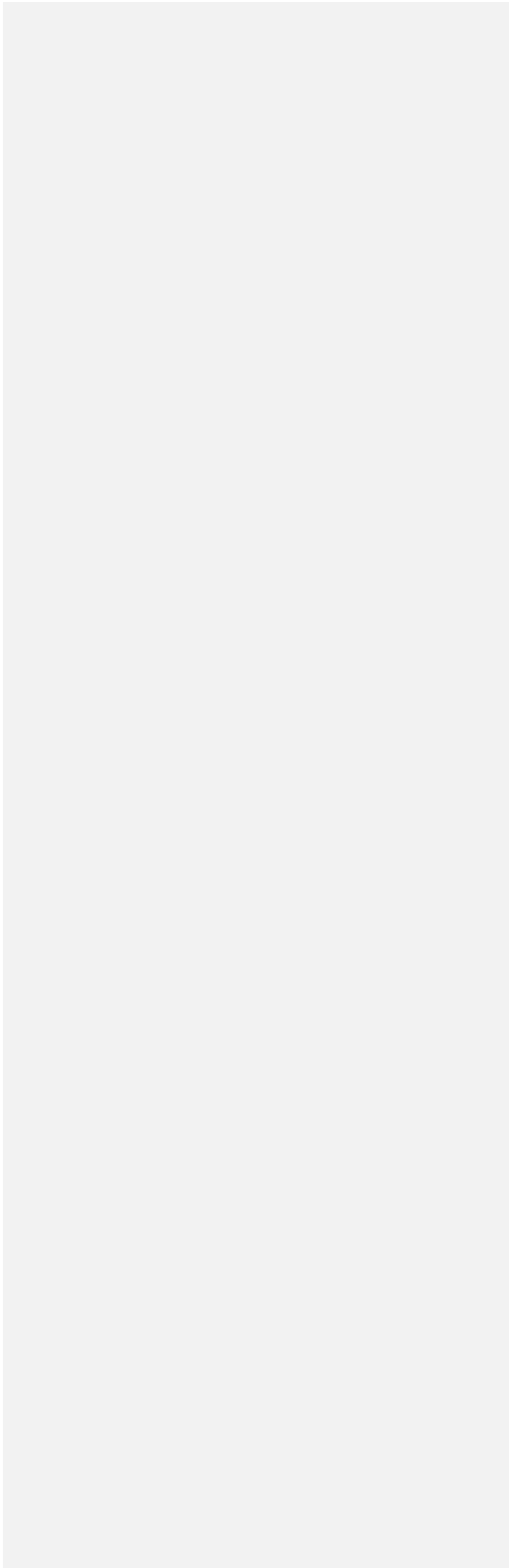


Archangel

Eleanor Keener



Planned segmentation and POV setups

Initial life: Single

Joining the recon team: Single

USS Chara: Single

Incident: Dual (complete)

Recovery: Dual

Back to Recon: Dual

Arcturus: Single

Opening

April 26th, 2465, 16:45

My name is Eleanor Keener, born in Tacoma, Washington, to parents I never met. Left behind at a military installation with nothing but an old recon patch to my name. The patch is like nothing anyone had seen before: a golden eagle, its talons gripping a jagged radiation symbol emblazoned on a shield of pitch black. It's a piece of fraying fabric I've spent my whole life staring at, tracing the edges with tiny fingers, wondering who they were and why they left me.

Today I turned four, I sit cross-legged on the floor of my assigned quarters, clutching the patch like it might whisper its secrets if I held it tightly enough. Outside, the other kids played tag, their laughter echoing through the thick glass windows, but I stayed put, the patch soft in my hand. The faint stitching of a unit number on the front had long since frayed away, leaving no clues, just questions.

Birthdays were supposed to mean something, right? Candles, presents, maybe a hug. But not here. Here, it's just another day in a long string of forgettable ones. No one knew it was my birthday—hell, I didn't even know if it is. I had no records, no birth certificate. Just a patch, a handwritten note with a name, the date I was found, and more questions than answers.

I didn't plan on telling anyone either. There's no need to put myself at the center of attention. Attention comes with questions, and questions I can't answer.

As I sit on the cold tile floor, looking into the patch as if it would suddenly speak, I whispered to patch, "Someday, I'll find out who you belonged to." It isn't a promise to them—it is a promise to myself. Whoever they are, wherever they went, they'd left me behind. And I am going to find out why, one way or another.

The difference between me and the other children in the dorms is simple, their parents were off somewhere in the universe, being heroes or in high places of power making decisions for entire fleets of ships. I am an orphan, a nobody, another number on the sheet, but it comes with perks, zero expectations, zero eyes on me where my colleagues were being watched at every moment, as long as I am out of sight out of mind, I am safe.

Later that year I am enrolled in the academy that is on base and start attending, my studies become a reprieve from the bleak life in the dorms, I spend hours studying, learning anything and everything I can. By the time I am 5 years old, I am practicing math that won't be taught for another 2 years.

By the time I was 6 I had learned the hierarchy of the school yard, and the rulers of it so to speak, the worst of which being Gabriel Renault with rich parents who were determined to make a commander out of him, he ruled the school yard with an iron fist, I did my best to steer clear of him. "Orphaned rat," he called me once, and the name stuck with a cruelty only children could master. I slipped behind the old storage shed, where the shadows swallowed me whole. From my hiding spot, I watched the others play, their laughter distant, almost unreal. Being invisible was a skill I'd have to master, and I was getting good at it.

At the age of 7 the most wonderful thing happened, I'd found it, the holy grail, a haven, the library. It was the one place no one bothered me. Its towering shelves, filled with books older than the base itself, felt like a fortress. That day, I discovered an engineering manual tucked behind some outdated military journals. The diagrams were mesmerizing, intricate as puzzles, and I lost track of time tracing the lines with my fingers. When the librarian tapped my shoulder, I nearly dropped the book. "You can check that out, you know," she says with a kind smile. I nodded, hugging the book to my chest like a treasure.

The months flew by, and before I knew it, I was 8, excelling academically, receiving high praise from often harsh mentors. Never receiving recognition of course, the kids with affluent families were plastered on the front cover of the newsletter, with my name buried deep within the pages in a footnote. The trophies and awards meant little to me, the information gained was priceless, the more I knew, the more I had a fighting chance to leave this place behind.

My birthday came again, I was 9, the dorms were quieter than usual that night. Most of the kids were with their families, celebrating some holiday I couldn't remember. I stayed behind, perched on my bunk with my patch in one hand and a book in the other. The book was about a 21st-century engineer who took a simple idea and built empires from it. I wasn't sure if I believed in the empire, but the idea of rising up from nothing? That I understood.

By 10 I was climbing the academic ranks, vying for positions against those several years older than me, earning internships and scholarships, most of which were military funded, many of which I may never be able to use. My academic placement garnered the attention of the elder kids who often attempted to pick on me, using insults that their families had taught, most were about my lack of parents or money. I had learned to brush off the insults, they were like parrots, repeating the simple words connected to an object.

At 11, I had my first positive interaction with another kid, a younger boy, maybe 7 at the time, Thomas Ridgewell. His parents had just been deployed onboard the Erebus, a cruiser

class warship. He had been crying in the corner for hours, no one had dared to try calming him, I had nothing to lose and went to sit next to him, “Here” I say, holding the small gear I had been toying with all day to him, “If you hold it right, you can spin it in your hand”. He hesitated after seeing who I was, and then took it gently from my hand. Watching his small hands turn the gear, I realized something: fixing people wasn’t so different from fixing things. You just had to figure out what made them tick.

Shortly after turning 12, my haven was invaded, “Hey, orphaned rat,” Renault had sneered, blocking the library door, flanked by two of his rock headed cronies. “Got anything in your sad little life other than those?”, pointing at the stack of books clutched to my chest. “I’m surprised you know what a book is” I shot back without thinking, he had tried shoving me to the ground and ran after he only managed to knock the books out of my hands. I had stood my ground, and this was a turning point.

The science fair the year I turned 13 was a spectacle, as it always was. The exhibition hall was packed with parents and students, the air thick with the hum of anticipation and the smell of too many bodies in one space. The projects ranged from laughably simplistic drawings of vehicles to over-the-top displays that screamed parental involvement. It didn’t take much to see who had done the work and who had simply paid for their name to be attached to something shiny.

My entry stood off to the side, modest compared to the glitzier displays. It was a makeshift engine, cobbled together from salvaged copper wire, bits of scrap metal, and a soup can from the canteen. I’d spent weeks assembling it in secret, testing and retesting every connection until it purred to life. It wasn’t flashy, but it worked. The intricate details—the wiring, the careful soldering, even the hand-drawn markings etched into the casing—spoke of precision and determination.

When the judges made their rounds, I caught them glancing at my engine. One of them even nodded, a faint smile tugging at the corner of her lips, but none of them lingered. Instead, they flocked to Gabriel Renault’s display, a pristine kit showcasing the functionality of a nuclear fission reactor. It was undoubtedly impressive, but I could tell he hadn’t built it. The neatly printed manual beside it bore the logo of a private tech company, one far beyond the financial reach of anyone like me.

The results came in, and to no one’s surprise, Renault’s name was announced as the winner. Applause erupted as he strutted to the stage, his parents beaming from the front row. My name, as always, was buried in a footnote, a passing mention too small to be noticed.

I started packing up my display, trying not to let the disappointment sink in too deeply. This wasn't new. Recognition wasn't why I did it—but still, it stung. Then, as I lifted the engine to tuck it into my bag, a shadow fell over my table.

"Keener, is it?"

I looked up to see a man, maybe in his mid-twenties, dressed in full military uniform. The engineering corps badge gleamed on his chest, catching the harsh fluorescent light. His sharp features softened slightly as he glanced at my project.

"Yes, sir," I replied, my voice cautious.

"This yours?" He gestured to the engine.

I nodded. "Built it myself."

He crouched slightly to get a closer look, inspecting the wiring with a practiced eye. "Not bad," he says, standing back up. "This kind of work takes skill—real skill. Keep at it. We could use someone like you one day."

He didn't linger, but his words stayed with me long after he walked away. In that moment, it didn't matter that my name was buried in a footnote or that Renault had taken home another trophy he didn't deserve. Someone had noticed me—not for where I came from or what I lacked, but for what I could do.

The world as I knew it changed in an instant just before I turned 14. The final days of the academic year were always bittersweet. For the other kids, they'd rush to pack their bags and count down the hours until they could board shuttles to their families, their laughter echoing down the dormitory halls. For me, the end of the year was just a reminder of what I didn't have.

The awards ceremony was held in the same exhibition hall where the science fair had taken place months before. Rows of folding chairs stretched across the polished floor, most of them occupied by parents who clapped and cheered as their children's names were called. I sat in my usual spot, the two chairs beside me conspicuously empty, reserved for parents who would never arrive.

My name was called, it often was during the yearly ceremony, and always, the applause was muted for the most part. It did bring me some joy knowing I had probably clawed the award from the hands of someone much more affluent. I walked across the stage, saluted the headmaster, and collected my piece of paper, another to add to the file.

Later that week, while a majority of the others packed their bags to head home, vacations, or pricey academics their parents had bought them into, I was expecting another year of

the usual silence from my inbox, Instead, and to my great surprise, I received a formal message from the Office of Military Advancement.

"Eleanor Keener: Selected for the Advanced Sciences and Technologies Program. Report to Command Hall C, June 5, 0800 hours."

Staring at the message for a solid 15 minutes before breaking my eyes free from the message plastered on the screen of the PDA.

This had to have been a mistake I thought, the ASTP was a military program designed to pull the brightest minds into research and development, integrating advanced education with plenty of practical training in engineering, physics, technology, and field work. Students had to be handpicked, most were brought in around the age of 18 or 19, and often were groomed into the role for years by well-connected families. People like me simply weren't supposed to make it into the program at all.

I immediately brought my PDA to the dorm supervisor to report it as a mistake, but when I showed it to her, she didn't even blink. "It's not a mistake" she says flatly. "You've been on their radar for years. Pack your things".

ASTP

June 5th, 2475

June 5th arrives faster than I could have ever anticipated, time seemed to move faster, the 12 hour flight from Tacoma to Kiev felt like nothing, then the hour and a half drive from Kiev to Ivankiv passed in moments. The ASTP's facility wasn't marked on any maps, its existence known only to a select few, and just kilometers from the edge of the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, it was a stark reminder of both humanity's failures and its potential for redemption. The facility itself, a sprawling complex of reinforced concrete and underground labs, seemed to rise out of the earth like a relic of the Cold War.

The area's isolation was no mistake, the nearest town was barely a spec on the horizon, the ASTP facility felt like another world — a proving ground for the brightest and toughest. I had never been anywhere like it, I had to remind myself, this was my first time outside of Tacoma, but I never felt more at home staring out across the open fields and patches of forest.

The buses slowed to a stop and the order was given to file into the Command Hall, it was massive, the walls lined with flags, pictures, and plaques commemorating everything from the first USMC unit to the greatest minds in Sol. I was one of around 25 individuals standing

in a neat row, our bags at our feet. Most of them looked like they belonged there — boots polished, uniforms immaculate, decorated in ribbons. I, on the other hand, stood out like a sore thumb, a secondhand jacket that had I had patched with mismatched material, and a pair of boots that looked like they had already seen decades worth of combat. To add to the growing pile, I was at minimum 4 years younger than everyone else.

Maximilian Barrick, the commanding officer of the facility stepped forward, his uniform a drab grey camo, a stark contrast to the flash and brass I was used to, the only identifier being the rank markings on his shoulders. “Congratulations”, he began, his voice steady and commanding, his eyes scanning the neat row in front of him, as if he was going person by person, picking apart every miniscule detail, stripping us bare. “You’ve been selected for a program that will challenge you physically, mentally, and emotionally. The next four years will define the rest of your lives. Some of you will excel, others will fall short. But remember, you are here because you have potential. You will not be the only cadets here, there are three other years’ worth of cadets here, you are just the newest. Prove to us—and to yourselves—that you belong.”

The room was silent, the kind of silence that presses against your ears and dares you to break it. I stood ramrod straight, forcing myself not to fidget under his scrutiny. His eyes finally landed on me, a fraction of a second longer than the others. I knew what he saw: the youngest in the room, a skinny girl with a patchy uniform that had modified with various materials. I met his gaze anyway, refusing to blink. *Go ahead, size me up. You’ll see I’m not going anywhere.*

“This program,” he continued, “isn’t just about science or technology. It’s about creating leaders. Innovators. Survivors.” He began pacing the row, his boots echoing on the polished concrete floor. “You will face obstacles designed to push you beyond your limits. You will be tested in ways you cannot yet imagine. Some of you will thrive in this crucible, but others will crack under the pressure.”

He stopped near the middle of the row, standing in front of a tall cadet who was trying to appear unfazed. “Cadet, why are you here?” he asked sharply.

The cadet swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing visibly. “To serve, sir.”

“To serve,” the officer repeated, his tone almost mocking. “And how do you plan to serve when you don’t even know what you’re capable of?” The cadet’s face turned crimson, and the officer moved on.

When he reached the end of the line, he pivoted sharply, addressing all of us again. “This isn’t a school where you’ll be coddled or applauded for mediocrity. This is a proving ground. Every failure is an opportunity to grow. Every success is a step closer to becoming

something greater than yourselves. If you're here for glory, you'll be disappointed. If you're here to work, to fight, to innovate, then you might just make it."

He stepped back to the center of the room, hands clasped behind his back. "Your instructors have been handpicked for their expertise. They will not tolerate laziness or excuses. And neither will I. Welcome to the Advanced Sciences and Technologies Program. Now, report to your quarters and prepare for your first evaluation at 0500 hours. Dismissed."

The room remained frozen for a heartbeat longer, as if we were all afraid to be the first to move. Then, almost as one, we broke formation, grabbing our duffels and heading toward the dormitory doors.

Before I could fall in with the rest of the cadets a female voice rang out "Keener, come here", I looked over at where the voice came from to see a secondary officer standing next to the man who had just terrified half of the cadets in the room. Her voice had a Slavic accent to it, I assumed she was a local, and not brought in from an outside source like many officers at this location.

"Keener, you're with me" she says as I get closer, I could feel the eyes of my fellow cadets following my every move, "I'll be taking her from here", she says, a thinly veiled layer of disgust in her voice as she shot the commander a piercing look. To my surprise, he recoiled at her gaze, there was something more to this woman than met the eye.

"Keep up Keener" she said, the disgust gone from her voice, as if it never existed, turning on her heel and leading me down a secondary hallway, away from where the remainder of the cadets were heading. It was only now I noticed that we were the only two female personnel I had seen since arrival.

I hurried to keep pace, my boots clicking against the polished concrete floor as I followed her down the dimly lit hallway. The air here felt different—cooler, quieter, as if this part of the facility had been forgotten by the rest of the world. I couldn't help but wonder why I'd been singled out, and by her of all people. Who was she? And why did even the commanding officer flinch under her gaze?

She didn't say a word as we walked, her posture rigid and her steps purposeful. The silence stretched between us, broken only by the occasional hum of machinery echoing through the walls. I tried to steal a glance at her face, but her sharp profile gave nothing away. If she noticed my curiosity, she didn't acknowledge it.

Finally, she stopped in front of a steel door marked with no identification. She pressed her hand to a scanner on the wall, and the door slid open with a hiss, revealing a small, sterile room. A single table and two chairs sat in the center, illuminated by a harsh overhead light.

“Sit,” she says, gesturing to one of the chairs as she moved toward the opposite side of the table. Her tone wasn’t hostile, but it left no room for argument.

I sat, my mind racing with questions I didn’t dare voice. She dropped a thin folder onto the table and slid it toward me. The cover was blank, but the weight of whatever was inside felt significant.

“Do you know why you’re here, Keener?” she asked, her voice calm but probing.

I shook my head, unsure of what to say. “No, ma’am.”

She opened the folder, revealing a series of documents, photographs, and what looked like reports. My name was printed in bold at the top of the first page, along with a grainy photo of me as a child. I blinked, trying to process what I was seeing.

The officer leaned back slightly, her piercing gaze never leaving mine. “You’ve caught someone’s attention,” she repeated, her voice steady but laced with something unreadable. “And not just because you’re young. No one gets into this program without a recommendation from high places.”

I frowned, the words settling uneasily in my chest. “I thought I was chosen because of my performance.”

Her lips curled into a thin smile, though it didn’t reach her eyes. “You were. But performance isn’t the whole story, not here. Someone—somewhere—decided you were worth the risk.”

“A risk?” I echoed, my voice sharp despite myself.

“Yes,” she says, her voice dropping slightly. “A fourteen-year-old girl with no family, no clear affiliations, and an unsettling ability to outthink people twice her age. That kind of profile raises eyebrows, Keener. It makes people ask questions. And those questions don’t always have simple answers.”

Her words hung heavy in the air, but before I could respond, she flipped the folder shut and slid it back toward me. “Whatever strings were pulled to get you here, they won’t help you now. From this moment on, you’re under a microscope. Every mistake, every hesitation, every moment of weakness will be noted. And there will be people waiting for you to fail.”

I clenched my jaw, forcing my hands to stay still in my lap. “I won’t fail.”

Her expression softened just slightly, enough to catch me off guard. “Good. Because there aren’t many of us here.”

“Many of us?” I asked, unsure of her meaning.

She straightened, her gaze steady. “Women. I noticed you looking around earlier. You’re right—we’re the minority. And it’s not just a numbers game. It’s about expectations. Some of these men will think you don’t belong here. That you were a diversity pick, or worse, a charity case. Prove them wrong.”

I blinked, startled by the sudden shift in tone. “Why are you telling me this?”

For the first time, her posture relaxed, and she leaned forward slightly. “Because I know what it’s like to stand where you’re standing. I wasn’t much older than you when I got my first command—barely eighteen and surrounded by men who thought I’d crumble under the pressure. Every day, I had to prove I wasn’t just good enough. I had to prove I was better.”

Her voice hardened again, though her expression remained calm. “I see the same fight in you. The same fire. But fire can burn out if you let it. Don’t let it.”

She stood abruptly, signaling the conversation was over. “Keep up,” she says, turning on her heel and leading me down yet another hallway. This one was narrower, lined with metal doors on either side. The hum of machinery was louder here, mingling with the faint sound of voices coming from behind some of the doors.

“I’ll be blunt, Keener,” she says without looking back. “You’re starting with a disadvantage. Your age, your background, your gender—they’ll all be used against you, whether overtly or not. Some will want to see you fail because it justifies their beliefs. Others will challenge you because they think it’ll make you stronger. Either way, you’ll have to fight harder than anyone else here.”

She stopped at another unmarked door, swiping her ID badge across a panel. The door slid open, revealing a cavernous room bathed in the dim glow of scattered overhead lights. The air was cooler here, tinged with the metallic scent of oil and ozone. In the center of the space stood a table, and on it lay what looked like a disassembled drone.

“Here’s the deal,” she says, her voice echoing slightly in the vast space. “This drone is standard-issue reconnaissance equipment. Military-grade. It’s been sabotaged—intentionally. I want you to fix it.”

I blinked, caught off guard by the sudden challenge. “Fix it?”

“You heard me,” she says, crossing her arms. “You’ve got one hour. And no manuals, no schematics. Just your brain and your hands.”

I hesitated, stepping closer to the table. The drone’s parts were scattered across the surface—wires tangled, circuits exposed, the casing warped in places. It was a mess. But it was also familiar. I’d spent years tinkering with broken things, piecing them back together with little more than intuition and persistence.

“Why?” I asked, looking up at her. “Why this test?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Because I need to know if you can do more than follow instructions. Out there”—she gestured vaguely, toward the world beyond the facility—“you won’t always have a guide. Sometimes, all you’ll have is your own ingenuity. Show me you can use it.”

The weight of her expectation pressed down on me, but beneath it, a spark ignited. This wasn’t just about fixing a drone. This was about proving I deserved to be here—not because of strings someone else had pulled, but because I had earned it.

I rolled up my sleeves and approached the table. The parts glinted under the overhead light, and I felt my focus narrow. This wasn’t a classroom or a competition. It was me, the drone, and the ticking clock.

The first thing I did was sort through the parts, laying them out in an order that made sense. Motors, rotors, wiring, the main circuit board—it was all here, but nothing was where it should be. Someone had gone out of their way to sabotage it. I spotted burned connections on the board and bent pins where the wiring should have been secured. Whoever had done this hadn’t just dismantled the drone; they’d tried to make it irreparable.

I glanced at the tools on the edge of the table—a basic kit, nothing fancy. A soldering iron, wire cutters, pliers. My hands hovered over them as I assessed the damage, mentally mapping out the steps I’d need to take.

The first twenty minutes flew by in a blur. I worked quickly but carefully, untangling wires, straightening bent components, and replacing what I could. My fingers ached from the fine motor work, but I pushed through, the faint scent of soldering filling the air. I stole a glance at the officer, who stood at the edge of the room, arms still crossed, her face unreadable.

“Thirty minutes left,” she called out, her voice breaking the silence.

I nodded, not bothering to reply. The worst part was the circuit board. Several traces were completely fried, and without replacements, I had to improvise. I stripped wires from less

critical parts of the drone, using them to bridge the gaps in the damaged board. It was messy, but it would hold—hopefully.

When I finally reassembled the casing and screwed the last panel into place, sweat was dripping down my forehead. I checked the clock. Five minutes left.

“Done,” I say, stepping back from the table.

The officer walked forward, her boots clicking against the floor. She inspected the drone, her sharp eyes scanning every inch. Then, without a word, she picked it up, carried it to a nearby console, and placed it on a testing platform. She typed a few commands, and the drone’s systems came online with a faint hum.

The rotors spun up, the lights blinked in sequence, and the console beeped to confirm operational status. The drone lifted a few inches off the platform, hovering steadily.

She turned to me, one eyebrow slightly raised. “Not bad.”

Relief flooded through me, but I kept my expression neutral. “Not bad?”

“You finished it,” she says, her tone clipped. “But it’s still jury-rigged. Those wire bridges won’t last under real conditions.”

I frowned, bristling at her critique. “To be fair, I didn’t have replacements.”

“Exactly,” she says, stepping closer. “And you adapted. That’s the point, Keener. You figured it out. Now we’ll see if you can keep doing it.”

She leaned in slightly, her voice lowering. “Welcome to the program. But don’t think for a second that you’re special. Everyone here is exceptional. The difference is whether you can stay that way.”

“Your quarters are in the same hallway as mine, the jackasses in command see it as some sort of cruel joke, isolation in an attempt to intimidate” her tone earnest for the first time since she has taken me aside. “It’s marked 2-A, and keep an eye on Stingray”, my expression obviously giving me away as to the fact that I had no idea who that was.

“They really didn’t brief you on anything did they” she says, a touch of worry in her voice now. “Stingray is the nickname for Barrick, the commanding officer, I’ll explain more later, privately” she says turning her attention to the drone for a moment. “Go get yourself cleaned up and unpacked, I’ll come by in about 2 hours”, turning her full attention back to the equipment in front of her, “oh and Keener”.

Grabbing my bag from the floor, “Yes ma’am” I asked, pausing at the door.

“Good work”.

As I stepped into the hallway, I felt the tension in my chest ease slightly. For the first time since I arrived, I allowed myself to feel the smallest flicker of pride. The challenge wasn’t over—not by a long shot—but I’d taken the first step. And if there was one thing I knew about fire, it was that it burned brightest under pressure.

Making my way down one of the many concrete hallways the facility seemed to create out of thin air, I followed the signs until I had made it to a section of hallway that ended in a dead end, doors on either side, each with their own letter and number designation, quickly finding the door marked 2-A, a nameplate on the wall read:

“Keener, Eleanor. Quarters 2-A”

The only other that was marked in the hall was 1-A, the nameplate read:

“Petrov, Nadia. Quarters 1-A”

I assumed she was the officer who had pulled me aside, I silently cursed myself for not asking her. Hindsight is 20/20 after all, turning to the door marked with my name and swiping the ID I had been provided with earlier. The door lock clicked back and the door opened into a simple space, a bed, dresser, table, chair and a bedside table is all that adorned the room. A small window was imbedded into the far wall, immediately I noticed it was a hidden window, if seen from outside, it would look like just part of the wall, probably bullet proof as well given everything about this facility.

A small bathroom was attached to the side, containing a shower, toilet, sink and mirror, nothing fancy, but it was certainly cleaner than the dorms in Tacoma. I quickly set about setting the alarms for 0400 on my PDA and setting it aside, unpacking the few clothes I had and putting them into the small dresser, making it to the bottom of the bag, I pulled a shirt out, tucked inside was the recon patch, the only belonging that meant anything.

Commented [CP1]: Corporal Nadia "Deadlock" Petrov, 28 at this point, 5'7, one of the only other women in the engineering program

December 20th, 2475

The facility was buzzing with activity, military tailors running amuck attempting to make everything perfect for the upcoming Military ball in Washington DC, this was the time for every branch to show off who they had pulled from the cadet lottery.

I had been handed what I thought was a plain black dress, it had turned out to be one of the most revealing outfits I had ever seen, far from practical. Corporal Petrov had one look at it before storming off to find Barrick, returning with him by the collar of his freshly fitted uniform.

“WHAT THE FUCK IS THIS” she shouted gesturing at the dress, “DO YOU WANT TO BE KNOWN AS THE COMMANDER WHO FUCKING SEXUALIZED A FOURTEEN YEAR OLD GIRL” there is fury behind every word, I am almost certain she is about to blow a fuse or pull her sidearm and put a round through his skull. “LIKE FUCK, WE’RE IN FRONT OF SOME OF THE MOST IMPORTANT PEOPLE IN POLITICS, AND YOU CHOOSE THAT?”. Fuck she is a scary woman, and I’m glad she is even somewhat on my side.

Barrick quickly conceded, and soon I am in the car with the Corporal, heading into Kiev to find something that would work in short order. The drive into Kiev was surreal. I’d spent most of my life confined to rigid structures—military bases, training facilities, and the sterile walls of the ASTP. But as the armored vehicle rolled through the outskirts of the city, the world outside seemed strangely alive. LED signs flickered against the early winter darkness, reflecting off frost-covered sidewalks. People bustled about in heavy coats, their faces flushed from the cold.

Petrov gripped the steering wheel with white-knuckled intensity, muttering something under her breath in Ukrainian—or maybe Russian. I didn’t ask. Her mood hadn’t improved since we left the facility, though she hadn’t directed any of her fury at me.

“I don’t understand what the hell they were thinking,” she muttered, her voice low but still laced with venom. “Parading you around like some damn showpiece. It’s disgusting.”

I didn’t know what to say. The military ball sounded intimidating enough without the added pressure of being “presented” as one of the ASTP’s successes. Whatever that meant.

“It’s fine,” I offered weakly. “We’ll find something that works.”

Petrov shot me a glance, her sharp features softening just slightly. “Keener, you’re fourteen. You shouldn’t have to deal with this bullshit.” She turned her attention back to the road, her tone softening further. “Stick with me, kid. I’ll make sure they don’t pull crap like this again.”

I didn’t reply, but her words settled into my chest, warm and unfamiliar.

When we reached the city center, Petrov parked the vehicle near a line of brightly lit shops. The streets were crowded despite the biting cold, and every breath hung in the air like a ghost. I stepped out of the vehicle, my boots crunching against the icy pavement. The lights, the sounds, the sheer energy of the city—it was overwhelming and exhilarating all at once.

Petrov grabbed her coat from the back seat and motioned for me to follow. “Come on,” she says. “We don’t have much time.”

The first shop we entered was a whirlwind of fabrics and mannequins. A saleswoman, polished and smiling, approached us with the kind of enthusiasm I’d only ever seen in training instructors when someone volunteered for extra drills.

“Looking for something specific?” she asked, her gaze flicking between Petrov’s military uniform and my wide-eyed stare.

“Something formal,” Petrov says curtly. “Elegant. And practical.”

The saleswoman nodded and led us toward a rack of dresses that seemed far more reasonable than the monstrosity I’d been handed earlier. Petrov sifted through them with practiced efficiency, muttering under her breath about cuts and hemlines. I stayed back, feeling out of place amid the vibrant fabrics and delicate designs.

“What about this one?” Petrov held up a simple navy-blue dress, its lines clean and understated. It wasn’t flashy, but it was beautiful in its simplicity. The kind of thing I imagined someone important might wear—not someone like me.

“Try it on,” she said, shoving it into my hands.

The fitting room was small and brightly lit, the kind of lighting that made every flaw glaringly obvious. I slipped into the dress, the fabric smooth and surprisingly warm against my skin. When I stepped out, Petrov was waiting, arms crossed and eyebrows raised.

“Well?” she asked.

I glanced at the mirror nearby, my reflection startling me. The dress fit perfectly, its subtle cut making me look older—more confident, somehow. For the first time in years, I didn’t feel like a scrappy orphan trying to keep up. I felt... dignified.

“It’s good,” I said quietly.

“Good?” Petrov repeated, her sharp tone returning. “Keener, you look like you could walk into a Union meeting and tell them to go to hell.”

A laugh escaped me before I could stop it, the tension of the day finally breaking. “Thanks, I think.”

Petrov smirked, tossing a velvety black jacket at me. “Keep that confidence, kid. You’re going to need it.”

As we left the shop, the dress carefully wrapped in a garment bag, I found myself glancing at the bustling streets again. It was the first time I'd felt... normal. Like I could exist in a world outside of military protocol and high-stakes challenges.

"Petrov," I said as we climbed back into the vehicle.

"Yeah?"

"Thanks," I say softly.

She didn't look at me, but the corners of her mouth lifted in the faintest of smiles. "Don't mention it, Keener. Now let's get you ready to show them what you're made of."

The next few days were a blur of movement, Stingray kept his distance, the Corporal making sure someone was always with me, either technical staff or herself, never another cadet or a member of the AST program, a line had been crossed, and she was going to hold it with her life.

I questioned what the jacket was for as soon as we arrive back at the facility after our trip into Kiev, her reply, "Well as much as I hate for you to wear the god awful ASTP patch, it's required" and had shown me how to stitch Velcro onto the jacket's shoulders.

The needle slid through the fabric effortlessly, securing the Velcro patch to the shoulder of the jacket stitch by stitch. Petrov watched silently from the corner of the room, arms crossed, her sharp gaze ensuring that this wasn't just a lesson in sewing — it was a matter of principle.

When I finished the second patch, I carefully pulled the recon patch from my PDA case and held it up to the light, wondering if there was any chance of saving the fraying edges. The golden eagle, wings spread across the faded radiation symbol, had lost some colour living in dark places, but the design was still as unmistakable as the first day it had captured my attention, the only object tying me to where I came from. I ran my thumb over some of the fraying edges, quickly moving to remove loose threads with a pair of scissors.

Petrov stood up, her expression darkening as she stepped closer. "That's not standard issue", she said quietly, her tone unreadable.

"It's all I have — all I've ever had which ties me to where I came from", I replied, meeting her gaze. "I don't know what it means or where it came from, but it's mine".

For a moment, I thought she might argue. Instead, she nodded. "Keep it close Keener. Sometimes the past has strange ways of revealing itself" taking the patch tenderly from my hands, as if it may fall to pieces at any moment. "She has seen combat, that's for certain", her eyes roving across the patch, deep in thought. Finally looking back at me, "if possible,

I'd like to take this with me for just a minute", she said, but seeing my look of absolute horror quickly states "It won't be for more than a minute, I promise, I want to see if I have this same shade of thread, try and bring her back to life".

I relax a little, and nod hesitantly, "You can even come with me if you'd like, just to make sure I'm not lying" she said, attempting to calm my nerves concerning something that clearly held massive value to me.

"Yes please" I replied, my voice small. That patch was the only constant besides the challenges and hell life had thrown into my lap.

Petrov tucks the patch into her inner pocket with incredible care, her expression softening. "Come on then" she said gesturing for me to follow. "The sewing kit I like to use is in my office. It won't take long".

I fall into step beside her, still uneasy but reassured by the tenderness in her tone. As we walked, the hum of the facility's machinery filled the silence, punctuated by the faint click of our boots against the tile floor.

"I'm surprised it's lasted this long," she said, her voice conversational but tinged with curiosity. "Most patches don't survive more than a decade or two of hard use."

"It's all that I have" I reply quietly, "No records, no family — just this".

She glanced at me, her sharp eyes softening again. "That's a heavy burden for a piece of fabric," she said, her lips curling into a faint smile. "But I suppose we all cling to something."

When we reached her office, Petrov motioned for me to sit at a small desk cluttered with fabric scraps and spools of thread. She retrieved the patch from her pocket and laid it on the desk under the bright light of a desk lamp.

"Definitely older than I thought," she muttered, running her fingers over the frayed edges. "And this stitching..." She leaned closer, narrowing her eyes. "This isn't standard issue for any unit I've seen. Could be custom, maybe even pre-dissolution."

"Pre-dissolution?" I asked, tilting my head.

Petrov hesitated, her expression unreadable. "Back when the Eastern Recon Divisions were still operational," she said carefully. "Before everything went to hell..." her voice trailed off, her fingers tracing the faded designs.

"But it's best not to drop down that rabbit hole" her focus returning to the task at hand. She rifled through her sewing kit, pulling out a spool of thread that matched the patch's faded

gold tones almost perfectly. “Let’s start by patching her up” she said briskly, as if to move my mind along from the weight of her earlier words.

As Petrov began the careful work of re-stitching the patch, the hum of the facility seemed to fade into the background. My mind raced with questions. If the patch was from the Exclusion Zone, what did that mean for me? For whoever left it with me? I had spent years staring at its design, tracing its edges, wondering who it belonged to. Now, for the first time, it felt like I was on the edge of an answer—just out of reach.

Petrov’s voice broke through my thoughts. “You said this was all you had. Do you remember where you found it?”

I shook my head. “It was with me when I was left at the base in Tacoma. A note with a name, and then — this.”

She nodded slowly, her eyes focused on the needle and thread. “Whoever left it with you wanted you to have it. That’s not nothing, Keener. Hold onto that”.

When she finished, she handed the patch back to me. I marveled at the work she had done, the frayed edges were gone, the design, sharper, almost new, the inky black of the shield contrasting sharply with the bright yellow of the radioactive symbol. It felt heavier, as if the repair had restored more than just the physical condition of the fabric.

“There” she said, leaning back in her chair. “She’s got a little more life in her now. Don’t let her fall apart again” her voice sincere.

I nod, clutching the patch tightly. “Thank you”.

Petrov studies me for a moment, her sharp gaze unreadable. “If you want to know more about it, keep your ears open in DC. People talk, especially at events like the ball, even more so if there are drinks. You’d be surprised how much a little alcohol can get someone to spill”.

Her words lingering as I left her office, the patch firmly in my grip. For the first time, I felt like I was holding more than a piece of fabric. I was holding a clue to my past, maybe even the key.

The day we were scheduled to leave came far too soon. The quiet anticipation that had settled over the facility in the days prior was gone, replaced with a flurry of last-minute checks and frenzied activity. Final inspections were made with military precision, every cadet standing at attention as officers moved down the line, their eyes sharp and unforgiving.

“You’re wrinkled,” one officer barked at a cadet a few rows over, his voice echoing through the hangar. “Fix it before we board, or you’ll be staying behind.”

I glanced down at my attire—a simple yet elegant navy-blue dress that Petrov had insisted I try on. I hadn’t expected to love it as much as I did. The fabric was soft and smooth against my skin, tailored perfectly to my frame, with just enough structure to feel formal without being restrictive. It was nothing like the gaudy monstrosity I’d been handed before—this dress felt right, like it belonged to me. For the first time, I felt less like an out-of-place cadet and more like someone who deserved to be here.

Petrov appeared at my side, inspecting me with a critical eye. “Not bad, Keener,” she said, her tone gruff but approving. “Try not to trip in those shoes. I don’t need to be explaining your clumsiness to a room full of brass.”

I rolled my eyes but straightened under her gaze. “Yes, ma’am.”

She smirked faintly before turning her attention to the rest of the group. “Everyone checked and cleared?”

“Yes, Corporal!” the cadets shouted in unison, the sound reverberating through the hangar.

The lightweight aircraft waiting for us was sleek and efficient, a product of the defense budget that seemed endless for events like this. Bags were stowed, assignments were handed out, and soon we were filing aboard, each cadet clutching their garment bags like lifelines.

As I found my seat near the window, the hum of the engines vibrating beneath me, I glanced over at Petrov, who was striding down the aisle with her usual air of authority. Her sharp gaze swept over the cadets, taking in every detail as if she were mentally cataloging who would cause trouble first.

When she caught my eye, she smirked faintly and sat down across from me. “Relax, Keener,” she said, her tone gruff but not unkind. “You’re going to do fine. Head up, shoulders back. Remember, they’ll be watching—but that doesn’t mean they need to know everything.”

I nodded, her presence was as steadying as it was intimidating, and knowing she’d be there made the prospect of the ball feel just a little less daunting. As the ramp closed and the aircraft began to taxi down the runway, I couldn’t help but feel a mixture of excitement and dread. This wasn’t just another ball. It was an introduction—to the brass, the politicians, the people who decided the futures of cadets like me.

Whatever happened next, I knew one thing for certain: this was going to be a night I'd never forget.

The descent was smooth, the hum of the engines replaced by the soft hiss of hydraulics as the aircraft touched down on the private airstrip. Through the small window, I caught glimpses of the sprawling venue ahead—a grand, sprawling building lit up like a beacon against the evening sky. Tall columns framed the entrance, and the faint glimmer of polished marble hinted at the kind of opulence I'd only ever seen in training videos.

As the hatch opened, a rush of cool evening air swept through the cabin, carrying with it the distant hum of voices and the faint strains of an orchestra warming up. Petrov was the first to stand, adjusting the crisp lapels of her dress uniform. She glanced back at us, her gaze sharp as ever.

"Alright, cadets," she said, her voice cutting through the low murmurs. "This isn't a social outing. You're here to represent the program, and that means no mistakes. Keep your heads high and your mouths shut unless someone asks you a question. Understood?"

"Yes, Corporal!" the group replied in unison, the echo of their voices ringing through the cabin.

Petrov's eyes flicked to me, and I thought I saw a glimmer of something—encouragement, maybe, or just her usual no-nonsense approval. "Keener," she said as we filed toward the exit. "You remember what I told you?"

"Head up, shoulders back," I repeated, adjusting my posture.

"And don't forget to smile," she added with a smirk. "You're the underdog here. Make it count."

Outside, the world felt larger than I'd expected. The venue loomed ahead, its towering columns and arched windows glowing with warm light. Cars and shuttles lined the circular drive, sleek black vehicles dropping off military officers, politicians, and other figures who looked every bit as polished as the marble steps they ascended.

Petrov stayed close as we walked toward the entrance, her presence grounding me in a way I hadn't anticipated. The other cadets moved in pairs and small groups, their murmured conversations blending with the distant hum of activity. Renault, of course, was at the front of the line, flanked by two others from his cohort who hung on his every word.

The inside of the building was even more intimidating than the outside. Chandeliers glittered high above, their light casting soft reflections on the polished floors. Officers in pristine uniforms mingled with civilians in elegant evening wear, cadets from other

branches in pockets around the room, their conversations a low hum of formality and muted laughter. The air smelled faintly of polished wood and something floral—lavender, maybe.

“Keener,” Petrov said quietly, nudging me toward the far end of the hall. “Stick with me for now. I don’t want you getting swallowed up in this mess. Not yet, anyway.”

I followed her lead, my eyes darting around the room as we navigated the sea of people. The grandeur of it all was overwhelming, but I forced myself to stand taller, my movements deliberate. *Head up, shoulders back.*

We stopped near a small group of officers, their conversation halting briefly as they noticed us. Petrov exchanged a sharp salute with one of them, a grizzled man in his fifties with an air of quiet authority. His gaze flicked to me, and I felt my stomach tighten.

“This her?” he asked, his voice low and even.

“Eleanor Keener,” Petrov replied, her tone firm. “ASTP Cadet. One of the best I’ve seen.”

The man’s sharp eyes scanned me briefly, his eyes lingering briefly on the recon patch, before he nodded. “Well, Keener,” he said, his tone unreadable. “Tonight’s your chance to prove that.”

I swallowed hard, forcing myself to meet his gaze. “Yes, sir.”

Petrov’s hand on my shoulder was a steadying presence as the man turned back to his group. “You’ll be fine,” she murmured. “Just remember—you’re not here to impress everyone. Just the ones who matter.”

As we moved deeper into the hall, the sheer scale of the event became even more apparent. Groups of polished officers and elegantly dressed civilians clustered near grand staircases and arched windows, their voices blending with the faint strains of music from the orchestra.

Petrov stayed close, scanning the room with the wariness of someone who didn’t trust glittering chandeliers and soft smiles. I kept close, her presence a lifeline as we weaved through the maze of uniforms and formalwear.

That’s when I saw him.

At first, I didn’t know who he was—just another face in the crowd. But something about him stood out, a quiet confidence that contrasted sharply with the other cadets. He wasn’t moving in the rigid, formal way so many of us had been taught; instead, he seemed... comfortable. Effortlessly so.

He was standing near the corner of the room, leaning against a polished marble column with a glass of something that looked like champagne in hand. His dark suit was perfectly tailored, the kind of sharp professionalism that spoke of wealth and importance, but his posture was relaxed, as though he found the whole event amusing rather than intimidating.

“That’s Damien Thorne,” Petrov said quietly, following my gaze. “The prodigy. Son of Dr. Isaac and Dr. Mary Thorne. Heard of them?”

I shook my head. The names didn’t ring a bell, though something about the way Petrov said it made me feel like they should.

“R&D legends,” she explained. “Top minds behind half the tech this place runs on. Weapons, systems, experimental propulsion—you name it, they’ve had a hand in it. And their golden boy is following in their footsteps.”

“Why’s he here?” I asked, unable to keep the curiosity out of my voice.

“Networking,” Petrov said with a faint smirk. “People like him don’t go through programs like ASTP. They’re born into connections. He’s here to meet the right people and probably laugh at the rest of us while he’s at it.”

Her words were tinged with disdain, but I could sense something else—a grudging respect she wasn’t willing to admit outright.

As if he could feel us watching, Damien’s gaze flicked in our direction. His eyes—sharp, calculating—met mine, and for a moment, I couldn’t look away. There was no malice there, no sneer like Renault’s, but there was something about the way he looked at me that made me feel like he already knew too much.

To my surprise, he smiled, a faint but genuine expression, and tipped his glass in a mock toast before turning his attention back to the conversation he was half-listening to.

Petrov scoffed. “Of course he’s charming. Comes with the territory.”

(Insert some bullshit and pleasant talk with officers here)

The hum of the orchestra swelled softly in the background as the naval ball reached its apex, the grand hall alive with muted conversation and the clink of glasses. I moved near the edge of the room, my gaze darting between clusters of officers and cadets. The weight of the evening pressed on my shoulders, a constant reminder of how out of place I felt in all this grandeur.

“Quite the event, isn’t it?”

The voice startled me, smooth and deliberate, cutting through the cacophony like a scalpel. I turned to find a tall woman standing beside me, her naval uniform immaculate and adorned with insignias that spoke of authority earned through blood and grit. The gold trim on her shoulders gleamed under the chandeliers, her rank displayed prominently for all to see.

“Admiral Cassandra Blackwell,” the woman introduced herself, extending a hand. Her gray eyes locked onto mine with a sharp intensity that made my heart quicken.

“Cadet Eleanor Keener,” I replied, quickly shaking the offered hand.

Her eyes drifted down to my jacket, pausing on the recon patch stitched onto the shoulder. A flicker of recognition passed across her face, subtle but unmistakable. “Interesting choice of adornment,” she remarked, her tone measured but carrying a note of curiosity. “Not many cadets walk around with one of those.”

I tensed, my thoughts racing. “It’s... a family heirloom, ma’am,” I said carefully, repeating the explanation Petrov had drilled into me. It wasn’t a lie.

Blackwell’s lips curved into a faint, knowing smile. “An heirloom. How quaint. Did you know there are people in this room who would recognize that patch without needing an explanation?”

My stomach churned. “No, ma’am,” I replied, my voice steady despite the unease creeping into my chest.

Blackwell tilted her head slightly, her sharp gaze unwavering. “I don’t expect you to. Most of those who recognize it wouldn’t speak of it openly. Recon work, particularly the kind tied to that insignia, tends to leave more questions than answers. It’s the nature of their missions—classified, dangerous, and often forgotten.”

Her words hung in the air, heavy and deliberate. I resisted the urge to fidget under her scrutiny, forcing myself to meet her gaze.

“Tell me,” Blackwell continued, her voice dropping just slightly. “Do you know what it really means? Or is it just a relic to you, something to remind you of someone else’s past?”

I hesitated, my mind racing for an answer that wouldn’t sound foolish. “I don’t know much, ma’am,” I admitted finally. “But it’s... personal. Important.”

Her expression softened, though her eyes remained sharp. “Personal, yes. Important, absolutely. You may not know the full weight of that patch yet, Cadet, but others will. And not all of them will see it favorably.”

I swallowed hard, my pulse quickening. “I’ll keep that in mind, ma’am.”

The admiral studied me for a moment longer before stepping closer, her voice low enough that no one else could overhear. “For what it’s worth,” she said, “I knew someone who wore a patch like that. They were remarkable—brilliant, determined, and unyielding. But they were also reckless. The kind of reckless that gets people killed.”

My breath caught, but I didn’t dare interrupt.

“Whatever path brought you to this patch, Keener, make sure you don’t repeat their mistakes. Symbols like that carry weight—the kind of weight that can either open doors or bury you under them. You’re young, but I sense there’s more to you than most people see. Prove me right.”

She straightened, her sharp gaze lingering on me for a moment longer. Then, with a curt nod, she turned to leave, her measured strides carrying her back into the crowd.

I stood rooted in place, my mind spinning. The patch, once a simple token of my past, suddenly felt heavier. Blackwell’s words echoed in my ears: *There are people in this room who know its story.*

I glanced around the hall, my eyes scanning the sea of faces. Who among them knew its significance? And what did that knowledge mean for me?

The questions churned in my mind as the music swelled again, the orchestra’s melody a stark contrast to the unease settling in my chest.

Later in the evening, as I lingered near the edges of the crowd, trying not to look too out of place, I heard a voice behind me.

“You’re new to this, aren’t you?”

I turned to find Damien standing there, his glass now empty but still in hand. Up close, he was even sharper than I’d first thought—every detail of his appearance polished, his presence oddly magnetic.

“What gave it away?” I replied, trying to keep my tone neutral.

“The way you keep checking the room like you’re expecting an ambush,” he said with a faint smile. “Relax. Most of these people are too busy pretending they’re important to notice anyone else.”

I crossed my arms, unsure whether to be annoyed or grateful for the advice. “And you? Are you pretending to be important too?”

He chuckled at that, the sound low and easy. “No need to pretend. People like you and me, we don’t fit into their world. But that doesn’t mean we can’t use it to our advantage.”

“People like us?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

His gaze flicked to the golden eagle on the shoulder of my jacket—my recon patch, displayed but still there for anyone observant enough to notice. “People with a knack for being underestimated,” he said quietly, his tone almost conspiratorial.

Before I could respond, someone called his name from across the room—a sharply dressed officer with a look of expectation. Damien gave me a slight nod. “Good luck tonight, Eleanor. Something tells me you’ll need it.”

And with that, he was gone, slipping back into the crowd as effortlessly as he’d appeared. In his absence, something else grew—something that hadn’t been there before. Confidence, maybe? No. It was interest, subtle but undeniable. Damien Thorne was charming, and even though I had no chance in hell with someone like him, a girl could dream, couldn’t she?

I let the thought linger for a moment, enjoying the brief escape from the noise and chaos around me. But, of course, peace never lasted long.

“Hey there, charity case,” came a familiar sneer from behind me, the voice grating enough to send a fresh wave of irritation through my veins.

I turned slowly, already bracing myself. Renault stood there, his ever-present smirk firmly in place, though this time he was flanked by only one of his usual cronies. I wondered idly where the other had disappeared to—maybe he’d accidentally insulted an officer and gotten dragged off. That would’ve been funny.

“Renault,” I said flatly, crossing my arms. “What do you want?”

He ignored my tone, his eyes narrowing as he gestured vaguely toward where Damien had disappeared. “Saw Thorne has taken an interest in you,” he said, his gaze flicking over me in a way that made my skin crawl. “Guess even someone like him can be distracted by a pretty face. Not much else you’ve got going for you, though.”

The smirk on his face was infuriating, and I felt the heat rising in my cheeks, but I wasn’t about to let him win. “That’s still better than being just another body in the meat grinder,” I snapped, my words sharper than I expected.

For a brief moment, his smirk faltered. It was a small victory, but one I clung to all the same. He recovered quickly, though, his expression shifting back to its usual smugness.

“Careful, Keener,” he said, his voice low and mocking. “Don’t let that mouth get you into trouble you can’t handle.”

“Careful, Renault,” I shot back, stepping closer. “Don’t let that ego get you into trouble *you* can’t handle.”

His eyes flickered with something—irritation, maybe—but he didn’t reply. Instead, he turned on his heel and walked away, his crony trailing behind him like a shadow.

As I watched him go, I let out a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding. Renault had a way of getting under my skin like no one else, but this time, I didn’t let him win. That small victory felt like a step forward, even if the path ahead was still uncertain.

The encounter with Renault left a bitter taste in my mouth, but I wasn’t about to let him ruin the night. I straightened my dress, forcing myself to take a deep breath and scan the room. The air was thick with the hum of conversation, the clinking of glasses, and the delicate strains of music from the orchestra. Around me, cadets and officers mingled with politicians and high-ranking officials, their polished smiles concealing agendas I couldn’t begin to understand.

Petrov appeared at my side, her sharp eyes immediately honing in on me. “What did Renault want?” she asked, her tone clipped.

“To remind me that I’m not supposed to be here,” I replied, trying to keep my voice steady.

Her lips pressed into a thin line. “You belong here as much as anyone else,” she said firmly. “Don’t let some spoiled brat like him make you think otherwise.”

I nodded, her words steadying the frustration swirling in my chest. Petrov wasn’t the sentimental type, but when she gave advice, you listened.

She led me into the hall, weaving through the crowd with her usual air of authority. I stayed close to her hip, my ears tuned to the conversations around us. Petrov stopped periodically to chat with groups of officers and specialists, each time introducing me with a brief explanation. I doubted they needed to hear the story—it was probably already well-known that an orphan with no money or connections had somehow managed to land a spot in the ASTP.

What struck me was their reactions. When Petrov casually mentioned that I wasn’t from an affluent family, I noticed their postures shift, their expressions softening. It was as though the fact that I hadn’t been pampered like the rest of the cadets put them at ease. I wasn’t

part of the privileged class they were used to handling, and somehow, that made me more relatable—or at least less threatening.

As we moved deeper into the hall, a well-dressed man approached, his uniform adorned with enough medals to make him stand out even in this crowd. Petrov stiffened slightly beside me, her posture straightening as he stopped a few feet away.

“Corporal Petrov,” he said, his voice smooth but commanding. “I see you’re keeping an eye on the next generation.”

“General Cross,” she replied, inclining her head respectfully. “Always.”

His sharp eyes turned to me, appraising me with the same precision one might use on a mission briefing. The weight of his gaze felt almost physical, pinning me in place.

“And you are?” he asked, though it sounded more like a demand than a question.

“Eleanor Keener, sir,” I said quickly, standing as straight as I could. “ASTP cadet.”

His gaze lingered, as if he were mentally cataloging every detail about me. “Well, Cadet Keener,” he said, his tone even but firm. “Tonight’s your chance to show us what ASTP produces. I trust you won’t disappoint.”

I swallowed hard, resisting the urge to fidget under his scrutiny. “No, sir.”

Cross gave a single nod before turning back to Petrov. “Good to see you, Corporal. Carry on.”

With that, he disappeared into the crowd, leaving me feeling like I’d just passed some kind of silent evaluation. Petrov’s hand landed lightly on my shoulder, grounding me.

“You handled that well,” she murmured.

I let out a slow breath, forcing my shoulders to relax. “Is he always like that?”

Petrov smirked faintly. “Cross? He’s not half as scary as he looks. But he doesn’t waste his time on people he doesn’t think are worth it. Take it as a compliment.”

Her words steadied me, though I couldn’t shake the lingering sense that General Cross’s interest wasn’t entirely casual.

As the night wore on, the music shifted, the orchestra striking up a waltz that drew people to the dance floor. I lingered near the edge, watching as couples twirled gracefully under the glittering chandeliers. The elegance of it all felt surreal, like I’d stepped into someone else’s life for the evening.

“Not a fan of dancing?” Damien’s voice broke through my thoughts, smooth and easy as ever.

I glanced over to find him standing beside me, his dark eyes studying the dancers with mild amusement. “Not particularly,” I admitted. “I’ve got two left feet.”

“Good thing it’s not about skill,” he said, offering a hand. “It’s about confidence. Care to try?”

I hesitated, glancing between his outstretched hand and the dance floor. “I’m not exactly dressed for embarrassment.”

“Then don’t embarrass yourself,” he said with a smirk. “Come on. You can’t let Renault have the satisfaction of seeing you sulk in the corner.”

How he knew what Renault had said I didn’t know, and frankly, I didn’t care. I placed my hand in his, letting him lead me onto the floor. The music swelled, and for a moment, I forgot about the patch, the general, and everything else weighing on my mind.

Damien’s movements were confident but not overbearing, his steps guiding mine with a precision that made it easy to follow. “See? Not so bad,” he said, his tone light.

“Speak for yourself,” I replied, though I couldn’t help but smile.

As the music carried us across the floor, I realized something: I wasn’t just surviving the ball. For the first time that evening, I felt like I belonged.

As the music faded and the dancers began to disperse, Damien led me off the floor with the same casual confidence he’d shown all evening. “Not bad, Keener,” he said, releasing my hand. “You might even pass for someone who does this regularly.”

I rolled my eyes, though I couldn’t help the small smile tugging at my lips. “Don’t get used to it. I’m more at home with grease and wrenches than glitter and chandeliers.”

Damien chuckled, a genuine laugh that caught me off guard. “That’s what makes you interesting. This place is full of people trying too hard to impress each other. You’re one of the few who doesn’t seem to care.”

Before I could reply, a sharp voice cut through the ambient noise. “Damien. A word.”

I turned to see a woman approaching, I immediately recognized her as Damien’s mother, her tailored suit a stark contrast to the flowing gowns and military uniforms. Her presence was commanding, her sharp gaze locking on Damien like a hawk.

“Excuse me,” Damien said, flashing me a quick smile before turning to follow her. The ease in his posture shifted slightly, his steps more deliberate as he walked away.

I watched them disappear into the crowd, curiosity gnawing at the edges of my mind. Why did Damien seem less sure of himself around his own mother?

Left alone again, I made my way toward the quieter side of the hall, where the air felt less heavy and the voices less pressing. The faint strains of music continued in the background, but I was focused elsewhere—on the patch attached to the shoulder of my jacket.

The admiral’s reaction had been eating at me all night. Her words, her expression—it all felt too deliberate to be coincidence. She’d recognized something, I was sure of it. And not in the casual way people recognize an old emblem. It was deeper than that, sharper. Almost... personal.

“Lost in thought, Cadet?”

I started slightly, turning to find Admiral Blackwell standing a few feet away, a glass of something dark in her hand. Her sharp gaze locked onto mine, softened only slightly by the faintest hint of curiosity.

“Just trying to figure out what the hell’s going on, ma’am,” I admitted, glancing around to make sure no one else was within earshot.

Blackwell stepped closer, her movements deliberate and measured. Her eyes flicked briefly to my shoulder, to the patch I knew she’d already noticed earlier. “You handled yourself well tonight,” she said, her tone even but carrying the weight of authority. “But you need to tread carefully.”

“Why, ma’am?” I asked, keeping my voice low. “What does that patch mean to you?”

Her lips pressed into a thin line, and for a moment, I thought she wouldn’t answer. Then, in a quieter voice, she said, “Not here, Cadet. Too many ears. But let’s just say symbols like that aren’t easily forgotten. If I recognized it, others will too—and not all of them with good intentions.”

The weight of her words settled heavily in my chest. Before I could press further, Blackwell straightened, her gaze hardening again. “You’ve got potential, Keener. Don’t squander it by asking the wrong questions in the wrong places.”

With that, she turned and disappeared into the crowd, leaving me rooted in place, more questions swirling in my mind than before.

A voice crackled over the PA system, signaling the end of the formal proceedings.

The crowd began to shift, conversations breaking up as people moved toward the exit. Cadets filed into neat rows, their movements automatic after months of training. Petrov gestured for me to join the others, her expression unreadable.

As I fell into line, I couldn't help but glance back toward the far end of the hall. Damien was there, speaking to his mother, their conversation tense but contained. His gaze flicked up, meeting mine briefly, and though I couldn't read his expression, there was something in his eyes that made my stomach twist.

Petrov's hand landed lightly on my shoulder, pulling me out of my thoughts. "Come on, Keener. Time to go."

I nodded, falling into step beside her as we made our way back to the waiting transport. The hum of voices and the glittering lights faded behind us, replaced by the cool stillness of the evening air. But the weight of the night stayed with me—Damien's cryptic charm, Cross's pointed words, Admiral Blackwell's intrigue, and the ever-present question of the patch I carried.

By the time we arrived back at the ASTP facility, the mood had shifted. The cadets, once lively and animated, were now subdued, the exhaustion of the evening settling over them like a heavy blanket. I trudged back to my quarters, the adrenaline from the ball finally wearing off.

Sitting on the edge of my bed, I pulled the patch from my jacket, running my fingers over its worn edges. Its golden eagle seemed to stare back at me, the faint lettering almost mocking in its faded mystery. Admiral Blackwell's words echoed in my mind—cryptic, deliberate, and far too specific to be a coincidence.

She'd seen it before. I was sure of it. And she hadn't been the only one. Her warning looping in my head: *symbols like that aren't easily forgotten*. If Blackwell had recognized it, who else in that room had? And why did it feel like they were all keeping secrets I wasn't meant to uncover?

I thought of Damien's knowing look, of the way he'd pointed out that people like us were underestimated. He'd noticed the patch, hadn't he? Or was I reading too much into every glance and word exchanged that night? My head swirled with questions, each one spiraling into another, forming a knot I couldn't untangle.

The patch wasn't just a relic of some forgotten past. It wasn't just a family heirloom or a comforting token to hold onto. It was a thread—fragile but connected to something far larger, something tangled in the very foundations of the world I'd found myself thrust into.

Whatever it meant, I knew one thing: pulling on that thread might unravel everything. It might bring answers I wasn't ready for, or truths I couldn't handle. But for the first time, I felt a flicker of resolve.

Maybe it was time to start pulling anyway.

The room hums with low murmurs as cadets shuffle into the hall, their conversations clipped and subdued. The tension is palpable, hanging in the air like a storm about to break. It's the first briefing of the second semester, and everyone knows what that means: changes, replacements, and more pressure than ever.

I take a seat near the edge of the row, my notebook resting on my lap, the sharp graphite of my pencil scratching against the paper as I jot down a few scattered thoughts. My head stays low, my focus deliberately on the page. It's easier that way—to avoid the whispers, the glances, the unspoken grief still lingering after the last mission.

Petrov strides in moments later, her boots striking the metal floor in crisp, even steps. She's in full uniform, her expression as unreadable as ever. But she isn't alone. Behind her is someone new—a tall figure whose relaxed posture seems at odds with the suffocating tension in the room. My pencil pauses mid-stroke as I glance up.

Petrov takes her place at the podium, her sharp gaze cutting across the cadets. "Listen up," she snaps, her voice slicing through the murmurs. Silence falls like a hammer. "We've had gaps in the program since last quarter's operation. Command has approved new candidates to fill those slots. Standards do not drop. You're still here because you're the best, and I expect you to prove it every day."

Her eyes sweep the room before she gestures to the man standing behind her. "This is Lieutenant Damien Thorne. He's joining the ASTP effective immediately. R&D background, advanced field experience in experimental tech deployment. He'll be integrated into your rotations starting tomorrow."

The name hits like a shockwave. My head snaps up, my pencil slipping from my fingers. There he is—Damien. The boy from the ball. The one who'd left me infuriated, intrigued, and everything in between. His jet-black hair is tousled in that same deliberate way, his steel-gray eyes scanning the room with an unnerving calm. And then, as if sensing me, his gaze locks onto mine.

My chest tightens. Of course it's him. Of all the people Command could have chosen, it's him.

“Thorne is here because Command sees potential,” Petrov continues, her voice cutting through the swirling thoughts in my head. “It’s up to him—and all of you—to prove them right. Dismissed.”

Petrov steps back, giving Damien the floor. He surveys us with an air of confidence that’s almost too casual, too practiced. “Nice to meet you all,” he says, his voice smooth, measured. “I’m looking forward to working with you. Or beating you, depending on how competitive this place really is.” His lips curve into a faint smirk, and his gaze flicks back to me—just for a moment. “Let’s make it interesting.”

I grit my teeth as heat rises to my cheeks. The cocky bastard hasn’t changed a bit.

The room erupts into whispers as Petrov dismisses us. Some cadets glance at Damien curiously, others with thinly veiled annoyance. Renault’s sneer is impossible to miss. “Great,” he mutters loud enough for everyone to hear. “Another golden boy sent to babysit us.”

Damien doesn’t react, stepping down from the podium and weaving through the crowd with infuriating ease. But as he passes me, he slows just enough to lean in, his voice low and far too familiar. “Didn’t think I’d see you again so soon, Keener,” he murmurs. “Miss me?”

I glare at him, my words a sharp whisper. “What the hell are you doing here?”

He straightens, his smirk unfazed. “Same as you. Trying not to die.”

And then he’s gone, slipping through the crowd like he belongs here—like he’s always belonged here. The worst part? A part of me wonders if he might be right.

June 5th, 2476

Despite its prestige and remote location, cadets in the program were granted summers to do as they pleased—provided they returned by August 12th. Missing that deadline risked immediate expulsion from the program. The catch? To leave for the summer, a release from duty had to be signed by someone from your immediate family, a prior unit, academy division, or even a paid representative hired by your family.

I had none of those.

I quickly discovered that the Tacoma division of the Naval Academy — the closest thing I had to a "prior unit"—had conveniently lost my records. They claimed there was nothing they could do for me. But deep down, I suspected the truth: my record hadn't been lost. It had been erased, scrubbed from every database, leaving me in bureaucratic limbo.

That left me stranded in Kiev with no family, no money, and no connections. The thought of staying on-site for the summer, alone in the facility's sterile halls, was unbearable. I was determined to find another way—even if it meant taking risks.

One by one, they came: parents, officers, businessmen. Each one took a cadet under their wing, their presence a reminder of connections I didn't have. By the time the dust settled, it was just Renault and me, the only two left standing in the echoing hall. The idea of being stuck here with him as my sole company was enough to turn my stomach.

When his parents arrived—both of them, of course—I couldn't help but let out a small sigh of relief. His mother's sharp gaze flicked to me as his father spoke to the officers managing the handoffs. "Isn't that the charity case from Tacoma?" I heard her whisper after several pointed glances.

"Yes," Renault replied curtly, his tone clipped and devoid of interest. He didn't spare me a second glance until they were walking away, his bag slung over his shoulder. That's when his eyes met mine. For the briefest moment, there is something almost resembling pity in his expression. Almost.

And then he's gone, leaving me alone.

"Well, Keener," Barrick's voice cutting through the quiet, his sneer unmistakable as he approaches the table where the release forms sit. "Looks like you're the last fish in the pond. Can't say I'm surprised."

I opened my mouth to retort, to defend myself, but before I could get a word out—

"Stingray," a sharp, commanding voice interrupted. Corporal Petrov strode into the room, her presence as authoritative as ever. She didn't even glance in my direction as she fixed Barrick with a glare sharp enough to cut steel. "Don't you have something better to do than taunt a cadet? Or is that the limit of your leadership skills?"

He bristled but said nothing, his lips pressed into a thin line as he turned and walked away. Petrov waited until he was out of earshot before shifting her attention to me. Her expression softened, just slightly.

"Come on, Keener," she said, motioning for me to follow. "We need to talk."

I hesitated. "About what?"

She glanced over her shoulder, raising an eyebrow. “Unless you plan to spend your summer staring at these walls, we need to figure out where you’re going.”

We ended up in her quarters, a small, utilitarian space with little more than a bed, a desk, and a chair. She leaned against the desk, arms crossed, her sharp gaze fixed on me.

“Look, I don’t usually do this,” she began, her tone gruff but not unkind. “But I can’t stand the idea of you being left here like some forgotten stray. You’ve got potential, Keener, even if half the officers here are too blind to see it.”

I blinked, unsure where this was going. “So... what are you saying?”

Petrov sighed, running a hand through her short-cropped hair. “I’ve got connections with the armored division in Kiev. Engineers. Good people. You spend the summer with them, work hard, and you’ll come back here with more experience than any of these pampered brats. Plus a little cash lining your pockets,” a mischievous grin appearing.

My chest tightened with a mix of surprise and gratitude, though I wasn’t sure I believed her. “Why would you do that? You don’t even know me.”

She smirked. “Don’t flatter yourself. I’m not doing it for you. I’m doing it because I hate seeing talent wasted, and you’ve got something. If you want to prove me wrong, fine. But if you’re smart, you’ll take the offer.”

I swallowed hard, my fingers clutching the edge of the chair I’d sunk into. “What’s the catch?”

“No catch,” she said, straightening. “But don’t think for a second I’ll go easy on you if you screw it up.”

I nodded slowly. “Okay. I’ll do it.”

“Good,” she said, her smirk widening into something resembling a smile. “Now grab your gear. We leave at sunrise.”

We had left at sunrise as was expected, and soon enough I was dropped off outside the gates of a vehicle yard, military equipment ranging from your standard Humvee to MBT’s sat in various stages of repair or scrap, I walked towards the main hanger, as I had been instructed to by Petrov before she had taken off to god knows where, it wasn’t my business at the end of the day.

The hangar was alive with noise—metal grinding against metal, the hum of welding torches, and the rhythmic clank of tools against steel. I stood near the entrance, clutching the strap of my bag, feeling smaller than ever amid the towering hulks of tanks and armored vehicles.

“Keener, right?” A gruff voice called out. I turned to see a broad-shouldered man in grease-streaked fatigues, his sharp eyes scanning me like I was an untested machine part. “Corporal Petrov said you’d be joining us. Didn’t think she meant a kid.”

I straightened my shoulders, forcing the nerves out of my voice. “I’m here to work, not to be babysat.”

A low chuckle came from behind him, and another crew member—a wiry woman with short-cropped hair—smirked. “We’ll see about that. Hope you don’t mind getting your hands dirty, kid.”

“Try me,” I shot back, though my heart was pounding.

After a fight with poorly designed parts and terrible placement of components, the engine roared to life, sputtering unevenly before finally settling into a steady hum. I wiped the grease from my hands, glancing at the skeptical faces around me.

“Told you it wasn’t the fuel pump,” I say, stepping back from the MRAP. “The coolant lines were misaligned.”

The wiry woman—Katya, I’d learned—crossed her arms, a grudging smile tugging at her lips. “Alright, Keener. You’ve got some brains under all that attitude.”

It was strange how quickly a month passes, despite everything, I found solace in my work with the Kiev engineering crews, and the daily cycle started, every day different, yet every day the same. The armored crews would bring back a damaged vehicle, or a vehicle with something broken or failing, we would diagnose the problem, fix it, and send it back out.

I had also made some new acquaintances, as well as bumped into an someone I had met at the Naval Ball in DC, the grizzled vet who Petrov had saluted, his name was Sargent Lucas Carter, nicknamed bullseye, 50 years old and still fighting, rough around the edges at first, but always willing to lend a hand. He ran the vehicle depot and repair shop here in Kiev, I had run into him, literally, while looking for a replacement coolant tube for an MBT fusion generator. We had gotten along well, although I didn’t interact with him often enough to make a conclusion.

“Hey Ellie!”, a voice yelled into the engineering pit where I stood. I looked up from the engine I had been working on and met the eyes of Ethan Moreno, a private first class, a grin spread across his face like always.

“Hey Ethan!” I shout back in response, taking his outstretched hand and being pulled topside, “What brings you to my doorstep?” anytime he had that look on his face it meant

Commented [CP2]: Age at point: just turned 15
Setting: engineering bay, Kiev university of advanced sciences and engineering, armored division. She goes to Kiev during the summers.
Private First Class Ethan Moreno, 19, 5’8, a friend
Sergeant Lucas “Bullseye” Carter, 52, 5’11, athletic build, buzzed brown hair, no stubble to be seen, rough on the edges, a lovable bear on the inside

that he had either broken something in spectacular fashion, or had made a really stupid bet and won. I silently prayed it was the first, that could at least be fixed.

“Well, Sergeant Carter learned that you haven’t fired a gun before”, his smile widening, “I think he said something along the lines of “Well that’s fucking unacceptable”, and stormed off to find the range officer”, his laugh fills the room as he recounts the scene, voices and all. I turn to wipe my hands, the engine grease practically dripping from my palms.

“Yes Moreno, it was quite funny”, said a cool voice from somewhere behind him, he spins quickly and salutes the woman who had just walked in. “Corporal Pretrov ma’am, I-I meant nothing by it”, I almost forgot he stuttered when scared shitless. I curse to myself as that is going to be a setback in his confidence.

“Don’t worry Moreno, I won’t report you, your retelling was quite accurate. At ease”, Ethans hands fall to his side, her gaze softens as she turns to me, she favoured me, as the only other woman in the ASTP, it was good to have someone like yourself around. “Keener, Lucas asked me to come retrieve you”, she stated matter of fact like, it had been almost a month since I had last seen her, and she had refused to tell me where she was going when I asked while being dropped off.

I look at her puzzled, “Have I done something wrong ma’am?”, matching her cool and steady voice tone. My mind tramping back through the past couple weeks, I had pulled off so much bullshit when fixing the vehicles that came back, it could be anything.

“Don’t worry Keener, you haven’t done anything wrong, I’m to bring you to the range, as Moreno stated”, her gaze shifting slightly towards him, he’s stiff as a board, “You may as well come with, as it seems you have nothing better to do”, he breathes out a breathy sigh as he drops his shoulders and relaxes.

“Come on then”, her voice a little more urgent, “We don’t want to keep Lucas waiting”.

We made our way to the shooting range, I could smell the gunpowder used by the older rifles on demonstration to the public and new recruits, the equipment was nearly 250 years old, still working like it was fresh off the assembly line. I spot him from a mile away, the Sergeant was never one to blend into crowds, his existence in a room always brought a powerful presence, the very definition of “Fuck Around and Find Out”.

We turn a couple heads from the civies and fresh recruits alike as we approach this mountain of a man, stopping a short few feet away with the Corporal at the front.

“Sargent Carter” Corporal Petrov calls out, I quickly snap at attention, with Ethan bringing up the rear. The Sargent turns away from the clearly terrified range officer and towards the three of us.

“Ah, Petrov, I see you’ve brought Ms. Keener, hopefully it didn’t take too much coaxing to get her out of an engine bay and onto the range”, a hearty laugh emanating from the grizzled veteran. “At ease, all of you, you look like stiff boards”, his eyes click over to me, “And how are you today, Ms. Keener?” his stern voice cracking a little, as if he truly meant the words.

I struggled to find the right phrasing as I had never really been a part of their rank structure, keeping to my designated zones and staying out of trouble allowed for freedom in engineering. “I’m doing well today sir” I say holding my ground under his steely gaze, “still wondering how our gear comes back from each deployment in worse condition than the last”, if I was going to get into his good graces, I may as well try the humor he had introduced.

He remains emotionless for a moment before a smile breaks out on his lips, “You’ve got that damn right Keener, we need you all in engineering more than ever at the moment” he says, his tone lightening for a moment. Good play Ellie, good play.

“Now, what’s this I hear about never having fired a gun before” his expression shifting back to his usual no-nonsense demeanor.

“No sir, I have never fired a gun” I say, a little caught off guard by the sudden shift in tone.

“Parents never took you out? Or just didn’t own guns?” he says, beginning to walk towards an open shooting position, a black rifle case in his right hand, gesturing for me to fall in with his stride.

For a moment, I hesitate. *Parents*. The word lands awkwardly, stirring a familiar unease. “I... don’t know, sir. Never knew them,” I say finally, keeping my tone as steady as I can.

His stride slows just slightly, and he glances at me with an unreadable expression before continuing. “Fair enough,” he says, his tone neutral. “Well, there’s a first time for everything.”

Turning his attention to Petrov, “So, Nadia”, his tone playful “You drop your prodigy on my doorstep and then run off, I might just keep Ms. Keener for myself!” laughing to himself.

“You know where I went Lucas, and besides...” she says jabbing his arm “it’s not like I haven’t covered your ass more than once, need I remind you that you forgot your husband’s birthday one year?”.

The Sargent turned a shade of dark crimson “And it never happened again” he quickly retorted.

Stopping beside the shooting position, Sargent Carter placed the rifle case on the table and flipped the latches open with practiced ease. “Well, Ms. Keener,” he says, his voice carrying a hint of pride as a smile spread across his face. “Today is a good day.”

He reached into the case, pulling free a sleek, unmistakable rifle. “We happen to have an OTs-03 SVU in the arsenal, and—” he paused for dramatic effect, “—fresh sets of 7.62x54r ammunition. A rare find these days.”

My eyes flicked to the rifle, but it was Petrov’s reaction that caught my attention. For the first time, she seemed genuinely starstruck, her gaze locked on the weapon as though it were a relic from another life.

“And yes, Nadia,” Lucas added with a knowing grin, glancing at her as he handed the rifle over, “it does fully function. I brought it in specially for you. I know you’ve got a particular fondness for this one.”

Petrov stepped forward, her movements almost hesitant as if she didn’t trust what she was seeing. Her hands trembled slightly as she took the rifle, cradling it like it might vanish if she blinked too hard. She turned it over carefully, examining the details, her fingers brushing against the stock.

“Lucas...” she murmured, her voice softer than I’d ever heard it. She pulled the bolt back, the sound sharp and clean. “How did you get this?”

Lucas leaned against the table, his grin widening. “That, my friend, is my secret to keep. But I will tell you this—it wasn’t easy.”

Petrov looked up at him, disbelief and gratitude flickering in her expression. “You have no idea what this means,” she says, her voice steadier now, though still laced with awe. “This rifle—it’s... history.”

“I figured you’d appreciate it,” Lucas replied, folding his arms across his chest. “You’re one of the few people who knows its value beyond the specs.”

“Why this rifle?” I asked cautiously, glancing between the two of them. “What’s so special about it?”

Petrov turned her gaze toward me, her expression unreadable for a moment before she spoke. “The SVU isn’t just a rifle—it’s a piece of history. Compact, precise, designed for urban warfare. But it was also used by some of the best reconnaissance units in operations no one talks about anymore.”

Her fingers traced the metal, her tone distant. “It’s... more than that, though. For some of us, this rifle was a last resort, the only thing that stood between life and death.”

Lucas gave a small, knowing nod but saying nothing, letting Petrov's words hang in the air.

Petrov handed the rifle back to Lucas, her expression unreadable but her movements careful, almost reverent. "Alright, Keener," she says, turning her sharp gaze on me. "Let's see what you're made of."

I blinked, surprised. "Me?"

"You wanted to know what's so special about it," she replied, motioning toward the rifle as the Sargent loaded a magazine with practiced ease. "No better way to learn than hands-on."

My stomach twisted. I'd never held a rifle, let alone fired one, and the way Petrov's expression shifted to something akin to a challenge only made the knot tighten. But I wasn't about to back down—not in front of her.

Sargent Carter smirked as he handed the rifle to me, barrel pointed safely toward the ground. "It's got a bit of kick, so don't let it surprise you," he says, his tone casual but his eyes watchful.

The rifle felt heavier than I expected, its cold metal pressing against my palms. I adjusted my grip awkwardly, the stock slipping slightly as I tried to position it against my shoulder. Petrov stepped closer, her sharp eyes tracking my every move.

Petrov adjusted the rifle in my hands, her movements deliberate. "The OTs-03 SVU is a shortened variant of the Dragunov SVD," she explained, her voice low but clear. "It's lighter, more compact—designed for urban operations where space is tight. But don't let that fool you. It's just as deadly, and it'll punish you if you don't respect it."

Lucas stepped closer, gesturing toward the rifle's receiver. "This is a gas-operated, semi-automatic system," he added. "Bolt cycling is smooth, but if you don't handle it properly, you'll feel it kick. Hard. Keep the stock tight against your shoulder. Loose form means bruises—or worse."

"Not like that," she says, her voice low but firm. She reached out, her hands surprisingly gentle as she adjusted the rifle in my hands. "Anchor it here," she says, tapping the spot between my collarbone and shoulder. "Tighten your grip. If you let it move, it'll bruise you—or worse."

I nodded, my heart pounding as I raised the rifle toward the target downrange. The iron sights lined up shakily, my breath uneven.

"Relax," Petrov says, her tone softer now. "Control your breathing. In through your nose, out through your mouth. Keep your focus on the target, not the rifle."

I took a deep breath, the weight of her words settling over me like a steadying hand. The target seemed impossibly far, a small, white silhouette against the dark backdrop of the range.

"Alright, Keener," Sargent Carter says, stepping back. "Let it rip."

My finger hesitated on the trigger for a moment before pulling it. The crack of the shot echoed through the range, the recoil slamming into my shoulder despite Petrov's adjustments. The rifle jolted in my hands, but I managed to keep my grip steady. The target downrange jerked slightly, a small hole punched cleanly through its edge.

"Not bad," Carter says, a grin spreading across his face. "Could've been center mass, but you didn't miss entirely."

Petrov raised an eyebrow, stepping forward to adjust my stance again. "Your grip's still too loose. This is a tool, Keener. Respect it, or it'll kick harder next time."

Her words stung, but I bit back a retort, resetting my position. The second shot felt smoother, the recoil still jarring but manageable. The hole appeared closer to the target's center this time, and a flicker of pride sparked in my chest.

"Better," Petrov says, her voice clipped but lacking the usual sharpness. "Keep practicing. You've got potential, but don't let it go to your head."

Lucas chuckled. "Don't listen to her too much, Keener. That's high praise coming from her."

Petrov shot him a look, but I caught the faintest hint of a smirk on her lips before she turned away. "Load another mag," she says, motioning for Lucas to step in. "You're not done yet."

Petrov then motioned for Lucas to reset the target. "We're moving to controlled pairs. Two shots in quick succession. Focus on keeping the rifle steady between shots. Use your core, not just your arms."

Carter leaned in as he swapped out the magazine. "And don't forget your trigger discipline. Smooth, consistent pressure. No jerking. You're guiding the shot, not punching it out."

I took another deep breath, lining up the sights once more. The first shot cracked through the air, followed by the second almost instinctively. The recoil still rocked me, but the rifle stayed steadier this time. Both bullets struck the target, closer to the center.

"Good," Petrov says, her tone neutral but approving. "You're learning. Now, let's work on transitions."

She walked over to the range console and keyed in a command. Additional targets popped up at varying distances. Some were stationary, others began to move slowly from side to side.

“Your job is to engage multiple targets quickly and efficiently,” she says. “Start with the closest, then transition to the furthest. Adjust your aim with your body, not just your arms. It’s about fluidity.”

The moving targets were far more difficult than I’d expected. My first shot at the nearest target grazed the edge, and the second shot missed entirely as I struggled to keep up with its pace.

“You’re chasing the target,” Petrov says sharply. “Don’t follow it like a spectator. Anticipate where it’s going. Lead your shot.”

Lucas chimed in. “Think of it like predicting a punch in a fight. You’re aiming for where the target *will* be, not where it is.”

I reset my stance, tightening my grip and focusing on the rhythm of the moving targets. The next shot hit just off-center, and the one after that landed near the bullseye. My breath came quicker now, adrenaline buzzing in my veins as I transitioned to the next target.

By the time I finished the sequence, my arms ached, and my shoulder throbbed, but I’d managed to hit most of the targets. Not perfectly, but enough to feel like progress.

Petrov stepped forward, taking the rifle from my hands and examining it. “Not bad,” she says finally. “You’ve got a lot to learn, but you’re not hopeless.”

Lucas grinned. “High praise coming from her.”

I let out a shaky breath, wiping my palms against my pants. “Thanks. I think.”

Petrov’s sharp gaze softened just slightly. “Remember, Keener. This isn’t just about hitting a target. It’s about discipline, control, and knowing when to pull the trigger—and when not to.”

Her words lingered as Lucas packed up the rifle, the weight of the lesson sinking in. This wasn’t just a shooting session. It was a test—and I’d passed. Barely.

I turned to Petrov, my voice hesitant but curious. “Something you said earlier, this rifle is nearly 450 years old, how was it a last resort, I thought that most of our long range was based in railguns now”.

Petrov's eyes dropped to the floor, "Yes, it is archaic by our technological standards, but out in the field, you work with what you have" her voice distant. Carter moved to stand beside her, placing a hand on her shoulder, bringing her back to reality.

"We're all military Keener" Carter says solemnly "some information is better of buried, but I can't fault your curiosity".

Placeholder transition/more information

The rest of the summer passed quickly and without much hassle, I picked up several more useful skills and spent many weekends on the range with Sargent Carter, honing my skills with a rifle, knowing that my colleagues in the ASTP were already well ahead of me in skills, and that I would need to work double time to close the skill gap.

Year 2

Lectures begin swiftly, a relentless pace introducing new skills and concepts daily. The fundamentals of quantum mechanics are laid bare, weaving into the intricacies of warp core mechanics, the systems of nuclear fusion, and even the outdated, yet foundational, technologies of fission. Each lesson feels like unraveling a mystery, connecting the dots between the past, present, and future of humanity's technological evolution.

History features prominently—a detail many of my colleagues resent. They murmur their frustrations during breaks, unable to grasp why our mentors insist on weaving the past into the fabric of our advanced studies. But I understand. History holds answers, warnings, and clarity that many seem too shortsighted to appreciate.

Our primary mentor, a grizzled man with eyes that seem to pierce through time itself, has no patience for their complaints. He is quick to snap at those not paying attention. "Time is a flat circle," he often growls, his voice carrying the weight of centuries. "If we refuse to learn from the past, we are doomed to repeat it."

His words resonate with me, aligning with the evidence humanity has already written into its scars. The two world wars of the 20th century stand as grim testaments to hubris and short-sightedness. Then there are the catastrophes like Chernobyl—an event etched into global consciousness. I remember his lecture vividly: how he described the 1986 meltdown not as an isolated disaster, but as a chilling echo of another incident at a similar power plant. Both had stemmed from the same reckless doctrine: push the limits until the system breaks.

And when systems as volatile as those do break, the fallout is not just physical but deeply psychological, reshaping how entire generations view progress, danger, and hubris. He compared the incident to the cycles of conflict and collapse that humanity seemed unable—or unwilling—to break free from.

I find myself nodding along when he speaks, even as others roll their eyes or doodle in the margins of their notes. Perhaps they've yet to understand what he's teaching us. Technology, innovation, even progress itself—all of it means nothing if we don't temper it with the wisdom of the lessons learned the hard way.

A couple days later or some bs, idk working it out

The room is quieter than usual, a rare occurrence for the ASTP lecture hall. Normally, cadets chat in hushed tones before Petrov arrives to begin the day's training, but today, the atmosphere feels heavier, loaded with an unspoken tension.

I glance around, trying to read the faces of the others. Renault is leaning back in his chair, his arms crossed and his expression as smug as always. Across the room, Kira Bane taps her fingers against her notebook, her sharp eyes darting toward the podium every few seconds. Even Damien, who's usually annoyingly relaxed, is sitting straighter than usual, his fingers drumming against the table in front of him.

Something is definitely up.

Petrov strides in, her boots echoing against the metal floor. She's flanked by two unfamiliar figures—both wearing sleek, black tactical uniforms that are sharper and more functional than anything we've ever been issued. One of them, a man with a scar running down his jawline, scans the room with the cold precision of a predator. The other, a woman with cropped blonde hair and an air of quiet authority, doesn't so much as blink as she surveys the cadets.

Petrov stops at the podium, her usual scowl firmly in place. "Listen up," she says, her voice cutting through the silence like a knife. "Today marks the beginning of a new phase in your training. Command has decided that the ASTP is overdue for an integration program with one of the Navy's most elite units."

Whispers ripple through the room, but Petrov's glare silences them instantly. She gestures toward the two strangers. "This is Captain Elias Grayson and Lieutenant Sara Voss, both senior members of Recon Unit Specter."

The name sends a ripple of shock through the cadets. Everyone's heard of Specter. They're the Navy's ghost unit, the ones sent in when everyone else has failed—or when failure isn't

an option. Their operations are classified to the point of myth, but the few stories that leak out are enough to strike both awe and fear into anyone who hears them.

“They’ve been assigned to oversee the integration of select cadets into recon-level training,” Petrov continues. Her eyes sweep across the room, daring anyone to look away. “This is an opportunity, not a guarantee. You’ll be evaluated every step of the way, and if you don’t meet their standards, you’re out. Permanently.”

I feel my stomach tighten. This isn’t just about excelling anymore—it’s about survival. The stakes have never felt higher.

Captain Grayson steps forward, his voice low and gravelly. “Recon isn’t just about skill—it’s about trust. Your team is your lifeline. Out there, no one cares how fast you can run or how many targets you can hit if you can’t watch someone’s back while they watch yours. We’re here to find out if any of you are capable of that.”

His gaze sweeps over the room, landing briefly on me before moving on. “The next few months will be hell. If you think you’ve seen hard training so far, think again. Recon doesn’t just break you—it rebuilds you. If you make it through, you’ll earn a place among the best. If you don’t...” He shrugs. “Well, there are worse things than washing out.”

Lieutenant Voss steps forward next, her voice calm but firm. “We’ve reviewed your files. Some of you have potential, others... not so much. Starting today, we’ll be running specialized exercises to determine who’s worth our time. I suggest you take this seriously.”

I glance at Damien, who meets my gaze with a raised eyebrow. His smirk is gone, replaced by something sharper, more focused. For once, he looks like he’s taking this as seriously as I am.

Petrov clears her throat, drawing our attention back to her. “First evaluation starts now. Head to the outdoor training grounds. You have ten minutes to get your gear and report. Dismissed.”

The room erupts into motion, cadets scrambling to grab their equipment and head for the exit. I move quickly, my mind racing as I try to process what this means. Recon-level training. Specter. The chance to prove I’m more than just another cadet.

As I sling my pack over my shoulder, I catch Damien’s voice behind me. “Excited, Keener? Sounds like your kind of nightmare.”

I turn to face him, my expression carefully neutral. “Excited isn’t the word I’d use.”

He grins, that familiar cocky edge returning. “Don’t worry, I’ll make sure you don’t fall behind.”

“Funny,” I shoot back, my tone dry. “I was about to say the same thing to you.”

We file out of the hall with the others, the weight of what’s to come settling over us like a storm cloud. For better or worse, everything is about to change.

Final year bullshit

Dream sequence before final practical

Timestamp: April 15th, 2479

The desolation stretches before me, endless and silent. Broken buildings jut out of the earth like jagged teeth, their walls weathered by time and abandonment. The Geiger counter on my hip clicks steadily, a constant reminder of where I am—a place forgotten by history but not by time.

Ahead, the carcass of a warship looms. Its name is emblazoned in faded letters on the steel hull: USS Kalypso. The sight of it makes my stomach twist. The ship is a relic, like so many things out here—a monument to something long dead.

I approach cautiously, my boots crunching over debris. A large breach in the hull catches my eye, a jagged tear just wide enough for me to squeeze through. Inside, the darkness swallows me whole, save for the faint light streaming through the breach. The air is thick with damp and decay, and my footsteps echo unnervingly.

To my left, faded letters mark the direction of the Hangar Bay. To the right, Armory. My gaze lingers on the latter, drawn by some unseen pull. A tattered banner hangs loosely on the wall nearby. The sight of it stops me in my tracks.

The symbol is unmistakable: a golden eagle clutching a radiation symbol. The sight taunting me as it always does, a reminder of the patch I wear and the questions it carries.

Something moves at the edge of my vision.

I spin, rifle raised, my heart pounding. A shadowy figure peeks out from behind the bulkhead leading to the armory. Humanoid in shape, but wrong. Its eyes—or where its eyes should be—are black voids, consuming the dim light around them.

Its tattered jacket hangs loosely from its shoulders, and my blood runs cold. The patch on its right shoulder mirrors mine exactly.

I've seen this figure before. In dreams. Nightmares. Always vague and undefined, a specter haunting the edges of my consciousness. But this time is different. It's sharper, more real.

"Hello?" I call out, my voice steady despite the tremor in my chest. The rifle remains shouldered, ready. I don't expect a reply—I never have before.

But this time, it speaks.

"Come... find us... Eleanor," it rasps in broken Ukrainian, its voice grating like rusted metal. A shadowy hand reaches out, beckoning me forward.

I don't move. "This isn't my first rodeo," I say, keeping my aim steady. "How can I trust you?"

The figure twitches violently, its form distorting as though struggling to remain whole. Its next words come slowly, haltingly. "Born... Ukraine... 2461. Abandoned... Unknown... 2461."

The air grows heavier, the figure's presence pressing down on me like a weight.

"I know my past well enough," I reply, though my voice falters. Whoever—whatever—this is, it knows me. It knows too much.

"Friend... traitor..." The words seem to pain the figure, its body convulsing with each utterance.

"Family... hunted..."

"Documents... redacted..."

"History... forgotten..."

The shadow steps into the light, its form shifting violently. One moment, it's a figure in full recon gear; the next, it's faceless. Then, it begins to change.

I see them. Petrov. Carter. Blackwell. The Thornes. Their faces flicker into focus, one after another, before dissolving into shadow again.

"Daughter... abandoned... Name... changed..."

The final form stops me cold. A young girl stands before me, clutching a patch tightly in her small hands. I recognize her immediately—it's me. Four years old, confused and terrified, clinging to the only piece of identity I have left.

"Parents... KIA..."

"Daughter... located..."

"Overlord... intervening..."

The figure stops shaking, its movements stilling as it becomes formless once more. Its voice shifts, no longer broken but clear, deliberate.

“She must find her own answers. Trust no one.”

The shadow shifts again, this time taking the form of a young man. My stomach twists as Damien’s face comes into focus.

“The new Thorne... knows... who she is...”

My mind reels. How? How could Damien know? I’ve trusted him—told him my fears, my worries. If he knows the truth and keeps it from me, then what does that make him?

“Come... Eleanor,” the shadow says, its voice beginning to fade. “Find... answers...”

And then it’s gone, dissolving into nothingness.

A deafening roar comes from outside the hull, the world shaking and crumbling around me. The floor falls away, and I’m falling, spiraling into darkness.

I jolt awake, drenched in sweat, my chest heaving. The warship is gone, replaced by the familiar confines of my quarters at the ASTP facility. I check the clock: 1:05 a.m.

“Fuck that,” I mutter, swinging my legs over the side of the bed. Sleep isn’t an option after that.

The cold shower doesn’t settle my mind, but it steadies my heart rate. Pulling on a field uniform and grabbing my gear, I leave my quarters silently, heading toward the checkpoint.

The guard barely looks up as I approach, my badge already on the counter. “Where are you headed?” he asks, his voice groggy.

“Exclusion zone. Reactor number 5 or the vehicle graveyard,” I reply evenly. “Stress from the upcoming practical,” I add, half-truthful.

“You know the drill,” he says, sliding a liability form toward me. “If you’re not back in 24 hours, we send a search party. At 48 hours, you’re MIA. Radio ahead if you need an extension.”

I fill out the form quickly. “I know. This isn’t my first time.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he mutters, stamping the form and handing it back. “Stay safe, Keener.”

Stepping into the cold April air, I welcome the quiet like an old friend. The trees surrounding the facility sway gently in the breeze, their rustling soothing my frayed nerves. My gear sits heavy on my shoulders, a constant reminder of where I’m headed and why.

The exclusion zone stretches out before me, vast and empty. Each step takes me further from the hum of the facility, the sterile walls and endless whispers fading into the background. The crunch of leaves underfoot and the occasional distant call of wildlife fill the void, a soundtrack to my solitude.

The quiet hum of the exclusion zone surrounds me as I straddle the electric bike, the faint glow of the dashboard casting soft light over my gloves. The engine purrs to life with a whisper, no roar to shatter the stillness of the forest. I grip the handlebars, my gaze fixed on the path ahead. Adjusting the NVGs over my eyes, their faint blue glow casting the world in eerie shades of cold light.

This is where I belong—not inside those sterile walls filled with whispers and shadows, but out here, where the rules are my own, where instinct is the only guide.

I twist the throttle, and the bike surges forward, gliding over the uneven dirt road with an effortless grace. The trees blur past, their skeletal branches reaching out like claws in the eerie glow of the night vision. My breathing is steady, controlled, matching the rhythmic hum of the bike. Out here, there's no noise from the facility, no whispers of bureaucracy—just the quiet, endless pulse of the exclusion zone.

The landmarks along the way are familiar. I pass through the burnt forest first, its blackened trees clawing at the sky like skeletal fingers. Life has begun to return here, slowly but stubbornly. Green shoots push through the ash, their defiance against past tragedies a stark reminder of nature's resilience. The air carries a faint, acrid scent, a lingering ghost of the fire that once consumed this place.

From the forest, I ride toward Zaylissa, a village that has long since been abandoned. Its crumbling homes are overrun by creeping ivy and wildflowers, nature reclaiming what humanity left behind. I walk through the remnants of a playground—its rusted swings swaying eerily in the breeze—and pause at a well whose stone walls are cracked under decades of neglect. Each step through the village feels like stepping back in time, into a world frozen by catastrophe.

Further along, I reach the region's water treatment plant. Its skeletal remains tower above me, pipes twisted and broken like the veins of some long-dead beast. Pools of stagnant water reflect the pale glow of my NVGs, their surfaces rippling slightly as stray winds pass through. I pick my way carefully through the debris, the silence heavy here, as though the very air holds its breath.

From there, I enter the outskirts of the burnt forest, a landscape marked by both destruction and quiet rebirth. The forest opens into a clearing, the horizon dominated by the colossal Duga radar station. Its massive frame looms over the treetops like a giant

latticework skeleton, a relic of another era. The rusted steel seems both imposing and fragile, a monument to ambition and failure.

Duga. It's the first stop, the monolith looming in the distance like a relic of some forgotten god. I feel the anticipation clawing at me, sharper with every mile. This place—it started everything. The rabbit hole I tumbled down, the questions that haunt my every step. Words whispered to me in broken Ukrainian by a figure that shouldn't exist. How accurate they are, I don't know. But it is something.

At the base of the radar system, I pause, tilting my head back to take in the sheer scale of it. The cold wind bites at my face, carrying with it the faint metallic tang of rust and decay. The Duga stands like a sentinel over the surrounding forest, its purpose long forgotten by most. But not by me. Somewhere in this place, buried beneath layers of history and secrets, the answers I seek are waiting.

The cold, stale air of the Duga Radar Station presses around me as I move deeper into the structure. Dust and decay cover every surface, the remnants of the past shrouded in layers of grime. My boots echo faintly against the metal flooring, each step a reminder that this place was once alive with purpose. Now it's a tomb.

I enter what looks like an old operations room. Rusted terminals and shattered monitors line the walls, their screens long dead. A desk sits at the center of the room, its drawers partially open, as if someone had rifled through them in haste. I approach cautiously, my NVGs casting the space in an eerie blue hue.

Rifling through the debris on the desk, I uncover scattered documents, most of them illegible due to water damage. Then my fingers brush against something cold and smooth. Pulling it free from the mess, I hold a small, dust-covered PDA. Its casing is battered, but it still looks functional.

I press the power button. A faint hum fills the air, and the screen flickers to life. My heart skips as the boot screen displays an emblem—a golden eagle overlaid with a radiation symbol. The same insignia on my patch. The lock screen demands a password. I hesitate. The words from the dream echo in my mind:

"Friend... Traitor."

"Documents... Redacted."

"Come on," I mutter under my breath, trying the most obvious options: **'2461'**, the year of my birth. **'Keener'**, my last name. **'Kalypso'**, the ship. None of them work.

The device locks me out for a full minute after my third failed attempt. I pace the room, frustration mounting. There has to be something. Some clue.

Frustration bubbles up, but I force it down. There has to be another way.

I search the desk, rifling through its drawers. Papers crumble in my hands, but one drawer feels heavier, its contents still intact. At the bottom, hidden beneath a layer of faded maps, I find a laminated card. Its text is faint, but the words “System Access Override” leap out at me. The edges are worn, but the card is whole.

Slotting it into the PDA’s port, I hold my breath as the screen flares back to life. A new message appears: **“Accessing External Storage...”**

The PDA bypasses the lock screen entirely, booting into its main menu. Most directories are empty or corrupted, their contents long gone. But one folder catches my attention: **“Unit Aether—Classified Recon”**. The name sends a chill through me.

Inside, there are several files. Some are labeled cryptically—**“M_OPS_Logs”** and **“Protocol_Blackstar.”** Others are more personal: **“Keener_Report_Final”** and **“Extinction_Protocol.”** My chest tightens. *This is it. This is the trail I’ve been chasing.*

I select the first file. A video loads, its quality grainy but serviceable. The screen flickers, and I’m staring at a recon team in full gear, their movements brisk and methodical. A voice narrates in the background, low and deliberate:

“This is Recon Unit Aether, log entry 142. Recon mission on Gamma-7 is green. Priority objective: secure classified materials. Blackout protocols in effect. No confirmation from Command.”

The camera pans across the team. Five figures stand in a semicircle, their faces obscured by helmets. One figure steps forward, removing their helmet to reveal soft features and piercing eyes. The familiarity hits me like a punch to the gut. She looks like me. Is this my mother?

I lean closer, unable to look away. She speaks, her voice steady but tinged with something I can’t place—determination or fear. “Mission parameters are unclear, but failure is not an option. If you find this log, we’ve succeeded... or we’re gone.”

The video cuts off abruptly, leaving me staring at a blank screen. My hands tremble as I open the next file—a text report. Fragments of sentences jump out at me:

- **“Keener compromised.”**
- **“Mission incomplete. High-risk extraction impossible.”**
- **“Remaining team member: KIA.”**

I scroll further, my heart pounding. The dream's words seem to whisper in my ears:

"Documents... Redacted. History... Forgotten."

The final file in the folder, "**Extinction Protocol**," refuses to open, the PDA warning that it requires an encryption key. My frustration surges, but I force myself to breathe. *One step at a time.*

The back of my mind churns as the puzzle pieces begin to connect. The words from the shadowy figure in my dream replay over and over:

"Friend... Traitor."

"Family... Hunted."

"Daughter... Abandoned."

My parents were part of this. Not just participants, but key players. And they weren't just erased—they were betrayed. By Command? By their own unit? By someone closer? The questions swirl faster than I can process, each one hitting like a wave.

One detail sticks with me above all else: *"Overlord... Intervening."*

The PDA's screen dims as I tuck it into my pack. The words from the dream refuse to leave my mind, especially the shadow's final warning:

"She must find her own answers. Trust no one."

I glance around the room, feeling the weight of unseen eyes. The banner with the golden eagle still hangs on the wall, its edges frayed and worn. The insignia feels heavier now, its significance pressing down on me. I stand and step out of the room, the cold air rushing to meet me.

As I leave the Duga station, I feel both closer to the truth and further from understanding. The PDA holds answers I've been chasing my entire life, but it's also a warning. This path isn't just dangerous—it's deadly.

What did they know? What price did they pay to protect it?

The words from my dream ring clearer than ever:

"Find us, Eleanor."

The forest begins to thin, giving way to the vast, eerie expanse of the vehicle yard. Under the faint blue glow of my NVGs, hulking shadows emerge from the darkness. Rows of rusted vehicles stretch into the distance—tanks, personnel carriers, and trucks, all in various states of decay. Their outlines are softened by decades of rust and moss, yet the weight of history clings to them like a second skin.

The first vehicle I pass is a tank, its turret frozen mid-turn, a skeletal monument to some forgotten battle. Vines snake up its sides, wrapping around the barrel like nature's quiet rebellion. My Geiger counter clicks steadily, the sound unnervingly loud in the stillness. I tighten my grip on the rifle slung across my chest, the cold metal grounding me.

Further in, I spot the shattered remains of a helicopter, its rotor blades broken and splayed out like jagged wings. The cockpit windows are cracked, the interior barely visible through layers of grime. I climb onto the crumpled frame, my boots slipping slightly on the damp metal. From this vantage point, the scale of the vehicle yard becomes apparent—an endless sea of dereliction, stretching toward the faint silhouette of Reactor Number 5 on the horizon.

The reactor's cooling towers loom like ghosts against the night sky, their decayed outlines a reminder of humanity's hubris. That's where I'm headed. The thought sends a shiver down my spine, but I push it aside. I didn't come this far to stop now.

As I descend from the helicopter, my boot catches on something metallic. I crouch, brushing away the dirt and debris to uncover a small, rusted box half-buried in the ground. Its hinges squeak in protest as I pry it open, revealing a faded map and a handwritten note. The map is marked with several locations, one of which is circled in red: **Reactor 5 - Core Access.**

The note is brief, scrawled in hurried handwriting:

"This isn't just about the mission. The answers are deeper than the core. If you're reading this, don't stop until you find it."

My pulse quickens. The words feel like a challenge, a reminder that I'm not just walking through history—I'm unraveling it. I fold the map carefully, tucking it into my pack, and continue deeper into the yard.

The vehicles become sparser as I exit the field, trekking my way towards the reactor, the hum of the Geiger counter growing quieter with each step, the vehicles are the only things left irradiated.

A chain-link fence surrounds the facility, its rusted edges jagged where time and neglect have worn it down. I slip through a gap, stepping onto cracked concrete. The air is heavier here, carrying the faint metallic tang of radiation that lingers in the soil and walls.

The reactor itself rises before me, a massive, decaying behemoth. Its walls are streaked with rust and grime, vines creeping upward in defiance of its industrial facade. The structure feels alive in its stillness, as if it's holding its breath, waiting.

I pause at the main entrance, my rifle steady in my hands. The wind whispers through the broken windows, carrying faint echoes of a world that no longer exists. I force myself to move forward, stepping into the dark interior.

The first thing I notice is the sound. It's not silence—it's the absence of the familiar. No hum of electricity, no distant murmur of machinery. Just the hollow echo of my boots against the concrete floor. My flashlight cuts through the darkness, illuminating walls streaked with rust and peeling paint. The air feels damp, thick with the weight of years.

The main corridor branches into two paths. To the left, faded letters on the wall read **"Control Room."** To the right, another sign points toward **"Core Access."** I hesitate, my fingers brushing the edge of the map I found. The core is where the answers lie—that much is clear.

I take the right path, stepping cautiously. The Geiger counter's clicks grow, a steady reminder of the reactor's lingering past. The corridor narrows, the walls closing in as I descend a metal staircase slick with condensation. My flashlight flickers, its beam catching on exposed pipes and broken gauges.

At the bottom, I find a heavy door marked **"Restricted Access—Core Containment."** It's slightly ajar, the faint glow of emergency lights spilling through the gap. I push it open, my breath catching as I step inside.

The core room is vast, its ceiling disappearing into the shadows above. Machinery surrounds the central chamber, some of it rusted and broken, but much of it eerily intact. A faint hum resonates through the space, the sound vibrating in my chest. The glow from my flashlight reflects off the metal surfaces, casting strange, shifting shadows.

In the center of the room, a console stands, its screen flickering faintly. I approach cautiously, my fingers brushing against the controls. The screen displays a single message: **"System Diagnostics Incomplete—Manual Input Required."**

Beside the console is a small locker, its door hanging open. Inside, I find a black case emblazoned with the golden eagle insignia. My breath catches as I flip it open, revealing a series of encrypted drives and a stack of documents. At the top is a handwritten note, its ink smudged but legible:

"If you've come this far, you know what they've done. This isn't just about the past. It's about what's next."

Beneath the note is a photograph—a grainy image of the recon team. Five figures stand together, their faces obscured by helmets, but one figure at the center catches my eye. The patch on their shoulder is unmistakable, identical to mine.

I tuck the drives and the photograph into my pack, my mind racing. The console beeps, pulling me back to the present. I glance around the room, the weight of unseen eyes pressing down on me. This place holds more than I've uncovered, but I can't stay much longer.

As I step back into the cold night air, the reactor's shadow stretches long across the ground. The drives in my pack feel heavier than they should, their secrets waiting to be unraveled. Whatever happened here, whatever my parents were part of, it's not over.

The galaxy is alive with whispers of the past, and I intend to hear them all.

Second Naval Ball

It has been almost 6 months since the final, it's the day of the Naval ball, 4 cadets are dead,

The room is filled with glittering chandeliers and a low hum of muted conversations, but all of it seems to fade when I spot him. He's standing near one of the grand marble columns, leaning slightly against it with a glass of something golden in hand. Damien Thorne.

Even out of his usual tactical gear, he still manages to exude that same effortless confidence, though the sharp edges of his combat-ready presence are softened by the suit he's wearing. The tailored black fabric fits him perfectly, accentuating his broad shoulders and the lean, powerful lines of his frame. A dark tie sits neatly against his crisp white shirt, but it's loosened just enough to hint at his more casual, rebellious nature. The clean-cut look doesn't make him less dangerous—it makes him seem untouchable, as if he could charm his way out of any situation while still being the deadliest person in the room.

His jet-black hair is short and slightly tousled, the faint disarray giving him an air of effortless perfection. It's easy to imagine him raking his fingers through it earlier, an unconscious habit born of years of stress and thought. Even here, at an event as polished as this, he looks like he's just stepped out of something far more intense—rugged, untamed, and completely captivating.

And then there are his eyes—steely gray and cutting through the room with an intensity that feels almost magnetic. They catch the light in a way that makes them impossible to ignore, calculating and sharp but layered with something deeper. As his gaze sweeps over the crowd, I feel my chest tighten, silently hoping it doesn't land on me and simultaneously wishing it would. When his eyes finally lock with mine, I swear time slows. There's something about the way he looks at me—like he already knows exactly what I'm thinking and is waiting for me to figure it out myself.

A faint scar slices across his right eyebrow, not enough to distract from his striking features but enough to make him seem... real. Like someone who's lived through things most people can't even imagine. His slightly crooked nose only adds to that image, a subtle imperfection that somehow makes him even more perfect. Everything about him speaks of resilience and strength, a life lived on the edge, but it's wrapped in a calm, unshakable exterior.

He shifts his weight, his free hand slipping into the pocket of his trousers, and I notice how even a simple movement like that commands attention. The low light glints off the faint silver cufflinks at his wrists, details so subtle I almost miss them. He catches someone else's gaze for a moment, offering a faint, polite smile before his focus returns to me.

My heart skips, and I quickly glance away, heat rising to my cheeks. I shouldn't be looking at him like this, not here, not now. But the memory of his sharp eyes and the way he wears that suit—effortless, powerful—lingers far longer than I'd like to admit.

The orchestra swells, its melody weaving through the grand hall like a silken thread, but all I can focus on is him. Damien Thorne, standing just a few steps away, his sharp gray eyes locked onto mine with the kind of intensity that sends heat curling low in my stomach. His tailored suit fits him too perfectly, all clean lines and confidence, the faint scar cutting through his brow only adding to the undeniable pull he seems to command.

I swallow hard, feigning interest in my champagne flute as he approaches. Each step he takes feels deliberate, calculated, like he knows exactly what kind of effect he has—not just on me, but on everyone around him. He stops just short of entering my personal space, close enough that I can catch the faint trace of something—spice and cedar, maybe—lingering in the air between us.

"Enjoying yourself, Keener?" His voice is low, smooth, carrying just enough warmth to draw me in but not so much that it loses its edge.

I tilt my head, raising an eyebrow as I take a slow sip of champagne. "Should I be?"

His smirk tilts at the corner, dangerously close to a grin. "Depends. You always look this comfortable standing in the corner, or is it just tonight?"

I scoff, my grip tightening slightly on the flute. "Comfortable isn't the word I'd use."

"No? What would you call it, then?" His gaze dips briefly, skimming over the lines of my dress before returning to meet my eyes. There's something in the way he looks at me, a deliberate slowness that feels like a touch, like he's peeling back every layer to see what's underneath.

"Surviving," I say finally, fighting the flush threatening to creep up my neck. "Unlike you, I'm not here to play charming diplomat."

His chuckle is soft, but there's an edge to it, a weight that lingers. "Charming, huh? Didn't realize you thought so highly of me."

I open my mouth to fire back, but the words tangle in my throat when he steps just a little closer, his presence overwhelming. "Don't flatter yourself," I manage, though the quip sounds weak even to my ears.

He leans in slightly, the movement subtle enough to seem incidental, but it's not. I can feel the heat of him now, and his voice drops just enough to make it feel like this conversation

exists in its own little bubble, away from the glittering crowd. "You know, you clean up better than I expected."

My pulse skips. The comment isn't lewd, but there's something in the way he says it, in the way his eyes linger on mine, that makes the room feel a little too warm. "Don't start," I warn, my voice sharper than I mean it to be.

"Start what?" His smirk deepens, and for a moment, I swear he knows exactly what he's doing to me. "Just making an observation."

The air between us crackles, thick with something unspoken, something neither of us will name. I don't trust myself to respond, so I glance at the dance floor instead, watching couples twirl gracefully under the chandelier's soft glow. Anything to keep my mind off the way Damien is looking at me, like I'm the only thing in this room worth noticing.

"You could join them," he says suddenly, his voice breaking through my thoughts.

I glance back at him, arching a brow. "And embarrass myself in front of half the Navy? No, thanks."

He laughs, low and warm, and the sound snakes its way through me, curling in my chest. "I didn't peg you for a coward."

My eyes narrow, my irritation warring with the sudden, inexplicable urge to see what he looks like with that smirk wiped off his face. "And I didn't peg you for a mind reader," I shoot back, but it lacks the bite I intend.

He extends a hand, palm up, his confidence maddeningly unshaken. "Dance with me, Ellie."

I blink, startled. "What?"

"Just one dance," he says, softer now but no less commanding. His eyes hold mine, daring me, and damn it, he knows I can't resist a dare. "Unless you're really that scared."

I set my champagne flute on the nearest table, ignoring the way my fingers tremble slightly. "Fine," I say, slipping my hand into his. "But if you step on my feet, I'm never letting you live it down."

"Deal," he says, his smirk softening into something almost genuine as he leads me onto the floor. His hand is warm against mine, his grip steady, and when his other hand settles lightly on my waist, the contact sends a jolt of awareness straight through me.

The music shifts, slow and deliberate, and we move. He's good at this—too good. Every step is smooth, precise, and he guides me effortlessly, like he's done this a hundred times

before. I try to focus on the rhythm, on anything but the way his fingers press into my waist just enough to steady me, but it's impossible.

"You're not bad," he says, his voice low enough that only I can hear.

"Don't sound so surprised," I reply, my tone sharper than I intend. But the smirk that curls at the corner of his mouth tells me he knows exactly how off-balance I feel.

The distance between us feels too small, his presence too overwhelming. I glance up at him, my resolve faltering for just a moment, and his eyes meet mine—sharp and knowing, with a heat that steals the breath from my lungs.

"See?" he murmurs, his voice soft but filled with something I can't quite place. "Not so bad after all."

The orchestra swells, its melody weaving through the grand hall, wrapping around us like silk. My gloved hand rests on Damien's shoulder while his other hand holds mine, his grip firm yet gentle. His touch is steady, but it ignites something in me, something I've tried to ignore since the moment we stepped onto the dance floor.

We've been moving in perfect rhythm, his steps guiding mine with a precision that feels effortless—natural. Too natural. I hate how easily he gets under my skin, how he reads me without even trying. I hate that he's right. I hate that my heart won't stop racing, that his touch feels like it's branding me, that this moment feels bigger than it should. And most of all, I hate that part of me doesn't want it to end.

"You're quieter than usual," Damien murmurs, his voice low, meant only for me. His gray eyes catch mine, sharp yet soft, a combination that leaves me breathless. "Should I be worried, or is that your way of saying you're impressed?"

"Neither," I say, the words escaping in a breathless whisper that betrays me. His lips twitch into that infuriating half-smirk, the one that always leaves me teetering between irritation and intrigue.

"I think you're lying," he counters, spinning us gently, the room blurring at the edges as I focus solely on him. "But I'll let it slide. For now."

My jaw tightens, but I can't bring myself to pull away, not when his hand tightens ever so slightly on my waist, grounding me in a way I didn't realize I needed. The weight of the evening—the stress, the tension, the unspoken words—fades into the background. It's just us. Just this moment.

"Damien," I start, but my voice falters. His name feels different on my tongue, heavier somehow.

“Yes, my angel?” he asks, the teasing lilt in his voice softer now, his gaze locked on mine.

I hate that he calls me that. I hate that I don’t hate it enough.

“Why do you do that?” I ask, my voice barely audible over the music.

“Do what?” he asks, tilting his head slightly, his dark hair catching the light just so. The scar across his eyebrow softens his otherwise sharp features, adding an unexpected vulnerability that makes my chest tighten.

“Call me that. ‘My angel,’” I say, my gaze dropping to his tie, my courage waning under the intensity of his stare.

His hand leaves my waist, and for a split second, I feel its absence like a cold rush of air. But then it’s back, gently tilting my chin up, forcing me to meet his eyes again.

“Because,” he says simply, his voice dropping to a near whisper, “it’s what you are.”

My breath catches. The world slows. I can’t think, can’t speak, can’t do anything but stare at him as his thumb brushes against my jaw, so light it feels like a phantom touch.

“Damien...” I manage, my voice trembling with something I can’t name.

“Tell me to stop,” he says, his forehead resting lightly against mine now, his words warm against my lips. “Tell me you don’t feel this too.”

I can’t. I don’t trust myself to speak, so I shake my head instead, the smallest of movements. His eyes search mine for a moment longer, as if giving me one last chance to push him away.

But I don’t.

And then he closes the distance.

His lips are warm, softer than I expected, and they ignite something in me I didn’t know was there. The kiss is tentative at first, a question, a test. But when I don’t pull back—when I kiss him back—it deepens. His hand slides from my waist to the small of my back, pulling me closer, and I feel the world dissolve around us.

There’s no music, no crowd, no naval ball. Just him. Just us.

When we finally pull apart, I’m breathless, my heart pounding in my chest like a drum. He’s watching me, his gray eyes darker now, his smirk nowhere to be seen.

“See?” he says, his voice low and rough. “Told you.”

I want to laugh, to roll my eyes, to say something snarky. But I can't. Because for once, I don't hate that he's right.

And I don't want this to end.

Recon deployment, 2480

Chara, 2484

The steady hum of the *Chara*'s engines vibrates under my boots, a constant reminder of just how far I am from solid ground. The ship is massive, sleek, and intimidating, its labyrinth of corridors polished to perfection. Everything feels sharp here—efficient, impersonal, and cold. The smell of recycled air mixed with faint traces of oil and metal lingers, and I tighten my grip on the strap of my duffel bag, trying to keep my focus.

People glance at me as I walk past. Officers, crew members, cadets—they all move with purpose, their eyes flicking toward the recon patch on my shoulder before darting away. I ignore it. I've learned to. I just keep my head high and my steps steady, like I belong here. Even if it doesn't always feel that way.

I'm scanning the corridors for my assigned quarters when a voice cuts through the steady hum. "Lieutenant Keener, I presume?"

I stop mid-step and turn. A short woman stands a few feet away, her posture sharp and her uniform impeccable. Her dark hair is pulled back into a tight regulation bun, and her gray eyes are as sharp as the crisp insignia on her collar: Lieutenant Commander. Second Officer.

"Yes, ma'am," I reply, keeping my voice steady. I straighten my shoulders and meet her gaze.

She studies me for a moment, her eyes flicking briefly to my patch before returning to my face. "I'm Lieutenant Commander Reed. Second Officer aboard the *Chara*. Welcome aboard."

"Thank you, ma'am," I say, keeping my tone polite but neutral.

Reed's gaze lingers, assessing me in a way that makes my skin prickle. After a moment, she gestures for me to follow. "You're assigned to quarters in the midship, the engineering section, but before you settle in, I'd like a word."

I nod and fall into step beside her, matching her pace as we navigate the maze of corridors. She walks with an air of authority, the kind that doesn't need to raise its voice to be heard. The other crew members we pass snap to attention, their eyes following her but avoiding mine.

Reed leads me into a small observation room near the starboard side of the ship. The view hits me first—stars stretch endlessly across the black void, scattered like shards of light on a velvet backdrop. For a moment, I forget the tension knotting in my chest, caught up in the sheer expanse of it all.

"Take a seat," she says, leaning against the edge of a console. Her posture is relaxed, but her eyes remain sharp, dissecting me before I even speak.

I sit down, setting my bag on the floor beside me. "Yes, ma'am."

Reed crosses her arms, her gaze never leaving mine. "I've read your file, Keener. It's... unconventional, to say the least. Orphaned, placed into the ASTP, then assigned directly to recon operations. That's not exactly a standard path."

I hold her gaze, my voice steady despite the unease curling in my stomach. "No, ma'am. It's not."

She tilts her head slightly, almost like she's trying to read between the lines of my response. "You've been through a lot, that much is clear. But let me be upfront—on the *Chara*, we judge you by what you do here, not what's in your file. Competence outweighs background. Do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am," I say firmly, trying not to let my relief show.

Reed nods, her expression softening slightly, though her sharpness remains. "Good. I'll be blunt with you, Keener. People are going to watch you here—for better or worse. They'll see the recon patch, hear the rumors, and start drawing their own conclusions. It's up to you to show them who you really are."

Her words settle heavily in the air, but I don't flinch. I've been watched my entire life—judged, underestimated, and second-guessed. This isn't new.

"Yes, ma'am," I say again, my voice steady.

Reed straightens, brushing an invisible speck of dust from her sleeve. “Get yourself settled in. Drills start at 0600. And Keener?”

I pause at the doorway, glancing back. “Yes, ma’am?”

“Make it count.”

Her tone isn’t harsh, but it carries weight. I nod and step back into the corridor, the hum of the ship wrapping around me once again. As I head toward my quarters, her words stay with me: *Make it count*.

I glance down at the patch on my shoulder, the familiar eagle staring back at me like a challenge. If they’re going to watch me, then fine. I’ll give them something to see.

Incident, 2485

[Timestamp: 13:49, 1 Minute After Cascade]

Damien:

“Fuck, fuck, fuck—Ellie, stay with me!” I yell into the radio, my voice breaking. Silence answers me.

She can’t be dead. She just can’t be. I’d never forgive myself.

I round the corner to the maintenance lift, my boots sliding through a pool of blood. My breath catches in my throat.

“Fuck!”

There she is—crumpled on the ground, a growing pool of crimson spreading beneath her. My heart stops. I drop to my knees beside her, my hands trembling as I press two fingers to her neck. A pulse. Weak, but there.

Relief hits me like a punch to the chest, but panic follows immediately.

“Ellie?” I rasp, barely able to get the words out.

Her eyes flicker open, unfocused and glazed. “Viper?” she murmurs weakly. “Where are you?”

"I'm here, my angel. I'm here," I say, choking on the words. Tears blur my vision as I brush blood-soaked hair from her face. She's alive. That's all that matters.

"I... I can't feel my legs," she says, her voice shaky, strained. "What happened?"

I force myself to look her over, even though every part of me screams to look away. A deep gash crosses her face, blood pooling in her eyes and matting her hair. Her left hand—what's left of it—is shredded, tendons and sinew glistening where muscle has been torn apart. But it's her legs that churn my stomach. Burned. Shattered. The upper thighs are mostly intact, but below that—nothing recognizable. Just jagged remnants of bone peeking through what used to be flesh.

She's dying. If I don't move fast, I'll lose her.

The lights overhead flicker. Backup power is failing. Once it goes, the ship will depressurize across most compartments, and there'll be no getting her out. I reach for the radio on my shoulder, switching to the main crew frequency.

"This is Lieutenant Commander Damien Thorne," I bark. "Is anyone still on board the USS *Chara*? Respond."

Static crackles before a familiar voice cuts through. "It's good to hear your voice, sir," Lieutenant Adrienne Wolfe says, steady as always.

"Wolfe," I say, relief washing over me. "Do you have anyone with you?"

"Yes, sir. Fifteen total. Engineers, technical, a couple medical staff, and a frigate in the hangar bay. The pilot says he's leaving in five minutes with or without us."

"Tell him to hold position. I'm coming up from the engineering deck, and I'm bringing Keener. How long until backup power fails?"

"Fifteen minutes, maybe less," Wolfe replies. "Secondary power bank's barely holding. What's her condition?"

I glance down at Ellie, my heart clenching as her eyes flutter shut again. "Severe. Massive blood loss, avulsions on her head and legs, and her left hand's shredded. Is Dr. Calder there?"

"Yes, sir. I'll give her the sitrep." Wolfe's voice stays calm, but urgency creeps in.

"Good. Tell Calder to get ready. We'll need everything she's got."

"Understood, sir. Meet you at the hangar entrance," Wolfe says. "Keep her alive."

“I’m trying,” I mutter, pulling a coagulant pen from my med pack. I stab it into Ellie’s thigh, just above the worst of the damage. The bleeding slows slightly—not enough, but it’ll have to do.

The mag-lev shaft ahead looms in the dim light. Debris floats within, shards of twisted metal reflecting the faint glow of emergency lighting. The shaft isn’t gravitized, leaving an open space perfect for navigating—but treacherous in its jagged chaos.

“Hold on, Ellie,” I whisper, securing her limp body against my chest.

I push off the edge of the mag-lev platform, letting the zero-G take hold as we drift upwards. My arms tighten around her as I maneuver through the shaft. The hum of my breath inside the helmet and the groan of the ship’s structure are the only sounds. Every second feels like a lifetime.

“Viper,” Ellie murmurs weakly, her head resting against my shoulder. “Don’t... drop me...”

“I’d never,” I say softly. “You’re stuck with me, Keener. No way I’m letting you go now.”

[Hanger Bay]

[Timestamp: 13:52, 3 Minutes After Cascade]

The hangar is a war zone—scrap metal and bodies are strewn across the floor, and fires burn in pockets where fuel has ignited. The frigate, *Argos*, looms in the distance, its ramp lowered and engines humming, ready for a quick escape.

Wolfe and Calder rush to meet me halfway across the bay. Wolfe’s usually calm demeanor cracks as her eyes land on Ellie. “Fuck,” she mutters, hurrying to take some of Ellie’s weight. “Glad you found her. She wouldn’t have lasted much longer.”

“No time for pleasantries,” I grunt, shifting Ellie into Wolfe’s arms as I adjust my grip. “Let’s move.”

Calder steps in, her face pale but determined. She jabs Ellie’s arm with a yellow auto-injector, muttering something under her breath. The blood flow slows further, but Ellie’s breathing remains shallow, her face ashen.

We push through the wreckage, every step a struggle. The *Argos* looms closer, its engines roaring as the pilot prepares for takeoff. Inside, the space is cramped, filled with wounded crew members—engineers and technicians mostly, their faces etched with pain and exhaustion.

Calder and Wolfe take Ellie from me, laying her carefully on a stretcher. I linger for a moment, watching as they work, before stepping back to check on the rest of the crew.

"Is everyone accounted for?" I ask Wolfe, who is already shouting orders to the remaining engineers.

"All we've got," she says grimly. "No one else answered the last call."

I nod, my gaze drifting to the viewport. The *Chara*'s remains hang in the void, a twisted skeleton of steel and fire. The secondary power bank fails as we breach the initial debris field, and I watch as the hangar's containment fields collapse. Debris and bodies spiral into the vacuum of space, a grim ballet of destruction.

I turn back to Ellie. She's pale, barely clinging to life, but alive. For now, that is enough.

"You're safe," I murmur under my breath, more to myself than to her. "You're safe, my angel."

Recovery

Eleanor:

The first thing I notice is warmth—a steady heat radiating from somewhere close, pairing with the faint crackle of firewood. I inhale slowly, the sharp tang of antiseptics mixing with something softer—pine, maybe. The air feels heavier than I remembered, but not unpleasant.

I blink, my eyes adjusting to dim, golden light filtering through wooden beams above me. This isn't a medbay. The ceiling is warm, rustic, with the faint glow of a fire flickering across it. I turn my head slowly, every movement sluggish but deliberate. A large window catches my attention, framing snow-covered trees outside, their branches heavy with frost beneath a pale winter sky.

"Ellie?"

The voice pulls me away from the window, a voice I knew well. "Damien—" quickly snapping my head to the direction of his voice, wrong choice, it hurts like hell. I see Damien sitting beside me. He's leaned forward, his forearms braced on his knees. His face is rougher than I remember—shadowed by exhaustion and darkened by a scruffy beard that hadn't been there before. But his eyes hold something else. Relief. And maybe... something softer.

"You're awake little phoenix" he says, his voice low but steady. His hand hovering over mine for a moment before it finally settles there, warm and solid. A steady anchor in the haze.

I flex my fingers under his, testing the edges of my awareness. That works fine—good. But when I shift my legs, the sensation is... different. Not absent, just unfamiliar. An inaudible

hum courses through me, subtle but present. It isn't fear that I feel. It is curiosity. I glance down, lifting the blanket draped over me.

My legs are there. Functional. Natural-looking. The polished lines and subtle seams of cybernetics catching the light, if I didn't know what I was looking for, I wouldn't see them. I run my fingers along the edge of my left thigh, tracing where synthetic skin met flesh. It's smooth, warm—nearly indistinguishable from my own.

"How long?" I croak, noticing the IV drip in my right arm, my voice is dry.

Damien shifts slightly, his grip on my hand tightening a bit. "Almost four weeks," he says. "You've been out since the incident aboard the Chara."

I nod faintly, my memory stirring like a distant storm. The core cascading. Being thrown against the wall. The heat emanating from remnants of the core. "The crew?" I ask, I already know what the answer will be.

His jaw tightens, his gaze dropping briefly to the floor. "We got as many out as we could," he says quietly. "But not everyone..." He trails off, exhaling sharply before meeting my eyes again. "We're still waiting on the final casualty report."

I let the blanket fall back over my legs, though my gaze lingers on them. Flexing my toes experimentally, I watch as the movements match my intent almost perfectly, the cybernetics—calibrating, responding.

"The augmentations," I murmur, running my fingers over the smooth surface of my left leg again. "They're... incredible."

Damien blinks, caught off guard. "You're not... upset?"

I tilt my head toward him, raising an eyebrow. "Damien, I signed the consent form. I knew what I was agreeing to." My lips tug into the faintest smirk. "Besides, I wasn't planning to stop walking anytime soon."

That draws a laugh out of him, short and soft, but genuine. He leans back in his chair, rubbing a hand over his face. "I should've known better than to worry about you."

"Yeah," I say, letting the smirk linger for a moment before turning my focus inward. "How bad was it?"

His expression sobers, the humor fading as quickly as it had appeared. "Bad," he admits. "The medic said there wasn't much left to salvage. Your legs... your lungs... your hand... you gave them one hell of a fight." He pauses, his voice quieter when he continues. "They

wanted to go with standard models, Mary and I made sure they followed your request. Natural-looking. As close to you as possible."

He pauses for a moment before continuing, "Mary threatened to toss one of the medics into a vortex field if he didn't follow the request form." He chuckles to himself.

I nod, satisfied. "Good. Remind me to thank her for that." I flex my legs again, marveling at the smooth precision. "It's strange," I murmur. "They feel... almost normal. Like they've always been there." I glance back at him. "I'll need specs, though. If something's going to be part of me, I should know exactly how it works."

He chuckles, shaking his head. "You just woke up, and you're already thinking about mods. Classic."

"Can't let a good upgrade go to waste," I say, grinning faintly. A flicker of my old self, maybe.

The silence that follows isn't uncomfortable. I let my head sink back into the pillow, my gaze drifting to the window again. Snow was falling softly now, the kind of stillness that demanded patience.

"Is this your place?" I ask after a moment, my mind drifting to the world around me.

"Yeah," he says, glancing at the window. "Figured you'd need somewhere quiet to wake up. A medbay didn't feel right for you. Too sterile. And here... well, it's safe." There is something else there, hesitation, but now is not the time.

I nod again, letting my eyes close as exhaustion pulled at me. "Safe," I echo, the word settling over me like a blanket. "Thanks, Damien."

"Always," he says softly. His hand lingering on mine until my breathing evens out, the steady crackle of the fire and his warm hand in mine, steady and grounding, sleep is quick to pull me back under.

I wake to find Damien missing from the chair beside my bed, the faint impression of his weight still visible in the cushion. A glass of water sitting on the bedside table, condensation beading down its surface in the warm room. Tentatively, I reach for it with my left hand—the reconstructed one. To my surprise, everything works perfectly. My fingers curling naturally around the glass, my wrist rotating without hesitation, and the cool texture of the glass registering in vivid detail. I can feel again.

The sound of a door closing downstairs pulls me from my thoughts, followed by the dull thud of something heavy being dropped. A bag? Groceries, maybe?

“Damien?” I call out, my voice hoarse but steady. I push the blanket off my body, the warmth of the room brushing against my bare skin. Swinging my legs over the side of the bed, I brace myself on the bedside table and attempt to stand.

Big mistake.

“FUCK!-” I yell as my body crumpled to the floor, my legs refusing to hold my weight. Pain lances through me—not from my legs but from the sheer humiliation of the fall. I tried to claw my way back onto the bed, but before I can make any progress, Damien bursts into the room, his expression a mixture of concern and exasperation.

“Ellie, my phoenix,” he says softly, crouching beside me. “You’re pushing yourself too hard. It’s going to take time before you’re fully recovered.”

His arms slide under mine, and in one smooth motion, he lifts me off the floor and settles me back on the edge of the bed. I scowl, my pride stinging worse than the impact.

“I was fine,” I mutter, though the wobble in my voice betrays me.

“Oh, sure. Fine. That’s exactly what I’d call it,” Damien says, raising an eyebrow. “Is this the new recovery method? Face-planting onto the floor?”

I glare at him, but the corners of my mouth betray me, twitching upward. “I didn’t think my legs would just give out like that,” I say, shaking my head. “They look fine, so I figured they’d work.”

“They’re cybernetics, Ellie, not magic,” he replies, brushing a strand of hair from my face. “It takes time for your nervous system to adapt. You’ve been out of commission for weeks. You’re not going to get up and run a marathon on day one.”

“Well, I wasn’t planning to run,” I quip. “Maybe just walk to the window or, you know, not crash onto the floor.”

“Right,” Damien says with a soft laugh. “We’ll work on that, but not by testing your durability on the hardwood. You’ve got nothing to prove, you know.”

I roll my eyes, my fingers fidgeting with the edge of the blanket. “I hate feeling useless, Damien. Four weeks just lying there while you—you’ve probably been running yourself ragged taking care of me.”

His expression softens, and he crouches in front of me again, resting his hands on my knees—right where flesh met synthetic. “You’re not useless, Ellie. You’re alive, and that’s all that matters to me.” He pauses, his dark eyes locking with mine. “And for the record, I don’t mind running myself ragged for you. You’re worth it.”

I don't know what to say to that. His sincerity is a lot to take in, and my chest aches with something I couldn't quite name. I reach out, my reconstructed hand curling around his wrist. The touch was small, but it says everything I couldn't.

He smiles at me, the tension easing from his shoulders. "Now," he says, standing up and pulling me gently with him, "how about we try this again? This time, with a little help?"

"I'm not made of glass, you know," I grumble, leaning into him for support as he steadies me on my feet.

"Maybe not," he says, his tone teasing, "but you're certainly fragile right now. So let's keep you in one piece, yeah?"

I scoff but let him guide me around the room. Every step is a reminder of how much work I have ahead of me. My legs move, but each motion feels sluggish, disconnected. It is frustrating, to say the least. Still, I focus on the progress I was making, no matter how small.

By the time we make it back to the bed, I am exhausted, my arms trembling from the effort of keeping myself upright. Damien helps me sit down, his grip firm and reassuring.

"That's enough for now," he says. "We'll do more tomorrow."

I groaned, leaning back against the headboard. "Tomorrow can't come soon enough. I feel like a toddler learning to walk all over again."

"A very stubborn toddler," Damien says with a grin, earning him a glare. "But hey, at least you've still got your sense of humor."

"Barely," I mutter, though a faint smile tugs at my lips. "Now, are you going to feed me, or am I supposed to survive on IV fluids forever?"

He laughs, standing up and leaving the glass of water on the bedside table. "Don't worry, my angel. I'll whip up something edible. Just don't expect it to be fancy."

"Edible is good enough," I say, settling back into the pillows. "But if it's terrible, I reserve the right to throw it at you."

"Noted," he says with a mock bow, his grin widening. "I'll make sure it's at least passable. Sit tight."

As he walks out of the room, I let out a slow breath, moving to pick up the glass of water and take a drink, the cool liquid hitting my tongue and relieving me of the dryness that resided within my voice.

It feels like an eternity before Damien returns with a plate of food, it isn't a lot, but that is to be expected. He has two plates and a second cup of water with him, I admit, the man can balance incredibly well.

"I hope you are a fan of sausage and eggs" he says as he hands me a plate, "and I see that you've gotten a hang of your hand already" gesturing at the glass of water which sits half full on the beside table.

"Appears so, way less issues than with my legs", I say before taking a bit of the sausage now attached to the fork in my hand, "it—holy fuck Damien", caught off guard with how well seasoned the sausage was.

"I know right?", he says and takes a bit out of his own, closing his eyes savoring the taste, "it's reindeer if you'd believe it", turning his head to me scarfing down the food that was on the plate.

"Slow down there little phoenix, there's more in the kitchen if you want more" chuckling softly to himself, "I underestimated how hungry you'd actually be", his smile is contagious.

"Four weeks is a long time to be in a coma dipshit" I tap his shoulder with the fork playfully a grin breaking out across my face, "but you're right, I should slow down before I choke on something".

We eat in a comfortable silence, it's fucking delicious, I knew the man could cook, but goddamn he gave me a run for my money. Soon enough my mind began to wander, the fork between my teeth. Damien must have noticed as he took the empty plate from me and set it to the side.

"I know you probably have a million questions in that pretty head of yours", taking the fork from my mouth before I can protest, "I may not have all the answers, but I can at least answer the ones I can", he settles himself next to me on the bed, taking my hands in his.

"First, where are we, I know it's somewhere north, like, far north" I glance out the window at the snow lightly dusted across the treetops. It's a breathtaking sight, one I could get used to.

"We're in Juneau, Alaska, it's a little out of the way—who am I kidding, way out of the way, family home like I said, no one other than me has used it before," his words are soft and caring, this is his home, away from the hustle and bustle, quiet and calm. His eyes drift to the photos on the wall, I follow his gaze. None of them show his family, all of them are with the Recon squad and people I don't recognize. Hell, he has photos with Cassandra Blackwell, and for once she isn't buried in tech or strangling some poor Navy officer for interfering with her squads.

“Hey Damien?”, my voice comes softer than I intended, curiosity lacing the edges.

“Yes, my angel?”, his eyes shifting to me.

“Why are your parents in any of these photos?” I asked, my eyes scanning for any trace of the senior Thornes.

Damien’s gaze flickered down, and I caught the subtle tension in his shoulders. He leaned forward slightly, resting his hands on my knees—right where flesh met synthetic, grounding me like he always did.

“They... they weren’t the type to take photos,” he says finally, his voice careful, measured. “At least not with me. Most of what they did wasn’t the kind of thing you’d want captured anyway.”

I narrow my eyes, sensing there’s more. “That’s not really an answer,” I say, my tone soft but firm. “What aren’t you telling me?”

His fingers tighten just slightly on my knees, the pressure more reassuring than anything else. He takes a deep breath, his shoulders rising and falling as though he’s carrying a weight too heavy to bear. “Ellie, my parents weren’t just researchers,” he says finally, his voice low and steady. “They were part of Aether.”

The words hit like a punch to the gut, and for a moment, I can’t breathe. “Aether?” I repeat, disbelief lacing my tone. “Your parents were *in* Aether?”

He nods slowly, his gray eyes clouded with something I can’t quite place—guilt, regret, maybe even shame. “They helped build it. The protocols, the missions, the ops—all of it. They believed in what they were doing. Thought they were making the world safer.” His voice drops, tinged with bitterness. “But they didn’t anticipate the cost.”

I stare at him, the pieces of the puzzle shifting in my mind but refusing to fit together. “So everything I’ve been chasing—everything I’ve uncovered about Aquila—your parents were at the center of it?”

“Not everything,” he says quickly, as if trying to ease the weight of the revelation. “But enough. Enough to make me wish I could’ve stopped them before it all spiraled out of control.”

I reach out, brushing a strand of his tousled hair away from his face, my fingers lingering at his temple. “Why didn’t you tell me?” I ask quietly, the hurt evident in my voice. “Why keep this from me?”

Damien leans into my touch for a brief moment, his eyes closing as though savoring the contact. “Because I didn’t want you to see them the way I do,” he admits, his voice raw. “I didn’t want their mistakes to taint what you’re fighting for. Or make you question everything you’ve done.”

His confession hangs heavy in the air, and for a moment, all I can do is stare at him, my heart aching with a mix of emotions I can’t untangle. Finally, I shift forward, cupping his face in my hands and forcing him to meet my gaze.

“Damien,” I say firmly, my voice steady despite the storm raging inside me. “Whatever your parents did—whatever role they played—it doesn’t change who you are. And it doesn’t change what I’m fighting for.”

His hands slide up to cover mine, his touch warm and grounding. “You’re stronger than anyone I’ve ever known,” he murmurs, his voice thick with emotion. “But you don’t have to do this alone, Ellie. I’m with you. Every step of the way.”

The sincerity in his voice makes my breath hitch, and before I can second-guess myself, I lean in, pressing my lips to his. The kiss is soft and slow, a silent promise that we’ll face whatever comes together. When we finally pull back, his forehead rests against mine, our breaths mingling in the quiet space between us.

I can still see something else behind his eyes, something he doesn’t want to tell me. “Somethings wrong” I say pointedly, “It involves us, but you’re not telling me, just tell me”.

“There’s talk of internal sabotage,” he says finally, his voice low and somber. “The entire ship is under investigation. Renault’s leading the charge, and...” His eyes darkened. “He might have his sights set on us.”

“Renault?” I sat back, incredulous. “Why would he come after us? We haven’t done anything to him.”

Damien’s lips pressed into a thin line before he spoke. “Don’t blame the man, he’s trying to do his job the best he can. With personal relationships in the mix, it’s hard.”

He reaches up, brushing a stray strand of hair from my face, his fingers gentle as he tucks it behind my ear. My hand instinctively following his, and before I know it, my fingers are laced into his, holding him there.

“That bastard,” I muttered, an exasperated look crossing my face. “The fact I saved his ass... He wouldn’t even be alive if it weren’t for me!”

Damien’s gaze softens as he watches my reaction, though his hand remains firmly intertwined with mine. “I know,” he murmurs, his voice a soothing counterpoint to my rising

anger. “And trust me, Renault knows it too. But he’s under pressure. The higher-ups are breathing down his neck for answers, and it’s making him sloppy.”

I shake my head, the frustration simmering just beneath the surface. “Sloppy or not, that doesn’t give him the right to turn this into a witch hunt. He knows damn well I did everything I could to keep people alive on that ship.”

Damien tilts his head, his expression caught between understanding and caution. “You did, Ellie. No one can take that away from you. But Renault... he’s got his own ghosts. Maybe he’s trying to prove something to himself. Or to Command.”

I snort, leaning back into the chair. “He can prove whatever he wants without dragging me into it. What does he think? That I sabotaged the Chara? That I was somehow responsible for the cascade?”

Damien squeezes my hand, his thumb brushing over my knuckles in a gesture that steadies me more than I’d like to admit. “No one who matters believes that, Ellie. Not Wolfe, not Calder, and definitely not me.”

The warmth of his reassurance chips away at my frustration, but the weight of Renault’s potential accusations lingers like a storm cloud. “It’s just...” I pause, struggling to put the jumble of emotions into words. “I’ve been through hell and back for this Navy. And now I have to fight to prove I belong here?”

Damien’s fingers tighten around mine, pulling me out of my spiral. His eyes, so often cold and calculating, are lit with a quiet intensity. “You don’t have to prove anything, Ellie. Not to Renault, not to Command. You’ve already proven it to the people who matter—the ones who were there. The ones you saved.”

I search his face for any hint of doubt but find none. His conviction is solid, unwavering. It grounds me in a way that nothing else can. I lean forward slightly, our foreheads nearly touching. “You know,” I say softly, a faint smile tugging at the corners of my lips. “You’re way too good at talking me down.”

His mouth quirks into a half-smile, the kind that always leaves me second-guessing how he really feels. “It’s a talent,” he replies, his voice low and teasing. “Besides, I like having you around too much to let you spiral.”

The tension between us shifts. The air feels heavier, charged with something unspoken but undeniable. I lean in closer, the space between us disappearing inch by inch. Damien’s gaze flickers to my lips, just briefly, and that’s all the confirmation I need.

“Thank you,” I murmur, barely louder than a breath, before pressing my lips to his.

The kiss is soft but grounding, a steadying force in the chaos. His free hand moves to cradle the side of my face, his touch warm and reassuring. For a moment, the world narrows to just the two of us—no tribunal, no accusations, no Chara.

When we finally pull apart, my cheeks are flushed, and Damien's eyes hold a warmth I rarely see. "I'll always have your back, Ellie," he says quietly, his voice steady.

The tension eases, though it doesn't disappear entirely. I take a deep breath, letting his presence steady me. "Alright," I say, leaning back slightly, though my hand remains in his. "Let's see how this plays out. But if Renault crosses the line, I'm not holding back."

Damien chuckles softly, his thumb brushing over my knuckles. "I wouldn't expect anything less." His expression shifts slightly, something deeper flickering behind his eyes. "Just remember, Ellie—whatever happens, you're not in this alone."

For a moment, the weight of the world seems a little lighter. And as we sit there, hands intertwined and the warmth of the kiss still lingering, I realize that, for all the chaos and uncertainty ahead, I have someone in my corner. Someone I can trust.

Recon Part 2 Bitches

Here's my thoughts, I want them to go back and retrieve the Kalypso, repairing it and getting it starside, and rebuilding unit Aether, as both Damien and Eleanor have close ties to it, they would build a black operations system under the watchful gaze of overlord.

This is where shit gets interesting

Multiple options for this, including an nsfw copy, because yes, I am that girl

OPTION 1: AKA BORING BITCH STATUS

Damien:

"Howdy bitch" Ellie appears beside him, a pistol to his head and pulled the trigger. His skull cracking open on the opposite side as the projectile burns through, gray matter splattering the wall.

“Fucken got what he deserved”, she says, hatred dripping from her words as she pulls Tessa to her feet. “You alright?”, Ellie’s voice suddenly soft, moving Tessa away from the bastard’s body, “he can’t hurt you now” as she pulls her into a tight hug, tears streaming from her eyes.

I can check on them in a minute “Overlord this is Viper, message”, my voice steady as it can be after what I just watched occur in the span of 5 seconds. His body lays motionless, not a single twitch of movement, Rowan keeps his rifle on it as he approaches and gives me the all clear.

"Go ahead, Viper," her calm, measured voice crackles through the radio, a welcome reprieve from the chaos.

"Be advised, target is KIA. Kill credit goes to Archangel," I reply, forcing my voice to steady. Just another sitrep, I tell myself. Focus on the report. Ignore the body. The thought loops relentlessly as I wait for her response.

“Affirm Viper, the bounty for that bastards head will be dealt with on RTB”, the reply can’t come soon enough, and I’m not prepared for the next statement, “And Viper, thanks for making sure he’s in the dirt, the system failed us once, it won’t happen again”.

OPTION 2: YEA MY GIRL IS A WAR CRIMINAL

Damien:

“Howdy bitch” Ellie uncloaks beside him, a pistol in her hand, in one swift motion she has him on the ground, incapacitated, I had to remind myself that if she wanted him dead, he wouldn’t have a head on his shoulders.

“Fucken got what he deserved, fucked with the wrong crew” venom dripping from her words as she pulls Tessa to her feet. “You alright?”, Ellie’s voice suddenly soft, moving Tessa away from the bastard’s body, “he can’t hurt you now” as she pulls her into a tight hug, tears streaming from her eyes.

I move quickly and secure his hands and legs, noticing burn marks on his hands as I do so, I go for the radio on my shoulder “Overlord this is Viper, message”, my voice as steady as it can be. Finishing my work, and satisfied that even if he did get up, he wouldn’t make it far,

“Go ahead Viper”, her calm voice comes over the radio, I wonder if she’ll maintain it with the information I share next.

“Target has been apprehended, alive, you can thank Archangel for that one”, I can’t hide the pride in my voice, she had earned that callsign and for a good reason, “No casualties”, I quickly add, letting my gaze wander around the room, supplies are stacked to ceiling of the cave, he had been here for a minute, probably stalking the team waiting for the right moment. The bastard did as well, and he’d well pay for it too, I remind myself before the radio lights up again.

“Affirm Viper, good job with that asshole, I don’t want to see him again, feel free to do as you please”, her voice filled with conviction.

“Say again Overlord, you’re leaving him in our hands?”, the surprise in my voice apparent, she has to know that is a terrible fucking idea, hell, even leaving him alone with Rowan was a guaranteed death sentence, and he would be tame compared to what the ladies would do.

“Affirm Viper, we can’t prove he was the cunt who pulled the trigger on Spectre, or Anna, that and I don’t trust the system to do what needs to be done”, her usually steady voice dropping deadly serious, “I want to see him dead, as much as your crew Viper, you may do as you please, just catch it on camera for me”.

I force a smile under the surface, glancing over at Ellie, still holding Tessa, she catches my gaze, nodding curtly, she had heard what I said. Glancing back to Rowan who had moved to make sure that the bastard was out cold, sticking a tranquilizer into his arm, and then to Ayla, holding the entranceway.

“Rowan, how long until we can move him?” I ask, forcing my voice to remain calm, my heart beating against my ribcage. We were being left to deal with the bastard, that alone could lead to incredibly dangerous results.

“Less than 5 minutes” he responded without looking up from the piece of work in front of him, “Why do we want him alive? I’d rather Archangel have pulled the trigger on the bitch, means I don’t have to keep him alive”, his voice filled with anger, I remember the nights that he had spent, trying to keep Spectre alive, trying to find any solution, he wanted to see the asshole burn as much as the rest of us.

“We have orders, I’ll explain once we’re back at base, trust me, you’ll like this” I let a small smile slip as Rowan stands up. He had no idea what would come next, and I have a feeling that none of them would let him die quickly.

4 hours later, Camp

“So are you gonna explain why the fuck we had to drag this fucking sack of shit 4 hours back to camp?”, Tessa’s voice is alight with flame, the crazy arsonist she is creeping back bit by bit.

A grin spread across my face as I sit down on a nearby rock, “Well my fiery friend” gesturing to the body unceremoniously dropped into the sand as soon as we reached camp, “We have been given permission to, and I quote “do as we please””. I chuckle as her jaw drops, Ellie had run off to go grab a couple things and was walking back over with a case with a hazard warning symbol in one hand and a shotgun slung over her shoulder, a gas mask lazily bumping against her thigh.

“And this was sanctioned by Overlord?”, Rowan’s voice is cool and calm, but the look in his eyes betrays his intentions, I can practically see the 300 different options he’s running through in that medical mind of his.

“Yes, my good sir it was, he’s ours to do whatever”, my voice falters a little as I turn to Ayla, she’s shifting uncomfortably, “If you do not wish to do anything, then you don’t have to” I say, directing that at Ayla in particular, but offering it to the whole team.

“Don’t get me wrong” Ayla speaks up in an argumentative tone, “I want to watch him die, I don’t think I’d be able to do anything myself”.

I walk over to her, leading her back to the rock I was just on, sitting her down. “I see no issues then”, my voice low and sincere, “We won’t force you to do anything, that’d drop us to his level of filth”, She nods slowly, “it’s settled then”.

I look over to Tessa and Ellie, Tessa has the shotgun in her hands, “I’m not doing anything until he’s fucking awake”, her voice assertive “I’m taking first watch, no questions asked”. I nod, no use in arguing with her, she’s dead set.

I look over at Rowan, who is standing next to Ellie, the hazard box open, he looks up and meets my eyes “I want to be with this one when she gets her turn, and make sure she goes last, this *will* kill him”, his eyes are wide, I immediately know what she brought out and glance at her, a mischievous smirk spreads across her lips, “what??” she says, feigning innocence, her body language contradicting her at every turn.

“Fine, Ellie, you get to test that thing, but make sure everything is secure and Rowan is with you when it happens” I say and quickly move [NAME] unconscious body under cover, it was good to see them in higher spirits, even if it meant that we were certainly about to do something incredibly illegal, and considered immoral to most, but we weren’t the general population, and this wasn’t just a random guy, this was a fucking traitor, a bastard, he deserves this.

The night passed in tense silence, interrupted only by the occasional sound of Ellie shifting next to me and the muffled groans of [NAME] stirring in his unconscious state outside. Everyone was already moving when I rose. The cold morning air bit my skin as I stepped outside. The check was complete. Ellie's triumphant grin had faded into grim determination, and Rowan had barely said a word since sunrise. Today was the day we finished this.

Ellie held the hazard container with a grip so tight that I thought she might shatter the handle, Tessa stood beside her, shotgun in hand, small silver canisters marked with a flammable symbol tied around her waist. Rowan stood off to the side, a rifle slung over his shoulder, smoke still billowing from the cigarette in his hands.