Firepower

“Hey, do you have a light?” Crimson asked, rehearsed nonchalance in her voice. An animated fire danced in her amber eyes as she looked to the taller, one-armed woman who wore a deep scowl on her face, even before Crimson had approached.

The scowl seemed to flicker, for just a hair of a second, into an even deeper annoyance as Tully’s gaze shifted off from the distance to the shorter girl. Then, with a shake of her head -- and a not-so-subtle roll of her eyes, Tully firmly placed her on cigarette in her lips as her sole hand ruffled around in her purse for just a second before fishing out a metal lighter, flicking it open, lighting it, and offering it out to Crimson. “I thought you *were* fire -- or at least controlled it,” she snarked without a second thought, turning back out to the fading sunset and staring at it once more. Its purple and orange hues reflected across the large bay that separated their school -- and the dormitories that they loitered outside of -- from the megapolis on its opposite side, and it was a reminder of the fact that summer was now upon them.

“I thought you didn’t help anyone, ever?” Crimson fired back without a moment of hesitation, a shockingly smug grin tugging at the bandage on her right cheek. When Tully didn’t answer, simply shaking her head instead, the grin faded for just a second as Crimson’s mind scrambled to come up with another response. Failing to find one, she took just a second to flop out a cigarette of her own from one of the sleeves of her thick flannel and lit it with the offered lighter. After a small drag, she’d got it: “I usually don’t see you out here.”

“There’s a reason for that,” Tully chimed back. She’d still not turned back to Crimson -- but her tone had softened.

“Do you… maybe wanna elaborate on what that reason is?” Crimson tried to coax.

The annoyance in Tully’s maroon gaze as it finally turned back to Crimson killed it. “I only smoke when I need to take a break and *think*,” Tully articulated with enough emphasis to drown the idea of subtly to death in a half-inch of water. Then, with a sigh -- and another roll of her eyes -- Tully far more flatly stated, “Look, I understand that you’re most likely here for *something*. Just spit it out already, and stop wasting the time of both of us.”

Tully’s forwardness had caught Crimson off-guard, and with her free right hand, she awkwardly ran her hand through her rose gold hair, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath in. “I’m just here for a smo--” she began, but cut herself off with a sigh as she shook her head, “I… kind of wanted to talk to you about that girl, I guess. Nothin’ too serious.”

“The one who died?” Tully clarified. Her tone was still nonchalant, but her hand paused in its motion of taking the cigarette out of her mouth.

“Which other girl could I be --”

“There are a lot of girl’s on this campus --”

“Alright, alright, I get your point,” Crimson conceded sharply, closing her eyes once more and giving another shake of her head. “You really are not much of a people person, are you?”

“What gave it away?” The only way, in those four words, for Tully to have spoken more condescendingly would have been for her to turn back from the sunset city skyline she was looking at would have been for her to turn to face Crimson and give a faked, sickly-sweet smile. Instead, she took a drag on her cigarette once more and paused, her brows furling as she did so. As she let the smoke out, she plucked the cigarette from her lips, tossed it off, and snapped her fingers before it hit the ground. A purple orb snapped out and enveloped the cigarette, and then disappeared, taking the cigarette with it and leaving only a firecracker-like report. Then, quietly, Tully asked, “What about Vi?”

“Is it true that DJ Atomika was her girlfriend? The musician?” Crimson asked, falling back into a nonchalant tone -- though it had a bit of amusement in it still. In a way, it was hard to believe that such a famous musician -- her name, before her death, was plastered all over the electronic billboards that lined the streets of Aval, always advertising another concert, another album, another party, another escape from reality.

“DJ Atomi-- oh, right. Thyme. Yeah, she was dating Thyme before…” Tully started to explain, but her words had begun to falter and she just clenched her fist tightly instead. With a small tilt of her head, her maroon eyes fell shut, and with a sigh, they reopened. “Yeah. Vi and Thyme dated before Thyme’s death.”

“So that was her real name…” Crimson muttered with a weird single chuckle. “Wait, you knew her?”

“She was a student here, too. Same year as me,” Tully answered.

“Oh. Were you--”

“We weren’t close, no, but I appreciated her presence. Thyme had a way to light up a room with her smile, if not with her music. She was… an interesting person to talk to, because she wasn’t ‘corrupted’ by the reality of the other world she inhabited -- or by ours,” Tully interjected, turning back to Crimson. There was a fire in her maroon eyes now, in the way that she was speaking even as she looked down at Crimson. “Listen. You wanted to know about Vi, not Thyme. What was it?”

With a small nod, Crimson’s tone didn’t back down in the slightest as she asked, “Do you know how she died?”

“She took her rifle and shot herself. Her dormitory was down the hall from mine, I heard the shot myself.”

Crimson’s jaw hung open from just how easily Tully said it, as if it was just another Tuesday morning and she was exchanging meaningless pleasantries with a coworker. “She shot herself?” she exclaimed, her voice echoing through the empty courtyard.

“Yes, that is what I just said,” Tully snarked, rolling her eyes.

“I just find it… a bit hard to believe, don’t you?” Crimson chirped back almost immediately. “We’re at one of the best training schools in the country -- no, the world -- and *no one* kept an eye on her to make sure that she was healthy to keep on fighting? Especially after her girlfriend had died? Not a single check in?”

“Why would they? She’s just one student out of a several hundred, and we’re expected to die anyways, just usually in combat. Hells, who’s to say the people in charge weren’t the ones who *allowed* it? Or -- wait, you might be onto something there,” Tully replied. Though initially dismissive, her tone quickly turned inquisitive as she brought her hand to her chin and started tapping both her index finger and her left foot.

“Wait, I am?” Crimson responded, a bit amazed.

Without even acknowledging Crimson, Tully began to think aloud. “With *her* rifle, there would be no way to, well. It wouldn’t leave much of a head afterwards, is what I’m trying to say. I’ve seen what it does to zombies and trolls. No one knows who the first person in the room was -- and who’s to say that the first person in the room wasn’t the one who’d actually done it? Most everyone else on the floor had been too confused to process that it wasn’t just thunder, it was a gunshot, and unless we were able to get into her room, we wouldn’t know where the round went after it left her head… Wait, without that, we don’t even know if it *was* Vi. The body was cremated, after all.”

“Wait, so do you really think Vi didn’t kill herself, then?” Crimson puzzled, confused.

“...No, I still think she did, but it’s fun to think about what if this *was* just a cover-up,” Tully said after a brief pause, her tone soft once again. “Regardless, as much as I hated her presence, she was a good counter to Thyme -- just as positive and, well. She lived up to her name.”

“Violet?”

“No, she hated being called Violet. Vibrant.”

After a pause, Crimson just said, “That’s… a pretty name.”

“Yeah. It was,” Tully agreed. She turned back out to the city once more, and quietly, she asked, “Is that all?”

“Yeah. I’m going to just finish this cigarette, and then I’ll go and leave you be, okay?” Crimson offered.

Tully just shook her head. “No need. I’ll be seeing you, maybe,” she replied, turning back to the building behind and slowly beginning to walk off.

With a nod and an indifferent shrug, Crimson acknowledged Tully leaving but didn’t comment -- not initially, at least. She rested herself against the brick wall, and then, right before Tully left earshot, called, “By the way -- I can tell your cigarettes are fake. Too herbal smelling; rethink what you’re making them out of.”

With her last catcall out of the way, Crimson slid down against the wall, landing on the ground with a thud, and looked out towards the city. Oh how she wished to make it burn. Tear down each and every billboard, all of the corporations that bought them to fight amongst each other instead of anything else. Taking one more drag upon her cigarette, she snuffed it out against the concrete as she let out a long breath. She could feel her emotions welling inside of her, the confusion -- perhaps a bit of anger with it -- outpouring from what felt like her heart.

Before she’d knew it, she’d burned a hole right through the butt of the cigarette.