provides any value besides copying and pasting serial numbers, and your position was *created* for you. Our dumb *bitch* of a chief gave you a free job, and now we have to carry you around? She's making us babysit you, and I'm not into that."

"Just like you're not into keeping your family affairs in order—"

Ellie barely has time to register the room's temperature sharply increase. She sees Alice raise her right hand, but before she can act she's sent flying backwards into the wall, hitting the back of her head on a metal beam with a *thunk*. Suddenly, the alarms are blaring, and water from the sprinkler system starts pouring down on the two of them. Ellie doesn't even need to fully think about it; Alice hit her with fire. What kind of blast, she wasn't sure, but the force was *otherworldly*. It felt like she had been hit by a bus, leaving her a bit dazed. She could see Alice's lips moving, but her ears were ringing so loudly that she couldn't make out the words. Ellie's grateful for that. It gives her a bit of time to think.

Well, she would be thinking, except her jacket is on fire. It's still on fire, despite the sprinkler water clearly coming down onto her. It's not like a grease fire, where the water makes the fire spread further, the flames just... aren't affected. The last time she saw a fire like that was at The Garden, where—

A massive explosion shook the foundation of the girls' dorm. Ellie had gone to sleep that night expecting it, but nothing could have prepared her for the nightmare she would be thrust into the next time she opened her eyes. By the time she had done so, her room was already ablaze; the rumble beneath her doing little to disturb her slumber before the hot smoke filled the air, turning every breath into a desperate struggle for survival from the moment she awoke. The distant, but no less audible ra-ta-ta-ta! of semi-automatic weaponry peppered a chorus of screaming as people in neighboring rooms fled from their burning bedrooms only to be met with the architects of their very demise.

*Ellie could hear footsteps pile up on the other side to the door of her dorm room. They were incredibly heavy, and there were a lot *of them. They were spread across the hall, clearly unbothered by how loud they were. After roughly six seconds of that, silence. She knew the plan, though; she had five seconds left. Ignoring the noise and the fire surrounding her, she sprung into action. Reaching under her bed, she found the lever-action rifle she had stolen from the firing range last night, along with the backpack full of supplies she had prepared before bed. The rifle was already loaded with the safety disengaged; a reckless idea, but it was the only thing she could think of.*

Two seconds to spare.

She got into position, took aim, held her breath, and as soon as the door swung open—

Ellie rips her flaming jacket off of her body. In the next instant she balls it up and, ignoring the feeling of the skin on her palms burning away, throws it as hard as she can at Alice. The pyrokinetic swats it out of the air, but by then Ellie's already closed the distance, tackling her.

Right now, everything is spinning. Her head hurts, her ears are ringing, the sound of the fire crackling and the sprinklers pouring water and the fire alarm blaring are all blending together, and *all* of it feels and sounds like the fire at The Garden. She can feel the adrenaline in her body pumping, she can hear the gunfire from the dorms next door, and she knows it's not real but she doesn't even care anymore. As far as she can tell, the person she's wrestling with on the ground right now just tried to kill her. So, it's only fair for Ellie to try and get onto her back for a proper chokehold. After all, at The Garden if someone tries to kill you, whatever happens next is fair game.

Alice rips her hands free from Ellie's grip, igniting them again. In the next moment, she punches Ellie in the stomach as hard as possible, making sure to throw some fire behind it for some extra pain. The mechanic feels the burning on her torso, and can feel the soreness and the pain from the impact of the punch, but it feels... dull. The force throws her a couple meters away, off of Alice, but she lands on her feet with ease. Really, it feels like she's not even in her own body anymore; she can feel all of the sensations from everything around her, but it's *all* dull. Muted. At this point, her arms and torso are *already* littered with severe burns, but she can barely feel them. All she can think about is how this even happened to begin with.

Alice is looking at her with fury in her eyes, and her own arms are ablaze. She punches the air in front of her, sending all of the flames built up on her right arm towards Ellie. The mechanic runs running straight towards it, not even bothering to slow down.

Red hot flames engulf her, licking the skin on her torso. She'll worry about it later.

Alice looks surprised at what Ellie just did, but she doesn't falter. Instead, she instantly gets in a boxing stance, throwing a jab at Ellie's upper body with her flaming left hand. Thankfully, the mechanic is in the exact range she needs to be; she's able to step to her right, grabbing the pyrokinetic's left wrist with her own left hand. While continuing to divert the motion of Alice's jab, Ellie raises her left arm slightly, and slams her right fist as close to the woman's liver as possible. It's a clean hit; she backs off winded. But for Ellie, it's not enough.

Miss Kerry always taught her students three principles: aim for the vitals, maintain your range, and *end the fight*. She'll be okay as long as she maintains her preferred range, doubly so with the increased reaction time afforded by her brain's processing speed. She's not worried about ending the fight either. The vitals, though, those were important: the liver, ribs, neck, back of the head, and groin. Those five spots were the most important factors for applying Miss Kerry's three principles correctly. They weren't necessarily *vitals* in the sense that you'd be aiming for them with a weapon, but in a fight they were the best areas to target if you needed a tough opponent to go down. And Ellie wanted nothing more than to see this one go down *hard*.

That hit to the liver caught the pyrokinetic off guard, but she stumbles only for a moment. Still, that moment is more than enough for Ellie to throw her right straight into the ribs, before slamming her left into the woman's solar plexus. When she doubles over in response, Ellie gets *even closer* for a proper hold, hitting the pyrokinetic below the belt with her right knee. A dirty move, but that's what she gets for using fire. She tried to kill Ellie; it's fair game, and it works *real* well. The mechanic can *feel* the strength leave the woman's body for a split second, and that's the only opening she needs to get around to her back for a second time. The same as before; she goes for another chokehold. Alice squirms to get out of it, stomping on the mechanic's toes and elbowing her in the gut. It's so ineffective Ellie starts to wonder if she's begun to lose consciousness yet, which is exactly when the woman she's choking manages to get enough air to ignite another flame.

This time, she doesn't even bother aiming. She just throws it at the ground, blowing the two apart entirely. Ellie's sent flying more than a few meters back, but aside from that, she's no worse for wear. Once her vision clears properly... she can see the loading bay is *ruined*. The entire garage is on fire now, with the sprinklers proving ineffective. From *just* outside of the flames, she can see people trying to use various methods to put out the fire, and for a split second the mechanic wonders if Relland and Barret's magic water might be helpful.

A loud cough snaps Ellie out of her thoughts. When she looks to the source, she sees Alice on the other side of the room. She's on her hands and knees, coughing up a lung.

This entire time Alice has hated her so much because, in her mind, Ellie is worthless trash that they have to lug around. She doesn't provide any value, she doesn't actually *do* anything to help, and she doesn't deserve to be there. And now the woman who's so much better than her is on the ground, coughing and hacking after a getting choked for a little bit. How sad. Ellie wishes she felt bad for her, but more than anything... she's itching to end the fight.

She sprints towards Alice without a second thought.

You think I'm childish, but you don't know anything about me, is all Ellie can think.

It's all she can think, even as she runs straight through *another* wave of fire that Alice throws at in desperation, this time tackling the pyrokinetic when she gets in range and getting on top of her. This time, Ellie doesn't waste any time pounding away at her head from above with her right, over and over, until her punches stop landing. That alone was definitely enough to rattle the woman; she's staring at Ellie with a strange, wild look in her eyes while pitifully raising her arms in front of her face, desperately trying to push Ellie away while guarding herself. It takes her a second, but then she realizes it: Alice, a pyrokinetic that's handled *serial killers* alone before, is scared. Right now, in this moment, a *weapons analyst* scared the daylight out of her. It's *hilarious*, yet she can't bring herself to smile, joke, or laugh.

That's strange.

Alice is supposed to be strong, and *this* is what happens when she's on the back foot? Then again, it's not like it's something Ellie hasn't seen before. It was common for kids to get into The Ring, hyped up on their own abilities, just to start blubbering the second they took a hit to the face. But *Alice* was like that? And she was the leading *CATR*?

The fact that she's bothering to put up the scared act now is... *frustrating*. It's so frustrating that Ellie can't help herself when she yells, "If you're not gonna fight back, *move your fucking hands!*"

It was a common tactic she picked up from the few times she's had to fight in The Ring. At this point, usually the opponent was no good to fight any further... but in The Ring you only won by knockout. There was no tapping out, and there were no TKOs; you simply put as many opponents to sleep as you can, until they put you to sleep. So, in moments like this where the fight was clearly over but they were cowering, prolonging the inevitable, she would yell "*Move your hands!*"

They always did, consciously or otherwise. And it was good for them; it's a quicker and easier way for the fight to be over than cowering and hoping that someone takes it easy on you. In that kind of moment, your instincts are taking over the wheel. You become little more than a prey animal.

Naturally, Alice obeyed, and the instant the two made eye contact, Ellie punched her in the right temple as hard as possible. For a moment, she saw the back of Alice's head bounce off of the hard flooring, and *that* finally put a smile on her face. She wasn't done though; she kept firing away at the woman's temples. Any time the pyrokinetic tried to defend herself, Ellie would bark at her to stop it. She could have gone for hours, and it *still* wouldn't be adequate payback for how much grief this woman's given her over the years.

After Ellie gets a few more hits in, she pauses to look at Alice's brown eyes. They're glassy, with slightly dilated pupils; signs of a concussion, just what she was hoping to see. Before she can throw in a few more punches for good measure, though, she feels several arms grabbing her by the remains of her clothes, pulling her away from the woman underneath.

The instant that happens, everything fades away.

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Not a single person expected an argument between CATR Squad Leader Alice Molton and the new weapons expert to *literally* explode minutes in. They certainly didn't expect to see what happened next; the mechanic sprinting through flames like hell on wheels, receiving major burns on her body and shrugging them off just to punch Alice in the face once or twice, tackle her, or *literally* pick her up and throw her around. Nearly everyone in the office was stunned into silence; all they could do was watch as Ellie—the new girl, snarky and bratty, but never mean spirited—received several third degree burns on her torso while smiling from ear-to-ear.

But of all the people there, none were as shocked as Sam herself. This was a *completely* different person compared to the Ellie she had known before. That Ellie may have been a good shot, sure, but she wasn't a close combat fighter. She certainly wasn't the type that would *smile* after getting burned while tackling someone's onto the pavement and firing away, in a manner that would certainly leave the person on the receiving end with a concussion. Sure, it was Alice, and she hated Alice as much as everyone else in the room, but she just... couldn't bear to watch Ellie wear that *awful* grin while doing something so... *excessive*.

It's one thing to get into a fight with someone you hate. But Sam could tell that in *this* moment, Ellie was *reveling* in the act of brutalizing the squad leader, no less in front of everyone here. She just punches the woman, yells at her for trying to guard herself, and punches her again. Quite simply, it's ugly to watch, and that's what pushes Sam to act.

She takes a deep breath, concentrating on as much of the ESP in her body as she can muster, and—

Double Accel.

It's a simple ability. She can adjust her body's own sense of time, allowing her to move at up to twice the speed, or perceive things at half the speed. In less than a second, she crosses the distance between her desk and the loading bay, and as soon as she's there, she's shouting at onlookers to help. Meanwhile, she ignores the feeling of her own heart rapidly beating, as though it were about to explode. The only downside to her ability she can think of is the fact that it speeds up her heart rate, so she needs to be careful about stress after using her skills.

Thankfully, though, the second Ellie gets grabbed she goes limp like a small kitten being grabbed by the scruff of its neck, and the two are separated without further incident.

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When Ellie finally snaps back into herself, it takes her a second to realize... she's in a hospital room. She *vaguely* remembers what happened, but it's hard for her to focus too much on any one thing. Her entire body hurts so badly, and it takes all of her energy to do anything besides stare at the ceiling. She can feel gauze wraps covering nearly every inch of her body, with needles stuck in various places underneath. An IV drip, a catheter, an EKG, and various other things are scattered all over. They must be giving her some form of pain medication, too; she's hurting, sure, but it feels less like she was roasted alive by an angry woman with pyrokinesis, and more like she collapsed while running a marathon. Being able to tell that much helps ease her mind a bit; so far, her senses are still intact despite being burned all over.

At the same time, she wants to cry. There's no way she can deny it anymore, she's—

"You know, the more I try to understand you, the more it feels like I don't know anything about you at all."

Sam's voice snaps her out of it. The sound of her voice is so distinct, Ellie doesn't even really have to think about it. "You don't know me," she replies.

"Let's talk, then," it doesn't seem like she plans on letting Ellie rest first.

"No, thanks."

"Oh, *come on*. I think I'm owed that much for stopping you from doing something you'll regret. What if you killed her?" And now she's being indignant.

Ellie scoffs. It hurts a little to laugh, but it's so funny that she can't help it, "You think I'd regret that?"

Sam doesn't say anything for what feels like forever. When she speaks again, her voice is unusually quiet. "*Would* you?"

Ellie tries to take a deep breath, but hisses in pain. Breathing deep like that hurts, a *lot*, "I'm not against it. It's probably good that you stopped me though."

"Why is that?"

"It's been a long time since I've killed someone. I'm... not sure what would happen if I did," Ellie's not sure why she said that. At all. Sam is practically a stranger to her; outside of work, the two have *never* talked before. *Sure*, the woman was attractive, but at the end of the day she was just a coworker. But the mechanic's head hurts, her body hurts, and for the first time *ever* it feels like someone at the PIU genuinely wants to listen to her speak. Whatever pain medication they've given her is probably helping too, now that she thinks about it.

Sam's response isn't what Ellie expected. She scoots closer to Ellie's bed, and then asks, "Is it okay if I touch your arm?"

It's so oddly specific that the mechanic feels weird *not* saying "yes". When she does, Ellie still can't help but jump at the sudden contact. Even though she knew Sam was right next to her, not being able to see her reach out was enough to make the bedridden mechanic jump out of her skin. Granted, it's not like she couldn't just *look* at the person talking to her, but for some reason Ellie just... can't. The mechanic feels oddly vulnerable, and she doesn't like this feeling at all.

Sam keeps talking, "I won't force you to tell me anything, but... Something tells me you've been through a lot, and you don't like to lean on others. Even now, you're hurt so badly, and it's like you don't even care. What happened to you to make you so... reckless with your own life?"

Ellie is *genuinely* confused. "Why do you care? If you're worried about me being back at work, I'll be back as soon as I'm cleared—"

"That's the *thing*, Ellie! I care because *you* don't care! The difference between me and Alice is that *I* care about my team. We talk to each other; that's why everyone knows Trix's whole deal. When Barret's son died, *we* were his pallbearers. It's not a normal team dynamic, but that's what you *need* to be a functioning team. And it's something I want you to be a part of, too."

That last sentence makes Ellie's heart ache. She didn't even realize how desperately she's wanted someone to say something so... simple.

Ellie manages to find the words, and asks her, "You're about my age, right? How did your parents handle having a kid during New Genesis?"

Sam doesn't respond right away, "Mine had me just after. They didn't know anything about espers, but they *tried*. It ended up working out, I think."

"I wasn't that lucky, unfortunately. My mom died and my dad shipped me off to an orphanage that was experimenting on child espers. He didn't know about that last part, but I don't think he would have cared."

The mechanic feels Sam's hand grip her forearm slightly, "That's... *awful*, Ellie. I'm sorry. I know I asked but... are you okay with talking about it?"

"It's fine. The place is gone, anyways. It was burned to the ground once news of what they were using the campus for got leaked."

After that, the two sit in silence for a bit. Ellie's still staring at the ceiling, partially because everything still hurts pretty badly, but also partially because she's scared of seeing the expression on Sam's face. She's never told anyone besides Chase anything about The Garden, and while the details were left out, just saying it out loud makes her feel... strange. All she can do is focus on the cool feeling of Sam's hand resting on her burned forearm, gently brushing over the gauze-covered skin with her fingers.

After a while, she quietly asks, "Were you experimented on, Ellie?"

The mechanic has honestly never thought about it. She doesn't even *want* to think about it, because the real answer is so much scarier to her. She's spent the past ten years trying not to think about it. Everything terrible that's ever happened to her has been the direct result of a label she never even asked for, and even as an adult that label keeps being thrust upon her. The fact that her own agency over *the very thing she was* may have been entirely taken away from her is... haunting. That was the worst part about being aware of her condition after the fight, because there's no way she can avoid admitting the *awful* truth to herself.

"I... don't know. I mean, *something* happened, but... I don't know. The place burned down before I even got a chance to ask."

"Then how do you know about it?" Sam asks in response, but her voice is shaking.

Ellie finally gets the strength to look at her. Sam returns her gaze, and it's only then can the mechanic see small tears brimming at her eyes. Instead of answering Sam's question, she can only ask, "Why are you crying?"

Objectively, she knows why. Any person with empathy would feel *terribly* sad hearing just some of the things that Ellie's talked about. But she can't stop herself from asking; the idea that someone would be *crying* over her story doesn't make sense to her. She's cried countless tears over her own issues, sure, but seeing *someone else* cry for her was new. The question only seems to make Sam cry harder though, because as soon as Ellie asks that her face crumples up and she turns away.

"Sorry. I'm fine. I just—You've been dealing with a lot. I didn't know, and some of us have been so *awful* to you."

She doesn't sound fine.

Ellie doesn't know how to respond to that, so she jumps back to the question Sam had initially asked her. She returns her gaze to the ceiling and says, "You wanted to know how I knew about the experiments, right? In a way, it's hard for me to *not* know; when you can pick up a grown adult like it's nothing, you start putting two-and-two together. Still..." Ellie feels the words catch in her throat. It's odd, in this situation... it's almost as though she's admitting she's not a real person. As though if she says the words out loud, she'll vanish, and the Ellie sitting here will be replaced by something else entirely.

But she knows she's already put herself in that scenario, so she takes a deep, painful breath and says it: "The reason my dad hated me so much was because he thought I was a demon. So it's hard to sit here and wrestle with the idea that someone might have tried to turn me into one, without me knowing. It's... I don't know."

"It sounds scary, I don't know how I'd deal with it," Sam replies, solemnly, "Is your sister the same—"

Her next question is interrupted by the EKG Ellie's hooked up to going *haywire*. Even though the nurses are going to start rushing in any second, it's not because of a medical emergency. The mechanic is simply *freaking out*, because after everything that's happened it's nine-thirty at night, and Chase gets out of school at *four*. She didn't come home, nor did she call or text Chase to tell the teenager she's going to be late. Before she can start begging Sam for her phone, though, her companion is already doing her best to calm her down.

"Easy, relax. You had her listed as an emergency contact, remember? We called her the second you were admitted. She's in the lobby, we've just sent someone to give her updates on your condition."

That's not good either, though. Ellie says as such, and when Sam looks at her confused, all she can say is, "If you think I get mad, she's worse. She's gonna be *pissed*."

Sure enough, Ellie's starting to hear a *lot* of commotion from far down the hall, and it's inching closer. It's not long before she can make out voices, and most of them seem to be distressed or panicked.

"**Hey**, you're not authorized—!"

"Someone get security, this wing doesn't allow visitors—"

There's a *lot* of people, and the crowd is closing in fast. Before Ellie can even prepare Sam for what she's in for, a short, black haired teenager loudly kicks in the door to her room at the hospital. Chase is wearing an expression that Ellie has never seen before: her facial expression itself is muted, but her jaw is tight, and the look in her eyes is intense enough to make someone drop dead on the spot. In that vein, Ellie thinks it's pretty admirable that the doctors and nurses even tried to stop her; she sure as hell wouldn't have. Especially considering that Chase's eyes are doing something that Ellie has *never* seen them do before.

The iris of her left eye is *glowing* bright red. It's glowing so brightly that it's clearly visible even in the well lit hospital room. Chase has always resembled her parents, but that tight anger boiling under the surface combined with her glowing eye makes her look especially like her mother. Ellie isn't quite sure why.

At the same time, Ellie tries to ignore the feeling of her blood running cold in her veins.

"Who did this to you?" Is the only thing Chase says. She's looking *directly* at Ellie, pointedly ignoring everyone else in the room.

Sam talks first, clearly snapping into work mode, "Sorry, but as this incident was between PIU officers—"

"I didn't ask *you* a fucking thing, did I? Ellie, *who did this?!*"

Sam is stunned, and so are all of the nurses and doctors, who have finally realized it's best to give up on their attempts to stop the short black-haired girl from causing a scene. They just silently walk away, equal parts deflated and concerned.

Ellie decides it's best to diffuse things. She can tell the full story later, "Something happened at work, but we can talk about that at home. Come over—"

"**No**, tell me now! When we get home we're gonna eat dinner and then you'll spend all night dodging the question. Just *tell me*."

"Chase—" Ellie starts to protest, but she sees the girl's bottom lip quiver slightly and that's all it takes for her to give in. "Sam, I'm sorry. Can you give us some privacy?"

Thankfully, Sam nods, and gets up to leave without putting up a fight. The second the door closes behind her, Ellie scoots over as much as she can and pats the hospital bed, gesturing for Chase to sit. The teenager doesn't move.

"I called you twenty-five times. On call twenty-six I realized that your job called me, and they said you got hurt."

So, they didn't call her right away, is what Ellie thinks at first, but Chase is quick to clarify.

"They called me hours before, I just didn't recognize the number. I just..."

Her bottom lip quivers a little more before her face crumples up, and tears start to spill out.

"You're hurt so badly, and for *what*? Who are you having issues with that's willing to hurt you *like this*?"

"I just got hurt at work, that's all. Really—" Clearly, Chase isn't buying it, because the second Ellie even bothers with a lie like that she starts *wailing*. It's not that she doesn't *want* to tell Chase about the fight, Ellie just can't say it. She isn't even sure why she's trying so hard to downplay it anymore. She *literally* got into a fight with a coworker that can throw fireballs, and got burned. Why can't she just tell Chase that? Why is that so hard?

"Do you regret letting me stay with you?"

It makes Ellie's heart *ache*. The fact that those kinds of things are still on her mind makes the mechanic feel like the scum of the earth, somehow. "What? No! I'm glad you're with me."

"Then why do you still hide everything from me?"

"Chase, I don't—" Ellie flinches as soon as she says it. It's not the truth at all, because she *does* hide things from Chase. There have been so many things that she's just opted *not* to tell her, for one reason or another. She keeps telling herself it's because she doesn't want to burden the girl with her woes, because of how much she's been through already. But is that even true? The disappointed look in Chase's eyes says it all: there was never a time where she didn't know that Ellie had been lying to her.

Why can't Ellie just *say it*?

"You know, I don't even know why you wanna know this badly. Nothing happened, dude; I just got in a fight with a coworker and *lost*."

The second Ellie finishes that sentence, she feels her voice quiver. Somewhere, a dam cracks.

Chase is staring at her. She's still crying, but she manages to squeak out, "*All that* from a fight with one person?"

"One of the officers at the PIU is a pyrokinetic, and a real *bitch*. All she does is talk down to me, or call me names, and it's *childish* but I *fucking* hate it. I lost my cool in front of all my coworkers and started a fight with someone way stronger than me and now you're looking at what happens."

As soon as she says that, it finally clicks. The reason she's had such a hard time opening up to Chase is the same reason she's felt so frustrated with her position at the PIU, and the reason everything with her dad bothers her so much. She just wants to have control over how others see her... the one thing that no one has any control over. The second she makes that realization, she falls quiet. Now isn't the time; she *needs* to at least say that much to Chase, if nothing else to clarify what's going on in her head. But she can't think of the right way to say it. All she can do is constantly recurse over the words bouncing around in her head. She doesn't want to say the wrong thing and widen the emotional gap between the two of them, because that's the *only* thing she's done recently. Instead, all she can do is stare blankly at Chase, then at her own hands clasped together, back and forth on loop.

Thankfully for Ellie, though, Chase is the first to speak.

"I don't think all of that is 'nothing,' Ellie. She's been picking on you this whole time, hasn't she?"

That's not what Ellie expected. Even though she was sobbing moments ago, Chase's facial expression has softened again. Her eyes are still teary, but her gaze is direct. She's giving Ellie her full attention, taking that small gap in the mechanic's defenses as an opportunity to dig deeper. Ellie can't help but be thrown off by how *determined* she is, "I mean, *yeah*, but—"

"Then *of course* you're gonna want to get into a fight. I bet you're just embarrassed that you got hurt."

It's just a joke, but it rings true a bit more than she'd like to admit. She knocked Alice on the head more than a few times, but she doubted a mild concussion would keep someone like that down. In the grand scheme of things *Ellie* was the one that walked away in worse shape. The burns are one thing; she's not really worried about that, even though they were quite severe. Really the thing that bothers her is just that...

"I just feel stupid. It was a *stupid* thing to do."

Her voice cracks again, and after that she starts to cry.

She hates it, but it's the one thing that truly makes her feel so upset more than anything. There was *absolutely* no reason to pick a fight with someone that uses fire as an ability. Even if getting burned isn't a concern, Ellie has *no* advantage up close or at a distance, and especially not without a weapon. Meanwhile, Alice had the upper hand the entire time during the fight. What the *fuck* was she thinking?

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"Berkeley, what happened to your nose?!"

The stern, drill sergeant-like voice snapped Ellie out of her funk. She had been so busy yelling, cursing, and biting back tears in pain that she hadn't realized she was being watched by The Garden's Professor of Social Engineering and Strategic Theory, Miss Kerry. Unlike Professor Lance, who was fine with anything besides his first name, Miss Kerry insisted on being called such. She was a tall imposing force; a redhead that towered over everyone, and acted like it. Glasses barely hid the visage of scars on her nose, and she always wore a business suit. Sometimes she would change up her hair style, but she usually opted to let her long red hair flow past her shoulders. Ellie always thought she was quite pretty; being fourteen, some things you just couldn't help. Miss Kerry's nasty attitude quickly shut down any thoughts of admiration, though.

Especially considering she had managed to find Ellie in her secret hiding spot, crying and cursing over a broken nose.

Ellie wasn't particularly glad Miss Kerry had found her, but seeing the tall redhead in front of her now was far from a surprise. Miss Kerry was an esper with the ability to locate ESP within a certain radius of her. Ellie didn't have a lot of ESP, but the little that (apparently) resided within her brain was enough to give her hiding spot away. Said "hiding spot" being a dilapidated bathroom in the basement of the girls' dorm; it was always avoided due to its condition, but it made for a good hiding spot whenever Ellie didn't want to be seen by anyone else.

This time was no exception. But seeing Miss Kerry; her fierce stature, fiery red hair, and intense scowl, Ellie knew what she was in for.

"I got into it with a couple of the girls just now. I can fix it on my own, so—"

"What do you mean, 'got into it'? Did you get in a fight? You're in here crying over a broken nose because of a fight?"

At the end of each question, she steps closer and closer, until she's eventually standing between Ellie and the door. Great; this was exactly why she didn't want anyone to see her. Getting your nose broken *really* hurts, especially when you get a book slammed in your face by someone that has backup. Granted, it was Ellie's fault, but still.

Miss Kerry was the overseer of the hand-to-hand combat courses, as well as the Social Engineering and Strategic Theory courses. She took pride in progress, but when it came to failure she was like a moth to flame. At The Garden, the students were always taught, "Mind and body. A weak mind and strong body will never prevail, and a strong mind with a weak body is destined to fail. Strength is mind and body."

To Miss Kerry, a "strong body" that was affected by insults or injuries was worthless. So, she sought to correct that behavior; her students weren't allowed to cry, or express distress. Even outside of her courses, you were expected to remain calm no matter what anyone said or did, even if you got hurt, and even if someone hurt you. If she saw you react, then she would offer something "to help you toughen up". That something would be The Ring, or solitary; whichever got the better reaction. If you didn't react, she'd let you off the hook. Naturally, if you reacted she would follow through, which set the record straight very quickly.

So, her seeing Ellie in here crying over a lost fight that she provoked... wasn't good. This likely prompted her interrogation, much to Ellie's chagrin. Who wants to answer questions while dealing with a face full of pain and this much blood?

"I'm crying because it hurts. Can you please leave me alone so I can fix my nose?"

"Do you realize how stupid you look? You're the only one here with this supposed 'brain anomaly', and you're just running around getting into fights. Who does that?"

Ellie tried to ignore how badly that stung. It wasn't her fault that everyone decided to have issues with her, "Me, now can you *please* leave me alone?"

"What happened?"

Ellie did her best to tune out Miss Kerry's questions, continuing to wipe away the blood coming from her nose. The break was pretty bad after all; resetting this was gonna suck.

Miss Kerry, clearly aggravated at being ignored, demanded louder, "*What the hell happened, Berkeley?*"

"Lea made fun of me for being an orphan, I made fun of her for... something gross she did, and then one of her friends smacked me in the face with a textbook. There, *happy?*"

"Surely you knew that picking a fight with her friends around would be stupid. Why didn't you de-escalate?"

Ellie *hated* it when people told her that. It's not like she didn't think about de-escalation, it's just hard to do that literally every time she talks to someone. The kids didn't fucking like her, no amount of turning the other cheek would change that. "Why am I the one that always has to de-escalate? Why can't they just leave me alone?"

"Because there's presumably more than one of them, and they're all stronger than you. Why fight?"

"They're *not* stronger than me, Lea's in the fucking hospital now. *That's* why I fought."

"And what about her friends?"

Ellie didn't have an answer for that.

Miss Kerry shook her head, clearly disappointed, "What a waste of potential. You're too old and too smart to be in here blubbering over a broken nose, and especially not because of a fight you started. *Get over it* and be ready for dinner in fifteen, or else we're giving your plate to the dogs again. And don't bother going back to the dorms after, you've gotten too soft."

Ellie knew exactly what that meant. Her heart sank, "*Why?* That's not fair."

Miss Kerry snapped her fingers, "*That* right there. You're crying about 'fairness', knowing damn well that *none* of this is about being fair. It's about being smart enough to avoid making stupid mistakes. Your body may be strong, but until you can get rid of that ego, you will always be as pathetic as the father that died trying to throw you away in the first place. While you're in solitary, I want you to think about that."

After she finished that sentence, she walked out of the dilapidated bathroom, leaving Ellie completely gutted by the comment about her dad, and alone.

Ever since she had been promoted to Dorm Manager, every kid her age and up decided they had a bone to pick with her. Talking crazy to people with higher "tiered" jobs than you was ill-advised, but because Ellie didn't have parents or a fancy psychic ability of her own, they often targeted her anyways. That was the thing that pissed her off more than anything; they would sit there and make fun of her specifically until she cracked. It didn't matter that they were *all* there because their parents shipped them off, Ellie was an actual orphan and they weren't. Their parents wanted them, and hers didn't.

That wasn't entirely true, but it was more true than she wanted to admit.

After one of the girls, Lea, hurled a similar insult at Ellie, she decided she'd had enough and shouted back, "At least I wasn't caught humping tables in Professor Lance's office!" prompting a chorus of 'ooooooooohhhh's from every kid in the room. After class ended, Ellie's face was promptly introduced to a hardcover textbook on the way out. Things got pretty blurry after that, but somewhere along the way things were broken up; Lea had to be hauled off to a hospital due to a broken femur. It was practically unheard of for The Garden to send kids off campus to be treated for medical emergencies, which made Ellie feel pretty good about herself.

Still, it's not like she wanted to get into a fight with anyone. She was just tired of constantly being on the receiving end of everyone's assumptions, and never being taken seriously because of her actual efforts. She could put people in the hospital with her bare hands, perfectly memorize and copy anything, had abnormally sensitive hearing, could read text on a billboard from over four hundred yards away, or shoot with the kind of speed and accuracy that made trained soldiers uncomfortable, but she spent two years cleaning bathrooms because she couldn't lift rocks with her mind or whatever. Then again, if she was actually capable enough, maybe she wouldn't have gotten into that fight at all. Or any of the other ones; she was smart enough to avoid confrontation, she should know better.

She hated Miss Kerry with every fiber of her being, but the woman was right.

It was a waste.

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In the present, Ellie's feeling that for the first time in years. Compared to all of the other things that could hurt her, nothing was worse than the incredibly minuscule fact that she had just made a dumb mistake that put herself in danger. It was something the staff at The Garden loved to hammer home constantly; someone as smart as her shouldn't *be* fighting against people that have the advantage over her. She should be mentally present at all times, not letting childish shit like "four-eyes" provoke her. The fact that she was even in this situation to begin with *was* the thing that frustrated her. Looking at Chase, she can't help but feel like the teenager would be disappointed. She *must* be; to her, Ellie is a genius. She's not the kind of person that runs headfirst into danger and has the wherewithal to be sad about the result.

When she sees those blue eyes across the room from her, though, she doesn't see that at all. She's just watching Ellie, waiting for... something, it seems. And in this moment, the mechanic decides that it *has* to be right now. She needs to tell her the truth about where she grew up, if nothing else but to make sure that there's less secrets between the two. There's so much that she wants to say, and the fact that she has no idea how Chase might react is more terrifying than anything else.

But in this moment, she finally finds the words.

Ellie slowly takes a deep, shaky breath.

"Chase, have I ever told you about what it was like at The Garden? Or any of the stuff that happened there?"

The teenager shakes her head. She's still standing across the room, like she's scared to cross the halfway point between the door and Ellie's hospital bed. Ellie gestures her to come sit on the bed again, but Chase refuses again.

"They said you had third degree burns, you're going to need surgery. You need to be comfortable."

Ellie can't help but smile. Even after all these years, she can't help but be in awe of how empathetic Chase truly is. It's like she's genuinely incapable of being selfish when she knows someone in front of her is hurting. But...

"I think... you might want to be sitting down. It's a long story. And don't worry about the burns, either; I'm gonna tell the nurses when they get back, but..."

Ellie reaches her left arm over, and tears open the gauze wrapped on her forearm. It's a little difficult because of how much *shit* she's hooked up into, but it doesn't take a lot for her to remove enough gauze for Chase to see her skin.

Normally, it's a terrible idea; third degree burns permanently damage the skin, and require skin grafts at the bare minimum. Exposing the damaged skin to air would be incredibly painful, and would result in the area getting infected with bacteria. The thing about Ellie's arm, though, is that the skin has mostly healed by now. She's not sure to what extent, but she can feel that nearly *all* of the burns all over her body have healed to some degree. She was about to explain as such to Sam before Chase arrived.

When Chase sees the scarred, but otherwise completely smooth caramel-colored skin on Ellie's arm, she's visibly left with more questions. The teenager quickly scurries over to Ellie's bed to get a closer look, crossing the impossible gap between them faster than either girl could breathe. As she looks at the healed skin her mouth hangs open in confusion, and she's clearly trying to come up with words... but she can't seem to find them.

Ellie takes that opportunity to talk first.

"I've told you about the orphanage where I grew up before, right?"

At the sound of the mechanic's voice, Chase seems to snap back in to herself. She nods an affirmative, "Yeah, back at the old house. You said they were experimenting on people."

"They were. They used to sneak demon meat into our food, or inject us with Gehenna directly." At the mention of "demon meat", the teenager's face twists in disgust, but when Ellie says "Gehenna", that disgust turns into confusion.

"You and my uncle have both said 'Gehenna' before, what does that mean?"

The offhand mention of her uncle throws Ellie off. She had forgotten Chase went to his house on her own, previously. When she asks about it, the teenager is surprised that Ellie even cares.

"I mean, *of course* I care. I was incredibly upset because of how his... *decision* might affect you, but that was still a shocking thing to see. I'm glad he's okay enough for you to talk to; you need *some* family around, at least."

"What do you mean by that?"

Ellie's caught off guard, "I didn't mean anything, I just think it's important for you to have family you can rely on." And it's true. She *genuinely* didn't mean anything by it.

Chase isn't budging, though.

"At the old house you said we were like family, what happened to that?"

"Chase, *nothing happened*, I just—"

"Did I do something wrong? It's okay if you want me to move in with him when he's in better shape."

They go back and forth for a bit longer before Ellie, exasperatedly, shouts, "I'm not trying to get rid of you, okay?! I always figured you'd be happier with someone you're related to, but I'd never force you to leave!"

"Well I *wouldn't* be happy with him! He's a demon hunter! Do you know how much I hated always being home alone while Mom and Dad were out demon hunting?! I hate being at home by myself and not knowing where anyone is! I don't wanna go back to that!"

"Then don't! You can stay with me as long as you want!"

"But you don't want—"

"*Of course I want you to live with me! If you left I'd just be sad all the fucking time!*"

A gentle cough from the doorway interrupts their... argument? It wasn't supposed to be, but they were getting pretty aggressive towards each other. When both direct their attention to the doorway, the source of the cough is... a different nurse than any of the ones that was trying to kick Chase out earlier. This was likely the one that was attending to Ellie before the mechanic regained consciousness. She's short, but that well-timed cough did a good job at getting both girls' attention.

"I'm aware that you two have an exception, but I must remind you that it is well past ten o'clock. Visiting ended two hours ago, and you've been disturbing the patients in nearby rooms."

Ellie doesn't have to hear anything else, she's already apologizing. Chase is staring at the woman blankly and unflinchingly, seemingly waiting for the nurse to say something else. And that's when Ellie realizes that Chase has scooted over so that she's sitting directly between the nurse and the mechanic. She still hasn't said anything, and she's still staring as though she's silently daring the nurse. As though she's saying, *What are you actually gonna do if I get loud? Are you gonna try to kick me out?*

It's odd, but the behavior reminds Ellie of a guard dog; she can practically hear the teenager growling like one. That seems to snap her out of her funk entirely, and she laughs for what feels like the first time in a while.

With a smile, she finally manages to get out, "Sorry for the noise, we'll be quiet,"

The nurse, smiles, clearly satisfied at having broken up an argument. After that, she walks back out of the room, and the door automatically slides shut behind her.

...

What were they even talking about again?

"Gehenna," Ellie says out loud, reminding both girls where they were at before the mention of Chase's uncle got them into it. "You were saying you wanted to know what that was, right?"

After their spat, Chase seems to be much more relaxed. She probably had a lot of pent up energy from everything that happened in her perspective, so now that she's gotten most of it out she's fully sitting on the bed next to Ellie listening intently. She nods, occasionally glancing at the scarred skin on Ellie's forearm.

"Demons are made of two things; the corrupted Anima that serves as their body's energy source, and the substance that their bodies are made of. That substance is 'Gehenna'; anything it comes into contact with it corrupts, as long as that thing has Anima. So, animals, plants, and presumably people, since ESP is a human's Anima. It's not that simple, though."

"How so?"

"Well... you've seen how your uncle looks, right?" Ellie asks. It's a little insensitive, but given that Chase has been to see him recently, the mechanic is sure it's not too bad to ask. Sure enough, the teenager doesn't even seem to think about it, and nods. Ellie continues, "That bubbling black stuff is Gehenna. It still needs a container or vessel of some kind in order to function. Your uncle had enough Anima for his 'container' to be his Gehenna, but not all demons are like that. Corrupted beasts, for example, use the bodies of animals as their 'container.' Make sense?"

Chase pauses, folding her arms and rubbing her chin, "I... think? So in a way, the Gehenna *is* the demon, right?"

"Right. Without Anima, it can't maintain a consciousness. As long as it has corrupted Anima, it's a living thing in and of itself."

"Makes sense—wait, if Gehenna becomes a *living* thing with corrupted Anima, and ESP is a type of Anima, that's why it failed, right? They were injecting espers with Gehenna hoping that their ESP would be corrupted, but they couldn't control what happened next."

That's... exactly what happened.

Any form of direct contact with Gehenna could trigger the early stages of Gehenna corruption. Injecting it only allows that corruption to get a head start on the internal organs, causing them to fail outright or mutate into... *something* incompatible with the human body. If the test subject was a particularly strong esper or had an abundance of ESP, they would become something else entirely, and need to be put down. Ellie is genuinely flabbergasted, because that was a conclusion that it took the scientists at The Garden *months* of trials to arrive at. Sure, Chase was going into this with the understanding that people died due to these experiments, but for her to draw the correct conclusion instantly... she's a lot smarter than she gives herself credit for. When Ellie says as such, it's impossible to ignore the blush spreading across the teenager's cheeks.

Chase runs her hand along the burn scars forming on Ellie's arm, before quietly asking, "Is that what happened to you?"

Ellie shakes her head, "For one thing, I'm still me. I'm not sure *what* happened, but I have a guess. The fact that they spiked our food was much lesser known, but I think that's because it had less side effects than the Gehenna injections. The only reason we got suspicious about the Gehenna injections was because kids were disappearing every three weeks on schedule."

Ellie knows this is a *lot* of info for one person to take in, and sure enough the teenager's expression is unreadable. Her jaw is tight, and her voice sounds *angry*; just as angry as she was when she kicked in the door to the hospital room when she asks, "They really snuck shit into your food like that?"

"I didn't believe it myself until I found the document listing the efficacy of their testing methods. The casualty rate was fifteen percent, compared to the injections sitting at around eighty. Usually the only thing that caused any side effects were if the test subject had pre-existing issues with food digestion. You need your body to break down and metabolize that meat ASAP, otherwise it's no good."

Ellie didn't even realize she had gotten so deep into explaining things, but when she realizes Chase is staring at her blankly, it snaps her out of it. The teenager hasn't said a word, but Ellie has a good idea of what she's about to ask.

"You're probably wondering *why* they'd do something like that, right?"

Chase nods.

Ellie takes a deep breath, this was the part she always tried to avoid. It's such an awful truth that just thinking about it threatens to unravel the mechanic whole every time. But Chase deserves to know at least this much.

"The orphanage was a place called 'The Garden', run by the Eden Research Institute."

"Hold on—'Eden' as in ERI, the MedTech company?"

Ellie nods.

The Eden Research Institute is, by all intents and purposes, a well known medical company that contributed greatly to post-New Genesis medical and technological advancements. They pioneered high-tech prosthetics, vision augmentation, military technology, AI, and anything else rich bastards were willing to throw their money at. The Garden was their secret project; immediately after New Genesis began and riftborn appeared, they were contracted by several territories—including New Haven—to devise ways for humans to use their newfound "human magic" to defeat these invaders. Things got *really* iffy when one of the top researchers made contact with a "daemon lord"—a high-intelligence demon capable of maintaining their physical form through Gehenna, in addition to using corrupted Anima as both their life source and a direct energy source for their own form of "magic".

Ellie's grateful that Chase is making this easy on her. She's not interrupting much at all, instead carefully waiting for the mechanic to finish explaining something before chiming in. There's a lot to get through, but Ellie's at least hoping that she can get the big picture stuff out of the way today.

"The long and short of it is that whoever ran into that researcher clued him into a way for humans to amplify 'human magic' by corrupting the energy that powers it; that human would gain an increase in their physical attributes, as a bonus. Combined with a method that worked at scale, you could grow an entire army of super-soldiers. ERI is a MedTech company, but again, they were being contracted to come up with war solutions for espers; they'd be foolish not to look into it."

"So they rounded up a bunch of abandoned kids," Chase finishes that thought. She sounds bitter; it makes Ellie's heart ache, for two reasons.

Partially because the teenager just looks so *sad* now that she's been given a clearer window into Ellie's life when the mechanic was her own age. She's just staring blankly at Ellie's arm, gripping the sheets like she doesn't even know what to do with her own two hands. It hurts Ellie to see her so... conflicted, but at the same time she can't help but feel relieved that Chase cares this much. However, the other reason all of this makes Ellie sad is a lot less heartwarming. Ellie always called the facility where she grew up an "orphanage" or a "home for espers." It was simple, it got the point across, and it made it easy to explain why a child with no parents stayed there for nine years without a visit from any relatives or family friends. Hell, she would have probably been there forever had it not burned down.

But the thing is... it wasn't an *orphanage*, it was supposed to be a *school*.

In fact, most of the kids there were kids whose parents believed they were sending them to a *boarding* school. Ellie was one of very few orphans there, and the only orphan that she knew personally. Part of the reason she endured so much torment from the kids there was *because* she was an orphan in a sea of affluent children who believed they were there for training and an education. To her, that's the part that makes her sick to think about; the very idea that parents were told they'd be sending their kids to a place of learning... only for that to be the last time they ever saw them.

After she escaped the fire at The Garden, Ellie spent years searching online. She used every avenue she could think of, she followed every lead, she even scoured the online forums where she found out about the plans for the operation to burn it down in the first place, and everything she found told her that... The Garden burned down due to a gas leak and subsequent explosion from the kitchen. Someone's child was shot dead in their dorm room, the body burned to ash with the room itself, and all the parents heard about was a "gas leak."

It might be the hardest thing Ellie's ever done, but she tells Chase nearly everything about her childhood she can think of. It's not everything—she leaves out some of the sketchier details about her time as a Field Operative, and keeps anything involving fights brief. Still, she talks about as much as she can remember, from the jobs system the students had to the fire that burned the place down. So, *sure*, she leaves out the more... *difficult* details, but it's a window into her life that the teenager didn't have before.

After saying all of that, though, she can't even *look* at Chase, not out of shame or embarrassment, but because she just doesn't want to see the look on her face as the teenager digests that information. So, she's quite a bit startled when she feels two arms wrap around her body from the side. Their owner is shaking, burying her face into the bicep on Ellie's right arm.

"Why didn't you tell me about any of this?" Chase asks, her voice quivering.

"*Because*," is all Ellie can think of. "Your life has been so difficult, how could I ever—"

Chase squeezes her tighter, interrupting her, "But *yours* is too."

The mechanic tries to protest, but she can't think of anything to say. She knows that Chase deserved to know everything the entire time, that there was never a reason to keep anything a secret from her. But it still felt impossible to bring up, because every time she decided to, all she could think of was Chase seeing her as... *less* than she was before.

"My whole life, I've always sort-of been the victim of people's assumptions about me. My dad saw my abilities and assumed I was a demon, the kids at The Garden saw I was an orphan and never gave me the time of day, and the coworker I got into a fight with saw how I got my job and assumed I was worthless. I guess in a way, I was *scared* that if you knew about my life, or some of the things that happened, you'd see me differently, too. I don't *want* that."

Chase's response isn't what Ellie expected. The teenager surprises Ellie by letting go of her hug and gently taking hold of her right hand, clasping the digits in between her own two hands. Ellie finally gets the strength to look at her, but now Chase is the one avoiding eye contact. She's just looking down at both of their hands, quietly tracing the outline of Ellie's fingers with her own.

"You know something? I think you're too strong for your own good."

That's enough to make Ellie's throat close up. "What do you mean?" is the only thing she can manage to say.

"My mom used to say that sometimes, people are just too strong for their own good, y'know? It's hard to say you're struggling when you're strong enough to handle most of your problems on your own. You start thinking, 'What's wrong with me? Why do I need someone else's help when I could fix everything on my own before?' I always figured Mom was probably talking about herself when she'd say that, but sometimes I wonder if she was thinking about you, too."

The mechanic can't help but chuckle, "Your mom *was* always more worried about me than I think she should have been; we didn't know each other that well, but she was nosy. Always trying to ask what's going on, if I was okay, or if I needed someone to talk to. I mean, it makes sense; your parents *did* find me on the side of the road."

That gets Chase to look at her, and when she does, her eyes are wide, "*What?! They just found you? That's how you guys met?*"

Ellie laughs at that reaction, forgetting for a moment that they were supposed to be *quiet*, "Yeah. It's not exactly a fun or happy story, but after I got away from the fire I sort-of just... gave up? I didn't exactly have a plan, so once I got out of the place and realized they weren't lying about it being in the middle of bum-fuck nowhere it took the wind right out of my sails. I ran as much as I could, made it to the side of the road, and *right then* my legs gave out. So there I was, laying on the ground, covered in dirt, soot, and blood... and that was when your folks drove by. They thought I was a corpse, so when I woke up in the back seat of their car and started talking they got a good scare!"

Chase doesn't say anything. Ellie got so caught up in the memory she half-forgot where they were, exactly. When she looks at the teenager's face again, she isn't making a sad face or anything, but tears are streaming down her cheeks as she look as at Ellie's hands listlessly. She lets them drip onto her hands without moving a single muscle, not even bothering to wipe them.

"They found you by coincidence. If they were crossing the highway during nighttime, it was because they were coming home from a job. If either of you were a little earlier or later, they wouldn't have found you. You would have *died* out there, alone. And then... I probably..." Chase doesn't finish that sentence, but Ellie doesn't need her to.

The mechanic adjusts her right hand so that she can properly squeeze Chase's two, "You know something? I don't think that *anything* is a coincidence; everything that happens in our lives happens because we were in the right place at the right time, even the bad things. I like to think that everything in my life turned out the way it did so I could be there for you, when *you* needed someone to lean on."

Chase doesn't respond, silently letting tears roll down her face for another couple minutes before finally starting to wipe them. Ellie knows what she's thinking about, but doesn't interrupt her train of thought. It's getting pretty late, and Ellie's pretty sure she's said all that she needs to. Not to mention, they're both sleepy as all get-out; Ellie never actually got any rest after her scuffle with Alice at the PIU office, and knowing Chase, the teenager didn't either. It doesn't take long for both of them to yawn simultaneously, and the girls take that as their cue to start figuring out what the hell they're gonna do for a sleeping situation in this cramped room.

After a bout of silent gestures that quickly devolve into bickering and a couple pillows being thrown, Chase tells Ellie to scoot over a little bit more before climbing into the hospital bed fully. The two can *barely* fit on the twin-sized bed together, partially because Chase is still careful to leave some space between her and Ellie, and partially because despite their height difference both girls have pretty broad shoulders. It's not exactly an easy fit, and the struggle of getting into a comfortable position without sleeping on top of each other is a bit annoying. But, like everything else they've done so far, they manage to make it work.

As soon as the teenager gets into a horizontal position, her responses get slower; a telltale sign that the sleep she's been fighting all evening is finally getting the best of her. Before fully drifting off, though, she manages to mumble a small, quiet sentence.

"I'm glad you don't believe in coincidences. You're a really cool big sister," is all she says before her voice collapses into snores.

They're a bit louder than a physically active seventeen-year-old's snores should be, but Ellie doesn't mind. Hearing that after voicing all of her fears, worries, and doubts, was like having a massive weight lifted off her shoulders. She probably couldn't stop herself from crying no matter how hard she tried, so the mechanic is glad she doesn't have to worry about it.

Epilogue: Antigravity

Despite the relatively simple way things ended between her and Chase, Ellie was ill aware that the days following her hospital visit would be some of the strangest in her entire adult life up to that point.

The day after, she made the mistake of sleeping in well past the morning hours. When a new nurse came in to check on her, he found Ellie and Chase dead asleep. The latter of the two had completely forgotten about the whole "giving the hospitalized mechanic space" thing, and was all but laying directly on top of her. Some of the EKG pads and IV needles had shifted a bit as a result, and when said nurse went to move Chase and adjust the equipment, he saw where Ellie had mostly healed. *That* resulted in an *insane* amount of commotion, Ellie having to explain to several different parties that yes, she knew she would heal, yes her intention was to say something but she wasn't able to, and yes she does in fact work for the PIU and she's not a fraudster. They were able to verify that she was from the PIU, which helped her waive her fees and avoid an embarrassing ordeal with the normal police. Still, she can't help but feel like she cheated them a bit.

That was primarily because Ellie was *pretty* certain she'd get fired for the fight with Alice. It was, by all intents and purposes, a complete disaster of a situation. They burned down the loading bay, severely damaged the CATR transport, and overall the structural integrity of the office itself was massively affected. She was expecting to be canned and to have to foot the bill for that, but what she *wasn't* expecting was for Alice to step in and take responsibility for the bulk of the damage. In her own words, "I provoked Berkeley again and again, and she *still* didn't do anything until I tried to hurt her first. In that vein, trying to kill me after I tried to set her on fire is a reasonable response."

When Chief Kurosawa told her about that while the two were catching up on things over lunch the day after she got out, Ellie genuinely couldn't believe her ears. The two had been fighting and bickering for *years* now, just for it to get dropped like that?

"Alice Molton. *CATR Squad Leader* Alice Molton stood up for me. Are you sure that concussion didn't fuck something up in her head?"

"I couldn't believe it either, but she told me she couldn't sit there and let them throw the book at you. Especially not after the fight itself."

Now *that* sounded like Alice. "Might makes right" was practically her motto; of course having someone like Ellie go toe-to-toe with her would change her view on things slightly. The mechanic sips her coffee, "So, since she thinks I'm 'worthy' enough to be a part of the team, she didn't want me to get fired?"

"Not quite. She just said that it wouldn't be fair to put the weapons expert in trouble over a fire that a pyrokinetic started."

Huh, maybe she was starting to turn over a new leaf after all; Ellie found that idea pretty amusing. Unfortunately, what the chief said next was a quite a bit less amusing.

"That being said, Ellie, you're not getting off the hook. Neither you nor Alice will be paying for damages... but *both* of you will be suspended for two weeks. You'll get pay, Alice will not. *That* was what she was arguing on your behalf for."

Ellie groaned loudly at that. She *should* have been grateful that Alice did her a solid, but she was more preoccupied with the fact that she was now technically indebted to the pyrokinetic. Chief Kurosawa picked up on this, laughing slightly as she lit a cigarette.

"Don't feel so bad, she'll be alright. You definitely owe her one, though; take her out for dinner sometime!"

And just like that, Ellie suddenly had two weeks open on her schedule.

For the most part, it doesn't really feel like two weeks, though, because most of it is spent with Chase dragging her around all over the place. Every day there's *something* she wants to see, or do: whether it's a movie, or something sporty like basketball, batting cages, or skating at a park. They've just been doing *stuff* for the sake of being out and active, really. It's odd, because up to this point they have pretty much always stayed at the apartment when they wanted to hang out. Ellie doesn't want to *complain*, but she can't help but wonder if something was going on with Chase. When she asks, the teenager's response doesn't help.

"It's a nice day, that's all," is the only thing she usually says. But that's odd, because most of the time when it was a "nice day" they would still just sit inside and play games, or watch whatever was on TV. Chase had *energy*, sure, but she wasn't constantly begging to go outside, or constantly asking the mechanic to show her something "tech-y" (whatever that means).

Ellie's mulling over that bit while the two of them are at an indoor skatepark. She didn't bring anything herself this time, content to sit back and "supervise"; to her credit, watching Chase is pretty entertaining. She makes a wooden board with wheels look like it's gas powered, practically flying off of the board itself most of the time she gets any airtime at all. And then she *does*, but the fall is so overly dramatic that Ellie and everyone else that saw it can't help but laugh. Seeing Chase sitting on the wooden planks of the halfpipe she just bailed on, laughing herself to tears over the cartoon character-style fall that just happened, it all finally clicks.

This is who Chase actually is, beneath all of the things that went wrong in her life up to this point, beneath all of her own pain and issues.

When the impossible weight of grief and struggle is lessened enough for her to breathe, the real Chase finally gets to emerge; endlessly energetic, and always curious. It's as if for the first time, Ellie is seeing that eight-year-old running around her shop downstairs at the apartment, grabbing random items off of the shelf, all grown up. That realization makes the mechanic cry, a bit more than she's capable of hiding at the current moment. Sure enough, before she can even think about it too much, the now-teenager is right next to her, gently rubbing her back the exact same way she always does when she sees something wrong with Ellie.

"You know, you don't have to do this *every* time I cry. I'm just a bit of a crier," Ellie gets out in between snuffles. She was *trying* not to make a scene, but Chase blasting from one end of the room to another in less than a second just to comfort her did the opposite of that. It's pretty hard to mind your own business when a giant streak of crimson red lighting flies through the room.

"But I want to, just in case something happened. You *are* okay, right?"

Ellie laughs a little, "Yes, Chase, I'm okay. Thank you. You can go back to skating."

The teenager slaps her back as hard as she can, and then takes off again with a wide smile.

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After one week of her suspension, the boredom was finally starting to settle in. Chase still dragged them outside sometimes, but other times the weather was so *abysmal* and muggy that they ended up staying indoors. All of that changed pretty quickly when Ellie got a call from Chase's school, though. It turns out, while they weren't able to rebuild enough of the school to have it ready by the end of the school year, they had enough rebuilt to host a proper cap-and-gown ceremony for the students that would be graduating this week.

Ellie's ecstatic; not just because of the obvious, but because in *her* mind Chase was going to have to repeat the school year. A part of the mechanic was genuinely dreading another few months of trying to drag a grumpy, black-haired teenager out of bed at seven in the morning every day, but hearing that they'll both be free from that routine entirely is nothing but good news.

At least, Ellie thinks so, but when she tells Chase the only thing she gets in response is, "Can't they just mail my diploma?"

That's a bit of a disappointing reaction, but the mechanic isn't necessarily surprised. "Probably, but why not just go? You're already at the finish line, and it's in the *evening* so you don't even need to get up early."

Chase doesn't look back at her, which is honestly fine as she's currently preoccupied. Ellie recently managed to repair one of her broken game consoles: a small-ish indigo cube with a black handle on it, practically a relic from decades before the Great Civil War started. This was a pet project of Ellie's for quite some time, but she only recently found the parts she needed to fix it. Just as soon as it was ready, Chase grabbed it and sat down to play, which the mechanic is watching her do right now. These days, people usually played video games at larger establishments like VR arcades, since games could be tailored to highly specific experiences with a better sense of scale. Due to the technology involved, home consoles were *very* expensive, and as such *very* rare. Apparently, they used to be rather affordable back in the day; based on Ellie's research, a single parent could save up and buy one of these purple cubes without much issue.

Regardless, it's something new to them. There's much less visual fidelity, but it's a lot more fun watching Chase struggle with the controls. Ellie can tell she's deliberately avoiding the question, though.

"Chase, if you don't want to go, you can just tell me."

"Okay, I don't wanna go. Can you help me with this? I don't know who thought cleaning *paint* off the walls would be a good idea for a video game. Was shit *this* dire seventy years ago?"

Ellie can't help but snicker at the girl's ranting and raving, as she sits down on the floor next to her. After taking a moment to get used to how this *despicable* controller feels in her hands, she beats the level Chase was struggling with easily. Once that's taken care of, Ellie sets the controller down at her side and asks, "Why don't you want to go?"

"Can I see the controller, at least?" Yeah, Chase is *definitely* avoiding the question.

Ellie responds by shifting the controller so that she's sitting on it, folding her arms, and staring silently at the teenager. Chase responds by mirroring Ellie, and the two stare at each other silently for nearly a full minute before Chase relents first with a loud groan.

"I already knew that graduation was back on, they sent it out to our student emails. But... our email said it's limited to blood relatives, and I know that you'd be upset if I invited my uncle Brian instead of you, so..."

Ellie tries to ignore that pang of disappointment that started welling up when she heard the phrase "limited to blood relatives" and replies, "Who said I'd be mad at that? I don't have any problems with him."

The teenager looks at her with a frown, "It's not that, it's the fact that you can't be there but he's allowed."

She's right, of course. That fact *does* make the mechanic feel quite upset, because in all honesty she was looking forward to being there for Chase. She doesn't have any issue with the girl's uncle, but it's impossible to ignore that bitter feeling at the idea of him getting to be there after having been absent during such a crucial moment, even though it's not like he wasn't deserving of grace during his own situation. For just a second, she considers just making up something to ease the teenager's mind. She doesn't *have* to go, and it's only fair that her uncle goes in Ellie's stead. He deserves at least that much.

But when she gets ready to say that, she can't. Chase, for her part, doesn't miss a beat; the moment Ellie's voice dies in her throat, the girl speaks again.

"Please just be honest, it makes you upset, right?"

"Of *course* it does, Chase, but I don't want you to skip something this important just for me. Brian should *at least* get to see you graduate!"

"He's not gonna be able to make it, and / don't want to be there if you're not there! You told me you would have been there, that's all I'll be able to think about!" The teenager's voice cracks a little at the end of that sentence, and neither girl says anything for a while.

When Ellie breaks the silence, not even *she* was expecting the words that came out of her own mouth.

"Why don't we just go see him? Maybe we'll be able to figure something out."

Chase looks stunned, "I *just* said he's not gonna be able to make it!"

"And *that's* why we're figuring it out."

The teenager looks at her with utter disbelief, before shaking her head and saying, "Whatever."

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On the drive over to Chase's uncle's house, neither girl speaks for a while.

Chase is pretty clearly upset about something, but whenever Ellie tries to ask the teenager pointedly ignores her. The two of them have never gone without speaking to each other; every time one tried, the other broke the silence rather quickly. They've always been a talkative duo, and even if Ellie had issues opening up emotionally to the teenager there was never a moment where she felt like she couldn't *talk* to her. This is the first time that's happened, and she isn't sure what to do.

So, the car ride is silent. The mechanic can't take it, though.

"Look, if you're mad at me, you could at *least* tell me why."

Chase's response is curt, painfully so, "He won't be able to go, and you can't either. It's not gonna change anything."

"Well, neither is the silent treatment! So start talking; I'm not a mind reader—"

"See, *that's* what I'm fucking mad about! You're not listening to me!"

"Then what the *hell* am I supposed to do, give up?! What's the point of that?" Ellie's getting annoyed, now. Something must be going on, because Chase is being obstinate to the point where it doesn't make sense.

But by then, they've arrived.

The door to Brian's house is still off its hinges, but at least it's in the right spot, now. There's caution tape all over the doorway, and a couple of his ever-watchful neighbors are *glaring* at Ellie through the windows of her car. Which is fair, she did sort-of kick his door down in the middle of the night a couple years ago. Chase pointedly ignores both the staring and Ellie trying to get her attention. The second Ellie shuts off her car, the teenager gets out of the passenger side, slams the door shut, and waltzes into her uncle's house without another word. Ellie follows her, being extra careful not to do anything even remotely violent to her car door or his front door.

When she gets inside, she can tell something... *weird* has been going on.

The Gehenna bubbling all over the walls is mostly gone, concentrated at one spot on the center of the ceiling. That spot is one *massive* bubble, growing and shrinking as though it were breathing.

I'm surprised. Never though I'd see you again, of all people. Ellie, right? And there he goes, speaking in her head again. Chase isn't saying anything, just looking off to the side. At the same time, Ellie's getting that *watched* feeling again, and it's *bad*.

There's a hallway directly to her right, but it's so dark in there that she can't even see past the very beginning of it. For just a moment, she starts to be able to make out some shapes in the darkness of that hallway. As her eyes begin to focus, the shape starts to become a bit more clear. It's some kind of... quadruped. The second she sees that much, her heart rate instantly skyrockets. She makes a mental note not even to glance towards that hallway, because Lord knows she'd rather not know what those four legs belong to.

"So... Chase is graduating from high school soon," is how she starts.

The bubbling and "breathing" of the Gehenna on the center of the ceiling stops in its tracks.

Chase... is this true?

The teenager speaks up, still sounding quite angry, "It's true. Only relatives are invited, though, so..."

That is... fantastic news. When I've got a body again, we'll have to celebrate. In the meantime though... I'm sorry.

Oh. Duh.

That's why Chase is mad. She comes here more often than Ellie, so naturally she'd know more than anyone that he *can't* go... because he doesn't have a body. He's definitely more alert than he was the last time Ellie was here; his voice is much more clear, he's clearly more capable of long sentences, and that "when" is leaving the mechanic with a strange sense of hope.

But none of that matters right now; he won't be able to go to Chase's graduation. Because he doesn't have a body. It's so obvious that Ellie can't believe she didn't think about it before driving all the way over here.

"When will you have a new body?" Ellie asks.

I'm not sure, probably another month. It takes quite a bit of time to build up the energy needed to maintain a human form.

Chase is quiet after that, deliberately avoiding Ellie's gaze every time the mechanic looks in her direction. Ellie wants to say something to her, but she can't find the right words to say. It's odd; for all of her brilliance, and her ability to think quickly while under duress, she always finds herself unable to say what she thinks she *should* say to Chase. It shouldn't be this difficult by any means, but she always feels like she's on the verge of saying the wrong thing.

But the silence between them is deafening. The mechanic can't take it, she *has* to say something.

"Well, I guess I'll call the school then—"

That sets Chase off, "What the fuck—Ellie, *no*. It's **fine**. I don't want to go."

"*Why?* Last time we talked about it you said you wanted me to go! Now you don't even want me to try?! Make up your mind!"

"I *DID* make up my fucking mind!" The teenager *shouts* at the top of her lungs. "I told you, I don't *want* to fucking go! You just keep ignoring me, it's not *my* fault you never got a high school graduation of your own!"

The *instant* those words leave Chase's lips, Ellie feels it in her chest. Of *course* a low blow like that hurts, because Chase knows exactly why the mechanic never experienced those things. Ellie didn't have an even *remotely* normal childhood, she didn't go to school growing up the same way the teenager did, and she never got to experience things like school sports or a cap-and-gown graduation ceremony. Despite all of those things, Ellie would have been lying if she said that she was even considering her own POV in this situation. She really *did* just want to see Chase walk the stage and get that diploma; not just because of her own selfish desire to see the teenager experience little things that she might take for granted, but because she felt like the girl's parents were owed that much.

So, it hurts to see her so *against* the idea. And it hurts that she threw such a sensitive topic back in the mechanic's face, mere weeks after she had finally gotten the resolve to open up about it. Ellie tries to hide it, but Chase knew what she said was hurtful the moment she said it. She instantly starts to apologize, but Ellie barely even hears her over trying to keep her own composure.

Both girls, however, hear the growling coming from the dark hallway *very* clearly. It's a sound that makes them stop cold in their tracks.

Sorry to interrupt, Brian's voice rings in both of their heads, loud and clear. *In this state it's rather... difficult to control my Cerberi. I'm afraid it may be best for you to leave for now.*

The growling from the dark hallway gets louder. Neither girl needs any more convincing than that to get out of dodge.

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The car ride home is... silent, again. Chase is looking out of the passenger side window, while Ellie looks straight ahead, entirely focused on the road. This time, Ellie doesn't even feel pressured to say anything. She's not sure *what* she's feeling right now, besides just generally feeling bummed out. Driving is nice for that, at least, since she can listen to the gentle hum of her car's engine and put all of her focus on the road. She's so focused, though, that Chase talking to her out of nowhere scares her out of her own skin.

"Ellie... I'm sorry. That was a really fucked up thing to say."

The mechanic wants to say "it's fine", but for some reason... it doesn't feel like it. So, she doesn't say anything, for once. Chase keeps talking.

"I know you just wanted to do everything you could for me, I just... I started thinking about how much I wanted my mom to be there, y'know? I knew uncle Brian couldn't make it, and since *you* wouldn't be able to make it, and Mom's... I just, I don't know. I'm sorry."

Ellie tries to respond to that, but her throat feels tight; it's difficult to even make sounds. She's choked up, just that little comment at Brian's house was enough of a shotgun to the heart that the mechanic is genuinely *confused* by how hurt her feelings are. She tries to push through, but the second she feels and hears how shaky her voice is, she realizes this might not go well.

What she says, though isn't what she expected herself to say.

"You were right. I was only thinking about what I wanted."

"What do you mean?" Chase asks, her voice barely louder than a whisper.

"I *was* ignoring how you felt. I was so wrapped up in thinking about how *awesome* it would have been to see you walk that stage. You told me before that you were worried about it, but I pushed you anyways because I figured you'd just *give up* on fighting it. Of course you'd be angry with me—"

"I'm not mad at you, Ellie."

The mechanic laughs a little. It sounds bitter, "Okay, *that's* not true. You were screaming at me just now."

"Maybe I *did* get a little heated."

"Well, *maybe* you should think a little more about what you say when you get heated! Like, really? I *just* told you about everything and *that's* what you say to me?"

"I said I was sorry! I don't know, okay?"

Ellie wants to say "it's fine", but she can't.

So she doesn't. Not even after they get home; both girls just sit in the car, silently staring at everything but each other.

And then Chase asks, "Do you want me to stay with my uncle after he gets better?"

It has absolutely *nothing* to do with anything she's feeling right now. It's a completely different topic, one with an obvious answer, but it's such a shock to Ellie's ears that her face *instantly* crumples up as soon as she hears it and she starts to cry. For *everything* they have done together, and everything they've been through up to now, Chase just *cannot* seem to understand that Ellie does what she does because the mechanic *loves* her. The mechanic has never felt more pride than she did the first time she told her squadmates that Chase was her sister. Even though she's not by blood, just being able to say that she is fills her with more pride than she knows what to do with.

But to Chase, all of that is convenience. Or obligation.

Ellie doesn't even know what to say, so she just sits in the driver's seat with her face in her hands and sobs. Chase doesn't do anything, and the realization that she's gotten used to how quickly the teenager responds when she's upset just makes the mechanic feel even worse.

"Do you really think you're that much of a burden?" Is all Ellie can manage to ask.

It takes Chase a second, but she replies, "I just, I feel like your life is so much harder *because* of me. All of this shit with the graduation thing, and then I'm being a bitch to you over it. It's not fair to you."

"What about that gets fixed if I'm by myself?"

"You don't have to worry about some kid's high school graduation—"

"Did you think I was *lying* to you when I told you I wanted to go?!" Ellie practically shrieks.

"Well, no, but who *wants* to do stuff like that?"

"*Me!* I just *wanted* to see you graduate! You're not just 'some kid' to me, you're my *fucking* sister!"

As soon as she says that, Ellie goes back to crying. She just feels oddly *defeated*; She's tried so hard to get Chase to understand her own value, but the teenager just won't get it. She's just refuses to see what Ellie's trying to get her to see, and it makes the mechanic feel lost.

She genuinely, truthfully doesn't know what to do.

So, when Chase asks, "Do you really mean that?" all Ellie can do in response is nod, as she continues crying.

The passenger side door opens, closes, and then shortly after the driver's side door opens. Ellie doesn't bother looking, but she already knows Chase is right there.

"Can we go inside? It's a bit hard to do this in the car," Is what the teenager asks. Ellie obliges wordlessly and the two slowly make their way inside the garage. They remain silent all the way up until they get into the apartment. The second they get inside, however, *Chase* is the one that starts to cry first. She dives her face into Ellie's midsection, wraps both of her arms around the mechanic, and squeezes with all of her might.

Ellie returns the hug without a second thought. Through her own tears, she manages to apologize, "I'm sorry for ignoring how you felt. It shouldn't have been this big of a deal for you to tell me you *don't* want to do something."

She feels *really* bad about that. Nearly all of this could have been avoided if she had just *listened* to Chase when the girl initially said she didn't want to go. It was likely incredibly upsetting having to go through that entire ordeal, setting foot in the house her uncle tried to kill himself in, looking at the carnage, and still having to debate with Ellie. That's not fair to her *at all*.

However, when the teenager responds to her, it's not what Ellie expected.

"Do you still wanna call the school and ask?"

Ellie's dumbfounded. All she can do is stare at Chase, confused at what this kid even *wants* from her. Chase is quick to catch on to the confusion and start explaining, though.

"Look, I'm not mad at you for any of that. Anymore. I just, I didn't get it, and I felt like I was saving *you* a headache, and then you kept fighting it and I got annoyed that *you* didn't listen to me because I thought you were trying to do me a favor but then I got mad and went too far and you started crying and—"

She's speaking at a mile a minute, desperately trying to clear the air. Ellie gets the picture though: Chase thought that it would be more of an inconvenience to Ellie than necessary, and didn't want her to go through all of that just because the mechanic felt like she was obligated to do so. Especially considering her uncle Brian would have had to do none of it. When she stops Chase from speaking and guesses as such, the teenager nods.

Ellie takes a deep breath in, and out. "Just so you know, I don't like obligations. I do things because I *want* to do them. And right now, the only thing I want is what you want. So do *you* want me to call the school?"

Chase nods again, so she does.

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Ellie isn't sure why either of them were freaking out about it, because Chase was far from the only orphan at her school. As it turns out, getting an exception was actually quite easy, and only required Ellie to provide her ID and proof of residence. Once that was taken care of, two graduation ceremony invites were shipped in the mail a day later. And the actual ceremony itself was only a couple days after that, with a rehearsal the day before the main event. Not very much time to prepare, mentally or otherwise.

Naturally, the day came faster than expected. It took place at around dusk, the sun falling past the horizon directly over the ceremony itself in a way that kept the area well lit without being too hot. Plenty of viewers still opted to bring their own shade though, since the seating area was mainly comprised of old-school metal bleachers with no shade whatsoever. The ceremony was well underway by this point, with each student slowly making their way to assigned seats. It doesn't take much effort for Ellie to spot Chase amongst the sea of students her age.

For one thing, it's because she's short. The kid entered and exited high school without getting past 5'5, and was *still* phenomenal at contact sports like basketball. Ellie found herself wondering how much of that was due to her possible demon heritage, but it's not like there was any way to know for sure.

"Aren't you a little young to be a parent?" A voice that Ellie *never* thought she would hear at this place snaps her out of her thoughts. When she turns to face it, it's exactly who she thinks it is: Alice.

Great.

Ellie keeps her answer short, "I'm just here for my sister."

Alice hums in response, before moving to sit directly next to Ellie. The mechanic scoots into the empty space almost instinctually, which gets a hearty laugh from the squad leader.

"Relax! We're even, at least right now. Besides, I owe you one."

"Funny, I was thinking the same," Ellie replies, and it's true. "The chief said they were gonna bring the hammer down, but you stood up for me. I... really appreciate that."

Breaking bread with Alice makes her feel weird. She half expects the woman to take the opportunity to pick on her a bit, or at least rub it in. But instead... the pyrokinetic smiles slightly and says, "It's the least I could do. You saved my baby."

And then it clicks; *that's* why she's here. When Ellie asks as such, the woman nods.

"A fire situation is the worst possible scenario for a pyrokinetic. The only ability you have to protect yourself *directly* makes everything worse," Alice launches into an explanation. She's *never* talked to Ellie like the mechanic was a human being before, so the idea of having a normal conversation with the squad leader she hates (hated?) has her so thrown off that all she can do is listen to Alice speak. "I've had to practice manipulating natural fires with ESP extensively, and even then most of the time I don't use my psychic abilities at all due to the risk. My daughter was stuck in that kind of situation."

It makes sense, actually. For all of her prowess with fire abilities, they *would* be useless in a situation where they're stuck somewhere with an unknowable amount of flammable substances. It was truly a no-win scenario. In that vein, Alice has every reason to be grateful that Ellie was there, but... "How do you know I did anything? I could have just been there for weapons analysis."

"Did you know that both Sam and Chief Kurosawa credited you as the acting squad leader for that dispatch during the debrief?"

That hits Ellie like a freight train, "Are you... sure? Sam was the acting squad leader for that."

"And yet, her report stated that, 'upon arriving at the scene, I was unfortunately overwhelmed by the scale of the destruction and failed to act when I should have. Berkeley, however, instantly sprung into action.' Even according to them, if you weren't there, they would have failed."

It's at *that* moment that Ellie realizes... she almost let Chase skip school that day. They *argued* about it, Chase left, and the only reason Ellie even wanted to tag along on the dispatch was because she had suspicions that Chase might have gone to school that day after all. If Ellie had let her skip school, or had reason to believe Chase skipped school on her own, she wouldn't have gone... and both Sam and Chief Kurosawa believe they would have failed if she hadn't.

But still, Ellie can't just accept that.

"It was a coincidence."

"Was it? Your sister's alive, my daughter's alive, and we're all here listening to *Pomp and Circumstance*. Seems like anything *but* a coincidence, to me."

She's right of course, but it still makes Ellie's mind spin. By now, though, the guest speaker's taken the podium, rambling about "paths ahead" and "new challenges" and the standard motivational mumbo jumbo. The words are nothing new to her, but the scenery certainly is.

It's lovely. Nothing too gaudy or professional, but everything is well done. The stage where the speaker is standing clearly doubles as the length where students will walk; it's a structure of polished wood adorned with a narrow carpet along its length. The carpet itself is royal purple with a golden border along the edges, and both ends of the walkway have matching stairs alongside it. Ellie *loves* the carpentry in particular; there's a slight crudeness to it, but to her that just adds to the charm. It means that someone cared enough about this event that they took the time to build it by hand; likely a parent or graduating student. The stage has a beautiful arch, with lots of flowers of various shades of purple. Lavenders, bellflowers, lilacs, and petunias are just the ones Ellie can name, and every single one is clearly placed with care and intentionality.

The carpet on the walkway shares the same shade of royal purple that decorates the rows of chairs where each student sits. The chairs themselves are cheap picnic chairs, but there's purple ribbons all along the perimeter of the seating area, with those ribbons being adorned with more lilacs and bellflowers. After taking in all of the scenery, her eyes wade through the sea of students and land on Chase. Ellie had tried to get her to put on a nice dress, but the girl *adamantly* refused because in her words, "I'm gonna be wearing the same thing as everyone else!" and, well, she is. A cap and gown, purple with gold trim on both. It's nothing fancy, and so she blends in with the crowd.

Just for a moment, though, the teenager happens to look in her direction.

Ellie can see well enough to make eye contact, even from the the bleachers where she's sitting. She's not sure how well Chase can see her from that far away, but the mechanic still puts on a big smile and waves. The girl's got good enough eyesight, it seems, because the second Ellie does that, Chase's face turns bright red and she sheepishly turns away. Ellie can still see her smile from ear to ear though, and for a moment she sees the teenager's bottom lip quiver slightly. That's enough to make the mechanic do the same.

She's vaguely aware that they've started calling names a while ago, but Ellie's quickly snapped back to reality when she hears the announcer call out, "*Ashe Molton!*"

Once the polite claps from her side start up, she knows she heard correctly. A head with shoulder length white hair under her cap and gown pops up. Naturally, Ellie can't see the full outfit, but she *can* see that the girl opted for jeans and combat boots underneath her gown. The mechanic can't help but laugh a little at how brazen that is.

"She *really* didn't want to dress up under that thing, huh?"

Alice seems to think it's just as funny, "Not only did she not want to dress up, she did it on purpose. Little shit doesn't even *like* wearing combat boots."

That makes Ellie laugh more.

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Chase thought seeing Ellie in the stands would help, but as it turns out it's doing the opposite. The second the mechanic smiled and waved at her, the teenager felt her stomach do a full backflip. Just having to sit in one spot and wait is actually quite nerve wracking, in a way.

The white haired girl that stood up in response to "Ashe Molton" makes her way back to her seat as the next few names are called. Chase can barely hear them over her own heartbeat, but she's acutely aware that they're deep in the M's now. It's odd, really; for the past week and a half, her mind had been dead set on not being here at all. She figured that not going to her graduation ceremony wouldn't bother her that badly. Even when Ellie made a *really* big deal about trying to get her to go, she figured she'd be fine with her decision not to.

And then Ellie said, "*You're not just 'some kid' to me, you're my fucking sister!*" which threw her for quite a loop.

It's not like Chase didn't believe her the first time she had said something along those lines. It's just that, well, the teenager had assumed that at some point Ellie would simply snap back to reality. Both times she had said that, it was after a situation where Chase's life was in danger. Given those circumstances, Chase figured that Ellie was just the type to get dramatic if she was in trouble. *Sure*, Ellie was her babysitter when she was a little kid, but there's so many degrees of separation between that and being... a surrogate parent? A caretaker? What was Ellie even trying to be, in the first place?

It turned out, the answer was... *nothing*.

Ellie wasn't *trying* to do any one thing in particular. The mechanic truly did just look at Chase and see a younger sibling worth bending over backwards for, and for her that was enough motivation to do whatever she felt was necessary. That little wave from Ellie was more than enough proof of that.

Chase is so wrapped up in her own thoughts, that she doesn't even fully register her own name being called out loud by the speakers. Once she realizes it, she slowly gets up to make her way to the stage, but the moment she gets up... Ellie goes *ballistic* in the stands, screaming and cheering so loudly that the people next to her are *clearly* put off. It's so obnoxiously loud and energetic that it's *unlike* her, and Chase pulls her cap down to hide her face as much as possible in response. At the same time, though, all of the tension and knots forming in her stomach are completely gone.

Walking across the stage at a graduation ceremony is something everyone practices. It's not like there's anything unique to it: all you do is walk along the gaudy, purple runway in a straight line, shake hands with four people—including the school's Principal and Vice Principal of course, get the diploma cover (the real diplomas are on the other side of the grass field), and then pose for a picture with the school's administration. When she gets to the picture part, though, the Principal and Vice Principal have an odd smile on their faces. They're a strange looking duo; an incredibly tall woman with curly ginger hair, and an incredibly short, chubby man with glasses and a bald head. Chase had only seen them a few times, mostly at the school's sporting events before she quit the basketball team. She's in the process of racking her brain trying to think of a quick, easy thing to say as she shakes both of their hands, but the principal beats her to the punch.

"Your parents would be so proud," is all he says.

Naturally, a school site principal would be aware if he had a student athlete that was suddenly orphaned during her years at his site. Doubly so because, especially by now, Ellie is the girl's only emergency contact, and was the only one allowed to pick her up by the school. But Chase had somehow forgotten all of that until now, so the second he says that she *instantly* starts to cry. She haphazardly tries to cover her face with her diploma cover, but that *obviously* doesn't work, so instead all she can do is choke out a small, "Thank you."

While taking the picture and walking back to her own seat, she can't help but think about the days just after her mom went missing. She can easily recall how devastated she was at the time, and how, to her, it felt as though no one cared or noticed she was hurting at all. But maybe they did, and she didn't realize it because of what she was going through on her own. It's food for thought.

She doesn't get much time to think, however, because before she even knows it the last name is being called... and then the ceremony is over.

The students throw their caps in the air, scramble to catch them, and then make a mad dash to the table on the other side of the grass field with their *actual* diplomas on it. By the time Chase gets hers, Ellie's already made it down from the stands. This, more than anything, seems to hammer it home; she really *did* stay for the whole thing, like she promised she would. It's one thing seeing her at a distance, but seeing the mechanic mere feet away from her at *this* place has the teenager ecstatic. She barely even realizes she's fully sprinting over to where Ellie is, and the next thing she knows she's grabbed the mechanic from behind and wrapped her in a crushing bear hug. Ellie responds with a short yelp, and then a groan as her back slightly pops.

"*Alright*," she manages to croak out, "any friends you wanted to see, or are we getting out of here?"

Right on cue, the teenager's stomach grumbles a bit louder than expected. She lets Ellie go, "Nah, I'm starving. Let's get out of here."

Ellie exhales a deep breath, rubbing her back, but before she can say anything else she seems to think of something, and jogs over to the first parent she sees. The second the mechanic hands the man her phone, Chase realizes what's going on. She's not much of a fan of pictures, but she'll oblige *just* this once to make Ellie happy.

The two stand side by side, Ellie nearly a whole foot taller than her. Before the picture actually gets taken though, Chase sees the mechanic bend down out of the corner of her eye. Soon after that, she's lifted fully off of the ground, way higher than she was expecting. As soon as she realizes she's midair, she's screaming, kicking, and demanding Ellie put her down, but the mechanic responds by shifting her grip so that Chase is fully thrown over her shoulder, and yelling "Cheese!" at the top of her lungs. Chase's kicking and thrashing make the two fall over shortly afterwards, of course.

It's probably bad taste to let a neat cap and gown get dirty like this, but the teenager really can't bring herself to care at all. Ellie clearly can't either; she paid for it in full and she's laying down on the grass *in tears* from how hard she's laughing. While watching her laugh, Chase thinks about how desperately she had tried to *avoid* her graduation ceremony in the first place. She had just about gotten Ellie to *agree* with her, and maybe there's a world where she did. For the first time in her life, the girl's happy she didn't get the 'what if' scenario she wanted.

It's easily the happiest day of her life.

Part Three: Deep Sea Diver

Prologue: Two-Way Mirror

When Eleanor Berkeley's younger sister graduated from high school a week ago, she was under the impression that her sister's freedom from high school meant freedom from the most annoying of her own responsibilities. She'd still have to work, sure, but she was free from the early morning rush of waking up at six o'clock in the morning and having to cook breakfast in order to get a grumpy teenager out of bed on time. It was a pretty grueling routine, but it was very necessary as her "sister", Chase Noel, was the total opposite of a morning person. She was the type that could easily sleep well into the afternoon if she was allowed to laze around, so making sure she got out of bed every morning was essential. It was one of the first things that Ellie learned when she started taking care of Chase full-time.

When Chase was twelve years old, her father, Jack, was murdered in broad daylight. The two were out on a shopping trip when they had been separated, and his last act to protect her ended with him being fatally wounded mere inches away and falling on top of her as he passed. Only three years after that, Chase's mother, Kaitlin, vanished without a trace during the girl's sophomore year of high school. A devastating one-two punch that, on its own, left Chase almost completely alone during a time in her life where she *desperately* needed someone to rely on. To make matters worse, her uncle, Brian, attempted to take his own life shortly afterwards, partly due to the grief of losing his own sister, and partly due to the grief of losing his own wife and unborn child due to an unprecedented illness years prior.

Ellie took it upon herself to step in, going through the effort of properly becoming Chase's legal guardian. While it hasn't been the *easiest* thing in the world, she's incredibly glad she did.

Ellie and Chase have always had a somewhat close relationship. Ellie was the girl's babysitter when she was around eight, and as she got older Ellie's mixed-use apartment would become the place where Chase spent the bulk of her free time. She would take the monorail to Ellie's apartment after school, and hang out either in the shop downstairs or in the apartment upstairs for hours until Kaitlin picked her up. This made her moving in a pretty natural step forward; she often left spare clothes, toiletries, and various knick-knacks at Ellie's apartment, on the off chance she'd need to stay there overnight. So, it didn't take much adjusting for her to have her own space carved out.

Ellie was just glad to have company; she and Chase's relationship quickly grew from there. After a couple white lies, more than a few arguments, and Chase's high school being burned down by a PMC of kobolds, Ellie found herself referring to Chase as her younger sister more often than not. Chase, for her part, never seemed to mind it much. Not even at her graduation, where the two *definitely* got more than a few side-eyes from other families as they look nothing alike. She seems to be perfectly happy with the label, and if she's happy, Ellie is too.

Well, she would be, at least. Except, immediately following what was far and away one of the best days she'd had in a long while, Ellie received a phone call from her chief at New Haven's Paranormal Investigations Unit.

"How have you been, Ellie?" was how the chief, Mina Kurosawa, started off. Simple pleasantries on the surface, but Ellie knew that Chief Kurosawa wasn't the type to call for a wellness check.

Chief Kurosawa took her title and position within the PIU *very* seriously. While she wasn't against hanging out or talking to her team off the clock, she hardly ever crossed any personal boundaries like phone calls. On one hand, this made her quite enigmatic; it was hard to know how the chief felt about you as a person *or* as an officer. At the same time, though, it made it extremely easy to navigate discussions with her. One never had to guess if there were any ulterior motives to her reaching out, because she never reached out in the first place unless it was for work reasons.

Bearing all that in mind, Ellie responds, "I've been well. Just enjoying the time off."

"Time off" would certainly be a way to put it. A couple weeks ago, Ellie and a fellow officer at the unit got into a pretty ugly fight. More accurately, the officer was actually a *captain*; Alice Molton, an esper well versed in pyrokinesis. She was, in no uncertain terms, an *incredibly* nasty person to deal with, and had made it a personal point to make Ellie's time at the PIU miserable for the two years she had been there up to that point.

The Paranormal Investigations Unit was a relatively new branch of law enforcement. Created after the ceasefire and subsequent conclusion of The Last War a decade ago, the PIU was established in all mega-cities as a branch of law enforcement created specifically to handle crimes committed by espers and riftborn, as well as ensuring public safety in the event of demon attacks or outbreaks—all of which kickstarted by a series of events that have since been labelled "New Genesis."

Due to espers, riftborn, and demons all popping up at around the same time, the PIU was quickly enshrined as a way to collectively police anything under that umbrella. It was a job opened up to espers and riftborn alike; the former being humans that could use the bio-electricity generated by the central nervous system as an energy source for "human magic," and the latter being the collective name for all new species that began appearing on Earth following New Genesis—including elves, dwarves, kobolds, wyverns, and many more.

This created the circumstances that the Paranormal Investigations Unit was founded under. Without a lot of time for the remnants of modern society to prepare for such a significant change it was deemed that, for the time being, the best way to police espers and riftborn was to create a unit of law enforcement that comprised them. Ellie had been working with her own mega-city's PIU for a couple years as a weapons analyst at the time of the fight, and naturally the end result of a fight between Ellie and the pyrokinetic she had beef with was the *entire* loading bay for the team's dispatch vehicle being burned down.

So, her "time off" from work was more accurately a two week suspension, with pay. It's *basically* still time off, but there's a an asterisk on it that makes her feel weird about getting a phone call from her boss after the fact. For that reason, she's partially expecting her joke about enjoying the time off to fall flat, which it does.

"I'm glad to hear you're enjoying yourself. Would you like for an extension?" Chief Kurosawa replies from the other end. She doesn't sound very amused.

Ellie takes the hint, "Nope. Just wanted to lighten the mood a bit, what do you need?"

"Remind me: your suspension ends tomorrow, correct?"

It does. Ellie can't stop herself from groaning, "Yep. I'll be back in the office at eight o'clock, sharp."

"Great! Now, scratch that; you and Sam will be accompanying me on a business trip in two days. Sound good?"

Well, that's certainly new.

"Fine with me, I guess," Ellie replies. "Where?"

"Olympia. This quarter's 'All Chapters' meeting begins two days from now, and they've requested that both of you attend."

At the mention of 'Olympia,' Ellie feels her breath catch in her diaphragm. She's been there before, back at The Garden when—

Ellie stops herself right there. Some memories don't need revisiting, especially not when it's been so long after the fact. Before she can get stuck in her thoughts any further, Ellie mentally drags herself back to the conversation at hand, "Alright. Are we meeting at the monorail station in two days, or..."

"I'm actually on the way there right now. However you and Sam meet me there is up to you, just be there when the meeting starts. We'll be in town for about a week, so feel free to take tomorrow off and pack, if needed."

Ellie doesn't think she *needs* the time, but she knows better than to say no to an extra day off. The two exchange goodbyes, and then Ellie hangs up. Right as she puts the phone down, a *different* voice speaks up from the living room behind her.

"Sooo, where we goin'?" Chase's voice rings loud and clear. She's laying down on the couch, reading a book in what looks like the most uncomfortable position to do so by far: flat on her back, staring straight up at the ceiling, and holding her reading tablet directly above her. She's already cracked the screen once by dropping it on her face while reading like this, and Ellie has yet to let her live it down.

"I'm going to Olympia for a work trip in a couple days, and *you're* going to drop that thing on your face again."

"I am *not*! This time, I've got a good grip on it, and—"

Right on cue, she drops it on her face. Ellie can't help but laugh at that, prompting Chase to sit up and glare at her.

"First, you're leaving me behind while you get to go to *Olympia*, and now you're laughing at me? I just broke my reading tablet, and you're *laughing* at me."

Ellie doesn't stop laughing, but she relents a bit, "Fine, I'll fix it. Can you leave it on my desk?"

Chase doesn't move, though. She's still glaring at Ellie silently, as if waiting—oh, for crying out loud, "Chase, *no*, you can't come."

Her glare instantly turns into a giant pout, "Aww, why not?"

"*Because*, the hotel rooms are paid for during events like these. I can't just sneak you in."

"It's not like you'll be sharing a room with anyone, though!"

That's... a good point, actually. But still, "What if there's only one bed?"

"We've shared a bed before. You also never sleep *in* beds, you're always sleeping on the floor!"

Dead to rights. Ellie hardly slept anywhere but on the floor or at her desk. When she was a freelance mechanic, it was because she often pulled multiple all-nighters while working. Now, though, she's just used to sleeping on hard surfaces. It's hard to get comfortable while laying on something so... *soft*.

Okay, so maybe there's not a *real* reason Ellie can think of as to why Chase can't come. But still, she's getting an *awful* vibe from the idea, for a reason she can't even articulate.

But she thinks about it a little more.

It *would* be a great experience; mega-cities are massive provinces that people rarely travel between. Each mega-city spans roughly tens or hundreds of thousands of square miles, and are split into districts, each with several wards. Ellie's apartment is in the Apollo ward of New Haven's Sol District, with three other wards roughly an hour apart from each other: Juniper, Mercury, and Ceres. The PIU office is located in the Ceres ward, which is only a thirty minute drive in the morning before traffic kicks in. Chase's childhood home was in the Mercury ward, and Juniper isn't too far away from there; about forty-five minutes by monorail. Despite how close together the wards are, they're more than large enough to be day trips, and if someone feels like traveling further, there are six other districts in New Haven. As a result, travel is mostly relegated to drives and monorail rides between wards or districts.

If you *do* need to travel between mega-cities, it only happens during the daytime. As soon as the sun goes down, mega-cities lock their borders tightly, and you're left to the horrors that lurk in the dark. For that reason, it's been pretty rare for most people to *leave* their mega-cities at all lately, outside of work reasons. It's just safer to avoid the potential harm, but at the same time, it means that it's very likely Chase has never left New Haven.

Ellie thinks that's a bit of a shame, so it doesn't take much convincing for her to say, "*Fine*. I'll double check with the chief to make sure there are two beds."

Before Ellie can even finish her sentence, Chase leaps over the couch, running over to the bar in their kitchen where Ellie is sitting. "*Hell yeah!* When do we leave?"

"Two days. We'll be gone for about a week," Ellie lets out a sigh.

Chase eyes grow wide, and before Ellie can prepare herself she's getting hit by an onslaught of questions. Nothing out of the ordinary; just what Olympia is like ("you'll see"), if there's anything fun to do there ("I don't know"), and what the ride there is gonna be like ("boring, probably"). Ellie humors the questions to the best of her ability, but deep down she's having a hard time shaking the feeling that *something* about this is a very bad idea. She's been to Olympia before, sure, but that was back when she was at The Garden a little over a decade ago. The idea of revisiting the place after so many years makes her feel queasy.

But regardless, it's been a while. There's no use spinning her wheels over it, so she focuses on preparing for the trip instead.

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Despite not necessarily *needing* the extra day off, it ends up being quite useful. The girls decided to use the time to research a bit more about the area, and stumbled upon the information that Olympia apparently uses some kind of artificial weather system. Their system allegedly operated outside of the systems meteorologists used to calculate weather data for a given area. As a result, forecasts from outside of Olympia-provided sources were heavily inaccurate. When they're able to dig into the Olympia-provided forecasts, they see that the blisteringly hot week they were preparing for would be more akin to a cool breeze at the beach. A nice sixty-to-seventy degrees Fahrenheit all week, as opposed to the temperatures ping-ponging between ninety-five and over one hundred and ten degrees.

So, they get a bit more freedom to pack.

Ellie still opts to bring some summerwear for the two of them, despite Chase's negging about how pointless it would be. She's probably right, but Ellie is *still* having a hard time shaking the ugly feeling that she's having. Knowing that so much has changed since the last time she's been there has her worried about what else might be different. Because of that, Ellie feels like she has to make sure that both she and Chase are prepared for *anything*. She's currently pacing around the living room in a circle, triple checking her suitcase to make sure that there are supplies for extreme hot *and* cold. After packing the fifth pair of shorts and a second bottle of sunscreen, though, two hands reach over and slam her suitcase shut. Their owner, Chase, is staring at Ellie with a small frown, and her brows furrowed.

"Alright, you're acting weird. What's going on?" is all she asks.

For just a second, Ellie considers saying "Nothing," and trying to move on. But the last time she did that, they just ended up arguing *way* more later. And to make matters worse, Chase *cried* about it, as she felt like Ellie was hiding things because she had come to regret taking her in. That wasn't true back then and it isn't true now, so instead of just trying to sidestep the question Ellie's truthful.

"I... don't know. I've been to Olympia before, back when I was at The Garden, but it was so *different*. Everything was. I guess I'm just a little on edge about it."

The look in Chase's eyes immediately softens. She was clearly expecting to have to fight to get something out of Ellie, "I didn't know that. Olympia is pretty far, why were they sending you out there?"

"I've told you before that they were trying to research ways to turn espers into soldiers, right? Olympia was a part of the process; field assignments and trainings usually happened there."

Chase doesn't say anything at first, instead sitting down on the couch. She motions for Ellie to sit next to her by patting directly to her right, which Ellie does. After the two sit in silence for a while, Chase asks, "Are you scared to go?"

That's not what Ellie was expecting to hear. She takes a slow breath, "I think I'm a little scared. Sometimes it feels like I haven't really left The Garden at all, so it freaks me out to be going somewhere that's so... *tied* to it, I guess."

After she finishes her sentence, Ellie's startled out of her woes by the feeling of a hand taking one of her own. Again, Chase is the culprit, grabbing Ellie's left hand and squeezing it. "Then, I guess it's a good thing there's gonna be two of us."

Logically, Ellie knows that doesn't change much of anything, and shouldn't affect her own worries about the trip. But in reality, being reminded that she *definitely* won't be left alone during her work trip makes her feel much, much better. She lets out a small laugh, and feels the weight on her shoulders float away with it. When Chase tilts her head in confusion at that, all Ellie can say in response is, "I'm just shocked. You sound like the older one sometimes, you know."

Instantly, Chase's cheeks turn a bright red. She lets go of Ellie's hand, lightly shoving her, "Fuck you, you always say that! You're just hyping me up."

Ellie laughs harder, "Okay, that's true, but I also mean it! You say stuff that impresses me all the time."

And that's true, too.

The entire time she's known Chase, the runt has always had a way with words. When she was younger, she'd often chime in on conversations between Ellie and her parents with pertinent information. They were usually little fun facts she had learned in class, but her ability to recall them while half-listening to a conversation that *should* have been way beyond her pay grade was no less impressive. The older she got, that more that streak grew in frequency as Chase got old enough to study on her own, on the off chance she ever felt like it. As far as Ellie could tell, there wasn't a particular subject that spoke to her, or a particular field she was interested in. She just paid attention when given information, and held onto it extremely well. During the brief period of Chase's teenage years prior to Ellie getting her job at the PIU, she had become somewhat notorious at Ellie's shop for being so nosy during business hours that people thought she was Ellie's assistant.

Rather, she was so helpful—often unwittingly—that people thought she had been *recruited*.

After Ellie started working at the PIU, Chase *continued* being useful. When Ellie would be asked to write reports for investigators, she'd have Chase proofread them, and her corrections would *a/ways* be on point. Not to mention, when it comes to emotional support she *a/ways* manages to know exactly what to say. Ellie definitely has to cede to her, in that regard.

When she starts to say all of that, Ellie gets about halfway through the third sentence before Chase—her whole face having turned beet red—covers Ellie's mouth with both of her hands. She can't even look at Ellie in the eyes, "*Okay!* I get it, thank you!"

Chase already looks to be so embarrassed that she's on the verge of tears, so Ellie decides to take it easy on her. She just laughs some more instead, tousles Chase's hair, and says, "Thanks for the pep talk. I'm glad you're coming with me."

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Before either girl knew it, the morning of their trip had arrived. Ellie made sure to text Sam ahead of time that they wouldn't be riding the monorail together, and received an "Okay..." along with a sad cartoon octopus emoji in response.

It makes Ellie feel a little bad, honestly; she hasn't seen or heard from Sam much at all since the fight in the loading bay. They had an oddly sobering heart-to-heart when Ellie was admitted to the hospital for her injuries after, and she could recall Sam looking so distraught when learning about Ellie's childhood. More than anything, the fact that Sam wanted to *listen* to her ramble about those things always stood in the back of her mind. In contrast, Ellie knew next to nothing about Sam. Who *was* she? Why did she care so much? Time manipulation is rare, how did she get so skilled with such an ability? Maybe she would have gotten answers to those questions on the monorail.

All of those thoughts quickly vanish once she tells Chase that they're taking the car, though.

It's far from the first time she's seen it, but Chase has *a/ways* been a big fan of Ellie's car: a bright red, classic roadster. The interior was all vintage, with light brown leather seats, and the center console remaining virtually untouched. Under the hood, of course, it's fully electric: with four high capacity battery modules—two for main power, two reserves charged by a row of solar panels hidden on the backside—and a set of twin induction engines that Ellie... *acquired* from an abandoned sports car in a nearby dump. To her surprise, the engines were in great condition, with no visible damage; the issue ended up being the dual inverter they were connected to.

In order for an induction engine to get power from the battery, it needs to be run through an inverter. When Ellie was initially testing the engines they didn't spin up, but after she cleaned the connectors between the engines and the dual inverter... they fired right up. There were still more repairs needed, of course—both cosmetic and mechanical. Regardless, when all was said and done, she had a car that cost her roughly a couple thousand bucks to fix. Compared to the price of buying a new or used vehicle these days, it was practically free.

Sucks for whoever threw away a perfectly good car, though; they probably could have saved some money if they knew what a "car wash" was.

When Chase was in junior high, Ellie let her ride shotgun *once* for a trip to the monorail station. At the time, Ellie was adamant that it would be a one time thing. She didn't want anyone in her car but herself; another thing that's somehow changed in the blink of an eye. Ellie had actually decided that she was going to drive the two of them when Kurosawa first called her about the work trip, but opted to keep it a surprise. Sure enough, Chase is *ecstatic*. She damn near jumps *over* the car in excitement, looking at Ellie like the latter just performed a miracle. Seeing Chase fawn over her car right now, she's glad that she chose to do that.

It being a two-seater means that the drive won't necessarily be *spacious*, but Ellie's not really worried about any of that. They put their luggage in the front-trunk—evoking a squeal from Chase when she sees the hood of the car fly up with no engine inside—hop in the car, and hit the road.

At first the drive seems normal, but when they get to the border of the Ceres ward, Ellie takes a hard left rather than drive through Ceres. Before Chase can ask, she's already explaining, "Olympia is southeast of New Haven, so it'll be a straight shot if we take this highway. We *could* go through Ceres and drive further south before turning, but we'd have to pass through three or four districts. It would take a *lot* longer."

This highway, compared to the city's roads and freeways, is rather drab and empty. It's somewhat far from any population centers, so there's relatively little need for any sprucing up of the area. As a result, the scenery slowly shifts from bustling shopping centers, skyscrapers, and pedestrian traffic, to long stretches of desert with the few buildings left standing in ruin. As far back as Ellie can remember, places outside of major metropolitan zones have always looked like this. It's a common misconception that they look like this because of the Last War, but in reality they were devastated decades before it. She's not sure of the specifics, but before the arrival of riftborn and the beginning of the Last War, the territory that New Haven was formerly a part of had been engaged in a conflict known as the "Great Civil War."

The little she knew of the war came from her father, who had fought as a soldier. It was born from a dispute regarding the land invasion of a neighboring country north of the territory's border. The war was devastating, with the large territory of fifty provinces being reduced to sixteen sovereign nations, and then only a few years afterwards riftborn arrived.

Not much time to rebuild before a second conflict.

Thinking about all of this makes Ellie's head hurt. It's a bit of a sore spot for her; since so much of what she knows comes from her dad, all of it just reminds her of what it was like to grow up with him. Thankfully, Chase is still talking her ear off, so every time she starts to feel bad, she doesn't get very long to dwell on her thoughts. That continues up until they get to the checkpoint roughly ten miles from the border to Olympia.

It's a simple three-lane toll booth. This highway is mostly used for work purposes—primarily commuters or vehicles transporting goods to and from the city—so the lanes, while empty, are specific: one is for business vehicles, one is for commuting workers, and one is for members of Olympia's governing council. Notably, *none* of them are for pedestrian travel, so Ellie, being someone that lives and works outside of Olympia traveling in, would be none of these. But when she pulls up to the toll booth, the cyclops manning it recognizes her instantly.

"Hey, Ellie! Haven't seen you in a while, I thought they finally got your ass!" He's excited to see her, as always. Granted, Ellie's feeling the same.

"C'mon Ty, you know I don't go down that easily," Ellie digs back, while handing him her business card. It's a different one than her PIU ID, which seems to catch Chase off guard. Ellie can see her react, open her mouth to speak, and decide against it, all out of the corner of her own right eye.

Tyson, the cyclops, has been working at this toll booth for *years*, probably before Ellie met him. He's a sweet guy; somewhat simple-minded, but very well spoken despite it. Back when she had first set up her demon hunting agency for Chase's parents, he was one of the first proper connections she had made. Before her agency was verified by the World Order, she had to use falsified business cards to get Jack and Kaitlin into and out of Olympia for jobs there. Tyson put a stop to that, having sweet talked his bosses into getting Ellie a couple of provisional business cards—which were *supposed* to expire, but never did. At the time, when she asked him why he did that, he replied, "You didn't laugh when I said I was going to college, you gave me books."

Truthfully, she felt pretty bad back then, because she had completely forgotten that she'd even done that. But several years later, Ellie can see the neatly arranged stack of books forming in the corner of his booth. It's *massive* compared to how many were there before; he must read a lot.

"How's school going? It's been a few years, any progress?"

Tyson slips her business card into the slot for it on his machine, and replies with a shrug, "Eh, I quit. Too hard. Reading at work is more fun."

Ellie chuckles. Funny, she probably would have done the same thing were their roles reversed, "I can't blame you. Are they paying you better, at least?"

The machine dings. Tyson takes her card out, and hands it to her with a big smile, "*Way* better."

"No complaints from me, then. Glad you're doing well, keep it up!"

Ellie takes her card back, gives a silent wave to Tyson one more time, and then drives through the booth. Chase, meanwhile, is absolutely bewildered.

"So, why am I just now finding out that you have a cyclops friend that owns the toll booth outside Olympia?"

"He's an *acquaintance*, he *works* for the city managing *one* toll booth outside of Olympia, and he had to fight very hard for his pay," Ellie corrects, mostly for the sake of getting on Chase's nerves. "Also, you never asked. I would have told you!"

Ellie's reward for being a pest was a growl from the passenger's side, and a rather hard punch to her right shoulder. Chase, the culprit, replies with a laugh, "*You* don't get to say that, you love keeping secrets!"

Well, she's not wrong.

Back when the fight at the loading bay happened, Ellie had been downplaying what was *really* a series of workplace harassment incidents between her and one of the PIU's captains, Alice Molton. On their own, the incidents weren't a big deal; Alice was aware that Ellie had been hired due to being acquainted with the chief, but didn't know Ellie was an esper in her own right. So, because she thought Ellie was just a regular nerd who got nepo-hired into a job in law enforcement, she took it out on Ellie quite a bit.

Chase was well aware that *something* had been going on; Ellie had been coming home from work and crying in her room, hoping to get her tears out before Chase came home from school. Not only did that rarely work, but Chase eventually caught her crying in the living room anyways. This prompted questions from time to time, but Ellie never fully answered... until the loading bay incident happened, putting her in the hospital. She still feels pretty bad that it took so much for her to open up to the teenager that she's constantly trying to encourage. Things had gotten to the point where Chase thought Ellie was trying to get her to move out, or that Ellie had grown tired of being around her. It all just leaves Ellie feeling ugly and shameful of ever having put Chase through that.

So, instead of laughing at what was clearly intended to be a joke, all she can manage is a solemn, "I'm sorry."

Chase, for her part, immediately tries to backpedal, "*Woah*, I wasn't being serious, Ellie. You don't have to apologize—"

"No, I *do*. You were trying so hard to be there for me, and I ignored that until it made you feel like shit. I hate that I put you through that."

"But still, we talked it out. You don't need to feel bad about that anymore."

"Well, I can't help it! I feel like I'm constantly making things way harder for you than it needs to be, and—*ow!*"

Her apology speech is interrupted by the rather sharp pain of Chase pinching her right forearm. When she rubs the spot and tries speaking again, Chase pinches her again, before stealing a chance to talk.

"I think sometimes you feel like you have to justify yourself, like things won't be fixed between us if you don't give me a formal apology. I *live* with you, Ellie; not because I *have* to, but because I *want* to. If you hurt my feelings, or if I hurt yours, we just *talk* about it, and that's enough for me."

That kills the building well of negative feelings right then and there. Ellie can only smile.

"There you go, acting older than me again. You wanna switch places with me and drive, too?"

Chase just stares at her, "You know I can't drive, right?"

Ellie pretends to have forgotten, snapping her fingers, "*Oh*, you're right! Guess that's never happening then—"

"*WAIT*, no, just teach me! Come on!"

"Not in *this* car, but you'll be more than welcome to drive it when you get a license."

Chase looks like she wants to protest, but thinks about it a second longer before shrugging instead, "Actually, I can accept that. I have a different question, though."

Ellie figures she knows exactly what it is, but tells Chase to go for it anyways.

"You said it's been a long time since you've been to Olympia, but you have a working business card to get in. You know the cyclops running the business-only toll booth on a first name basis, but you haven't set foot in the city in that time? At all?"

Ellie nods, keeping her eyes on the road. There's still a little bit of driving to go, but it's smooth sailing from here, "Pretty much. Your folks would handle everything in the city on their own when they'd go. I was a little younger than you are now, so they didn't need me hanging around. Once I got the business cards squared away, my ass stayed right at home, for the most part."

"Because you were scared, or because you were being lazy?" Chase replies, the little shit.

"You know the roof to this car is down, right? I can just throw you out of this motherfucker," Ellie jabs back.

"So, both? Got it!"

Ellie responds to that by reaching towards the passenger's seat, trying to unbuckle the seatbelt with her right hand. Obviously, she's not intent on succeeding, but she gets *just* close enough to the button to elicit a fit of giggles from Chase, who tries to swat Ellie's hand away from her seatbelt. In the back of Ellie's mind, though, she knows Chase is right again; it *was* both. She was never much of a fan of traveling, but she'd be lying if she didn't say a big reason for that was *because* she was scared to be within Olympia's borders in the first place.

But for now, Ellie does her best to shake away all of those thoughts. The time for those worries is coming to a close, as the mega-city's borders come more and more into view.

Each mega-city has a large border around its entire perimeter, with exactly one entrance at the southernmost point and one exit at the northernmost point. For pedestrian travel or tourism, these are the only ones that people are allowed to enter and exit freely, given that the gates haven't closed for the night. The entrance gates themselves are rigorous checkpoints where your luggage, vehicle, and person are thoroughly checked. This was presumably for smuggling; each mega-city was its own sovereign territory and had its own set of laws. It was quite common for folks who didn't spend a lot of time traveling to get used to one mega-city's laws, and accidentally bring contraband to a different city. These checkpoints were often impacted, meaning that one could spend *hours* waiting in line to be checked in, but they were also very necessary. Thankfully, Ellie's not going to the main gates.

This was the other reason she opted to take the highway and go through the toll booth; businesses didn't have to go through the public checkpoint. There's a smaller, expedited checkpoint made specifically for Olympian residents who travel to and from the mega-city for work. Technically, they're cheating *big time* by using this entrance, but if they were going to be caught they would have been at the toll booth. Thanks to Tyson, that's not happening, so they're in the clear. Sure enough, when they pull up to the expedited checkpoint, the employees manning it double check the license plates on Ellie's car, scan her business card a second time, and then wave them through.

And then they're in the city. Both girls are at a loss for words.

New Haven, while massive even by today's standards, is far from a utopia. While the mega-city has mostly rebuilt following the damage from the war, there are still quite a few slums peppered throughout. Part of the reason there's a monorail system is that a normal railway *couldn't* be built; the Atlas and Rhea districts within New Haven are heavily unstable masses of land plagued by frequent earthquakes, and the wards within those districts had to be built using "gravity converters" to remain stable on top of the ground. Visually, though, it's a modern city; the buildings are a sleek, uniform gray, advertisement boards use holograms with nanotechnology to update information live, the streets are bustling with lots of cars alongside pedestrians, and there's a good amount of arcades and indoor amusement parks. It's a modern city that matches artistic interpretations of the "future" from decades prior.

Olympia, however, is *nothing* like that.

When Ellie had set foot in here last, it was actively being used as a stronghold for riftborn military forces and any human defectors that chose to work with them. Housing and public infrastructure were *very* limited, partly due to the territory having been in the process of rebuilding from the Great Civil War when the Last War began. Railways were reserved for goods and soldiers, telecommunications services had been thoroughly damaged and restored only to the point that it was deemed necessary for the war effort, and commodities such as water or electricity had to be rationed. Due to the lack of public infrastructure, jobs were few and far between, forcing many civilians to commute for work. There were pockets of a thriving civilization, but they were few and far between, sandwiched between (or sometimes *on*) military bases, air defense systems, and supply depots.

All of that has *completely* changed. Now, the city is *massive*, and the roads are so wide open that Ellie's bright red sports car sticks out like a sore thumb. Most people in the city are walking or using the city's own monorail system to get to and fro, with the monorail being visibly packed even from the street level. Sidewalks are just as packed; there are a dime a dozen shops and cafes lined up, and *all* of them are bustling with activity. There's nowhere near as many tall buildings as New Haven, but the ones the girls *do* see are covered with foliage. It adds a *lot* of color to the skyline, giving the city's buildings a living, ethereal vibe. There's no gentle hum of a street filled with cars, advertisements don't cut through the noise of the city, every building looks *different*, and there are more riftborn here than Ellie has ever seen in her life.

There are so many that she feels strange even thinking of it like that; in a way, *this* is their home.

It's an entire society where there's not an invisible line between humans and riftborn; each riftborn species is a part of their community and environment, just like humans and animals would be. A group of five elves that appear to be around Chase's age waltz out of a coffee shop with large hardcover books in hand, drinks floating idly near their heads as they gesture wildly in conversation. An adult female centaur walks slowly, keeping her eyes on a much smaller, younger centaur on her right side. The young one stumbles every few steps, nervously glancing up at the woman above him as he does so; maybe she's his mother? A cop that appears to *literally* be some kind of bipedal canine walks up and down the street, engaging in passing conversations but clearly keeping tabs on the various people they (she?) sees.

They aren't "riftborn" the same way they would be in New Haven; they're simply each their own individual species, all coexisting with one another.

Ellie's snapped out of her train of thought by the time, though; it's almost two o'clock. That's when she's supposed to meet Sam and Chief Kurosawa at Olympia's PIU office... and Ellie's just now realizing that she has no idea where said office is. Thankfully, Chase has already grabbed her phone, and started punching the address in. The kid moves fast; Ellie hadn't even asked her to do that, yet. When she says as such, Chase just shrugs and replies, "You said it's been a while, so I figured you needed it."

She's *really* glad she decided to bring Chase with her.

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Once Ellie drops her car off in the Olympia PIU's parking garage, she goes to greet her team with Chase in tow. No one has any badges for this office, so they have to wait outside the front door for someone to let them in. Both Chief Kurosawa and Sam are wearing their PIU uniforms, with the chief wearing a black longcoat adorned with the New Haven PIU logo and her rank insignia.

There's just enough time for introductions, so Ellie starts getting that out of the way. Sam is, seemingly, excited to have a new face around; Ellie figures there's a good chance that she recognizes Chase from the Apollo Heights incident. When she hears Sam start pestering Chase about her speed on foot, she takes it as a sign she was right. However, it's *impossible* for Ellie to tell what the chief is thinking. She's staring at Sam and Chase silently, with her arms folded and her right hand covering her mouth and nose. That's when Ellie notices the chief is wearing a pair of black gloves, likely for fashion, but the chief is *not* normally one to be fashionable. For some reason, Ellie can feel her heart starting to race, so she tries to calm herself down, as best as she can.

It's not working; something's not right. She can *feel* it.

Chief Kurosawa snaps her gaze in Ellie's direction. She says, "Ellie, do you have a moment?" and while the words are light as air, the look in her eyes is *intense*.

Ellie's legs follow Kurosawa without her even realizing it.

They don't walk far, just around the corner to the other side of the building. As soon as they turn the corner though, Chief Kurosawa asks, "So, that's your 'sister,' right?"

She uses air quotes when saying "sister" for some reason Ellie doesn't understand. It *does*, however, instantly sour her good mood.

"That's unnecessary. There's a story involved, but you could bring it up in a nicer—"

"Oh, *I'm sorry*, was I supposed to have a nice reaction when you brought a demon to Olympia's PIU office without telling me?"

"Chase isn't—" is how Ellie starts, but then she remembers that... Chase *is*. Not just hypothetically due to an experiment she wasn't aware of, but by blood due to her lineage. Ellie forgot because it's never been important in New Haven, but in Olympia it *could* be.

The chief, noting Ellie's silence, continues by asking, "Do you know *why* Olympia has a public checkpoint?"

"Smuggling, primarily. You don't want to bring contraband from one mega-city to another," Ellie replies. The chief nods.

"That's precisely why every mega-city requires pedestrians using the public entrance and exit to go through a full screening. However, I didn't ask about every mega-city, I asked about *Olympia*."

When Ellie doesn't have an answer to that, the chief pinches the bridge of her nose and exhales sharply.

"We're in the central hub for a vast majority of the riftborn that live on this continent today. These are not just humans with a percentage of the population being espers, elders from every species living in this city have been aware of and utilizing their Anima since well before they've arrived here. For many, knowledge has been passed down across their lineage for several millennia. The entire reason *you* know about Gehenna corruption and its effects on the Anima within a person's body is because it was *their* problem well before they arrived here, and they had done the groundwork to curtail it."

Well, that's definitely problematic.

"But, Chase isn't like a corrupted beast. She won't go berserk or destroy anything just because of residual Anima floating around the environment, right?"

As soon as the chief catches even a hint of Ellie being unsure, her face twists into a nasty scowl, "Oh, you don't even know for sure? You didn't think about *any* of this, at all? You didn't even consider her own *safety*?"

That last question catches Ellie off guard, "What do you mean by 'safety'?"

"I *mean* that the concern isn't whether or not she's going to go berserk. If everyone is familiar with using their form of Anima, and they're familiar with Gehenna corruption and its effects on Anima, what should that tell you?"

Of course.

It's such an obvious answer that Ellie's a bit annoyed that the chief had to drag her to the conclusion. Naturally, a society that's familiar with Anima, its types, and its usage, would have ways to detect whether or not that Anima was being corrupted by Gehenna, somehow. *That's* the reason the chief is frustrated: not only because of the unexpected visitor, but because Ellie may have put the visitor *she* brought with her in danger, purely out of ignorance. Thinking of it that way makes her feel sick to her stomach.

Chief Kurosawa, having made her point, lightens up a bit, "Well, we can't fix it now. I'm assuming you had a reason for not leaving her at home, correct?" When Ellie nods, the chief continues, "Then there's nothing we can do about it. The chief of this unit will be meeting us in a few minutes, so we don't have time to bicker."

The chief walks off in the direction the two came from, quickly ducking around the corner and towards the front door of the PIU office. As soon as she sees Chase, Kurosawa quickens her pace, takes her gloves off, and then holds them towards Chase the second she's within reach.

"You. Put these on," is all she says. Ellie winces; that's probably the worst way to address Chase if Kurosawa wants to avoid bickering.

Chase just stares at the chief blankly, before saying, "Ew, keep those to yourself. I don't know you."

As soon as that response leaves Chase's lips, Ellie's pretty sure this is gonna turn into a problem.

The chief is *clearly* aggravated, "I don't care if you know me or not, *put the damn gloves on*. If you want an explanation, I can give you one later."

"Nope, I want an explanation now."

At that moment, Ellie starts to interject with the hopes of getting Chase to at least back down here without causing a scene. But Chief Kurosawa, not being used to the adamant disobedience of a teenage girl, has already blown a fuse. She stomps up to Chase, grabs her collar, and yanks the girl towards her, making sure their faces are as close as possible.

"*Listen to me*, you little shit," Kurosawa *growls* through gritted teeth, "I don't care about how Ellie normally treats you. I'm *not* your sister, and you're *not* about to do this back and forth with me. Put the gloves on, or I'll *make* you put them on."

It's a threat that, even from a distance, works a little *too* well on Ellie and Sam. Both of them are stunned into silence, reduced to nervously staring at each other in the hopes that they don't have to break up a fight between their superior officer and an eighteen year old.

From where she's standing, Ellie's able to see Chase's face, and her eyes are doing the thing they did at the hospital again. It was a brief moment, but seeing how brightly Chase's left eye began to glow red at the sign of her being *truly* angry left a strange impression on Ellie. It was a truly terrifying stare, one that could very well turn an unsuspecting looker into dust. She's absolutely *glaring* at the chief with that expression, and the chief, while Ellie can't see her expression, is assuredly glaring right back. For just a moment, though, Chase's eyes wander over to Ellie. Perhaps unconsciously, perhaps looking for the okay to throw down here.

But *that's* not happening.

On one hand, well, the chief has never really been against beating up teenagers. She certainly wasn't back when she first met Ellie, that's for sure. On the other hand, though, if Chase fights, and it somehow causes the city's Gehenna corruption detection system—or whatever it is—to trigger, Chase could be in so much more danger than either sister realizes. Ellie doesn't know the extent to which *anything* could happen here, now that the chief has pointed it out, so when she meets Chase's gaze... she puts on the biggest frown she can muster, and shakes her head, 'no.'

Thankfully as soon as Ellie does so, the glowing in Chase's left eye instantly begins to fade, with the color of the iris returning to its normal blue. She clenches her jaw, snatching the gloves from Chief Kurosawa and putting them on... *seconds* before the door to the PIU office slides open. The mechanical *hiss* of the door's sliding mechanism visibly startles all four girls, who all seem to forget that a fight was seconds away from breaking out. A man steps through the open doorway, the light from inside bending around him as though he's eclipsing it. He *seems* to be a somewhat tall human, with broad shoulders, and bicep muscles that are visible even from a slight distance. He's wearing black slacks, with a navy blue button up shirt tucked in, and black loafers. Both of his hands are shuffled in his pockets, and he's holding a black jacket under his right arm. Ellie doesn't need to be able to see the details; *this* man carries himself like a PIU officer.

And that's when she realizes, it's not as though he's *eclipsing* the light. Rather, the visage of him is shimmering slightly, as though there were massive waves of heat radiating from his body. Ellie isn't sure *how* she knows, but his ESP is what's bending the light around him. After what feels like ages the door slides shut, and that's when Ellie can see his face properly. He's a human man, somewhat old, with long hair tied into a ponytail, and a well-trimmed mustache and goatee, all gray. At first his expression is muted, but when he looks in Chief Kurosawa's direction...

"Mina! How have you been, my dear!"

He absolutely *lights up*, practically skipping down the steps and over to the chief, before wrapping her up in a massive bear hug. Despite how the chief normally carries herself, this man *easily* towers over her by at least a foot and a half. Ellie, who's grown accustomed to the chief raining down fire and brimstone on any officers that call her by her first name, is completely thrown off. She glances over at Sam, who's just as confused, then at Chase, who's staring off to the side with a facial expression that Ellie can't quite read. None of them seem to know what's going on, and are twice as confused when the chief appears to *return the hug*. Before any of them can ask, though, he turns his attention to Sam.

"Soo-min, yes? I've heard a lot about you," He approaches Sam ("Soo-min"?) and reaches out with his right hand for a handshake. Sam returns it firmly, and he nods in approval while continuing to speak, "When Mina told me she was going to recommend you to CATR as a rookie, I'll admit I wasn't impressed. You've *outdone* yourself; if I'm not mistaken, you're the one who stopped those troublemakers in your Hyperion district from blowing up New Haven's central communications tower."

And *that's* when Ellie realizes that she actually *recognizes* Sam from somewhere: the Hyperion CCT Massacre two years ago.

New Haven's Hyperion district is located dead center of the mega-city. It's primarily a business hub; all of the city's monorail lines lead to the main station there, making it the de-facto central location for all large corporations stationed in New Haven and their employees. Located within that business hub is a tower overlooking all of New Haven with a grand total of one hundred floors, many of which were rented out as workspaces. However, its main function is to serve as the main signal tower for all wireless communications in New Haven. A group of four esper terrorists had quietly snuck into the tower by posing as employees at one of the companies that rented a space there, planting explosives at the lower levels and hiding amongst the employees on the upper levels. Only a handful of eyewitnesses called in something suspicious, and ultimately very few people working there that day even noticed something was off.

Things resumed as normal until about three o'clock in the afternoon, when the group began carrying out a three-step attack on the tower. When later testifying in court, the leader explained the plan in detail: Step one was to "lower the personnel count in the building," both as a warning, and to make the next two steps easier. Step two was to round up the remaining personnel, and gather them on the top floor as hostages. Step three was to gain access to the CCT's settings panel, and control communications in the city. It would have been *disastrous* for New Haven, as the entire city likely would have lost access to their phones, internet, radio broadcasts, and television overnight.

When asked about their motive, their second-in-command explained in front of a grand jury that, "New Haven is hiding the truth about who runs the city, and what they're up to. They monitor communications, and use the CCT to control which districts have access to certain information."

Ellie remembers feeling oddly sympathetic to that cause at the time. From her perspective, New Haven was hiding the truth about something: The Garden. The Eden Research Institute was one of the companies that used the CCT as an office space, and she would have loved for just an *iota* of what happened at The Garden to be discovered by the public. Unfortunately, the terrorists were more concerned about New Haven's emergency broadcasting system than the things the mega-city's governing body were truly hiding.

Emergency broadcasts played on all devices that connected to the internet and radio, nothing new in and of itself. The difference being that at the time, certain districts and wards had been receiving erroneous emergency broadcasts. Either the information was *vastly* different from the information delivered to other areas, or the broadcasts simply never played. The group alleged that New Haven was testing this as a way to "direct" the general public's attention towards whatever the city's government deemed important. They claimed that New Haven was controlling the rhetoric in different districts using the citywide emergency broadcasts, which was *much* harder to prove as people had grown accustomed to emergency broadcasts being delivered on a per-district basis. They had a valid point, though, considering they *were* correct about the citywide broadcasts being marketed to citizens as broadcasts for the *entire* city, regardless of area, with New Haven quietly moving away from that policy over time.

Still, that was *hardly* justification for murdering over two hundred people during "step one" of their plan.

Due to how effectively the CCT was infiltrated, early emergency calls failed to convey the severity of the issue, leading to the New Haven PIU only sending out the RFAT at first. CATR would be dispatched shortly thereafter, but there was a roughly fifteen minute delay between the two teams being dispatched. Upon arriving at the scene, one of the CATR personnel ignored protocol and sprinted into the building, coming out unscathed exactly sixty seconds later. Despite each member of the group being on the observatory on the one hundredth floor when CATR arrived, they were all found sprawled out on the ground floor, unconscious. At first, it was assumed that there had been a structural failing that caused them to fall all the way to the ground floor somehow. However, at the PIU's press conference following the incident, it was confirmed to have somehow been due to the efforts of the lone CATR personnel. Her name was kept anonymous, but the news got a real kick out of slapping "The Girl Who Stopped Time" on everything for a few months.

There had been a few reports since then spread throughout the news, and while she continued to remain anonymous, Ellie saw the face a handful of times. She feels a little bad that she never recognized Sam until just now.

Before Ellie can say anything, though, the man is already walking towards her. He reaches out for another handshake, and Ellie returns it as firmly as she can. He must have liked that, because he grins slightly and says, "*Oh*, it's been a long time since I've run into someone that can't control their own strength. I can see why Mina's interested in you, especially after you saved the day in Apollo."

Ellie doesn't like that phrasing, but she's accepted that it's more than likely something she'll be hearing a lot during this trip.

A couple months ago, Chase's high school was attacked by a different terrorist group: the Kobold's Republic Army, a militia formed under the pretense that the ceasefire that ended the Last War shouldn't have been signed by riftborn leaders. According to Trix, a koboldian member of the New Haven PIU's CATR team, the KRA believed that continuing to carry out violent attacks would restart the war offensive, and lead to the defeat that they felt human armies across the globe deserved. This, in and of itself, being motivated by human military forces having killed a political leader of theirs shortly before the ceasefire's signing.

Ellie's not sure how she feels about the movement as a whole, but she didn't get much of a chance to form a nuanced opinion on it when they launched an attack on Chase's high school, Apollo Heights. This was nothing like the Hyperion CCT Massacre; where those perpetrators had been organized and bided their time for the sake of efficacy, this was almost assuredly engineered to cause as much chaos as quickly as possible. They set off explosives on the school campus, and rounded up teachers as hostages before leaving them on the ground floor, surrounded by more armed explosives. In addition, students would go on to report that a significant number of classes had been locked into their classrooms upstairs, likely with the hopes of trapping them within the burning building before the RFAT could rescue them.

Ellie wasn't even supposed to be a part of that dispatch. She was only brought along because she had all but begged to be, and the CATR team didn't seem to need her around. Still, when they got there and realized the KRA had *bailed*, leaving all of their equipment in place, Ellie ran in behind Sam. It didn't take them long to run into Chase, who had made it down to the ground floor on her own while helping the classes on her floor get to safety. Only then did they encounter a lone KRA infantryman, who had stayed behind for some reason that none of them have been able to figure out as of yet. When he tried to hold Chase at gunpoint, she and Ellie managed to silently coordinate a take down, and he was later brought into custody.

At the time, Ellie wondered why Sam, who was supposed to have been the acting squad leader for the dispatch, had practically frozen in place. In hindsight, it made perfect sense; she was in the middle of a high school on *fire* after being hit by a terrorist attack, with no indication of how many students or staff could have been hurt or killed. A *lot* of people would freeze there. However, it was *far* from the worst fire that Ellie had been in, and so she started barking orders like it was *her* team and not Sam's. Mainly to keep herself sane, since everything was starting to feel and sound like The Garden again.

But, Sam would later go on to admit she was at a complete loss on what to do in that situation, and Ellie's pushing forward would help the situation wind down. They would later go over the situation at the PIU's debrief meeting the next day—which Ellie was forbidden from attending, due to both Sam and Chief Kurosawa wanting her to spend time with Chase after the incident. There, Sam allegedly told the chief that Ellie should be credited as the acting squad leader, as her efforts are what resolved the situation, and the chief would relay that reasoning to her peers.

As a result, Ellie got a bunch of credit that she *really* doesn't feel like she deserves.

But this Olympian PIU officer doesn't need to know any of that, so instead she smiles and replies, "I'm nowhere near as seasoned as *Soo-min*, but hopefully I can live up to the hype." Ellie makes sure to put a little emphasis on Sam's name, and while saying it out loud definitely feels weird, seeing her comrade startled at the sound of her own name was quite funny.

A sly grin unfolds on the man's face, and he nods approvingly, "Humble, too. I like that. How about we continue our conversation inside?"

He walks towards the front door to the Olympia PIU office, with the chief, Sam, and Ellie in tow. Chase lags just a bit behind, and she's *eerily* quiet, with her hands in her pockets. Ellie can't think of a time where Chase has gone this long without making a sound, but she figures that the newness of the situation is probably just getting to her. However, as soon as Chief Kurosawa steps inside the building, Ellie is yanked out of her thoughts by the wail of an *incredibly* loud siren. It's so loud that Ellie's almost certain there's some kind of imminent danger, so she turns to grab Chase's arm so the two can bounce.

Before she can, though, Chase *backs away from her* just as Ellie hears the chief say, "It's okay, Michael. It's just me, I forgot my gloves in my hotel room this morning."

The man they had just met—presumably Michael—responds, "Oh, *that's* rare! You've been in New Haven for *way* too long."

Ellie's heart sinks through the floor. *That* must have been why the chief was being so adamant about getting Chase to put the gloves on. Something about them must suppress Anima in a way that makes it hard for their systems to detect. She looks at Chase, trying to get the girl's attention and see if the gloves are making her feel weird. Chase responds by looking away from Ellie, clearly trying to avoid her gaze. She's unmistakably pale, though, and it's pretty clear that she's actively working to avoid putting on a scowl. Something in this chain of events *definitely* pushed her over the limit, and she's barely holding on.

Ellie tries to get her attention again, but Chase just backs away further. Great.

The sirens stop, but Michael begins speaking before Ellie can call for a timeout, "Apologies for the sudden noise. My name is Michael Arrow; I'm the chief of this city's Paranormal Investigations Unit. As you can see, we take preventative measures against Gehenna corruption here. Even your chief is capable of setting off the alarms if—"

Chief Kurosawa lightly taps him on the shoulder, "Actually, I haven't explained that to my team yet. If you could give us some time, maybe?"

Michael looks at Kurosawa, then at Ellie, Sam, and Chase. Rather, he *stares* at Chase silently, far longer than normal. Then, he asks, "Mina, who's that girl?"

"She's—" Ellie starts to answer, but before she can get any further, she feels an invisible pressure crush her body from all sides. Rather, it's an impossible weight holding every inch of her in place. She can feel her skin tingling something fierce, which clues her in to this being some kind of psychic ability, but *what* kind?

As Ellie feels the air pressure crush her, Michael responds, "Don't talk out of turn. I was asking your chief."

Oh, *now* she's mad. If only she wasn't being held in place by what feels like the weight of a pickup truck.

Thankfully, Chief Kurosawa clearly doesn't like his response either, because she glares at him and says, "That's Ellie's sister that you're interrogating, now *knock it off*. Keep your fucking hands off of my team."

Michael looks at the chief briefly, and then smiles, "Apologies, I forgot how antsy you get over subordinates." He doesn't seem to be intent on giving up just yet, though, because he looks at Chase again and barks, "Girl! Show me your hands."

Chase takes her hands out of her pockets... and she doesn't have the gloves on.

Michael stares at her for a bit longer, and then relaxes. The pressure lifts off of Ellie's body, and as soon as it does she feels her knees give out. She hadn't gotten *used* to the feeling, but having it relieved so suddenly made her bones feel *weak*. Sam lunges to catch her, and when she barely manages to do so Ellie tries to say thanks. But she feels so *exhausted* from whatever weight was resting on top of her that all she can do is gasp for air.

After all of that, Michael addresses Chief Kurosawa again, "Sorry about that. But, just like you want to keep your team safe, I would like to do the same." He walks off towards the door leading to the main office, while continuing to speak, "Remember, Mina, the meeting begins tonight. I would go over Olympia's laws and policies with your team, so that we don't repeat an incident like this. The units from Fort Veridian and Cerulea will be in attendance, after all; restraint isn't exactly their specialty."

He buzzes himself into the main office, and then leaves the girls in the foyer alone. No one says anything for what feels like hours.

The chief is the first to break the silence, exhaling deeply before saying, "Well, I guess I have some things to explain. Have you all dropped off your luggage?"

Chase and Ellie shake their heads no, while Sam... doesn't do anything. She's just quietly rubbing her chin while staring at the floor, clearly lost in thought. The chief repeats her question, but Sam doesn't respond again. This time Ellie taps her on the shoulder, and she practically jumps out of her own skin before apologizing, "Sorry, I dropped mine off this morning."

Her voice sounds shaky.

Chief Kurosawa stares at Sam briefly, before turning her attention to Ellie and Chase, "All of our rooms are on the same floor, so how about we debrief after you two take care of your bags?"

It's the best chance she's gonna get for her and Chase to have some breathing room, so Ellie quickly takes it. She grabs Chase's arm, and practically drags her out of there before she can protest. Surprisingly, she doesn't; Chase lets Ellie walk her all the way to the parking garage two blocks away, then once they get to the car and Ellie lets go she quietly gets into the passenger's seat. Ellie gets into the driver's seat, and they drive off to their hotel.

The drive is quiet. Painfully so.

When they arrive at their hotel, it doesn't take much time at all for them to get their bags out of the front-trunk and into their room. Ellie figures it's her only shot to try and talk to Chase, so she takes it.

"Chase? Talk to me, what's—"

"What would have happened if you told him the truth?" Chase blurts out, interrupting her. Ellie's caught off guard; she had been wondering that, too. It pains her to admit that she doesn't know, so she tries not to.

"We don't have to find out, the chief gave you her gloves right? You didn't trip any sensors with those on."

"I don't *want* to wear these! Not after seeing how that guy talked to your boss when she claimed she forgot; he's *clearly* targeting her!"

Ellie hadn't considered that, but she's right. Presumably, Chief Kurosawa was the only member of Olympia's PIU with her disposition when she was over here. She's seemingly had to wear those gloves the entire time, silently signaling to everyone around that she's dangerous enough to require a leash. It's likely no coincidence that Ellie's never seen the chief wear anything of the sort while in New Haven.

"Maybe they are. But you'll be with me, and the chief even had your back earlier. We're not gonna let anything happen to you."

"Just like you had my back when your boss was barking at me, right?" Chase bites back. Ellie was partly expecting that, but it still hurts to hear.

"I wasn't expecting her to be that aggressive. She had just finished bitching me out too, you know," It sounds like an excuse, but she really *was* stunned at the time. She didn't know what to do, partially because she was *also* scared of something bad happening.

Chase doesn't buy it, "So when she threatened to fight me, you didn't help me out because she had you shaking in your boots?"

"*That's* uncalled for," Ellie replies with a frown, "I just didn't think she was gonna go that far! She was the one that was yelling at *me* for bringing you somewhere that's not safe for you!"

The instant Ellie says that, the look on Chase's face changes. She looks crestfallen, "So *something* bad would have happened if you told the truth."

"I *don't know*, okay? I was hoping the chief would explain shit, but she *hasn't*." Ellie takes off her glasses, pinches the bridge of her nose, and exhales sharply, "I don't know what to do, I just feel bad because I wasn't expecting things to be so hostile towards *you*."

Chase doesn't respond to that right away, instead turning away from Ellie. Neither girl says anything for a brief moment, and then Chase asks, "Do you want to send me home? I don't want to be here if it's not safe for you. I can handle being by myself for a week."

She doesn't sound like it.

As soon as Chase says that, Ellie's eyes begin burning at the corners, with tears spilling out soon after, "Why are you worried about me? Aren't you the one it's not safe for?"

"I mean, yeah, but that still means that if anyone wants to get to me they'll just go through you. If I'm not safe here, then you aren't going to be safe with me."

Ellie feels something inside of her break.

"I don't *need* you to worry about me! Why can't you worry about you?!"

Chase looks Ellie in the eyes, and the latter is almost petrified by the vacant, icy stare. It feels like she's looking in a mirror again, and it makes her stomach turn backflips. When she speaks, Ellie barely recognizes the sound of her sister's voice, "It wouldn't be the first time that someone was killed to get to me. That's all."

It's as though she dropped a live grenade in the hotel room. All Ellie can say in response is, "Is that... what happened to your dad?"

Chase freezes in place, clearly not expecting to have this conversation here, of all places. After a moment, she responds with a nod, "I... sometimes I still have dreams about it. When I do dream about it, it's like I'm seeing everything clearer; I always see details I didn't notice before. Like, when me and my dad got separated, it was because those guys in masks were trying to *kidnap* me."

"Are you worried that those guys will come back and hurt me, too?"

"Not exactly *those* guys, just in general. I just don't want you to get hurt trying to protect me," Chase's voice is barely a whisper, and yet Ellie feels the words hit her in the chest harder than anything Chase has ever told her up to that point.

Her body moves on its own, closing the gap between her and Chase, before wrapping her in the biggest hug she can muster.

"That doesn't mean it's not safe for me to be around you, it just means we need to have each other's backs. I dropped the ball on that front earlier, I'm sorry."

"It's okay," Chase replies, and then they pull back from the hug.

Now that they've gotten their heart to heart out of the way, Ellie feels a bit more rejuvenated. She lightly punches Chase on the shoulder, and when a small smile breaks out on the teenager's face, that's all Ellie needs to know her younger sister's feeling better too.

"Well, now that things are already going off the rails, why don't we see what the chief has in store for us?"

Interlude: Abomination

After they hash things out in their hotel room, both girls make their way over to Chief Kurosawa's room. Her room is on the same floor, as well as Sam's, so it shouldn't take long for the group to rendezvous.

Compared to Chase and Ellie's room, the chief is living in luxury. She's staying in a suite that has a bedroom and separate living room area, complete with a kitchenette. There's even a balcony, which the two girls find her leaning over while smoking a cigarette when they arrive. She didn't even bother locking the door; Chase waltzes right in without thinking to knock, turning to look at Ellie sheepishly when the door flies open.

"You should learn to knock before opening doors, kid," the chief calls from the balcony, without turning to even look at her guests. "You're lucky I could smell the two of you from down the hall."

Compared to earlier, where she was clearly trying her best to be cordial, her tone of voice right now is *dark*; she's pissed off. Ellie sighs, exasperatedly, while Chase just looks at her, at the chief, then back at Ellie again.

"Am I supposed to know what that means? Does she have a good sense of smell? Is she a beastkin, or—"

The chief puts out her cigarette, walking inside the room and sliding the glass door shut behind her. "Let's start here: how much *do* you know?" When Chase turns to her side to look at Ellie, the chief snaps at her, "Don't look at Ellie. I'm talking to you, how much do you—"

"Look, can you be nicer at least?" Chase interrupts, clearly annoyed at having been talked down to so much. Ellie just buries her face in her hands, realizing that her sister and her boss butting heads is *definitely* going to be a recurring theme.

The chief glares at the youngest of the group something fierce, before pinching the bridge of her nose and sighing, "Forgive me, I'm not used to dealing with people your age. You *are* at least owed an explanation at this point. I just want to keep things brief, since we'll be breaking things down again with Sam when she arrives."

Right on cue, there's a light knock at the door. The chief rolls her eyes, mutters, "Never mind, then," and gets up to open the door. Sam's standing on the other end, having exchanged her CATR uniform and jacket for a plain white t-shirt and navy blue pajama bottoms. As the group of four each take a seat at the dining table in the chief's kitchenette, Ellie finds herself glancing at Sam, over and over. It's odd; her outfit is very plain, but Ellie can't help but stare. Instead of greeting Sam, though, all she says is, "How come you didn't tell me your name was Soo-min? It's a pretty name."

Sam's face turns beet red, "It's a little embarrassing. After getting called 'Saw Men' for three years in a row at school you get tired of people mispronouncing your name."

Ellie wants to reply with a joke, but she doesn't know what to say to that. All she does instead is apologize, "That makes sense. Sorry if you don't like it."

Sam's clearly a little confused at that response, but before she can ask the chief claps her hands once to get everyone's attention, "Well, now that we're all here, I guess we can start with the basics and go from there. You're probably wondering what the deal with the alarms at the Olympia PIU office are all about, right?"

All three girls nod in response. Chief Kurosawa's face turns grim.

"Very well. What I'm about to tell you must *not* leave this room, although I believe it will shine a much needed light on things. But first, would anyone like a drink? It may help."

No one says anything. Not even Chase.

The chief smiles bitterly, "Don't say I didn't warn you." She takes a deep breath before speaking again; it's an odd gesture for someone who's normally so well composed, "Let's start here, then. I'm not a human being; rather, I'd be considered a lesser known species of demon called a 'fiend.' Ellie is vaguely aware of this, but I do wish I could have explained this to you under more ideal circumstances, Sam."

After she finishes that sentence, Sam whips her gaze towards Ellie with a frown. For some reason, Ellie can't look at her in the eyes.

The chief, seeing the clear confusion on Sam's face, continues, "Don't be mad at her. While she knew, it's not like she knows any specifics. We've just ran into each other before, back when I used to work for this unit. They were aware of my disposition when I was hired, and the gloves were a condition of my employment. I wasn't lying to Michael when I said that I had forgotten, though."

Out of everyone in the room, it's Chase that has the first question. She raises her hand, politely waiting for the chief to finish her expectation. Kurosawa is thrown off at her sudden display of manners, but lets Chase ask regardless, "How do you forget being a fiend? That sounds weird."

The chief nods, "It does, unless you know what fiends *are*. You three are familiar with Gehenna corruption, yes?" When all three girls nod in affirmation, she continues, "When a being with sufficient Anima—whether it be ESP or mana—is corrupted, what happens?"

"It depends," Ellie answers, almost instinctively, "I'm not sure about riftborn, but for humans ESP flows through the brain and central nervous system. If that gets corrupted, the person... ceases to be."

"That's correct, Ellie, but *how*?" The chief prods. Ellie herself doesn't even know this part; for all of the experiments at The Garden that she's been aware of, she's never seen the end result of an esper that was fully corrupted. All she knew was that they became "something else" and had to be put down.

Ellie *almost* says that, but the words catch in her throat. Thankfully, the chief spares her a walk down memory lane, and starts talking again.

"When your Anima is corrupted by Gehenna, that is your very life energy being corrupted. The Gehenna combines with and overtakes the very energy that makes you a living person, and the person that was there before is completely replaced. There's a new personality, a new mind, and while the exterior remains, the interior is vastly different. The old person effectively dies, and in their place is, effectively, a newborn, seeing the world with eyes for the first time. Remember, Gehenna in and of itself is merely a force; it doesn't have a personality on its own."

"So, in other words," Sam interrupts, her tone of voice instantly becoming hostile. She kicks the table, sending her chair sliding backwards, before standing up in one quick motion, "You're *not* 'Mina Kurosawa', you're a demon that corrupted her body and replaced the essence of the person within."

Ellie's not sure if she's seeing things correctly, but in Sam's left hand, a medium-length sword in its scabbard has appeared. She didn't have that earlier, where'd it come from?

Before Ellie can ask, though, the chief is addressing Sam directly.

"You have every right to show me hostility. But, you should listen to my explanation first. Remember, if I'm a demon by nature, the last thing you'd want to do is provoke me to combat, right?"

Sam doesn't answer, but she stays standing with her sword at the ready; her left hand on the scabbard, and her right hand lightly gripping the handle. Out of seemingly nowhere, the air has become *extremely* tense.

The chief takes another deep breath before speaking. Ellie can't help but wonder if she's nervous about this, somehow, "While yes, I *am* a demon that corrupted the body and essence of the original Mina Kurosawa, this was done willingly."

She begins her explanation.

"Years ago, back when riftborn and demons had first arrived, there was quite a bit of misinformation surrounding what Gehenna truly was. Mina Kurosawa was simply a frail girl, on the verge of passing away in her late teens due to illness. After her reported illness became terminal, her family sought alternative methods to prolong her life, and were led to an experimental treatment with Gehenna. The body and mind survived... but the occupant was gone; instead, it was just me. I had the memories, the life experiences, and the body felt like mine, but as soon as I looked my parents in the eyes and spoke, they knew their experiment was an irredeemable failure. Funny how that works; the first memory of my own was the distraught look of my family, knowing full well they had effectively killed their kin.

"Just before my first moments of being fully aware of myself, I felt the old host speak to me; she had grown so frail that her ESP had weakened, yet she persisted because, in her own words, she 'wanted to meet me before she goes.' Oddly, what her parents could not see was that she herself had accepted her fate well prior to the experiment, and knew it would fail where they were blinded by their hope. Her only request was simply to live in her stead, and do the things she would not be able to. I accepted the terms of my employment in Olympia because I believed that a woman with that kind of bravery would want to fight for change. Maybe there were more experiments being set loose in the world, like I was. People wandering around bearing fractured memories, with no idea where they even came from before they gained consciousness. But no matter how long I stayed here, that never changed. Now as an adult, I'm well aware that this city would never be welcoming to someone like me. That's why I'm in New Haven, currently."

Sam doesn't move, but she asks, "Then why do you help demon hunters? That's part of our job in CATR."

"Think of it this way," the chief starts, "When was the last time *you* had to deal with a fiend, even when aiding demon hunters? If you think about it, demon hunters themselves rarely hunt more than corrupted beasts under normal circumstances."

"But still, those are *demons*, just like you. Why would you want *any* of them to be hunted?"

The chief rubs her chin for a moment, "The best way I can explain it is that when we're Gehenna, we're formless and thoughtless. After Gehenna corrupts something, it will always become a separate entity regardless. I may be a demon, but I'm one that with eighteen years of human memories and life experiences prior to my birth. A corrupted beast is not that; they are an animal being corrupted by Gehenna, and simply run berserk while spreading it everywhere. I've got a lot more in common with humans than those."

Sam keeps her sword at the ready, but sits back down in her chair. She's still sitting far away from the table, clearly wanting to keep her distance from the chief. Kurosawa smiles at that, but she seems a little bit sad.

"I didn't want to tell you, you know. I'm aware of your family's circumstances, and I know this likely hits home for you all too well. I just want you to know that the entire time I've been your superior officer, my intentions have never changed. I want to protect the people of New Haven, no matter what happens. I don't know if it's what the old Mina would have wanted, but when I think about it, it's the only thing I want to do."

Ellie turns to Sam, "'Your family's circumstances'? What does that mean?"

"How about *you* tell me why you hid this from me first?" Sam snaps back. It's unusually fierce, and Ellie can't respond to that.

The chief speaks up again, "About that, it's not a secret. Many of the higher ups at the New Haven PIU are aware—"

"But what about the *people* you care so much about protecting?" Sam asks. "Don't they deserve to know?"

Chief Kurosawa scoffs at that, "*Please*, you should know the reactions of people are hard to predict. You yourself are proof of that; I believed you to be level headed enough to take the news well, but in reality no one likes hearing the truth. Even here in Olympia, the reason they built an entire defense system is *because* they wanted to weed out people like me before they could gain a foothold in society. I was only ever an exception to the rule, and they used the proof of my existence to build a society that exiles anyone that's *in between* like me."

Sam doesn't say anything, but her sword vanishes from her left hand. She folds her arms; she's still frowning, but appears somewhat convinced. Ellie, meanwhile, is more flabbergasted by witnessing an entire sword and scabbard disappear from her very eyes than she is from the news. Most of it was info she was already aware of from her time at The Garden, the details she didn't know were just additional information for her to muse over. But first...

"Sam, remember what I told you at the hospital?" Ellie turns to her side, doing her best to make eye contact with Sam. She doesn't even attempt to return the gaze, and Ellie's surprised at how badly being ignored like that hurts. She soldiers on, anyways, "I... there's a lot that happened, and I ended up spending some time in Olympia before the orphanage was burned down. I ran into the chief there."

"Define 'ran into.' What kind of stuff were you involved in?"

"I... broke into someone's house, and had to outrun the cops."

Chase snorts in response to that, busting into laughter, "You did *what*? You were kicking in doors?"

Sam is unamused despite Chase practically *howling* in laughter, "That doesn't explain how you knew about the chief's little *secret* before everyone else."

"I'm glad you mentioned that, because that's part two of our meeting," Kurosawa interrupts. "We're all aware of Ellie's *circumstance*, correct?"

Chase and Sam both nod slowly. "I don't know details, but... you mentioned an experiment before, right?" Sam asks Ellie.

Ellie nods, doing her best to ignore the feeling of her heart sinking to the pit of her stomach.

Thankfully, the chief spares her somewhat, "That's all you need to know, really. Whatever the outcome of that experiment, to *me* she smells extremely similar to that sister of hers. Speaking of which, I think *now's* a good time for you two to explain your part in this mess."

Chief Kurosawa makes a point to glare directly at Ellie while finishing her sentence. However, it's *Chase* that speaks first, "What do you want to know?"

The chief rolls her eyes, "*Please*, girl. What could *you* tell me that Ellie couldn't—"

"Did you forget *I'm* the half-demon here, jackass?" Chase bites back. "I'm the problem, right? Ellie didn't have to put those fucking gloves on."

Kurosawa is *livid* at that response, "Are you out of your mind?! Why would you *ever* think it's acceptable to talk to me that way?"

"Because *you've* been talking to me however you want! And *I have a name*, by the way: it's Chase! Now do you wanna know my family's situation, or not?"

The chief clenches her jaw, clearly considering the pros and cons of escalating further. However, to the surprise of both Ellie and Sam, she *acquiesces*, gesturing for Chase to continue.

"I didn't know about the details until just now, but I'm pretty sure my mom was a... fiend, like you described. My dad was a human. Ellie used to be my babysitter when I was a little kid, and when my parents died she took me in." Her voice trembles slightly, but she continues, "No, I'm not her sister, but I like that she thinks of me that way."

Out of the corner of her eye, Ellie sees Sam jolt when Chase says the phrase, "when my parents died."

There's a dour mood hanging over the room, now.

Then, Chief Kurosawa quietly asks, "Do you have any other relatives?" Compared to her tone when talking to Chase before, it's *far* gentler now. Ellie thinks she must feel a little regretful of how she had been treating the kid earlier, now that she's got an idea of why Ellie insisted so heavily on bringing her around.

Chase glances up at the ceiling while rubbing her chin in thought, "Just my uncle, but I'm not sure what his deal is. I think Ellie said he's a... 'daemon lord', or something?"

As soon as the words 'daemon lord' leaves the girl's mouth, the chief's face turns pale as a sheet.

"Chase, was it? I need you to listen to me: no matter what you do, *do not* say that out loud as long as you are here. Daemon lords are *not* like the usual demon, they are clusters of Gehenna that have been fully separated from their collective, having gained sentience from absorbing the Anima around them. Many of them are extremely hostile, and the fact that you are even related to one at all would make you a target. That goes for both of you, as well," Chief Kurosawa looks at Sam and Ellie, "*do not let that detail leave this room if you value your freedom.*"

That leaves a bit of a cloud over the room. No one says anything after that.

The chief loudly coughs to break the silence, before asking, "So, would anyone like a drink?"

This time, everyone takes her up on the offer.

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When the chief gets up to make everyone's drinks, Ellie taps Sam on the shoulder, nodding her head towards the other side of the room. The two get up and walk away to chat, while Chase waltzes over to bother Kurosawa, who's pouring three margaritas—one of which is virgin, since Chase isn't old enough to drink yet. Seeing that out of the corner of her eye, Ellie can't help but feel amused; for all of their arguing earlier, the two seem to be more than comfortable with each other now that the chief knows where the teenager is coming from.

But Ellie can't focus on that, because she has a much more pressing matter to attend to. "Sam, I'm sorry for—"

"My brother fell into a Gehenna deposit a few years ago, right after I joined the PIU," Sam starts off, still not looking at Ellie. "He was acting weird for a few days, but none of my family noticed something was wrong. Then, when my parents played a prank on him, he freaked out and killed them. It turned out, he was a demon that had seemingly replaced my brother, and did it maliciously. Sometimes, I still think that."

Ellie doesn't say anything. Sam just turns to look at her, while continuing to speak, "When I found out what happened, I didn't waste time hunting him down. I didn't even bother waiting for him to explain. I figured that was the right thing to do; after all, he had taken my family from me. But, after hearing what the chief just said... I don't know anymore. Maybe he was just scared, and didn't know who the memories in his head belonged to. Makes me wish I took the time to ask."

She looks away from Ellie, clearly trying to think of a way to finish her thought. Ellie leans on the wall, carefully studying Sam's expression, "I can't say I know exactly what you're feeling, but I *do* know the fact that you're willing to consider you may have been wrong is why you're here today. The chief knows how to pick 'em, after all."

Sam doesn't say anything in response to that, she just turns to look at Ellie, and smiles. Unlike the cordial smiles they've exchanged in passing, the look in her eyes right now is incredibly warm and inviting. It makes Ellie's heart feel like it's beating out of her chest; a feeling that she's normally used to being a sign of anxiety, but right now...

A slow, mellow jingle snaps Ellie out of her thoughts. She forgot, the day is *far* from over, and sure enough Chief Kurosawa says, "That's our time. We'd better leave now if we don't want to be late."

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The chief offers to let the troupe ride in her rental SUV: a sleek, all-black ride with tinted windows. It's even got fully functioning autopilot, which she uses to her advantage while debriefing everyone on what to expect. This time, she's got her own pair of gloves, but Chase is still commandeering the other pair. Ellie expected her to put up a bigger fuss about it, but all Chase said when asked was, "We talked it over, I don't mind wearing them," with a shrug.

What the hell *did* they talk about, exactly?

She doesn't get a chance to ask, though, because the chief is in the midst of her speech.

"Basically, an 'All Chapters' meeting is a chance for the heads of the PIU chapters in each mega-city to get together and make sure everyone is of one accord. It's important to remember that all of the things we're policing are quite new, so if one city is privy to important information, this meeting is the best time to bring it up."

"So, why are we here, then?" Ellie asks.

"The Apollo Heights incident was very concerning," Chief Kurosawa replies. "It's the first time something of that caliber has happened in New Haven since the Hyperion Massacre, and while it was resolved neatly, everyone has their concerns. You had similar ones, after all."

She's right about that; after the Apollo Heights incident, Ellie had spent weeks at the office disassembling their abandoned explosives and trying to map out a plan or motive. Even now she can't think of anything, which would certainly pose a problem to law enforcement in any other cities that would be worried about copycats. If the goal was chaos, the KRA had certainly succeeded on that front. But there would be *more* effective targets than a school, too. All of it is confusing enough for Ellie to feel that the concern of other chapters was warranted.

"Now, I want to be very clear about something before we go inside," The chief continues as the car pulls into her reserved parking spot, "The other mega-cities have vastly different cultures, and will have *vastly* different responses to being in your vicinity. Many of these cities were built by riftborn after the war, and they may be very hostile towards humans. Some may even try to provoke you. *Please* do not take their bait; many of them only wish to have an avenue to harm humans. While I don't think any of you would necessarily be *hurt* by them, I think that would be a lose/lose scenario for all of us, regardless."

Ellie doesn't need her to explain further; she's well aware of the history and tensions between the ten mega-cities on this continent.

After the ceasefire was signed, the few habitable areas left in the Americas were divided by the remnants of the United Coalitions into ten mega-cities. The remaining pockets of human civilization left on the continent settled into three of the ten: New Haven, Olympia, and The Lone Republic. Of those three, only New Haven and The Lone Republic were truly "human" made cities, with Olympia's human population comprising defectors from the military and peaceful settlers from other human civilizations that were destroyed. The other seven mega-cities: Artemis, Lunaria, Aurora Delta, Aurora Epsilon, Dune Valley, Fort Veridian, and Cerulea, were set aside for riftborn settlers, who utilized the ruined and sometimes uninhabitable terrain quite well.

For example, the Auroras are flat lands with tall buildings that are laid out in parallel. This, when combined with the turbulent winds of the area, creates massive wind tunnels that draw any riftborn capable of flight to the area. On the contrast, Dune Valley is a mega-city in the desert outside of New Haven, in a crater so deep that many New Haven residents don't even know there's a city there in the first place. However, Dune Valley's residents, primarily riftborn who have adapted to live in the arid climate, were mainly there because they had been exiled from human communities after failed attempts at peace. They emigrated to the area so they would remain out of the way, but as a result many of those residents have grown disdainful of humans. The same could be said for residents of Fort Veridian: a human military base that was captured during the war by a squadron of guerrilla riftborn soldiers, whom the city was named after. Due to the circumstances the city was founded under, they could be outright hostile towards humans.

Or at least, that's what Ellie thinks the situation is. But when they walk inside, past the security gates (thankfully with less alarms this time) and into the meeting area, she's absolutely *swarmed* by a fleet of curious folks of all shapes, sizes, and species. Some are beastkin, some are dwarves, some are elves, some are kobolds, and some even appear to be human. Where she was expecting them to be much hostile at first, many of them are excited to meet the officers Kurosawa chose. The chief must have a stellar reputation amongst her peers.

Sure enough, as she walks through the halls *everyone* appears to be on a first name basis with her. As the troupe passes through, she's stopped every so often by high ranking officers from other units, all of whom seem to be genuinely excited to see her. She's fist bumping dwarves and drakes, handing out high fives to avian beastkin soaring through the halls, and even the supposedly hostile reptilian beastkin and kobolds are excited to see her. Ellie has to try not to giggle at the sight; the chief is practically a celebrity, all she needs to complete the look is to be kissing babies and handing out autographs.

However, every once in a while some of them stop and stare at Ellie, Chase, and Sam. Unlike the warm looks that the chief gets, theirs is *far* more icy. It makes Ellie realize that Chief Kurosawa wasn't lying about the trepidation they felt towards humans; the chief herself had just earned enough of a reputation to be trusted, and she had spent a *lot* of time building those foundations. Ellie feels a bit uneasy, which isn't helped by the tallest woman she's *ever* seen walking directly in front of her to cut off her path.

"So, you must be Kurosawa's fresh meat," the tall woman says. Ellie has to crane her neck up to look at her; she's *at least* seven feet tall, with long purple hair trailing down her back. Her PIU uniform looks identical to New Haven's, except the logo on the shoulder of her jacket is a golden pegasus: the official seal of Fort Veridian, with insignia showing her rank of Lieutenant. Looking at her face, her irises are a slightly glowing yellow, and there are black scales trailing from her chin down the sides her neck. To cap it off, she's got a pair of black horns; one each on the left and right sides of her head. She smells of burnt cedarwood, and just standing a couple feet from her makes Ellie feel like she's standing in front of a furnace.

"I wouldn't say my meat is particularly fresh, unless you plan on taking me out to dinner?" Ellie replies.

The tall woman(?) leans down, so that she's as close to face-to-face as possible with Ellie, before *licking* the right side of Ellie's face. It feels like a rough, slimy, scalding hot cloth is being raked over her, and it's honestly a *disgusting* feeling. Before she can even say anything, the tall woman is staring her directly in the eyes, with her voice becoming an incredibly deep growl, "I think *I'd* rather be the judge of that. I could go for a snack before—"

"*Lieutenant Cassandra Nuvoe!* Have you forgotten about what will happen if you cause another problem this week?" A separate voice barks. This one belongs to a much more *normal* sized woman: she has long white hair, and while she's wearing a matching Fort Veridian PIU uniform, she's exchanged the black slacks for a long, black pleated dress, with black combat boots. She's wearing a black blindfold over her eyes, and her pointed ears make it clear that she's some type of elf. In her right hand is a black cane, and her head is adorned with a black beret that shows off the insignia indicating her rank: Chief.

"Sorry, Boss," the tall, purple-haired woman replies, "I just love casing the newbies that New Haven brings every year. You'd think they've never seen a *dragon* before!"

And, well, she's right. Ellie was just hoping that her first meeting with a dragon would be more cordial and less... *violating*. For all of the stories she's heard through the grapevine about dragons and their behaviors, she never expected one to openly consider eating her *just because*. It's strange, she's never been humiliated quite like this before. It doesn't help that the second Chase heard the word "dragon", she skipped right past Ellie and up to Lieutenant Nuvoe, practically jumping on the dragon-woman's back.

"Did you say you're a *dragon*? That's so cool! Can you fly? Do you have a tail? Can you breathe—"

Chase's pestering is met with the dragon grabbing her by her shirt, and *throwing her into the wall directly to her right*. Instantly, the entire room goes silent, save for the light tapping of the Fort Veridian Chief's cane as she walks, and Ellie scrambling over to the hole in the wall where Chase was thrown. Thankfully, the girl appears to be in one piece, but she's got a few cuts and bruises along her arms. Her eyes are wide open, though, and she's *glaring* in the direction of the dragon, with her left eye glowing red.

Not good.

"Nuvoe! Think about how *we* look, for once! Are you aware that we *require assistance*?" The Chief of Fort Veridian's PIU yells.

"Aw, Helvie—"

"Not another word out of you, *brute*," "Helvie" says as she picks her cane up, and *slams* it back down. As soon as the bottom of the cane makes contact with the ground, black chains sprout in a circle around Nuvoe, wrapping themselves around the dragon-woman's entire body, before forcing her down to the ground on all fours. After that, the blindfolded elf walks past Ellie, peering into the hole in the wall where Chase is.

"Oh! Well, you're holding up quite well after taking a hit like that. Most humans would have been dead from the sheer force exerted by the throw. You're a strong one."

Chief "Helvie" lightly taps the bottom of her cane on the ground twice, after which the rubble and the hole in the wall begin to glow silver. Then, the damage starts to *repair itself*, rewinding through the destruction, with Chase floating on out. The second her feet touch the ground, she tries to dash towards the dragon, but... she doesn't go anywhere. Rather, it seems like she *can't* go anywhere.

"Please ignore the childish games of my Lieutenant," Chief "Helvie" says. "She's always trying to do a number on humans that annoy her, even when it's inconvenient. As I'd prefer not to be indebted to humans, consider us even after this."

Chase responds to that by folding her arms, and spitting out a, "Thanks," as the silver glow fades. Her left eye is still glowing red, which seems to get a rise out of the dragon-woman that's currently bound to the floor.

"Oh, you're *real* mad, aren't 'cha? Come on, let me get a bite!"

"*Nuvoe*, do you want to be locked inside of a shipping container in Dune Valley again? Don't forget that I broke you out, and if you continue being a thorn in my side, I'd be more than happy to put you right back where I found you," Chief "Helvie" practically bellows. Even though she's barely raised her voice, her tone is *far* more militaristic than Ellie's used to, and it freezes her down to her bones. The way she's talking to Nuvoe almost reminds her of Professor Lance when he'd hit his limit with the students at The Garden, threatening them with a night of solitary if they can't sit through his lessons without interruptions. Sure enough, Lieutenant Nuvoe falls *completely* silent at the mention of her "shipping container."

Ellie feels a little bad for her. She knows all too well what that's like.

Chief "Helvie" doesn't seem to notice, though, more intent on smoothing things over with Chase, who's *still* silently glaring at the bound dragon-woman.

"Apologies that we had to meet under these circumstances," Chief "Helvie" says to Chase. "I am Chief Seraph Helvetica, of Fort Veridian's Paranormal Investigation's Unit. I take it you're one of Chief Kurosawa's newest recruits? With your toughness, I'm sure she made a good choice picking you."

Hearing that sentence snaps Ellie back into gear. She moves to stand in between Chase and Chief Helvetica, who's reaching out with her right hand for a handshake. Helvetica doesn't seem to notice Chase refusing to take her hand, and she doesn't notice right away when Ellie steps in between the two, which Ellie is sure to make a mental note of; so far, Chief Helvetica does seem to be truly blind.

"About that," Ellie says, matter-of-factly. "*I'm* actually the new recruit. This girl is my younger sister. Just a civilian accompanying me, since she wanted a chance to see Olympia for the first time."

It's not entirely the truth, but Ellie isn't sure how much she wants to reveal to people who were that hostile moments ago. Notably, Chief Helvetica isn't angry with Lieutenant Nuvoe for trying to hurt Chase, she's angry because Nuvoe hurting Chase could in turn hurt their chances at receiving help in some fashion. It's a very pragmatic reason for wanting to avoid conflict, and while it will certainly make negotiations easier, it gives Ellie enough pause to consider against trusting Helvetica right away.

She's glad she did that too, because the second Helvetica shakes her hand instead of Chase's, the Fort Veridian Chief's apologetic demeanor completely shifts, "I see. Unfortunate that she couldn't remain civilized enough to respect my Lieutenant's boundaries. Hopefully, she's learned a thing or two about foolishly rushing towards a hungry dragon if she plans on accompanying you to events in the future."

Naturally, that dismissive tone gets under Ellie's skin, *big time*, "Oh, my sister's gotta be civilized, when your so-called 'brutish' Lieutenant is the one that threw her into a wall?"

"And was my Lieutenant supposed to sit back and allow herself to be a sideshow attraction?" Chief Helvetica scoffs, shaking her head in disbelief, "I certainly have my own issues with the way my officers carry themselves, but you humans really *are* all the same. You treat us like exhibits at one of your 'petting zoo's, and yet we are required to respond in a cordial manner? It's no wonder you needed that silver-tongued whore to beg for your lives; provoking danger is your specialty."

"*Seraph Helvetica*," Chief Kurosawa's voice cuts through the tense conversation like a hot knife through butter. "Is there any reason why you would be harassing my team?"

"Nothing, besides a handsy human child harassing mine. I see you still prefer dragging your motley crew all over the place. When will you teach them manners?"

"*Please*," Kurosawa rolls her eyes, "You've gone so blind, you've got an ape pretending to be a dragon pulling rank. Don't talk to me about my team needing manners as long as 'Soot-Breath' down there is on payroll."

Chief Helvetica clicks her tongue, "I see you're still bending over backwards for the humans. I should have killed you when I had the chance."

"Too bad, and now you're blind so you *can't*. Don't think I forgot your abilities aren't worth a damn in a fight, isn't that why you hired that Lieutenant?"

Ellie has *never* seen the chief talk to someone in such a manner before. It's honestly a little refreshing; despite every word dripping with venom, Kurosawa and Helvetica seem to know each other quite well. Every once in a while one smiles, and the other returns it, but their eyes continue flashing hints of disdain towards the other. She doesn't get to ponder on those thoughts for very long, though, because out of seemingly nowhere Chief Michael Arrow's voice *booms* over the entire room, silencing the growing commotion entirely.

"Helvetica! Kurosawa! *Both* of you, stop this pointless bickering! Wasn't that incident enough?"

He practically stomps down the halls towards the two, the shimmering on his body from his ESP in full effect as he approaches the scene. He's wearing his Olympia PIU uniform as usual, except his jacket—complete with the Olympia PIU logo and his rank insignia—is draped across his shoulders like a cloak. Compared to his cheery demeanor when first seeing Kurosawa earlier, he's far more intense now. It's much more reminiscent of how he treated Ellie when he saw Chase. Clearly, both Helvetica and Kurosawa respect Chief Arrow enough, because when he tells them to stop they both freeze in their tracks.

When he sees Lieutenant Nuvoe is still bound to the floor, Arrow glares at Helvetica something fierce, "Seraph. If you need to physically restrain your Lieutenant this often, you should reconsider your criteria for promotions. Must we do this *every single time* Fort Veridian and New Haven are together?"

Chief Helvetica stiffens for a moment, clenching her jaw. The black chains restraining Lieutenant Nuvoe loosen, before going back into the ground. Nuvoe herself doesn't get back up right away, instead taking her time stretching her limbs while on all fours, before standing up again. Compared to her boisterous demeanor earlier, though, she's still *eerily* quiet. Ellie feels *really* bad for her, now; despite how disgusting their very first interaction went, she's all too familiar with how it feels to be trapped in a box with no light, *completely* alone. The solitary room at The Garden could very well have been a shipping container with how dark it was in there.

She makes her way over to the dragon-woman who's just standing there listlessly. Chief Arrow is still reading Helvetica the riot act, but Ellie can't even hear what he's saying to her.

"Are you okay?" Ellie asks Nuvoe.

The question seems to snap the purple haired dragon-woman back into herself, "What, never seen a dragon get chained up before? I just need to stretch."

"I mean, you're pretty tall, and she had you chained up like that for a few minutes. Are you sure you're okay?" Ellie asks, again. She's not sure how to bring up the thing she's *actually* worried about, but Nuvoe's response to her first question is equally as concerning.

Nuvoe just glares at her, "Do you think I'm a child? I don't need a human to worry about me."

Ellie's pretty annoyed at that response, and she doesn't do a particularly good job at hiding it, "Well, *my* chief doesn't usually chain me up when she gets mad at me, so—"

"Is that all you wanted? To brag about how much easier it is to be a human? If that's the point, then *I don't want to hear it!*" Nuvoe bellows. After that, she stomps out of the meeting room, before leaving the office entirely. Ellie quickly trails behind her; mainly because she's still worried about Nuvoe for some reason, but also because Nuvoe yelled so loud that Chief Arrow and Chief Helvetica even stopped and turned to stare. She *certainly* doesn't feel like being the center of attention after that.

Once she gets outside, though, Ellie's thoughts of embarrassment are completely interrupted. She can hear quiet sniffing from just around the corner, and when she follows the sound to the source... Nuvoe is sitting on the ground, with her back against the wall and face in her sleeve, *crying*.

Ellie sits down next to her, "It was really fucked up of your Chief to mention the shipping container. I know what that's like."

Nuvoe isn't convinced. "*Human*, I swear, if you're trying to make jokes—"

"I'm not."

"Right, because a human would know what it's like to be trapped inside of a shipping container for five years. Always getting thrown around by something, or constantly rocking on a boat somewhere in the middle of the ocean. Some nights, it would be so *cold* and so hard to breathe that I couldn't even make a fire. You're saying you know what that's like?" She practically chokes out. Despite her demeanor, it's clear to Ellie that she's been holding that in for a while.

"Maybe not everything, but I know what some of that's like. When I was a kid, the orphanage I grew up in would put us in solitary confinement with no lights as a punishment. Sometimes the *really* bad kids would get their arms and legs tied up."

"And I'm supposed to believe that? What kind of human orphanage would do that?"

"One that cared more about researching espers than the kids living there. I don't think this is a very funny thing to joke about either, if it wasn't clear."

Nuvoe turns to look at Ellie, glaring right at her. Ellie stares right back, unflinchingly; deep down, she's a little scared of being licked again, but she's not afraid of a little staring contest. After a beat, Nuvoe breaks eye contact with a small laugh.

"You're not half bad, kid," she says. "A little tip, though: we dragons have a *really* good sense of smell. If you're even a little scared, it's a dead giveaway that you're an easy lunch."

"What's up with that, anyways?" Ellie's been dying to ask. "Are you a *dragon* dragon? Is that something I've gotta be worried about every time I see a tall chick with horns, or—"

"*Man*, you're just as bad as the other kid!" Nuvoe groans, but this time her smile doesn't fade. "What's with you humans and thinking everyone is a sideshow attraction?"

The words catch in Ellie's throat. She's right, but... "I wouldn't say it's always about you guys being a sideshow attraction, or a petting zoo, or whatever. You've gotta remember, this stuff is new to *us*, too. A dragon is the kind of thing they talk about in books, so for them to be *real* is still a bit of a shock. I just want to know more about you."

As soon as Ellie says it, she realizes that those words definitely came across a bit more intense than she meant. Sure enough, Nuvoe appears to be a little embarrassed, hiding her face with her hands and turning away. Her body heat even skyrockets; for a brief moment, she's so warm that Ellie gets a bit uncomfortable just sitting next to her.

When she finally speaks, though, Nuvoe sounds a bit sad, "I'm not sure how things went from your perspective, but when we arrived here there wasn't a welcoming party. We just sort-of... blinked, and our home wasn't there anymore." She looks up at the sky, closing her eyes before continuing. Her voice is almost a whisper, "There used to be so many dragons. We *conquered* the skies. And then suddenly... we were surrounded by machinery that rivaled our power, and quickly nearing extinction."

Nuvoe takes a deep breath, before standing up and saying, "Let's ditch this meeting. I wanna show you something."

Ellie shrugs. She's never been one for the bureaucratic stuff, anyways, "I'm down, what—"

She doesn't even get to ask what Nuvoe had in mind, because Nuvoe looks up at the sky and *roars*. Her roar is so loud that every car in the area starts going berserk, their alarms ringing up a chorus that blends with the thunderous noise. After what feels like an eternity, Nuvoe's black horns and scales begin to glow, with clouds rapidly rolling in over a previously clear sky.

The wind howls, as though a hurricane is blowing through the city. And then... **CRACK!**

Lightning snaps down from the clouds, right next to Ellie, who involuntarily yelps at the suddenness of it all. She's not sure what just happened, because to *her* it looks like Nuvoe just yelled until lightning struck her dead. Except, in Nuvoe's place is a *massive* black reptilian figure. It's at least thirteen feet tall, with large black wings on its back, and two black horns on its head. However, the face makes it all too clear what's going on: it has two glowing yellow eyes, and the purple hair on top of its head is the exact same as the woman who was just struck by lightning.

Sure enough, the giant winged reptile says, "What are you staring at, let's go!" And that seals the deal for Ellie: Lieutenant Nuvoe just transformed into a *real* dragon.

Nuvoe crouches down a little bit, just enough for Ellie to hop onto her back. And then, they take off.

--

A few minutes after Lieutenant Nuvoe stormed out of the room and Ellie followed, an earthquake struck the Olympia PIU office. All of this was happening *far* too fast for Sam, who had just witnessed an *incredibly* strange scenario unfold in front of her after only an hour. The Fort Veridian PIU's Lieutenant Nuvoe threatened to *eat* Ellie, threw Chase *into a wall* as if the teenage girl were a toy, and then Nuvoe's Chief, Seraph Helvetica, got involved and took things *way* too far. Somewhere in that mix Sam's *own* Chief got involved, seemingly out of nothing but spite for Chief Helvetica. *That* ended up with Chief Arrow, of Olympia's PIU, getting involved and yelling at Helvetica, then at Kurosawa. Helvetica, because what she did to her Lieutenant in front of everyone *was* particularly nasty, and Kurosawa, because, well...

"Not every issue with Helvetica needs your intervention! *You* just want to fight her."

"*Me?! She said she regretted not killing me, are you serious?*"

"And did you forget *why* that duel happened? *Your* arrogance made your own team unravel! *You're* the one that let the Reaper escape, and *guess who took her eye?*"

"I *told* you, there was something *weird* about that! *It was a fucking kid!*"

Sam's not exactly sure.

The two Chiefs were practically *screaming* at each other, with an intensity that was making the other officers increasingly nervous. For two people who both claimed to hate "pointless bickering", he and Chief Kurosawa appeared like they could go at it all day. But before anyone could intervene, the earthquake struck, and everyone forgot about the scene that had been unfolding rather quickly. As everyone evacuated the building, however, they left just in time to see the silhouette of a winged figure taking off into the sky, with a person on its back.

"That *bitch!*" Chase's shout startles Sam out of her own skin. "That's *Ellie!* Why does *she* get to do all the cool stuff?!"

Chase angrily stomps the ground several times, and as she does that Sam realizes she's *right*. That *is* Ellie, riding what looks like... a *dragon*? Is that—

"Cassandra, you *have* to find a way to transform without the theatrics," Chief Arrow groans out loud, his face buried in the palms of his hands

...

After a beat, Chief Arrow removes his face from his hands and claps them together once. It's loud, and everyone jumps at the sudden noise.

"Well, we're already behind schedule. We don't need those two right away, so let's get started, shall we?"

Despite his tone of voice, his facial expression *screams* that he's already fed up; it doesn't take a genius to understand that "let's get started" was *far* from a suggestion. And so, everyone chorales back inside of the building.

Once everyone is inside, Chief Arrow wastes no time getting into the meat and potatoes of today's discussion, "In lieu of the typical 'meet and greet' that we do on the first day of this retreat, I'd like to get straight to the point. There are exactly two main topics we'll be going over this week. I suppose we'll have to start with yours, Chief Helvetica."

The meeting room is laid out in a circle of ten three-man groups. Each mega-city on this continent is in attendance, with every unit sending their chief along with two representatives. Naturally, since Lieutenant Nuvoe flew away, Chief Helvetica is left with just her captain, who Sam doesn't know by name. He's a rather young man with short black hair, hidden by the hood on what appears to be a custom short sleeved Fort Veridian PIU hooded cloak. The bottom of his face is covered by a facemask, which makes it hard for Sam to get much of a grasp on whether or not she's seen him before.

At the mention of her name, Chief Helvetica stands up from her seat, "Thank you, Chief Arrow. Within the almighty Fortress Veridian, we've been undergoing a pressing matter. There's been an increase in Gehenna deposits within the city, along with human settlers trying to make their homes in our city. We require help in curtailing both—"

"You *never* change, do you, Seraph?" a new voice interjects. Its owner is what appears to be an extremely tall eagle with somewhat human proportions—an eagle beastkin, "You claim to be from 'the almighty Fortress Veridian,' but your unit's numbers are quickly dwindling. Maybe you should accept the humans' help, I heard they *love* elves!" He finishes with a high pitched, squawking laugh, and quite a few people in the room laugh with him.

Sure enough, the insignia on his PIU jacket is that of Aurora Delta; his rank, chief. At his side are a winged, magenta colored reptilian creature that looks somewhat like a small dragon—a drake, and an owl beastkin, who seemingly can't be bothered to pay attention to the meeting over the book he's currently absorbed in. Both seem to be captains, if the discarded jackets laying on the back of their chairs are anything to go off of.

Chief Helvetica clenches her jaw, clearly not finding amusement in his joke, but unwilling to play along, "Chief Eirstorm, while I'm sure you think your jokes are quite funny, I'm *quite* serious. We've noticed an uptick in Gehenna deposits alongside the increase in humans capable of magic within our city. We allow them to hunt demons as they wish, but the problem remains. Our land is rich in mana; in order to curtail the rapidly expanding corruption, we need a way to cut down on the amount of excess mana circulating in the area."

Chief Eirstorm doesn't respond, but he doesn't appear convinced either. Another chief, this time from Lunaria, raises their hand. Unlike the others, the representatives from Lunaria are wearing all black PIU uniforms along with face coverings, and their seating area has shading that completely covers the bodies of all three. Sam's not fully aware of the details, but she *is* vaguely aware of Lunaria being the home of nightwalkers like vampires or werewolves. Perhaps even the low light of dusk is too much light for them to function.

"If the amount of mana in your area is excessive, it must be *used up* to prevent corruption. You should be welcoming any humans capable of magic within your borders. Remember, dear, human magic *also* utilizes mana."

Without being able to see their face, Sam is having a hard time figuring out who the chief of Lunaria's PIU may be. Their voice is perfectly even in tone, and their PIU jacket is *just* baggy enough that their figure is hidden. It's a bit easier to get a vague idea on who's next to them; one has opted to exchange her black slacks and shoes for a frilly, black and red dress with fishnets and stylish, heeled boots. The other has made no alterations to his uniform, and simply sits with his legs crossed and arms folded. Going off of the insignia on their jackets, they appear to be a captain and lieutenant, respectively.

Sam finds herself at a bit of a loss for words. *Much* of this conversation is going over her head; while she's been with her mega-city's PIU for a few years now, she's never had to deal with the full extent of riftborn and their complexities. She's just now realizing that she knows *nothing* about their societies, how their magic (or *magics*) work, what advantages one might have over the other in terms of land or resources, and trying to keep all of this in mind is starting to make the room spin. She scans the faces of the other officers in the room to see if they're on the same accord, and as she does so she notices Chase leaning against the wall, watching silently. Her eyes drift in Sam's direction, and when the two briefly make eye contact she puts on a polite smile and waves. Despite this meeting *supposedly* being above the pay grade of an eighteen year old, she's quietly watching, and doesn't seem to be lost much at all.

Thankfully, after she scans the room some more, Sam doesn't appear to be the only one out of the loop.

A blue-haired elf wearing a *massive* pointed hat briefly makes eye contact with Sam from a few groups down. She's from... Artemis, it appears. Unlike the others, who are in relatively modern clothes with modern devices like cell phones, laptops, or tablets, the Artemis chief and representatives have exchanged their sleek PIU jackets for old-fashioned robes, while using paper and pencil for note taking, record keeping, and even reading. Sure enough, there's insignia along the backs of their robes, with the blue-haired elf's indicating that she's a lieutenant. Their team brought several satchels full of books and scrolls along with them, and the blue-haired elf even has a staff leaning against her chair. This one isn't like Chief Helvetica's cane; it's a seemingly five foot long, *proper* wooden staff, neatly decorated with different colored markings and charms. Despite being from an area that *should* be more informed about this stuff, the blue-haired elf appears to be *completely* out of her depth. She was nervously glancing around prior to making eye contact with Sam, and as soon as the two lock eyes her face flushes, and she hides her face under her hat.

Unfortunately for her, everyone in the room saw that. Chief Helvetica shoots a nasty glare in her direction and asks, "*What*, Violetta? Do you have any ideas?"

Despite being so afraid of eye contact that she folded under zero pressure, Violetta does her best to respond to Helvetica's intensity, "Um, I know it's not what you want... but I think Chief Nightshade might be right. Don't you need more magic to be used if you want to clear up mana?"

"I see you're as dense as ever. It's not about *clearing up* the mana, it's about how we can store it for future use—"

"But that's the thing!" Violetta doesn't back down, despite stumbling over her vowels and having the volume of a church mouse. "Trying to store it is the problem. It's a naturally occurring part of the environment, if you use it up you'll lessen the strain on the earth; you can get *even more*!"

"That's *precisely* why you belong with those druids in Artemis," Helvetica practically spits out. She and Violetta appear to have prior history, "You're not thinking about the amount of energy we need to power a military—"

"But why is that *our* concern, Helvetica?" Chief Arrow interjects. Despite giving her the floor at the start, he doesn't appear intent on sitting out of the debate, "We are *not* a military, we are a police force. Your political aims in Fort Veridian are *your* issue."

Helvetica grits her teeth, "*Michael*, need I remind you that Fort Veridian is still being sought after by human armies? We experience more attacks on our border than the other cities, ergo we need *more* firepower to dissuade them."

Chief Arrow doesn't appear to be very moved by Helvetica's argument. He pauses for a while, rubbing his chin, before speaking again.

"When I gave you the floor to present your issue, I did it with the understanding that many of us here would disagree. What I'm hoping you'll come to understand, Helvetica, is that the war *is over*. While you may not be enthused by the results, the reality is that you *must* accept help from the humans that you seek to reject. We cannot give you the firepower you want if you cannot accept help from within your own city, especially considering that you're in need of more officers at your unit."

It's the second time that someone has mentioned something of the sort. Sam's *definitely* concerned about that, even if the others view it in a more comedic light. If Fort Veridian can't keep enough officers on payroll to quell riftborn and esper criminals, the citizens within the "almighty fortress" would be in danger. However, as Sam turns to her left to ask Chief Kurosawa for more details... she notices Chief Kurosawa is covering her mouth, shutting her eyes as tight as possible, and *shaking*. For just a moment, Sam is worried about her chief; maybe something that was said in the argument with Chief Arrow earlier left her feeling upset?

Except... when she leans in closer to ask if anything's wrong, she realizes that the chief is *desperately* trying to keep herself from laughing.

And *now* she's just about had it. Sam raises her hand.

"Forgive me, but I'm having a bit of trouble figuring out why Fort Veridian's PIU losing members is funny. It's obvious that some of you feel a certain type of way towards Chief Helvetica, but to *me* it looks like the city is in massive danger and no one seems to care—"

"Oh, child, it's so much simpler than that," another representative from Artemis speaks up. This time it's their chief; an older woman with extremely long jet black hair and unnervingly deep black eyes. She seems to be a little bit older than Chief Kurosawa, maybe in her late forties, but her skin is so clear it's a bit hard to tell. She looks somehow older *and* younger than all of the other women in the room, and there's a fair amount of them. When she speaks though, it's all too clear that she's likely *much* older than the impression she gives off, "The biggest issue with Fort Veridian losing members is Chief Helvetica herself. As you saw earlier, she's not exactly one that many want to be employed by."

The Chief of Artemis' PIU says that *out loud* in the middle of the meeting, and Helvetica is *visibly* furious. Her face turns a shade of red that Sam has *never* seen before, and she practically shouts, "You're one to talk, *Eileen*. Of course a *druid* doesn't understand the importance of limiting the number of humans within their borders. I'm sure you've got *plenty* of humans over there helping plant trees."

"*Chief Greenflow*. Do not disrespect me," Chief Greenflow replies. Unlike Violetta or Chief Arrow, she doesn't even give Helvetica an *inch* when the latter doesn't address her by rank. Greenflow continues, "Our human colonies in Artemis have been a *resounding* success. While many experience a culture shock at first, it turns out quite a few humans *are* in search of ways to abandon technology and their modern conveniences. They're quite knowledgeable about wildlife, it turns out!" She laughs.

Chief Greenflow's upbeat response to human colonies being mentioned only serves to further the scowl on Helvetica's face. She doesn't say anything else.

Then, Chief Kurosawa speaks. Chief Arrow tenses up, clearly expecting her to taunt Helvetica, but instead all Kurosawa says is, "I think humans will surprise you, Chief Helvetica. I'm not saying to trust them blindly, but surely it won't hurt to accept their aid with regulating the Gehenna buildup in your region?"

Chief Helvetica still doesn't say anything.

Chief Arrow simply looks at his watch, before sighing, "I'd hoped Lieutenant Nuvoe and Miss Berkeley would have been back by now. Let's go on recess for now; in about an hour we'll reconvene, and then end for today."

Everyone gets up from their seating areas, and the group meshes together as different units begin to mingle. Sam figures that now's the best time to ask, so she walks over to Chief Greenflow, who's engaged in conversation with quite a few people at once. She seems to be a bit of a celebrity, likely due in part to her looks. Even Sam has to admit she's a stunner; maybe part of being a druid was getting to have the best aspects of every age. They *can* shapeshift, after all.

However, as soon as she's in eyesight, Greenflow approaches her *first*, "I was waiting for you. I figured you had more questions, right?"

That's a little scary; Sam *did* have more questions for her, and yet Greenflow knew before she even got a chance to ask, "I just wanted to know what the whole deal with Fort Veridian was. Why is Helvetica being a bad boss that much of a problem?"

"You saw it when we were waiting around, earlier. Chief Helvetica runs her team like a military, and isn't afraid of punishing members of her team that anger her. Violetta, my lieutenant, was a captain for her unit about a year ago. Chief Helvetica was trying to get her to toughen up, so she would send Violetta out on CATR dispatches frequently. Violetta is *not* a fighter by any means, and she was stabbed twice with a poisoned blade while attempting to stop a riot. Do you know what Chief Helvetica did?"

Sam doesn't have to guess; rather, she doesn't *want* to.

Chief Greenflow continues, regardless, "She berated her *in the hospital*. In front of the team, and the hospital staff. Violetta is *terrified* of her own shadow; she hates bugs, gets startled by sparks when trying to light a fire, and is afraid of most animals. And yet, immediately after that incident, she packed up everything she owned and transferred to my unit. *That's* why Chief Helvetica is losing members."

Sam doesn't know what to say; what an *awful* scenario. She couldn't imagine working for someone that cared so little about her well being, and for such a sweet girl to have gone through that... She has to work to pull herself together after hearing Violetta's story.

But there's one more thing, "Also, what's the deal with mana? You guys keep saying humans can use magic, I thought that was *your* thing."

Chief Greenflow giggles, dismissively waving her right hand, "Oh, we just have our own terminology. I believe you call yourselves... 'espers,' yes? To us, what you do is simply your form of magic. Every species is a little bit different: for example, elves pride themselves on knowledge and understanding. Their spells rely on incantations so they can memorize them easier, and each spell has a defined usage and intent. We druids simply seek to be one with nature and the environment no matter where we are, so while we do not use incantations, our magic is nowhere near as meticulous. Instead, we utilize mana primarily to heal wounded and barren lands, or maintain ecosystems. We can't, say, levitate objects or repair damaged structures."

"But what does all of that have to do with being an esper?" Sam asks.

"It's the same thing; like elves pride themselves on understanding and study incantations that invoke very specific effects with their magic, *your* magics are built on the concepts that you understand. You may not be able to feel the will of the earth around you, but you *do* know how the elements *function* far better than we do. In just a couple decades, you've become more knowledgeable about our anatomies than we've *ever* been, and your people adapted to using magic exceedingly fast. Humans from our realm could not use magic prior to—"

Despite how casually Greenflow says it, the words are like a shock to Sam, "What do you mean, humans from *your* realm? I thought *we* were the first humans that you ran into."

"*Please*. Why do you think we were prepared when the humans here first declared war? In our home, there were plenty of humans around. They simply weren't as advanced as you. It's why so many of us harbor such intense hatred towards humans; we don't have much experience with *your* kind of humans, but we've had plenty of dealings with humans across millennia. Helvetica and her younger brother were raised in an elven slave camp ran by humans, and her brother had killed her masters to escape. That's likely why she hates them so much."

Despite how Helvetica had been acting all evening, Sam can't help but feel for her. It's one thing to have been sporadically mistreated due to being an outsider, but to have been a *slave*? *Of course* she would come to hate humans; anyone would. Sam tries to say something, but can't find the words. Greenflow just looks at her and smiles warmly.

"And *that's* why I know the humans here are different, somehow. As you can see, Helvetica lacks the respect of many of her peers due to her... *aggressive* behavior. And yet, despite being given *ample* reason to laugh with the rest of them, you can't. I'm hoping that one day she'll come to understand why that is."

Sam has a *lot* more questions for Chief Greenflow. She's never had the chance to have a one-on-one conversation with a druid before, and given their supposedly long lifespans, there's so many things she could shed light on. There's so much about their home world (realm?) that she doesn't know, and there are so many riftborn species that she knows nothing about; this is the *perfect* chance to learn more. Sam never gets the opportunity to ask, though, because the second she opens her mouth, Ellie and Lieutenant Nuvoe walk through the door. The entire room falls completely silent.

They're covered in cuts and bruises, and they're both *soaking wet* from head to toe.

Suddenly, Sam can't think of what she was about to ask; the only thing on her mind is likely the same thing on *everyone's* mind, and it happens to be the same exact words that come out of Ellie's mouth next.

"So... What'd I miss?"

Climax: Paradigm Shift

When Nuvoe said "let's go!" Ellie was overcome with excitement at the idea of getting to fly on a dragon's back. She's been alive for twenty-eight years now, and it's far and away the *coolest* thing she's ever gotten the chance to do. Except, the second Nuvoe leaves the ground, Ellie realizes... she's never flown anywhere before. She's been in *lots* of high places, jumped out of windows in more than a few tall buildings, and even scaled rooftops.

But she's never so much as set foot in a plane.

And so, when Nuvoe shoots upwards fifty feet in the air after flapping her wings only twice, Ellie screams *embarrassingly* loud. Nuvoe just laughs at her in response.

"Don't tell me you're scared of heights, human!" The dragon says.

"I've got a name, you know: it's Ellie. Maybe we should have taken care of that before you let me hop on your back."

"Eh, it's no biggie. My name's Cassandra!"

"I know *that*," Ellie replies. "Chief Helvetica said it out loud in front of everyone. *Lieutenant Cassandra Nuvoe!*" She puts on her best five-minute impression of Nuvoe's chief. And as soon as she finishes, she faintly hears Chase yelling the words, "That *bitch!*"

Ellie looks down and almost regrets it; they're so fucking high up, and a dragon's back doesn't exactly have seatbelts. But seeing Chase stomp on the ground like an angry toddler is an absolutely *hilarious* reward. Ellie can't wait to tease her about that later.

Once they get above the clouds, Ellie's pretty sure it's the best view she's ever seen. Part of her is wondering how they're able to breathe so well, despite being roughly thirty thousand feet in the air. Cassandra seems to read her mind, which is the second time someone from a riftborn species has done this to her.

"When we dragons transform like this, part of the reason is because we naturally absorb so much mana from the environment that we need to get rid of the excess. As a result, there's lots of that excess mana floating around my body that I can still control; I'm using that to keep you on my back, and to make sure we both can breathe easily."

That's good to know, but now Ellie has a more pressing question on her mind, "You know, I work with an elf at my local PIU, and sometimes it feels like he's reading my mind. I think you just did the same thing. What's that all about?"

Cassandra pauses to think for a second, and then replies, "Well, I think it's got something to do with the way mana flows through you humans' bodies. It goes through your, uh, nerves? And brain, right?"

Ellie nods, "Yeah, our *ESP* does, we don't use mana."

"*Of course*, you're the technical type. Fucking nerd," Cassandra groans. Ellie laughs, while the dragon keeps talking, "It's all the same thing, anyways. Anima, ESP, mana, whatever, it's just the energy that living things give off. The difference is how it's used and *who* uses it, not who's got a specific strand in their body. I guess it's easier for you guys to say that plants and animals use Anima, though?"

Well, that certainly makes things simpler.

"Right?" Cassandra says. She's definitely doing this on purpose. "Don't worry, I'm not reading your mind. It's just that when you think of something, the mana—sorry, *ESP* that goes to your brain can be sensed by people who are in tune with it. I don't know *exactly* what you're going to say, but I guess I'd say I can feel the *intent* of the question."

That makes a lot of sense, actually. Ellie doesn't have anything to say in response, instead just opting to stare at the horizon as Cassandra soars through the sky. Despite the sun setting, there's still enough light for it illuminate the sky above the clouds. It makes her feel like the two are in their own world for just a moment.

"You know, I could get used to this," Ellie says, mostly to herself. "It's so quiet up here."

"It sure is," Cassandra replies. Even though Ellie can't see her face, she can practically hear the smile in the dragon's voice. "Flying really *is* the best. I love it, even if I'm the only one up here anymore."

Well, that doesn't sound good. "What do you mean?" Ellie asks.

"We're almost there. You'll see," is all Cassandra says in reply. Despite how happy she seems to be while flying around, Ellie has a hard time ignoring the fact that she sounds a little bit sad, too.

She doesn't say anything in response though, instead just gently stroking the spot on Cassandra's neck where her hands are resting. She's not sure if the dragon is comfortable with the touch—most reptiles aren't. If she truly hates it, Cassandra isn't saying anything to make Ellie stop, though.

After they fly together in silence for a few more minutes, Cassandra says, "We're here. Hang on!"

And that's when Ellie realizes she doesn't have anything to hang on to. She screams even louder than before as the dragon dives below the clouds, quickly losing altitude. And then... they're at a mountain pass covered in snow. Ellie's not sure where, exactly, but before she can ask Cassandra, the dragon transforms back into her human form, her horns and scales receding to the size they were previously.

And then she collapses face first onto the pavement.

Ellie wastes no time running over and lifting Cassandra over her shoulder as best as she can. Compared to how chatty and energetic the dragon seemed before, now she looks *terrible*. Her hair is matted from sweat pooling on her scalp, her skin is pale, and her hands are even clammy.

"What's wrong?" Is the only thing Ellie can ask.

Cassandra laughs a little, "You're don't have to be so worried every time stuff happens, I just need to catch my breath."

"You *literally* just used mana to help yourself breathe."

"Exactly. Normally, I only need enough to keep myself going. Trying to keep you on my back while making sure you can still breathe adds a *lot* of strain. So, I need to catch my breath. We're at the right spot, though."

As she finishes her sentence, Cassandra nods her head towards a hole in the side of the mountain they're on; a cave. Ellie helps her get inside, and once they are, Ellie's not sure *what* she's looking at. The cave is mostly empty, but there's a small blue fire burning at a pit. Along the wall, there are paintings that depict what Ellie believes to be a sky *full* of dragons, all flying.

Something about this place makes Ellie's heart ache.

"I got it from here, I can walk," Cassandra says. Ellie lets her go, but she still leans on the wall as she makes her way over to the fire pit. Once she gets there, she sits in front of the flame, putting her hands towards it.

Ellie stares at her. "Are you cold?"

Cassandra smiles, "You could say that. This flame is called the Hearth. It is an undying flame that symbolizes the life of our people. Small as it may be, it *is* quite warm."

Ellie quietly moves to sit next to Cassandra. The flame is awfully small; based on what Cassandra just said, she doesn't have a hard time guessing as to why. Ellie stays silent, however, waiting for her to continue talking.

"When I said we conquered the skies before we arrived here, that part *was* true. But we were already being hunted in our home well before. By the time we were thrown to your world, there were less than twenty dragons left. I don't even *know* how many there are now. I think that was the worst part about the shipping container; not only was it always dark and cold, but... I had no idea where my people were, and I couldn't fly to search for them. They had completely scattered, and I didn't even find where the Hearth had been transported to until after Seraph got me out of that container. I owe her everything for giving me a chance to find my people again, but every time I come back here... I find myself wondering how much *everything* is really worth anymore."

She leans back before closing her eyes again, and doesn't say anything for a while. Ellie scoots a little closer; the fire really *is* warm. Despite being so tiny, it shows no signs of going out any time soon. Yet, Ellie has a feeling that she knows what Cassandra is thinking.

"You're scared to look for the rest, yeah?" She asks

Cassandra nods, her eyes still closed, "Of course. I'm scared to keep looking and find that it really *is* just me. I don't want to be alone."

"I know what that's like, I think. Maybe not all of it, but..."

Cassandra finally opens her eyes again, and looks down at Ellie. Unlike before where she suspected Ellie was trying to make fun of her, this time the dragon is looking at Ellie as though *she* were the pitiful one.

"You know, Ellie, you sure have a lot in common with me for someone who grew up in such a nice place."

Ellie can't help but laugh at that, albeit bitterly, "A *nice* place? My entire childhood I was being told I shouldn't have been born. My dad thought I was a demon that would kill everyone in the house, but when my mom stuck up for me he killed her. A few years later he shipped me off to the orphanage, and then had the nerve to die before I could ask him why he did it."

She's not sure why she's talking about this, but she wishes she wasn't. Staring at this fire that symbolizes a rapidly dwindling endangered species, imagining being trapped in a shipping container with no way to know if your family or friends were okay, and remembering all of the things she had to do for punishments at The Garden is bad enough. Thinking about her dad right now just... *hurts*. She can't help but wish that things were different, that she had normal parents who didn't need to fight over loving her unconditionally.

Ellie's spiraling emotions are interrupted by the feeling of a large, worm like object touching her side. For a split second, she jumps out of her skin, but then she realizes what it is: a tail. Sure enough, once she realizes that, she's able to tell exactly where it's coming from. Its owner is right next to her; she isn't looking at Ellie directly, but an unmistakable blush is on Cassandra's face.

"Sorry if this isn't your thing. You were shaking pretty badly."

Ellie doesn't protest, she just inches a little closer to Cassandra, who responds by wrapping her tail around Ellie a little tighter.

"I'm sorry if hearing about my life every time you open up about yours is a little much. I just keep being reminded of what it was like to be a kid," Ellie says. She's not even *sure* if that was meant for Cassandra; the words flew out her mouth before she could think that far ahead.

"I don't mind," Cassandra replies. "I'm mostly just wondering why humans would do such terrible things to their own species. You'd think they would unite against a common enemy, or something. Before us, I mean."

"We did. We united against each other because of status, or because of prejudice. Even when the war broke out, we were more concerned with separating the soldiers from the workers. Kids like me weren't people, we were just guinea pigs being told that our sacrifices would save the human race one day."

It's hard for her not to feel more bitter about everything the more time passes. She truly cannot believe that all of that misery was for *nothing*, and yet it seemingly was. The war ended with no fanfare, and as far as she could see none of the research findings from The Garden have ever been used, even in medicine. All of it really was a waste, and with each passing day it makes Ellie feel more and more like she's dying inside.

"What happened to the orphanage?"

"Gone. It was a project that a company in New Haven was working on. When news of a few kids dying reached social media, they hired a PMC to kill everyone in the middle of the night and burn it down."

Cassandra doesn't say anything after that. Ellie doesn't know what to say either. She just tucks her knees into her chest, and stares into the tiny, neon blue flame of the Hearth.

After eons of silence, Cassandra says, "What an *awful* situation. I'm sure you were terrified."

For some reason, that makes Ellie tear up. It's so simple; she's told Chase almost everything, and even Sam knows the key parts. She has constant nightmares about it, and even has flashbacks where she's at the place when she gets stressed. But not once has she ever *truly* thought about it, "I was the most scared I've ever been in my life. I made a plan ahead of time, but seeing *that* much... you know, it just fucked with me. Made me think that I had died in my sleep and gone to Hell, or something. Sometimes I feel like I never actually made it out."

And sometimes I wish I didn't, is what Ellie's thinking. But she can't say that out loud.

Cassandra hugs Ellie a little bit tighter with her tail. It's so *warm* and inviting that she feels like she could fall asleep right in this cave.

"I'm sorry for throwing your sister into a wall," Cassandra says, out of nowhere. Ellie's completely caught off guard, and snorts out a laugh despite still crying.

"Just let her catch a ride sometime, she'll forgive you," Ellie replies.

"I bet. Thankfully she's not hurt. Then again, of course a demi-fiend wouldn't be hurt from something like that."

As soon as the words "demi-fiend" leave Cassandra's mouth, Ellie's blood runs cold. She completely freezes in place, realizing that she's so far away from home with no way to get there. After Chief Arrow made it clear that demons of all kind would be targets, she should have been more careful. *Especially* considering that Chief Kurosawa said riftborn were more familiar with this stuff.

What a *stupid* mistake.

"*Woah*, relax. I'm not as hardcore as those freaks in Olympia," Cassandra doesn't let go of Ellie entirely, but she does give her a little more space. Ellie just stares at her for a moment.

"What does that mean?" she says.

"Olympia is way too hardcore with slowing Gehenna corruption. Most fiends were born like Chief Kurosawa, having old memories stored within the body but just barely gaining a consciousness for the first time. They've got crazy firepower if you provoke them, sure, but most of them are just confused by suddenly waking up; they're not dangerous. Demi-fiends aren't either, their only crime is being born from the union of a fiend and another species. If I had a problem with it, I wouldn't be letting you ride my back either, you know."

At first Ellie's shocked, but then she remembers, "Right. Sense of smell."

It still hurts.

She turns away from Cassandra fully, and cries. Harder than she's ever cried around Chase.

"I never even had a *choice*," Ellie says, through sobs. "All the other kids that *died* at least got to volunteer for it. Nobody asked *me* if I wanted any of this, and *I'm* the one that lived, so now I have to live the rest of my life pretending to be something I'm not."

"Why pretend?" Cassandra says. "You may not have gotten to choose, but *surely* it hasn't been all bad, right?"

"Aside from the fact that I have to live every day knowing that I became the *exact* thing my father said I would, it hasn't been that bad, actually."

"Well, that's not fair to yourself," Cassandra replies.

Ellie knows it's not. But it still hurts for her to think about.

"You know, I really think you should give Helvie a chance," Cassandra says, out of nowhere.

Ellie's a little confused, "I don't have anything against her in particular. She seemed a bit... *intense*, and she was awful to you, but if you don't hate her I have no reason to."

"I mean, it's just that... she *really* hates humans, right? But it's because in our home she used to be a slave to humans, and they did *really* fucked up shit to her. Took out one of her eyes when she tried to run away, anything to hurt her. She really does just want the best for people, but the only way she's been able to get it is—"

"Yeah," Ellie says. She honestly wishes that Cassandra hadn't shared so much sensitive info about someone that she doesn't know too well, but Ellie tries to let it go.

"I know, it's not my stuff to share. But she can be *really* bitchy, and a lot of the other high ranking officers treat her like shit because of how bitchy she can get. I just think... you two might have a lot in common. She needs a friend."

"But what about you?" Ellie asks. Compared to how she treated the humans she supposedly despises, what she did to Cassandra was *way* more messed up.

Cassandra just laughs, "Oh, please, she's just a little rough with me, that's all. It's our sense of humor!"

"Even what she said about the shipping container?" Ellie's not convinced.

Cassandra doesn't say anything to that. Ellie just keeps talking.

"I'm fine with helping her get over her human biases, but I'm *not* fine with her just saying whatever she wants to her teammates. Especially not if they're as kind as you are."

Cassandra blushes again, "I'll talk to her about it."

Neither girl says anything after that. They just listen to the gentle crackles of the Hearth, and watch the starry sky from their viewpoint of the cave. It's a wonderful view.

And then both girls simultaneously remember that they actually *did* ditch a meeting that they probably should be at. So, they quickly scramble out of the cave so they can search for a clearing to fly. As soon as they run out of the cave, though, they both spot a figure standing in the clearing that Cassandra had landed in when they first got here. The figure is certainly dressed well for the environment; a thick blue winter coat with a faux fur hood, waterproof pants, and a pair of waterproof hiking boots.

The problem is that they *definitely* weren't in this area before, and they're wearing a mask to hide their face. It's a serpent with seven eyes. Chase mentioned seeing something like that in her dreams recently.

This *cannot* be good.

Ellie turns to Cassandra, "Uh, we gotta—"

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," the person in the serpent mask says; they at least *sound* like a woman. Ellie doesn't get long to ponder that, though, because all of the snow on the mountain surrounding them suddenly flies into the air, melting into water before turning into sharp icicles.

An esper that can control water, while they're on a snowy mountain pass like sitting ducks. That's *definitely* not good. Neither Ellie nor Cassandra have anything to protect themselves from *that*. "What do you want?" Cassandra says.

Ellie can feel her skin starting to tingle; it's either ESP from the serpent masked woman in front of them... or Cassandra's getting ready to transform. She *did* say mana was the same thing, after all.

"Do not worry, if you listen to me you'll leave this place unharmed," the serpent masked woman says. "I am but a messenger."

"For who? Quit playing with me!" Ellie shouts back. She's *really* not trying to entertain any mind games here; without that flame from earlier this place is *cold*, and her PIU jacket is nowhere near thick enough for this weather.

"You'll find out who soon enough, don't worry. I just figured I'd let you know that you don't need to worry about the KRA anymore."

Something about that makes Ellie feel queasy, "What do you mean?"

"We had worked out a deal with the KRA to capture the Starchild and return her to her throne," the serpent masked woman says. "I suppose they had other plans. Thankfully, their explosives were... *poorly made*, so instead of killing the Starchild, they started a fire that told everyone they were there."

Bingo.

Ellie hates how the news was delivered, but *that* was the missing link. Their equipment was crudely made *at best*, it only makes sense that one of them misfired while they were arming the rest. The fire itself was the accident, which means they likely left their stuff and bailed because they *had* to.

The serpent masked woman continues, "They left all of the evidence onsite, and one *dumbass* tried killing her before getting arrested. Anyways, after that we figured that our contract was terminated, so we took care of them. They're all dead; you'll likely see it on the news once they've been found within the next few days."

It hits Ellie like a freight train. The KRA was an entire *movement*. They comprised an entire subsection of kobolds who wanted justice for what they'd lost. They all likely had a *reason* for wanting to do what they did, even if what they did was heinous. Ellie feels frustrated at that; she wishes that they could have at least explained their reasoning for themselves. It doesn't sit right with her for that to be how it ends.

"I'm sure you're not happy with that, but we have a common goal. We both want to keep the Starchild safe—"

"*Enough* with the 'Starchild' bullshit, you mean Chase, right?" Ellie says. She figured it out right when the serpent masked woman mentioned the "dumbass" that tried to kill the "Starchild". It's clear as day that's who they want, but *why*?

The serpent masked woman laughs a little bit, "Of course. It's not a secret by any means, simply her role. You've been *especially* fun to watch, though; you're every bit as cunning as Bishop Lance said you would be."

Hearing the name "Bishop Lance" makes Ellie feel like her body is on fire. This person *cannot* be talking about the man Ellie is thinking of. That man is dead.

The serpent masked woman throws her head back, and laughs *even harder*, "Oh, this is *wonderful*! He told me once I said his name you would react like that! He really *can* see the future!"

"*I'm not falling for that!* Jordan Lance is *dead*. I *know* he's dead," Ellie yells back. She can't tell if she believes the words she's saying or not.

And then, the air turns *ice* cold.

"*Do not call him by his name*. You should know better than that."

The icicles come crashing down.

At that exact moment, a roar crashes through Ellie's eardrums and shakes the mountain they're standing on. Thunder cracks the sky, and lightning smashes down mere feet from Ellie's right side. She was ready for it this time, though.

The icicles are easily sharp enough to split the skin like butter, but nowhere near dense or thick enough to cut deep. Ellie likens it to the feeling of glass, except it melts before the wound becomes problematic. She'd rather not stand in it, though, which is why she's glad that Cassandra's put a wing over her to protect her.

She really is nice. Ellie feels sorry that such a cool dragon has to be around someone like her.

Hearing Professor Lance might be alive makes Ellie feel weird. In an odd way, she's happy to know he's okay; when she thinks back to everything at The Garden, she remembers liking him. But she also knows how awful he *could* be. She's *experienced* how awful he could be. If he's still alive, there's no telling—

"*Ellie!* Wake up! Let's get out of here, these things hurt!"

Ellie snaps back into the present; she *has* to keep her body moving. She jumps onto Cassandra's back, and the second she does... the icicles stop.

"*Phew*, I just needed you to be on my back before I put a barrier up," Cassandra says. "I'm still pretty low on gas, so we've gotta move!"

And then they blast off towards Olympia.

Ellie wishes she could enjoy the ride, but she just can't stop ruminating over "Bishop Lance" in her head. She desperately wants it to be a coincidence, but the woman said that Ellie would react "like that" when "Bishop Lance" was mentioned. Most importantly, she knew *the rule*: you *never* called Professor Lance by his first name. If you did, he would give you the harshest punishment he could think of on the spot.

Ellie did it exactly once, and her punishment was five days in solitary with a caged, wounded corrupted beast somewhere nearby. The *smell* was atrocious; the metallic smell of Gehenna corruption on lifeforms is not unlike the smell of blood. Having the beast trapped in there with her made the room smell like warm meat storage. To make matters worse, when an animal is corrupted by Gehenna and turns into a corrupted beast, it will still attempt to communicate the way it used to. The hot, disgusting smell of rotting meat, paired with the pained whines and howls of a canine corrupted beast, were the only thing Ellie had for company for five days. It was the longest she had been in solitary in her life.

Cassandra tries to make light talk, "So, what's the deal with that Bishop—"

"Don't *fucking* ask me that right now!" Ellie shouts back, and instantly regrets it so badly she collapses into tears while trying to apologize. All of this is *way* too much.

Cassandra seems to understand, though, "I'm sorry. I guess that was your 'shipping container,' huh?"

That phrasing makes Ellie smile a little, "If you want to call it that, sure."

"I won't make you talk about any of that with me, but at least tell your sister about it," Cassandra says.

She's right. Not just because it's pertinent to her too, but because she wasn't expecting a wound this old to hurt so badly.

They spend the rest of the ride in silence, and then do their best to *at least* look decent once the Olympia PIU office is in view. They're covered in cuts, bruises, and water from the icicles, and Ellie feels like she *really* wants to cry some more. But she *at least* has to get through today, so she walks through the front door... And everyone *stops* and *stares*. It's so quiet that you could hear a pin drop, and now Ellie *truly* wishes she were dead.

"So... What'd I miss?"

"Apparently, not as much as us," Chief Kurosawa says, walking up to the two. "*Where the hell were you?*"

Ellie's in a pretty bad mood, and Kurosawa's *definitely* in a bad mood. It's probably the worst-case scenario, right now.

"Me and Cassandra were playing hooky, and then all of a sudden some weird *bitch* appeared and started saying random stuff. Oh, by the way, the KRA case is closed! That chick who jumped us said she killed 'em all!"

Ellie doesn't even bother dressing up anything she's saying, and the entire room *erupts* at the news. People of all different species are furious with seemingly *only* her for not getting more information, letting the supposed murderer go, or whatever else; she's not even paying attention anymore. Honestly, she's not in the mood for any of this right now, something tells her that one way or another she's not going to be keeping her job after this week.

Cassandra roars next to her. It's not as loud as it is when she's transforming, but it *is* loud enough to silence the crowd, "It's *not* her fault! We were ambushed!"

"And *why* were you in that position in the first place? You were *supposed* to be *here!*" Chief Helvetica yells back. When Cassandra doesn't have an answer, Helvetica *unloads* on her, "Fucking *idiot*, I can't believe you. Why can't you just *follow orders?*"

"Okay, *that's enough*. You don't need to talk to her like that in front of everyone," Ellie barks back, stepping between Cassandra and Helvetica. Helvetica was standing alone while everyone was mingling when they walked in, so things must not have been going in her favor. Ellie suspects that Chief Helvetica may even be trying to act tough, and she herself is just so *upset* about everything that just happened. Turns out, she doesn't mind getting into it today.

Helvetica glares, then points her cane in Ellie's direction while saying, "*You* stay out of this, *homunculus*. I can smell the Gehenna corruption on your breath, just like that chief of yours. How I talk to my team is *none* of your concern."

"And how's that working out at your unit?" Ellie asks. It's an honest question; there's just *no way* someone would enjoy working for a chief like this.

It turns out, the answer is "not well", because as soon as she says that Helvetica's face twists into a *terrifying* scowl. In the next moment, Ellie's lifted off of the ground and *slammed* into the wall herself. In the back of her mind, she thinks it's pretty funny that both she and Chase have been slammed into walls today. It still pisses her off, but when she tries to say something about it, she realizes *she can't move or speak*.

"Today, I have been *disrespected* by *everyone* in this room," Helvetica nearly bellows, "While my peers may get a pass, I will *not* tolerate such comments from *you*. *You*, are not an officer assigned to any of our RFAT or CATR squads. *You* are merely support for those who do the work. And as The Adjudicator for your CATR evaluation, I can see exactly what you *truly* are—"

The Adjudicator for her *what*?

Ellie certainly didn't ask for anything of the sort. She's told Kurosawa over and over again that she *didn't* want to be in CATR, even if Kurosawa was starting to convince her otherwise. She doesn't get to think about that for long, though, because in the next moment Helvetica mouths a series of words that Ellie can't hear, and everything gets *really* fuzzy.

Kurosawa seems to realize something; she runs over to Helvetica, trying to get her to drop whatever spell she's casting. "Seraph, *stop!* It's not—"

For just a moment, everything goes completely silent as Ellie sees the face of a woman—no, her *mother*. She had completely forgotten what her mom actually looked like, before the only memories Ellie had of her were overwritten by the image of her sprawled out on the kitchen floor. She had dark black hair, a splash of freckles all over her face, and a warm smile. Minus the hair color, it's oddly kind of like looking in a mirror.

And then the fuzziness fades.

Ellie's *completely* bewildered. It wasn't like a memory; the *face* of her mother, as she appeared well before she died, had filled her vision. It should have been comforting... and yet she wants to throw up all over the floor. She feels like she just ran for a thousand years, and for some reason she's remembering all sorts of random details about The Garden that she *really* wishes she didn't.

What did Helvetica just do to her?

"*You...*" Chief Helvetica *growls*. "My *brother*. My *eye*. It was **you!**"

And then Ellie feels an uncountable amount of weight crush her body into the wall further. She can barely breathe, and it feels like her bones are *creaking*, on the verge of shattering into a million pieces.

"*Seraph!* Let her go! It's not what you think!" Chief Kurosawa yells, frantically shaking Helvetica's shoulders as the latter's gaze remains unbroken on Ellie; the rest of the room is dead silent. Not even Cassandra is saying anything. Ellie can't even see where Chase is, and that alone makes her feel like she's drowning.

"What could that *possibly* mean?" Helvetica yells back. "I went *into* her mind, I saw *everything!* This girl is *nothing* but a monster in human flesh, and you wanted to recommend her to—"

"That's what I'm *telling* you! I *don't* want to recommend her to CATR! She's *been* against it!" For some reason, even though it's true, hearing Chief Kurosawa say that... really hurts. Ellie wishes she at least put in the effort, because now even her frustratingly supportive boss is saying that she's nothing more than a helper for the people who do the *real* work.

"Even if that's true, I'm *not* letting her go. She's hurt *far* too many people. *She killed her own parents*, someone like that deserves nothing less than the *worst* punishment imaginable."

Ellie's body feels cold, all of a sudden.

That doesn't make any sense. She would have only been eight years old. There was never a reason to do anything *that* violent; hell, she had never even picked up a weapon before The Garden. She might have done a lot of bad things at The Garden, but she certainly didn't *kill* her own parents. Her mom was killed by her dad during the argument, then her dad and her stepmother...

How did they die, again?

Kurosawa keeps yelling, "She was being *abused!* You know what that's like—"

"*DO NOT* compare me to her!" Helvetica shouts back, "My brother and I *lost* our parents! We were *trafficked* and *sold* by bandits. *Her* parents did her a courtesy, and sent her *away* from her abuse to a school! *She had no reason to kill her them!*"

"Are you kidding me?! You *just* saw that fucking place! They *taught* her everything you saw her do!" Chief Kurosawa absolutely *refuses* to back down. Ellie appreciates that the chief cares enough about her to fight on her behalf, but at this point she'd rather let Helvetica finish the job. Having other people argue about so many things that she barely remembers is quite mortifying. She doesn't even remember most of the things about her dad, besides how much she hated him for what he did.

If she could just *remember* how he died, she could get out of this, somehow.

"They simply nurtured an instinct that was already there. She was a natural, even her teachers would admit it," Helvetica says, almost laughing. "Isn't that right, *Eleanor?*"

Ellie's name rings through her eardrums like a gunshot, and she feels her body go limp. She can't tell if it's because her bones were finally crushed, or because something else broke. Really, she can't feel anything at all. Her heart is beating and she can still think, which is a good sign, but she just *can't* bring herself to move.

"*Let go of her!*" Chase's voice screams from... somewhere. A bright red light fills the room, and shortly after, a glowing object covered in red sparks soars through the air, crashing into Helvetica. As Helvetica is sent flying and the red object slows down, Ellie realizes it's *Chase*. There are red sparks flittering all over her body as she runs over and reaches into the hole where Ellie is.

Ellie's really happy to see her; seemingly nothing bad's happened while she was away. She still doesn't say or do anything, though; Ellie's not really sure *what* to do right now. She just knows that she *really* needs to figure out how her dad died, or else things are gonna spiral out of control *really* fast.

Chase, meanwhile, doesn't bother waiting for her to do anything and simply reaches into the hole, pulling Ellie out. She wants to laugh at how poetic that is; Chase is a really good sister. The exact kind that she would always lay awake at night wishing she had, back when she was at The Garden. But she can't do this anymore; Ellie knows that *this* is just a bridge too far for this poor kid, who's lost everything and everyone that matters in her life.

And so, Ellie darts through the crowd as fast as possible the second her feet touch the ground. Chase tries to call out to her, but she doesn't slow down or stop. She just bursts through the door, and then outside, as far away as she can possibly go. Ellie's confident in her speed on foot; she can run at around thirty-five to forty miles per hour, so it should be *real* easy to get away from all of this and figure out—

"Ellie, *please* just listen to me!" Chase catches up in no time, of course. There was never a chance in hell that she was gonna outrun her. "I can tell a lot just happened to you. Let's get out of here, and then we can talk about it, okay?"

"You heard what she said, right?" Ellie asks. She doesn't know why she's hoping for anything other than the truth.

Naturally, Chase doesn't humor her. She always takes this stuff seriously, after all, "Of course I did. But *I don't care*. I know about what he did to you *and* your mom. And I know that you regret killing him, too."

She's so wonderful. Ellie's in awe that Chase has that much faith in her, but... "That's the problem, Chase. *I don't regret a thing*. I'm *glad* he's dead."

Chase doesn't even stutter, "That's fine, too! I told you, *I don't care!*"

Ellie doesn't know why, but hearing that from Chase of all people just makes her feel worse, "*Why not?! Your parents are dead! You should hate me for getting rid of mine!*"

Chase doesn't falter at that, either.

"When my mom died and everything with my uncle... went down, do you know what happened to me? I got jumped at school, I drank until I got *sick*, I trashed everything in my house, and then I tried to *drown myself in the bathtub*. Do you know what happened next?"

Of course she does; it was one of the worst days of her life. She was *terrified* when she found Chase in there.

"I woke up on the floor, and you were *right there*. You *saved* me. You let me move in with you, so that I wouldn't be alone."

Chase moves closer, hugging her from behind. Ellie doesn't dare move an inch or speak; she feels like she's going to explode. When Chase talks more, it's clear as day that she's doing her best to hold herself together, too.

"You were my *babysitter*, remember? You kept that torn-up blanket around for all these years, just because I told you *once* that I liked it. I don't care that you killed your asshole abusive dad. He *hated* you from day one. I don't."

"When my dad was alive, he would always say that it was only a matter of time before I killed everyone in the house," Ellie barely even recognizes the sound of her own voice when she starts speaking. "When he died, do you know what he fucking said to me? 'I knew it.'"

Chase snuffles, "What a *prick*. Fuck that guy."

Ellie wasn't expecting that, so it makes her laugh a little. But...

"Helvetica—she's not wrong to be angry, though. When I was at The Garden, they had us... *getting involved* during the war, and since Helvetica was a part of the squadron that would eventually capture Fort Veridian, she was a target of mine. I shot her brother and I *thought* I got her too, but it was only her eye."

"And do you regret that?" Chase asks.

Ellie doesn't even need to think about it, "*Of course* I do. But sorry isn't gonna bring anything back for her."

"It's better than nothing, though," Ellie hears Cassandra's voice right behind where Chase is. She's out here too? *Why?* "You're *not* a monster. You were a kid going through awful shit, trying to take control of your own situation by any means necessary. Helvetica shouldn't have done that to you in front of everyone, even *if* she had a reason to be suspicious."

Ellie still can't bring herself to turn around and *look* at Chase or Cassandra. Neither of them deserve to have to deal with the kind of baggage she's bringing around. But at the same time, she knows that they'll never give up at this rate. *A room full of cops* watched her essentially admit she murdered two people before the age of ten, and yet here those two are. Hell, she and Cassandra *just* met, today; the dragon has *no* reason to care this much.

"Cassandra, be honest. *We just* met, *why* do you care?" Ellie asks. She hates how cold her voice sounds, it doesn't suit her at all.

"You're the one who started a conversation with 'I grew up at an orphanage that used to lock us in shipping containers for a punishment'. You tried to *understand* me, and no human I've known before has *ever* attempted that. Certainly not one that has every reason to hate me." After that, she addresses Chase, "By the way, uh, sorry for throwing you into a wall earlier."

Chase just snickers, "It's fine, let me catch a ride sometime and we'll be even."

"You know, Ellie told me you'd say that."

Chase doesn't respond to Cassandra, instead just hugging Ellie from behind even tighter, "*Please* at least look at me."

Her voice sounds so small.

Ellie's body moves on its own, and the second she and Chase lock eyes... Ellie crumples to the ground, covers her face, and sobs.

"I *can't*. You mean *everything* to me, but I just *lie* to you all the time," At this point, her lips are just moving autonomously. Words that she's buried so deeply inside that she had *forgotten* about them spill out of her, "I've *killed* more people than just my dad, and lived my entire life pretending none of it even happened! You deserve *better* than someone that hides that from you—"

Chase lifts her off of the ground by the collar of her shirt, and *slaps the shit out of her*. It feels like the hardest Ellie's been hit *ever* in her life, but that's partially because of who did it. That finally makes Ellie look at Chase for real, and when she does, Chase looks *hurt*. She's scowling with tears streaming down her face, and her whole body is shaking from heavy, shuddering breaths as she tries to hold in sobs of her own.

All she can say is, "Stop being preachy with me! *Who* else do I deserve?! Someone with a spotless background check that'll just leave me behind like everyone else, is that it? *Don't say 'someone better' than you, either!*"

Ellie was going to say that, but Chase beat her to it, so she stays silent.

Chase just asks again—no, *demands*, "Give me an *answer*, Ellie!"

"I *don't know!*" Ellie yells back. And then Chase hugs her, again. This time it's a proper back-popping squeeze, like she usually does.

"Then stop lying to yourself. You're the one that feels like *you* don't deserve anything *you've* gotten since you killed your dad, right?"

Ellie didn't realize it at first, but now that Chase has said it, she realizes that her little sister caught her dead to rights yet again. She returns the hug, in spite of the ache building up in her lower back, "Of course not. No matter how hard I try, I still remember it, and the staff at The Garden *knew* the whole time. They'd always yell at me and give me harsher punishments when I fucked something up, saying stuff like 'that's what you get for being a murderer.' And then they'd give me a gun and tell me to shoot at other students for an 'exercise.' They spent so long drilling that into my head that I simply accepted it. After The Garden burned down, I figured it would be best to leave it all behind me, but..."

Her sentence trails off. She can't finish it, but everyone knows what she was going to say.

It never really goes away.

Ellie hears the light tapping and scratching of a cane, along with another set of footsteps; two people walking towards them. She can tell just by the sounds that one of them is Chief Helvetica, but when she looks toward the source, she's doesn't know why she's surprised by the other.

"I *told* you it wasn't what you thought," Kurosawa is *still* arguing with Helvetica over what just happened. "You skimmed over nearly *three decades* of memories, naturally some of the details aren't going to be clear right away."

"Yes, I can see that now," Chief Helvetica grumbles while rubbing her temples. "I was in shock from suddenly reliving the day my brother was *shot* by her."

Ellie remembers that day *very* clearly. Each member of Squad Veridian was an individual target that field operatives were sent after, due to their plans for capturing the military base having been leaked early on. Ellie was an *excellent* shot with marksman rifles back then; she hit Helvetica's brother, an elven sniper himself, clean between the eyes from well over two thousand yards away, then quickly took aim for Helvetica and fired, hitting her somewhere in the head. She didn't move or get up, so Ellie counted that as another kill. Seeing her today, it's likely that after Helvetica's eye was hit, she stayed down due to some combination of shock, fear, and survival instinct.

Ellie feels sick to her stomach thinking about it; the last thing Seraph Helvetica would see *for the rest of her life* was the death of her brother. She's *blind* now, and Ellie took that from her so casually that she lived twelve years after the fact without knowing Helvetica was even alive.

"I'm... really sorry about your brother. And your eye," is all that she can say, now. The apology feels hollow, almost *insulting*; it's not nearly enough.

And yet, Helvetica appears taken aback by it. The words she was clearly preparing to say catch in her throat, and she just looks blankly in Ellie's direction for what seems like forever. Then she says, "During the war, there was one rule we always accounted for in our plans: 'Beware of the Reaper.' Do you know what that means?"

Of course she does. Back when Ellie was a kid carrying out assignments for The Garden, the staff got hold of plans from riftborn armies and realized that was what they had been calling her. They turned it into a *nickname*. When Ellie says as such, Helvetica appears... *abhorred*. However, before she can say whatever she's planning to say next, Ellie interjects, "Those days are way behind me, I *know* you saw that much. Kurosawa can tell you, I'm not exactly a fan of getting my hands dirty."

Helvetica turns away from her, "When I saw the memory of what you did to your parents—no, that *woman* and your *father*, before seeing what you did to my brother and I, I *wanted* to believe that was all there was to it. It felt like nothing else I could see would ever justify such actions, and that you were every bit as evil as I've believed you to be. But... you've *truly* been through a lot, and you've got a *good* chief. She was willing to risk her own job in order to have your back; you two should remain friends, she's the exact kind of companion we all need."

Her next sentence pours cold water on *everyone*, though.

"That being said, I *cannot* in good conscience support your decision to continue working in law enforcement, at least for your own sanity. Your mental faculties are working overtime to keep your *proclivities* in order, and there have already been times where you've lost yourself in the commotion. Am I wrong?"

Chief Kurosawa is *pissed* at Helvetica for that and has already started yelling, but... "You're right," is what Ellie says. "It's the reason I didn't want to be in CATR in the first place; there's *nothing* better than the rush, especially when it's all I grew up doing."

So, Ellie takes her badge out of the back pocket on her pants, and moves to take off her jacket. Kurosawa is *panicking* now, "No, *don't*, you don't need to quit because of this—"

"It's not *because* of this, Chief," Ellie reassures her, and for once she's being honest. "I've been thinking about it for a while; being a weapons analyst just isn't my thing. I miss building stuff."

And she means it, too.

All of the times where she's had to do things at the PIU; whether it be field assignments, the occasional CATR dispatch before she was put on leave, dealing with Alice, or even just having to work with Chase on her reports, all of it just made her dearly miss working in the shop. She misses getting her hands covered in grease and grime while building things, pulling back-to-back all nighters to finish commissions, meeting with parts vendors, and setting up contracts. She even misses the little things, like getting to cancel orders from rude clients without refunding. The look on their faces every time was simply *priceless*, can't enjoy that when saving lives is supposed to be the priority.

Besides, lately she's even been thinking of bringing on Chase to help. She's old enough, now; it would be a lot of fun.

Ellie walks up to Chief Kurosawa, takes the chief's left hand, and puts her badge inside it. Then, she hangs her wet jacket on the chief's completely still outstretched arm like a coat rack. It looks a little funny, but Chief Kurosawa appears *crushed*. Ellie can't help but tear up at the sight; she's never seen the chief look this sad before. She really *did* appear to believe in Ellie, as shocking as that sounds.

"C'mon Mina, don't look at me like that. You knew this was coming."

Kurosawa sniffles, "Yeah, I did. When I hired you, I was honestly worried that you were still, *you know*. But working with you, you've grown up a *lot*; I can tell you'd rather do your own thing. I just wish my unit could have been a better environment for you."

"Are you *kidding* me?" Ellie's surprised she thinks her unit was a *bad* environment, "Most of those guys were great! You and Sam should *definitely* stop by the shop sometime, I can always hook you up with whatever you need."

"Even if we need to track down someone selling weapons on a black market?" Kurosawa smiles.

"*Especially* if you need that. I'm not law enforcement anymore, it's easier to do that kind of stuff 'my way', you know?"

Yeah, this is *definitely* more her speed.

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Even though quitting her job was *supposed* to be the easy part, Ellie's just now remembering that the whole point of this meeting was to go over a case *she* was involved in. A case that likely just got whole lot more problematic with the recent news that was delivered, albeit with *zero* tact whatsoever. She addresses Kurosawa and Helvetica again, both of whom are discussing amongst themselves how the *hell* they're going to explain this to everyone else.

"Chief—Mina, sorry, I should probably tell you more about this whole KRA thing. The person claiming responsibility for it was a female aquakinetic esper, wearing a serpent mask with seven eyes. Ring a bell to you?"

Saying the chief's first name casually like that feels *weird*; Ellie thinks she'll probably end up calling her 'Chief Kurosawa' more often than not. Kurosawa herself doesn't seem to mind, clearly preoccupied by the rest of what Ellie said.

"Nope, but that's specific enough for me to remember going forward." The look on Chief Kurosawa's face quickly darkens, "*Everyone* with the KRA is dead?"

Ellie nods, "At least, that's what she said. Supposedly, they were in cahoots together, came up with a plan to capture this 'Starchild,' and I guess the KRA was planning to kill the, uh, child, rather than capture. The fire at Apollo Heights was caused by one of their handmade explosives being faulty, and going off early while they were executing their plan."

Kurosawa rubs her chin, staring off into space, "Which explains why most of them had left without seeing their plan through: *it was already a bust*."

But that just leaves bigger questions: *who* were they working with? What's up with the masks? And why were they calling Chase 'Starchild'?

"Tell me, Eleanor—" Chief Helvetica starts.

Ellie cuts her off, "I *really* don't like being called that. You know why."

Helvetica is stunned for a moment, but recovers with a small cough, "Yes, my apologies. *Ellie*, are you familiar with 'The World of The Stars'?"

Ellie shakes her head. Helvetica grimaces a little.

"It's a bedtime story we'd tell our young. The story is about the union of two beings from the cosmos, and how their offspring will lead all life to its next evolution. The story is short, but it's quite a pleasant read. I'll have to send it to your chief so that she can give it to you."

"Why not just give it to me directly?" Ellie asks.

Helvetica scoffs, "After what I did to you? No thanks, even I know there are some lines you don't cross. You probably can't stand the sight of me now."

She's partially right. Ellie *did* feel that way a little while ago, but honestly handing in her badge has lifted such a weight off of her shoulders that she doesn't even care anymore. The only consequence was that she and Chase ended up having a *really* important conversation that Ellie had been dodging for years, now. It's objectively a pretty good outcome, even if it was born from Helvetica forcefully peering through the full extent of her memories and declaring her a murderer in front of a bunch of PIU chiefs.

Actually, that might be a problem.

"I don't really care about what you did, honestly," Ellie starts off. "But am I gonna, like, get brought in for questioning? Am I gonna get charged with something? Should I move?"

Helvetica's face turns beet red, and she purses her lips; is she's *embarrassed*? Chief Kurosawa chimes in, "Yeah, about that. You see, *Seraph* here actually bailed you out—" but before she can finish her sentence, Helvetica *loudly* coughs to interrupt her. Ellie finds that *really* funny; for all of their fighting and arguing, Helvetica and Kurosawa clearly have a little routine going on. They really do appear to get along quite well.

"As Mina said, it turns out I'm still behind the curve when it comes to human policing practices. Michael was *quite* furious with me; it seems that your confession would be deemed inadmissible due to it being obtained under duress. In our home, we could use this magic freely to find proof of any crime so long as the perpetrator was alive and well. I suppose humans do not view this as an acceptable method of gathering information, even if it *is* pertinent. I'll have to keep that in mind going forward. I sincerely apologize."

After she says that, Helvetica looks off to the side, her jaw tight. It's clear that she's not particularly happy with the result, and Ellie honestly can't blame her. She *was* correct in her judgement, at least to a degree, and yet she's only been reprimanded for it. Her brother's killer, the one who stole her sight from her walks free, *because* she was vengeful in her actions. That would be frustrating—no, *infuriating* to anyone.

"Hey, if I'm not going to jail, I have no issue with you coming down to the shop to hang out. Or like, beat me up for payback, or something," Ellie says to Helvetica. The elf looks like she can't believe her ears.

"After *all of this*?"

"I don't see why not, Cassandra said we'd get along. You can show me that 'Story of the Stars', or whatever it was."

"The *World* of the Stars," Helvetica smiles. "Very well, I suppose we can set up a meeting every now and then."

Epilogue: The Road to Dawn

After quitting her job, Ellie was just about ready to head back to the room and pack. The rooms were paid for by Olympia's PIU for the meeting, so she figures they're probably not gonna let her and Chase stick around now that they're no longer affiliated. Chief Kurosawa still offers them a ride back to the hotel, which both girls quickly accept. Before going back to the meeting though, Kurosawa goes out of her way to let both of them know that they're free to stay in the city for the remainder of the week.

On their walk through the hotel and back to their room, Ellie asks Chase if that's what she wants to do. The latter just shrugs.

"Are you okay?" Ellie asks.

"That's what I was gonna ask you! I can't believe you're not mad at Helvetica for that," Chase snaps back. She must have been holding that in for a while.

"Oh, *I am*, but I deserved it, too. Besides, I'm not going to jail, and it forced you and me to talk about something that I've been bottling up for a while, so I guess that's good enough."

Chase stops walking, balling up her fists, "So, is there anything else you wanna tell me?"

Ellie thinks about it for a while, but can't come up with anything. For some reason, this just makes Chase *more* upset.

"Dude, *come on*. Every time you say that, you drop something else on me a few months later. Is that *really* it?" Chase looks away from Ellie and folds her arms across her chest, clearly miffed about the way things went down.

"There really isn't anything I can think of," Ellie replies, putting both hands up. Then she *does* think of something, "Actually... I *do* have one more."

Chase doesn't move or speak, but she glances in Ellie's direction. Ellie just steps towards her and gives her a hug.

"Thank you for not giving up on me. I've never been good at this 'opening up' stuff, sorry that it has to be a fight every time."

Chase tries to ignore her at first, but she clearly can't. She begrudgingly returns the hug, "It's okay. I just want you to trust me as much as I trust you."

It's definitely *not* okay, but what Chase said after that digs deep into Ellie's bones. "Trust" is such a strange concept; if you had asked Ellie before, she *undoubtedly* would have said she trusted Chase with every fiber of her being. But did she *really* trust her? *Does* she really trust her? She's always worried about Chase's reaction to things, maybe Ellie wouldn't be so worried all the time if she *did* actually trust her. She has no reason *not* to, after all.

So, as they get back to their room, Ellie resolves that she's gonna be better about that. For real, this time.

"Alright, now for the million dollar question," Ellie opts to switch topics. "Are we staying the full week, or—"

"*Please* no," Chase interrupts her, flopping onto her bed. It's so sudden that Ellie cackles in response as Chase rants while staring at the ceiling, "I wanna go *home*, dude. That meeting tired me out, and I'm *over* having to put these gloves on every time I walk into a building."

"Hold on, you *sat in* on the meeting the whole time? I figured that would be way too boring for you."

"I wouldn't say *boring*. I mostly just felt bad for Chief Helvetica, even though what she did to you was still fucked up. It seemed like she *really* needed help, but they spent most of the meeting making fun of her."

Cassandra *did* mention that Helvetica's peers seemingly don't like her. When Ellie asks Chase if she could figure out why, Chase shrugs again.

"She's just mean, and I guess she scares off a lot of the riftborn that work at her unit. They're having issues with Gehenna deposits in Fort Veridian and need help getting rid of it in the area, but she doesn't like humans either, so she won't accept human help and wants them out of her city."

Well, that certainly lines up with what Cassandra told her in the cave. On the surface, it seems like a simple solution: just hire the humans to backfill vacancies in Fort Veridian's PIU. But... given her history, Ellie understands why she's hesitant. That's probably the same reason why Cassandra suddenly begged her to give Helvetica a chance. In hindsight, it makes perfect sense that Chief Helvetica totally snapped after Ellie's comment about her unit; she had *just* spent the past few hours being a laughing stock for it. It makes Ellie feel pretty bad, all things considered.

"Alright, new rule, then. When Chief Helvetica comes to the shop, we gotta be *extra* nice to her, okay?"

At the mention of "the shop" Chase sits bolt upright, "What does that mean?"

"It *means* I'm opening up the shop again. How else am I gonna make money without a job?"

Chase is *ecstatic* at the news. She spends the rest of the night asking for every single detail on what it's gonna be like, and Ellie hasn't even asked her if she wants to work there yet. In the back of her mind, she supposes it's because Chase spent a lot of time there as a kid, but not nearly as much once the shop had taken off. That was about when her mom passed away, after all.

Ellie chuckles to herself while Chase keeps talking; working with her is gonna be a *lot* of fun, for sure.

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They take an extra day to pack before leaving for New Haven, and as they're packing the news airs. In the basement of an abandoned stadium in Dune Valley, remains of an unknown amount of kobolds were found. The more identifiable ones were confirmed to have ties to the KRA... but significantly more bodies are *entirely* unidentifiable. The footage and pictures shown are basically a giant red mosaic blur, which tells Ellie all she needs to know.

Whatever the serpent-masked woman was talking about yesterday, she meant business.

Ellie looks at Chase, who's about as pale as a sheet. At first, she's a little confused, but then Ellie remembers that Chase was *there* when Ellie explained the situation to Kurosawa and Helvetica. She tends to be so quiet when listening that Ellie forgets she's nearby more often than not, but she *definitely* heard the detail about the serpent-masked woman and the "Starchild" they were hoping to capture.

Sure enough, Chase asks her, "Yesterday, you told Kurosawa that the KRA attacked my school because they had a deal with someone in a... serpent mask to kidnap me, right?"

Ellie nods. She didn't mention Chase *directly*, but it wasn't particularly difficult to piece together who the "Starchild" was supposed to be. Especially if you were the one who got a gun pointed at you.

"I think one of those guys was there when my dad got killed."

"That's what I was thinking," Ellie replies.

Neither of them say anything for a while. Chase just silently goes back to packing, and Ellie's not sure how to respond to that, so she does the same. Just as she gets to her suitcase, though, her phone rings. Ellie doesn't even have to guess who's calling.

"You saw the news, I'm assuming?" Kurosawa says from the other end.

"Yeah. I take it I'll be coming back sometime in the future?" Ellie can feel it in her bones, they'll likely need her help again if this is the direction things are going in.

Surprisingly, Kurosawa *doesn't* seem to agree, "If we need the help. I don't think we will, though; you've gotta leave *some* of the fun for us, you know."

Ellie can tell what she really means: *You're a civilian, now. Do your own thing, we'll call you if we need you.*

"Sounds good," she replies. "If that changes, you know where to find me."

Kurosawa laughs a little from the other end, "Most people who quit their job don't turn around and tell their boss, 'let me know if you want me back.'"

"Yeah, but most people don't have bosses like you."

Chief Kurosawa doesn't say anything for a while, clearly taken aback by Ellie's own response. Then, she says, "Thanks. I appreciate that."

The two exchange goodbyes, and then hang up. Unlike how their conversation ended last night, this time Ellie feels a little sad about how suddenly she dropped out on Kurosawa; the chief might have needed help on this one. She thinks about Chase for a little bit, though, and surmises that at least for now it's probably better this way. However, thinking about Chase and Kurosawa reminds Ellie of something else.

Ellie turns off the TV, cutting the news broadcast off as they begin repeating information that was said at the beginning of the 'breaking news' segment.

"Hey, Chase, what were you and Kurosawa talking about when we were in her hotel room yesterday?"

That question seems to snap Chase out of whatever funk the news report initially put her in. She closes her suitcase and then turns to look at Ellie fully, before saying, "I was asking her if being a fiend affected her psychic abilities at all. She told me that the 'old' Mina wasn't an esper, and then said that I'd be a different case. After that we got into a whole talk about that stuff and how much I've learned to use my abilities for."

That's... not at all what Ellie expected. She figured that Mina would have a lot less to say than that, but still, "How did that lead to her convincing you to wear the gloves?"

"She didn't convince me, but when talking about how they affect her own flow of energy, I could tell she hated them, too. I guess they sort of 'cap' the amount of energy she can build up, and it makes her feel like her gloves are too tight. Like they're cutting off blood flow, I guess? Either way, when she said that I realized that it probably bothered her just as much as they bothered me."

"I didn't even know they felt that bad to wear, why didn't you tell me?" Ellie feels a little guilty. That sounds *incredibly* uncomfortable for just about anyone, really.

Chase shrugs, "Didn't think it was important. I think they're more uncomfortable for her than me, though; she's a fiend, so I guess that means the gloves affect *all* of the Anima in her body, not just some of it. For me, it's just kind of like I'm wearing an extra layer on top of my clothes. After a while I feel a little gross, but if I ignore it I think I'm okay."

After saying that, Chase goes back to double checking her luggage. Ellie muses over the information for a second, and then she realizes that she's missing a pretty important detail, "Chase, this is going to sound weird but... what *is* your ability, exactly?"

Chase snaps her gaze over to Ellie, raising one eyebrow with a slight grin, "You don't know? You've known me since I was eight, how do you not know?"

The way she's saying it makes Ellie regret asking; she feels bad, somewhat, but the bigger issue is that even Chase knows it's a little embarrassing for her to have *never once* asked. Sure enough, Chase's slight grin grows into a shit eating one the second she takes a second too long to reply, which just makes Ellie cover her face with both hands and yell back, "*Don't* look at me like that! We've always had bigger fish to fry!"

"Even at Apollo Heights?"

"*Especiall*y there! You were super fast, is that it?"

"Nope!"

Okay, *now* Ellie's lost; she'd basically always assumed that was *actually* it, and as such never bothered asking after the fact. She throws her head back and *groans*, still covering her face with her hands. Naturally, Chase just snickers at that response, and when Ellie asks her what it is, she replies, "Not telling! Should have asked sooner!" and sticks out her tongue.

Ellie stays there, face still in her hands, this time caught up in thought. What *is* her ability? She's *definitely* never seen Chase use it to its fullest extent before, which makes this so weird to her.

"Can I at least get a hint?" Ellie replies.

Chase responds by pursing her lips and glancing towards the ceiling for a moment before saying, "Sure!"

After that, she picks up a balled-up pair of socks, winds up her right arm, and throws it directly at Ellie. It's a simple pitch that *appeared* soft by the way Chase threw it, but the second the socks leave Chase's fingers... they *fly* towards Ellie with the speed of a bullet. That's *not* an exaggeration, either; Ellie has to hit the deck and *dodge* the socks altogether, because in a split second she realizes if she tried to catch them she might legitimately break something in her hand.

Sure enough, they hit the wall with a resounding *thud*, and leave a dent in the wall deep enough for them to rest there.

Ellie narrows her eyes at Chase, "Okay, so when I said 'give me a hint,' I *wasn't* saying 'try your best to kill me.'"

Chase sticks out her tongue again, then laughs, "It was a good hint, though!"

It... was, unfortunately. When Chase wound up her arm for the throw, Ellie could see the typical red sparks fluttering up and down her right arm, and the pair of socks themselves even glowed red for a bit while in midair, just like whenever she would speed herself up. If Ellie had to guess, if she's doing the same thing to herself as the pair of socks, it wasn't a normal speed boost. When she's speeding herself up, she's likely doing it by altering the amount of momentum gained from kicking off the ground during a run, and did the same with the socks by altering the amount of momentum gained from throwing them. Altering the speed of an object in motion...

Ellie snaps her fingers, "Kinetic energy. Your powers alter the kinetic energy of an object, changing how far and fast it travels based on the object's initial speed. Is that right?"

Chase smiles a bit, and says, "If that's what you think."

For a second, Ellie's a little annoyed; it just seems like her sister is intent on playing more mind games, seemingly just *because*. However, after thinking for a second longer, she realizes... Chase is serious. She probably hasn't had a *thing* to call it yet, because the people who were supposed to teach her this stuff died on her before they could.

Ellie bites her lip.

"What do *you* think, Chase? Do your abilities at least make sense to you?" she asks.

"More than they did before, at least."

That's about all that Ellie can do for her in this department. She makes a mental note to give Kurosawa a call later, that might help a bit going forward.

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"Okay, I didn't think this part through. You're gonna have to go down the stairs with your eyes closed."

"Chase, this is *stupid*—"

"*Please*, I promise it'll be worth it!"

Since getting home from Olympia, things basically haven't slowed down *at all*. The two weeks afterwards were spent prepping the entire downstairs area for business. The shop had gone pretty much untouched aside from the occasional cleaning to make sure rodents and critters hadn't found their way in, and the garage looked *awful*. Ellie was never good at keeping her garage clean; she only ever needed it to be convenient to build in. Since she knew where everything was, it was never a problem. The issue now is that she remembers where everything is, but their locations are so random it's got her pissed off anyways. Was she always this sloppy?

So, instead of cleaning the garage, Ellie set her sights on restocking the shop, first. Building stuff was a ton of fun, and (naturally) Chase found a way to insert herself into every step of every process. Mass producing attachments for prosthetic arms, various plasma cartridges for ammunition, and body armor were the main goals. Chase asked questions and tried to help on every part, whether it was programming, helping put them together, or testing their safety features. They spent a full week going over that, and making sure there were enough for the storefront to have demo units; everything would be made-to-order once commissions started coming in.

Things had been going smooth enough, up until about halfway through the second week. Just when Ellie was about ready to try and tackle the garage, Chase told her to put on a blindfold and follow her down the stairs, *to* the garage. Ellie's honestly not worried about going down the stairs blind, but she *is* worried about what Chase did when she wasn't looking. Chase has *never* been the destructive type, but Ellie is so thoroughly in the dark (literally and figuratively) that what she *doesn't* know is honestly far more worrying—

"Okay, you can take it off," Chase interrupts her thoughts.

Ellie quickly obliges...

...and the garage is *spotless*.

Better than spotless, actually: the mess has been neatly organized, with plastic containers on *rows* of shelves neatly lined along the wall. Each container is labelled, and as Ellie reads the labels she realizes the contents are categorized by their respective shelves. One shelf has generic materials, like screws and motors, another is for core building materials like metals and plastic filament, even the *ammunition* is properly organized and categorized. Her workbench has a designated area on the wall opposite the staircase, with all of Ellie's tools neatly laid out; hell, they've even been *polished*! It's a nearly breathtaking sight, and just as Ellie turns to ask Chase when she even had time to *do* all of this, Chase throws a balloon in her face and yells, "Happy birthday!"

Ellie falls silent. She starts mentally going over her own calendar and then realizes... it *is* her birthday. She didn't even *realize* it was, nor can she even remember the last time someone else even mentioned it to her. She looks over at Chase, who's just staring at her with a massive smile on her face.

"Well, do you like it?" Chase asks. She's shifting from foot to foot while talking, clearly unable to stand still. "I've been sneaking down here every night to clean up a little. I wanted to put up some party poppers, but I figured you wouldn't like those very much 'cause they're kinda loud—"

"You did *all* of this, by yourself? For me?" Ellie interrupts her, while walking around the perimeter of the garage, scanning each shelf. She hadn't even considered that her own birthday was just around the corner, but beyond that she's just amazed that Chase cleaned and organized the whole garage on her own. *Silently*.

"Well, *yeah*. When we started working on the shop, you kept tripping over stuff and yelling 'who the fuck put this here?!' So, I figured the cleanup would be helpful, if nothing else! What do you think?"

Chase is *clearly* antsy about whether or not she likes it, which Ellie finds pretty amusing. How could she *not* like it?

"Thanks, Chase. Especially for remembering my birthday, *I* didn't even remember it, myself."

"Of course you didn't. You're good with deadlines, but you're never good with birthdays. You forgot mine for three years in a row, remember?"

Ellie pauses. She *did*?

Before she can think too long on that, though, the buzzer at the shop rings.

She hadn't planned on opening today, but *surely* it wouldn't hurt too bad to see what's going on. Sure enough, news that the shop's re-opening soon has already made it around the area, and there are more than a few people here to check it out. Things will definitely be a lot more busy from here on, but considering who's helping out this time, it'll be a lot more fun.