

# Archangel

The Life and Experiences of 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 26<sup>th</sup>, 2465, 16:45**

My name is Eleanor Keener, I was born in Tacoma, Washington, to parents I never met. I was left behind at a military installation with nothing but an old recon patch to my name. The patch was 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 sat 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 was 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 was. 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 was no need to put myself at the center of attention. Attention came with questions, and questions I couldn't answer.

As I sat 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 wasn't a promise to them—it was a promise to myself. Whoever they were, wherever they went, they'd left me behind. And I was going to find out why, one way or another.

The difference between me and the other children in the dorms was 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 was an orphan, a nobody, another number on the sheet, but it came with perks, zero expectations, zero eyes on me where my colleagues were being watched at every moment, as long as I was out of sight out of mind, I was safe.

Later that year I was enrolled in the academy that was on base and began attending, my studies became a reprieve from the bleak life in the dorms, I spent hours studying, learning anything and everything I could, and by 5 years old was practicing math that wouldn'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 ass 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 said 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 had said, 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 said, 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 had expected 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."**

I stared 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 said flatly. "You've been on their radar for years. Pack your things".

## **ASTP**

### **June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2475**

June 5<sup>th</sup> 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 and a constant threat of radiation not even 100 meters beyond the fence, 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 had 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 to the greatest minds in Sol. I was one of around 30-35 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 cadets here, there are several 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 too-large uniform that had been adjusted hastily that morning. 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 said as I got closer, I could feel the eyes of my fellow cadets following my every move, "I'll be taking her from here", she said, 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 said, 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 said, 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 said, 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 said 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 said, 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 said, 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 said, 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 said, 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 said, 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 said, a touch of worry in her voice now. “Stingray is the nickname for Barrick, the commanding officer, I’ll explain more later, privately” she said 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.

**December 20<sup>th</sup>, 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 had shouted gesturing at the dress, “DO YOU WANT TO BE KNOWN AS THE COMMANDER WHO FUCKING SEXUALIZED A FOURTEEN YEAR OLD GIRL” there was fury behind every word, I was almost certain she was 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 was a scary woman, and I’m glad she was even somewhat on my side.

Stingray quickly conceded, and soon I was 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 said. “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 said 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 said 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 had questioned what the jacket was for as soon as we had gotten back to 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 stated "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 relaxed a little, and nodded 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 tucked 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 fell 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 replied 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 in the Exclusion Zone, and many other radioactive sights around the word..." 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 nodded, clutching the patch tightly. “Thank you”.

Petrov studied 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 lingered 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.

**June 5<sup>th</sup>, 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 orphaned rat 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 was something almost resembling pity in his expression. Almost.

And then he was gone, leaving me alone.

"Well, Keener," Stingray's voice cut through the quiet, his sneer unmistakable as he approached the table where the release forms sat. "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

Stingray 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?”

Stingray 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 said, 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.”

**Connect these two portions somehow girl, I'm too tired to figure it out right now**

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

Corporal Nadia "Deadlock" Petrov, 35, 5'7, one of the only other women in the engineering program

Sergeant Lucas "Bullseye" Carter, 40, 5'11, athletic build, buzzed brown hair, no stubble to be seen, rough on the edges, a lovable bear on the inside

"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 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 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 was 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 shooting 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 the Sergeant 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, snapping to attention, I quickly follow suite with Ethan bringing up the rear. The Sargent turns away from the clearly terrified range officer and towards the three of us.

“Ah, Corporal 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 cracked 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 me that 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.”

## Incident

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

*Damien:*

“Fuck, fuck, fuck—Ellie, fucking stay with me!” I practically yelled into the radio, my voice breaking. Silence answered me.

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

I rounded the corner to the maintenance lift, skidding to a halt as my boots slid through a pool of blood. My breath caught in my throat.

"Fuck!"

There she was—lying crumpled on the ground, a growing pool of crimson spreading beneath her. My heart stopped. I dropped to my knees beside her, my hands trembling as I pressed two fingers to her neck. A pulse. Weak, but there.

Relief hit me like a punch to the chest, followed immediately by a wave of panic.

“Ellie?” I rasped, my voice barely above a whisper.

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

“I’m here, my angel. I’m here,” I said, choking on the words. Tears blurred my vision as I brushed blood-soaked hair from her face. She was alive. That’s all that mattered.

“I... I can’t feel my legs,” she said, her voice shaky, strained. “What happened?”

I forced myself to look her over, to assess the damage, even though every fiber of my being screamed to look away. There was a deep gash across her face, blood pooling in her eyes and matting her hair. Her left hand—what was left of it—was shredded, tendons and sinew glistening where the muscle had been torn apart. But it was her legs that made my stomach churn. Burned. Shattered. The upper thighs were mostly intact, but below that—nothing recognizable. Just jagged remnants of bone peeking through what used to be flesh.

She was dying. And if I didn't move fast, I'd lose her.

The lights flickered overhead. Backup power was failing. Once it went, the ship would depressurize across most compartments, and there'd be no getting her out. I reached for the radio on my shoulder, switching to the main crew frequency.

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

Static crackled in my ear before a voice finally cut through. "It's good to hear your voice, sir," came the familiar, steady tone of Lieutenant Adrienne Wolfe.

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

"Yes, sir. Fifteen total, mix of engineers, technical, a couple medical staff, and a frigate in the hangar bay. Pilot's ready, but he 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 replied. "Secondary power bank's still holding, but barely. What's her condition?"

I glanced down at Ellie, my heart clenching as her eyes fluttered shut again. "Severe," I said tightly. "Massive blood loss, avulsions on her head and legs, and her left hand's a mess. Is Dr. Calder there with you?"

"Yes sir, she's here with us, currently tending to some of the others, I'll give her the sitrep" her voice still steady, I never understood how she maintained that calm air of control.

"Get Dr. Calder ready. We'll need every ounce of magic she's got."

"Understood, sir. Meet you at the hangar entrance," Wolfe said, her voice growing more urgent. "Keep her alive."

"I'm trying," I muttered, grabbing a coagulant pen from my med pack. I stabbed it into Ellie's thigh, just above the worst of the damage, watching as the blood flow slowed slightly. It wasn't enough, but it would have to do for now.

I turned my gaze to the mag-lev shaft. Pieces of stay metal floated inside of the lift, with parts of the superstructure jutting out into the space at odd angles. Of course, nothing could ever go smoothly. Thankfully, mag-lev shafts aren't gravetized, leaving an empty space with just faint emergency lights marking the walls.

"Hold on, Ellie," I whispered, securing her limp body against my chest.

I pushed off the edge of the mag-lev platform and floated into the shaft, the zero-G taking hold as we drifted upwards. My arms tightened around her, keeping her close as I maneuvered us through the empty shaft. The hum of my breath and the faint groan of the ship's structure were the only sounds. Every second stretched into an eternity.

"Viper," Ellie murmured weakly, her head resting against my shoulder. "Don't... drop me..."

"I'd never," I said firmly, my voice softening. "You're stuck with me, Keener. No way I'm letting you go now."

The descent was slow but steady. When we hit the secondary hanger deck, gravity returned, pulling us down gently onto solid ground. I adjusted my grip, my legs threatening to buckle under the sudden weight. With a deep breath, I pushed forward, heading for the hangar bay.

### **[Hanger Bay]**

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

The hangar was a war zone—scrap metal and bodies strewn across the floor, fires still burning in pockets where fuel had ignited. The frigate, Argos, loomed in the distance, its ramp lowered and engines humming, ready for a quick escape.

Wolfe and Calder met me halfway across the bay. Wolfe's usually calm demeanor cracked as her eyes landed on Ellie. "Fuck," she muttered, rushing to take some of Ellie's weight. "Glad you found her. She wouldn't have lasted much longer."

"No time for pleasantries," I grunted, shifting Ellie into Wolfe's arms as I adjusted my grip. "Let's move."

Calder stepped in, her face pale but determined. She jabbed Ellie's arm with a yellow auto-injector, muttering something under her breath. The blood flow slowed further, but her breathing was still shallow, her face ashen.

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

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

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

“All we’ve got,” she said grimly. “No one else answered the last call.”

I nodded, my gaze drifting to the viewport. The Chara’s remains hung in the void, a twisted skeleton of steel and fire. The secondary power bank gave out as we breached the initial debris field, I watched as the hanger’s containment fields failed. Debris and bodies spiraled into the vacuum of space, a morbid ballet of destruction.

I turned back to Ellie. She was pale, barely clinging to life, but alive. For now, that was enough.

“You’re safe,” I murmured under my breath, more to myself than to her. “You’re safe, my angel.”

## **Recovery**

*Eleanor:*

The first thing I noticed was warmth—a steady heat radiating from somewhere close, paired with the faint crackle of firewood. I inhaled slowly, the sharp tang of antiseptics mixing with something softer—pine, maybe. The air felt heavier than I remembered, but not unpleasant.

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

"Ellie?"

The voice pulled me away from the window, a voice I knew well. “Damien-” quickly snapping my head to the direction of his voice, wrong choice, it hurt like hell. I see Damien sitting beside me. He leaned forward, his forearms braced on his knees. His face was rougher than I remembered—shadowed by exhaustion and darkened by a scruffy beard that hadn’t been there before. But his eyes held something else. Relief. And maybe... something softer.

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

I flexed my fingers under his, testing the edges of my awareness. That worked fine—good. But when I shifted my legs, the sensation was... different. Not absent, just unfamiliar. An inaudible hum coursed through me, subtle but present. It wasn't fear that I felt. It was curiosity. I glanced down, lifting the blanket draped over me.

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

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

Damien shifted slightly, his grip on my hand tightening just a bit. "Almost four weeks," he said. "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 asked, though I already knew what the answer would be.

His jaw tightened, his gaze dropping briefly to the floor. "We got as many out as we could," he said quietly. "But not everyone..." He trailed 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 lingered on them. Flexing my toes experimentally, I watched as the movements matched my intent almost perfectly, the cybernetics—calibrating, responding.

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

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

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

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

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

His expression sobered, the humor fading as quickly as it had appeared. "Bad," he admitted. "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 paused, his voice quieter when he continued. “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 paused 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 chuckled to himself.

I nodded, satisfied. “Good. Remind me to thank her for that.” I flexed my legs again, marveling at the smooth precision. “It’s strange,” I murmured. “They feel... almost normal. Like they’ve always been there.” I glanced 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 chuckled, 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 said, grinning faintly. A flicker of my old self, maybe.

The silence that followed wasn’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 asked after a moment, my mind drifting to the world around me.

“Yeah,” Damien said, 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 was something else there, hesitation, but now was not the time.

I nodded again, letting my eyes close as exhaustion pulled at me. “Safe,” I echoed, the word settling over me like a blanket. “Thanks, Damien.”

“Always,” he said softly. His hand lingered on mine until my breathing evened out, the steady crackle of the fire and his warm hand in mine, steady and grounding, sleep was quick to pull me back under.

I woke 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 sat on the bedside table, condensation beading down its surface in the warm room. Tentatively, I reached for it with my left hand—the reconstructed one. To my surprise, everything worked perfectly. My fingers curled naturally around the glass, my wrist rotated without hesitation, and the cool texture of the glass registered in vivid detail. I could feel again.

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

“Damien?” I called out, my voice hoarse but steady. I pushed 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 braced myself on the bedside table and attempted to stand.

Big mistake.

“FUCK!-” I yelled as my body crumpled to the floor, my legs refusing to hold my weight. Pain lanced 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 could make any progress, Damien burst into the room, his expression a mixture of concern and exasperation.

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

His arms slid under mine, and in one smooth motion, he lifted me off the floor and settled me back on the edge of the bed. I scowled, my pride stinging worse than the impact.

“I was fine,” I muttered, though the wobble in my voice betrayed me.

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

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

“They’re cybernetics, Ellie, not magic,” he replied, 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 quipped. “Maybe just walk to the window or, you know, not crash onto the floor.”

“Right,” Damien said 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 rolled 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 softened, and he crouched 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 paused, his dark eyes locking with mine. “And for the record, I don’t mind running myself ragged for you. You’re worth it.”



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

He smiled at me, the tension easing from his shoulders. "Now," he said, 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 grumbled, leaning into him for support as he steadied me on my feet.

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

I scoffed but let him guide me around the room. Every step was a reminder of how much work I had ahead of me. My legs moved, but each motion felt sluggish, disconnected. It was frustrating, to say the least. Still, I focused on the progress I was making, no matter how small.

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

"That's enough for now," he said. "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 said with a grin, earning him a glare. "But hey, at least you've still got your sense of humor."

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

He laughed, 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 said, settling back into the pillows. "But if it's terrible, I reserve the right to throw it at you."

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

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

It felt like an eternity before Damien returned with a plate of food, it wasn't a lot, but that was to be expected. He had two plates and brought a second cup of water with him, I'll admit, the man would balance incredibly well.

"I hope you are a fan of sausage and eggs" he said as he handed me a plate, "and I see that you've gotten a hang of your hand already" gesturing at the glass of water which sat 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 the (Insert recon branch leader), 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 still on me.

“Why isn’t Renault in any of these photos?” I asked, my eyes scanning for any trace of the man.

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.

“There’s talk of internal sabotage,” he said 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? Havoc?” 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. “You did catch him sleeping with the second officer, you remember her, Elise Darrow. Ellie, he’s desperate for a way to discredit you—and, by proxy, me.”

He reached up, brushing a stray strand of hair from my face, his fingers gentle as they tucked it behind my ear. My hand instinctively followed his, and before I knew it, my fingers had laced into his, holding him there.

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

Damien’s lips quirked upward in a faint, bitter smile. “Guess we didn’t see the whole him,” he said quietly. “I certainly didn’t. And I’ll tell you this—I’ll never forgive him for cheating on you.” His thumb brushed softly along my cheek, his voice steady but tinged with steel. “Just so we’re clear.”

I leaned into his touch, closing my eyes for a brief moment. “I don’t understand how someone can turn on the people who had their back—on the ones who trusted them. It’s pathetic.”

## Recon Part 2 Bitches

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 appeared beside him, a pistol to his head and pulled the trigger. His skull cracked open on the opposite side as the projectile burned 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: OH 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 yet, he wouldn’t have a head on his shoulders.

“Fucken got what he deserved, fucked with the wrong crew” 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 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, that and I don’t trust the system to do what needs to be done”, her usually steady voice dropping deadly serious, “I want so 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 close, 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 another time”, 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 in his hand, smoke still billowing from the cigarette in his hands.

The tension was palpable,