Trophy Case For the Wounded

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Trophy Case For the Wounded

by Ghostigos

Summary

It's all trauma, every inch of it. No need to worry, a little bit of therapy and pills and you'll be functioning in no time.

That's what they say, so that's what you attempt to believe. But something is always itching in the back of your mind, like a thought you're forbidden to think but begs for attention regardless. It makes itself known through the hazy patterns that flash across your vision when you blink. It's something bad, but when you probe for answers all you get is a pounding headache.

Or: Miles escapes Mount Massive Asylum and practices restraint in all the wrong areas of recovery
Notes

Yo. Guess we're doing this huh?

Also I don't believe this was ever properly addressed so I'm addressing it now: Miles Upshur is written with SPD, which you can learn about here!
They keep you for ninety days. That's the deal.

It's been eighty-eight days.

They don’t let you be left alone for very long, or feed yourself without a person monitoring your eating process. It was hell just convincing them that you don't need someone to help you get ready for bed. It didn't really support your argument either when there was an incident months ago where you couldn't get the stupid noises in your head to stop screaming, and you foolishly believed that pressing a knife to your arm would make things better.

Today's supervisor, Evelyn, is particularly picky in making sure you've eaten every morsel of oatmeal in your bowl. She's watched you for over a month now, so she's softened a smidge in allowing you leg room. But not enough to make you comfortable with her presence.

You're sitting in a white cafeteria. There are spots of colorful flowers placed around the room to lighten up the atmosphere, and a few paintings are framed along the wall. There is idle talk amongst the patients, at least from what you can hear from your table. Only Evelyn is daring enough to sit with you.

The humming in your ears has you glaring down into your black cup of coffee.

Evelyn has used this opportunity of silence to break out her clipboard. "Status update, Mister Upshur," she states.

"Peachy."

"Speak honestly." Her hash stare has you sighing in aggravation. A month of the both of you having to deal with the other's unbending temperaments has you equally sick of one another.

"Look, can't I just go home?" you ask impatiently. "I haven't killed anyone, I haven't caused any sort of trouble. I don't see why you need me locked up like this."

Evelyn clicks her pen and adjusts her clipboard so you can't peek over to see what she's writing. It can't be pleasant, you're certain.

"For the tenth time, Mister Upshur," she says, "you are to stay here in Refuge for ninety days exactly, unless your stay is prolonged because of any more...incidents."

You scowl. "I barely touched that guy," you argue, but Evelyn stops writing with finality and stops your protest with an immediate glare.

"Reports say that you broke his arm," she replies brusquely.

"He was in my way."  
"There was no excuse to get security involved," Evelyn sighs. "You're a loose cannon, Upshur. Do you expect me to shorten your stay at Refuge because I believe you're sane enough to step out into the real world?"

You bring your styrofoam cup up to your lips with a raised eyebrow. "Would you?"
She gives you the intelligent form of a scoff that plasters her grim expression. "If it were up to me, I would have you registered at least for another month." Then she sighs heavily. "But your therapists say you've made progress in your recovery, so I have to go by their word."

You wouldn't call it "progress". The least you feel like you've done is stop sitting like a statue when the therapists attempt to coax you to talk about your emotions. Granted, you've taken a few techniques from their sessions, particularly for nightmares or violent impulses. But you don't call it progress because it hasn't fixed what's wrong with you. Not really.

Evelyn checks her watch as you slowly sip the black liquid, drawling on time. "It's almost ten," she announces. "Finish up, your appointment's in twenty."

You're about to make a show of doing the opposite, and taking your sweet time in sending your dirty dishes back to the carts along the corners of the cafeteria. But you're so unbelievably close to getting out of this rehab center now. If Evelyn can write you up for even the smallest of scenarios (okay, breaking one's limbs was bad, but it only happened once), you don't want to test her patience any more than you've already been doing.

So you give a sigh and slam your now-empty cup down on the tray and heave yourself off of your chair.

Evelyn makes nothing of your display and clips her pen calmly back on her clipboard. "Trevor will come and get you," she says, "I'm going on break."

"Thank god," you mumble, and gain a dirty glare that pierces your back all the way to the cart.

You abandon Evelyn in the cafeteria and make your way back to the stairs, where your room resides on the fifth floor. A few doctors peek at you from the corners of their eyes, but you seem stable enough today so that they let you pass without question. Besides, you're leaving in two days; they don't have to see you anymore after this.

The elevator doors open as you step out to the emergency stairway, but you've learned your lesson in relying on elevators.

When you're alone again, behind closed doors, do you let out a tremendous sigh, and the buzzing regains itself in your brain. You squeeze your closed eyelids with your palms and grab your forehead with clenched fingers. Looks like the daily headache has decided to kick in already.

At least the medication has been helping you with your diagnosed schizophrenia. That's why you see things when you close your eyes, they tell you. It's all trauma, every inch of it. No need to worry, a little bit of therapy and pills and you'll be functioning in no time.

That's what they say, so that's what you attempt to believe. But something is always itching in the back of your mind, like a thought you're forbidden to think but begs for attention regardless. It makes itself known through the hazy patterns that flash across your vision when you blink. It's something bad, but when you probe for answers all you get is a pounding headache.

You don't need anything else to haunt your nightmares, you eventually decide. Remembering Trager and Walker and everyone else is enough for now.

It's five minutes for a quick shower, and another five to stand in front of a mirror to convince yourself that it's you staring back, it's just you, just you. The doctors said depersonalization was another cause of the trauma, and don't overthink anything, because that makes it worse.

So eventually you decide that yes, this is you, and this is who you'll be for the remainder of the day.
By that time, half of your alone time is up; Trevor will be here soon to practically hold your hand and walk you to your therapy session. At least he's not as strict as Evelyn is; he's cut you much more slack beforehand, so you're not that worried about his upcoming visit.

Everything in Refuge is run on a tight schedule, to help you adjust, they say. Every inch of your day is calculated to the last minute to help you—you don't know how, but you suppose it does help you not be as alone with your thoughts as your brain demands you to be. As long as you can shove away thinking, you'll live.

Your therapist wanted a bunch of notes. He wanted a list of goals you're going to set for yourself once you step foot out of rehab, so you're not drowning the moment no one is there to tell you to take your medication or shower or practice coping techniques.

Your room is messy. No matter how much your supervisors fuss about the state of your environment, you assure them that this is just how you've always been. Flinging notes and books this way and that helps you remember to get things done, or at the least they sit around and mock you until you finally get up and finish your work.

The notes you'd promised are atop a stack of books on your nightstand. Amongst nightly reading did you finally finish your task, but it wasn't completely difficult. You already know life is going to absolutely suck the moment you're out of here, so you didn't have much to write down. But he'll take it; it's better than nothing, you suppose.

The headache takes into a throbbing state, where you begin to rub the sides of your temple fiercely with the pith of your missing index finger. The black tendrils at the corner of your sight curl in and out, and your head throbs as the vision dissolves into static. Red, hot static that begins to scream in a high pitched tone and has you doubling over on your bed mattress. You give a hiss of pain as the sensation spirals into your downward spine and ribs. It feels like something is almost trying to get out of you.

It's screaming.

You need to get out

There's a knock at the door that snaps whatever is crawling around right back into your subconscious, and you tumble backwards onto the crinkled sheets, panting heavily, suffering the aftermath of yet another dumb "schizophrenic" episode. The buzzing dissipates into a soft hum, and then it's nonexistent.

You are still here. You still exist.

The door knocks again, hesitantly this time.

"Miles?" Trevor. "Are you in there?"

The concern in his voice springs you right back upwards, and the feeling makes you reasonably dizzy. You take another minute to attempt to rub your eyes before you reply, "Yeah, sorry."

"Is everything alright in there?" Trevor calls, and you can't say that you had another episode. You need to get out of this stupid rehab center; you need to look as sane as possible in order to do so.

"I'm fine!" You readjust yourself immediately and shove all signs of the recent panic attack away. You grab your notes and quickly slip on a grey t-shirt lying on the floor. "I was just...grabbing something."
There's a small silence that has you thinking that he didn't believe you, and he's going to rush in and question you and you'll be stuck in Refuge for another month or two.

But eventually, there's an, "Alright. Well, we're running a bit late, so you might wanna hurry up."

You flip the door open to face Trevor, and he gives a start when you exude an instinctual glare that you immediately have to soften. You have to remember that you're trying to look normal here.

"I'm here," you announce, and wave your notes in his face. "Told you, I was getting something."

He takes into account your jesting character with sucking in one bit of his cheeks just enough so he looks like he's biting back a comment.

"You know, if you cleaned your room, we wouldn't have this issue," he finally says, stepping aside so you both can head for the stairway. You take the lead wordlessly.

You look back over your shoulder to see his disapproving stare. "I told you, my mess helps me think," you argue.

Trevor sighs. "I know. But still, it'd be nice to come in and not see the aftermath of a hurricane in there."

You're about to offer a good-natured chuckle, but you stop yourself. He still treats you like the equivalent of a patient, even after so long. No need to encourage his attempts of friendship; he might start to thinking that treating you so helplessly is going to be acceptable.

Instead, you mumble, "You're more than welcome to clean it if you have a problem."

You don't even catch Trevor's response to your empty threat; you're too busy slowly putting one foot in front of the other, because no one is here. It's just you and Trevor, and he's not going to hurt you. You're safe. You're fine.

The instinctive fight or flight beating of your heart quickens as you trail your steps down the stairway. You're so used to sprinting down like there's no tomorrow, like someone is breathing down your back and about to reach for your throat.

God, you're so helpless that by the time you've finished the last pair of stairs you're outwardly cringing at yourself. You're glad that Trevor can't catch your facial expression from behind.

It's a while of heading towards the therapist's room in an awkward state of silence, but eventually you're able to brush Trevor off your back and enter the room where, once again, you have to be dissected from the inside out to make sure you're safe and stable.

Dr. Song is already settled on his chair, papers scattered on his lap, when he greets you. You respond by placing your stack of notes on his own pile and sitting yourself down on the couch across from him.

He gives you a curious gaze as he examines the papers you'd handed him, pawing through the contents with the look of a student being given a new textbook.

"What is this?" he asks, keeping his voice a sense of friendly curiosity.

You cross your arms to indicate that you've relaxed into your seat. "You said you wanted those, right?"
And then his old eyes, crinkled with age, brighten with recognition. "Oh! You completed the assignment?"

You sniff. "It's what I'm known for." He doesn't catch onto your sarcasm, and if he does he says nothing to address it.

Instead he observes the concept of the papers, not truly looking at the context, and gives an approving nod, protruding his lower lip in surprise.

"I'm glad you did as instructed, Miles," Dr. Song says. "This is essential in making sure you're ready to step out of The Refuge with a clear mind and accurate objectives to strive for."

You'd kill for a cigarette right now.

"Let's see," Dr. Song takes a moment to observe what seems to be the first item on the list, and his eyebrows scrunch into exposing an expression of confusion.

You straighten your position a bit so your elbows are resting on your knees, intent on his unnecessary input.

He makes eye contact with you, but his gaze is curious yet guarded with the professionalism that his emotions won't be examined as easily.

"It says here, 'get up to watch sunrises'," Dr. Song recites.

You nod. "I thought it'd be nice to wake up and see something in the morning. Keep me motivated, you know."

His eyes brighten, but his stoic frown only curls up slightly as the edges to indicate that he's pleased with your response.

"That's a very encouraging goal," he agrees with a nod, and his praise seeps into his tone. "It's a unique perspective to view the dawn of a new day as an awakening for new opportunities."

You give a halfhearted shrug. "I guess," you murmur. "I can't see shit outside my window. I want to at least see something."

You do have something, though, when you look out the window every morning here. You're just not ecstatic that you can look out onto more windows, since your room is among others that curve to support a courtyard down below. Once a bird ran into your window, though, so you can't say your view has always been boring.

Dr. Song gives a thoughtful hum and makes to grab a marker. "I'm going to put a check mark on this one," he tells you, and the squeak of the pen has you clenching your jaw at the pitched noise that emits from it. Your ears have grown quite sensitive.

On the next goal, his face does something funny that you can't understand. His voice is marginally balanced as he recites: "Go to Washington D.C."

You frown, confused by the sudden deter of positivity in Dr. Song's voice. "Yeah?"

He looks at you, expression frustratingly guarded, as always. "Any reason why?"

"Not really," you say honestly. "Just seems like a nice place to be. Seems like I'd enjoy it."

There's more to it; you feel attached to D.C., oddly enough. Like you belong there, maybe in a past
life or some shit like that. It'd help put two and two together if you could see the sights yourself. But of course, you don't tell Dr. Song this, seeing as he's acting super weird about it, and you don't want to push his patience.

Contemplative and quiet, Dr. Song eventually adds a remark of his own off to the side of the paper. He explains, "How about you settle down first, and maybe D.C. can be another time, yeah?"

You don't see why he's emphasizing so much on the subject, so you just sweep it under the carpet and mutter a, "Yeah, sure," in order to keep the train rolling down the tracks. The sooner you're done, the sooner you can leave.

You go through the small list like that, with Dr. Song giving a few tweaks to your ideas (you'd talked for a while about getting a dog; in the end, you let Dr. Song talk you out of it. "It's a good idea for later," he assured you). Occasionally he'd completely cross one out (he expressed strong disapproval on "getting a beer").

Overall, he claims you're improving, and that these are good, simple goals to reach for once you're out.

At the bottom of the list, however, when he catches your final vow, his face begins to darken.

You frown and lean back into the cushion. "What now?" you ask, borderline irritable at this point. But you have a feeling you already know what you're about to be chewed out for.

He doesn't say anything, instead turning the paper so that you can read where he's placed his marker under, so you know which one he's talking about.

Underlined multiple times, in all caps, you'd written, "FIND KID".

You lock eyes with Dr. Song and give him a bitter sort of look. You don't even attempt to argue with him; you already know what he's going to say.

He sets the note back down with a disappointed sigh, and adjust his glasses on the brim of his nose. You feel like a young student about to be chewed out by his school principal.

Dr. Song seems to hesitate as he looks somberly at you. "Miles," he begins, "We've talked about this."

You hold up one hand immediately in strong defense. "I don't understand the problem," you argue firmly. "It's reasonable, isn't it?"

Dr. Song gives you a rather condescending glance. "Miles, I thought we both came to terms that this 'Chara' is nothing more than a schizophrenic illusion. Just a coping strategy for witnessing the horrors of the experience."

"But what if they're not?" Your voice is close to begging at this point. "What if there was an actual kid that traveled with me through the asylum? What if that's a possibility here?"

He shakes his head. "There's no one by the name of 'Chara' that was registered into Murkowski's systems. They didn't treat adolescent patients."

"They said that their parents signed them up for the treatment for money," you argue.

"We've discussed this. Chara's backstory emits from your sympathy for the patients that were forced into the program against their will. You're projecting pity onto a nonexistent Variant because you
don't know where else to put it."

You clench your jaw. You knew the minute you wrote that list that you'd be receiving this sort of pushback.

"You saw the footage," you growl. "There was a kid with me the whole time."

Dr. Song takes this into a brief moment of consideration, but he doesn't seem convinced. "The footage was confiscated," he finally says, slowly. "But they allowed me access to your notes that you took."

You force back the urge to groan. You know what point he's about to make next as he searches for the proper papers to support his next explanation.

"Not once in your notes have you ever mentioned a child traveling with you," Dr. Song says, navigating the copies of the notes with the knowledge of one who's scanned said papers a thousand times before. "At least once or twice do you use a 'we', but the rest doesn't give any sort of evidence that you had company outside of yourself."

You stay silent out of spite. There was a reason you'd done so, you recall. It was out of respect for Chara's presence; you didn't want the public to make any more of a nuisance of themselves for when they grabbed hold of Chara and perhaps even yourself. You didn't want them to be pushed into interviews or brought attention in anything else they'd performed; it wasn't their fault that they were in there.

Besides, if you remember, there's a vague memory of you writing out a last-minute apology to Chara in your notes, when you had retreated into the underground lab. But all you hear in Refuge is that you didn't, you didn't, you didn't.

At your lack of argument, Dr. Song seems to believe that he's bought you into his bullshit theory that Chara doesn't exist.

"The sooner you accept this, the better," he reassures you, and makes a move to cross out the note.

You blurt out, "What if I look for them anyway?"

He pauses and arches a brow as he looks back up at you. You've gotten his attention now.

"Say you're right," you reason. "Say the kid isn't real. But if I figure that out myself, wouldn't it help?"

You're spouting nonsense at this point for a reason you aren't completely conscious of. But Dr. Song seems considerate again.

"I suppose that would help you move on," he eventually agrees. "But what would you do?"

You cross your arms again as a gesture of confidence. "I'm a reporter. I snoop."

He nods slightly, so you're assuming he's on board with you now. Some form of relief unclasps its hold on your stomach.

It's a moment of quiet, and you think you're about to be dismissed. But Dr. Song sets his marker down and takes a sip of his water set on the stand next to him. He usually does that when he's about to delve onto a touchy subject, and you find yourself stiffening.
"If Chara was real," he begins, "and you managed to find them, what would you do next?"

You don't have to think hard. "I'd tell them I was sorry."

"Sorry for what?" he presses.

You take a minute to observe the ticking of the clock. You want to get out of here more than anything else.

"I...we had a deal," you tell him, even though you recall reciting this story before. "We promised to get each other out."

"If you held up your end of the bargain, and you're out, doesn't that mean that Chara would be out too?" Dr. Song interrupts.

You shake your head. A funny noise is buzzing in the back of your head again. "I don't remember," you mumble.

He nods. "I understand that it's hard for you to remember how you escaped," he says, sounding considerate. "It's common for trauma survivors to blur events together in a method to avoid the exact emotions felt in said event."

You can't help but feel like that's not exactly what happened, but when you try to think hard, you find yourself biting back a groan of pain as the angry pulsing regains itself in your mind. It's best to ignore it; you don't want to unlock anything that may come with remembering exactly what happened when you and Chara had finally escaped.

A part of you questions whether or not you really ever escaped. Maybe it was all just a figment of your imagination. Maybe you died and this is the afterlife. You don't know.

"What else would you tell Chara?" Dr. Song prods, and you look at him to avoid the temptation to sprawl onto the couch and allow your aching brain to take over.

What would you tell them? Besides you're sorry?

It wouldn't be right to keep clinging to them; they have people caring for them, right?

"I guess..." you trail off in thought. "I guess I'd just say goodbye?"

Dr. Song perks up. "Why so?"

You look down at your hands and the useless nubs remaining of your index and ring fingers. "Because I don't know what else to do for them," you admit in a low tone.

It's a moment before Dr. Song seems to approve of your plan. "That's fair," he says. "You're acknowledging that you're not in a proper place to care for a child."

"I wasn't planning on adopting them," you snap; god, you're the last person who should be relied on to be a parental figure in any kid's life. Especially not Chara; you owe it to them to have them break away from you altogether.

Dr. Song shakes his head. "I wasn't talking about adoption," he protests gently. "Not all parental figures are actually parents. If what you've told me about Chara is true, then it sounds as though they really admired you, because you were safe to them."

Guilt. You feel nothing but guilt now.
"You're not in a position to be looked up to," he continues, then adds quickly, "At least, not for a while. Let yourself heal first, let that be your main priority."

He snaps his notes shut. "You've shown much improvement from my time with you, Miles," he concludes. "Once we figure out this whole Chara situation, we're on the right track."

You don't say anything else. You let him blab on about healthy techniques to practice once you're outside Rehab's closed doors, what to do in case your family comes back, that sort of stuff.

It's an hour of listening to his rants on recovery before he finally stops and gives you a professional sort of smile that you don't find emotional attachment in if you looked hard enough.

"Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is never easy for anyone," he finishes. "Be kind to yourself once you're outside our care here. And don't do anything stupid."

Then he shakes your four-fingered hand and brushes you gently out the door. You head right to the vending machines and grab yourself a bottle of soda. It's the closest to alcohol you'll get in this stupid building.

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"You've got to be kidding me."

The nurse typing on the computer gives you a helpless shrug. "I'm sorry, Mister Upshur, but you haven't been permitted to live on your own quite yet."

You give something close to a snarl. Something in your chest is tightening with anger.

"What do I need to do to prove that I can live without you smartasses breathing down my neck every five minutes?" You snap.

She holds up her hands in a defensive gesture at your sharp voice, but her eyes are bright with caution. "Sir, if you want to live with a close family member instead, I'll see if they can be a little reasonable—"

"No."

You don't want him getting involved.

The nurse sighs. "Then I don't know what to tell you. They won't let you leave without clarification that you're able to step out of rehab with all the necessary tools needed to—"

You interrupt again, furious. "You're never going to let me go home, are you?"

"You are going home," she reasons. "You're just going to be supervised for six weeks to make sure nothing goes wrong."

"Do you do this with all your patients or am I just a special case?" you ask acidly. Every part of your body is stiff, and you find that your heart is beginning to twist and ache in a horrible way. They don't trust you. They won't let you go back home.

The nurse hesitates, eyeing something on her monitor before giving a rather hesitant nod.

"I'd say special case," she finally admits, looking sheepish. "You've been separated from the rest of Murkoff's...victims. The current agenda insists that those affected by Murkoff receives intensive care from trauma, including therapy, medication, and nurses from specific rehabilitation centers and
programs to constantly provide for them."

You let out a long groan. "So what? I get an in-home babysitter for a few weeks?"

"Not babysitter," she clarifies with exasperation. "Just someone who's going to live with you for a while, just to make sure you're on the road to recovery."

Then the nurse clicks something that enables a printer beside her to spit out a piece of paper. She briskly hands it to you from across the desk, and you snatch it from her hand out of curiosity.

"Here's some information about your supervisor," she says, pointing to the paper you're holding. "His name is Jackson Wrent. I think you'll enjoy him."

You scowl and stuff away the paper; you don't even attempt to read it. "Doubt it. But thanks."

You storm away from the desk, feeling dark and bitter. Some section in your hindbrain is feeding off your negativism with satisfaction, so that it feels right to be a grumpy hot mess. You make your way back to your room and unceremoniously stuff everything away in your suitcases.

Maybe you should have just died in the asylum. That would have made a lot of things easier.

Then you remember Chara.

No, you wouldn't leave them like that. But living is so hard.

When you're finished, you plop yourself down onto the bed and fall into a restless sleep filled with images of decapitated heads and surgery wounds.

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A knock on the door awakens you, and you sluggishly get to your feet. Your body feels like it's been slammed into by a truck, but you let the medication's affects of productivity kick into autopilot and allow you to trudge off the bed.

When you open the door, you're greeted by a practical ray of sunshine packed into one person. It's the clothing, you decide, all pressed and folded neatly to give him a scholar sort of look. His plaid sweater and the matching bow tie are a tad much, you decide.

The man is a bit shorter than you, with a shaven head of black, curly hair and light chocolate skin. His glasses are black-rimmed. He holds out a hand to you with a small smile.

"Miles Upshur, right?" he asks.

You run your eyes with an exhausted sigh. It's way too early for this. "Who the hell wants to know," you mutter, your words sleepily tying together to make you sound intoxicated.

He takes away his hand hesitantly. "Oh, sorry. Didn't introduce myself." Then he straightens his posture.

"My name is Jackson Wrent," he introduces, sounding like he's reading off of a Hallmark greeting card. "I'm your--"

You cut off his speech with a rude waving of your hand. "Yeah, yeah. Babysitter. I'm well aware."

He gives a small start of surprise before registering what you mean with what seems to be an understanding nod.
"Unreasonably close to that, yes," he agrees, and you perk up. "I'm just here to make sure you don't kill yourself, basically."

At that, you find yourself giving a scoff of laughter. "Fair enough. Just be sure not to make a nuisance of yourself."

"No promises," he replies with a grin. Then he adds, "I'm sorry for waking you up so early. They said to get you to breakfast pretty quickly today, since you have a lot of packing to do."

You turn back to your packed room, eyeing the suitcases you'd thrown on the floor after cramming them full, in order to make room on your bed to sleep. "Not much."

Jackson peeks over your shoulder to where you're staring at your room, twisted upside down and inside out to make sure you didn't forget anything.

"Seems like you're all set in here then," he pulls away from the doorway with a satisfied smile. "Wanna head down for breakfast? They might let us head outside if we finish early."

Any opportunity to get out of here sounds appealing, however tired you are. You give a slow nod. "Sounds good. I'll head down after a shower."

Jackson returns your nod. "Alrighty. Guess I'll see you there."

Then he heads back down the hall, leaving you in the brightened hallway. You watch him leave; you're surprised he's not practically skipping, the way he's holding himself up like he's about to bounce off his feet.

If he's going to be this way the entire time, you might have a trouble with his perky exterior. But overall, he seems reasonable. At least he didn't ask to walk you down, like you're a helpless child. That's the key in confirming that he's way too eccentric-looking, but you guess he'll do.

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You both end up alone, at a table in a corner, with you staring down at your omelette.

Jackson didn't bring any sort of supplies with him, like Evelyn or any of your other supervisors usually do. You wonder if he's just trying to make a decent impression. Has he heard of you?

"So, Jackson," you venture, just to break the silence. It's much quieter than usual in the cafeteria, save for the clanging in the kitchen. "Tell me about yourself."

He perks up with registered surprise. "Oh, alright," he says. "What do you wanna know?"

You shrug, taking a thoughtful bite of your omelette. "I don't know, just, your life, your dreams, what you're doing with your career path that you ended up in this hellscape."

Jackson doesn't seem to take kindly to your passive accusation, but he stays quiet on it. He takes a minute to think as he sprinkles pepper onto his eggs.

"Well, there's not much to say, really," he finally admits. "I went to the University of Michigan to pursue in psychological science, I ended up with a degree in photography. Don't ask me how that happened."

You perk up and swallow your mouthful of eggs. "Photographer, huh?"

Jackson shakes his head with a chuckle. "Not really, at least I don't think so. I guess the professors
saw something in it. Some sort of ‘calling’ or shit. They kept pushing me towards it, but...it wasn’t what I wanted to do."

He sighs and settles back. "So I went back, got the degree in the career I wanted, and now I'm here."

You frown. "What does this job have to do with the psychology field?"

"More like the medical field," Jackson corrects. "I want to use psychology somewhere, but I'm not sure yet. So I guess you could call this experimenting."

"Spoonfeeding traumatized adults?"

He laughs, but you don't find the question humorous. "I prefer calling it a hands-on sort of experiment. It helps me get an intimate sort of experience with patients I might be working with."

You suppose that makes sense, but you're not about to show any sort of approval at his statements. Instead you take a slice of bacon on your plate and snap an edge of it off to chew it.

"So I'm your lab rat," you clarify, and you're surprised to see that Jackson nods in good nature.

"If you'd rather be called that," Jackson teases. Then he goes quiet, seeming suddenly uncomfortable so he twiddles his fork along his plate. It doesn't make any sort of squeaking noise, you notice, thank god.

"I saw your footage," he finally admits, exhibiting discomfort at the thought. "Man, they really put my skills to the test by assigning me you."

You can't help but almost laugh. "Yeah, I'm hell. Don't act surprised."

Jackson doesn't seem to have your sense of humor, instead saying wistfully, "I'm just surprised you survived."

Nodding, you mutter sourly, "So am I."

You finish up your omelette in the silence that follows, and your train of thought shifts into the idea that if Jackson saw the footage, and Dr. Song didn't, maybe there's a change that he can confirm that maybe Chara is real. Maybe Chara did travel with you. Maybe he even has information on where they are now.

But you fling your fork onto your now-empty plate with bitterness. No, you don't want to know anymore. Chara could be real, or dead, who knows? Perhaps ignorance truly is bliss.

Jackson is curious at your sudden bad temper, but he says nothing about it. You decide that if he keeps that up, he'll be a decent housemate.

You point with your remaining index finger at his half-empty plate. There's still a good leftover bit of eggs left. "Are you gonna finish those?" you ask.

Jackson sputters for a quick moment, like what you asked wasn't written anywhere in the manual instructions on how to take care of you.

"Oh! No, no I'm not." He pushes the plate quickly over to where you can grab it, and you reach across the table to do so. As you pull the plate onto your tray and over your empty one, you see Jackson giving you an inquiring look.

Then you notice his gaze is fixated on one of your hands.
You grab your fork and absentmindedly stab it into the eggs with a roll of your eyes. "Go ahead and ask me. Everyone else does."

He seems skeptical, but eventually he asks carefully, "What happened to your fingers?"

You take a sip of your orange juice nonchalantly. "Crazy doctor cut them off."

"Oh." Jackson's face twists into a disgusted grimace as he takes one last gaze at your missing digits before regaining eye contact with you, almost respectfully.

"Christ, dude," he sighs. "You're like Indiana Jones mission gone wrong."

You almost choke on your juice with amusement. You guess that's one way to put it.

By the way that Jackson's eyes seem to brighten at your response, the atmosphere becomes a bit looser.

When he goes on to talk about his job and his family or whatever, you find yourself tuning in every now and then, rather than completely zoning out like usual. It's about five minutes into a "conversation" before you both realize that you finished your meal a long time ago.

The rest of the day is chaos; Jackson allowed you to walk around the courtyard a bit to at least get your legs up and moving, but that was the only luxury the rest of your day carried. All you received was documents shoved into your face, multiple tests, a lot of people making absolutely sure that you were sane enough to release to the public.

You end up slamming the door to your room at the end of the day and letting the weird swarm in your mind take over for the rest of the night.

There's another knock, and you have to practically snarl a, "Come in."

This time, Evelyn is behind the door, and she saunters into your room, taking into account the lack of cleanliness amid the rummaged drawers and bedsheets.

"So you're the reason we're running low on housemaids," she comments passively.

You rub your eyes wearily. "I think I'll miss you most of all."

"Sarcasm is a fool's response," Evelyn says, annoyed. "I'm just coming in to give you the final papers."

"The final papers?" You drag yourself onto the edge of the bed with a tired sigh. "Or the final-final papers?"

Evelyn narrows her eyes. "I see that you've been through the excruciating trial of leaving Refuge."

You groan. All this paperwork and constant clarifications of testing your sanity almost makes you want to give up and just stay for at least another month to avoid all this. Almost.

Without making another snarky comment about your irritation, she unclips a handful of papers from her ever-present clipboard and hands them to you.

"This is just confirming that you've gained Refuge's permission to continue to participate in Murkoff Recovery Program, and a couple of documents expressing the idea of Witness Protection Program."
"Gee, thanks." You pick up the documents with zero interest in the content. They've signed you up for so many programs already. Like it's going to fix what happened.

And then Evelyn leaves with a small goodbye and departs from your life. Good riddance.

Tomorrow, you're going to be as close to freedom as you've been given for months. Having Jackson around will be its own pain, sure, but at least you can head back to your apartment and at least attempt to pick up where you'd left off.

Still, you remember Chara. And you remember Mount Massive like a pain in your side that you can't erase. Something is always going to be off, especially since you'd been denied full closure on any of these subjects. Unless you count the constant claims from Dr. Song that Chara never existed in the first place. Even Jackson's refusal to mention any sort of companion you may have traveled with is considered questionable. Maybe you really are losing it.

You let the buzzing reside into almost a relaxing background noise, as it draws you into another frenzy of horrid nightmares.

You'll figure everything out in the morning.
You meet Jackson in the front lobby of the rehab center. You have one employee helping drag along your suitcases; you haven't admitted that most of your luggage is just useless piles of notes and books that you've stolen from around the building.

At least he dropped the checkered golfer getup he'd had on yesterday, instead wearing a simple collared shirt, baby blue, and khakis. He seems more comfortable when you approach than when he'd first met you.

He dangles a set of keys in front of you after he helps the employee gather your luggage. "I'll drive," he offers.

You pause. "Do you know my address or something?"

Jackson gives you a funny glance. "Well, obviously. I have to know where I'll be living for the next six weeks."

You scowl. "Don't remind me."

He helps you out to the parking lot, and you've never felt the air feel so clear and free in your life. After months of struggling to escape that building, you're finally out.

Jackson stops at a silver car and opens the trunk, carefully setting your suitcases inside, like they might be full of something valuable.

You'd figured you still weren't in possession of your jeep anymore, but still you ask, "What did they do with my car?"

"Hm?" Jackson perks up and slams the trunk shut. "Oh, I have no clue. Probably took it for evidence or something. Sorry man."

You look away with a glare cast at the cement. "It's fine. It's not like I paid for it or anything."

Jackson swerves around you and unlocks the car with a click of his keys. You wordlessly encircle the vehicle until you reach the passenger's side and settle yourself into the leather seat.

You get a whiff of a sharp, clean scent; this car obviously has a routinely check up to keep it clean and tidy. While you silently adjust to the stench, Jackson plugs in the keys and starts up the engine.

"Alright!" he announces proudly. "First stop is the hospital."

You almost give a start. "Why?"
He calmly backs out of the parking space with practiced caution, paying no mind to your growing panic.

"Picking some of your medication, is all," he explains. "We'll be done as soon as we arrive."

You sink into your seat and try to calm your beating heart. It was a false alarm, you reason. He's trying to help. He wasn't going to lock you up in there again.

The idea of being stuck in another building with no chance of escape makes you sick, so you stare out the window. The trees are bare with winter, and the clouds above are wispy and grey, dulling the sunlight enough so that you don't have to squint when you look up at the sky.

"Want to listen to the radio?" Jackson suggests.

You shrug, not taking your gaze off of the passing trees and cars. "Do what you want."

"Alright," Jackson flips on a button that has a man's voice blaring over the speakers. "Any requests?"

You shake your head. "None."

You end up listening to bluegrass music, with Jackson occasionally humming to the tune before silencing himself, most likely for your favor. You don't really mind, but you're not about to seem supportive of his presence, so you stay quiet.

Everything is passing by so quickly, in a monochromatic sort of color palette right outside your window. You haven't been in a vehicle for so long, just allowing yourself to be carried from one destination to another. Not without you being on a stretcher.

Something is triggered when you think about your dull, dull memories of being hospitalized. Right after the asylum; you were in restraints, with something constantly digging into your ankles and wrists. You were like the equivalent of an animal, because you didn't know what else to do.

It's like picking out the specific details of a dream, and you ponder on the reliability of the hazy memories.

Jackson says something that has you perk up tiredly. "What?"

He gives you a glimpse of concern before he conceals it. "I said 'do you want to grab something to eat'?"

You think about it, but you don't have any sort of appetite. You've been having trouble with food for a while, particularly during dinners or lunches. Breakfast was tolerable. It's like you were simply charging up a machine; if you were digesting something burnt, you could care less as long as you get what you need and leave.

"Maybe later," you say curtly. Everything in your apartment by now has probably curled up and died; you wonder if Jackson's job comes with getting groceries when you don't want to.

It's not long before the highway you're driving on breaks off to the hospital buildings up ahead. You ignore your tightening stomach and instead position yourself to just relax into the seat. You're just picking up medication, after all; you're not here to stay.

Jackson catches your gaze out of the corner of his eye. "Hey man, you alright?"

"I'm fine," you sputter, but you find yourself clenching your fists and clothes with a bit more force
that implies you're lying through your teeth. "Just get the damn meds and get out."

He doesn't seem satisfied with your response, but he gives an encouraging nod. "You can stay in the car, if you want," he suggests.

You wonder if doing so would be wise, but you somehow fight against it. You've been caged up for so long, that even offering yourself up to a hospital doesn't sound terribly bad. Besides, worst case scenario is you can always run for it.

"No," you grumble, and you beg your limbs to stop trembling. "I'll go in."

Jackson looks like he's about to protest, but instead he thinks better and nods, "Okay."

You pull up to the front of the hospital's parking spaces, since Jackson has a pass to do so. You don't ask why; the sooner you're in, the sooner you're out.

When you exit the car, you realize that this place is huge. You have to look up and practically break your neck to get a glimpse of the top. The buildings connected to this one are just as major in size.

Jackson notices your stare and gives a proud grin. "Pretty big, isn't it? That's why Refuge is close by; one of the best hospitals in the country."

You'd suppose it'd have to be huge in order to have them administer you in it. You're a lost cause; might as well have the best doctors try to figure out why.

When you walk in, Jackson asks, "Do you want to take a seat? I'll go and get what you need."

There it is; the supervisor's instinct to treat you like a completely helpless human being. You suppose he had to show his true colors sometime.

But the idea of being sucked deeper into an unknown medical place brings up bad, bad memories. So you oblige and sit yourself down in the waiting room.

As you sit down, you catch a few stares. You wonder what you look like, with bags under your eyes and ruffled shirts that you haven't bothered washing. You wonder if you look familiar.

You flip through magazines and watch a muted local news program on television. Immediately you're bored, and you're looking around skeptically, waiting for something out of the blue to occur so you can turn heel and burst out the exit. This place is so unfamiliar and it stinks of medical supplies so it makes you sick of your stomach.

You blink and you see a broken wheelchair, blood stains, you hear horrible screaming in the distance.

You ask a passing nurse where the restroom is and you break into a sprint. You just need to think. Using your head is good.

Once you fling open the bathroom doors, you're panting and splashing water onto your face until you're gripping the sides of the sink. Panic is making you hyperventilate, so everything corporeal and sensible is just barely out of your reach. You need to think, and you need to think now.

To calm yourself down, you lock eye contact with your reflection in the mirror.

You are here. You exist.

You repeat that thought over and over until it makes sense to you, and you're able to flick a few more
droplets of water onto your face with an exhausted sigh. You're back, and you're using your head.

When you step out of the bathroom, you realize that you have no clue where you are.

Your heart stops beating momentarily, as the fluorescent lighting blinds you, giving the hallway a bright, almost unnatural look that has you remembering the Underground Lab like an nail jabbing your inner flesh. You need to find Jackson and just get the hell out of here.

It's a while of wandering, because you don't trust nurses or doctors to lead you to a proper place. This is not Refuge; that wasn't the real world. This is the real world, and you're already drowning in it.

You find that you've accidentally wandered into what seems to be a place for adolescent patients, and you give a muttered curse. Now you're really lost. Would it kill them to at least put up some decent directional signs around here?

"Sir? Are you alright?"

You look around to see a nurse in a white lab coat, looking at you with heavy concern on her face. You realize that you're breathing pretty hard.

"Sir, are you lost?" she repeats. "Would you like me to guide you back?"

You shake your head and look away. "I'm fine," you say, but it's not entirely convincing, not even to you.

She gives you another long gaze before eventually you depart with an empty apology and pretend like you know where you're going.

Maybe it would've been wise to ask for help, but excuse you for having a great number of trust issues lately. You can't believe it's only day one of getting out of rehab.

The hallways are quiet now, with the distant beeping of machinery used to keep dying people alive. The noise is maddening to you.

You continue to try and head back the way that you assume you came, without running into that nurse again. You'll just look like a wandering, crazed patient that needs to be sedated.

As you round a corner, you hear a voice. A small, tiny voice.

"Excuse me, ma'am? When will she be here?"

It doesn't matter who "she" is. You know that voice better than you know your own.

The reply is drowned out by the sound of you running down the corridor and you almost slam into a wall as you turn into another area of the hospital. A small administrative desk, housing one nurse busying herself at the computer.

Waiting patiently at the other side of the desk is a child with their back turned to you, in a white patient's gown.

You recognize that rusty-brown hair immediately.

"Chara?"
The child turns upon hearing that name with a blink of surprise, and their face is so clean that you almost don't recognize them. You're used to seeing their expression covered with a grime that came from the asylum.

This can't be real.

But the child abandons their place near the desk immediately, turning to gaze as you with eyes so wide that their mouth has dropped open. The shock in the atmosphere is so vivid you can't feel anything else.

They scream, "Miles!"

You don't have a moment to think as they sprint to you, and you kneel down automatically to scoop them into your arms the minute they collide with your chest.

They're here.

It's too good to be true.

You tighten your grip on Chara because they can't be real, all this time they can't be real and here with you. You haven't earned this in a thousand years. You've almost smothered them with your arms that are wrapped securely in your hold, so they can't ever leave again.

Chara begins to tremble, and you realize that they're squeezing back just as hard. Maybe harder.

"Oh my god," they gasp, and their voice is stammering with tears. "It really is you."

You caress their head with one hand, and you realize that you're pathetically close to crying too. Something hot is pricking the back of your eyes.

"Jesus, kid," you breathe, because you can't speak properly anymore. "You scared me to death."

They give a small little breath of laughter that bounces around in your chest, and you don't think you've never loved anything more in your entire life.

When they break away, their face is puffy and red from crying, and you reach out to wipe away any stray tears left on their cheeks and eyes.

Chara gives you a languid smile through glistening eyes that are threatening to spill more tears. "I thought you left me," they whisper hoarsely.

You tighten your hold on their shoulders. "I didn't," you promise, emphasizing by giving them a small, firm shake. "We had a deal."

Their lips begin to shake again, and you bring them back your chest, where they wrap their skinny arms around your neck and squeeze you tightly, almost choking you.


"I just—remember the Lab— and then the soldiers—" Chara sobs, and you shush them.

"We're okay now," you soothe, and you don't care if you don't truly believe what you're saying. "We're here."

They give you a final squeeze before collapsing onto the floor, where they mimic your position and settle on their knees.
"We're here," Chara murmurs, like they're in a dream.
"We're okay."
"We're okay."

You reach out to smooth their hair, and you note that it's a bit longer than when you'd last seen them. Their length is almost covering the tops of their shoulders.

It's been so long.

Chara grabs hold of your outstretched hand by the wrist, and they inspect it with a blank stare. They deflate momentarily at the sight.

"Still no fingers, huh?" they comment, sounding almost guilty.

"Just two missing," you assure them, and reach down to grab a hold of their hand to wrap it in yours. "Nothing serious."

Then you remember. "How are you?" you ask, suddenly concerned.

Chara gives you a funny grin that doesn't meet their broken gaze. "It's a bit of a story," they reply.

You pause. "Want to go down and get some food, talk about it?"

They nod, and a small spark of something positive passes across their eyes. "I'd like that."

You're surprised to find yourself actually eating something with a decent portion, like having Chara back around has encouraged your stomach to stop complaining for at least an hour or so.

Chara doesn't seem to be entirely hungry, only ordering half of a sandwich and offering the rest to you. You end up talking them into buying at least a small fruit cup to accompany their meal.

When you're settled, you're glad that it's early. There aren't many people around, just a man in the back hunched over a laptop and a nurse on her break. It won't be long before lunch, though, so you have a limited amount of time before human interaction becomes a looming threat.

Chara pokes open their juice box and gives it a small slurp. "This is weird," they admit quietly. "Usually we're running for our lives. Now we're not."

Thank god you're not the only one who thought so. You didn't want to say anything.

"Why are you here?" you end up asking, avoiding biting into your chicken sandwich just in case you miss something important.

Chara hesitates, but eventually they sigh.

"I wasn't originally hospitalized here," they explain. "I was transferred to another hospital for surgery."

Before you can ask, they tell you, "Bullet wounds. Those stupid soldiers got me in the ribs and abdomen. The doctors kept telling me that I was really lucky to be alive."

You feel a small foot gently tap your shin from beneath the table. "You saved my life. You turned
away just as the soldiers were firing at us."

Then they pause, remembering something that has them darkly staring down at their juice box. "You got shot, too," they mumble. "A lot."

You know. But you're also not entirely sure on what happened next, on account of your brain completely shutting down whenever you venture to recall your last moments in the asylum. You wonder if that's the same with Chara.

"It doesn't matter," you shake your head. "As long as we're both okay."

Chara gives you a stare, like they want to ask you something, but they think otherwise and take a small bite of their sandwich.

"I guess not," they muffle through their mouthful. When they swallow their fill, they add, "They told me I had three broken ribs, third-degree burns, a huge swollen bruise on my neck, and of course—"

Chara pulls up one of their legs up onto their chair so they can gesture to a leg brace. "Fractured ankle." They set their foot back down with a small wince. "And that's not counting small bruises and cuts."

You cringe. "Jesus, I'm sorry kid. I should've been looking out for you better."

They airily sweep away your apology. "Don't be sorry. You saved me," they say, and they offer you a tiny, grateful smile.

You realize how much you missed this.

Chara takes another bite of their sandwich, and you do so as well, just so it doesn't get cold. It's quiet for a minute, but you don't feel like the atmosphere is filled with any form of discomposure that has you rushing for conversation. You feel as content as you've been for months.

"So why are you in here?" Chara finally asks. "I didn't see you around anywhere."

You swallow, curious. "You checked?"

They roll their eyes. "Of course I checked. I missed you."

Something oddly cold swirls in your heart at hearing that Chara has become attached to you. You don't know why; you have little to nothing to offer anybody, let alone children. You can't do this for them; Dr. Song prohibited it.

You set down your sandwich. "I was in a rehab center."

Chara stares at you, confused. "A what?"

"A rehab center," you repeat. "It's where people who drink or smoke or have problems go to get their life back together."

They think for a second. "So like an asylum?"

"I thought so."

Chara gives a small laugh. "How was it?"

You shrug and look away. "It was alright, I guess. I was a pain in the ass the whole time, but I guess
"Helped to be an ass, or it helped to go?" Chara asks with a gleam of humor in their eyes.

You give a grin. "A mixture of both."

Chara returns your smile. "What are you doing here then?"

"Picking up medicine," you reply, and you ignore the small tug of guilt at leaving Jackson to think you've gone off the rails and disappeared into thin air. "I'm heading home now."

Chara sighs longingly. "Lucky. I have to stay longer."

"How come?"

They linger in silence for a heartbeat. "The doctors have been focusing on just physical issues, since I was in such bad shape when I first came here. Now we're going to talk about mental stuff."

"That won't be terrible," you lie. "You'll get the help you need."

Chara gives you a hopeless gaze. "But I don't want help!" They give another heavy sigh and pick at their untouched fruit cup. "I just want to get out of asylums and hospitals and anywhere else."

You reach over and pat their hand understandingly. You feel like you're talking to a mirror; you've been having the exact same problem with being caged up and checked on like a rabid animal.

"I have an in-home supervisor now," you say, rather out of the blue.

Chara suddenly gives a snort. "How is that?" they ask, shining with sudden amusement.

You frown. "Excuse me for not being overjoyed that I'm sharing my apartment with a perky stranger."

Chara returns to eating for a while, seeming more at ease, and you let them while you sip your drink. You're just glad that they're eating; you know you've been having trouble with that yourself.

"Is he cute?" Chara asks suddenly with a playful expression.

You blink, baffled for a split second. "Who?"

They give an exasperated little scoff. "Your supervisor," they clarify.

It takes a minute of reflecting on what you'd consider "cute". You suppose in an odd sort of sense, save for his atrocious fashion choices, he's not terribly bad on the eyes. But the emotional attachment you feel in having him anointed as your pointless caretaker stops you from thinking too hard on it.

"Not my type," you eventually decide, and resume eating.

"You're not into the happy type?" Chara presses humorously.

"Are you thinking about finishing your food instead of judging my taste in men?"
For a split second Chara's joyful air dissolves, like you've indirectly insulted them. You have to end up tapping their shin back with your foot to indicate that you're not mad, and it was just lighthearted banter. Even so, they don't seem completely satisfied when they carefully finish up the first half of their sandwich.

When you're finished, you help Chara wrap up their last portion of their meal so they can take it back to their room. You let them take the lead, since you recall that you being lost is what lead you into this circumstance in the first place, due to the anomalous environment.

Chara takes your hand, and something stiff and hard in your stomach melts away into a calm sort of aura, where your head feels just a bit clearer.

They start talking to you about the nurses they've met and how sometimes they sneak out of their room just for rebellious purposes, and how they gain food and knickknacks from doctors out of pity. You can't keep up with everything that tumbles out of their mouth, but you're happy to hear their voice again so you tolerate it.

You wind up in somewhat familiar territory, and you hear Jackson's voice from a fair distance. He sounds close to a frenzy, and you have a feeling that you know why.

When you round the next corner, you're at the same administration desk where you'd spotted Chara. Jackson is now harassing this poor woman at the desk with an alarmed posture and frantic hand gestures along the table.

"Honest to god he just disappeared!" he's saying fretfully, "This is my first week and I've already messed up by losing my only client."

Before the victimized women has a chance to speak her mind, you call, "Hey."

Jackson does a complete twist with his body and looks relieved when he spots you.

"Thank god," he mutters under his breath and heads back to where you are, and Chara ducks behind you automatically at a stranger heading towards you both.

"What the hell, man?" Jackson demands. "I was gone for only five minutes. I thought you were in the waiting room."

"I was," you argue; you're not in the mood for this. "I just had to use the restroom, no big deal."

"It is a big deal if you're missing for forty minutes!" he snaps. "I was this close to literally calling the cops!"

Your jaw hardens. "I'm fine. I was just having trouble with something."

Jackson opens his mouth to say something you assume is going to be extremely scathing, but he stops himself when he peers down and seems to notice that there's been a child with you this whole time.

"Who's this?" he asks; his voice has taken on the tone of one who is familiar with the delicacy that is children, and that it probably isn't wise to start cussing someone out in front of them.

You reach down to reassuringly pat Chara's head. "This is Chara."

Chara holds out a small hand in an attempt to wave. "Hi," they whisper, and then they snap their hand back down and press their head to your side, looking incredibly nervous for being put on the
Jackson's face lightens with an unknown recognition. "Wait, Chara?" he repeats, astounded. "Like the kid in your footage?"

Your heart skips a small beat. You were right all along. Chara was real the whole time.

You're so dumbfounded that you're about to ask something along the lines of, 'There was a kid with me?' But you gain hold of yourself in favor of preventing Chara from giving you a stumped look.

So you just reply, "Yeah, this is them."

Jackson's face becomes a tad bit more sympathetic and he adjusts himself onto his knees to meet Chara's eyes properly.

"I thought you looked familiar," he greets amiably, and he gives a soft smile. "How are you?"

There's a minute before the weak reply, "I'm fine, thank you," is barely heard. Their response has that sort of automatic politeness that's often beaten into people, and it makes you uneasy to see Chara struggling to interact because they believe that there's some sort of punishment involved if they don't behave correctly.

You're glad when Jackson seems to catch onto Chara's extreme distress and takes a mental sort of retraction in inquiring them any further.

He positions himself back up to where he can give you a proper glare, full of silent disparage.

"Look, I'm fine with you meeting up with old friends," he scolds. "But would it kill you to run it by me first?"

Swallowing your personal argument— you don't feel like igniting controversy in front of Chara right now, especially when they're already pretty drained—you mumble, "I guess not."

Jackson takes into account your senile apology with a stiff nod. "Alright," he concedes. "Well, I got the meds. I see you've already eaten."

He gestures with a side-eye over to the wrapped sandwich in one of Chara's hands, and they immediately blurt out with a frantic start, "Sorry!"

Jackson gives them a confused glance. "Don't be," he reassures them. "I know you both had a bit of catching up to do."

He looks at you with a more understanding gaze when he adds, "I can let it slide this one time."

Then he claps his hands rather loudly so that you jump, and he declares, "Okay then! Home we go!"

"My home," you correct sharply.

"Your home," he repeats respectfully, but he doesn't sound sorry.

You're about to walk away when Chara stiffens and pulls you backwards with a desperate tug on your pant leg. You turn back around to see that their eyes have become wide, looking close to the point of crying.

"You're coming back, right?" they ask, sounding extremely fragile and almost terrified, like any form of safety they'd previously felt was brutally sucked out of them.
With a wave of endearment, you quickly kneel back down and give them a hug that they return. "Of course I'm coming back," you promise, and Chara seems to relax into your hold immediately.

"Good," they say with a sigh, then they pull away with a satisfied smile. "I'm going to hold you to it."

A nurse comes back and sweeps Chara away, and you watch them disappear around a bend with a sense of unease at seeing them in the hands of medical staff, knowing their history with doctors. But if Chara was scared, they would have certainly shown it through body language or by clinging to your leg again; you have to trust them.

You leave the hospital with more awareness of your surroundings, like something in your head has become unclouded with the typical fuzziness you often carry. When Jackson shoos you back into his car, not once do you consider arguing, like you tend to do with officious people such as him. You could almost say thank you for grabbing the medication in the first place, and giving you this offhanded opportunity to see Chara.

You don't, though, so the ride is quiet.

The cars rush past your field of vision, currently blurry from a daydreamy sort of air that you relish in. This is the closest thing to tranquility you've felt in a while.

Jackson pipes up. "Am I allowed to ask about the kid?"

You immediately give a harsh, "No."

Instead of seeming disappointed, Jackson seems to understand, pressing you no further than a soft, "I didn't think so."

The road breaks off into familiar territory that has you feeling a dull sense of joy crawl up to your chest.

It doesn't matter where you've been up until now; you're almost home.

- 

You approach the front desk and explain the situation as best as possible, and after a bit of a hassle with the manager, you eventually grab a new key for your apartment. It's no secret that you may or may not have misplaced the original when your car was confiscated.

Jackson grabs a couple of suitcases, much heavier than your tiny bundles, and slams the trunk down once he's emptied his car. You assume that the suitcases belong to him.

When he catches your stare, he quickly says, "I'll carry these. You just worry about yours."

You have no trouble with that, so you shrug, "Sure."

Since you're weary of elevators, you give Jackson the keys— if he betrays your trust, then you can always grab a new apartment, you feebly reason—since he's going to be taking the easy route in transporting his luggage.

He gives you a stare. "Do you really want to walk seven flights of steps with all that junk in your hands?"

You adjust the bags in your grip and try not to show how much you're struggling to hold them
properly; who made suitcases so slippery anyway?

"It's fine," you snap, more so just to cover up the fact that you're really close to just shoving these in Jackson's hands if he's so confident that he can hold your luggage better than you.

Jackson raises a brow, eyeing the suitcases sliding through your hold. "Right."

The elevator luckily dings open, and he wastes no time in placing his own bags inside, occupied with his own worries to lecture about your life choices.

In the end, maybe he was right. You're heaving upward with so much stubbornness that when a passing lady asks to assist you, you practically bark at her and she quickly lets you on your way. One bag falls and cracks open, sending papers flying down the steps. Your colorful string of curses that follow are loud enough to have another passerby fleeing down the steps quickly to hurry away from the scene.

Eventually, once you've messily scooped everything back up and placed them securely in your arms, you're able to step onto familiar grounds and meet Jackson right outside your room.

"Told you I could do it," you pant.

He doesn't seem convinced, giving you an amused sort of look that makes you almost want to tear his throat out. Lucky for him, he's smart and decides not to make any further inquiries.

Jackson clicks the door open, and you almost push past him with the eagerness to settle back down on your couch and pretend that things can just be back to normal if you think hard enough.

You head inside and immediately something seems out of place.

The furniture is how you left it, everything is still placed where you'd expected it to be. Nothing is wrong, save for a faint stench that Jackson begins to show a strong distaste of and heads towards your kitchen. Your plant on the kitchen counter is wilted, but it was already close to death when you'd last seen it.

You wander the halls, trying to feel happiness at seeing everything again. All the pictures, the objects, the scraps of paper and books you'd collected from your career as a reporter. You feel like a ghost.

Then you think that maybe you're the one that's out of place.

No. That can't be it.

When you slowly open the bedroom door and step into your room, it's tugging horribly at you that this isn't home anymore. But you've wanted this for so long, you can't have this final sense of security slip through your hands like liquid. This is all you have left.

You go through the routine of unpacking and placing everything where it's supposed to be, trying to find that final puzzle piece that clarifies that this is home again. This is where you've wanted to be since the minute you were trapped in that asylum. Why doesn't it feel right?

A sudden cry of pure disgust has you curiously peeking around the corner, where Jackson has his back turned and is giving an elaborate show of waving his hands, as though to ward off a troublesome fly. The scene is almost humorous.

"God!" he chokes. "Your food is rotten!"
You practically roll your eyes. "No shit."

Jackson slams the fridge door shut and turns to you with a look like he was personally offended at your decaying food.

"There's no way in hell I'm touching that stuff," he concludes distastefully. "I'm ordering a pizza for dinner."

You make way to walk back to your room; over your shoulder, you mutter, "Do whatever you want." You could care less right now.

When you're finally finished with unpacking, you stuff the empty suitcases in your closet. You gaze at the clothes hanging up in there, and you try to imagine yourself in a time where you would wear them. But it feels like the outfits belonged to someone else.

*That*’s it.

It feels like you're wandering around someone else's house, like you're a ghost, or an extra in a movie that you're partaking in. You don't know why you can't convince yourself that this house used to be yours. The food that Jackson is complaining about was what you were going to eat at some point in time, before you'd traveled to Mount Massive.

Something stirs itself calmly through your stomach. Anger. Your body clenches as you throw yourself onto your bed and try not to feel detached from yourself again. You're still here, no doubt about that. But you're not you anymore.

*So what's the point?*

What even happened in that asylum to make you feel so different? Granted, the obvious exposure to blood and guts everywhere obviously wasn't normal. But why did it make you feel horrible, even in the outside world? Why is it still a vivid sense of dread and terror that you constantly feel? Is that why you feel so unlike yourself?

This isn't home anymore. You wanted home to be a physical place, but it can't be.

Jackson knocks on the door, and you scoop yourself up. You don't need any sort of therapeutic comfort right now, especially not from someone already intruding in your once-was home.

"Hey," he greets, looking guilty for interrupting your time alone. "I'm going to set myself up somewhere. Is your office or living room alright?"

You shake your head stiffly. "You can sleep on the porch for all I care."

Jackson perks up with interest. "I didn't know you had a porch."

"I don't."

His inquiring expression flattens at your belittling implications. "Oh."

Then he looks back at where your living room area leads into a small office, where you can peek inside since you'd left the door open. "I'll just sleep in your office right now," he decides; he looks at you and adds, "I brought an air mattress, so you don't have to set anything up."

"Fine by me." Your tone is screaming at him to get lost.

Finally he seems to catch a hint, and closes the door shut behind him without another word. You
listen to him shuffling his luggage into an area that once belonged to you, where he'll occupy it for the time being.

The very idea of sharing your house with a stranger is like a kick in the teeth.

You lie on our back and glare up at the ceiling, allowing the dark swarm in your head to take form and dance along your vision. It makes shapes out of the empty wall above, so you allow it to entertain you. It's better than thinking.

Comfort eventually emits from lying on a familiar bedding, and you dream of being a ghost.

Chapter End Notes

Name of chapter taken from song "Let's Get Breakfast" by Walter Mitty and His Makeshift Orchestra
You wake up the minute you hear banging on the door. It's an instinct to jump to your feet, even when your head is fuzzy with sleep, and storm out of your room with creeping alarm activating your footsteps.

Jackson is already at the front door, and you're about to yell a warning that it's not safe because someone is out there.

When he calmly opens the door, he's greeted by a man in a uniform, holding a couple of boxes in his arms. You breathe in the scent of marinara and bread.

He's no Variant. He's just a pizza man.

You could punch yourself.

Jackson signs the receipt and closes the door once the man gives him the boxes, and before he's able to catch you rapidly breathing from a distance you throw yourself onto the couch.

"Pizza's here," he says.

You give him an unappreciative glare. "I noticed."

He appears confused at your irritation, but doesn't comment as he takes the boxes into the kitchen to open them.

You're about to reach for the remote to click the television on when Jackson calls, "Where are your plates?"

You bite back a frustrated groan. "It's pizza. Just eat with your hands. That's what it's for, right?"

Jackson pokes his head into view, and to your surprise he seems to be a bit annoyed himself. Seems like your bad temper is contagious.

"Someone's moody," he observes, with a hint of acerbity deep in his tone like he wants to say something else but knows better.

You run a hand across your face and clench at your facial features, like you're rubbing all the sleep out of you. "I'm just tired," you lie.

To your relief, Jackson seems to soften. "I woke you up, didn't I? Sorry about that," he apologizes.

You flop back down onto the couch. "It wasn't you," you eventually sigh. "It was the damn pizza guy."

Jackson waves away your complaint. "He wasn't trying to hurt anyone," he says, blithe. Then:
"Aren't you gonna eat?"

"You go ahead," you reply tersely. You've already settled onto the sofa for the time being. "I'll eat in a minute."

You listen to Jackson rummaging through your pantry and drawers, practically flipping the kitchen inside out in order to find a couple of plates for his meal (you're not going to tell him that they're on the top shelf on the right). Eventually the clank of dishes and a pleased "Aha!" confirms that his mission to search for proper tableware was a success.

Eventually you peek over the couch as he sits himself down on your table with a plate of two slices and a glass of what looks like soda. On closer observation you spot what seems to be a sort of sticky dessert beside the slices of pizza.

Jackson takes a sip of his drink and raises a curious eyebrow in your direction. "You coming?"

You respond by reaching for the remote and enabling the television screen to show a local newscast talking about the weather.

With your back turned, you hear Jackson call from the table, "I'm getting the feeling that you're not respecting my position as your supervisor."

You respond by leaning back on the couch and holding up your middle finger to where he can see it. Thank god in heaven that Trager at least left you that luxury.

Jackson gives a sigh and returns to his eating.

The smell emanating from the kitchen is admittedly tempting, but you're already zoned out and becoming one with the droning voice of the weather lady on the screen. Something about chance of rain or clouds or sun, you don't know.

You don't realize that you're staring at the screen looking for static until you notice the faint scream of the white noise ringing in your ears.

A hand placed on your shoulder suddenly grabs your attention and you give a start that almost knocks you off the sofa, your heart racing.

"Sorry!" Jackson gasps, and you force your heartbeat to relax as you bring a lazy hand up to your eyes. You got to stop keep doing that

"It's fine," you lie.

Once you seem to be stabilized, Jackson hastily explains, "I'm not an idiot. I know you're going to fall asleep on me."

Before you can try and think of a tart remark for that, Jackson comes around to where he can place a small set of colorful pills on the coffee table, then he sets down a glass of soda beside them.

"Before you drift off again, at least take your medication," he says.

You run a hand through your hair. "Rather not," you grumble.

Jackson gives you a rather authoritative gaze out of the corner of his eye that you don't take kindly to.

"It's not optional," he argues. "Take your pills or face the consequences."
With a lengthy groan, you eventually decide that he's right. So far, everything about the asylum is a comforting blur, thanks to the assistance of the pills that overall numb your trauma into something negotiable. You'd hate to go without it; you're not sure what would even happen.

Then again, the couch is lulling you into a physical state of coziness that you haven't experienced in so long that you just might be willing to risk it. Home may be a hazy memory, but it still has the familiar comfort that you can fall asleep to.

Eventually you just wave your hand dismissively and adjust your position on the couch cushions. "I'll take them later."

Jackson's face becomes stern. "Later," he repeats. "Promise?"

You sigh in exasperation. "Yeah yeah, promise."

He hesitates, and you think he's close to giving you mouth to mouth just to make sure you digest the pills, but he pulls away and heads back to the table to finish his meal.

"I'm trusting you on this," Jackson says once he's settled back down in his seat. "I'm probably headed to bed after this, I'm beat."

You shuffle onto your side to get a better view of the television screen. It's gone to a commercial promoting aftershave with a fairly handsome man onscreen.

"Don't forget your pizza," Jackson reminds you, but you ignore him. The static is becoming pleasing to the ears; better than listening to a lecture about not taking your medication.

You don't realize you're drifting off as the news comes back on and yammers about riots and robberies and everything in between.

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The buzzing won't stop.

It's a pulse that activates your running legs as you sprint and run and crawl and do everything in your power to escape, but your limbs are like tar that stick to the metallic floors reflecting the fluorescent lights above. The room stinks of the collaboration of medical supplies and rotting bodies.

He's behind you, growling, his chains echoing along the white walls.

"Little pig, little pig, no more escape."

You feel his claws squeeze at your throat, and the static begins to form into a deafening screech that has you and Walker tumbling to the floor, breathless.

You watch with a paralyzed body as Walker begins to choke on his own blood, and fluid pours from his mouth. He's being dissected from the inside.

You've seen this before.

The world transforms into an anonymous daze so that when you blink, it's Walker or Trager or Father Martin or someone bleeding out in front of you, sometimes screaming in voices that aren't their own, or sometimes saying nothing at all as their bodies are torn in front of you. The red begins to drown you in a fit of panic you can no longer control, and you're sinking into the floorboards as the thick liquid pours into your mouth and attempts to suffocate you.
You flail helplessly in the blood, but every attempt to cry out for help is lodged in your throat. You stay silent as the red forms into patterns in your brain, and you see insects and buildings engulfed in flames.

A tiny set of hands make an attempt to grab you, but through the kaleidoscopic images that engulf your sight, you can't see who's helplessly grasping at your bloody fingers and hands.

Then the hands become stiff and dissolve into the liquid, and when you reach again, the fingers are hard and cold with death and you pull away.

Then the world becomes something dark and oily, and a pair of eyes that don't exist watch you carefully, analyzing your heartbeats, your thoughts, your movements. It's like something has latched itself into your existence and wants a piece of something you can't offer anymore.

You don't know why, but you feel an innocent sort of fascination on what it would be like to make a man bleed.

It opens its mouth and swallows you whole, in a world of black tendrils that coil into infected cuts and mouths held agape in fear. You can't fight or run against it, and instead you attempt to soothe your fear. But you can't.

The fear is white-hot, and it crawls up your spine and intestines and settles into an erupting that scratches your throat raw.

You feel yourself pushing abruptly forward, and the world becomes a tan color.

The buzzing will never stop. It's settled into your veins and provides for your vital systems to keep you alive. When you hyperventilate, you feel something crawling around in your ribcage, like it will rip out of your chest at any moment and tear you apart, just like what it did with Walker and everyone else. Everyone who ever brought dishonor to it.

It's a while before you eventually collapse back onto the ground, and you feel a solidarity that you don't recognize. When you blink, something unfriendly is waiting for you, so you keep your eyes pried open as you focus on the dancing atoms along the white ceiling.

You're at home.

You curl your fingers around the couch's textures as though it would help ground you again. You were just dreaming, is all. But it's never that vibrant since most of your nightmares are shoved into your inner apperception with help from your pills.

Your pills.

You twist your aching head— god, did you sleep on cement?—over to your coffee table, and you unpleasantly eye the untouched pills and glass of soda that you promised you'd take.

No wonder your head feels like it's about to explode; you didn't take your medication.

Not wanting a lecture from Jackson is the motivational idea that has you hauling your sore ass up to where you can reach over and scoop up the tiny pile of pills into the palm of your hand, throwing the medication down your throat and nearly choking on it. Once you swallow, you take a small sip of stale soda to assuage for the bitter aftertaste.

It's a while of naming ten objects in the room and counting your mutilated fingers before you feel
grounded enough in the present, but you're unnerved. You feel like you've only been given an introduction of whatever nightmare fuel is activated whenever you sleep. But you suppose that'll teach you to take your meds.

From outside your apartment, you can hear glimpses of Jackson's voice, like he's talking to someone in a low tone. You're suspicious, but before you can make a move to pull yourself upright and inspect further, Jackson opens the door and enters your apartment from the hallway.

"No, I get it. It's a bit concerning though," he's saying, and you notice that his hand is holding a phone to his ear. So you stay quiet. He hasn't noticed you're awake yet, since he's not looking at the couch.

"Of course not! I want to keep this job, it's just— yeah, I know— I know." He listens for a bit to someone on the other line, and the room is quiet enough to where you can barely hear the opposite speaker. You can tell that it's a man's voice, though.

When the man concludes his lecture, Jackson sighs and runs a tired hand across his face, minding his glasses.

"Look, the guy's been through a lot," he replies, keeping his voice low. "You haven't seen the footage—yeah, you don't want to. Just let me—let me finish this. I'll come home soon, I promise."

There's a heavy pause before the man on the other line mutters something indecipherable, and Jackson's tone becomes soft and relieved when he replies, "I'll see you soon."

He clicks the phone and sets it down on the kitchen counter, giving the device a lingering gaze before he turns and sees you eyeing him. He gives a start.

"Sorry, didn't know you were up," he quickly explains, but he doesn't have the vibe of someone who's guilty. You still have your suspicions, because it doesn't take a detective to know that he was discussing you to someone else.

Jackson eyes the spot that once held pills on the coffee table, and he gives you a dubious sort of look.

"I know you didn't take them," he says, and your heart does a flip because you've been caught red-handed.

But then he walks away before he can catch your unnecessary yet instinctive glare in his direction. "I figured you wouldn't," he continues from the kitchen. "That was my bad. I should've woken you up."

You peer him down as he opens your fridge and begins scraping through your remaining food that isn't molding.

"Why didn't you?" you ask sharply.

Jackson takes out the pizza box he's stuffed into the fridge. "I was about to, but you looked so cute when you were sleeping."

You're about to sputter before he adds, "I'm kidding. I took a call last night and forgot about it midway into the conversation."

You reach to take another sip of the warm soda, since apparently all rules of breakfast have flown out the window. Jackson takes a slice of the frozen pizza and chews it thoughtfully as he sits beside you on the couch and uses his free hand to open up his laptop.
"Who were you talking to?" you ask, out of the purpose of making idle conversation.

Jackson shrugs, unconcerned. "A friend. He was asking about my job and how I'm doing, all that fun stuff."

He opens up his email on the desktop, and you lose interest. You take another long sip of soda before Jackson says, "Breakfast menu is a frozen pizza. I'll go shopping later."

You grunt as you make your way off the couch and stretch your aching bones. "How sweet of you," you mutter ungraciously. He chooses to ignore your sarcasm.

The last bits of the nightmare are dissolving into an ugly throb that you can barely make sense of as it dwells in your hindbrain, where it's desperate to find meaning in your everyday routine. It's familiar now to allow the bits and pieces of the traumatic dream to sink into your subconscious by reassuring yourself that they're dreams and you're in a safer location. It helps now to know that Chara is in good hands, instead of being left to ponder on theories for their fate.

You take a small bite of pizza before you realize you're still far from hungry; your stomach is clench so tightly that you're not sure you could digest food even if you wanted to. Might as well make use of your morning, since you need to get out of this god-awful apartment.

"Where are your keys?" you call to Jackson.

He hesitates and turns to give you a suspicious look. "Why?"

You slam the pizza box shut. "I'm going to the store."

"For?"

"For groceries," you snap, irritated. "Why else?"

Jackson takes a minute to seriously ponder on whether or not you should be trusted with such a simple task. Then he makes the slowest nod of reluctant approval.

"They're in my room on your office desk," he finally says. "Just get back in about an hour. I'm not sure I'm even allowed to let you go."

You roll your eyes. "Call it gaining brownie points."

As you're heading into your office to obtain said keys, Jackson calls, "You better be telling me the truth. If I smell alcohol when you walk in, I'm going to be pissed."

"I'm just going to the store," you lie. "Nowhere else."

"Some nurses brought these nice balloons in for me," Chara is saying. "Some flowers, too. No yellow ones, though."

You eye the said flowers and balloons and have to give the nurses credit in the thought they seemed to put into giving Chara's room a lush bouquet of colorful roses. They're pink and white and give the bland room a sense of spirit that it doesn't automatically carry. They're right, though; you don't spot any yellow flowers.

"It was still thoughtful," you comment. You didn't receive anything but verbal apologies from the staff at Refuge on your conditions.
Chara gives a stiff nod. "I told them not to, but they were persistent." They lean back down on their bed and sink into the thin pillow. "I hate presents."

You cross your arms and lean back in your own chair, seated right beside Chara and the medical equipment pumping fluid into their veins. Chara said that the room was stuffed with machinery when they were first administered, so this is considered improvement to them.

"Is there a particular reason?" you ask, regarding their thoughts on receiving gifts.

Chara doesn't seem comfortable in addressing the question, taking to picking at their white bedsheets with a downcast expression.

"No," they murmur, but you know that's not true. Still, you don't press the subject further.

It's a while of tossing millions of questions you have stuck in your mind about Chara, but each one has the threat of being a touchy idea that they might not be comfortable with talking about. You know personally how Mount Massive is something you're no longer fluent in discussing with others without getting harsh.

Before you're able to conduct a reasonable conversation starter, Chara turns to you, suddenly curious.

"Do you still have that book?" they ask.

You have to think for a minute of what the heck they're talking about, but your mind comes to a blank.

"What book?"


Now that they mention it, you do recall a circumstance where you'd carried around a novel that Chara had gained interest in; you'd placed it in your bag alongside your journal and camcorder to give it to them later, once you were both out of that mess.

You've been denied access to regain any supplies you'd walked into the asylum with, including your jeep. You doubt that they'd even grant you a small book that surely has no point in being confiscated; you're still not even sure what use it was to take away your car and bag in the first place. It's not like you're a criminal.

You end up having to shake your head, rather disappointedly. "I think they took it away with the rest of the bag," you answer them.

Chara gives you a hurt gaze, but they ask, "Who's 'they'?"

"Hell if I know," you scoff. "Not that I care at this point."

Chara snorts. "True enough. I just want to get out of here."

You suppose you should be concerned on all the strings attached to your escape from Mount Massive. Everything is so blurry and indecipherable in your mind that when you try to think about it, your brain does a freefall that has you struggling to assure yourself that you're really okay and safe.

You could be lied to all this time, and that the therapists and supervisors are no better than Murkoff.
You might be played for a fool. But you're so, so tired. As long as Chara's here and alive, you can't let your mind wander so freely. If everything comes crumbling down in the end, you know where to find them.

"Did they take even the camera?" Chara prompts, and they look a bit fretful.

You nod. "They did." You find a twinge of anger press at your stomach. That camera was yours personally, and it cost a fortune. There's also a sort of bond that you feel was established with the camcorder as well, as it helped you in lots of tight squeezes around the asylum. At the least, it deserves proper recognition for all it's done to help you in your travels.

Chara frowns heavily, and you explain, "I doubt they would have deleted what was on there."

Still, they don't seem satisfied as they marvel at their fingernails scraping at the white cloth their wrists are wrapped in. You notice that their arms are tightly bandaged, all the way up to their elbows.

"They're not going to question me, are they?" Chara asks, and their voice has become very small.

A weird flash of something feral has you reaching out to give Chara a small pat on the arm gently, as though to soothe them.

"They won't," you say, and in your tone you establish that if they even attempted to perform such an action, you'd have a couple of choice words to share with whoever "they" are.

Chara seems surprised, but relaxes at your touch so when you pull away, they seem more calmed, almost with an altruistic sort of air that they didn't carry beforehand.

"I'm glad you came by," they murmur, looking at you with gleaming eyes. "I wasn't kidding when I said I missed you."

What should be affection is something cold and hard in your chest that makes you frown rather uncomfortably.

"Sorry I didn't bring you anything," you say, because it's only polite that when you're visiting someone in the hospital to bring them something thoughtful.

Chara shrugs, amused. "Nothing but your cute self," they tease, and they quickly add, "Besides, I don't like people giving me things in the first place. It's more ideal if you don't even bother."

You're not sure you completely agree with that mindset, but for Chara's sake you don't bother to argue. You find yourself digging through a pocket in your jacket and pulling out a small flipnote with a pen tied to it.

"I have this," you say, holding out the notepad to them.

It's common for you to record almost everything now, since it's a reporter's sort of instinct. But now it's an obsessive action that you can't help anymore. Writing down how you felt in the asylum was your way to openly vent, and you guess the intensity of the emotions never really left your pencil. It explains why your room in Refuge was overcrowded with useless notes; observations and offhanded comments about who knows what.

You perk up when Chara grabs the notepad away from you with unexpected enthusiasm, and they seem to bounce excitedly as they begin to move the pencil along the paper, positioning their knees upward so that you can't catch a glimpse of what they might be doing.
You give a small smile. "So you like writing, huh?"

Chara looks up. "Hm? Oh, no I don't write a lot. I was drawing something."

"Drawing what?"

They stop and take a long time to reply, but Chara eventually holds up a small doodle of a cartoonish dog. They seem to shrink as you observe the drawing; you have to admit, the picture is pretty cute.

You give an approving nod as Chara avoids your gaze. "It looks nice," you comment.

Chara gives you a shocked glance from their hiding place behind the notepad. They look so vulnerable that you're close to stuffing the drawing away so that they don't have to worry about it anymore.

Then they rip out the page and practically shove it in your face.

"Do you want to have it?" they ask, and the question sounds forced and bumbling, like they're so inexperienced with this sort of communication in giving someone something.

You must have looked like you were hesitant, because Chara shoves the drawing away in an attempt to destroy the paper, their face tight with panic.

"No it-it's okay!" they sputter, sounding apologetic. "It's a dumb drawing! I..." They place the now-crumpled sheet of notebook paper somewhere beneath their bed covers, so you can't look at it anymore.

Chara is practically sinking into their bed now with shame; you have to find something to say in order to make them feel better again.

But your mind is blank.

They toss the notepad and pencil back into your lap from where they're seated, still not meeting your eyes.

A soft knock outside the door has you both jumping, before you realize that it's just a nurse waiting outside the door.

"Are you Chara's guest?" she asks you.

You nod, your gaze still glued onto Chara's immersed position in the bedsheets with a horrible wave of guilt.

"Well, I need to perform a few physical checkups with them," the nurse contributes, "so if you could —"

You sit up and give yourself a stretch that pops your back; hospital chairs are always so uncomfortable and you're not exactly sure why.

"I'll get out of your way," you say, without being asked. You're avoiding the fact that you're leaving Chara without a formal apology for whatever you did that made them so impotent.

"You're more than welcome to go to the waiting room until I'm finished." the nurse suggests politely. "I'm sure it won't take too long."

You reluctantly shake your head. You have to at least hold up some of your bargain with Jackson
and at least grab a small carton of milk before you head home.

"I have to go," you declare, and you turn to give Chara a proper goodbye. You stop when you see how upset they've become, curled into a fetal position and watching you with wide, glistening eyes.

"Do you have to?" they ask, voice suddenly trembling.

You're not heartless enough to leave them like that, so you step forward and bring them slightly closer to you as you lean down and give them a side hug from over the bed.

"Yeah, I have to," you reply, and Chara attaches themselves to your jacket with clenched fingers that claw into the fabric.

"Please come back," they whisper, so that the nurse can't hear. "I'm so scared here."

You realize that you've been waiting for them to admit how much trauma from their time administered as a mental patient eventually seeped into their current hospitalization. You figured before that they were terrified beyond belief, and were refusing to expose it. You can relate.

Squeezing their good shoulder with your hand, you give a nod. "I will."

Chara takes another minute to stay concealed in your jacket for a little while longer, and you allow them to, at least for a little bit, before remembering that the nurse is still waiting patiently behind you.

You step away carefully, and Chara takes the hint to release you and retract back onto the bed. They give a short sniff before looking over your shoulder, expectantly observing the nurse.

She gives her patient a friendly smile. "Hi sweetie," she greets them. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

Chara shakes their head. "It's okay," they murmur.

You get an idea.

Quickly, as to get out of the nurse's way, you break out your notepad that you'd placed back into your pocket and furiously write. It's a good thing you're used to placing pencil on paper so fast.

When you're finished, you rip out the small piece of paper and hand it to Chara. They take it cautiously, giving you a quizzical gaze, before looking down and seeming surprised that you'd drawn a simple smiling face on the paper.

You reach out and give their hair a small ruffle. "Get better soon, kiddo," you tell them, and you get out of the nurse's way before she attempts to remove you from the room with force.

As you step out into the hallway, you peek over your shoulder to see Chara smiling down at the drawing.

You decide that, despite traveling back into the hellhole that is a medical center, lying to Jackson was completely worth it.

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You really don't feel like going to the grocery store now. Getting out of the apartment and having to appear as stable as possible among people is exhausting enough. But still, you can't look like you'd deceived Jackson (which you did), so you have to come home with at least something.

You're fine with receiving a lecture about getting nothing but two grocery items in the hour that you
were gone; it's better than coming back completely empty-handed.

There's also a sharp stench you've noted before about Jackson's car, so that you feel like you're driving a rental around. It just reminds you in a pained sense that a lot of luxuries you'd formerly taken for granted—like having your own car, for example—have been snatched away from you. And for what, exactly? Why was your car and the book Chara had mentioned confiscated for evidence? Evidence for what?

By this point you've gone into a cognitive autopilot where you park the car, you get out of said car, and you head inside the store with a mindset of getting something austere, like an apple or a carton of milk. Just something that will get Jackson to shut up when you get back home.

Halfway through scavenging the produce section, you realize that you forgot your wallet at home. You hadn't planned on actually going to the store today; you'd just spouted it out so Jackson could get off your back.

Well, now it looks like you can either shoplift or just walk out and see if you can concoct another plan in the car. Anything to make sure that you looked like you were shopping while you were out.

You're not looking at where you're going when a man bumps into you, just as you're leaving the store.

"Hey!" His gruff voice has you turning around with a growing sense of alarm, as though he might try and hurt you.

You end up giving him a look over. The one thing that protrudes to you in your thoughts is that he's skinny and slightly smaller than you. He can easily be taken down.

Instead you show cohesion as you decide to just give him an aggravated glare. "What?"

He doesn't seem like he's about to let the incident go so easily, squaring up on you and abandoning his travels into the store. His eyes are dark and ready for a fight.

"The fuck do you think you're doing?" he snaps, his voice louder than it should be. Sounds like he's just trying to start something to make noise; you can't stand these kind of people.

You're definitely not about to get entangled in his little game. There are a million other things you could be doing.

You gesture to the parking lot. "I was leaving," you answer, but you can't stop your voice from sounding irritated.

He doesn't take that as an answer, instead walking dangerously forward.

"Not even gonna say sorry?" he yells angrily. "Too smug and tough, aren't ya'? You son of a bitch!"

By now, you've captured the attention of about two passersby, and you give him a warning glare.

"Look, I'm sorry" you try, but in truth you're not sorry at all. You're just sorry that this drama queen was the person you had the misfortune to bump into. "But I have places to--"

He scoffs, ignoring your apology. "No you're not! I'll make you sorry, asshole!"

And then he reaches forward to push you violently into the middle of the road.

The impact of having someone attacking you is too much. It's just too much and you don't know
why your head is swirling into a dizzying mess. Your vision blurs and reality is whirling away and all you can see is some Variant in front of you and it looks like he's reaching for your neck.

You don't know what happens. All you see is a black and white blur as the man's egotistical mien turns into one of terror.

You black out.

The back of your head is throbbing, and visions of butterflies and stitched wounds are dancing in your brain. There's a whining sound that's straining your ears before you can properly come to.

You're somewhere with dim lights, in an unfamiliar setting. There's a ceiling fan flapping above you, and the movement has you closing your eyes again with a pained breath.

Something hot is oozing down your nose, and by the exposure your inner nostrils feel to the sharp air in the room, you're assuming that your nose is bleeding. Maybe even broken. Did the guy from the parking lot take a swing at you?

The events are sinking in slowly but surely; you fell unconscious in a grocery store parking lot because some guy was yelling at you. You can't wait to tell Jackson this one.

A soft voice beside you assures you that you don't have to wait to get home in order to tell him.

"Miles?" Its Jackson. He sounds extremely concerned, but keeping his voice volume to a minimum, for the sake of your still aching head.

He holds a blurry set of fingers up to where you can see them. "How many fingers?" he asks.

"Three." You're about to adjust yourself off whatever bed or couch you're placed on before you feel your pulse in your nose, and something wet is flowing down your chin as you turn to face Jackson.

"Christ," he breathes, and he reaches over to somewhere you can't see. He pulls out a couple of tissues and presses them to your nose as you cringe at the touch.

"What happened," you croak.

Jackson grabs more tissues in order to clog up the blood.

"I don't know," he admits. "You didn't have a wallet with you, so it took them a while to find someone to contact."

He winces as you groan at the pressure of the tissues he's forced to push up your nostrils. Half of the cotton is already bloody so he has to trash them. Your head is still an aching mess.

"They found you passed out in the middle of the road bleeding your nostrils out," Jackson continues somberly. "There was one person that claims he saw whatever happened go down. He said some guy pushed you and..."

He pauses, unsure of himself. "He said that your face just...I don't know. It wasn't pretty, whatever it was."

You dare to tilt your head slightly upwards in order to get a clearer view of the darkened room you're settled in. All the lights are off.
"Where are we?"

Jackson adjusts the tissues in your nose as you move. "Manager's office," he replies. "It was hell convincing the staff not to immediately take you to the hospital."

Your heart begins to pound in a fit of blind panic. "Don't," you grit through your teeth. "Don't make me go. I'm fine."

Jackson looks at you solemnly, but eventually shakes his head. "I wasn't planning on it."

He cleans up a bit around your mouth and chin where the blood has become crusted. You sink back into the couch you're placed on with relief.

"I've never heard of a case of someone's nose starting to bleed profusely in the events of remembering a traumatic episode," Jackson comments. "I know that the man pushing you must have triggered something."

He sighs. "It's so odd. I mean, I'm sure there's been something similar to this at least once. I'll have to research, though."

You're just as confused yourself. You raise your head a little to look at him. "Is this gonna happen again?" you ask. You hope not; you can't let this happen again; you'd be so useless if this were to be a common case.

Jackson finishes his work on cleaning your face like a mother would a child, and begins to wipe up the remains of the messy tissues. He takes a minute to respond.

"I honestly don't know, Miles," he says defeatedly. "But I've never heard of this happening on a regular basis. Do you remember what happened exactly?"

You try to shake your head, but you think better as you feel the blood stuffing up in the back of your nose and you don't want to tempt any more bloodshed.

You have to croak out a small, "No."

Jackson hums in consideration and looks away, lost in thought. He's silent for a minute, and you reflect on the faint background noise of people. You must not be that far away from the store section.

"I'll make a few calls, try to numb it so it doesn't sound like you need to be re-administered," he finally says. Then he turns to give you a hard stare. "But on the term that you stop lying."

You're about to ask before he explains, "You don't have any groceries. You didn't bring your wallet. I don't know what you were doing, but you weren't at the store in the time that you were gone."

Excuse you for wanting to do something independent without having someone breathing down your neck. Maybe you just wanted to gain a sense of personal worth in just doing something by yourself.

You note your crusted, red face with a dark grimace. Looks like you've learned your lesson in thinking that for a minute you could return back to a normal state of adulthood. You can't step outside for one second before turning into a walking catastrophe.

Jackson takes another long while to trim up his cleaning around your nostrils. "I'm responsible for asking where you went," he says, and his voice has an undertone of aggravation.

You don't reply. There's something about talking about Chara that's a touchy sort of bruise; you
haven't even considered talking about them to Jackson or anybody else. Just discussing them with Dr. Song was a personal battlefield, and he kept trying to tell you that they didn't exist for some damn reason.

The silence that follows sums up what you might be implying. It's Jackson's discerning nature that eventually causes his eyes to soften, like he's placed the pieces together all on his own.

"I have a feeling you went to go and see the kid," he concludes, and you stiffen.

You don't know how to respond, so you say nothing.

Immediately Jackson's expression becomes gentle, so that it almost makes you sick.

"It's fine if you go and see them," he reasons. "You don't need it to be a big secret that you're going to pay a visit to...what was their name?"

"Chara."

"Right," Jackson nods. "You're more than welcome to go and see Chara. I know they mean a lot to you."

There's that weird frigidity that's wrestling around in your guts upon hearing that, once again, Chara is some form of comfort to you as you are with them. It's like you're automatically tied to them because you'd both been able to survive a miraculous situation. You don't know how you're supposed to feel about it yet.

"Just try not to keep lying," Jackson sighs. "I know you hate having me monitor you constantly, but it's doctor's orders. It was better than having them take you to one of those healing homes."

"Healing homes?" you repeat stupidly.

"It's like where people are transported when they're not exactly ready to head home but they're out of rehab," Jackson explains. "Your case was interesting enough so that an in-home supervisor had to be brought in."

You're really not in the mood for a history lesson about your horrid condition, so you press a finger to your nose and allow yourself to hiss in pain as Jackson immediately comes to bring your hands back down to where your bruised nose is out of reach.

"Let's just head home," Jackson decides. "C'mon, let me help you up."

You allow him to wrap a helping arm under your armpit as he helps you straighten up off the couch. Nausea swarms around in the corners of your brain and you feel close to fainting, but Jackson keeps a firm grip on your side so that eventually you're able to hobble yourself forward. You must look so pathetic.

No one dares to even look at you as you both head towards the exit, with the two of you appearing most likely similar to the result of a gang mob gone horribly wrong.

You really don't fit in anywhere, not even at a public grocery store. You don't know why you feel so alone because of it.

- 

The rest of the day is a blur as you allow Jackson to coddle you into the car and continue such
actions when you get home; he almost has to force-feed you with whatever is left in your fridge, and he practically shoves your medicine down your throat.

When you're fed and secure in the comfort of your own home, you're able to step away from Jackson's endless mothering and eventually get a moment of peace in the bathtub. You don't feel much like showering, and besides, bubble baths always helped you relax more than showers ever did.

You relax into the simmering water with an exhausted sigh. You just want everything to stop being so abnormal for just two days, and not even *that* was given to you.

Is it always going to be like this? With you constantly juggling insanity like whatever it is nagging your thoughts is something outside your control? Just when you were finally learning to detach yourself from Mount Massive, like everything that happened was nothing more than a bad dream, you just get sucked into everything again.

And for better or worse you're also stuck with a child that's holding you up on a giant pedestal. You're not a good person; you don't know why they won't take a hint at that.

You have to look at the fact that Chara is in the hands of other people now, even if you hold a large distrust now of hospital staff. They're not over your authority. You don't have to take care of them.

The bubbles surrounding you fizz as you position yourself deeper into the tub. Maybe if you drowned yourself, you could forget everything.

...You decide not to. But you think and think and think about it until the bath water cools, and you're left alone in a lukewarm bathtub, pondering suicide like the corporeal train wreck you are.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter name taken from "Shitty Horoscopes" by Amrit Brar, which is a series where I also got the name of the first chapter; you're gonna be seeing a lot of similar chapter names

Something strange is afoot. Will our heroes be able to defy all odds and rise against their troubles or will they fall short out of carelessness and apathy???

....I'm betting on the latter.
temper the nest of hornets in your loveless mouth

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You're dropped off in front of an office building somewhere downtown that you haven't explored in a while. By the looks of the shiny cars and people walking past you in formal wear, you're supposing that this is a fairly posh area to be in.

Jackson rolls down the window and leans his head out a bit. "I'll be back at around two," he says. "I have to be somewhere."

"Gotcha." You're barely listening as you observe the glassy building you've been ordered to spend your therapy sessions in. Turns out Dr. Song won't be available outside of Refuge, so now you're going to be seeing someone else until you're considered sane enough to be left alone (which is probably going to be never).

They say that your new psychiatrist is the best in the state; she considers what you've been through tolerable enough that she's willing to give your story a listen.

"If you wander off again, I'm going to kill you," Jackson concludes.

You give him a small thumbs-up. "Noted."

He gives you another long stare that's beginning to make you uncomfortable, but he eventually shuts his car window and puts the vehicle in drive.

You watch the car disappear around a street corner, somewhat longingly. Now you really are stuck with nowhere to go but inside. You guess you have no choice.

You're greeted inside by a lady behind a desk, which is cluttered with pictures of possible family members and bobbleheads of cartoonish characters. You grab a mint from a tiny tray along the tabletop to save for later; you're not all that hungry, but that's nothing new.

"Hi!" she chirps, way too perky for your cynical mood to dissolve. "Do you have an appointment?"

You observe the happy children in the photographs and postcards. "Merry Christmas!" says one. "Wish You Were Here!" says another. Both portraits were taken at a beach.

"Miles Upshur," you finally tell her. Your gaze hasn't wavered from looking at the multiple family pictures. She must be pretty fond of her children; but you're curious as to why you don't see signs of a spouse in many of the photos.

She types something into her computer before giving you an approving nod. "Right on time," she tells you. Then she points over to a small waiting room in the corner. "Just wait over there and she'll be right with you."

You oblige and break your stare away from the desk's pictures. You sit yourself across from a man with a service dog, both of whom take no notice of your appearance.

The waiting room is bland, save for a plastic tree two seats away from you. Expired magazines are plastered on every drawer and coffee table. You're about to break out your notepad and make a remark of your first impression of this building you're trapped in before a loud clicking of heels grabs
The woman is dressed sharply, like she has a big name attached to her appearance that she's forced to press and clean constantly, just so everyone knows that she's the one in charge when entering a room. Her stern face is just as scathing as her outfit, and her blonde hair is tied back into a smooth ponytail.

She looks you dead in the eyes. "Miles Upshur?" Her tone is deadpan and devoid of emotion.

You couldn't be any less ecstatic that this is the woman you're expected to spill all of your problems onto.

Reluctantly, you stand up, and she watches you with a piercing glare, like she's dissecting all of you from the inside out with a simple gaze. She doesn't even bother to break her arms away from her clipboard to offer you a handshake; you're not terribly disappointed about that, though.

Finally, she turns around. "Follow me, please," she calls over her shoulder.

You do so helplessly, and you follow her down a long hallway with multiple closed doors. You're beginning to greatly distrust the abrupt apathy she seems to be feeling towards you, and you think back on Murkoff's staff. How they cared less about the conditions they forced their patients to live in. Even the damn whistleblower that sent you to Mount Massive in the first place is not to be trusted.

Finally she stops in front of one door in particular and opens it. She waves you inside, to a small room with a couch and chair separated from each other with a coffee table holding a box of tissues. The only thing on the wall, aside from the mandatory certificates that practically every doctor is supposed to show off, is a window behind the couch that looks out onto what seems to be a small courtyard. You can't tell because the blinds are half-closed.

"Have a seat," she instructs you.

"Sure." You mimic her apathetic tone and sprawl out onto the couch.

She watches you with narrowed eyes for a hot second before she settles herself down in the seat opposite you. She gathers her notes and takes another second to place them all spic-and-span.

"My name is Holly Stevens," she introduces, not looking up from organizing her papers. "I'm your psychiatrist for the next six months. And if I see no progress within that timeframe, you'll be assigned another psychiatrist."

"Sounds like fun," you comment sarcastically. She doesn't respond.

"You left some of these papers blank," Holly says, observing one of said papers with a dark glare.

You perk up. "Which ones?"

She passes you a handful of documents talking about your overall personality, what you wish to change, why you're in therapy, that sort of thing.

"I thought these were optional," you argue. That's a lie; you'd figured that they wouldn't just hand you paperwork for the hell of it. In truth, you really, really don't want to answer any of the questions.

Holly gives you a disbelieving stare that unnerves you greatly. It's as though she's some sort of mind reader.
"Mister Upshur," she begins, "Your files say you graduated Emerson with a major in journalism. You've given many astounding stories throughout the media about many sensitive topics. You seem to be a very intelligent man. Don't tell me that you didn't know that you had to fill out paperwork that was assigned to you."

You find your jaw tightening as she speaks, like her condescending lecture is physically making you sore.

"I'll investigate you myself until you return the paperwork to me on our next appointment," Holly concludes in a resigned tone. She makes it sound like there's no doubting that you're to complete your task properly this time around, and it makes you feel so inferior in her presence that you're very close to just hopping up and leaving.

She taps a stack of papers into a neat pile and sets them neatly into her lap. "Our goal is to separate yourself from the trauma."

You narrow your eyes. "And how exactly are you gonna do that?"

"It's quite simple," she says airily. "If you'd have completed your paperwork properly, I'd have more to go by on who exactly Miles Upshur is. All I can see right now is a very sarcastic man who is rather lazy in his homework assignments."

You shoot her a glare that she doesn't even take into account, and it's making you furious.

"For now," she sighs, and this time she does happen to look up and give you an icy stare, "We're going to talk about yourself in general. We're going to separate the trauma-induced personality traits with some traits that are still you, but maybe have been altered from the events at Mount Massive."

"That doesn't sound simple at all," you snort.

"If you cooperate, it shouldn't be rocket science."

You sit up. "How the hell do you expect me to know what these 'trauma-induced' characteristics are?" You gesture using your fingers to emphasize your point, using your pitiful missing index finger as well.

Holly doesn't seem bothered at your acrimonious question. "Remember how you first walked into that asylum. How did you feel?"

The memory of driving uphill is a bit foggy and detached, like it shouldn't belong to you. What the hell were you even thinking when you'd decided to explore a potentially dangerous area?

"I don't know."

Holly doesn't seem to believe you. She raises a brow. "Were you confident?" she presses. "Were you feeling brave, or feeling foolish?"

You give her another cold glare. "Damn right I was foolish!" you snap. "Walking into an insane asylum like I didn't have a fucking care in the world!"

She holds up her hand in a gesture to quiet down, which you don't take pleasantly to.

"That's not what I'm asking," she says. "I'm asking you how you felt then, not how you feel now with the foreknowledge you have."
You don't know why you feel so brave—or foolish—for wanting to insert this question into the picture, but you suddenly ask her, "Who's paying you?"

Holly doesn't seem put off by your reply, making you furious. Perhaps even furious with yourself for wasting breath you could've been using to plea sanity instead of asking such a stupid question.

"That question is none of your concern," she answers calmly.

Her answer sends up blaring alarms of warning in your mind.

You narrow your eyes and practically yell, "It is my business if you're working with those Murkoff pricks!"

"I understand you're paranoid, Mister Upshur, but please, calm down," she tries to reason. You're not listening. Something in your brain is screaming; static consumes the corners of your vision.

It's what ultimately has you scared.

You don't want another bloody nose. You don't want to black out again. That'd get you back into a rehab center for sure, with maybe three in-home supervisors when you finally got out of there instead of one.

You get up suddenly, and you're surprised that Holly's expression is showing the thinnest layer of fear that you've ever seen. But it's there, nonetheless.

Do you really look that horrid when you're angry? Did it used to be like this?

"I'm going to the bathroom," you lie, and step out before she can intervene.

You end up walking straight outside and blindly walking left. You don't know where you're going; all you can think about is how pissed Jackson is going to be when he gets back at around two. By now Holly has probably even emailed him like he's your mother and you're a bad student who disrupted the classroom.

The buildings merge into one after another, all with the same grey and brown sort of architecture that has you contemplating being lost, but you're sure now that you've been walking a straight line ever since leaving Holly's session. If bad comes to worse you can be reasonable and ask for directions from a random passerby.

Something bad and awful is bagging your thoughts; something about blood and gore and other subjects synonymous with death. You're close to giving it a listen if you don't almost bump into a tree planted along the sidewalk, where it exists just to give the city some sort of color.

You mutter a curse and swerve into a nearby bar. At least it makes it look like you know what you're doing.

The overwhelming stench of alcohol almost makes you gag; if you're punctilious enough, you think back to when the sharp, metallic smell of blood was all you could ever smell.

A low tune of jazz is playing in the background, and it doesn't seem busy yet, either because of overall low business or just because it's a tad too early to go and drink your problems away. There are a couple of men seated around; most are just staring into a phone or at a half-empty bottle.
The bartender is wiping off the counter when she spots you. "What'll it be, hon?" she asks in a rough voice that doesn't make you feel extremely welcome. You must be wasting her time.

You're about to ask for a simple glass of something strong, but a strange weight drops heavily in your stomach and stops you. It's a weird sense of guilt that you're not used to carrying when you're about to get wasted. You remember Jackson showing extreme distrust in your tendency to drink away your troubles.

For some reason as well, your mind flashes to Chara.

It's enough to have you shaking your head at the bartender. "Just came to sit down," you say.

She gives you an odd look that you're quite familiar with seeing nowadays. It's the look you receive when people think that there's something wrong with you.

"This isn't a meet n' greet," she replies, sharper than how she might've said it if her boss was monitoring her. "Buy something or get lost."

You tighten your teeth with frustration. Would it kill someone to be decent for five minutes?

"Fine," you grumble. "Glass of water then."

Her stare hardens. "Water is free."

You sit yourself down at the bar table anyway. "It's something, isn't it?"

She looks close to kicking you out with how she's still glaring at you, but eventually she throws in the towel and walks over to pour yourself a glass. She slides it to you unceremoniously and returns to her cleaning without another word.

All in all, you're really appreciating the kindly service.

You find that you're not drinking much of the water either way. Nothing against the stuff, but you're having eating problems anyway, and you guess that's not limited to having issues in staying properly hydrated. You end up just staring down at the glass, watching the reflections of the lighting above dance along the ice.

Surely by now you've lost it.

You get up and leave without another sip of your water and attempt to head back. You hope that the bartender has a hearty raise for even bothering to serve the likes of you.

- "You're impossible." Jackson is scouring through his piles of papers concerning who-knows-what, in a rather absentminded manner. "You know that? You're fucking impossible."

You watch him with an idle sense of interest in what exactly he's thinking of accomplishing in his task. It look like he's just trying to make his hands useful as he scolds you.

"I try to be reasonable," Jackson continues; he's stacking the papers into a neat and tidy pile now. "I get it; you've been through a lot, you don't like me, you don't like doing what you're told, I get it. Alright?"

"I don't not like you," you argue, but he's not listening. It was a half-truth anyway.
"I'm just trying to help! And so was Holly! And okay, she's a bit...firm, at times, but we're all doing our best to make sure you're on the right track to recovery."

*Don't bother.* You bite back the words.

"I'm starting to feel like your babysitter," he exclaims in an exasperated tone. "Now I drop you off at therapy and learn that you went god-knows-where!"

You don't respond. It catches his attention.

"Miles, where did you go?" Jackson prompts; his voice is derived of any sort of mercy you could snatch from him in order to get yourself out of this one.

You still don't feel comfortable with replying; he's not going to give you a listen when he realizes where you went, even if you didn't do anything harmful, like you may have wanted. Though, a sip of alcohol doesn't sound too bad now.

"Miles!" He's getting pissed now.

"I went to a bar! Alright? Is that what you wanted to hear?! I went to a damn bar downtown to get a fucking drink!" you shout back at him, mostly to get him to just shut up.

As you suspected, Jackson's eyes grow wide with panic. "You what?!"

"I—"

"Oh my god! What were you thinking?" He looks like he's about to fall on the floor in a spasm of pure panic. Like you walking into a bar was something that demanded immediate attention. Because you're an unstable wreck that needs to be watched at all times.

"How much did you drink? What did you even have? A whiskey— god, shots? Vodka?! What the hell did you do to yourself!" His voice has gone sharper than it's ever been; it's been a while since you've been giving a harsh lecture like this. The last time being when you'd crashed your mother's car into a ditch when you were sixteen.

"Dude, calm down! I just had a water, alright? No big deal," you urge him, and you find yourself getting angry when he gives you a look of pure disbelief.

"You..." Before he continues down his absurd train of thought, he takes a moment to have it sink in before he tries again, closing his eyes.

"Let me get this straight," Jackson says, holding up his hands for emphasis. He looks very close to snapping. "You left your therapy session not even five minutes in...to go to a bar. To get a glass of water."

You clench your jaw so hard that you think your teeth are going to break. "Yes."

Jackson takes a long pause that makes you insanely comfortable, particularly because his glare hasn't left you. His body is rigid and his eyes are swirling with emotions you can't properly comprehend.

Finally he brings a hand up to his face and pinches the ridge of his nose, squeezing his eyes and giving a long, defeated sigh.

"You're killing me, Upshur," he groans.

You know that it was wrong to just wander off like that— it's not like Holly was truly meaning any
sort of harm or offense, for all you know. It's not her fault you're so sensitive nowadays that you're always on high alert when it comes to authority. And okay, you may be acting a little unreasonable, but you're not sure why you're acting so awry all the time either lately.

Then Jackson gives his face a harsh scrunch before he lifts his head up, looking like he's a bit clearer in the head now. But he's still not gazing at you in a favorable manner.

"Let me smell your breath," he sighs.

You give him an absurd glare that almost has him stumbling backward. "You cannot be serious."

You feel grim when Jackson's stare doesn't waver for a moment. "Dead serious," he replies sharply. "Now let me smell your breath."

The silence stretches into a barbed ambience that eventually has your engraved hesitation withering; you take a heavy step forward, and Jackson waits for you patiently.

He doesn't even give a blink as you open your mouth and lean forward to give him a harsh exhale that almost consumes his nose due to how close your faces are.

Jackson sniffs curtly into your breath before backing away and observing your incredulous glare that you haven't bothered to wipe clean from your face. It's getting a bit eccentric, being treated like such a child.

Finally he nods, slowly but halfheartedly. "Alright," he concedes, sounding way too skeptical for you to be completely comfortable with his statement of affirmation. "Alright, I believe you. You walked out of a therapy session to go to a bar to get a drink a water."

Then he runs a tired hand through his clean-shaven head. "God, I can't believe I'm going to be telling this to Holly."

You could care less how ridiculous you might be sounding and acting right now. What seems more appealing is just hitting the sack and trying again tomorrow. It's not like today had much to offer anyways.

As Jackson inwardly contemplates his current troubles, you start to head towards your bedroom. Before he can ask, you say, "I'm going to bed."

He stares at you, almost baffled. "It's three in the afternoon."

"Is it now." You've callously turned your back to him and are in the process of opening your closed bedroom door. "It's a shame that time is an illusion."

Jackson looks like he has a million remarks about your erratic behavior, but he has the decency to keep his mouth shut. The great thing about being a traumatized adult man is you're able to call out other adult men who mothering you too much and they're usually able to step off out of shame.

You slam the door shut and flop onto the bed. You cram your pills into your mouth and eventually fall into a dreamless sleep.

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The only place you don't feel highly supervised by Jackson is when he drops you off at the hospital to visit Chara. You've been visiting them every day you can since you've been out of Refuge and first ran into them again.
Unlike most times Jackson drops you off somewhere and he has places to be, when you're about to see Chara he seems to be lessened of some sort of responsibility in caring for you. He seems to trust you to not wander off more than he usually does Nowadays.

You give a short goodbye as he departs, just to be polite, and walk in. You've gained more confidence in repeating the same steps constantly in the hospital than when you first walked through their doors. It helps to memorize the steps on the way up to where Chara is hospitalized, so that you don't go off the rails when you might happen to get lost.

The white walls are no less intimidating; they'd be a snug cozier with some sort of blunt warning as to what lies inside this building. A good blood splatter would do.

It's thoughts like these that have you firmly shaking your head until all you have to focus on is how dizzy you're becoming from said action.

When you approach the floor that Chara is, you don't even bother to stop by one of the nurses and ask for permission to visit. Medical staff have lost your trust a good while ago. If they have a problem with visiting a child without permission, then that's their own problem.

You're about to give a knock at the agape door to announce your presence, but something grabs at your attention.

The bed is clean.

It's been stripped of the wrinkled linens that Chara resided in, and the machinery normally plugged into their body is gone.

Automatically you're driven into panic mode.

They were fine when you last visited, weren't they? Did they have to be moved to another care unit? Did something horrible happen while you were out? Surely they couldn't be...

You rush to the front desk, almost furious with your anxiety.

She gives a start at your panicked expression. But she sheepishly asks, "Is everything alright, sir?"

"Where's the kid?" You have to morph this into a question the second it escapes your lips, or else it'd be a nonsensical command and you'd surely receive no answers if she thought you'd gone crazy. But still, your voice is a bit louder than it should be.

Her eyes are becoming bright with nervousness, more so at your frenzied state than your question.

"I'm sorry sir, could you be a bit more specific?" she asks slowly, like it'll calm you down some.

It doesn't. You blindly point in the direction where Chara's room is located, right down the hall. "That kid!" you exclaim. "Chara! Where are they?"

She peers over your shoulder to see where you might be pointing, and realization dawns across her face.

"Oh!" she says, sounding relieved that she can answer your question. "Chara! Of course!"

She scoots closer to her computer and clicks her keyboard for a moment, doing research that you can't catch a glimpse of from your position parallel to her.

Then she turns to you with a blank stare that catches you off-guard. "Chara has been sent home this
morning, I'm sorry."

Nothing clicks in your mind that's positive upon hearing this news. All Chara has told you about their life before Mount Massive is just bad, bad things. If their parents were heartless enough to administer their child into an evil organization just to make a quick buck, then you have no clue why they'd be in a rush to take them home.

You don't know why you can't accept that they're technically not your responsibility anymore. If you would even call it that.

"Do you know where I can find them?" you finally ask. You know that Dr. Song would prohibit this, but you just need to see them one last time. Just to say goodbye.

The nurse frowns. "I'm going to know who you are and your relations to Chara before I can answer that."

This is ridiculous. "I'm not going to murder them, for Christ's sake! I visit them every day! I just want to see them, is all."

She looks like she's close to calling security, so you lower your voice so that you can balance your voice a bit better, sound more reasonable.

"Please."

The nurse examines your rather pleading gaze with a firm stare, but she breaks away from eye contact with a sigh and clicks something else into the computer. You step away, more so for gratefulness than anything else.

Finally she sighs. "Apparently Chara hasn't been sent back to her parents," she explains. "She's been put under custody by a temporary guardian."

You ignore the nurse's ignorance of Chara's correct pronouns by asking, "So where is this guardian?"

- The nurse's printed directions for getting you to Chara's new home has you ringing Jackson up by borrowing one of the hospital staff's phone, since you didn't bring a quarter to use for the phones provided outside the building. You didn't think you'd have to use the phones today, so you didn't come prepared.

He picks up on the third ring. "Hello?"

"Hey."

"Miles!" He seems surprised. "Is everything okay?"

You feel irritated at his constant parental voice that he inadvertently carries while talking to you.

"Everything's fine," you answer. "Listen, I need you to drive me somewhere."

"Why?" Jackson asks, sounding vigilant.

"The kid went home today," you explain. "One of their doctors gave me their address."

There's an uncomfortable pause. Is there a jammed signal in your call?
When Jackson replies, he does so very carefully. "Miles, I don't think that's a good idea."

You furrow your brows, even if he can't see your glare through the phone. "What's not a good idea?"

"Visiting the kid," he hedges. "I know you're worried, but..."

"But what?" Your tone is becoming sharp.

"But maybe it's for the best. Chara is home now. You just need to accept that and move on."

You find yourself getting extremely defensive at his claim. "So I can't talk to them anymore?"

"I'm just telling you what I see!" Jackson reasons. "I see you becoming too close to that kid for comfort. I know that you both went through...horrible things, but maybe it's not wise to keep clinging to them. Maybe you both just need to move on from this by yourselves."

You scoff coldly. "You sound like Dr. Song."

"Who?"

"Forget it. Just come and pick me up or I'm jumping on a train to run off to Mexico."

You hang up and hand the doctor back his phone to go off to the waiting room.

It's lonely in there too. You're sick and tired of waiting rooms. You're just sick and tired in general.

The idea of never seeing Chara again doesn't simmer well with you, and your stomach is flipping doubles inside, extremely uneasily.

Maybe you are being a tad dependent on a child for your wellbeing, and that's what makes you angry with yourself more than anything. You haven't truly considered having to think of Chara as someone outside of your care for so long, and there are so many unresolved conflicts and questions you haven't dared to encounter yet.

It's for the best to leave them be, you know that. But you're going to get your final goodbye, damn it, whether Jackson likes it or not.

Chapter End Notes

Also: Wanted to clear up that I always write Chara as DFAB (unless I state otherwise), but they are nonbinary so please address Chara with their canon pronouns. Don't be that guy thanks (✿◠‿◠)

Chapter name from "Shitty Horoscopes" by Amrit Brar
"By the way," Jackson says as he splashes pancake batter into the frying pan, "You have four missed calls."

You look up from where you're seated on the couch. The television isn't on, but you're not feeling like communicating with the outside world and all its ugly conflicts that the limited channels you're allowed to watch nowadays provide. It all just gets you curious, and curiosity leads to awful things.

"Who from?" you ask, pretending to care.

Jackson takes a while to reach the phone plugged into the wall from his position in the kitchen. You'd told him not to waste his time experimenting with the newly-purchased groceries, but he's persistent to show off his culinary skills. As long as he cleans up his own mess, you suppose you shouldn't complain.

The phone beeps into life and he checks the caller identification. "All from the same guy... Someone named David?"

You freeze, with something icy dripping into your chest. Your heart races when Jackson is about to press the system and have the recorded message ring out over the apartment.

"Don't!" You don't mean to scream so harshly; Jackson's hand immediately retracts from the phone like he's touched a hot stove. He gives you an affright glance; the same one that Holly had given you in your first therapy session.

This time, you enable restraint. "Don't," you repeat, but you're seething through your teeth. You don't even know who exactly you're so mad at.

Jackson's gaze shifts from one of fear to one of something acquisitive. He leaves the phone be, but doesn't seem settled due to your intense reaction.

"Is that someone I need to be concerned about?" he asks, sounding a bit worried.

God, no. David isn't someone who's dangerous; quite the opposite. But the backstory and premise behind why you no longer communicate isn't something you're comfortable with delving into, especially not with Jackson.

So you just shake your head, but you're certain that you look like you're hiding something.

"It's nobody," you mutter; the words almost sting coming out of your throat.

Jackson must see something dark in your despondent expression that enables him to give you an eventual nod of consideration.

"Okay. But if it's a harassment situation, I can always—"

"No," you snap. "I...it's fine. He's fine."
The atmosphere becomes suffocating before Jackson heads back to the sizzling stove, dropping the subject.

You lean back down on the couch and shove away any thoughts of David on the phone. You don't know what he was even going to say to you; it's what unnerves you greatly, so your mind trails elsewhere.

No. Not the asylum trauma; you shouldn't let yourself think so hard in that area. So you surrender and try again.

You reflect on that folded piece of paper that holds the direction to Chara's new location; it's still hidden in your bedroom's desk. You allow yourself to entertain a plan on how to take the bus to where the place is; the zip code only sounds like it could be one county over, after all.

You just want to end this. That's it. That's *all*.

You turn to look at Jackson, busied with cooking the pancakes. You have another therapy appointment with Holly today, you remember with a grim frown.

She was a bit scathed that you'd gotten up and left the appointment not even five minutes in, but she *seemed* understanding enough so that she doesn't hold any outward fury about it. Still, she seems to hold a *tiny* grudge, like you've insulted her therapy techniques by performing such an action on her watch.

You can't say you look forward to seeing her. You've only had a handful of sessions with her since then, and every one of them is rather daunting, to say the least. First she probes your personality, then she's asking about your family and relations and all these surface level conversations that you know isn't going to last forever. She's bound to drop the shoe eventually and nag you about how things will get better if you just do these listed actions and methods for the rest of your life. Blah blah blah.

To summarize, you've been behaving for the last week or so. You can afford to sneak out just this once.

"Bacon is ready if you want some," Jackson calls from the kitchen.

Something out of character swirls in your stomach. Something like guilt. Because you're about to break one of the rules that Jackson has established on sneaking elsewhere without his permission, and you don't know why, but you feel kind of shitty for attempting to go under his nose and play hooky on your curfews again.

Maybe it really says something about you when you say suddenly, "I need you to drive me to the kid's house."

It's silent for a while, except for the stove's fan blasting air onto the pancakes so there's no danger of a potential fire. You see that Jackson is staring down at the kitchen counter, his expression darkened with contemplation.

Finally, he hedges, "I thought we agreed—"

"I didn't agree to anything," you snap, then try again, "But I just need to see them again. To...to cut ties."

You *know* he's not going to agree to it, you *know* you voiced your thoughts terribly and he's never going to let you do anything like this, especially when you have a therapy session at noon.
"Okay."

Your heart stops in surprise. You sit up straight from where you're seated on the couch. "Wait, seriously?"

Jackson turns to catch your stare and gives you a small nod. He doesn't seem pleased with his decision, but he doesn't seem disgusted either.

"It'd be stupid not to at least let you say goodbye properly," he says. "That kid really loves you."

You don't know why you're about to argue, but you're able to keep your mouth shut.

He turns back to the pancakes, which are almost finished. "After breakfast, we'll head out," he decides, flipping over the batter on the pan. "You have the directions still, right?"

"Yeah," you say, slightly faltering.

Jackson holds out the finished batch of bacon he's pulled out of the microwave. "Eat up," he calls.

You oblige, suddenly feeling very eager.

The directions lead you to a large neighborhood, housing very expensive-looking homes sheltered by dots of greenery evenly placed along front yards and near sidewalks. There aren't many people out, save for a few adults walking their dogs, but you don't spot any signs of children living along this road.

You're not entirely sure what you'd expected, but it didn't fit this description.

Jackson plugged the paper's instructions into the GPS, so he's driving along with confidence as the monotone voice informs to make a right up ahead and you'll reach your destination.

You become antsy at seeing where Chara resides. Are they taken care of, or are they suppressed and neglected?

Jackson pulls into a gated home, and you find yourself shocked at the simplicity of the housing. That doesn't excuse the fact that it's practically a mansion. The front yard is blossoming with various species of flowers that brings itself more attention than the white mansion residing the lush gardens.

"I guess this is it," Jackson says as he reaches out to shut down the GPS. "You want me to stick around or—"

"No," you interrupt, but you don't sound harsh. Your eyes are glued to the brick walkway that leads up to the front door."

"Fair enough," Jackson shrugs. "Call me when you're done?"

You're barely listening. "Yeah, sure."

Eventually you gain the courage to step out of the car, and you look up at the massive windows, wondering if someone is watching you approach from inside.

When you find your way up the walkway and climb the steps up to the door, you hear Jackson back out of the house's driveway, and you're stuck here.
It's tough to even lift up your fist to knock on the door, and when you do you find yourself cringing at how loud it is. It's going to get someone's attention, and when it does, you'll have to explain yourself and why you, an adult stranger, want to talk to a child.

What if this isn't even the right house?

Your heart is pounding by the time the door opens, and you open your mouth to say something, anything to explain yourself. But the person that greets you is a small child, and you pause.

The kid looks to be younger than Chara, with darker skin and shaggy brown hair that sticks out in strands around their round face, sprinkled with freckles. Their almond-shaped eyes watch you intently, and their fingers are covered by their large blue sweater.

This can't be the right place, can it?

"Um..." you stammer— you're awful as hell with children. "Hi, uh...kiddo?"

It feels weird to not say "kiddo" and not be referring to Chara.

The child props the door open with their shoulder and begins to move their hands in front of their chest. Sign language. You're about to panic before you notice them repeating the process, until you catch on. Their face is patient as you analyze the hands spelling out letters; thank god you learned American Sign Language's alphabet back in high school.

F. R. I. S. K.

You look back up at them. "Frisk?" you repeat, unsure of yourself.

The child gives a toothy grin and looks up at you with gleaming eyes, nodding.

You're beginning to dread ever trusting a random nurse at the hospital with giving you directions to a rich neighborhood.

Still, you find yourself asking, "Is there, uh, an adult or someone I can talk to?"

Frisk thinks for a moment and looks over their shoulder, as though looking for someone.

"Hey, Frisk! Who're you talking to?" You hear another voice ring out through the house, and immediately another kid joins their friend at the doorway and gives you a curious look.

The child is taller than Frisk, seemingly male, and looks a bit older too, but not by much. His skin is darker than his friend, making his lighter, curly hair stick out fiercely. The green-and-yellow striped sweater he wears makes his appearance almost comical.

He analyzes you with wide hazel eyes, taking Frisk's place at the front door, who shuffles behind the older child.

"Who are you?" he asks, childlike in curiosity.

You begin to step away from the excited children with a looming threat of guilt for interrupting these strangers' lives. "I—I'm sorry," you sputter, holding up your hands, "Wrong house. Just never mind—"

The boy's eyes boggle when he catches sight of your missing fingers. His mouth drops open in awe.

"Whoa!" he exclaims a bit too loud. "What happened to your fingers?"
You're scratched the wrong way upon hearing that question for the *thousandth* time, whether they're children or not.

"It's not important," you snap, but the kid ignores your bristling tone.

He turns to Frisk excitedly. "Frisk, look at his hands! Aren't they cool?"

Frisk gives you a small look from behind their position behind the other's body, and they nod, but they don't seem as interested in your missing fingers as their friend. You're fine with that.

They poke the boy's shoulder to catch attention, and Frisk's hands once again begin to move across their chest in sign language. This time, they're going much faster so that you can't keep up.

"Oh! Is he looking for someone?" The boy says, making sense of Frisk's hand movements more than you.

Frisk nods and spells out something so quickly that you didn't catch it, and they don't repeat the letters over and over so that you can understand.

The boy gives you a swift glance for confirmation before calling out, "Mom! Some weird guy is at the door!"

You're about to retort at their claim before you realize that maybe he has a point.

The oldest leaves to go and properly fetch his mother, while Frisk stays behind and just observes you with an expression close to amusement.

You're about to try again in departing before a woman steps out of the doorway and looks at you with surprise. She's a bit heavyset, and has darker skin than who you assume is her son that joins Frisk behind her, with curly dark hair that transcends to her shoulders, and grey hairs sprouting at the scalp.

Before she can speak, the boy pipes up from behind, "Look at his fingers!"

She turns to lay eyes on him. "That's enough, Asriel," she hushes, with the motherly sort of tone that's firm yet soft.

You feel like you've made a grave mistake in coming here.

The woman straightens her posture to give you a smile. She's almost as tall as you, so she doesn't have to look up very far when she gives you a friendly gaze.

"Greetings," she nods warmly. "Can I help you with something?"

You hesitate momentarily. Surely this can't be the house, can it? You've spotted no sign of Chara anywhere in this household; if they'd heard that some weird man was at the door and his fingers were missing, they would've caught on and rushed down to greet you.

But maybe this woman can still help. "Hi," you greet. "I'm looking for Chara? Do you know where they are?"

A stupid question. If they're not here, you don't know why she may have any sort of foreknowledge as to a strange child's whereabouts. They could have been sent off to Witness Protection Program.

Or maybe sent back to Murkoff.
The woman's eyes become guarded, and her polite smile wavers. That's how you know you've hit something.

"I'm afraid we do not," she says, but her voice is derived of the friendliness that it once carried.

She's hiding something.

She thinks you're dangerous.

You hastily explain, "I'm not—I'm not Murkoff, okay? I just— I need to talk to them. I'm a friend."

Asriel pokes his head up again. "Mom, what is he talking about?"

"Go inside," she orders firmly, brushing the two children back indoors and closing the door quickly behind them. You still spot the two observing the scene from a thin window placed near the doorframe.

The woman snaps her head to you with such a ferocity that you almost step back with alarm.

"If you're looking for Chara, you won't find them," she says, almost growling. "I know exactly what your men want from that child, and I will have none of it!"

"Whoa, hold on—" you attempt, but she isn't listening.

She pokes your chest sharply with her finger, her glare piercing yours. "Who do you think you are? Torturing a child like this?"

"I'm not with Murkoff!" you manage, spitting out the word. "I wouldn't work with those bastards if you paid me."

Her eyebrows raise a smidge, and you say, "I'm...I'm Miles. Miles Upshur. I kind of...escaped with the kid. I didn't mean to—"

You stop when the woman's expression changes completely, and she raises her posture with shock. Her eyes are wide and she brings the hand that was once threateningly close to your chest up to her mouth.

She takes a moment, and you stew in the silence, trying to conduct an appropriate reasoning to explain yourself. But you find yourself drawn into an abrupt hug as she throws herself into you.

"It was you!" she breathes. "You saved my baby!"

You're frozen in place, and while the woman doesn't sound like she's crying, she still sounds emotionally touched. One minute ago, she was about to murder you, it seemed like, so this is an awkward transition for you.

She gives you a final squeeze before pulling away with a watery smile. Her eyes are bright with tears she's restraining.

"I saw everything," she whispers. "I saw what you did."

You look down with the oddest urge to laugh at the worst moment possible. "I really didn't do much," you argue. "That kid took care of themselves just fine."

The woman doesn't protest, but she still seems grateful. "You saved my child," she repeats earnestly. "Thank you."
There's no way that Chara's mother is this compassionate; you know that Chara despised their parents— and for good reason, it sounds like. You have so many questions.

She gives you another long look before she motions behind her, remembering that technically, you're a guest.

"Would you like to come in for tea?" she asks, regaining hospitality. "I'm sure you have questions."

Tea isn't exactly your thing, but you need answers. So you nod. "Sure."

Before she goes to open up the door, she holds out her hand for you to shake, and you do so.

"Call me Toria," she says with a smile.

When you're inside, you're bombarded by Frisk and Asriel again; both seem extremely excited to have a man lacking two fingers in their household.

"Mind the children," Toria advises playfully. "Asriel meant no harm; he was just sticking his nose in areas it didn't belong."

She turns to gaze back over at her son. "Apologize to Mister Upshur," she instructs, but she doesn't sound angry.

Asriel looks down at his shuffling feet with shame on being called out for his ill-suited curiosity.

"Sorry," he mumbles.

You brush it off. "It's fine," you tell him.

He perks up at your approval and runs elsewhere, with Toria looking at him go rather fondly. "He's so full of energy sometimes that I don't know what to do with him," she says with a motherly click of her tongue.

Then she turns you and Frisk into the kitchen. The area looks like it was modeled for one of those housing magazines, with everything crisp and clean. A flower pot on the counter close to the sink holds a blossoming bouquet of flowers.

Toria places a teapot on the stove and warms it. She turns back to you with a smile. "Make yourself at home," she says.

Frisk runs to the fridge and picks out a juice box for themselves, and you lean back on the kitchen's counter to wait for the water to boil. They saunter back over to you, sipping their juice, and look at you again for a long time. You prevent yourself from shuffling as a result.

Toria turns to Frisk once she's satisfied with her work on the stove. She gives the child an affectionate pat on the head.

"Frisk, my dear," she says sweetly, "can you leave the adults alone for a moment?"

Frisk nods and gives you a wave goodbye before rushing out of the kitchen, like they've decided that they have places to be.

You watch them leave with the smallest sense of amusement. Children have always been this sort of concept that you've never been able to grasp; hence why you despise Dr. Song's assumption that you'd ever believe that you're in any sort of state to care for Chara in a parental way.
The teapot hisses, catching your attention as you're flooding in your own thoughts. It's enough to snap you out of it.

"Cute kids," you comment.

Toria gives you a humble smile, but her eyes are bright with pride.

"Asriel is my only child," she explains, "but I love Frisk like they're my own."

You frown, curious now. "They're not yours?"

She seems to think for a moment on how to word her next sentence, like it's complicated. She becomes noticeably uneasy on the subject.

Finally she says, "My husband and I, we're founders of a safe haven for troubled children. Maybe children that have no place to go, or have been kicked out, or are in an abusive situation that they can't free themselves from."

Something clicks.

"So that's how you—"

Toria wears a tight frown, interrupting you. "Chara was a family friend. We didn't adopt them, but we watched over them. Their parents wouldn't let us near for...reasons I don't feel comfortable with addressing."

You feel horrible knowing this. You don't know why; you'd expected to feel relieved upon knowing a thing or two about Chara's current caretaker. But you don't; you feel something dark and ugly in the place of anything positive.

"Frisk is one of the children from rough households," Toria explains as she sets the whining teapot off to the side for it to cool. "They're staying with us temporarily, until they move in with their new family. A father and his older sons; they're all very charming."

You want to beg more information out of Toria about Chara's former family. But your mouth is sewn shut in that aspect. It's almost uncomfortable now, this house. But it'd be rude to just leave.

Instead you ask, "Where's Chara?"

You haven't spotted them anywhere, and the amount of noise that Asriel and Frisk had made would have surely been enough to grab their attention if they were elsewhere.

Toria opens a cabinet near her to find some mugs for the tea. She places them neatly on the counter.

"They're out with my husband," she sighs, "Either off to therapy or to get ice cream."

You give a huff of laughter. For some reason, that sounds just like Chara.

Then something weighty begins to tug at your mind. You ask, earnestly, "Are they happy?"

Toria takes a long time to respond, more time than what you're comfortable with. She pours the hot tea into the mugs slowly before handing one of the cups to you wordlessly.

You're about to repeat the question in a sharper tone than before when Toria sighs. She blows on her tea for a minute, her expression downcast.
"They've been through much," she finally murmurs. The tea is too hot to sip, so she lets it stay put and folds her lips inside her mouth to wet them instead. "We haven't wanted to pressure them into happiness or anything they're not comfortable with."

You don't say anything, because she looks like she wants to say more.

Eventually she does. "They're doing better. They used to refuse to come out of their room... They still don't sleep, though."

You give nothing but a thoughtful hum just to show that you're still listening.

Toria looks at you with eyes shining with heavy emotion. "I honestly can't thank you enough," she says. "Chara would have been recycled back into Murkoff's lurid system if you hadn't been able to get them out."

The thought is unbearable, so you look down at the floor and let your mug of tea on the counter get cold. You don't even like tea.

The door opens as Toria takes another considerate sip of her tea, and you hear a deep voice call out, "We're home!"

You assume that Chara is with the person who just walked through the door alongside Toria's supposed husband, and you find yourself fidgeting suddenly. The idea that Chara is living a life outside of a medical facility is a thought you can't comprehend properly.

Toria does the job for both of you, responding, "We're in the kitchen!"

You stop yourself from visibly wincing when a pair of footsteps comes around the corner to meet you.

The first thing that you encounter is an extremely tall man, covered in blonde hair with a well-trimmed beard. His sharp outfit is complete with a golden flower pin tagged on the breast. You assume he's the one obsessed with the gardening in the household.

The child behind him is much more recognizable. They trail behind him, holding a cup of what looks like chocolate ice cream, wearing a dark navy blue sweater with a collared shirt and khaki pants. To see them dressed without a hospital outfit is almost unnerving; but you do notice them wearing a leg brace, probably to help with their ankle.

Chara catches a glimpse of you from behind the tall man and physically brightens. "Miles!"

They rush to you from across the room and slam into your stomach, earning a small chuckle from a witnessing Toria.

Your stiffness that you've walked in with melts again, like Chara is capable of providing a soothing presence that's able to make muscles loosen. You wrap your arms around them from where you're standing above them and manage to give their head a little pat.

"Hey kid," you murmur, and god when have you become such a softie, "How are you?"

Chara seems to ignore your question as they pop out from their position burrowed into your torso with a toothy grin.

"So you found me!" they chirp with a playful gleam sparkling their eyes. "Did I scare you?"
You lean back and ignore the watching stares of your observers to smooth out a stray hair on their head.

"A little," you admit, then you repeat, "How are you?"

Chara’s excitement that's practically vibrating off their body deflates slightly, but they don't release their hold on you. "I'm okay," they say, voice soft. You don't believe them, but you're not about to say anything.

The man turns to Toria curiously from across the room, and she explains, "This is Miles. From the footage."

A spark of recognition across the man's features causes him to advance to where you are and extends a hand in greeting. You try your best not to flinch at the extended arm.

"Of course! You seemed familiar," he says, and his voice is something like dripping honey; very sweet and warm. "I'm Aegros. My wife and I are the temporary guardians of Chara."

You shake his hand and try not to feel intimidated by his large palms that practically devour your own tiny hands (at least he didn't notice the missing appendages). He gives a firm, professional shake before letting his palm fall back, limp at his side.

Chara finally pulls away to take another taste of their melting ice cream. "You're famous," they tease you.

The concept of being famous has never crossed your mind recently. You've all but forgotten about what exactly would happen if the media ever decided to show interest in the recordings you'd documented on your journey. After a while, recording just seemed like the task advised to keep you sane, rather than to address the public of the horror.

"Am I?" you ask, dumbfounded.

Aegros gives a short glance over to his wife, like he's a bit confused at your own bafflement.

"You seem to be," he says, voice even. "It looks like everyone is aware of the...sacrifice that you made, going in that asylum."

Toria nods in approval. "It's all over the news, what you've accomplished."

It's exciting, almost, to hear that everything that's gone viral, everything that helped put the final nail on Murkoff's coffin, was thanks to your courage. At the price of your sanity, though; it sounds like no one would be too concerned about that, though. No one likes to hear how stories are captured, just that they're published.

But you did it. You did what you set out to do in screwing with Murkoff.

So why does it seem like the world still isn't listening?

Chara gives you a light punch in the stomach playfully to bring you back from your roaming train of thought.

"It's not so bad," they say, and while they sound perky, you can tell that the lighthearted banter they're giving you has ulterior motives. They're perceptive on recognizing when you're dissociating from a situation.
"Besides," Chara continues, taking another bite of ice cream, "If you're like me, then you're famous but don't know yet because of some Witness Protection shit."

"Language, dear," Toria warns them.


The paperwork that you signed while in Refuge. You were distracted and sleep-deprived. Did you sign something that forced you into a program you didn't volunteer for? Or was this a matter without a choice?

"Surely you'd known?" Aegros says, concerned himself. You must look scared half to death with this information. You feel like, once again, you're being played for a fool. Just another puppet for something that's kept out of your grasp, because no one trusts you to handle it.

You decide to let yourself simmer in anger. Blind fury was always easier to carry than acceptance.

"I had no clue," you admit, faltering. "I didn't know what happened to my camcorder or anything."

"I suppose there were good intentions behind that," Toria reasons gently, like you're a child. You're about to snap at her for it, but you stop yourself. It would be rude, and she's just as confused as you, surely.

"It is a bit odd," Aegros agrees with a thoughtful hum. "But I suppose there's not much to do on the situation. You must be assigned into the same form of protection that Chara is."

Chara finishes up their chocolate ice cream as their foster father is talking and trashes the plastic bowl away before coming over again to curl into your side.

"I'm sorry you didn't get a choice," they murmur understandingly. At least someone in this room has common sense, you think.

You give them a reassuring pat. "It doesn't matter," you lie. "At least it's public, right? They didn't keep it locked up."

"Whoever 'they' are, they're just a bunch of greedy ass—" Chara catches Toria's stare and mumbles instead, "...jerks."

"Well done," Toria praises.

Frisk pops their head around the corner to join the conversation, and their eyes immediately dart to Chara. They give an excited wave of their hand to grab their attention from a distance.

Chara perks up when they spot their friend and gives them a small wave in return. "Hi, Frisk," they greet in a friendly voice.

They turn to you, eyes bright again. "Frisk can perform sign language!" they tell you. "Isn't that cool?"

"Very cool," you say absentmindedly; you're swarming with questions that you weren't thinking of before you dropped in. You wanted resolution but received nothing but even more restlessness.

"Listen, I've overstayed my welcome," you say, stepping away from your placement on leaning against the counter. Your cooled tea still sits untouched next to you. "I should go."

Chara looks slightly hurt when you withdraw from their hold, but seem comforted when Frisk walks
over to take your place beside them.

Toria and Aegros exchange a glance before Aegros asks, "Are you sure? You're more than welcome to stay as long as you wish."

Your stomach clenches at their hospitality, almost like you distrust their outstretched comfort. You need to just get out of here; Chara is happy now, aren't they? They have people who can provide for them and love them more than you ever could.

"You're nice folks," you answer, "but I have to go anyway. Appointment, etcetera."

They both seem disbelieving at your sudden departure. Toria finally nods, however worried her facial expression is becoming.

"Well, you can come over any time you wish," she offers kindly. "We owe you that much."

You're already backing away from the kitchen to head for the door, but you give them a polite thanks and leave with a small goodbye in Chara's direction.

Their upsetting face is lifted when you follow up your departure with a wave, and they return it with a smile. Frisk does the same.

As you approach the door, you hear a small, "Pst!"

You turn frantically to the source of the sound before you notice Asriel in the corner, hiding behind a bookshelf in the next room to you.

His eyes are darting every which way before he creeps slightly closer to whisper, "Can you tell me what happened to your fingers?"

You're about to not reply to his question, but with a spark of amusement at his constant awe of your mutilations, you answer, "Rabid bear."

Asriel's eyes widen and he gives another look at your fingers with pure amazement.

"Cool." His voice is barely audible.

You open the door and leave on that note.

-  

When Jackson picks you up to take you back home, you realize that you'd completely forgotten about cutting ties with the kid.

Chapter End Notes

For those who ever wondered if I was going to add any Undertale-inspired characters/settings/themes throughout this series:

This chapter is for you *Will Smith pose followed by a sloppy wink*

Yep, Toria and Aegros are Toriel and Asgore! If you want to just refer to them as Toriel and Asgore like in-game, I'm absolutely fine with that. In fact I strongly encourage it; I
think Aegros is a pretty dumb name but hey, doing the best I can

Chapter name from "Shitty Horoscopes" by Amrit Brar
but the wolves have a way of arriving at your hearthside

Chapter Summary

Alt: 'We try and try but sometimes we cannot keep them out.'

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Holly has her face buried in her hands about an hour into your session. You have at least another thirty minutes left.

You wait idly for her to get over her small crises whilst twirling a pen that you'd picked up from the front desk and dancing it along the tips of your fingers. It's a choppy routine, considering that your ring finger is missing, and it causes the pen to fall into your lap constantly.

When she resurfaces, her face is calmer than when she'd retreated. She folds her lips and closes her eyes, like summoning some greater being to grant her patience with you.

Her voice is calm and unnervingly quiet. "Miles—"

"I've told you everything!" you bark. Your own patience has snapped long ago, and you grip the pen firmly in your hand now to point it at her.

"You told me to tell you everything I know and remember about the asylum, and I did! So what's the fucking problem here?"

Holly pauses, waiting for you to calm down momentarily. Then she replies, "Your lack of accuracy of the events, and your defense at dissecting into your memory at all over our sessions, is concerning."

You lean back and cross your arms, but you don't assuage your cold glare on her. "So what do you expect me to do about it?" you bristle.

Then she sighs. "Your coping strategy appears to be believing that a few of your memories are...'dark and blurry,' and there's some type of 'swarm' in your head," she says, reading a few of her notes placed in her lap.

"So?" you scowl, and you're absolutely being unreasonable on purpose, not because your defensive anger has risen tremendously.

"So it's unhealthy," she replies brusquely. "You've become adverse to my help in recovering the memories because whatever this 'blurry cloud' is in your head, it's disabling you."

You don't know why you decide to say this, maybe because it's your last resort, or maybe you're sick of Holly always seeming to have a crisp answer for everything, and you want her to be crippled for one second in answering you properly.

You say firmly, "Then show me the footage."
Holly physically pauses when you blurt it out, and you're beginning to personally regret planting that idea; you're not even sure if you can handle viewing the footage yourself.

But it's yours, isn't it? You should at least have rights to view it.

"Miles," Holly begins slowly; she always calls you by your first name when she's about to scold or lecture you. God, she'd make an awful mother.

You don't want to hear it. "I have rights to everything on that damn camcorder," you argue. "Don't you tell me for a second that I don't."

"It was confiscated—"

"Then get it from where it was confiscated!" You're practically yelling now, but Holly says nothing of your growing frustration. You've heard these sweetened excuses for too long now.

Holly falls silent and zips her mouth shut as she stares intently at you, like you're going to back down under her gaze. But you stare back twice as hard. Unlike her, you have something valuable on the line.

Then she does something she rarely does. She sighs in defeat.

"Okay," she exhales, like it's taking all the strength in her body to finally succumb to your wishes. "I'll see what I can do."

You're close to crying right now, you're so happy that you can finally see what was released into the public that was your doing.

But you don't show your outward gratitude with anything more than a sarcastic, "Thank you!" as you throw up your hands dramatically.

Before you can get too excited, Holly interrupts sternly, "I'm going to have to run through lots of regulations firsthand. The footage has been handed over to one of those pointless protection programs in order to spare your identity."

You're not sure if you believe that much. It's all Greek to you about what is considered copyrighted information and what is still considered yours. Is it supposed to be this complicated?

"I was able to view the footage," Holly continues. "I'm not sure how they'll react to allowing me to show it to you."

"But it's my camcorder!" you argue, rather childishly. "And my recordings!"

"Understood."

Her apathetic reply is what is beginning to make you feel like you're being played for a fool. They're all dangling some sort of bait in front of you like your misery is entertaining somehow. None of this is making sense.

"I'll let you know by phone call what they decide," she concludes, and slams one of her notebooks shut as though to tell you that the subject matter has been officially dropped.

"Great," you mumble, ungracious. "Can I go now?"

"No."
She pulls out another sheet filled with subject matters she's expressed concern on about you and begins to read them aloud to you.

You groan.

- Jackson takes a contemplative bite out of his blueberry scone. He seems genuinely interested enough in your story; his eyes haven't done that sympathetic glance that he tends to pull with you, usually when he thinks you're crazy or something, so quite often.

You're sitting in a cafe downtown, watching people in heavy coats walk by in the grey weather outside. It's the dull end of winter, where the skeletal trees are showing only the tiniest promise of budding sprouts along their branches to bloom when it's warmer. At least in here, you're in a spot blasted with heat and low folk music in the background.

It's after morning rush, so there aren't many people around, save for a few customers along the walls soaking up the cafe's free wifi. Your table is for two and set along the cold glass window of the restaurant, just for aesthetic effect, you suppose. You blame Jackson for choosing the seats.

"So do you think she'll do it?" Jackson asks, finishing his bite.

You shrug and take interest in your coffee cup instead. "Not sure. She wasn't too excited about it though."

"For good reason," he chimes in, but he doesn't sound like he's on Holly's side exactly, so you soothe your instinctive chagrin.

You don't know why the minute you went home you decided to give Jackson a shot in spilling out your current frustrations with Holly over your latest session. You're just so close to getting answers that you became almost excited now to share why it's unfair that you're being held back from footage you shot, with a camera you bought. Why is it so controversial then?

He continues with a sigh. "I told you before that I watched everything you shot."

You take a sip of your coffee. "Why."

"I had to," he shrugs. "The doctors wanted me to know what you...went through, I guess. To help me understand."

"Help you understand what you're getting yourself into?"

He gives a good-natured chuckle. "Basically."

You're surprised by the briskness he still seems to carry with him, even when you tend to be rather bad-natured. Okay, 'bad' being a nicer term for it. You know you're horrible; to him specifically. But you remember before he was officially assigned to you, and you seeming alright with his presence. At least in Refuge.

"What about the kid?"

Jackson snaps you from your staring contest with the ripples in your coffee. You look at him with narrowing eyes. "What about the kid?" you press, voice neutrally firm.

He backs off a bit to take a bite of his scone again. "Do they have access to the footage too? You
weren't going to bring them along, are you?"

The thought hadn't even crossed your mind. You've been so obsessed with your own copyrighted privilege to the camera's recordings that you hadn't thought about Chara's involvement or personal rights to your camcorder. You imagine that it's a bit more complex than your case; even then, you wouldn't feel comfortable bringing them along to view something that you expect to be horrifying.

And they're happy now, aren't they? You don't need to drag them back into your nightmarish realm of living when they have such kindly folks caring for them.

"I hadn't planned on it," you inform Jackson.

He stays silent in thought before he gives a nod, looking like he does believe you.

"It's probably for the best," he shrugs. "I've seen it, and it's gruesome enough as it is."

You frown. "Doesn't mean they can shove it away without my consent."

"No," Jackson agrees, surprising you. He takes a finishing bite of his scone before he physically shakes his head to emphasize his point. "It doesn't. You're right."

Before you can continue complaining, a flash of grey slams onto your table, startling you and causing your heart to thud into cardiac arrest.

"Heya loser!" An unfamiliar voice crows over Jackson while you attempt to shakily get yourself back together. You focus hard on the waves of your coffee, vibrating even more so from the newcomer's presence.

When you look back up to view your new tablemate, you hear Jackson scolding them harshly, "Nita! I told you not to do that!"

You observe Nita. The grey that you'd first associated with her when she first slammed onto the table are from her grey jacket covering a white graphic tee; a bit too thin of clothing for the contradictory weather outside. She's bronze-skinned, with wavy black hair chopped short right above her shoulders; a bit like Chara, in that way.

She answers with an overly-exasperated sigh as she drags a chair from a table close to you and plops down into it. Her attention is fixated on Jackson with a mischievous grin.

"Aw, not happy to see me?" She teases, giving him a playful shove.

Jackson still looks upset. "My...my client doesn't like loud noises."

So that's what you are? You give him a narrowed glance from across the table that he returns with a helpless frown and arched brows.

Nita's attention transitions to you in a heartbeat and almost does a double-take when you lock eyes.

"Damn, dude!" she exclaims. "Where'd you pick up this hottie?"

You begin to feel great discomfort and take another sip of coffee to avert your gaze from her own.

"I just told you," Jackson says, voice lowering to emphasize the need of toning down the volume in here. "He's a client of mine. I'm a supervisor."

Nita turns back to her friend with a toothy grin. "Client? Is that what they call 'boyfriend' these
days?"

You grimace at the idea, and so does Jackson. He gives Nita a gaze of strong disapproval.

"You know I'm still with Simon, right?" he asks her.

*Who the hell is Simon?* Do you even know Jackson at all?

Nita scoffs. "Sor-ree, dude," she grumbles, not sounding sorry at all. "Just thought you guys broke up or something."

"Nope." Jackson cleans up his area of crumbles from his scone with his used napkin to occupy his hand. "Still dating."

She turns to you then with a refreshed smile of confidence, and her eyes are sparkling playfully.

"Guess you're free then, huh?" She waggles her eyebrows.

You're about to deny her awkwardly, but she gives a chuckle. "Just teasin'. You look good enough so that you've got somebody in mind."

"Not really," you mutter, avoiding eye contact.

"Hey, guess he talks! How 'bout that?"

"Nita," Jackson chimes in, "go easy on him. He's not used to a quirky personality like yours."

They both exchange a knowing look that comes with friendship, and Nita gives Jackson another hearty slap on the shoulder with a more understanding smile that he returns.

"So back to this client dude," she continues airily, "What's his deal?"

Jackson perks up curiously. "What do you mean?"

"I mean is he like— holy shit!"

Her sudden screech causes you to almost choke on the coffee you're drinking. The stray heads around the cafe turn to the scene.

Nita is staring with awe at your detached fingers. You figured as much, but it leaves you even more bitter to her presence.

"Dude!" she breathes, looking at your hands with eyes wider than you've ever seen them. "That's wicked!"

"Nita," Jackson warns.

"How'd that happen?" she presses excitedly, taking no mind of the idea of personal space. She's crammed herself closer to you so that you can't scoot away, especially since you're practically glued to the cold window on the side.

"It's—" You try to think up some miraculous story to get her off your back, but her childish intrigue has you stumbling over your words. Like it reminds you of something sensitive.

"It's really not—"
"It doesn't matter," Jackson pipes in, sounding like he's trying to have your back, but his argument is too weak and Nita isn't interested. She snaps her head to him.

"Doesn't matter?" she says, dumbfounded. "Jacks, you can't deny that it's super cool!"

You're stuffing away any evidence of the missing fingers; the situation has you crawling around in your skin with a sense of extreme anxiety that's creeping in your chest. You want to get out. Now.

"Asylum."

Nita and Jackson both perk up in surprise when you find your voice again. It's firm and cold, unlike when you last attempted to use it with Nita.

She gives you an incredulous stare. "What?"

This time, you flash your hands out of where they're stuffed inside your coat pockets and into the open. Nita marvels at the placements where your index and ring finger are supposed to be.

"I went into an asylum," you explain, your voice hard. "I was strapped in a chair by a doctor. He cut off my fingers to make money off of them. That's what happened."

There's an eerie silence that follows, where even Jackson looks uneasy by your statement. He's giving you this gaze that can only be defined as pure disturbance at the story. You remember telling him this before; why is it so unsettling now?

Then Nita breathes, "Shit..."

You think for a second she looks ashamed for asking, but she perks up again and takes another long look at the spaces where your fingers should be.

Then she repeats, her voice a bit stronger, "That is badass."

Even Jackson seems appalled at the emotional depth behind her observation. Though you bet to think otherwise; there were precautions you could have easily performed in order to have your appendages all still intact. You could have moved quicker, you could have...

You could have made the kid go up the dumb waiter first.

The thought is so displeasing and disgusting on your behalf that you visibly scowl at yourself, becoming very angry at the concept of that theory.

"Wait," Nita's baffled voice catches your attention. "You said an asylum? With a crazy guy in it?"

You sip your coffee, almost way too nonchalantly. "Yeah."

Her eyes make a spark of recognition and her expression lifts in surprise. She whips her head over to Jackson.

"Is he that..." Her voice trails off skeptically, but when Jackson gives her no declaration of disapproval, she continues with growing shock. "Is he the guy?" She finishes, voice rising in excitement.

Jackson raises a brow. "The guy?"

"That guy who went into that asylum and uploaded that video!" Nita explains. She sounds so astounded at the thought, like you're a celebrity or something.
You don't know why you end up saying, apathetically, "Yeah. I'm the guy."

Nita's eyes widen with pure disbelief. "Nuh-uh!" She looks at Jackson for clarification. "Seriously?"

Jackson gives you a quick glance, like he needs your permission to clarify to his friend that you are indeed the crazy guy who went into an asylum and barely escaped with himself and a child in tow. You don't nod, but you give him a look that's something more airy and careless than usual; basically just giving him the green light to go nuts with your story.

Still seeming skeptical, Jackson nods to his friend. "Yes, that's him," he agrees.

Nita is practically bouncing on her toes with this newfound information she can barely contain. Her eyes are shining when she stares at your fingers, now locked around your coffee mug's handle.

"Oh my god!" she exclaims, but thankfully she still has some volume control in keeping her excitement to a minimum. "You are like...the coolest person! You know that right? You're like normal day James Bond!"

You really don't understand her praise. You give her a confused eye. "Not really."

She looks blown away that you've brushed off her idolization so quickly. "Uhhhh, yeah you are! Have you seen that video? You're badass to the max!"

You give Jackson a pointed stare when you reply, "Actually, no. I haven't seen it."

Nita doesn't catch on as quickly as Jackson does; he ducks away and finds interest in his empty coffee mug. Her attention is all on you.

"Then of course you don't know how awesome that was!" Nita crows, not having caught on to your sharpening tone. "Although, to be fair, I would've brought a gun."

She shapes her fingers into a hand gun and pretends to shoot Jackson in the shoulder with it. "Would've gotten rid of those lunatics just like that! Y'know?"

You're not soothed at the idea of shooting anybody. Something in your chest, in multiple areas, begins to feel bruised and sensitive, but you're not sure why.

"I didn't want to hurt anyone," you argue coldly. Would Chara have trusted you if you held a gun to them?

Would it have saved your fingers?

Nita gives a mischievous scoff. "Ah, pacifist I see. I get that." She nods understandingly.

Jackson eventually makes his presence known again with a small cough. "So, uh, Nita. How've you been?"

The conversation shifts from you as the star of the show into idle talk between Jackson and his friend with idle subjects you can't find yourself eager to participate in. You feel like an intruder, so you end up breaking out your journal from your pocket and recording the events that just occurred. No one notices.

- They're letting you watch it.
They're giving you permission to finally watch the events you recorded with your own camcorder. Holly called up and informed Jackson that taking you to a specific building would allow you access to the one thing you've been asking for ever since Refuge. Finally, you're getting answers.

You can't call what you're feeling excitement. Perhaps a mixture of agitation more than anything, since it's been such a hassle to get the footage that has your name written all over it. But still, there's anticipation that you can't miss in hearing that you can finally look at events that happened and be able to piece two and two together properly.

Jackson drops you off at a glassy, prestige building crowded with parking lots instead of other buildings around it. It stands out among the concrete playground it's placed in the center of, with the distant cityscape being it's only companion.

You didn't catch the name of the place; it was plastered near the entryway cut near the main road, but you hadn't gained interest until Jackson had slowed down to indicate that your car trip was coming to a close.

So you walk in automatically, allowing yourself to have your internal autopilot transfer yourself to wherever the directions the employees give you. They lead you to yet another clean and crisp front desk, mirroring the multiple front desks you've been forced in front of many times in the past couple of months.

The dark-skinned woman occupied with a call silences you momentarily before she sets down the phone to give you an inquiring smile. "How can I help you?" she asks, voice neutral and sounding more of a statement than a question.

Your mind runs blank. Why exactly are you here again? How do you explain yourself for what you're here for?

"Um," you stumble, then continue to trample over words in an attempt to sound like you know what you're talking about. "I, um, I was told to come here? In order to view some footage I shot. From Mount Massive Asylum."

A spark of recollection you're unfamiliar with has her typing into her computer before she gives you a clarifying nod.

"Yes, Miles Upshur, right? Just go to the elevator on the right and head up to the fourth floor. You'll be instructed of where to go from there."

You give a small thanks and do what you're told.

The building is a minimalistic dream for designers. It's white and grey with a tone of having this futuristic architecture that you feel is exaggerating whatever purpose they're serving just a smidge. You get the point that it's supposed to be some sort of example for creating a better tomorrow or whatever. But still, it's overwhelming.

Of all places, they kept your footage here?

You wonder if they have the rights to your car and baggage too.

When the elevator opens, it's empty. You attempt to take a step in, but something puts a falter in placing your foot down into the tiny, cramped room that's expected to shoot your up four floors to give you answers.

But you end up taking a sharp step back, thinking about the many, many failures and
disappointments that elevators tended to carry throughout the asylum.

You grimace at yourself when the doors close in front of you, whirring back up to another floor. You'd thought for sure that you could have controlled your fear by now.

A throbbing ensues in the back of your head, and you give a whine as you press your fingers to the sides of your forehead in an attempt to soothe the incoming pain. The buzzing is starting again, and for seemingly no reason.

You don't need this right now. You need to look as stable as possible or they'd never let you view the recording.

Your heart does a triple start when you catch glimpse of the stature of a man that walks to your side to click on the elevator button. How long have you been standing here, in front of a closed elevator?

He seems surprised to see you too, giving you widened eyes and a flash of concern from your state of continually rubbing the sides of your temple as the headache slowly ebbs away.

"Hey," he says, making a pitied attempt to reach out to you but seems hesitant himself, "are you okay?"

Immediately you straighten yourself in a faux impression of immediate recovery. You glare as the elevator doors open again. "I'm fine."

The man doesn't seem convinced, but he has etiquette in keeping his mouth shut. He nods. "Okay. Just making sure. You seemed in pain."

"I said I was fine," you snap, but you strain yourself in lightening your tone for future use.

He pauses, then sweeps his arm ahead of him to motion to the once-again opened elevator, showing an empty, tight cubicle with no chance of escape once the doors are closed.

"You first," he says politely.

You're not about to back down now, so sucking in a breath, you walk in like your feet are treading through thick cement. Your fists are clenched and you suppose that if it wasn't apparent how deathly afraid you are of elevator, surely by now it's showing.

The man does the decency of closing the doors, and you watch helplessly as you're closed in, with no chance of running out now. Whatever happens happens.

Through the corner of your eye, in an attempt to assuage your pounding heart as the elevator shifts with movement, you observe the man.

He seems more relaxed than you, but still has this odd wave of delicacy about him that you can't quite pinpoint. It could be a trap, sure, with his bag tightly strapped to his side with a protective arm, perhaps holding something dangerous like a gun or illegal papers. But he seems content in the tranquility for now, so you suffer in silence by heavily stiffening your frame and pretending to glare at the metallic doors in front of you.

He's lazily dressed, obviously not an employee. He has fair skin with a rough five o’clock shadow that hasn't bothered to be tampered with; blonde scraggy hair, weighty bags under his eyes. Overall, he seems like he's covering extreme fatigue.

Maybe he's on the same boat as you? You don't trust it, though.
Suddenly he extends his hand, and you step away from the movement instinctively. He looks apologetic for a moment too long to make you transition your worrying gaze into a merciless glare.

The man stutters. "Oh! S-sorry. Didn't realize you didn't...um, like...like touching."

You have to roll your eyes at his sorry excuse for trying to make the situation less weird. Hopefully the elevator will stop soon and you can get out of here.

"It's fine," you mutter.

He retracts his arm respectfully. "Didn't mean to startle you. Name's Andy Rowell. I'm visiting for...Witness Protection shit."

You regain yourself to resume moving a tad bit closer to him to prove that you're not a wuss. "Charmed."

The elevator stops and shutters, making you filled with nothing but raw anxiety. But the doors open before you, and you've never been happier to set your foot on solid grounding.

You have hallways to your left and right to walk down, seeing as you've been dumped right beside a small, empty waiting room. You're still not entirely sure what this company does, but your current mission seems to be out of place in this hospital-like building.

The man steps out with you, seeing as this was his destination as well. "Are you visiting for a reason?" he asks.

You don't know whether or not this man is associated with this business, so you decide to just give it a shot anyway.

"I'm here to pick something up," you say simply. "Footage."

He looks at you with sudden investment, raising a brow. "Oh? What kind of footage?"

Might as well tell him the truth. "I traveled to an asylum and got majorly fucked up. They confiscated my camcorder, so I'm just here to take what's mine and go."

Immediately the man's seemingly calm posture slants into something vivid and fragile. His face deflates with a newfound dread that looks astonishingly close to recognition.

"An asylum?" he repeats. His tone has taken a strange detour too; he sounds strained.

You stare at him quizzically. "Yeah?" This is a different reaction to Nita's, with her excitement greatly separating this man's fear. He's seen the footage too, apparently.

He seems to fumble for words, becoming frightened in a way that has you just staring at his behavior with incredulity.

"You," he starts, then tries again, "you aren't Miles Upshur, are you?"

You give him an exaggerated sweep of your arms, as though it's important and such a grand surprise that it's definitely you, in the flesh.

"One and only," you say caustically. Then you add, disinterested in his future reactions, "You wouldn't happen to know who I can talk to about the footage, do you?"

The man seems tongue-tied, then begins avoiding eye contact entirely. His eyes have become
uncharacteristically dark for his shaky movements.

"Uhh, y-yeah," he stammers quietly. "Yeah, you uh, you go to the left and, some... some lady will tell you who to talk to."

"Great. Thanks." You turn and head to said left direction.

Then you hear imbalanced, heavy movements from behind, and you peer over your shoulder to see the man hobbling to your side with a stiff right leg. He's practically panting as he joins you.

"Let me take you there!" he encourages, but his voice is still full of anxiety. "It's the least I can do."

You shrug. "Fine."

You're gracious enough in practicing being courteous so you fall behind a little to let the man keep up with what you're assuming is a prosthetic leg, hiding underneath his loose jeans. It would explain his jaunty walking.

Then he speaks as you round a corner, voice timid and layered with what sounds like guilt.

"My name isn't Andy Rowell," he murmurs in a low voice. He says it like it's some big secret that you're supposed to know already, but you peer at him apathetically.

Still, he rambles, seeming to take in a sharp breath and letting it out slowly. You notice his fingers running across the leather strap of the bag; the fabric seems comforting to his troubled mind.

"My name's actually Waylon Park," he whispers. His eyes are darting every which way when he says it.

You stare at him.

Then you shrug again, extremely indifferent to his confession. "Okay, great. Thanks for sharing."

"You don't understand," Waylon presses, looking even more stressed and hesitant by the minute. It's kind of pathetic. "That's...I-I, well..."

Then he exhales, looking a bit calmer than before, like he's gotten something off his chest. This time, he stops you in the middle of the hallway with a gentle yet firm hand on your shoulder.

He retracts it immediately at remembering your intolerance for touching.

"You remember receiving an email?" he inquires cautiously. "About Murkoff? And...everything that was happening?"

You're becoming slowly curious now, and you furrow your brows with growing suspicion at this man's knowledge. "A whistleblower, yeah. Why?"

"I, well...it was sent the same day you came to Mount Massive, right?"

"Yeah?"

"The day of the riot?"

"Yeah?" Your voice is getting hard now with impatience.

"A-and the email...and the whistleblower...—"
"What the hell are you talking about?" You snap, and he visibly cringes.

Waylon loosens with courage he'd luckily regained, and looks you dead in the eyes with his weary ones.

"I was the whistleblower," he sighs. "I sent you that email."

You're not sure what happens next.

Something surges forward in your stomach, heaving a great wave of adrenaline that ends with hands you feel disconnected from reaching, grabbing flesh. You slam into a wall, angry. Taking Waylon by the neck and squeezing him.

A dark cloud in your brain is spiraling into some pure form of emotion, sharp and strong that sends jolts unpleasantly through your stiffening muscles. It isn't right away that you recognize the anger and grief, all the strong stuff you've been storing away.

"You!" Your rage seeps from your clenched teeth like liquid. "You're the bastard that did this to me!"

Your vision is crazily blackening, becoming hazy and red. Your heart is pounding right out your ears; no better than the static to ring and make itself acknowledged. You're becoming nothing but the exact definition of wrath.

No.

No, you don't want this power.

But you're so mad, you're so pissed, you can't help it anymore. This was the guy who set you up for slaughter. He worked for them, works for them. He played you like a hook with a fish, and you'd taken the bait. Your life meant nothing to him; he saw you as nothing more than a way to expose something, perhaps a sick way to make profit.

He's choking.

This is bad. This is bad, bad, bad. But you remember being on the opposite side, the fear you felt that empowered your hunters. It gives you a sick satisfaction to reciprocate the fear, to see how they enjoy it. You sink your fingers deeper into his neck.

"Plea—" he begs you, and if you could see properly you'd expect his face to be as colored as a bruise. "I'm sor—"

"Sorry?!!" You exclaim. "You're sorry? You expect that to mean something? You expect me to forgive you?!!" Your voice is raised as far as it can go in order to dominate the ringing in your ears.

"Listen to me!" He screeches. "I—I— had to—"

Somewhere in your mind, you acknowledge someone screaming.

"Took my life" you seethe slowly, crunching your teeth together as you glare into what you assume to be his eyes; your vision is blurring tremendously and you can't see color outside or blacks, whites, and greys.

You're not sure what's happening. Something isn't right. "Took everything from me!" You continue, screaming. "Do you even know what you've done to me, you prick?!"

Memories resurface like bullets searing your skull. They flicker in and out of your consciousness but
they hurt like hell when they strike you. You glare him down as one sticks out like a sore thumb.

"And you—you took my— took my fucking car, didn't you?! Didn't you!"

"Wh—!" Waylon is dying. You think he is. You know he is. No one can escape your fury and gets away alive.

You bare your teeth and soak in his fear like it's your lifeline. "Stop. Talking."

It wants to escape, more than anything now.

Why don't you let it?

Why not listen to it?

Make him pay.

Make them all pay

A flash of hot white flashes across your faded vision as you feel a cold needle press into your neck.

You fall to the floor.

- "What happened..."

"You had a panic attack. We had no choice but to heavily sedate you."

"Where am I."

"Medical unit. You'll be released within an hour."

"Who are you."

"It doesn't matter. You're not going to remember when you wake up."

"Am I asleep?"

"You're sedated, like I said. You're not thinking clearly. The dosage will wear off within a day."

"Why am I here."

"Because you're dangerous. The more you blow your cover, the more trouble you're going to get in. Keeping you drugged and normalized is our safest option."

"Why are you doing this."

"Classified."

A hard tug restrains your wrists.

"Get some sleep. Mister Wrent will pick you up when you wake. We'll say you watched the footage and just didn't like what you saw, yeah?"

"That's not what happened."
"Yes. It was. Don't try to get smart on me, Upshur. You're already in deep shit."

"For what."

"I think you already know the answer."

Another harsh shove by the chains locked around your limbs.

"He's becoming conscious. Put him back under."

You try again. Nothing.

A plastic hand lifts the side of your head and injects something painfully into a vein.

The world is swirling away again. You're growing dizzy.

"We're on your side, Upshur. Remember that the next time you try and fuck us over again."

Jackson is sympathetic to your killer headache. He seems to feel a sense of guilt in allowing this to happen anyway; you're not about to protest if it means he's allowed to order dinner.

"How's your head?" he asks softly. He takes a slurp of a noodle, catered from the cheap Chinese takeout from across the road.

You cringe as you practice extra caution in bringing the ramen to your mouth and giving the pasta a thoughtful chew. Even the movements of chewing cause a dull ache in your temple.

"I've been better," you mutter once you've swallowed. You reach for your bottle of water, hoping that hydration will relieve your pain a bit.

Jackson frowns, his eyes dark. "I had no idea the footage was that risky a move for you. They said your relapse was so bad—"

You wave away his apologetic tone with a disdainful shrug. "Thanks for the vote of confidence."

He sighs. "I'm not going to lie to you. Just accept that you couldn't handle the footage and trust that it's probably in the right hands."

You're numb to the core, like an eternal tiredness has been planted inside your stomach that requires nothing but rest. Every word you're saying and every answer you receive bounce inside your skull until you're able to give steady grasps of comprehension. You know where you are—you're home. You know what your name is, who you're with, what you're eating. Is that not enough?
"Everything in my mind is so fucking fuzzy," you murmur coldly. "I don't understand."

Jackson gives a helpless shrug. "I really don't know what to tell you, Miles. I'll give Holly and some other doctors a ring and see if it's a result of Post Traumatic Stress."

Then he sets down his meal and gives your knee an aimless pat. You stare at the location he'd touched you for a long time.

"I really am sorry you didn't get the answers you wanted," he says, and his voice is truly sincere. "I wish there was something I could do."

You don't look at him. "There isn't."

"I know."

There's a steady quiet that follows, mixing both sides of the conversation into a mutual sort of silence where you want something to fix or alter, but there comes a mature understanding that there's nothing that can be done. You'd take that over excuses.

Then Jackson gets up with a sigh of closure, ending the quiet. He scoops up his mess and heads towards the kitchen to dispose the trash.

"Well, if it helps, it was a good idea on your behalf to not bring the kid," he calls briskly from the kitchen.

You don't peek over your shoulder, only taking a small bite of chicken. "I guess so," you respond, not truly comprehending the good news of not having Chara to accompany you.

You think again, a bit clearer, and decide that it was a good idea after all. What if they couldn't handle the footage either? What if they got hurt during your blind attack?

"It was smart to say goodbye to them," Jackson continues, pulling them out of your reeling thoughts.

Oh yeah. You did say you would do that, didn't you?

"Yeah," you mumble.

Jackson pauses his work around the kitchen, and you can feel his stare pierce your back.

"You said goodbye, right?" His pointed tone dominates his questioning statement, leaving your heart with an unpleasant thumping, like a lying kid who's been caught by a parent.

"I did," you snap, with a louder voice than intended with defense. "Get off my ass about it, will you?"

You're not confident that you'd bought him over, especially with your harsh reply, but your head begins to hurt again, so you draw attention to that by providing a harsh wince and bringing your knuckles to rub at your temples.

A buzzing noise begins to thicken from somewhere around the room.

"Okay, okay," Jackson says, but he doesn't sound annoyed, more so concerned. "Don't speak so loudly, alright? Just get some rest."

Your teeth tighten as you continue massaging your head.
"I'll clean up the mess," Jackson offers, coming up from behind to do such. "Lie down on the couch and get some sleep."

You oblige helplessly, with heaving throbs in your body that mute any potential argument. You settle into the couch, and you feel a steady hand grasp your shoulder.

"I don't know what to do," you hear Jackson sigh, talking to himself. He must think you've already dozed off.

"That makes two of us," you're able to grit out.

Then you hear a soft chuckle, lighthearted and kind. It bounces along the inside of your skull.

"Get better, Miles," Jackson says, and you hear a smile in his voice. "I mean it."

The drugs kick in and you fall into a murky sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Hello children it's semi-plot time

Chapter name from the novel "The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories; The Company Of Wolves" by Angela Carter
righteous thoughts are needed for living righteous lives

Chapter Summary

Alt: 'Greetings, good stranger, you seem very kind, but I have learned from the soldier's plight'

Chapter Notes

Our hero takes a break from fighting the governmental/societal bs and decides to find conclusions in other unresolved aspects of his life.

AKA local dad grows worried about his smol's tragic past and seeks answers from a reliable source

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You knock on the door, waiting patiently for the sputtering of small feet to approach the door with excitement and pull you inside.

Instead, you wait a while in silence until you hear a heavier pair of footsteps, belonging to an adult. You become uneasy, but you shove it down with force. This is what you wanted in the first place, isn't it? Adults can provide you answers.

Besides, asking for help from people like Holly has proven to be nothing but a wreck waiting to happen— you're just now getting over your dumb headache after being injected with about six different kinds of anesthesia. This could be a pleasant break, if anything.

The door opens, and you're met with Toria greeting you with an open expression, almost welcoming. Her mouth drops open slightly at registering who you are.

"Miles!" she exclaims lightly. "What a surprise! What can I help you with?"

Your impression of her is upheld by her kindly smile.

"Hi," you greet. "Can I talk to you about...something?"

Toria takes into account your hesitant question with a skeptical gaze, but it melts into something thoughtful. She gives a polite nod.

"Chara isn't home," she informs you, reading into your tone that your visit has something to do with the kid. "They're at school."

You raise a brow; you can't see Chara in an environment like school. Are they overwhelmed? Are they safe?

—Those aren't questions meant for you.
"I want to talk to you," you prompt, emphasizing that it's Toria, definitely not Chara, that you wanted to see. Besides, with Chara out, you can get what you need and go as easily as you came.

Toria looks puzzled, but keeps her smile open and sensible. She steps aside to allow you into her home. "Of course," she nods. "Do come in."

You do so, following the previous route you'd taken the last time you were allowed inside, following the hallway to the kitchen.

Toria creeps out from behind you to the stove and turns to you expectantly. "A cup of tea?" she offers politely.

This time, you manage to shake your head. "No thanks, I'm not into tea."

Her eyes widen with faux shock. "My goodness, not a tea enthusiast? What does Chara see in you then, I wonder?"

You can't help but provide her humor a small chuckle, but the joke dissolves into horror. "What does the kid see in me?" you ask seriously, perhaps a bit too anxious.

Toria warms the stove and places a single cup beside the warming pot. For herself, most likely.

"They think the world of you," she answers with a smile. "They don't talk much about you, or...what happened. But when you came over for a visit, I've never seen them so happy."

Your stomach grows stiff.

"Are you alright?" Toria asks, her voice heavily concerned. Her expression is rearing dangerously close to pity.

You straighten and attempt to cleanse your face of any of the inner conflict you're feeling. "Fine," you reply shortly.

She gives you a long glance before turning her attention back to adjusting the stove.

"Did you come to talk to me about something?" she finally asks.

You nearly sputter. "Oh! Uh, yeah. Yeah, I did."

Toria abandons her position with the teapot and instead heads towards where you're blocking the refrigerator, and you immediately back away as she opens it.

"Would you like a drink?" she asks. "We have water, juice, soda..."

"Just a water," you interrupt. Toria rummages through the fridge momentarily before pulling out a bottled water and handing it to you. You twist the cap open and give a short sip.

"Thanks."

"Of course." She closes the fridge and makes a gesture to point towards the ends of the hallway, blocked from where you're standing. "If you'd like to wait in the living room, you're free to do so."

You hesitate, but ultimately you think better of it. What's the worst that could happen?

"Alright." You follow her instructions and turn into a corner that follows into an open area, sloped downward. It's a living room, carved out into a cozy circle that's accessible by taking a couple of
short steps down. It's pretty fancy, you think. But you've always been easily impressed by those that may have spent a bit extra in home design.


A couple of pictures along the fireplace grab your attention, and you walk over to eye the framed portraits dotted along the mantle. It's a hoard of smiling faces, with Toria and Aegros and Asriel and a different child accompanying them in each picture, placed in the middle. Some are tall, some are short. Some smile easily, some appear worn.

These must be the foster kids Toria was referring to.

In a new picture, crisp and cleaner than the others, you spy Frisk amongst the small family. Their head is lowered shyly, with their hair drooping over their facial features as they curl into themselves. The posture reminds you faintly of Chara.

You become curious. Is Chara up here?

A pair of footsteps causes you to peek over your shoulder, where you spot Toria observing your studies of the pictures. Her expression is blank.

Then she twines her expression into a knowing gaze, maternal and affectionate. "I see you've found our family portraits," she says, with a tinge of motherly pride in her voice.

You nod, turning your attention back to the framed memories. You can't help but provide a frown.

"Chara is not photographed with us," Toria says, coming up behind you. Are you that obvious?

"They were not our own," she explains, "and even now, they don't enjoy picture-taking. We respect their needs and don't do such."

You turn to her. "Why don't they?"

Toria's eyes become clouded. "We may not understand a lot about Chara's triggers, or emotions, or burdens. We just know that sometimes people become used to bad things."

The photographs don't have the airy nostalgia they used to provide. You don't find yourself willing to dig deeper into her somber meaning; her knowing tone unnerves you.

Respectfully you take your seat on the couch.

"You're here for answers, aren't you?" Toria asks you.

You turn to her. Is she some sort of mind reader?

"I guess so," you sigh. "In truth, I'm not sure what I want."

Toria settles beside you, turning her body position to yours, placing her hands in her lap. Her posture contradicts your firm arms crossing your chest as you slump backwards into the couch.

"Chara was a neighbor of ours for a while," Toria begins. She sounds tired, uncertain. "Their family was fairly high class. Very fancy and expensive."

Something tugs your interest with a sharp feeling you can't rid yourself of. "Then why did they turn in their child for profit?" you blurt out.
Toria looks surprised. "Pardon?"

You straighten. "They said their parents signed them into Murkoff to make money off their administration. If they were rich like you said, why did they do that?"

You don't realize your voice is growing louder until Toria seems strained with your presence. It's guilt that is able to restrain yourself with an awkward cough. "Sorry."

"Oh," Toria's eyes become wide and apologetic. "Is that what Chara told you? Oh, dear. No, that's not what happened at all."

She folds her lips uncertainly, looking sorrowful. "Their parents did sign them up for the treatment, yes. But there was no profit to be gained from it. Chara was only administered because their parents were growing weary of their child... Perhaps they told Chara that their administration was beneficial financially, I don't know... I wouldn't have put it past them."

A pang of anger darkens your vision temporarily. A buzzing resumes somewhere in the room, but it zips out of existence as quickly as it came.

"So they were just thrown in there for the hell of it?" You attempt to keep your voice steady.

Toria nods. "A horrible thing. Pathetic, really. They'd been convincing themselves that Chara's unhappiness was due to incurable insanity."

Then her eyes water, and she peeks downward to pretend that she's picking something unwelcome from the corners of her socket.

"They mentioned doing it before," she murmurs shakily. "I just never thought that they'd..."

Toria trails off, avoiding your gaze. "I couldn't do anything. I...we all wanted to, terribly. But... They were already wary of us. We'd tried to take Chara away from them so many times..."

You simmer in silent fury for a minute longer, but you don't trust your stability for long. You notice that your hold on the water bottle has tightened.

"So where are their parents?" you ask suddenly.

Toria looks at you solemnly. "Car crash, two months ago." Her voice doesn't carry any form of grief on reflecting upon their deaths. "It's what allowed us to bring Chara into our home so easily."

Good riddance, you think bitterly, remembering Chara's bitter tongue upon informing you of their parents beforehand.

Your heart is thudding ugly in your chest, like Chara's pain deserves to be your own. Maybe this sort of emotion explains why Toria looks close to tears. You take a mental moment to restrain yourself from practicing the same grieving of an angry parent.

"So what happens now."

Toria looks at you, clearing her vision for the sake of surprise at your question. "Is that what you came for?" she asks. "Closure?"

You slowly nod, unsure of yourself. But your head firmly nods as you begin to think harder on the subject. Too many current problems you're facing are shifting into cold cases. You'd like to securely close the file on at least one of them.
"I want them to be happy," you say, glaring at your water bottle. Your hands are clenched around it like a vice. "I want to...I want them to be okay."

"Are you okay?" Toria presses earnestly. "Is that what this is about?"

You look at her. "What do you mean?"

She sits back, her eyes a kaleidoscope of emotions you can't pinpoint specifically. Her expression is watchful of your heavy gaze.

"Miles, it's very obvious that you keep looking for answers you're not receiving yourself," she begins, in a mild tone. "I'm not sure what it is, but I don't know if you're going to find it in Chara either."

You don't why this immediately rubs you the wrong way.

"I'm not going to adopt them!" you snap, surprising Toria. "Jesus Christ, do you know how horrible I'd be at being a...a father?"

Her gaze shifts into amusement. "Gracious, I wasn't implying that. It seems that you were reading way too much into my words."

You fall silent, biting back an unnecessary protest stinging your tongue.

Toria continues with a sigh. "I'm saying that Chara being happy may not be the key for your personal happiness."

"Who said it was?" you retort. "Maybe I just want to make sure that the kid's not going back to..."

"To Murkoff?" Toria finishes.

Your eyes flick down to the carpet. "You said it, not me," you mutter darkly.

"Chara is just as vulnerable to Murkoff as you are," Toria reasons. "We've done everything in our power to promise Chara a safe and stable future, but we can only do what we're able to. Whatever happens happens."

Then she gives a languid smile. "We've decided that we're going to adopt Chara."

You don't know why you feel a pained gulp lodge itself in your throat. Isn't that what you wanted? Chara with a happy family?

Toria mistakes your odd reaction with a sympathetic eye. "I understand that there will be struggles, but none of which we're not willing to take! Chara is a very important child to us; we're ready to take the risk for them."

"But Murkoff..." you stumble into a stammering quiet and take a sip of your water to cover your tracks.

"The risk in question." Toria nods, but her gaze is firm. "But we have reinforcements and protection; we have the law on our side. And we love Chara enough to fight for them, with force if we have to."

From the kitchen, you hear the pitched hiss of a teapot.

Toria snaps her head upwards. "Oh! One moment, please."
She rises from her spot and steps over your feet with a small apology and climbs up to the kitchen to soothe the pot. She leaves you alone, in a room that begins to slowly suffocate you.

You don't understand. Toria and Aegros are good for Chara, aren't they? They're providers for dozens of kids, maybe who've been in similar abusive situations at home. Like she said, they have more allies that may be stronger in areas where Murkoff isn't.

Maybe this way you can finally just let go of them once and for all.

Why is this so hard for you to digest this? It's a good idea. And besides, this isn't about you. This isn't about what you want.

Isn't this what you wanted anyway? It's not like the kid would ever be happy with you watching over them. Right?

...You're overthinking this. You rise to your feet and head towards the kitchen with a rush of energy to get yourself away from the living room, the photographs and everything else in this house.

Toria turns when she hears you approach; she's pouring herself a hot cup of tea and pauses with surprise at your sudden presence.

"I have to go," you declare bluntly.

She stares at you curiously. "How come?"

"I...appointment. Again. Can't be late, just—you know how it is."

You fumble sloppily with a proper excuse and take to twisting your bottle closed and tossing it in a trash bin close to you.

Toria looks close to interrogating you further, but seems to think better. "Chara will be home soon," she says. "Do you want to stay a little longer?"

The idea of seeing the kid makes your stomach sick.

"No," you shake your head decisively. "It's—they look like they're in good hands. I don't want to...I don't mean to...I should go."

Toria grows keen of your stuttering explanation with a parental sense of intuition. "You know," she says idly, "Chara may not need a parent, but that doesn't mean they don't need a friend."

You shake your head. "Maybe. Maybe later? Look, I don't—I'll go. Just—don't tell them I was here."

You barely hear her muddled reply as you rush out the door. The fresh air will probably do you good.

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There's a hollow ring that echoes around the house from the phone. You wait for it to shut up on its own, but the caller appears persistent. Enough to call you right back after they head straight to voicemail.

It takes a second for you to remember that Jackson is out. You'd been given medication before he left; he said he had a date he couldn't miss with whoever this Simon guy is and instructed with what pills to take at which time. He won't be home for a while.
You attempt to let the phone ring itself dry with a scowl at every sound that stupid machine emitted. The problem is the whining sound of the phone is becoming attractive, so you dissect and ponder upon the notes and odd, static melody the machine is producing.

The tendrils along your vision are familiar enough for you to slap some sense into yourself.

Eventually the noise has you heaving yourself off the couch, where you're pretending to read some book from your bookshelf. If it turns out to be David, you will not hesitate to throw your phone out the window.

But when you reach for the device, an unfamiliar number grabs your attention. Probably some ambitious salesperson. You decide to give them a run for their money.

You pick up the phone brutally. "You better have a damn good offer for calling me this much."

A squeak for a voice responds, derived of the smooth confidence that an average salesman would carry. "W-what?"

You narrow your eyes suspiciously. Whoever this is surely isn't having you head over heels for the product this caller's selling. "Who is this?"

"Oh!" The voice is oddly familiar. You can't pinpoint where you've heard it. "Sorry, sorry about that. This is...the home of Miles Upshur, right?"

You're not pleased. "What do you want?" you snap impatiently. "An autograph, an interview, a date? Who even gave you this number?"

"Whoa, hold on!" The unsteadiness of the man's voice is strangely reassuring. Like you've heard it before. "Phonebooks exist, you know."

You scowl. "Have we met before? I think I'd remember a smartass like yourself."

"Yeah, and you're a saint, aren't you?"

His smarmy remark catches you by surprise, but there's a sudden sigh on the other end of the line before you can say a thing. "Sorry about that," the man murmurs. "Yes, we've met before. And this isn't...blackmail or anything like that. I just want to talk."

You frown, leaning against the kitchen counter. "Depends on what you want to talk about."

The man hesitates. "The name's...well, the name's Andy Rowell."

He says it like there's a second meaning to the name. Like a verbal wink through the phone line.

"Who?"

He seems shocked, then annoyed. "Come on, man. Don't play that with me."

"Play what?"

"Andy Rowell!" he repeats again. "Remember?"

You stop and probe your brain to try and recall the name. You come short.

"Were you that guy I banged that one time in college?" You pry uncertainly.
"What?"

"Listen, I'm flattered but I thought we—"

"No!" He sounds incredulous, frustrated even. "I'm not some guy you banged in college! I'm Waylon Park!"

Then he hushes immediately on the end of the line. You almost believe he'd hung up.

"Um," you fumble awkwardly. It's a shame; you really feel like you should be remembering something. "Alright?"

Waylon's silence is alleviated by his baffled, "Are you fucking serious?"

"What?"

"You honestly don't remember?" He doesn't sound like he believes you. "You're kidding."

"Why would I joke about not remembering some guy named Waylon Park—"

"Keep your voice down!" He hushes you sharply. There's a note of extreme caution in his tone that has you pondering. "There might be listeners!"

You raise a brow, even if he can't see your expression. "Right," you drawl. "Listen, I don't know who you are or what you're up to, but I've got things to do, places to be—"

"I'm the whistleblower!"

His voice is on the edge of panic and anger, and your heart thuds in shock at the news.

"What?"

Waylon sounds even more agitated at your response. "The email? Murkoff? Whistleblower?" he presses desperately. "How do you not remember? You slammed me into a wall!"

You barely hear that last sentence as your insides curl with a dulled anger. "That was you?" you exclaim; why are you not feeling as furious as you should be? This guy ruined your life.

"...Are you actually serious right now?"

"You bastard!" You grit your teeth, but your heart isn't completely in the gesture. You're acting like you've heard this before! "Do you know what you've done to me? To my life?!"

"We've been over this!" Waylon exclaims, exasperated. "I stole your car and your life, I get it!"

You start. "You stole my car?!"

"Oh my god!"

"I can't believe this!" you scream. "You've ruined my life and you decide to call me?!"

Would you just shut up!"

You fall silent, your stomach tightening in fury.

"Thank you!" he sighs. When he speaks again, his voice is calmer. "Okay, I'm not sure what's happening here, but we've had this discussion before."
Irritation deepens your scowl. "Yeah, sure."

"I'm serious! I told you who I was and you choked me half to death."

"I think I'd remember something like that."

"I'm not..." Waylon gives a long pause, like he's deep in thought. His voice takes an odd route when he suggests, "Do you want to grab lunch or something?"

"You cannot be serious."

"I'm serious. I might be able to trigger your memory or something. You sound like you have no idea what I'm talking about, and it sounds like you're not kidding."

The idea of having a play date with the man that ruined everything for you— and many others, mindfully, given that he was associated with Murkoff and probably didn't leave the building with clean hands in the riot—doesn't sit very well with you. But if he's right, and there's something you're missing, it would make sense that you feel this off feeling in the pit of your gut. Like you should be way angrier than you really are. Like you should be handling this differently.

You finally give a defeated sigh. "Fine. Fine, fine, fine, fine. Whatever."

Waylon seems to perk up at your response. But if he's overjoyed at your acceptance of his invitation, he sure doesn't show any sign of it.

"Alright," he concedes. "How about that diner downtown?"

"You're going to have to be a little more specific than that."

He gives you the directions to the place, and you write it down on a piece of paper after he'd stated that he doesn't feel entirely comfortable with repeating anything like locations or names over the phone. You may not like the guy—hate him, honestly—but you suppose you could respect his wishes this one time.

"I'll see you then," Waylon says with finality.

"Wear something pretty," you mutter.

You hang up.

When Jackson comes home that night to ask about the missed calls left on the machine, you tell him that it was just a wrong number.

"So you relapsed."

"If you'd like to call complete amnesia a relapse, then yeah."

Holly looks deeply intrigued at the episode in question, rather than showing any hint of concern at your mental condition. She seems to want you to go into further detail of every possible thing you can recall.

She takes a second to write your remark down on her handy clipboard that's always pinned to her lap. Then she gives you another mechanical expression that is mentally instructed to press you forward; it's a habit of hers.
"Continue."

You stare back at her apathetically. "That's all I have."

She narrows her eyes. "That's not true."

"How would you know?" you snap impatiently. "It's not like you were there."

"You're restraining yourself again," Holly replies. "It's one of your tendencies when you don't want

to talk to me about an inner conflict of yours."

"Now you're just acting smart for the hell of it."

"Miles," she says sternly, and you shut up before you press her further. You're not in the mental state
to argue with her without raising your voice or bringing a violent hand to her face. Neither would be

polite.

Holly sighs. "Repeat the events. Give me the specific emotions you felt during each action."

Your mind trails to Waylon Park. If he really is who he says he is, why don't you remember him?

In the chunk of memory that you've lost, was that where you'd choked him?

Why do you not remember?

"Miles?"

You shake your head. "Hold on."

She seems surprised, but encourages your inner dissection of the memory. She probably thinks
you're doing what you're instructed, but it's hopeless to do such an action, you know. It's not like you
haven't tried beforehand; it's like an impossible barrier has been burrowed deep into your skull. Like

your mind isn't your own anymore.

A loud pitch of static gives a millisecond of a ring through your eardrums like you've struck a raw

nerve, and you hiss with pain as you bring a helpless hand to your ear.

You hear Holly's voice strain with shock at the event. "What happened?"

When you bring the hand back downward after squeezing the inner ear, as though to massage it, you
spot a dab of red on your index finger, where you'd pressed into the eardrum.

The concept of blood on your hands freezes you in place as you focus blindly on the droplet.

"I don't know."

It's then that whatever Holly's next plan of action was for the moment is interrupted with a small

knock at the door. You give a jolt at the sudden sound and stuff away any evidence of your small

bloodspill.

"Miss Stevens?" The woman from the front desk— the one with the family photos around her office
—peeks her head in.

Holly gives you a curious glare, as though she's intruding on something important. "What is it?"

The woman catches your eye. "Miles Upshur, right?" she hedges.
You frown. "Yeah. What?"

She opens the door a bit more and gestures you to follow her. "You have a call up front."

"I'm in the middle of a session," Holly intervenes firmly. You ignore her argument with the woman as you haul yourself off the couch.

"Miss Stevens, it will only be a moment," the woman pleads. Her eyes are wide with unknown concern. "It sounded important."

Uneasiness creeps up your spine. "Who's calling?"

She gives an apologetic glance over her shoulder as she leads you outside. You manage to catch yourself from throwing a smug grin in Holly's direction, instead shutting the door behind you.

"I didn't mean to interrupt," the woman says quickly. She sounds guilty, even though she shouldn't be; it's not like you care much for Holly's methods of recovery.

"Who's calling?" you repeat.

She leads you around the corner to where the front desk is placed. "A woman. I couldn't hear the name, but it sounded urgent."

You follow her steps in entering the small space, and she leaves you alone after picking up the wired phone beside her computer and handing it to you.

Cautiously, you bring the phone to your ear, unsure of who could be on the other end of the line.

"Hello?"

"Miles!" The voice belongs to Toria. "Thank heavens, I thought I'd never find you."

She sounds like her voice is creeping along the lines of desperation. Your mind immediately falters at the thought of something being wrong with Chara.

Oh no. That's what it is, isn't it?

You panic.

"What's wrong?" you ask in alarm.

Toria responds quickly. "It's Chara."

Your heart is beating harshly against your chest. "What happened? Are they hurt? Are they okay?"

"Hold on," Toria reassures you, despite sounding concerned herself. "Chara is safe. They had a...a panic attack at school today. We're in the office now, waiting for them."

She hesitates momentarily. "They won't talk to anyone."

"Well if they're like that, then why don't you just send them home?"

"They want to talk to you."

It's surprise that catches you first, then guilt, then skepticism. Toria is obviously the superior one here when it comes to confronting a lot of Chara's needs and troubles; what in her right mind makes her
think that you're just as capable as her to help them? You'd only make things worse.

"I..." Words fail you.

"I offered to call you for them, but they want to see you in person," Toria continues, her voice burdened with concern for her child.

"What...I...I don't understand." God, you sound so stupid right now.

"Please," she begs. "They're so distraught. I'll take anything to calm them down."

You can't. You're horrible with kids. You should've just said goodbye to the kid a long time ago, and now look at the situation you're in.

Does Chara really think you can help them? Do they even know how horrible you are with children — and people in general?

You should hang up right now. Holly will be waiting...

"...Okay."

Toria sighs in relief. "Thank you. We're at the junior high. Do you know where that is?"

You do. "Yes."

"Wonderful. See you soon."

The phone clicks.

You're in an odd trance now, placing down the phone in a mandatory fashion. *What the hell have you just agreed to?*

The woman peeks around the corner, looking worried at your offset reaction. "Is everything alright?" she asks gently.

Then your body shifts into overdrive, your heart thudding with some newfound determination. You have a task ahead of you.

You turn to the woman. "I'm stepping out."

Her eyes widen with curiosity. "Oh. Um, okay? I'll inform Holly then."

You're not listening. You're already out the door.

Chapter End Notes

Going off on a minor rabbit trail here just to establish some ground rules in Miles's relationship with Chara. Which is always a pleasure to write let me tell you

Goat mom continues to be the only voice of reason within this train wreck

Chapter name from song *Soldier's Daughter* by Jhameel (a wonderful tune to play when discussing these two broken/awful human beings trying to find a home in each
other)
without you, i am surely the last of our kind

Chapter Summary

Alt: 'You catch me when I'm falling, sometimes I wish you wouldn't. I can't tell if I'm learning'

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The city bus is surprisingly close to the school's location. It's centered near the city (as it should be), with spots of neighborhoods sheltering the building while still allowing taxis and buses and other various forms of transportation to run along the school's streets. A city bus stop is located right across the street; you're not sure whether that's more convenient or dangerous for it to be so close to school properly.

You're able to pick your way around the crossing points and parked cars with ease; it's not like you're so helpless in this situation that you don't even know how a public school functions.

Upon entering the building from the front, you gain directions to the office from a passing teacher and walk in unannounced and feeling very, very unwelcome.

The place is a mess, with supervisors and teachers sheltering Toria and Aegros along the ends of the walls, comforting the two that seem distraught on the current condition of their child. You're close to just stepping back out and forgetting the whole thing when Toria catches your eye.

Her eyes widen with some form of relief and picks her way around the staff to greet you. "Thank goodness," she breathes, confronting you with a light hug that you can barely take into account amidst your swirling panic.

She pulls away and begins to lead you to another doorway. A couple of staff members join you alongside. "Chara is in the back office."

A man crawls up from behind to take over for Toria in guiding you through a series of hallways to the back office before stopping at a wooden door, where there's a piece of paper blockading the small window where you can peek in. Toria has already fallen backward and has begun to talk to the staff again in hushed tones.

"If you have trouble, just come outside and we'll handle the rest," the man says with a decisive nod.

You glare at him unpleasantly. "This is a child, not a rabid dog."

He stammers suddenly, backtracking himself. "Oh, that's not what I—"

"I'll be fine," you retort, pushing the door open and closing it behind you swiftly to prove your point.

The room is white and empty, save for a file cabinet stuffed in the corner and some poster taped on the wall promoting the important of education. In the center is a small table with three chairs stacked around it, with Chara occupying one of the chairs.
They're curled into themselves, their arms firmly locked around their legs and their hand buried in their knees. They haven't moved as you gently shut the door to announce your presence.

Slowly, you adjust one of the chairs closer to them and settle yourself down. Concern has washed your brain of any guilt or cumbersome thought you might have originally carried upon gaining responsibility for Chara's wellbeing.

"Kid?" Your voice is soft and bounces along the empty walls.

No response.

You reach forward tentatively; you know Chara is sensitive about touching, so you give the smallest nudge on their shoulder.

They perk up slightly, seeming to glance at you through their messy hair.

"Hey," you murmur.

Chara lifts their head ever so slightly, giving you a small impression of their current facial condition. Their face is glossy and red, their eyes dangerously glazed over.

They give a wet sniff. "Hi," they croak, in a voice that could barely be even registered as a whisper.

A warmth floods your chest at their reply; they're so tiny and small in this moment, who would ever consider breaking them like this?

Keeping your hand in Chara's sight, you reach out to settle on their knee, giving it a small rub with your thumb. You're not sure if you're allowed to touch their face yet, so you don't.

"What happened?" you ask, keeping your voice low and gentle.

Chara sits up a bit more to adjust their position, crossing their arms and placing them on their knees to support leaning their head on. By now you've retracted your arm and instead just lean forward to give the kid a proper listen.

"Nothing," they whisper.

You frown. "Doesn't seem like nothing."

They give a shaky sigh, sniffing again. Their eyes are glistening with the threat of more tears. "It's stupid." They avoid eye contact with you.

"It's not stupid," you protest. Then you pause thoughtfully. "Did you think you were back in the asylum again?"

Chara's eyes begin to blur and they lower their head back into their knees.

"It's okay," you reassure them. "It happens to me too."

They perk up again and you can catch a glimpse of one of their eyes from beneath a layer of hair. "Really?"

You nod solemnly. "It can be bad. I think about all the bad things, and the bad people in there."

"Like who?"
You lean back to think for a minute while attempting to avoid angering your brain again. "Like Father Martin, and Trager, and Walker."

"What about Walrider?"

It's like the kid touched something sensitive, making your chest give an unnerving pang at the mention of the demon. It almost threatens you of deriving your voice.

"Especially him," you manage to choke.

Chara lifts their head again; you can catch a glimpse of a new trail of tears slipping down their swollen cheeks.

"Do you think about the doctors?" they wimper.

You blink. "The doctors at Murkoff?"

"Yeah..."

"Is that what you think about?"

Chara hesitates physically, and their bottom lip begins to waver with the threat of another sob.

Your brain short-circuits.

"It's okay," you say again, reaching forward and managing to catch a falling tear with your thumb. You gently cusp their cheek, and you're surprised to feel Chara relax at the touch. They even reach up with a free hand to grab hold of your wrist and keep it steady on their sticky face.

"It's really okay," you promise.

Chara sniffs. "No, it's not," they mumble thickly.

You give a deep frown that they don't catch, since their gaze keeps flickering away from your own.

"It's not okay what happened," you agree. "But you're okay now."

"I hate school."

You almost laugh. "I figured."

Chara melts their stiff figure and sets their legs back on the floor, looking down on them tentatively. They release your hand in the process, so you bring it back down to your side, harmless.

Then they get up and drop themselves down in your lap with a decisive huff. You didn't expect the sudden pressure near your groin area, and you give a pained grunt as they wrap their arms around your stomach.

"Jesus," you wheeze. "What are they feeding you?"

The little laugh you receive makes the whole trip worth it.

You reciprocate the gesture by reaching your arms down and drawing them closer to your chest, resting your chin on the top of their forehead.

They stay like that for a while, with only a few tiny snuffles to accompany the growing silence. You
relish in what you assume to be a victory on both sides of the party.

You don't understand. They're so small and vulnerable; why are the teachers treating them like an unstable mutt?

You have a feeling you know exactly why.

Then Chara gives your abdomen a squeeze. "Thanks for coming," they murmur. "I knew you would."

They knew you'd take a moment out of your day to come and assist them with something. That seems like a task for Toria, or Aegros. Just some form of guardianship over them. To them, you're reliable. You're safe.

You can't believe they're so oblivious as to how you really are.

Chara pulls away eventually; they clasp your hands in between their face, giving you a start. Their hands trail up to the curls of hair near your ears, and they give you a funny look amidst their dried tears and reddened face.

"Yikes," they remark. "Have you considered a haircut recently?"

You give them a displeased blink. "I'm really glad I came all this way to be criticized by a twelve-year old about my hair."

Chara stifles a smirk and begins to reach up near your forehead, giving your hair a ruffle. "It's long," they comment.

They have a point, unfortunately. You don't remember the last time you'd given your hair a decent trimming, save for a couple of times when you'd taken matters into your own hands, but it always turned out pretty sloppy. That was back when you were still allowed around sharp objects.

You lower your gaze to their shoulders, where their hair is just beginning to cover the tops of them. "So is yours," you reply.

Chara frowns as they bring their hands down to clutch the ends of their hair, clenching them in fists with embarrassment.

"I know," they mumble unhappily. "I'm going to have to cut it soon."

"Why?" you ask.

Their grip tightens on the tresses, making their knuckles white. "I hate long hair," they seethe unpleasantly, with their face turning dark and dangerous.

"Whoa, hey," you caution, reaching for their hands and retracting them from near their face. You keep the hands safely in your own, and their fingers eventually pry away from the last strands.

"Hey," you repeat, "If you don't want long hair, you don't have to have long hair. Nothing wrong with that."

Chara is oddly silent, then gives the smallest, "Really?"

You almost visibly start at their sudden revelation on this matter. "Who's been telling you otherwise?" you ask, surprised.
They sniff. "No one..."

That's not true, but you don't say anything as Chara eventually retracts your hold on their hands to bring them down to their lap.

"I want to be out of this room," they mumble suddenly.

Something overtakes you—maybe sympathy, maybe the same desire to exit a white-walled facility—and you scoop the kid properly into your hold as you stand up and adjust them in your arms.

"Fuck school," you sigh. "Let's get you out of here."

Chara gives an airy laugh before locking their arms around your neck. "Okay," they murmur, but there's a concealed smile in their tone.

You open the door to come face first with one of the staff members. He looks worried, then confused when he spots Chara in your arms.

"Don't worry," you tell him. "They didn't bite any vital veins or body parts."

You hear Chara give a small chuckle in your throat to accommodate your scathing humor; the man gives a hesitant step backward to let you pass, avoiding your eye contact.

You walk back to where Toria and Aegros are waiting patiently, and they immediately rush towards you when they see their child in your hold.

They both look concerned before you explain, "Everything's fine. Just take them home."


Toria steps forward, and automatically you find yourself lowering Chara back into the floor, and they let go albeit reluctantly. They turn to look at Toria, who gives them a sad smile.

"Hello, my child," she says warmly. Then she reaches forward slowly to smooth Chara's hair. "Are you feeling better?"

They pause before replying quietly, "A little."

Aegros joins his wife and hooks an affectionate arm around her waist as he smiles down at Chara. "Well, 'a little', is much better than 'not at all', is it not?"

Chara finds a sudden interest in the floor between their feet. "Yes."

Then they turn back to you and reach out for your hand. They look up at you sadly. "You're leaving, aren't you?" they ask.

Their tone is horribly feeble, ripping their stronger characteristics from their body and leaving a frail child. A sight you get extremely uneasy seeing.

You delay explicitly at their hold on your hand, ignoring Toria and Aegros's gazes, in fear of spotting confusion or irritation, maybe even impatience. Chara's eyes are still shining from crying.

"I..." you trail off, then give a small cough and continue. "I guess I don't have to, if you want."

You're awkward and on the spot, but you avoid shuffling your feet like a child. When you dare to
glance back up at Chara's foster parents, both seem to have an expression of...maybe not happy. Maybe approval, at best.

You look at Toria. "I can...I guess I can take them for ice cream or something," you stammer uncomfortably.

Toria seems to think for a moment before bending down to confront Chara kindly, giving them a supportive smile. "Would you like to go with Miles to get something to eat?" she asks gently.

Chara turns back to you, like they're in a state of skepticism upon seeing you want to take them anywhere. You realize that you and Chara have never truly interacted, not alone in public, at least. You wouldn't count when you had a snack with them in the hospital's cafeteria.

Do you even know this kid at all?

But you give Chara a nod of approval, and they turn back to their foster mother, their fingers knotted into their clothing.

"O-okay," they murmur, still sounding uneasy. "I guess that's alright."

Aegros gives Chara an encouraging pat on their shoulder as his wife rejoins him. He looks at you expectantly. "Just call us whenever you want to bring them home."

"Although around two or before then would be preferable," Toria adds. "We don't want them falling behind on their homework."

You feel a tiny weight press into your side, and you place your hand tentatively on Chara's head.

"We won't be out long," you reply steadily, although at this point you're making up rules and regulations as you talk. You have to look like you know a thing or two, at the very least, about childcare.

"Splendid," Toria cheers, with a sudden twinkle in her eye.

You blink. "You're not going to ask anything important?"

Aegros gives you a confused glance. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," you waver, "I'm...taking care of your child."

"For an hour or two," Toria chimes in, but her expression has lifted into the similar sort of amusement you've seen cross her face before, when you were discussing the concept of adopting Chara as a child.

"We trust you," her husband answers, his voice deepened with a sincere sense of honesty that makes you almost touched. But then a rush of cold stiffens your stomach; a familiar emotion that comes with caring for Chara.

Toria and Aegros say quick goodbyes to their child before leaving you both alone, as they trudge up to where they can receive Chara's homework from classes they're currently missing.

You're left alone with the kid, for a first time in a long while.

Chara suddenly rolls their eyes at you, their attitude shifting into a more prominent level of confidence. "God, you're such an imbecile."
You frown at them. "Excuse me?"

They take a sudden dainty pose, adopting an overdramatic air and plastering a fake look of horror for exaggeration. "My name is Miles Upshur and I have no clue how to take care of myself, let alone children. Kids make me nervous and I wouldn't know how to talk to one if you paid me! I have to receive constant validation that I'm handling one properly!"

Their imitation is taunting, but harmless. Their eyes sparkle with amusement all the while.

Yet you give them an arduous stare regardless. "I don't sound like that."

Chara gives a smile. "You get my point," they tease, giving you a light punch on the jacket playfully. "You're so nervous around me! It's weird."

*They noticed?*

"I haven't tried to be," you lie.

They look like they don't believe you for a second, and you have to stop yourself from squirming under their probing stare before eventually they flick their eyes away with a shrug.

"Maybe it's just me," they sigh. Before you can invent an appropriate answer, Chara continues, "Well, I'm not really that hungry anyway."

You give a helpless frown. "Well, is there somewhere you want to go?"

Chara becomes skeptical on replying, but eventually they reward your question with a side smile.

"Actually, there is," they say smoothly.

- You pretend to pluck a book from the shelf with a sudden interest, but once you get a better view of the cover you find yourself placing the novel back between where you'd found it.

It's a warm setting, with a nice atmosphere that doesn't have you immediately shrinking with interior discomfort. A lot of people have melted off into private corners to skim a page or two and see if they want to purchase the novel in question. Below you is the faint smell of coffee grounds, populated by several customers sipping cappuccinos while typing away at a computer.

It's very hipster-orientated, you decide. You prefer bookstores that just provide books, rather than some sort of calming experience of drinks and movies (which are being sold on the farthest shelves). Some areas of the place are just selling merchandise from television shows or comics rather than books. It's not your cup of tea, to say the least. Too many people, too many advertisements.

But still, Chara is having fun, so you can tolerate it for now.

You last spotted them poking around the young adult section, but eventually you see them drifting into more classical novels, maybe some that you might've read a while back. Since then, they've taken a special eye on some of the novels shoved into the cornered shelves, where many books are sent back to rot.

Chara's settled into a bean bag that's been squished along the back wall for extra comfort, surrounded by a handful of lengthy books that they must be planning to get to at some point. You find yourself smiling in amusement at their tranquil posture, slumped heavily against the wall and far along in one
of the books they've picked out.

You walk over casually to check in on them. "Found a few you like?" you ask, pointedly glancing at the tiny pile around their bean bag.

Chara looks up at you with a registered blink, like you've snapped them out of a trance. "Huh?"

You tug back an amused chuckle. "You're a bit of a bookworm, I've noticed," you remark airily.

They almost seem a bit ashamed, but in an amused sense, glancing down at their book in their hands with a barely-oppressed smile teasing the corner of their mouth.

"Guilty," they murmur lowly. Then they look back up at you with a sparkle of glee. "Reading is just...really fun."

You kneel down to get a look at some of the titles. A few have intelligible wording you wouldn't expect Chara to find interest in, and you physically raise your expression in surprise.

"Didn't know you liked to read big books like this," you say, picking up one of said novels and giving it a quick scan.

Chara shrugs. "A lot of people don't."

Upon inspecting the text with the quickness of a journalist, you nearly sputter as you approach a fairly suggestive scene in the story. "No, not this one," you say abruptly, snapping it shut.

Chara frowns in disappointment. "Why not?"

You slide the book near you so that you remember to put it back properly later. "Adult content. Not for your age," you explain.

You're given a sudden scoff. "I survived an asylum, I can handle whatever it is!"

When you turn in astonishment at Chara's bitter outburst, you see their face take a twist in expression and watching their eyes dart every which way and that, like they're soon to be caught by a sinister being.

Then they sink into their bean bag with a wave of dismay. "Sorry," they mutter.

You blink in surprise. Chara's candid statement of clarifying that you both had escaped an asylum alive makes you feel eerie in a way you can't pinpoint appropriately.

You lean back against the wall with a long exhale through your nose, crossing your arms in thought.

"Do you think about that a lot?" you ask, breaking the silence.

Chara fingers at one of the dog ears left behind on the book from a previous reader, their eyes dark.

"All the time," they say quietly. Then they look at you firmly. "Do you?"

You don't think too hard on it. "Of course."

They nod and flick back to occupying their hands in turning the pages this way and that. It's a compulsive method that is all too familiar for you to make any concerned comment about it; personally, you've grown to thumbing at appendages that are no longer on your hands for alleviation during anxiety.
"I don't feel real sometimes," Chara admits, their tone flat. "I feel like I don't deserve to be away from everything from...that place. I don't deserve to be..."

They pause, for lack of better wording, and instead make a waving gesture to the bookstore as a whole, drawing spotlight to the people idling along the shelves, minding their business.

"...Here," they finish. "I shouldn't be here."

You’re about to make a shallow protest, one that an average person is sure to telling a grieving child. You'd say something like, *it's okay, of course you deserve to be here, why wouldn't you?* You'd scoop them up and give them food to calm their racing thoughts and return them to their proper parents—the ones who can care for their trauma better than you ever will.

Instead, you say, "Look around."

Chara perks up. "What?"

You continue with a glance behind you to emphasize, "Look around and see how many people there are here."

They look at you, baffled, before giving a small attempt to do as you instructed before drawling, "Um, I don't know. A good amount?"

You nod. "And none of them have shit on what you've gone through."

When Chara doesn't seem to register your point immediately, you explain, "You have every right to feel like you don't belong here or anywhere. Do you know what twelve-year olds are known for?"

They shake their head.

"Twelve-year olds are known for griping to their parents about god-knows-what, eating too much, and playing games all day. Do you want to know what they're *not* known for?"

Chara doesn't answer.

"They're not known for living in a fucked up mental asylum with employees who were performing experiments on their patients, and escaping with all their limbs still intact."

"So what?" Chara sighs, looking down at their book, with their hands glued to the pages. "I get it, I'm special. But I don't belong anywhere...I'm weird."

You hold a frown for a long while, relishing in the awful silence that follows their statement.

Then you say defeatedly, "You and me both."

Chara gives you a glance, and they straighten upwards to give you a long stare with emotions so thick and incomprehensible that you don't bother to dissect every feeling that flashes across their eyes that are much, much too old for their age.

"We're both just messed up weirdos, aren't we?" they say cynically.

You don't have a positive answer for it, so you just nod pathetically, lowering your head. "Yeah, we are," you murmur.

Chara suddenly gives a sad smile, small and helpless against the storm of emotions that still have their face darkened.
"There's not a lot anybody could say to fix it anyway," they shrug. "It's not anybody's fault."

"It's Murkoff's fault," you argue coldly, with a burst of anger granting you a new energy that stirs in your chest. The fluorescent light above you hums with the need for a new light pretty soon, and you find the noise oddly enticing in the time period. It further envokes your fury.

Chara hesitates before giving a reluctant, "It is."

Then you're quiet.

You feel like you've ruined something precious and innocent. Snatched it up and tore it to pieces with your logical senses, too old for a child to comprehend. Toria and Aegros would know what to say; they would've soothed Chara's sadness a long time ago into this conversation, wouldn't they?

Chara sighs, shutting their book and setting it alongside the others. They lean back into the bean bag and set their hands in their laps; similar to Toria's sitting position, you recall.

"There's a lot you probably don't know about me," Chara begins slowly. "I guess we really don't know that much about each other."

You simmer in their complex statement and have to conclude their theory with a reluctant nod.

"I guess not," you reply, and you surprise yourself with a tinge of sadness that touches your tone.

Chara doesn't meet your eyes for a while, lost in thought, before they stare back up at you with a determined gleam that takes you off guard.

"What's your favorite food?" they ask suddenly.

You have to think for a second, considering that you haven't thought about your simple pleasures in a long while.

"Shepard's pie," you decide. "You?"

They don't have to take as much time to ponder as you did. "Chocolate. Lots and lots of chocolate."

You reflect a moment, seeing as their mood lightened a little. Then you ask, "What's your favorite animal?"

Chara sits back to relax in their bean bag, thinking harder than usual. They scrunch their face with consideration before deciding, "Probably dogs."


The atmosphere softens as you see Chara grab the book they were originally reading and pick up where they'd left off.

Seeing them fairly satisfied, you haul yourself back up off your feet. "I'm going to get a coffee from downstairs," you declare. "Do you want anything?"

Chara has already delved back into their fantasies and don't dare to pry their eyes away from the pages. "Maybe a hot chocolate," they say absentmindedly.

You head downstairs, finding yourself reluctant to leave Chara by themselves in a public setting. You've never witnessed them interacting in areas outside of hospitals or houses; this is all new territory for you, and you're not sure how to feel about it yet.
When you return with the desired order, you sit against the wall with a geographer magazine and hand Chara their hot chocolate, which they reward you with bright eyes and a delighted thanks. You both relax in that corner for a while, simply sipping and reading; you can't recall the last time you've felt that comfortable.

It's an hour later that you purchase the book Chara was reading and head out the door.

"So that whistleblower decided to give me a call," you say. It's a thought that's been repeatedly thumping on your mind, ever since you'd left the bookstore.

Chara halts their temporary stroll along the edges of the sidewalk to give you a baffled glance.

"A what?"

"A whistleblower," you clarify; although you're not sure why you wished to share this with a child, you feel that it's somewhat their business in a way you can't understand.

You receive a blank stare, so you continue, "It's someone that rats out a company if something bad is going on."

Chara's face lifts with recognition. "Oh, okay." Then they continue balancing on a piece of wood blocking the park's grass from the cement. "What does that have to do with anything, though?"

You hesitate. "Well, a whistleblower emailed me what was happening at Mount Massive, and—"

"Ohhh!" Chara's surprised breath makes you halt. They look at you with a face of sudden acknowledgment. "Is that what made you come to the asylum?"

You nod, impressed by their ability to catch on. "Yeah."

Chara gives a hum and returns to their sauntering, looking internally puzzled by something.

You frown. "Something wrong?"

They jump down from the wood and join you as the park you're walking in becomes inhabited by more trees up ahead, sheltering the cloudy sky from view.

"Well, the whistleblower made you go through all those bad things," Chara explains skeptically. "But..."

They look up as your pathway is shadowed by the trees above you, with bony limbs housing promising buds along the ends. A swift chill assures you that winter is still here, but the greenery above declares that the cold is almost done.

"But you would have never met me," Chara murmurs, looking back down at the concrete below. They kick a boulder in their path. "And I know that's...selfish. But, it's true."

You never thought of it like that.

It makes your stomach churn with this newfound understanding of the situation you'd been forcibly placed in. What would have happened to Chara if you hadn't come in? ...Wouldn't they have found the key card anyway? Wouldn't they have escaped regardless? They're smart, they never needed you.
All you ever accomplished from going to that stupid asylum was making everything ten times worse.

A sharp buzz in your right ear has you emitting a hiss as your emotions simmer back down, almost mandatorily, into the back of your brain.

Chara looks at you worriedly. "Are you okay?"

You dab your ear to reassure yourself that you're not bleeding again, in fear of repeating whatever that last episode with Holly was.

"I'm fine," you promise Chara, more kindly than you would ever informed Holly or Jackson.

They give a tight smile that's obviously waned. They look forward to where the sidewalk is curving to a thin river babbling below a slope.

"Sorry, that was dumb," they sigh.

You turn to them sharply. "It's not," you inform them. You wish they would stop doing that to themselves.

"I guess I wouldn't know what to say to the whistleblower guy," they continue. "I could yell at him and kick his shin—"

They stop. "But I could also thank him for making you come there and...y'know, find me."

You fold your lips tightly together, feeling your fingers rub together to accommodate for your two missing ones.

Chara gives you a tug on your sleeve. You look down at them as they seem to squirm under your stare.

"I guess what I'm trying to say is I know you're mad as hell, but I'm glad about...you know, meeting you and stuff."

Then they're quiet, and they rush off to observe the water below and crouch beside the riverbed.

You watch them poke at the water, forming ripples amongst the constant flow of the river. Ever-changing as it hits the rocks, then the sand along the edge, then flooding back into the tiny waterfall, nonexistent again.

It soothes you to watch the water's movement, and you drift towards the riverbed where Chara is sitting. You admire the glistening of the creek with your hands in your pockets, listening to the dripping of the water merging together.

You find yourself saying, "Are you ready to go home?"

Chara shakes their head, their eyes glued to their wavering reflection. They wave their hands around in the water, mesmerized by the ripples that follow.

"Not yet," they reply. "A few more minutes."

You grant them such, finding the constant noise of the river hypnotizing, and you stand in silence.

When you drop Chara back off at their house, Asriel and Frisk are kneeling by the doorstep, drawing
on the sidewalk leading up to their house with colorful chalk.

Asriel perks up as you approach him, abandoning his work on a pink-colored flower with his attention now fixated on Chara.

"Howdy Chara!" he beams, and Frisk looks up to offer them a wave.

Chara looks uncomfortable for the smallest of seconds before they release themselves from your side and walk forward.

"Hi," they greet steadily. Then they peer down at the piles of chalk beside their friends. "What are you doing?"

"Playing with chalk," Asriel answers with a proud grin, pointing to his latest masterpiece. "Do you want to draw something?"

Chara hesitates, looking like bouncing their options in their head for a while, like teasing a loose tooth, before eventually reaching down to grab a blue piece of chalk. They sit on their knees beside Frisk, pondering on what they should create.

You're about to leave when Asriel properly acknowledges your presence. "Oh, it's you!" he exclaims, sounding jubilant to see you again. "The fingers guy!"

"Az, he's got a name," Chara scoffs, but their face looks bemused.

"They're not wrong," you say, somewhat frustrated but not entirely, and saunter closer to give the boy a proper handshake.

He returns your gesture with a hearty slap of his palm meeting yours and a small smile. "Asriel Dreemurr," he tells you politely.

"Miles Upshur," you reply, giving a respectful shake between you both before releasing your hand from the grasp. He has a similar meaty grip, like his father, and you hate to say that it's oddly intimidating.

"Well, I'm glad we've all introduced each other," Chara interrupts. Then they turn to you expectantly. "Do you have my book?"

"Oh!" You rummage around in your pocket for a second before pulling out a book wrapped in a plastic bag. You hand it to them. "Here."

"Thanks," they say kindly, and then they do something surprising. Setting down their piece of unused chalk, Chara switches over to Frisk and gives them the book instead.

"Here, I think you'd like it," they say with a smile. Frisk sits up to inspect the novel, flipping the pages with a newfound interest.

They set the book down temporarily to sign a quick, Thank you.

"No problem," Chara replies airily. "I read a little of it already, it's about a girl who—"

"What the hell just happened?" you break in, astounded by Chara's action. You give them a raised brow. "I thought you wanted that book."

Chara shrugs, looking slightly apologetic. "I told you I don't like it when people give me gifts. But I have no problem with people buying other people nice things."
Even Frisk looks a bit baffled. They sign something quickly in Chara's direction that you can't catch.

Chara brushes away whatever their question was. "I'll just borrow it from you. I don't mind borrowing things."

You find yourself exchanging a glance with Asriel, who turns to Chara and comments, "You're weird."

The brute remark has you choking back a huff of laughter. The kid is an odd one, yes, but they mean no harm. Maybe they just hate owning things anyway, and they scavenge for their own loopholes. Maybe they just became used to something bad, like Toria said, regarding gift-giving. You wouldn't be surprised if that were a case in point.

You sigh. "Well, I guess I better go then."

Chara looks upset at your statement, but they seem more understanding than before and give you a nod.

"Thanks again for coming and...everything," they say shyly.

Even Asriel and Frisk seem disappointed in your departure. "Aww! Leaving so soon?" Asriel whines.

You give him a helpless shrug, still regarding your discomfort around children of any kind. Just communicating with them makes you edgy.

"I have to head back home," you explain, holding back an inappropriate sharp comment about how you're sure to be chewed out upon returning when Jackson discovers that you ditched another therapy session.

Asriel gives you a frown, tightened with dismay, before murmuring, "Alright, well, I'm sure Mom will want to say thank you."

You hold a hand in defense. "She doesn't have to," you protest. "It's fine."

Frisk waves you a timid goodbye, and Asriel gives you a short farewell before finding captivity in finishing his chalk drawing.

Chara gets up abruptly from off the sidewalk as you head back down the steps to find the bus stop you'd just walked a good distance from. You feel a sudden weight cling to your back that emits a small grunt of shock before you can recall properly that there's no harm in the action.

"Thank you," Chara repeats sincerely, muffling their voice into your jacket.

You twist around, feeling uncharacteristically touched, and sweep them into a short but firm hug.

You say nothing, but you depart by ruffling their hair and heading back to the bus stop. The multiple goodbyes that follow solely emit from Asriel, but you feel Chara— and perhaps Frisk—sending you a silent note of appreciation.

The sky is transitioning into a dim pink, flattering on the eyes, and you regard how late it is with nothing but numbed apathy. It's late; you should have been home hours ago. Jackson will have your head.

Oh well.
You can't say you find any victory for what you've accomplished today— if you can even call it accomplishment. The more you try to escape Chara's grasp, the harder it is for the both of you to move on.

Maybe there's a purpose, or maybe it's just life's way of mocking you for some complex punishment you deserve. You don't know.

Chara still needs you. God help yourself but you're beginning to wonder if you need them just as much.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter name from song "Dream State..." by Lucy Dacus

Also there is a little art for this fic???? I am Blessed,,,, couldn't establish a proper link to the art and I didn't want to upload it without permission for shame but thank user Komaru because they are wonderful and blessed and deserve great things
you've long seen your downfall spelled out in another's bones

Chapter Summary

Alt: The Awkward™ Chapter featuring arguments, bad conversation starters, and very horrible diner hangouts with people that our hero feels dangerously indifferent to hurting

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dull rhythm in your brain. Like a ringing, or a buzzing. Somewhere in between. It's nothing but noise. Lots and lots and lots of noise.

Muted noise. Black and buzzing like bees.

"Is he conscious?"

Voices. Like noise and static and bees.

"Dammit, Woode. Not enough anesthetic. He's conscious."

Two voices. Too voices. Like bees.

"He's not dangerous, is he?"

"We've gotten him drugged enough. He shouldn't have any other purpose for waking except to exercise his vision."

Danger.

Dangerous.

There's a cold thing on your arms, your limbs, everywhere. Cold and stiff. Pressing against your chest and arms and legs.

"He's struggling."

"He's no danger, Woode. Look at him, can barely summon a proper swarm."


"Put him under again. We have no need for interrogation."

"Do you have his personal information?"

"Miles Upshur, male, twenty-six. Family contacts and phone numbers in here too."

"I don't think this is a good idea."

A screaming is filling your throat. Pins and needles in your limbs. Actual pins and needles.
"No one will get suspicious under proper techniques. We should be fine."

"And if we're not?"

"He went mad from his traumatic stress and took a self-inflicted bullet in the head. It's really not rocket science."

A liquid is pumping into your limbs.

"Sir, he's growing more aware."

"Garant, the least he can do is hear our voices. His eyes aren't adjusted properly and he looks close to death. We're fine."

White white white red noise black buzzing buzz buzz bees

Something on your forehead.

"Knock him out. Continuing Project Alp dissection test."

"What stage is he?"

"Not a healthy one. Not ready to release yet."

"How do we explain his current condition then?"

"Say he's still recovering from horrible wounds, so we've labeled him in intensive care."

"And if his family calls?"

"Take it to voicemail."

"Right."

More liquid in your bloodstream. Moving, wriggling, squirming. Making your head lighter than air.

"And the girl?"

"A tougher nut to crack. Social Services will have our necks."

"But we'll retrieve her, correct?"

A voice. Deep and mechanic. Searching in the static harder and harder as you slip away into nothingness.

"That's the idea."

Then there's a sharp echo, harsher than the other voices, chorusing through your bloodstream and into your ribcage.

**Stay unconscious, Host. Stay unconscious. Stay unconscious. Stay unconscious.**

**Stay unconscious...**

The world goes dark.
Your eyes open to a blurry room you don't immediately recognize is your bedroom.

You give a sleepy hiss as you adjust your body to flip towards the ceiling, bringing a hand to your face and squeezing at the flesh firmly to wake yourself up.

Your head is pounding, like the fuzzy dream you've just experienced was vibrant and heart-wrenching. It had an odd tenor all the while, which sticks to you like a nasty taste in your mouth.

As you adjust yourself properly, there's a gentle knock at the door. You're not conscious enough for your eardrums to immediately assume the sudden noise is equivalent to danger.

When you don't answer, still rubbing your hair and face, the door clicks open and a tentative head pokes out from the hallway. Jackson.

"Breakfast," he informs you.

You don't give him an answer straight away, since you're preoccupied with your hands smothering your face. Eventually you mutter a small "okay" to get him to leave.

He says nothing else as he closes the door.

Jackson has you on house arrest now, with an exception being tomorrow, when you're scheduled to attend lunch with Waylon Park to get some answers.

As expected, Holly called him about your self-proclaimed early release on the therapy session yesterday. And as expected, you were not greeted amiably when you walked in the door.

Jackson approached you with crossed arms and began to give you another one of his infamous lectures about how Holly and others are just trying to help and you shouldn't walk out on an appointment and what the hell were you thinking. That sort of thing.

You lied and said the call was from your mother who wanted to meet up with you somewhere. Jackson didn't make a comment, but you saw how rigid his posture was, how stern his eyes were. There's no way you'd be pulling something like that anytime soon.

The only excuse being Waylon Park, which eventually you had to come clean about. Jackson seemed surprised as well that the man who ruined your life and sanity decided to just give you a casual phone call, instead of a formal greeting. You pretended not to care as much, and he gave you a free pass in letting you head out while promising to remain neutral on the whereabouts of Park, just in case. It's the least you can do.

But outside of that, you're forbidden from going out unsupervised, unless for a doctor appointment or therapy session. You have to head to some doctor in about a week or two for a daily check-up on your systems. Holly had been taking a couple of notes on your medication status (or as many notes as you allowed her to take); she hasn't made any comment outside of a disinterested hum that was followed by the click of a pen; you're not sure if that's good news or bad news, and at this point you're scared to ask.

Your joints creak with sleep as you adjust yourself to your feet, ignoring the dim whiplash of your lightheaded condition. Might as well just see if there's anything you can clean around the house. Maybe even catch up on your email, if you're bored enough.

You creep into the kitchen like a zombie, paying mind to Jackson's cooking. The stove sizzles with the promise of bacon, and you spot him handling a plate of freshly-scrambled eggs with meticulous care.
It's been a good couple of weeks for you to have grown accustomed to Jackson's constant desire to be in the kitchen, cooking up who-knows-what just for the need to get his hands on culinary equipment. It's intriguing to watch him transcend into this different state of mind that's unknown to you. He's glued to this deep commitment you can only label as passion; maybe you look like that when you're working on your own job.

When he spots his miniature audience, he snaps his attention immediately away from the eggs to give you a bright gaze. He still seems a bit distant from you, but his approach is friendly, nonetheless.

"Bacon is ready," he tells you.

You say nothing, navigating around his work to snatch a slice from off the greasy plate and popping it into your mouth. It's crunchy, yet savory. You'd be lying if you said Jackson wasn't that great of a cook.

"Schedule for today?" Jackson asks suddenly.

You feel like he's taunting you for a split second, and you whip around to offer a sharp remark on his courage before he hastily explains, "I know you're under temporary house arrest, but that doesn't mean you can't be productive."

You narrow your eyes unpleasantly. "Is that the plan?"

He shrugs. "I know that procrastination will probably make you feel worse more than anything."

"So do you want me to do some housecleaning, or massage your feet, or...?"

Jackson gives a sigh. "Well, a massage wouldn't hurt," he murmurs wistfully. Luckily, he adds in a teasing undertone, "I'm kidding. What you do for the rest of the day is up to you."

You don't ponder hard; your brain is hurting enough as is. "I'll just sleep."

"And...?" Jackson prompts patiently.

"And that's it," you finish, grabbing another slice of bacon.

He doesn't seem pleased at your plans. "You've been sleeping an awful lot lately," he remarks, but his voice seems to toss a silent question in your direction; a question you're not entirely sure of the purpose for.

You give an apathetic half-shrug as you crunch down your bacon slice and reach for the door of the fridge to grab a drink.

"Maybe it's a side effect of the medicine," you mutter carelessly. "I don't know."

You didn't pay much attention to what you'd implied; so when you close the fridge door, holding a carton of orange juice, you're surprised to see Jackson holding a concerned gaze.

You raise a brow at his expression. "What?"

He doesn't meet your eyes as his face becomes dark with a sudden concentration. He steps out of the kitchen momentarily, and you hear him rummaging in your office a second later.

With a natural intrigue, you walk closer to see Jackson from the open door quickly pawing through his baggage. He doesn't seem to have so much as touched your office, thank god, keeping to his own pile on the floor, right beside his air mattress.
You walk in with the authoritative privilege that is owning the office space and observe an occupied Jackson flipping out a couple of stacked papers. He hasn't looked up at you since you've walked in.

"Mind if I ask what you're doing?" you say, breaking the quiet.

Jackson gives you a glance, but it's immediately traced back down to the files. From where you're standing, you spot a couple of bolded letters on the papers talking about medical needs. Most likely all your health problems.

Then he says, voice strained with consideration, "You might be right about the medication."

"What about it?" you ask.

He turns back up to you. "I've been wondering about your dosage for a while now."

"My dosage?"

He licks his thumb and continues to trace through the multiple documents, adjusting his glasses. "It's extremely high. Higher than normal dosages I've seen distributed."

You don't understand what's so important about it. "Well, I'm kind of a mess," you protest dismissively. "That's not really news to anybody."

"No." Jackson slams a piece of paper down on the floor, motioning for you to pick it up. You kneel down curiously to join him on the floor, giving the paper a quick scan.

"I'm not allowed to show you this, but," Jackson shrugs, once again looking through his collection of files rather than paying attention to you, "I believe it's your right to know what you're being given, medication-wise."

You look at the elongated words that describe your antidepressants, psychotropics, etcetera. The terms don't have anything that pop out at you to make you immediately as suspicious as Jackson, since they all label their dosages with candid information. It's not like you ever even studied in the medical field, anyway.

You look to Jackson for advice. "So?"

He shakes his head. "It's just odd," he murmurs, half to himself. "I'd almost say they're drugging you."

"Isn't that the point of medication in the first place?" you retort, setting down the paper you're holding with no more care to read any further.

"The point of medication is for you to be able to handle your mental health better, not to completely sedate you into a state of anesthesia," Jackson explains. "If you were too productive, even, as a side effect, we wouldn't want that."

"...I'm being productive," you argue indignantly. "And I'm handling the whole asylum shit better than I probably should be. And you're telling me that's not a good thing?"

Jackson sets his papers away with a heavy sigh. "It's hard to explain," he concludes defeatedly. "But Holly has given me updates of your therapy sessions."

"Fantastic," you mutter.

"No, I'm saying that a lot of things she's telling me could be a sign of the heavy medication. She says
you don't remember events easily, or emotions you felt, and you're apathetic and sleepy and you're just really numb to a lot of your environment. Unless you're extremely defensive and blowing up in her face."

"Are you sure those aren't signs of me just being an asshole?"

"Normally, I'd say yes," Jackson says, so quickly and almost smugly it has your face turn a shade of red. "But I'm seeing a lot of side effects from the pills too. It could explain why you're acting like the asylum never truly affected you."

"So you want me to not sleep at night."

"I want you to confront the events appropriately so you can move on in a healthy fashion," Jackson corrects you. His eyes lock contact with yours, and you observe the true seriousness of his claim darken his gaze.

"I'm going to see if I can have them lessen your dosage," Jackson decides.

Irritation bubbles in your chest. "That's my decision."

"It's not," he argues, and you see how much he hates to say it, even though it's true. Either way, you direct your flash of fury into a glare that shoots daggers into him.

"I'm sorry," Jackson says, and he sounds like he means it. "But I think you need to remember how bad everything was so you can learn to cope without the medication."

An odd wave of anger has you snatching yourself off the floor and walking out of the office room. A place that once belonged to you, but doesn't anymore.

Nothing seems to belong to you anymore.

- 

You sleep through the rest of the day, with only Jackson waking you to take your pills or to feed you a meal. The only time he interrupts your method of resting the day away is when you've transported yourself to the couch; your sheets became suffocating and familiar and you needed a break from the constant atmosphere of your lonely room.

It was not because you were lonely.

Jackson is clicking away at his laptop, probably putting his mission of ruining your life even more to work. He doesn't look up very much as you shuffle yourself with sleepy groans on the couch.

Finally, he snaps his computer shut with such force that it almost makes you physically jump. You give him an inquisitive eye.

He snaps his gaze with yours with such ferocity that your eyes widen.

"Why are you adverse to my help?" he asks you; his tone is odd, edged with some form of desperation—maybe even anger—that you can't fully grasp.

Your first instinct is to deny his question. "I'm not adverse," you groan tiredly. But he doesn't want to hear it.

"Yes, you are," Jackson exhales impatiently. He removes his laptop from his lap and onto the coffee table so he can give you a proper gander from his position.
You brush off his persistent attitude and switch your stare up at the ceiling. "Blame it on the medication," you grumble.

This response seems to wound him, so his next words are scratching and unpleasant on the ears.

"You're unreasonable."

It hits a raw nerve you didn't know could be touched. You adjust yourself back to where you can give him a helpless glare, but his own seethes through yours.

"You don't want anybody to get near you. It has nothing to do with anything outside of your antisocial personality that you refuse to get adjusted."

You scoff. "Are you done?"

"I can't help you," Jackson concludes, looking like he's simmering in a fury that he's trying very hard to contain. "You don't even want to help yourself."

You sit up and give him a dark, pointless scowl. "Then leave."

He shakes his head. "It doesn't work like that. I'm hired to stick around for six weeks, progress or no progress."

His tone sounds defeated. Like he wants to get out of your house more than anything. The mutual emotion of disrespect he holds towards you stings, no matter how much you admit that you deserve this.

"Then make up some bullshit that I'm healthy and pitch perfect, I don't care!" You voice escalates into a testy yell. "I don't give a fuck if you're around or not! You don't even care if I'm alive!"

Jackson is dead silent, but god, his stare is harder than you've ever seen it. The quiet on his end is almost worst than if he bothered to speak. But his mouth is stitched shut. His calm demeanor is unnerving.

When he cracks open his lips, his voice is slow and steady. A whisper, almost.

"You don't know a thing about me."

The words are sharper than expected, but he snaps himself off the couch, grabbing his laptop, and walks off in a hurried pace to his temporary room. The short slam of a door scares you out of your skin.

You stay still, like time is frozen. The horrid rush of nothing but guilt and anger and pain crashes in your heart like waves. A kind of hurt that's gained from fights with people who matter.

The emotion isn't refreshing; it has you mentally stumbling on how much Jackson has subtlety meant to you. He hasn't left your side—even if he boasts that he can't—and he sticks with you on days when you refuse to get out of bed and care for yourself.

It's sickening. But it's what you need.

Not that you'll admit it.

The guilt leads you to the closed doorstep. On the other side, blocked off from your view, you hear
nothing but the faint tapping of a keyboard.

You stand at the door for a moment, truly wondering why you're there, staring at the painted wood. But you force yourself to steady your ground. You may be an asshole, but you're not heartless.

You're just not used to admitting it.

The fist stammers momentarily as it's held up to the wood, but eventually you suck in a breath and give it a knock.

No response.

You bite your lip harshly with your teeth and try again.

Still nothing.

"Jackson." You don't think you've ever said his name before. Not officially, anyway. It doesn't sound fit for your tongue; you could roll it around for hours and still be uncomfortable addressing him properly.

Then you hear a distant thumping, and footsteps.

You hear a click from the other side and the door swings open. You stare at the man in front of you, with his eyes more tired than you've ever seen them. He's this fresh, emotional being that you've never seen before in your house. It's odd; you just never pictured him like this.

Like he's a human with feelings.

At first, your throat is raw. The words stifle your chest and they have you doing a mental double take. It feels like you're digesting a rock; but you have to say it. It'd be wrong not to.

"I'm sorry." It's stiff, and it hasn't been used in a while. But you hope it's enough.

He seems to register your apology, but he still doesn't seem entirely sure of himself at forgiving you yet. His posture is unwelcoming.

Then he sighs again. "It's fine," he replies lowly.

You knit your brows closer, irritated by his passive response.

Before you can make a smart comment about it, Jackson looks up at you firmly; his eyes aren't as dark as they were before, so you can dare to identify the expression on his face as hurt.

"Miles, I've done everything I can to help you out," he admits. "I told you before that I'm new at this. Maybe this is all my fault."

He throws his hands in the air to emphasize. "I have no clue what I'm doing with you, or anything, really! I've felt like a stranger in this house for a long time."

The last sentence gives you a harsh pang in the stomach. It's saddening how deeply you can relate to Jackson's situation.

"I don't like you in this house," you crack open your jaw to force out the words. "But that's not your fault."

Jackson folds his lips into his mouth upon hearing your sorry excuse. His eyes are downcast.
"I know we'll never be friends," he says slowly, like he's doubting his own words the minute they escape his vocals. "Hell, I can't even imagine us talking like friends. The only conversation we've ever had was back in Refuge."

Back before you were exposed to the harsh realities of recovery. Back before you knew better.

His statement traces back to when you'd been with Chara yesterday; when you realized how little you really know about them.

"What's your favorite color."

Your bland question makes Jackson flit his eyes back up to yours. A second passes before you see a spark of amusement curling his frown with a threatening smile.

"What?" he asks, choking on a chuckle.

Chara would be laughing their ass off right about now.

Humiliation transfers you gaze to a landscape portrait hanging to your left on the wall. "I..." you trail off; you're just inexperienced with bonding, that's all. It's not anybody's fault that you have no clue how to interact with others.

When you dare to look back in his direction, Jackson is holding a small smile. What it lacks in length, it resolves in sincerity.

"It's orange," he says. His voice has deterred into a friendlier territory.

You bury your hands in your pockets and stop yourself from stumbling on your toes. "Oh. That's...nice."

Jackson gives a sudden chuckle, his eyes shining. His grin makes something squirm in your stomach.

"Mine's, um..."

"Blue."

You look at him in surprise when Jackson explains quickly, "I remember you talking to the kid in your footage. You mentioned that your favorite color is blue."

"Oh. Right."

The atmosphere is no longer as tense as it was, but there's a stiff air that still hangs over your heads at the unresolved conflict. It's Jackson who addresses it first.

"Miles, I understand that you're never going to be comfortable around me," he begins, adopting a melancholic undertone. "And I know you're upset and angry and you feel all these things that I'm probably never going to fix."

Then his eyes shift into a strong earnest emotion that has you frozen. "But I want to help. I really do. All I want, really, is just...understanding."

Jackson exhales through his nose and tightens his mouth, looking over your shoulder, rather than exchange another insufferable glance with you.

"I'm sorry about everything you're going through. I'm serious."
You'd blow off his claim if it sounded like he was truly *being* serious.

The dream hits you like a car crash, and your head pounds with an overwhelming pain that has you stumbling. You hold your mouth agape and let out a groan at the ache. Immediately the memory of the doctors and whatever they were discussing dims into a dull throb in your skull.

Hands grab your shoulders and gently pull you to the floor. You hear Jackson talking to you, his voice ridged into panic.

"Miles?" His tone is laced with genuine concern. "Hey, are you okay? What happened?"

You curl into your lap with your trembling hands still glued on your temples. Eventually the looming threat of the headache dissipates and you remove your hands, but you're still glaring at the floor, not moving an inch.

"What's wrong with me," you croak.

Jackson is silent, but you don't feel his hands budge from your shoulders. His breath is hot on the top of your head, but he seems reluctant to really touch you. His care for your personal space is nonetheless touching.

"There's nothing wrong with you," he murmurs eventually. "You're dealing with grief."

"Grief of what."

"Grief of what happened. There's nothing wrong with that."

You refuse. You can't accept it.

In spite of yourself, you find your hand gripping Jackson's arm with the tightening wrap of a vice. He seems surprised, but softens when he catches your sharp breaths, suppressing a helpless sob.

*The buzzing just won't stop.*

Jackson leans his head against yours and you both stay like that for a while, saying nothing. He probably doesn't know what to think of you either.

Your mouth parts and you whisper a pained, "Help me."

You're not sure where the plea came from, but you just want it all to *stop*. You don't know what's happening but it *won't stop*. It will *never* stop. Your headaches and therapy sessions and pills and sleeping will never stop and there's nothing you can do about it.

But you feel the sudden appearance of a smile from Jackson's direction. His hand traces along your back in an attempt of loose comfort.

You repeat again, uselessly. "Help me."

He gives you a solid pat. "That's my job," he says softly.

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The diner isn't what you'd suspect to be any sort of big hit, where a fan may come in for a signature dish that the restaurant serves. There's nothing classy or highly recognizable about it, other than it's another place to stop in for a burger to tame a wanderer's curiosity.
Jackson allowed you to take his car, on the condition that it's a secret between you both that in the
time period that you're gone, Simon paid your apartment a visit for an in-home date between the two.
You're more than happy to get out of their hair, even if their intimacy will be in your own house. But
these are measures you're willing to take nowadays.

When you walk in, there's a bell that clings overhead announcing your presence in the small, rather
cliche diner. A few people turn their heads to notice you but immediately switch down to their plates
again. You receive a warm welcome from a waitress currently working at the diner's bar in front of
you.

You do a quick scan around the stale atmosphere of the restaurant when a man in the back corner
gives you a small shout. Expectantly you walk towards him, if not hesitantly, and you see him
already adjusting to his feet.

One leg is off. It haunts his footsteps as he heads slowly towards you.

Usually you'd doubt it was anybody important— his clothing practically blends into the mundane
environment, like he's trying so hard to become concealed within the diner's walls—if his gaze
wasn't so wide and seeming worried about something.

This is the guy who ruined your life?

He seemed to be a lot bolder in his email than he is in person.

"Miles," he announces, but sounds timid and entwined with a terrified tone he's struggling to keep
under wraps. If what he said was true in that you tried to choke him once, you're not surprised.

When he tentatively holds out his hand, you force your own to meet his, for the sake of being polite.
But you say nothing.

"I'm Waylon Park," he introduces cautiously, but you stare right through his response. His stare casts
along the floor to avoid your gaze when he catches sight of your mutilated fingers, and his eyes
glisten with newfound horror.

"What?" you snap. "Got something on your mind?"

Waylon seems so vulnerable now that a gust of wind could blow him away. He motions uselessly to
where he was sitting, and before he can get a word in to invite you to have a seat, you rush past him
with a spiraling sense of anger and irritation to sit yourself down in the booth. Opposite of him, of
course.

The assertive dominance you're emitting into the situation makes you feel a little better, seeing
Waylon stumbling after you and looking almost embarrassed to be here.

You should be angrier. Yelling at him, even. Why aren't you?

The prickly silence lasts longer than to your comfort, with Waylon looking everywhere but near you,
and your stance is stiff as a statue as you give him a cold stare from across the table.

Eventually a waitress takes both of your orders— you expect Waylon to pay the check anyway, so
you don't worry about limiting your food possibilities—and she leaves you both with mugs of coffee
for two.

An old tune drifts along the quiet diner, keeping you distracted from saying a thing in your dinner
host's direction.
It's Waylon who decides to interrupt the silence with a heavy sigh. "Listen, I—"

"Don't."

Waylon blinks with registered shock at how sharp you've managed your voice to become. It's a talent.

"Don't," you repeat acidly, before he has a chance to utter a statement of bafflement. You hope your glare is strong enough to pierce his backbone.

"I don't want to hear anything you have to fucking say for yourself," you continue. "I don't."

Then you straighten your posture to add a bit of cream into your coffee, refusing to give Waylon another glance as you stare hardly into your drink.

When it's to your liking, you lean back and sip at the sweetened liquid. Waylon hasn't budged.

"Then why are you here?" he asks, and to his credit he keeps his voice steady.

Why are you here? Couldn't you just have gone elsewhere? Again, this man ruined your life. He deliberately lead you into that decrepit place, didn't he?

Wasn't this all a setup?

You take a thoughtful sip of coffee before setting the mug down on the table. "I want answers," you demand. "Not apologies."

Waylon's eyes become understanding, almost. He dances his fingers along some utensils absentmindedly. Like he didn't think this far ahead.

Impatience boils at your chest, and you snap, "Although apologies can't hurt either."

Instead, he asks earnestly, "Are you sure you don't remember me?"

The incredulous question leaves you angrier than before. Your body clenches with suppressed rage. Maybe if you were to choke him again it might ring a bell.

"No," you reply bitterly. "I don't."

You don't really want to.

He lowers his head with a considerate hum, seeming far from ashamed at your statement. It's infuriating.

Then he looks up at you with the similar confidence of a man who has a loaded gun pressed to his temples.

"I'm sorry," he says, upset and wavering.

It's not enough.

You slam your mug down onto the table, sending thick splashes onto the menu and utensils and anything else in its wake. The sound makes Waylon jump out of his skin, and his posture transitions into pure horror enacted by the noise.

"That's it?" Your voice is louder than it should be for such a peaceful diner. But you've been holding
everything in for too long. "That's all you have to say?"

Waylon shudders at your tone but keeps his voice steady when he protests, "I thought you didn't want me to say anything!"

He's right. And it angers you how imbalanced and intolerable you're being. But you feel rearranged, like you don't know if this is the proper reaction or not. It's making you anxious and raw, where you have to bite and snap at everything near you until you feel right in the head again.

Your method of attack is proving ineffectual. It's what has you punching the table with your fists and screaming, "Damn you, Park!"

Even the music seems to cut short, and if anyone in the diner wasn't paying attention to you, then they sure are now. You can feel the stares sizzling into your back before you can even turn around.

A courageous waitress eventually comes to your booth with a hesitant, if not ironic, "Is everything alright over here?"

Waylon exchanges a glance with you before you sink into the back of the booth, crossing your arms with disdain at the situation. This meeting is going quite sourly.

"I'll have more coffee," you mutter.

The waitress looks like she's close to making a comment, but zips her mouth shut and heads out to complete your demands.

When she's gone, Waylon grabs a couple of napkins and wipes up the mess without you lifting a finger. You don't give him a thank you, but there's this crisper silence between you both that wasn't previously there. Almost an understanding of sort, a mutual quietness. Dare you wish to use the term 'mutual'.

When he's finished, your coffee is filled, and the napkins are discarded, he gives you a tight frown.

"I honestly don't know what to say," he admits flatly. "Or where to start even."

"Not even going to give an explanation for yourself?" you scoff, unreasonable.

He turns to return your gaze, and you're surprised that even he has limits that you're testing. "I understand that you're mad at me," Waylon snaps. "But you could be a little sympathetic here."

It rubs you the wrong way. "Explain why I should be," you retort.

He gives a lengthy pause that he breaks with a long, exasperated exhale.

"I know there's nothing I can say that can alleviate the situation," Waylon says with a sad shake of his head. "But I want to at least explain what happened and why."

You suppose you can entertain him for a while and let him recite his tale of woe. You shut your mouth in a gesture to allow him to continue.

Waylon is reserved when the waitress places down your orders—him with a petty little steak, yours with a plain burger—and he looks down at his food with consideration before sucking in a breath.

"I said in my email that I worked for Murkoff. Software guy, y'know."

You don't give him the satisfaction of seeming interested.
"I don't know how much you had to go through," Waylon continues, looking pretty disappointed in himself. "I tried to get through your video, but...I couldn't."

"Get to the point."

"After I sent the email..." Waylon exhibits extreme discomfort, visibly trembling at the memory. You raise a brow. "I was...I was administered as a prisoner. I barely escaped with my life. I—"

He cuts himself short, giving a pathetic glance down at his leg.

"I had to amputate it," he remarks soberly, and you don't press it further when you eye the stiff figure of the prosthetic leg from underneath the loose jeans he's wearing. "God. It was...awful. I..."

The poor thing seems close to tears. So you stop him by holding up a hand to get his attention.

"So you're telling me that they imprisoned you for telling a reporter to come to a sinister asylum," you conclude brusquely.

Waylon gives a stiff nod. His eyes are glazed with the threat of a severe relapse upon recalling the memories. However short and terse he decided to tell his story, it was still worthy of the smallest pang of sympathy, given that he's obviously taking his condition much worse than you.

"I really am sorry," he repeats. "I shouldn't have gotten anyone involved... And I shot some footage too."

This is what makes a sour pang echo in your chest. "Really," you mutter, voice quiet with a suppressed emotion you can't identify.

He nods. "I uploaded it too. What I saw. I don't believe that my video was as powerful as yours, I don't think."

Engrossment numbs the ugly feeling growing in your stomach. "How so."

Waylon twists his spoon absentmindedly in his mashed potatoes, his eyes becoming heavier. "Well, Murkoff tracked down my footage. They sabotaged it, made it look like a fraud."

He gives you a tight nod in your direction. "I don't think they truly fooled anybody. I haven't bothered to ask. But everyone seems more interested in your story than mine."

"I'm honored," you mumble caustically.

"You should be," Waylon presses, somber. "I'm serious. People are going nuts about it. All your documents and findings— hell, it's all the news talks about. Murkoff is getting fucked over and over because of you."

You give him an empty glare, suddenly feeling oddly numb. Fame isn't the encouragement you wanted. At least, you don't suppose it is anymore.

Your mind deters into a different direction when you ask suddenly, "You worked for Murkoff, right?"

Waylon perks up at your question, baffled at the outburst. He still gives you a tiny nod. "Uh, yeah?"

The question— rather, the concept of the question—rolls around uneasily on your tongue, and you busy your mouth by picking up a french fry and giving it a slow chew.
When you swallow, you ask, "What do you know about Murkoff experimenting on children?"

It's interesting to see Waylon's expression turn into one similar to a fish out of water. He seems horrified at the concept of inserting adolescents into Murkoff's hands, but at the same time he looks lost in searching for the correct answer to your question.

"I...I don't recall hearing about such," he finally replies. Then he adds sadly, "I wouldn't put it past them, though."

You find his response even more frustrating, regarding his ignorance. None of this is making a lick of sense with Chara's backstory. You're not sure how to piece anything into a decent explanation.

"Then why was there a damn kid in that asylum, Park?" you snap, refraining your fist from slamming on the table again. "Answer me that."

Waylon seems genuinely surprised at the thought. He narrows his eyes uncertainly. "I'm sorry?"

"You said you watched the footage," you argue impatiently. "You of all people should know what I'm talking about."

His mind seems visibly drained of appropriate responses when he answers slowly, "I had no idea Murkoff even administered children."

"You said you watched it!" you repeat hotly.

He starts at your growing temper. "Not all of it! I didn't— I didn't know you were accompanied by a child."

Eventually you brush off his sorry excuses with a sharp wave of your hand, glaring back down at your burger. "Forget it."

It's quiet again, and you allow yourself some time to eat a bit of your burger (not the best thing you've put in your mouth, but not the worst either). Waylon chews on his meal a bit, but he looks like he can't handle more than a mouthful of food or two without becoming sick.

Seeming nauseated, he takes a sip of coffee and finally repeats, "I don't know what to say."

"Then don't say anything," you remark curtly, swallowing your fill. "I really don't want to hear it."

He gives you a helpless gaze. "Is there nothing I can do to just make this any better?"

"I doubt it."

Waylon does seem to carry this unfortunate acceptance at the circumstance. He says nothing else on the subject and works on finishing his food.

You suppose you understand where he's coming from. But then again, you find yourself stubbornly adverse to his advances of apologies. Or answers, for that matter. You've become stiff and apathetic to the events occurring, like you're viewing the scene from a photograph. Whatever happens with this conversation won't truly matter; you're choosing not to forgive him.

When Waylon is satisfied with his fill, he attempts to concoct another chance in forming a decent discussion with you. His expression is still uncomfortable, regardless.

"I just find it bizarre that you really don't remember me," he murmurs, then gives you a displeased gaze as he adds, "Unless you're fucking with me."
"Why the hell would I want to do that?"

He hesitates with thought. "I guess to punish me? I don't know."

It's not compassion that makes a smooth feeling ease your anger; you're not sure what it is, but it makes you seem to undoubtedly soften as you shift a peek down to his covered prosthetic.

"It seems like you were punished enough," you remark flatly, still looking at his leg.

When Waylon catches a hint of what you assume is some odd form of pity for him, he protests, "We've both been through hell. I think it'd be wise if we didn't compete to see who had it worse."

You shrug. "Wasn't planning on it."

Although that doesn't sound like a bad idea, if you're honest with yourself.

"Look, Miles, if you need me to do anything for you, anything at all," Waylon gives you a steady gaze, but it's still rimmed with sympathy that you suppose isn't going to disappear anytime soon, "I'll help you in any way I can."

You look at him blankly. You're not sure what use his promise is; it's not like anybody can help you now.

But still, you mutter the smallest of thanks and give another absent sip of your coffee.

From the corner of your eye, you spot Waylon digging through his pocket and placing a piece of scrapped paper near your abandoned dish. Upon inspection, it seems to be an address for somewhere.

"This is where you can find me," Waylon explains when he spots your confused expression. "I can't be entirely too specific due to... well—"

"Crippling anxiety?" you finish gravely, stuffing the note in your jacket (not like you'll ever need it).

He gives you a helpless frown, almost looking amused at your attempted insult. "I guess that's one word for it."

The conversation doesn't escalate any further than that— you've decided that you're finished with this Park guy. He keeps giving out mindless chatter about his family— he's got a wife and kids, good on him—and eventually his failed scheme to get you to pick up on a friendly subject subsides. When he makes a comment about the weather, you get the gist that it's time to leave.

Waylon covers the check, and as you're exiting the diner he extends his hand back out to you. Like when you first met him in the elevator.

You hesitate, eyeing the hand with a wave of displeasure. But eventually you take it, silently daring him to make another silent gape of horror at your lost fingers.

"It was nice to meet you personally, Miles," Waylon says with a firm shake. "I'm serious."

You release your hand to stuff them back into your pockets. Where Waylon's address brushes across one of your fingers.

"Yeah," you mutter, putting no heart into the reply. "You too."

Without another word, you part from him before he's able to give you another goodbye or crappy
apology or whatever he'd hoped to gain from this meetup.

Either way, you're glad you're never going to see him again.

Your phone that you've been given Post-therapy-session-gone-awry buzzes in your pocket, and you answer.

"Hello?"

"Hey, it's Jackson. When do you think you'll be back?"

"Probably about fifteen minutes." You pause. "If you're implying that you guys need a while longer to bang, I can—"

"No, no, it's fine," Jackson interrupts quickly, sounding flustered even over the speaker. "Simon has a meeting to go to anyway."

In the background, you hear the shuffling and an unfamiliar voice sounding like he's asking Jackson a question. It hits a nerve to know that these strangers are having a makeshift date in your apartment.

Jackson pulls away from the phone to say in a hushed tone, "Simes, I'm on the phone. Hold on."

There's a soft protest before you hear an obvious flirtation you can't hear (or see) between the two, and it makes you visibly awkward. Some ugly feeling is thudding in your stomach as well.

When Jackson returns to the phone, his tone is more airy than before. "Alright, see you then. And can you maybe pick up some milk on the way home?"

You scoff. "What am I, a maid? Do it yourself."

The voice from before—Simon—pipes up from behind, "Wow, sounds like a real gentleman."

There's a placid smile you can't see that is apparent in Jackson's chuckle, but he replies evenly, "I'm just saying, you're already out of the house. I'm not going to turn you in for dropping by the store and grabbing a few groceries."

Then he adds, albeit humorously, "Not unless you start bleeding out in the middle of the parking lot again."

It's Simon's baffled, "Huh?" that makes you choke back a reluctant snicker.

"Alright, fine," you sigh, pretending to sound more irritated than you really are. "Just clean up before I get back. And you guys have better not touched my bed."

"All taken care of," Jackson says dismissively; you feel like he's implying something you don't really want to press further. "See you then."

Simon gives a quick, "Adiòs."

Then you hang up.

A stiff rock rolls around in your gut as you start the car to go and get milk. Hopefully you won't pass out this time.

Chapter End Notes
Chapter name from "Shitty Horoscopes" by Amrit Brar
You have one new message.

With stiffened fingers, you're able to stop yourself from deleting the message before it plays.

When his voice carries around the house, it's a dull ache that throbs horribly in your chest. Awfully similar to guilt.

"Uh, hey Miles. This is my, um, I dunno, twelfth message? ...C'mon man, I know you're doing this on purpose."

You force your trembling hands to steady.

"Look, I—" He pauses to exhale a huge, defeated sigh. His tone is bordered with a growing anger that you can see clear as day. "Listen, Miles. You're probably not even going to listen to this."

Another pause, heavier this time. "We're worried about you. Don't think we haven't seen the news, and— god, it doesn't matter. It never did with you."

You wish Jackson was around. It would stop the apartment from feeling so empty.

"I don't know whatever I fucking did to deserve this. From you. You, of all the damn people in the damn world."

When the frustration exposes itself into his tone, it gnaws at your heart. Twisting the knife deeper into a wound you'd much rather forget.

"I'd like to think this is my last message."

He cuts short with a cold scoff. "Yeah, well, I've said that in my last message, I think. Maybe the message before that."

He gives another sigh. "So, I guess you can call if you wanna talk. Maybe grab a coffee or something. Yada yada. I'll try not to punch your lights out, if it makes my invitation more welcoming.

"...Alright, well, you know where to find me. You always have."

The machine beeps, and the message is done.

In a tight silence, you force yourself to delete the message before Jackson gets home, so he doesn't ask about it. Also so you don't find yourself repeating it over and over.

God. You're so pathetic.
Time passes as you tick away at your computer. Jackson has retreated to the living room—or maybe the kitchen, one of the two—and left you alone in your office. He was courteous enough so that his belongings that were originally strewn out along the room have now been stuffed neatly on the air mattress in the corner.

You haven’t touched your computer in a while. Your inbox has already blown up with messages; some from curious strangers, some asking for interviews. It’s all just spam to you, so you don’t give many of them a second thought as you drag them into your email’s trash bin.

Your Internet and television are basically on lockdown mode. Jackson explained that he was assigned to set up some basic controls over what you were allowed to view from the media, excluding you from access to your footage and anything else that could coax you into the harsh actualities of the world outside of your apartment (which you think is hypocritical, considering that he said before how preventing your access to the recordings was wrong, but you haven’t bothered to give him a piece of your mind about that yet).

He tells you that, when the administrators you’re kept into contact with believe that you’re ready to step out again, he’ll unlock you from the prison of limited wifi without hesitation. It still doesn’t leave you feeling any more complacent on the deal, considering that you can and will choose to be very bitter about your circumstances.

As you’re shifting through your messages, a gentle knock on the door startles you. But eventually you call the knocker to enter; it’s probably Jackson, not a Variant.

Your theory is proven right when you turn and see Jackson eyeing you at the desk. You think you’re about to get an earful of cautionary lectures, telling you to stay on the designated websites and whatever, but Jackson looks almost impressed with you; you’re not sure why.

“So you’re working again?” he prompts, interested.

You shake your head and switch your attention back to scavenging your messy email. "Not really. Just some spring cleaning, I guess."

You hear Jackson step closer as he peers over your shoulder while you’re still moving the items to the trash. The sudden lack of personal space is suffocating, but you’re too busy to make a harsh remark about it.

"Lots of people seem eager for interviews," Jackson finally comments, voice neutral.

"Yeah."

"Are you going to take up their offer?" he peeks at you from the corner of his eye, but you can’t tell whether he disapproves or encourages the idea.

You answer by continually removing messages from your inbox until, finally, it’s all clear. Save for a few emails addressing taxes, all that fun stuff you have no choice but to acknowledge.

"No," is all you say once you’re finished.

Jackson makes a small hum, but says no further comment about your decision. He backs away graciously to let you continue pawing through important information and billings you may have missed. Things that have nothing to do with the asylum or anything that might mention it.
"So, how exactly does your job work?" Jackson's question has you inwardly jolt. You'd thought that since he'd backed away from the computer that he'd left a while ago. Is he still watching you? Hasn't he ever heard of a stalker?

But still you entertain his fantasies for a while. "What do you mean?"

He idles himself by checking through his luggage on the mattress— maybe to make sure everything's there, you don't know. You've learned that Jackson has compulsive quirks about himself that you can oddly connect with, so you don't question them.

"Well, you're a journalist, right?"

"Investigative reporter."

He whistles. "Fancy."

You shrug. "There's a bit of a difference. An investigative reporter usually focuses on a single topic, and they're usually self-employed."

"Ah," Jackson says, more understanding. Then he presses, "So your main topic was...?"

"Murkoff."

There's a pause as Jackson murmurs, "Oh."

You don't see why he has to act so shy about it. It's not like it should be considered a big secret by now.

"To broaden, I was focused on governmental corruption," you explain to him. "MKULTRA, Afghanistan, anything that the government rubbed their dirty hands all over, I wanted to know what was up."

"So Murkoff wasn't your first rodeo?" Jackson corrects; he looks genuinely interested.

"Murkoff was manna from heaven. I know about them. I hated them. Getting that email was—fuck!"

Jackson perks up. You'd been typing on the keyboard for the first time in what seems like forever; you'd forgotten how things had changed since you'd done so.

"What's wrong?" asks Jackson, concerned.

You hesitate, still glaring helplessly down at your keyboard. Where you used to type properly with all ten fingers still intact.

"Fingers," you grumble, wriggling the missing indexes, pretending that they were still there.

There's a short quiet that you misinterpret as Jackson giving you a form of pity that you ignore. But it's proven incorrect when he continues, unfazed in tone by the incident.

"So you're a self-employed man, huh? How's that to your liking?"

You're more than happy to change the subject, instead dragging yourself away from the keyboard to avoid another mishap and swerving your chair around to face Jackson properly. He's leaning back against the wall, sitting upright on his mattress and watching you with such intrigue that it's almost fascinating.
Maybe not fascinating. Endearing? Nice, perhaps?

"It gets difficult," you begin. "But I'm usually up for the challenge. I know how it works with the press, media, all that. I used to be a journalist, y'know, with an office and coworkers and people dropping in and handing me stories to cover."

"Really?" Jackson interrupts politely, but he still seems to be sincere. You're not even sure why you're telling him all this, and the realization hits you like a brick and you zip your mouth shut.

"Yeah." Then, unceremoniously, you turn back to the computer and pretend to look busy.

"So why'd you quit?"

Jackson seems ever persistent, but you decide to look uninterested. You look at him like he just broke you from a trance. "Quit what?"

He looks like he's going to roll his eyes, not falling for your naive act. "Your job as a journalist. Why'd you quit?"

You remember a very foggy memory of going over the specifics of why. It was with Chara, in the sewers. They'd asked why you even bothered to show up at Mount Massive.

'Miles, why did you come here?'

Why did you?

—Your thought process is off the chains.

To retaliate, you hush your brain from going into unfamiliar territory, memory-wise, by cutting the conversation short.

"I just didn't like it," you lie.

Jackson catches on to the sudden curtain drop on the subject, and while he looks disappointed (and perhaps suspicious), he doesn't try and press any buttons.

You decide to steer a new subject forward, one that's been driving you mad for a couple of days now.

"What happened with the whole 'medication' thing?" you ask.

You're surprised to find Jackson shifting uncomfortably when the question properly sinks in; he busies himself with adjusting his glasses, a common habit you've associated with discomfort on his behalf.

"Yeah," he hedges, "that's...actually something I can't really get addressed? It's weird; I've emailed and called but they seem hesitant to tell me anything."

Jackson settles himself further into his unpacked luggage placed on the mattress, clearly unsettled to a degree you're not sure you're understanding.

He sighs. "I don't know, Miles. Something weird is going on with your medication."

Before you can delve deeper into his words, dissecting a new meaning for you to confront, Jackson waves away his heavy statement with a sweep into the air.
"But, I guess that your doctors know best," he concludes, but doesn't sound entirely convinced. You cast your gaze elsewhere, you thoughts becoming oddly dark at the mention of your doctors. The anonymous sources who are responsible for your pills and therapy and everything else tied to your recovery. See how well that's working out.

Luckily, there's a knock outside from the front door that draws both of your attentions elsewhere.

"I'll get it," Jackson volunteers before you can intervene, and you let him go without a fight. It's probably some lost visitor, or at the very least a confused mailman.

You're surprised to hear a familiar voice, and when it sinks in who's speaking, your heart gives a hard thud in your chest with a terrible dread.

"Hello, is there a chance that Miles Upshur lives here?"

You sprint out to the living room as you hear Jackson giving a hasty excuse for your absence, obviously baffled at the odd visitor.

When you enter the atmosphere, all the heads turn to you with a heightened curiosity at your reaction.

Toria is outside the doorstep, holding a brown bag in her hands, and with the same arm has a purse slung over her shoulder; obviously she's going somewhere.

Jackson, meanwhile, is giving you an incredulous gaze that you can't provide an answer to. You feel like your heart is plummeting into your gut; now you've been caught, haven't you?

...At least Toria seems happy to see you.

"Ah! There you are," she says warmly, unaware of your creeping unease. "Forgive me for intruding, but I have a quick favor to ask of you.

Don't mention the kid, please don't mention the kid—

"I need you to watch Chara for a couple of hours."

You gulp.

Behind Toria's figure is a hesitant silhouette from behind, where you investigate and lock eyes with a familiar face. Chara is gripping onto Toria's dress tightly, looking almost as uncertain as you feel. Like a deer in headlights.

Jackson gives you a slow, seething turn, bombarding you with a heavy glare that heavily implies that you're absolutely getting a mouthful later when you have a free moment.

"I know this is last minute," Toria reasons gently, like she's the cause of all your current troubles. "And I'm terribly sorry that I couldn't call you in advance. It was bad enough even finding your current address—"

"Excuse me a second," Jackson cuts in, a respectful smile brightening his gaze when he turns back to the innocent mother. "I don't believe we've met."

In a heartbeat, Toria shifts back to Jackson with an apologetic look. "Oh, gracious. Sorry about that."

She extends her hand, and you can do nothing but watch. "I am Toria Dreemurr, Chara's guardian.
And you are...?"

Jackson doesn't look your way as he shakes Toria's hand politely, but it's obvious by his stiff posture that he has a few questions to ask you later.

"Jackson Wrent," he introduces. "I'm Miles's...well, caretaker."

Chara pokes their head out and exchanges a glance with you that reads, 'You weren't kidding about the caretaker thing.'

You can do nothing but return a shrug, swallowing your dread for the time being.

"Alright, well." Toria looks behind her to give Chara a reassuring smile, running an affectionate hand through their hair. "Chara should be no trouble. They're very quiet."

"Hold on..." Jackson intervenes, and you think he's going to banish Chara and Toria forever out of your life in one sentence.

It's what causes you to ultimately throw caution to the wind and call out, "We'll watch the kid, don't worry."

Jackson whips his head around to give you a look you don't administer, since your focus is intently on Chara and their foster mother now. You're surprised that Chara even looks shocked at your proposal.

But Toria seems to take it the best out of any of them. Her eyes brighten gratefully at your promise. "Excellent!"

She reaches for the brown bag and walks over to hand it to you. Confused, you wait for her to explain.

"These are Chara's knitting supplies," she says. "As well as a few books, some drawing supplies, and I already packed them a couple of snacks if they get hungry. Emergency numbers are on a piece of paper in there as well."

Chara wastes no time in retreating from one adult to the next, taking their place behind your back to shelter themselves from an unfamiliar environment.

You feel them instinctively grab onto your jacket from behind, and you take the bag from Toria and reply, "Alright, thanks."

"No worries," Toria responds kindly. "I'll be back at around four."

Then she reaches down to give Chara another brush along the cheek lovingly. "I'll see you in a bit, my child."

"Okay," is the timid response.

Toria and Jackson exchange a quick goodbye and Toria closes the door behind her with a click. You hear her footsteps subside in the hallway.

And then you're alone.

Jackson turns to you again, looking like he has a million things to say. But he silences himself for the sake of a very anxious child clinging to your backside.
It's a minute of an unsteady silence before, surprisingly, it's Chara that breaks it. You feel them loosen their grip on you entirely as they give a gander at the apartment around them.

Still looking around, Chara asks you, "You live here?"

You ignore Jackson's glare to reply hesitantly, "Uh, yeah. I do."

"Hm." They saunter along the living room, stopping at the bookshelves to take a quick peek, before looking at all the paintings along your wall.

"I thought you lived under a bridge or something," they admit.

You have to stop yourself from smiling in that way that Chara makes you just by saying something off-putting like that. They tend to do that with you.

Jackson gives a cough that instantly kills the mood. He looks at Chara giving a quick read to a novel they'd plucked off of your bookshelf. "So, uh, Chara."

They turn to him, expression guarded.

"You're a friend of Miles?"

They give a small shrug, seeming uninterested. "I like to think so." Looking like they're suddenly intruding, Chara feels the need to place the book back on the shelf all prim and proper.

You attempt to draw Jackson away from having any more communications with the kid. "So your mom brought you some things to—"

"She's not my mom," Chara interrupts, voice suddenly cold. When they realize how brutal they sounded, and how surprised you are at their response, they mutter a quick, "Sorry."

It's another stretch of quiet that feels a bit pricklier than the last, with Chara residing on the couch and clamping into themselves like an unwanted guest.

You attempt to save their inward collapse by bursting out, "You like to knit?"

They perk up. "What?"

You hold out the bag to them, dropping it by their knees on the couch so they can pick it up if they want to. "She said you brought knitting supplies."

"Oh."

Before they can continue, Jackson says suddenly, "Miles, can I talk to you for a second?"

The rimmed anger in his tone that he's clearly failing at suppressing isn't reassuring.

To avoid having Chara somehow sucked into this, you excuse yourself from their presence as Jackson leads you into the back office, where he shuts the door behind him.

When he snaps his head back around, you hastily protest, "Listen to me—"

"You didn't say goodbye at all!" he explodes, then lowers his voice when he remembers the company in the living room. But his gaze is shining with fury.

"I—"
"No! I don't want you to open your mouth! I'm sick of your lies!" Jackson throws his hands in the air to emphasize his growing frustration. "I'm sick of all the lies! You said you would say goodbye and you didn't! You lied to me!"

Your mouth clamps itself shut; you're not sure what you can backfire that with, especially since he's unfortunately right.

He then points violently to the door behind him. "And now look what happens!"

Ultimately he doesn't get his reasoning finished because his sentence rubs you entirely the wrong way.

"What happens is that's a kid, Wrent," you bark, "I don't know what the hell I'm doing—"

"Then you should have just left it at that, you—"

"You wouldn't have known what—!"

"You're not listening to—!"

"How am I supposed to—!"

Both of your arguments transcend into furious yells before you know it, with nonsensical accusations and insults flying past each other's ear without the other taking a moment to register what was spoken. Your ears are thrumming with anger as your voice escalates without you realizing it. A buzzing noise starts somewhere in your train of thought.

Then there's a long pause, where you both seem to have this sudden realization that there's a child in the living room, who can most certainly hear your fighting.

With heavy breaths, you're able to regain yourself. The buzzing dims.

Now that the light of unregistered anger has left Jackson's gaze, he seems more frustrated than anything else. Less like a bomb about to explode, and more of the messy aftermath.

He gives a defeated sigh. "I don't know what to do with Chara either."

The statement catches you oddly off-guard.

"In truth, I'm not sure if cutting that kid out of your life entirely would have been the best option!" His voice takes an undercurrent of helpless exasperation that you can't ignore. "I don't know if it'll make things worse, in all honesty. I'm just trying to—"

He stops himself suddenly, falling backwards in his mental state of uncertainty to provide you only a state that glistens blankly. Now you both don't know what to do.

It's likely that Chara can hear this conversation, which is a creeping sensation you don't enjoy.

"Let's just forget about it." You break the silence, with the mindset of avoiding another controversial fight that you most likely won't be solving today. It's pointless to argue; you're watching Chara, and there's not a lot you can do about it.

"We can't just forget about it," Jackson protests heatedly. "This is a problem we're going to have to solve one way or another."

"And we can," then you add a bit harder, "Then I can."
It's not his burden to bear. Can't you just be in charge of one thing in your life for once?

Jackson is silent as he rolls his tongue along the inner corners of his cheek, mouth tightened, obviously contemplating something.

When he doesn't budge, you have to step forward and indicate that it's time to leave the room. Confrontation is for another day.

"Just let me handle this," you murmur; Jackson won't budge from his position of guarding the door for a moment longer.

But something intense must have accidentally crept into your tone, because Jackson gives a lengthy sigh as he slowly pries himself away from your path.

"I'm trusting you," he warns.

You don't register the weight of his claim as you exit the room and head back to your living room, where you assume Chara is waiting.

They're not.

Your heart gives an abrupt thud at seeing them out of your sight. They're supposed to be under your care, and you've already lost them? Fantastic.

Jackson walks up from behind, spotting the empty couch. His worry builds up steadier than yours when he asks, "Where did they go?"

A useless question, but it's one that still needs to be answered regardless.

You look around the room, attempting to swallow the growing apprehension down your throat like bile. "Kid?" you call out.

No response.

"Kid?" you repeat, voice becoming dangerously strained.

Then you hear the faint shuffling near your bedroom. Jackson perks up the exact moment you notice it, so you assume that he heard it too.

The two of you quickly walk over to the open door of your room; last you checked, it was closed, so this is a good sign, surely.

Cautiously, you peek into the room, and you spot a crouched figure perched on the side of your bed. The familiar rusty-brown color of their hair is relieving; immediately your anxiety dissolves into curiosity.

You give a gentle knock to announce your upcoming presence, and Chara's eyes widen at the sound for the smallest of seconds, barely noticeable. When they seem calm again, you push the door open and make your appearance properly known.

"What are you doing in here?" you ask.

Chara's eyes flood with guilt, shrinking away from you and cuddling the book you assume they were reading close to their chest, almost defensively.

"I'm sorry," they sputter, avoiding your eyes.
"No no, don't be," you encourage gently. You remember Toria's warning: sometimes people become used to bad things. "You didn't do anything wrong."

Jackson appears from behind, making Chara jump at his unannounced presence in the room. You shoot him the tiniest glare for that, but he doesn't seem to be affected by it.

"What are you reading?" Jackson asks the kid kindly.

They dart their eyes over to you, as if to ask if Jackson was safe. You give them a small nod.

"Um," they uncurl the book from their stomach and expose the cover of the book in question. "It's...about a girl in the woods. And she sees things and...goes on an adventure..."

They trail off, eyeing Jackson for his approval. You'll admit, it hurts to see them like this.

But Jackson seems to take Chara's withdrawn personality rather well (granted, he's only met them once before, and they'd acted similar to this. He probably thinks it's normal). He gives the novel a closer peek without moving closer to the kid.

"I've never read that before," he finally says. He glances up at Chara with a look of silent encouragement. "Is it good?"

You move closer to Chara and settle down next to them so they feel a tad more comfortable being probed by a stranger.

"Yeah," Chara murmurs, but you notice that their voice has gained a bit of strength.

"What kind of books do you like?" Jackson continues, crossing his legs together as though to prepare himself for a friendly conversation on the floor of your bedroom.

"I like..." Chara peeks at you again, getting another bout of reassurance that Jackson is a secure person to talk to. They melt a bit closer to your side for comfort.

"Dark fiction is nice," they reply softly. "But I also like classical. And poetry."

"Like 'Little House On the Prairie'," you clarify to Jackson.

Chara looks up at you in surprise. "You remembered?"

"Of course."

They hesitate, stroking the ends of the book with the thumb in thought.

"I loved that book," Jackson says.

Chara perks up. "Really?"

He nods. "I read it in school as a kid."

His gaze flicks to you, and you catch a glow of warmth in them that you surprisingly recognize as the same tenderness Chara seems to arise from others.

You have to tug back a smile because it's not just you, then. They have that effect on people, even if they can't see it themselves.
The clicks of needles is similar to a faded memory you may have gained from a visit to your grandparent's as a child. The typical sort of grandmother who would enjoy knitting for the hell of it.

Needless to say, the sound is soothing.

Chara has gained more confidence by the hour, it seems. Their posture isn't as brittle as before, if at all, as they lean against the arm of your couch, busying their hands with stitching the yarn into a golden-colored square. Maybe a future scarf, you're not sure. But they seem to enjoy it, regardless, so you're not complaining.

You're splayed on the opposite end of the couch, pretending to doze off, when in reality you're watching a documentary about some guy who had some minor convenience but made use out of it. Chara picked out the channel, so you're not sure if you're permitted to change it.

There are a couple more casting on's into Chara's knitting session before they take a small break to relax their fingers. They lean over the edge to reach for some snacks that Jackson had made for them, set on the coffee table. They yank the plate towards them and nibble on a slice of cheese.

"I had no clue you'd be the kind to like knitting," you tell them, admiring their progress on the project.

Chara eats their food, quiet as a mouse. Their reserved look is telling you that it's not a subject they like to discuss.

"It keeps my hands busy," they admit, surprising you with an answer to your rhetorical statement.

"What do you—" Your thoughts click when you remember how Chara always prefers to wear long sleeves. Not once have you seen their limbs properly exposed.

"Oh."

Chara shrugs, seemingly apathetic to your realization, but their stiff body language suggests otherwise. It's like you're touching a mental wound that they'd rather not discuss.

You suppose you shouldn't be one to pry.

Jackson announces himself from the kitchen. "Miles, I'm making stew. Do you want some?"

"Is it poisonous?" you call.

"Not this batch," he returns quickly, so that it stretches the ghost of a grin on your face.

"I'll have some," you decide. A lot of Jackson's involvements around the house are fairly intrusive, but you'll admit that having someone else cook for you— and being pretty talented at it—is a plus for the whole situation.

You glance at Chara, who is giving you a gleaming look, much too cheeky to leave you feeling optimistic about what's on their mind.

"What?"

They stretch their mouth into a grin that shows their upper teeth. "You guys are really cute," they admit playfully.

It leaves a jarring thump to echo in your stomach at the thought. You suppose, from an outsider's standpoint, that you and Jackson do have an intimate sort of relationship, with living in the same
house and all. He does seem to get a bit too friendly to completely disregard the claim.

But intimacy has never been a top priority for you. A one-nighter, you've never had trouble with; similar to brief relationships that have a couple of confidential moments, outside of sex. But commitment? That's something you've boxed up a long time ago, and you're not willing to delve deeper into it. They'll probably give you more pills and classify the cluster of emotions as something fancy; feeling stand-offish and indifferent to relationships has always been a major flaw of yours.

You realize, through the internal nitpicking of your thoughts, that you haven't rebuked Chara's observation. The widening grin they're giving you is devilish, and it's making your stomach crawl.

"You know it's not like that," you protest, but there's a bland aftertaste to the vehement tone you'd wished to approach. The uncertainty in your own voice is surprising to you.

Jackson swoops in from the kitchen, ovenmitt and apron still equipped, looking inquisitive on whatever you both are discussing.

"What did you do to him?" Jackson asks Chara, but his voice is all in good banter. "He looks a little pale."

His inspection makes Chara snort, their eyes sparkling with mischief.

"I was talking to him about a cruuuuush," they sing, drawling out their consonants as a flash of hot embarrassment creeps onto your face.

"It's not a crush!" you retort, ignoring how childish you sound. "It's a petty assumption of my private thoughts and feelings!"

Even Jackson seems to be entertained at your response; it's not your fault you tend to sound like an overused dictionary whenever you're feeling personally violated.

"Sounds like a crush to me," Jackson nods, exaggerating a character of someone diagnosing a serious illness. His professional stance and voice sets the mood and has Chara continually snickering.

"I concur," they agree, mirroring Jackson's physician-like tone. "We will need to investigate more into this matter. It sounds very serious."

Your cheeks are burning now with the unwanted attention you're drawing. To protect yourself from any more jokes at your expense, you look away and pretend to be exasperated by your acquaintances' humor than anything else.

"You both are horrible," you mutter.

Naturally, this sends them both into smiling frenzies, looking so mischievous through the corner of your vision that you want to snap their necks.

You could.

But you don't.

"So, Jackson," Chara says idly, turning to him. "Do you have a crush on anyone?"

"Just my boyfriend," he responds faithfully.

Chara perks up in surprise. "Oh, you're dating someone?"
He nods. "Have been for a couple of months now."

"What's dating like?"

The naive question brushes away your shriveling posture to have you look over at Chara's face, open with an innocence you haven't seen before.

They look like a kid.

Jackson settles on the edge of the couch and contemplates on how to word his response, peeking over at you with a silent invitation to participate. You deny the offer; dating has always ended horribly for you.

"Well, dating is..." he begins uncertainly, but slowly he readjusts himself. "Dating is like a promise. A commitment, really."

Chara rolls their eyes. "I know what dating is," they interfere, "I asked what it was like."

Embarrassed, Jackson coughs and starts over. You can see that he's a bit flustered at the idea.

"Dating feels like an ongoing conversation with a best friend," he explains. "They're always there for you, and you get to do nice things with them and communicate constantly."

You feel oddly touched by the words, but you don't allow you exterior body language to show Jackson's words any approval.

"It's...nice," he finishes softly, giving a smile at the thought; smiling at some big and wonderful concept that you've never had a personal experience in. Something you'll probably never have, in your condition.

Chara is quiet for a while, looking sincerely intrigued on reflecting in Jackson's words.

"You are so full of shit," they finally remark.

The blunt comment has a spout of laughter explode from your stiffened stomach, feeling your guarded stature melt away the more you allow the fizzing shortles to escape the grin that you're covering with your free hand.

You hear Chara accompany your laughing fit with small giggles of their own, cupping their mouth as well. Their sparkling eyes crinkle, and their tiny body shakes with suppressed laughter.

You wipe your eyes to prevent any tears from spilling and look at Jackson, who's wearing an expression that you wish you could freeze in time and reflect on forever. He doesn't seem mad, but rather baffled. Maybe even amused himself.

"Sorry," you breathe, calming yourself as your body gives a weary heave for air. "It's just—the way they said it—"

To your surprise, Jackson waves away your apology, and his mouth curls into a good-natured grin.

"Ah, fuck you guys," he says, sounding playful. It eases your rising anxiety since you'd assumed that he would have made a sour comment about your reaction.

Then he turns suddenly to face Chara, his face full of concern. "Wait, I didn't mean to cuss in front of a—"
Chara regains their bout of giggles and offers Jackson one of their trademark smirks. "You sound like Toria," they tease, then they add, "It's fine. I cussed too, so now we're even."

You settle back into the comfy arms of the pillow you were formerly resting against. Jackson eyes the two of you, almost fondly.

"I guess great minds really do think alike," Jackson comments, and he flicks his eyes between you and Chara so that you can make the connection of his meaning.

"But small minds rarely differ," Chara finishes. They reach to pick up their abandoned knitting project and continue, "You know that's the whole quote, right?"

Jackson takes a moment to marvel at the kid's intelligence, and you feel some pang of pride at Chara's confidence. Almost like you're proud of them.

"I didn't know that," Jackson admits, sounding impressed. "Learn something new every day."

Immediately, snapping themselves shut again, Chara casts their gaze back down to their hands and occupies their attention with knitting.

The scene ends abruptly, with you returning to watching the boring documentary, and Jackson retreating back into the kitchen to cook some more.

There's a hollow ache that surprises you; you're upset that this can't be a normality for anybody in this room. With laughter and idle conversations, where you feel like you aren't constantly stepping on eggshells.

For a moment, a brief second, you wish that Jackson and Chara were a part of your home. You wish you could merge all your worlds into one and shelter yourselves from reality and anything else that haunts your footsteps. You want this to be your normal.

It's a silly thought, so your regard it as such.

Chara pauses their knitting to observe you. "What are you thinking about?" they ask.

The nagging shadows of negativity in your mind is a constant. Chara will never make that go away, and neither will Jackson. You feel an itching sense of regret that you could ever trust them—or anybody—to fix you. You fix yourself, and you never needed anyone thus far. Anyone who questions your method of self-comfort gets the axe.

But you forget all that, looking at Chara; you want them always to be on your couch, joking with you. You want something more to offer them.

"Home," you answer them.

Chara looks confused now. "What about it?"

What about it indeed.

You turn back to the television and reach for the remote on the coffee table; you doubt that Chara would mind, given that they've stopped watching a long while ago. You surf channels while deliberately ignoring Chara's question, but you don't feel their eyes stray from you, sizzling their gaze into your temples.

"I'm not sure," you answer them lowly, suppressing a sigh. "I'm not sure anymore."
"...Are we friends?"

The sudden question shoves the current wistfulness right out of the environment. Chara's tone is blank, but you turn to them like they've just asked you something life-threatening.

"What?"

Chara's gaze is careful. "Are we friends?" they repeat sternly.

"Friends" is a scary word to you. It means commitment, it means communication, it means opening up parts of yourself that should be stuffed away. It means that you share a world with someone else and being okay with them seeing your flaws and imperfections, your everything.

But they've seen all that, haven't they? Chara has seen you at your worst— and god, have they; you were at your all-time worst in that god-forsaken Asylum, and they stuck with you.

And you stuck with them, didn't you?

You say, slowly, voice strained but steady, "Yes."

Chara's eyes gleam for a quick moment before they erase it to form a deadpan look, intentionally detached.

"Are friends a home?" they ask, and this time there's a ghost of sincere desperation, longing, and something else you can't identify in their tone.

It terrifies you, the idea. A person being a home.

But you answer, "They can be."

You've seen relationships on television and in books; people enjoy having a symbol of peace in others, don't they? Maybe it helps alleviate a certain fear of loneliness or depletion, you don't know. But you're certain it can be done.

Then they shrug, pitifully playing with a piece of yarn that they entangle their finger with. Their gaze shifts into something heavier when they deter their eyes from your own.

"Can we be a home?" they ask.

Your heart freezes in an ugly sense as they add, more desperately, "It doesn't have to be permanent! I-I just— I want a home, I want a friend—"

You're unresponsive.

They trail off, shutting down entirely, returning quickly to their work, as you sit there. You roll their request over and over on their tongue as they sit and click, click, click the needles closer and closer together into something beautiful and new.

Their downcast nature doesn't vanish throughout the remainder of their visit; when Toria comes to pick them up an hour later you still haven't answered their question.

"Did you mean all that stuff?" you ask Jackson that night.

He's sipping at a coffee cup while responding to an email, so his attention isn't all fixated on you.
You have to snap at him for him to properly come to, turning to you with surprise.

"I'm sorry?"

"About dating," you begin, stalling your specific inquiry for an unknown reason. The thought of discussing things like dating to Jackson isn't something you'd ever planned on doing, but here you are.

"What about it?"

Impatience conveys an appropriate eye-rolling on your behalf. "About dating being all sappy and communicative and shit, dumbass," you snap. "Is all of that true?"

Jackson gives you a long, probing stare, like he's determining whether or not your question is considered serious or not. You assure him of such by glaring back just as hard.

When he gives in with a sigh, his tone becomes more subdued, more thoughtful.

"Dating is different for different people," he says. "Hell, relationships are different for different people. It just depends on who you talk to."

He gives his coffee another long sip and returns to his laptop work. You're still not satisfied with his explanation; if anything, it just makes your heart squirm even more restlessly.

"So people aren't a home," you mutter to yourself, aloud for the world to hear and ponder on its meaning.

Jackson blinks. "What did you say?"

"Nothing."

He doesn't waver from staring, and you're beginning to feel uncomfortable.

"You know that saying, 'Home is where the heart is'?' he asks.

You scoff at his stupid question. "What's your point?"

He shrugs, immediately clicking away at his computer before he murmurs, "Maybe it'll mean something to you someday."

You pretend not to hear him.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter name from song "Lifeline" by Imogen Heap
and they thought me broken, that my tongue was coated lead

Chapter Summary

Alt: slice of life chapter but every time an unhealthy coping strategy is used it gets worse

Chapter Notes

Time to pass the metaphorical baton over to a new character's perspective!

Keep in mind that said character is written with PTSD and BPD, food problems, and really bad self-harm/self-conscious issues, so err on the side of caution if those are sensitive topics for you

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The whole scenario is supposed to feel like a dream. You're floating, breathless, in a trance, like you're in a swimming pool. It's a lightheaded feeling, numbing all your senses, but you feel like that's not what's supposed to be occurring. There's a reason you're in here, and it's not to get a good night's sleep.

The dream ceases to exist as soon as you acknowledge it, and you're forcibly snapped back into reality.

By the murmuring of voices around you, they sound displeased. Did you do something wrong?

The mask glued to your face becomes more prominent as your nerves begin to tear back into consciousness. Your lungs are beating slowly, at one, two, one-two, one, two. It's a soothing rhythm that begins to throb in your eardrums, drowning out the voices filled with disappointment.

A chilling liquid seeps into your veins as your body snaps itself awake, and your senses are raw at the sudden introduction to reality. You catch your breath and even them out in a self-taught pattern of one, two, three, four, and exhale again at one, two, three, four.

The slam of a clipboard meeting the floor interrupts your breathing session with a heavy thump in your chest. You shake at the string of curses that follow, with a man saying things you can't understand due to exterior noise being dimmed within your lifepod. He's mad, that's for sure. They did something to your brain and it was supposed to make you bad and awful, but you're the same as ever.

Your cheek still stings from where they'd last touched it.

You allow your bare feet to rub along the smooth glass at the bottom of the sphere you're trapped in. It's not cold as glass is supposed to be, but that's usually common in this sort of pod. Come to think of it, the atmosphere is oddly warm.

Amongst the chorus of arguments outside of your temporary shelter, you hear a sharp, "Get her out
of there."

The sight of seeing one of the doctors storming up to your glass bubble makes your heart automatically pound, and despite the multiple needles and pipes lodging you into place, you still step back awkwardly.

He opens the sphere with a few taps on a keyboard close by, and the hiss of the door opening makes you even more antsy.

It was much more pleasant in the dream-like state, you decide.

He stretches towards you, and you stiffen automatically. He looks at you with a firm displeasure.

"Don't move," he instructs you, and his unruffled voice greatly unnerves you. "It will make it harder to get the needles out."

You're close to spewing out a quick "Go fuck yourself," but you remember the last time that you stored up that much bravery and wasted it on a useless insult. It wasn't a pleasant aftermath, to say the least.

When he reaches in and begins to detach the wires from your flesh, he does so without your wellbeing in mind, so it stings and pricks at the tender skin. You clench your teeth, careful not to emit any sound of pain.

He finishes his work and grabs your arm rather forcibly, dragging you out of the safety of the sphere and setting you outside. Your bare feet are freezing on the tile.

Your arms are glued to your sides, picking at the hem of your hospital gown. They'll want you to change back into your regular clothes pretty soon.

They talk more amongst themselves, but you've stopped trying to latch together what they're talking about a long time ago. It was Dr. Bahandari that had to sit down and explain to you briefly about the products of the Morphogenic Engine. How it's messed up and wrong, and what the doctors have been telling you about how you're bad is not true.

You don't believe the last part, but you agree that experimenting on helpless patients isn't okay on your moral compass.

"Take her to Bahandari," instructs one of the doctors—or rather, scientists, but you're not sure which is which anymore. "I don't want to look at her right now."

"Yes sir." She grabs your hand without your permission and tugs you along. Your arm itches with the contact but there's nothing you can do, so you shrivel in silence.

The gentle rapping of your footsteps along the white hallway is deafening, but the atmosphere is so prickly at the scientist's disappointment in you, their visible emotions as flat as a plane of water, that you have no choice but to wallow in her form of punishment.

Why can't you make it work?

If you were allowed to calculate and analyze all the doctor's notes, then maybe you could see what they were doing wrong. You're not special. You're not different. You're just as bad as any other mental patient here; so why is it not working?

They tell you that you suffer because you deserve it.
You're shoved into a room with walls just as bland as the rest. A desk, an activated x-ray, a covered stretcher to the far corner with a sheet covering a dead body. The usual.

You spot Dr. Bahandari writing on a clipboard, probably recording something or other about the corpse in her office. She turns expectantly when the door swings open and you're deposited inside.

"Make yourself useful and babysit for an hour or two," the scientist says to her, and without another word the door slams behind you.

A sweeping air of momentary comfort is gained upon being with Dr. Bahandari, alone in a room without anyone else's company. It makes your bones weary, but you haven't been told to sit down, so you stand quietly while Dr. Bahandari finishes up her work before clicking the pen and setting the paperwork elsewhere.

She turns off the huge light above the covered body, indicating that her work with the corpse is done. In a swift gesture she releases the bun that her dark dreadlocks are wrapped into and lets the strands fall over her shoulders. She gives a sigh, and you loosen as well.

It means you're safe for now.

Dr. Bahandari looks to you, expression tame. "No such luck?" she asks; unlike the other doctors, her voice isn't hardened with authority, but soft and sober. Like she has a lot to say but she's been drained of the former confidence she may have carried at one point.

You find interest in the tiles below your feet, watching your toes curl and uncurl.

Her heels click as she steps closer to you, and you instinctively fortify yourself for a slap or even a punch. A hurtful scolding if you're lucky.

But no. She settles down to where you can properly lock eyes, her gaze serious yet oddly harmless.

"Ignore them," she murmurs, like she's wary of listeners. "There's nothing wrong with you."

"You can't help but allow a harsh sigh, clenching your gown in your fingers. "You keep telling me that, but you're wrong! Why won't the Engine work on me?"

When you realize you've raised your voice to an authoritative figure, you immediately shrivel with a wave of guilt so strong you're derived of breath. Looking down in-between your feet, you whisper nervously, "I'm sorry, Dr. Bahandari."

There's a pause that is much more scathing than the explosion of a hand against your cheek. But it dissipates quickly when Dr. Bahandari rises to her feet and walks back to her previous occupation of writing something down on the clipboard.

"I've said before that you can call me Sonya, Chara," she tells you, and her foreign accent sweetens the sibilants and plosives. "Just not when the other doctors are around."

A great stone pressing down on your gut is temporarily lifted when you hear that she remembered your name. Your real name.

"I know," is all you have to say for yourself. Stupid stupid stupid.

Sonya is nonetheless unaffected by your reserved structure, as she tends to be. You've learned by now that Sonya isn't entirely familiar with the common social cues you've picked up in your childhood; the doctors seem to isolate her because of it. It's what made you first trust her.
...Well, maybe not "trust". But you don't fear of her hitting you or anything like that.

"Why is my brain wrong?" you ask.

It's a moment of hesitation— or perhaps ignorance to your questions—as Sonya finishes up her notes and turns to you again.

"Your brain isn't 'wrong," she tells you for the hundredth time. "We've discussed this."

You shake your head. "But why is the Engine not working? They said that it should have worked by now!"

Sonya readjusts her papers, seeming to be in thought, but when she's finally pleased with her work she sets it off to the side and gives you her full regard.

"I've explained to you all I know," she says. "What else do you want me to tell you?"

She's right. She's given your graphs, drawn up diagrams of what your insides look like, everything. The more you question it, the more you feel like a nuisance. She seems calm, not impatient, but you've learned from your time with Sonya that she's usually unable to construct her internal emotions on her facial features. She could be sick and tired of you, for all you know. She probably is.

"I just want it to work," you murmur.

Sonya frowns. "No, you don't."

"Yes I do!" you snap, making her flinch. "I'm sick of people telling me how wrong I am!"

The weight of your words sink in as you retreat into your mental shelter, blocking out the external world as your guilt pangs ugly heartbeats in your chest.

You shouldn't yell. Yelling makes you bad.

Sonya takes a long moment, regaining herself, before she leans against the wall and crosses her arms, busy with inner contemplation. Her dark skin makes her look like a fly trapped in a milk glass in this place. You know that her race is a much more vibrant problem with the doctors than anything else. It's not like they were all pleased either when they learned that you were only white-passing, and that the antipodal genetics descended from your mother made you a disgrace.

She probably does feel trapped, maybe just like you feel.

—Don't be ridiculous. No one is like you. No one is as bad as you.

"You can't be broken because you've been exposed to the same amount of psychotic energy that the Engine produces multiple times," Sonya explains. "It's like a virus. Eventually you'll become immune to the disease, regardless of the symptoms, because they have refused to provide an alternative method in properly entering your neurological system."

You nod your head while you listen. People like it when you're interested in them.

She turns to you expectantly. "You saw the Engine, you were exposed to the virus, but you didn't get sick, yes?"

"Right," you reply obediently.

"But the doctors believe that if they introduce you to multiple scenarios, all the same and all just as
terrible as before, you'll become just like the others."

"Is that what they've been doing?"

Sonya nods, somber. "You're designed for something else, Chara."

She says nothing more following her ominous words, leaving you cold.

Dr. Bahandari was never experienced with finding proper analogies for things— you suppose you could have found a better way to explain it—but overall you get the general idea of what she's trying to tell you.

"So...is there a way to make me...you know, crazy? Like the others?" you pry.

Sonya doesn't hesitate as she responds, "Of course."

Your heart thumps. "How?"

She heaves herself off the wall and begins to pace from one corner to the next. A common habit for when she's explaining something scientific, or lengthy, or heavy.

"An alteration in equation, of course," she says brusquely. "A change in perspective of how to enter your brain, seal its images and provide a hormonal imbalance into the brain so that it's able to process —"

She rambles on and on about who knows what, seeming excited at the subject, but you've stopped listening a while after you received your answer.

"If you can do it," you interrupt, "then why don't you?"

Sonya stops.

She looks at you.

"Because I found the solution," she answers you. "And I never gave it to them."

A flare of anger rises in your chest. "Why? Why didn't you?"

If she gave them the formula, the solution, they wouldn't treat you like an unwanted dog anymore. You could be normal. You could be wanted.

You could be better.

Couldn't you?

Sonya gives you a long, long stare that makes you squirm. Her probing eye asks of you to come to the conclusion yourself.

She never answers your question. Instead she invites you to sit and entertain yourself with reading—she went up recently and checked out another book for you, which was thoughtful—and she returns to her work.

You scream at her in your brain, calling her refusal to expose the formula an act of cowardice.

Looking back, you wonder if it was love.
You read in the dark at night. The scarf you'd made when you were with Miles is complete now, and it's resting underneath your bed. If you were to ever need to give a quick gift, it will always be available for you. People like it when you give them things. It makes you seem good.

You'd turned out the nightlight after Asriel had gone to sleep— it was a waste of money in the electricity bill, you thought. It's not like a Variant or doctor followed you home or anything.

Even so, you checked the closet just in case.

The small shuffle of Asriel in his bed makes you jump, but you're able to tame your thoughts. If you ignore the noises, they go away faster.

You skim through the pages, bored with the story at hand— the girl is only involved in the book to be a love interest! What a waste—and scheming on how you could possibly steal the book you'd given Frisk from downstairs, where they reside in the guest bedroom.

That'd be rude, though. Frisk has been so kind to you; they'd hate you if you took advantage of their kindness. They'd never let you borrow anything or talk to them ever again.

It's not worth it.

As you return to your place in the story, you hear a muffled, "Chara?"

It terrifies you, and you stiffen immediately with your heart racing before you soothe your unraveling anxiety. It's Asriel's voice; it was too small and soft to be a threat anyway.

You turn to eye hm, all cuddled up in his blankets and sheets. He's always so cold at night.

Despite his eyes that are glazed with sleep, he seems alarmed. "Why did you turn off the light?"

You stare at him. "I wanted to."

"But—" He stops suddenly when he squints into the darkness to spot you holding a book, propped up comfortably in bed.

"Are you reading?" His tone is incredulous, despite his lagging voice that's still recovering from his slumber.

"Yeah?"

"But it's midnight!" He protests, then adds with an odd tone, "And it's pitch black in here!"

Is it?

You suppose so. There would probably be a reason that the nightlight was on in the first place. You'd never noticed the shadows beforehand, you just thought that the light source was a waste of space.

Since Murkoff, you've never noticed the darkness; at least, not in the way that you're supposed to. When it's a dim environment, you're able to depict the most nonexistent light sources and rely on the grey hues your vision provides. The wavelengths of light make objects and people moving more prominent than you'd assume is normal. You don't remember ever having trouble maneuvering around in darkness beforehand, but then again, a lot of your memories are murky in filing
comparisons between normality and abnormality.

"I can see just fine," you protest to Asriel.

"I can't!" He sits up immediately and snaps his attention towards the inactivated night light. "And did you turn off the light? Chara, I need that!"

You roll your eyes, even if Asriel can't see them.

You don't mind taking advantage of him. That's probably a terrible thing, sure, but he's such an innocent pushover. You've known him since before being administered into Murkoff, and he hasn't changed from the sensitive and kindhearted kid you've befriended years ago.

But that's the problem. He's so innocent, and you're not. You struggle to maintain the ideals of a proper friendship with him, but you want it. You're just not sure how to get it.

Experimenting with cooperation in the real world seems like a waste. It's not like you were ever good enough, and anger is always an easier burden than guilt.

Asriel has flipped himself off the bed and is attempting to go and turn on the night light again. You're not sure why this irritates you.

"You're a crybaby," you snap. "It's fine."

He ignores you and flips the light on, which angers you even more. Even if it helped in making your pages a bit more readable, admittedly.

"Reading in the dark hurts your eyes," Asriel informs you, but his tone is motherly, so you assume that at one point or another Toria told him the exact same thing.

"It doesn't hurt mine."

"It should!" Asriel protests with a huff.

You finally admit impatiently, "Az, I can see in the dark. One way or another, the darkness doesn't affect me."

You immediately regret saying that, because Asriel's eyes widen with a sudden childlike interest you've become used to witnessing.

He'd said once that Toria had warned him of asking you anything that may have had something to do with the asylum or any other dumb triggers that Toria thinks will help get your mind off of what happened. She may as well have said nothing at all; if anything, her unspoken prohibition has only further encouraged Asriel's curiosity about your past and your 'abilities' and about anything having to do with Miles Upshur.

He talks about how Miles said he lost his fingers to a rabid bear (you'd snorted back a laugh at that), and if your eating habits or dressing habits are mentioned you can feel his muted questions burning into your skull from across the table or house.

Its just another sign that there's something wrong about you.

This scene feels no different.

Asriel suddenly flicks the light back off and jumps onto your bed, and you flinch by reflex at the collision that you were unprepared for. He retracts with a squeak, "Sorry!"
He's grown adept to your constant flinching and uneasiness, where you constantly feel the equivalent of standing on the edge of a skyscraper, ready to fall. It's something that you find both irritating and endearing about having him around. He knows you're broken and bad, but at least he doesn't shove it in your face constantly, like Toria and Aegros do.

"You can really see in the dark?" Asriel whispers, looking around the room like it's a gigantic secret.

"Yeah."

His face twists stubbornly, like he does when he's growing aware of trickery you may pull on him (you'd once told him that you escaped from Area 51, and he'd made a similar expression when he slowly began to catch on; granted, though, the fib was a little farfetched.)

He holds out a hand in front of your face, protruding two fingers. "How many fingers?" he presses suspiciously.

This is childish.

But still you answer, "Two."

Asriel's eyes widen with interest as he shifts the number of fingers again to test you even more. "Now how many?"

"Three."

He snatches down his hand, looking secretly impressed but pretending to be annoyed. "You cheated!" he whines.

Frustration latches on a bit of your common sense as you argue, "How could I cheat? It's dark, Asriel."

"Yeah, w-well," he stutters, looking ruffled, "I still think you cheated!"

You slap your book shut—there's no way you're going to finish it now, and it's not like it was that interesting in the first place—and toss it to your nightstand, angry now at the time wasted with this petty argument.

"Whatever," you grumble, making a show of settling yourself down into the covers and snuggling your face into your pillow. "You can think whatever you want. I'm going to bed."

That's a lie if you ever said one. As long as there's danger and uncertainty and a lack of belonging and purpose that you carry, you will never rest. Most likely you'll spend the next couple of hours staring out the window, waiting for something to happen that will snatch you right back into the cruel hellscape you've just managed to crawl out of, before a natural weariness overtakes you. The pills you're given helps increase your constant exhaustion.

You feel Asriel wait a moment longer, seeming like he wants to say something, before you feel him push himself off the bed, and the weight on your mattress alleviates pleasantly.

He tucks himself back in—the only thing he seems to do himself without Toria's assistance, it seems—after putting the nightlight back on without your protests to stop it again. You hear him sigh as he finds his proper positioning in the sheets that protect him from the cold.

The silence is stifling and unfriendly. It's the door for unkind thoughts to skim along your brain and request attention, it allows you to reflect on things you'd rather not. It makes you remember where
you'd spotted Toria stuffing away the sharper knives in a closet near the kitchen.

It makes you anxious.

When you think you're alone, Asriel murmurs, "What's it like?"

There's a small explosion of fireworks in your chest when you realize that he hasn't fallen asleep yet. Your instinctive reaction to the sudden fear is to call out a shocked, "Jesus!" as you settle yourself again.

He really needs to stop doing that.

Luckily, Asriel isn't naive to the point where he can't identify that he's hurt you. "Oh, sorry! Didn't mean to scare you," he says apologetically.

You believe him. But you still squeeze your nose and eyes to calm yourself again. "It's fine," you lie. "What did you say, again?"

Asriel hesitates, seeming uncomfortable, before he explains, "Seeing in the dark. What's that like?"

His question baffles you. You're not sure what it's like, you just *do* it. You pay your ability of night vision the same amount of respect you would give to your lungs for breathing. It's just there; it's not like you can really do anything about it.

You've tried. No such luck.

So you respond with honesty. "It's really nothing special, once you get used to it. A useless ability, really. The only reason I *have* it is because those shit doctors severely fucked up somewhere—"

You freeze upon realizing your mistake and see Asriel's eyes bug out from beneath his cocoon of blankets. Stupid, despicable brat you are.

"I—sorry," you falter. "I didn't mean to—"

"I know," Asriel says, still sounding unhappy but at least he's willing to turn a blind eye to your actions. "It happens. I won't tell Mom."

You ignore that he called her "Mom", like she's your mother as well, to continue, "Well, again there's not much to say. I can just see useless stuff that people just forget about in the dark. It's not like a different reality or something. A stupid superpower, I think."

You abruptly end the conversation by switching over to your other side and pretending to be no longer interested in Asriel's curiosity.

For a long minute you can feel his gaze, wracked in judgement and unanswered questions, drilling itself into you from across the room. You stare out the window as intently as you would if there were an explosion that were about to occur outside.

But then Asriel sighs, kindly and patiently, "Good night, Chara."

It catches you off-guard, how understanding he seems to be on the subject. You think that if you were in his place, you'd be the opposite.

But still. It's nice; it's just not what you deserve, is all.

You reply, "Good night."
It's only polite.

You're still awake when Asriel's breathing becomes automatically slow with sleep. The quiet once again rushes into your head, making you unstable and tired. Just like you've always been.

They'll never go away. The thoughts, the flashbacks, the constant taunting and disapproval that sings in your eardrums like you're expecting a whirlwind of scientists and people from all around to come and observe you. To laugh and mock and criticize every inch of you until you're nothing but a speck of an atom as every part of your body is screaming, We're better off dead, we're better off dead.

When you feel exhaustion droop your eyelids, you don't get up to bother with night light anymore. It stays on, with its illuminating bulb brightening an atmosphere that was never your home, as you sink into a restless slumber.

Breakfast is plentiful.

It always is. Toria is intent on feeding you until you're as plump as a tick. Even if you end up vomiting half of your meal out within the next hour, you poke at your plate until you're able to cram the food down your mouth. She'd probably be upset with you if you didn't eat it; she made the meal just for you, and this is how you repay her?

She sets down a fresh batch of scrambled eggs and pancakes just for you; she even baked chocolate chips into the pancakes.

When you feel her softened hand touch the top of your head, you suffer an internal flinch at the contact. Toria is safe, you keep reminding yourself. Same with Miles. They're both safe.

"Eat up, my child," she tells you kindly, but her friendly stature is surely unrealistic. She's sugarcoating a demand that you must complete, or else she will be most certainly upset with you.

You oblige and eat, using all the proper dining techniques of cutting up your pancakes prudishly before you put them into your mouth.

Toria gives a smile as you finish up your eggs in a calm manner, so that means you're doing it right.

Frisk enters the room with a bad case of a bedhead, their pajamas ruffled and unclean. They look like they've crawled out of a rat's nest.

"Morning, Frisk," you greet them, and Toria's attention turns to them in a heartbeat.

"Oh! Good morning, dear," Toria says with a smile. Frisk returns it airily before they trudge to the table, sitting across from you.

They sign you, Good morning C-H-A-R-A.

"Your pancakes are almost ready," Toria tells them.

Frisk nods and replies, Thank you.

"Of course." Then she's whisked away, back into the kitchen to concoct the said dish for her temporary child.

'Temporary.' That's what you both are, isn't it? This won't last.
When she's gone, Frisk takes an immense interest in you, their eyes growing suddenly concerned.

*How did you sleep?* they ask.

You play with your pancakes, halfway finished. Your stomach is clenching with the portion of the meal being too much for you to digest, but you soldier on anyway. You know the consequences of what will happen if you look like you haven't eaten.

"Fine," you murmur, pretending to be extremely enticed by your breakfast to be interested.

The problem with Frisk is that they're able to practically smell a lie a mile away. It makes your sessions of exhibiting false recovery a tad less believable, which is exhausting. They're always prodding you in sensitive areas in order to make sure you're eating and sleeping and doing everything you're expected to, even when you don't want to.

You can't hold it against them, though. You know Frisk came from an unstable environment. They don't know any better. They're only ten.

Frisk's stare doesn't leave the top of your head as you cast your gaze away from them. You don't need an interrogation of your life choices this early in the day.

You hear them tap the table with their finger to regain your attention, and you oblige in giving them the dullest glare possible.

*You're lying.*

Their blatant observation has you giving a sour chuckle. "Stop the presses," you mumble sarcastically. "Frisk, you've figured out my secret. How could you."

Frisk doesn't seem pleased with you. No one ever really is.

They sign, *I'm worried about you.*

You brush it away. Everyone always says that. They never *mean* it. If they did, wouldn't you be feeling better? Wouldn't they do something to change you into a better person?

"Don't worry about me, Frisk. I'm okay," you murmur, but your heart isn't in the reassurance. You bite back any sort of protest that you're *learning* to be okay, in fear of having the half-lie spark any more unnecessary concern.

Frisk doesn't seem convinced, but to their credit they've learned when it's appropriate to shut up. Their silent criticism subsides when Toria comes in with their plate of food and their assiduity transfers elsewhere.

-  

Your arms itch.

They always do, nowadays. It can grow wildly intolerant when you're bored, and you just want to scrape out all your anger and impulsive anxiety out of your flesh. But Toria has hidden all the sharp objects in the house, so you simmer alone.

Whenever it becomes too much you're driven to perfect your knitting. It's an old habit that you'd picked up when your mother was teaching you 'polite femininity' or some bullshit, and the talent was perfected in Murkoff's care. It was always important back then that you learned to sew and knit and
cook and be a good little girl.

But you were never good enough.

You still continue the habit, now more than ever. You're under heavy surveillance in this house, making you feel guarded and insecure about your actions. Everything has to be perfect and stay perfect. If you ruined the system, well, you'd have to find somewhere else to house your sorry self. So you knit.

Frisk is soothed by the clicks of your needles, so usually whenever you're curled up on the couch or a bed knitting, they join you. You're not sure why the noise is so pleasing to their ears, but you've learned that Frisk just tends to enjoy things that you don't bother to reflect on often, like the texture of a blanket or the beating of a drum. It's just how they're built, and you of all people are in no position to judge.

You're sitting in Aegros's favorite armchair, currently unoccupied, finding immense interest in mixing the colors of purple and white into a large wrap for Toria. It can serve as a physical source of your gratitude so you don't seem so selfish in residing in her household and having nothing to offer in return. It will make you seem worth something, you hope.

Frisk is crouched against the coffee table between you two, drawing and humming a tune you've never heard before. Their crayons are spread along the table as they play with all the colors of the rainbow to compress into their masterpiece.

When they're not looking, you lean forward a bit to have a better perspective on what they're portraying. You spot a house beside four people, all very tall and smiling. You eye the smallest of the figures, with a blank expression that contradicts the vibrant joy of the portrait.

You frown and pause your knitting. "What are you drawing?" you ask.

Frisk looks up at you, like they're surprised that you even asked. Hesitantly, they brush away the leftover crayons along the borders of the paper so that they can hold up the final result.

You don't recognize the figures that Frisk has portrayed, but everyone is holding hands. The kid with the bowl cut and striped shirt obviously resembles the artist themself.

"Who are they?" you ask, referring to the three people around the drawn child.

Frisk looks uncertain on replying immediately, but you can be patient.

When they realize you aren't wavering, they put down the paper and uneasily sign, *My family*.

They've never put that word to any good use. Family. It's this outdated term you never found yourself carrying with wistful nostalgia, nor elation. It's a scary, distant thought. Every time you try and grasp onto the concept of a loving family, like the ones on television, it eludes your grasp and leaves you even more clueless.

Looking at Frisk's reaction to even using the word is like mirroring your own discomfort on the subject. They've never had a place—a person—to call home.

You've heard of Toria and Aegros discussing Frisk's future adoption in hushed whispers. Some guy and his two eldest sons. Frisk met them before, at some point in their indefinite backstory that you never partook in, and now they're going away soon. To find some secret level of happiness you've never known, and maybe something you never want to.
Your attention drifts back down onto the paper; the neutral expression on Frisk's doodled self is still a prominent detail to you.

"Why aren't you smiling?"

Frisk gives you a baffled expression, and you explain, "In the picture."

They don't respond, and the unnatural quiet to their otherwise beaming aura emits a dull skepticism in your gut. You return to your knitting, quietly concluding the topic.

"What is a f-family like?"

You jump, your heart missing one—two beats.

Frisk's voice is never broadened with confidence, and that usually comes with the inexperience they have in practicing their vocal chords. It's always shaky and has the equivalence of broken glass.

It usually means they're asking something important.

After spending a moment boggling at the appearance of Frisk's voice, you realize that they asked a question. "Huh?"

Frisk looks dismayed at your lack of understanding, but they try again, "A f-family. A-a dad."

It's such an incredulous question that you treat it as such.

"How the hell should I know?" you snap, and you find your stomach bubbling with this odd emotion that drives forth a defensive response. Frisk clams up at your exclaim, their mouth sewn shut once more.

You have to condition your heart to become a bit more sympathetic. You don't know much about Frisk and their home life, but you remember them mentioning, very vaguely, about having a mother. A father figure was never brought into the picture at any point in the discussion.

But you don't see how you, of all people, can be of any use to an appropriate answer to their inquiry. You were never even close to your dad! Asriel would be a much better person to ask.

"I have no clue," you tell Frisk, finally, breaking the tense atmosphere.

Frisk looks up at you with surprise; they've already returned to their coloring.

Their mouth opens, but it wavers so fiercely that they retreat to their hands again to provide a voice.

What about that man?

You raise a brow. "What man?"

They seem stumped, unsure of how to emphasize. But then they show their hands, palms faced towards you, and you watch as they bend down their index on the right hand and ring finger on the left.

Oh.

"You mean Miles?" you prompt.

Frisk nods, pleased.
You shake your head. "I'm not understanding the question."

You feel like you know what they're implying, but you don't want to delve deeper into it.

Unfortunately, Frisk is persistent. And they seem to unveil your naive statement and look past your resistant bullshit.

*Isn't he like your dad?* Frisk continues.

You figured that the conversation was veering into this prickly territory. The idea— the thought!—of Miles being some parental source of comfort unlaced some distress you've been attempting to button up since day one.

Parents are demanding and expect so, so much that you'll never personally expect from someone like yourself. They're always watching you and they're supposed to be this greater being on this unlimited pedestal that you'll never reach, because you're never going to be good enough for them.

Miles is so...*human.* He's so sympathetic and understanding as to where you came from. There was never this image of yourself that you feel you have to live up to around him.

It's something unknown to you.

It's *uncomfortable.*

"No. He's not," you tell Frisk, and you instruct your voice to be firm with finality.

It is. Frisk doesn't press the subject any further and grabs a new piece of paper to start another picture.

You don't feel like knitting anymore. You let the needles and yarn fall limp into your lap and stare at Frisk's picture of their family from afar, feeling disgusted with yourself that you were useless to providing an appropriate answer to their questions.

Miles as a dad. How stupid.

Does anyone think that? Does Toria? Does Asriel? Has everyone been suppressing this idea that he's supposed to be your father figure?

You inwardly squirm at the thought. It haunts you for the rest of the afternoon.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter name from song *"The Mute"* by Radical Face

For future reference: the mentions of Chara being white-passing refers to them being mixed Japanese from their mother's side! Never been properly addressed, but there you go. Sonya is Mauritian, which further explains the hints at unfair racial profiling within Murkoff corp.

Also Sonya is written with autism! Which Murkoff is Not Happy With. Hope this explains some things!
time is lost, found cracks along my bones, this metal god is all i know

Chapter Summary

Alt: 'And you know, somewhere in there you know there will be a price to pay till all this goes away'

Chapter Notes

Content warning for those with emetophobia and brief reflection on past suicide/self-harm attempts. This is an explicit chapter featuring body horror and physical sickness so please be safe!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You're sick.

You're not sure why. You just woke up today feeling exceptionally awful. Your bones are lagged with aches and sores and you're not confident that it's considered healthy. Your stomach is currently clenched with sharp cramps, like nails digging into your inner flesh. It throbs, and it reverberates into your skull, promoting a nasty headache.

It could be a result of medication, you try to reason. But the illness feels so abnormal; you're sweating through your clothes and bedsheets, and the soaked fabric is what ultimately has you shuffling upward as your sides explode with pain.

You heave your body upwards, ignoring every instinct that's screaming at you to just sink to the floor and collapse. A strange black substance is bubbling along the ridges of your eyes, and they pop in the back of your brain and provide more awful stings to pulse through your head. If this keeps up, you're probably going to faint.

But you have to look healthy. You really don't want Jackson to mother you all day, especially when you've been seemingly doing much better in getting up and feeding yourself. You can't ruin your reputation just because of a sick day.

You walk into the kitchen, slumping with every footstep like a zombie, chest throbbing and cramps tightening. The sound of a stove is agonizing to your sensitive ears.

The sudden patter of frantic footsteps race closer to you, and you know that Jackson has already caught sight of your condition.

"Miles?" he pries, sounding just as concerned as you'd feared he would be. "Are you feeling alright?"

You settle in one spot, finding no motivation to walk any further. You rub your face with one free hand to try and wipe away the sleep.
"I'm fine," you mumble, but your voice is so hoarse that it erases your argument entirely.

The black dots begin to dance along your closed palpebras, and they try to take shape into some odd figure.

You open your eyes too soon to try and interpret it. It's an awful mistake, because your vision is so sensitive that the lightened room makes your head spin and something sizzles in painfully your hindbrain. You lean forward, almost blacking out.

Luckily, Jackson catches hold of you and attempts to push you back to your room. You try to brush him away but with no avail. Either he's really strong, or you're just too weak. Probably the latter.

"Miles, sit down," you hear him say, his voice blurring as you attempt to shut him out and focus on the pounding of your awful, awful head.

"Sit down," Jackson repeats, and he moves you to what seems to be the couch by the feel of it. "There we go."

You collapse unceremoniously onto the cushions, finding immense comfort in the weight that subsides from your feet as you flip onto your side. You groan at the newly-gained pang in your ribcage; like there's a set of claws scratching the insides of your lungs.

Jackson presses a hand to your forehead, his palm icy against your heated, sweaty flesh.

"Jesus," he murmurs, which is probably not a good thing. You hear him straighten up to tower over your slumped body. "I'll take your temperature. Where's your thermometer?"

The question takes a temporary second for you to process, but you mutter, "Top shelf."

He nods and leaves to retrieve said device. You hear him rifle through your kitchen cabinets to try and find it; he seems to be having trouble, but that's not of your concern.

Now that you're alone, the visions in your eyelids have more time to fully develop, like a black-and-white photograph. Horrifying, but hypnotic.

The frames morph into an awful being, with multiple eyes and an oily silhouette that can only be described as if nightmares took a physical form. It's terrifying.

You snap your eyes open, trying to rid the creature from your mind, but when you look down at your shaking body you swear that your fingers are morphing into black appendages and a web of dark veins that trickle down your arms.

Jackson comes into view, and the blackness wanes.

He's holding the thermometer, and he bends down to your level. God, you probably look miserable.

"Open up," he instructs, and you have no choice but to do as he says. He pops the device under your tongue, despite how cold the plastic feels against your gums.

You clamp your lips tightly around the thermometer, locking it into place, and that's when it begins to beep.

Slowly, slowly. The noise echoes in your ears, enticing you. It's awful and you want it to stop. But you want it to stop. It's attracting some part of your brain that you suspect is linked off from the rest of you. Like it's connected to the thumping of your bones and the dark indigo of your veins. The
creature in your stomach that is scraping its way out of your guts.

It's terrible.

But it won't stop

—The thermometer stops beeping. Thank god.

Jackson plucks it from your mouth, and you tear yourself away from the shadows under your eyes to watch his face curl into one of extreme dismay.

"You have a high fever," he tells you. "I'll call the doctor—"

"No!" You force yourself to work your vocals up to that one word. It's horrible, feeling your voice slither up your scratchy throat, but it's worth it. Anything to make sure you don't get anywhere near a medical facility is worth a sore throat. Hell, it might even be worth dying for.

Jackson is shocked—as are you—that you can even summon any potency into your speech, so much that he hesitates upon acting on his word.

Slowly, he explains, "I know you're concerned—"

"Don't make me go." You seethe the plea through your clenched jaw, refraining yourself from shaking too much to accompany your already-convulsing body. The figure in your mind watches you movements intently. "Please. Please don't make me."

You're wracked into a coughing fit for good measure. Well done, Upshur. That'll show him.

Jackson doesn't seem adept to budging, though.

"Miles, I need to go and get us some more food," Jackson insists. "I can't leave you here sick and unsupervised."

"I'll be fine," you croak, lying through your trembling teeth.

Besides, it's not like you're going to kill yourself or anything while he's gone.

But then again, being alone with some weird monster waiting for you to behind closed eyes is not something you look forward to. But it's a price you're willing to pay, so long as Jackson isn't going to be coddling you all day with soup and blankets and anything else to assuage your sickness. You're for certain that you can do it yourself.

You've survived this long on your own, haven't you?

Jackson studies the temperature that's still showing on the thermometer, then gives a heavy sigh.

"I'll be back in an hour," he finally says. "Can you just sleep until then?"

The exhaustion pulling your body into sleep makes the question seem imprudent. "That won't be a problem," you sigh, sinking further into the couch cushions. Your body is still screaming as you do so.

Jackson paws around your house momentarily to supply you with accessible blankets, pillows, and food from the kitchen. He sets the plate of omelettes alongside a glass of orange juice on the coffee table, close enough to reach without having to strain yourself.
Then he places a small set of various pills. Some of them you recognize as your regular medication, others are probably to alleviate your current condition.

Jackson explains, "I need you to take these right now."

Your bruised body screams no; so you stay put.

"I'm serious," he says sternly. "I'm not leaving until you digest all your pills. I don't trust you alone with them."

A dull form of irritation draws your attention forward to giving him a firm Look. He doesn't waver, and it's infuriating.

"I've seen your records at Refuge," he continues, and god why can't he just shut up? "I know about the knife incident, and about when you stole all those pills another time and—"

"Fine." Anything to get him to stop talking about anything that happened at Refuge. That's a chapter in your life you'd rather keep closed and locked away forever.

You lunge your body forward in a massive heave that pains you greatly. But you clamp your sweating hands around the medicine and, in a foolishly grave attempt to get it over with, you swing your head backward and shove the pills down your throat, almost choking as you fiercely swallow. Your throat burns horribly, but at least you did what you were assigned to do.

Jackson is eyeing you with eyes stretched in surprise at your previous actions. The awful aftertaste dissolves into a bitterness that you can tolerate, so long as you can show Jackson how able you are to take care of yourself for an hour, even when you're sick.

He points to your orange juice, still untouched. "At least take a sip of liquid," he insists.

You'd roll your eyes if you didn't feel like any minute you look anywhere but forward your cornea is going to burst.

But since you want to be alone, you do as instructed, and Jackson assists in helping you bring the glass to your parched lips. The chilled juice is relieving to your raw, heated throat. You suppose some of Jackson's suggestions aren't always a total bust.

Not like you'll ever let him know that.

Jackson sets the glass back on the table once you've gotten your fill and hoists himself up to get moving with his plans for the day. You slump into the couch, grateful to be in tranquil solitude.

A few minutes later—or however long it is, time tends to be an illusion whenever you're stuck in some nonexistent dimension outside of reality—you hear the keys dangling in Jackson's hands.

"I'll be back," he states, and you hear the door creak open. "Call me if you need anything."

You're about to give him a thumbs up in recognition, but halfway through the process your arms flop back to the couch, drained of energy. Truly pathetic; you're glad that Jackson manages not to comment on it.

When the door closes, and it's empty in the apartment, you're alone.

What a scary word. You were alone in the asylum, you were alone in Refuge, and you're alone now.

No. You weren't alone in the asylum. You had Chara.
You think.

_Didn't you?_

—This train of thought is a mess.

When you dream, it's bold and black. There's eyes and blood and static and you can't interpret why
this is. Maybe you never will.

The strands of black curls covering your face are caked with slimy vomit; you're unable to pull back
your own hair as you throw up last night's dinner into the toilet.

Your stomach feels like it's been turned inside out, with the flames of the leftover bile churning in
your weakened andomen. The drool slipping from the corners of your parted lips isn't attractive
either.

Your senses have reached the absolute. You can't open your eyes without an avalanche of headaches
bombarding your temples, and now even breathing appears to be its own challenge. Your heart
thunders in your chest and it's at this moment that you really, really want to die.

The final spouts of spasms clench your stomach, and you vomit up whatever liquid is left in your
body. With heaving sides you flop onto the tile floor, slick with sweat.

Everything hurts. Your optic nerves have exploded into television snow, fluttering across your closed
eyes. The spikes in your gut strike again, causing pangs of electric visions to race across your
corneas.

You swear you're seeing things.

This raw form of fear you've never experienced before is tearing through the fuzziness of nausea,
and you're suddenly aware of your veins pulsing, your heavy breathing. Like there's a ragged being
that's tearing, clawing, eating you alive.

You dry-heave as your sweat beads pour onto the tile, dripping from your nose. You can't breathe as
this roll of sudden pressure chokes your lungs, and there's a pained hurl as you cough out a spew of
blood.

You get on your elbows as best you can and realize that no, that's not blood. It's too dark. But the
remaining liquid left hanging on the corners of your mouth is too thick to be classified as just water.

So what is it?

Shakily, you bring your hand up to the faux blood in your mouth, mindful of the missing index
finger and instead brushing the ridge of your lips with your middle finger.

You dab at the liquid and pull your hands away to examine better, but you're left even more baffled.

The blood is black.

It oozes from your lips like a nasty waterfall, and you end up giving another retch to drain out the
clogging filth building in your throat.

Your veins. You swear to every god out there that you aren't seeing things. Your arms are crawling
with black veins that belong to you. They protrude from your ghostly pale skin, awfully so.
You have to get up.

With a wheezing effort, you force yourself inelegantly to your knees. Your guts give an unsteady tumbling along your sides as you rise shakily to your feet, panting way too much for any ounce of dignity to be left for you if someone were to spot your current condition.

The edges of the bathroom sink are your lifeline as you grip them fiercely, hauling yourself to your staggering feet. Dread of collapsing keeps you on your toes. Quite literally.

Looking in the mirror is a mistake. Even the veins along your eyes and mouth are heavily prominent, colored in a blue and green with a sickly hue that compliment the purples under your tired eyes. Your goosebumps prick syringes into the skin as you examine your current state, your hair and face doused with perspiration, the blood vessels in your eyes reaching your pupils.

You look awful, to say the least.

You are sick.

There's a voice in your head now, full and could be fully mistaken for a conscious or a symptom of insanity if the voice didn't make your insides plummet with newfound terror.

You're so pale now. Almost see-through. Almost inhuman.

Then your nose begins to bleed.

God, as if you couldn't look any worse! What's Jackson going to say about this? He'll never leave you alone again.

The red droplets stain your faucet, and you lean expectantly down in the sink for if your stomach attempts to empty itself again or if your eyes decide to start leaking. At this point you seem to be up for anything.

We are unstable, this way, the voice booms in your eardrums. It's an anonymous tone, one that you couldn't properly latch onto a human speaker if you had the ability to think about it. You have the weirdest, strangest feeling you've heard the voice before. But you can't pinpoint where.

(You have officially lost your mind. This is what happens when you lose your mind, isn't it? You start to hear things and then you're placed in the loony bin, left to rot and die insane and alone.)

But your voice finds your neck and then your teeth and finally it explodes from your shivering lips.

"What are you."

It doesn't like being addressed.

Your guts twist, twist, keep twisting. You think you gave a small scream at the movement but it keeps shifting in your place, like it's nesting inside of your sick body. Whatever this thing is doing inhabiting your skin—or whatever it is, if it's even a physical problem—is so painful and awful, like thousands of needles are pressing into your ribs.

It retracts, giving a snarl. Its gnashing escapes your own mouth and you growl at your own mortal reflection. Your eyes are dripping fat, black goop.

Heal yourself, it whispers.
Then you think harshly, hoping that it can hear your exasperation, *That's impossible.*

**It's not.** You jump when it responds to your unspoken retort. It sleeps through the cracks of your brain like tar, slipping into areas that you keep yelling at it to get out, *get out!*

You fumble to the floor, overtaken by fatigue. A rush of something vibrant and immobilizing reels you close to fainting.

**How else could we have escaped?** it asks.

*Escaped what.*

Soft spots—lots of soft spots—open up and pop into bursts of stings, sharp and bad and they keep sinking deeper and deeper like bullet holes and you're seeing black *black red red red red*

*S t a t i c

I j u s t

w a n t e d t o

**g e t**

o u t

- 

"You're wrong! This isn't like Billy Hope at all! Look at it!"

"It's fine, Cooper. Just extract the swarm when we can and we'll just let itself die out. Think of it like a candle. A flame can't survive without oxygen, correct?"

"N-no..."

"Then the Walrider can't survive without a proper Host. Now try the Extraction Scan again. I'm not letting this son of a bitch attempt to escape our radar again with that thing attached to his life support."

"Sir, one final Scan could kill him. If he dies, then the Walrider is going to target one of us."

"Keep your voice down! I think he's awake."

Your eyelids sting. You attempt to wake up with languor tugging you downward, drowning you, making you feel like a pile of organs without a head.

"Wakey wakey, mister Upshur."

When your vision adjusts, you're glued to a machine. The world is blue and white and blurry. *Where are you? What are you?*

You are the totality of nothing. You are the end result of something that went wrong.

"Feeling good? You need anything?"
The singsong voice is enthralling. It stings your ears. You shut your eyes and try to recognize yourself. Practice a voice.

There's the faint sound of a needle. A machine.

"Son of a bitch..."

And then *everything stings*

"Smith! That's *enough*!"

Your skin is crackling. You think you're screaming but you deserve pain because that's all you are. Nothing but pain and needles and nails for bones.

"*Stop!* You're going to kill him!"

"He can't die, dumbass. The least I'm going to do is summon the Walrider."

"The 'least you're going to do' will *kill* us all!"

"**ENOUGH.**"

The Thing takes over your bones and you scream as it controls you and kills everything. It kills everything and you do nothing.

*Maybe you killed everything too.*

You don't know. Flies and wounds and organs indecipherable to the human race have become your playthings. Your daydreams. Your thoughts.

*You're not human anymore.*

And so you kill and bite.

And *kill.*

And *kill.*

And *scream.*

.

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Until you don't.

And you pass out.

And you become human as aches lag your once-godly bones and swallow you whole. Into nightmares that merge with reality. You collapse in someone else's blood.

You know that sound. You know that buzzing.
"Five things you can see."

You groan, unamused. "Fan, picture...that god-awful lamp...bed sheets...and your ugly fucking face."

Jackson frowns at your halfhearted insult that you'd managed to scrape up from your scattered brain.

"I see you're feeling better," he remarks, sounding like you're not sure if he's intending a hint of sarcasm or if he's making final, calculated checks regarding your mental health.

Your head is definitely clear, almost like it was pumped with an artificial intuition that erases the former fear and sickness you have a faint memory of living personally. Possibly you were kept in bed for way longer than a couple of hours, maybe you were even—

*Maybe you were hospitalized.*

It enables this raw uneasiness you haven't experienced in so long. The thought of needles pinned into your flesh and your life being monitored on machines.

Jackson is able to distract your spiraling anxiety through giving the lump of blankets covering your lower body a gentle smoothing.

"You've been out for a good couple of days," Jackson admits, sounding unaffected by the fact. "I mean...I guess you were out? I don't know, do you remember anything?"

You loll your head to the side of the pillow, fatigue dragging your body as far down into the bed as possible.

"Remember anything like what," you croak.

"I don't know," he sighs. "You were mumbling an awful lot. Something along the lines of 'wanderer' or...I'm not sure. It was pretty creepy, though."

Jackson gestures to his eyes as he explains, "Your eyes would open, and they would be really glassy. I had to contact several emergency backup numbers to get reassurance that you were okay."

"And what did the emergency backup numbers say," you ask, inattentive now. Lethargy threatens to close your eyes again.

You see Jackson shrug from the corner of your vision, which is already too sensitive and you give your eyes a quick flutter to keep the dizziness at bay.

"They said that you were fine," he says wistfully. "Although I beg to differ. You were a bleeding and oozing mess when I got home."

You're growing more tired by the minute, probably a side effect of some sort of medication that was stuffed into your system when you weren't paying attention.

"No hospital," you mumble, wearily and half-delirious. You can't think straight anymore, your mind driving into every which way and that. It's unsettling.
"Not yet," Jackson replies, and your heart does a quick beat.

"Not now, at least," he adds, and your heart speed decreases by the dozen.

He suddenly takes you hand, squishing your fingertips so awkwardly that you hiss at the contact, given how sensitive and raggedy you feel.

"Stay awake," Jackson commands— no, not commands. He <em>begs</em> you. He sounds worried, perhaps upset with you. Like he doesn't want you to go.

"Please," he adds, softer, firmer.

<em>Jesus Christ. </em>You've never seen or heard him like this.

So you obey. You slither his grasp away from your hand and adjust your vision to the world around you. The room filled with the ceiling fan, your picture frames, your lamp, your bedsheets, and Jackson. Your bedroom.

"I feel fake," you whisper, surprising yourself as you gander at your environment.

"You're not fake," Jackson reassures you.

"I <em>am</em>, though!" You attempt to sit up properly, ignoring the dull ache in your torso as you support yourself with pillows. You sweep your arm around the bedroom with something heavy in your heart that sickens the formerly-comforting aura this room once provided for you.

"This isn't my room anymore," you say sharply. "I haven't belonged anywhere ever since I walked into that damn asylum, and I can't even be there for that <em>fucking</em> kid! I don't think you understand how I feel so detached from everything because everyone is living out their lives and being okay and normal, and I can't <em>be</em> that!"

You clench your fists into the blankets, clawing at the fabric with a growing rage you can no longer contain. "I'll never be like them because I'm a <em>thing</em>! I'm supposed to stay alive and be normal and okay and I <em>can't</em> do that! I need you to watch me and make sure I don't get stupid and try to <em>kill</em> myself again, and I get sick and I pass out and I can't <em>do</em> this anymore! Even that kid is making better use of themselves and I'll never be anything but a washed-up prodigy of a stupid, <em>stupid</em> decision—"

"<em>Stop</em>."

Jackson's voice is firm as he takes your hands back into his own, withdrawing them from your deadly grip on the covers.

"You're not a <em>thing</em>," he insists, staring at you so harshly that it makes you stop and interpret his words. "You're trying to process a fucked up event that happened to you." He gestures downward to gaze at your missing fingers. "You lost your fingers, dude! That's hard! I saw everything you went through, and it was <em>hard</em>. You're going to be fine. It's only been a month. Just give it <em>time</em>."

Then he dispatches his grip on your hand, leaving you alone with your mutilated hands to hold themselves for company.

"And as for the kid, it's <em>fine</em> to feel a little weird about it," Jackson continues, his voice transitioning into something a little more gentle. "I get it. You're not sure how to view them or treat them, and maybe I haven't been fair to you about that. Maybe none of us have."

You groan. "But I still don't know what to <em>do</em> about them! I mean, do I ignore them? Should I just
see them every other weekend or something?"

This makes Jackson chuckle lightly despite himself. "Like I said, give it time. Chara has a family now, but you can still be their friend. Maybe their supporter from a distance."

The thought leaves you uncomfortable for reasons you can't pinpoint correctly, but you stiffly nod.

"You don't have to be anything but a person, Miles," Jackson concludes, giving your shoulder an encouraging pat. "You're just a human. You'll be okay."

The term 'human' is unnerving. You don't feel like one. Anything but, really. The thought is like razors in your brain, activating a touchy nerve that you don't want to probe any further.

"Water," you say, suddenly feeling very parched.

Jackson, thankfully, doesn't seem altered at the deterring subject topic. He nods loyally. "I'll be right back."

He leaves to fetch the glass of water in question. You hope he comes back soon; you don't want to look at yourself or be alone with yourself or anything else involving a similar matter of self-reflection.

But at least you have an idea of what you'll do when you're better. Once your fever blows over, have two people in mind that you'd like to pay a visit to.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter name from song "The Gilded Hand" by Radical Face

Since people seem curious, here is a very small attempt to wade into the inevitable fate of posting art on the Internet. Maybe more will follow once I stop chickening out, I dunno
The clean walls of the facility have always been familiar to you. Whether it be a hospital, a courthouse, anywhere you were whisked away to show how wrong you were or how messed up of a situation you've gotten yourself into. They all look the same in the waiting room, you think.

Teasing your natural curiosity, you give the room a steady observation. There are people minding their business, reading magazines or twitching on their feet, looking burdened with something. But if one dares to lift their head an inch over to your direction, you duck away immediately, your heart pounding to the steady rhythm of *don't look at me, don't look at me, please don't look at me.*

Toria is talking with someone, that's all you know. That's all anyone seems to do nowadays. Talk and talk and talk yet nothing is resolved. Not from what you can see. It's about you, though. All the incomplete arguments and constant governmental concerns received via call or email is all because of you. It seems like no one is certain on how to handle you.

Aegros had agreed to keep you company in the waiting room, knowing how antsy you become in white-walled environments. But he was called into the back by an angry Toria, unyielding to his reasonable protests upon leaving you alone. Her silent fuming was so intense that you'd scooped yourself inward and curled into a useless ball to guard yourself from her wrath. Aegros gave you a gentle consolation and assured you that it's okay and that everything would be fixed momentarily. Then he left.

You've been shuffling under the public eye for so long now that you feel your limbs prickling in the familiar sensation that often leads to you scratching at your skin. Since this is usually inexorable when your anxiety is close to getting out of hand, Toria left you in the waiting room with a smooth gemstone to relive your twitching fingers. The texture of the rock is comforting, so you thumb the crystal fiercely and marvel at the glistening colors. It's enough for now.

There are faint voices that are sharp and angry from a distance, but you feel the dull beating of your heart increasing, because you remember when those footsteps and voices were all headed towards you, and you were about to get yelled at and they'd pull your hair and call you names because you were bad bad bad bad—

Toria bursts into the waiting room with a hard slam of the door, nearly breaking the wall behind her. She storms towards the exit with Aegros behind her, looking concerned for his wife.

She turns to where you're seated, and you freeze under her dark gaze. "Chara, let's go," she snaps, and her voice is so unsettling in that concealed fury you're so familiar with amongst adults that you immediately scampers to her side, staring at your feet and frantically rolling the gemstone in one hand.

When Aegros puts a guiding hand on your shoulder from behind, you give a terrible flinch and he pulls away, almost in shame.
A woman rushes after you and Toria and Aegros, seeming rattled about something or another. You hunch your shoulders as she draws nearer.

"Ma'am, I can reassure you, we're doing everything we can—"

Toria whips around to face the woman. "I want to hear none of it!"

The waiting room's inhabitants are surely paying attention to the scene now, if they weren't before. The multiple eyes probing the back of your head is making you shrivel and squirm in place. But Toria is persistent.

"Tori—" Aegros tries, but is halted.

"You're scared to face Murkoff! That's it! That's all it is!" You can imagine steam spewing from her ears at this point. "You are a coward! I refuse to do any further business with people that are too scared of losing a paycheck to conduct proper investigations, and all the while my child is still illegally corporate property!"

You don't fully understand, but her words make you feel small. Your knuckles are white as you squeeze the gem in your palms.

"I understand that you're upset," the woman stammers, flushed at Toria's accusations. "But please, you must acknowledge that we can't delve into Murkoff's records without putting thousands of jobs, maybe even lives on the line!"

"Chara is my child," Toria seethes. "If you cannot accept that from a legal standpoint, it's in your hands."

There's a heavy silence that falls across the room, like the world has given a moment of reflection upon her statement. The quiet only makes your guts wriggle, because you imagine Toria's anger and disapproval is directed, somehow, towards you. Not even Aegros attempts to comfort you.

Finally the woman sighs. "Mrs. Dreemurr—"

But Toria doesn't seem to want to hear it. She clicks her heels forcibly as she exits the room, leaving Aegros to clean up the mess.

He turns to the woman and offers a respectful apology before he rushes you along out the door, and you follow his directions without daring to look back.

The eyes of the lawyers and businessmen and people from the waiting room follow you all the way to the car.

- 

As Aegros drives you all home, Toria gives a sigh that interrupts your regularly-scheduled dissociating out the car window.

"Chara, my dear, I'm sorry," she says sadly, and she flips herself back towards you, with Aegros giving her a curious look from the mirror that you catch.

Her eyes are soft, but probably fake. Surely she's much more upset with you than this. Surely.

You haven't said anything to her apology and instead pick at the tiny crevices of the rock while you watch the world swirl by you outside.
"I should never have snapped at you," Toria continues, growing distressed. She reaches out to you, as though in pain, but it's natural to avoid her touch, especially since she just now yelled at you.

She seems taken aback at first by your defensive response, but Aegros lays a comforting hand on her lap whilst he's driving, delivering a silent message that you have no part in. You awkwardly downcast your gaze to the colored rock that you flip over and over in both hands.

"Chara? Sweetheart?" Toria pleads gently. "Can you please, please look at me?"

Obeying her orders, you meet her eyes and are astounded at how genuinely loving she seems to be, emitting warmth from her soft eyes into your soul. You glue your knees together and shuffle your toes through the sneakers you're wearing.

"I'm truly sorry," Toria repeats. "Please forgive me. I want you to feel safe around me, my child. Hurting you was never my intention."

"Okay." You nod.

If you're cute and nice, no one will hate you.

Toria's eyes brighten and her lips form a smile. To her credit she doesn't try to reach for you again and instead turns back around to her husband, whom exchanges a knowing look with her that seems effervescent. So you guess that was the right thing to say.

It's a while of having them believe that you're simply daydreaming by looking out the car window before you find the courage to ask, "What's for dinner?"

The aura in the car transitions to normality once more. Aegros’s eyes crinkle from the mirror as he looks at you. You're not sure, but you think he's smiling.

"A simple roast chicken and rice meal tonight. We're almost home," he informs you. "We will feed you then. Your mo—Toria is making a butterscotch-cinnamon pie for dessert."

You've always enjoyed her cooking, and your stomach gurgles at the thought of eating dessert. Toria is quite favorable upon your preference of butterscotch over cinnamon, and she always adds that ingredient first before the second choice of cinnamon (usually Asriel's favorite). Which makes a difference, mindfully.

You're quiet all the way home, listening to Aegros's and Toria’s quiet chatter about the events that just occurred. Something that you're still unsure that you're understanding.

You've known for a long time now that they're planning to adopt you. You're not stupid; eavesdropping has been a constant talent of yours since you were a child. You know that the reason for the visit today had something to do with getting you officially adopted by them. The problem is that your parents had given Murkoff legal custody to you, and now everyone is too antsy to get their hands on any files that Murkoff and their remaining henchmen may have access to. It's logical. No matter what loopholes the Dreemurrs will find—as they tend to do; they've dealt with messy custody cases like this before in their careers—you're always going to be labeled as Murkoff property. It's just inevitable; you've tried to explain subtlety to them that Murkoff isn't like the other corporations the Dreemurrs may have had to encounter; they're dirty and rotten and will scrape the bottom of the barrel if needed in order to keep your file on their watch. You're never going to escape them, and you've accepted that.

Okay, you're getting used to accepting that. But point being that Murkoff is always going to be
breathing down your neck whether you like it or not. You're not understanding why neither Toria nor Aegros will come to proper terms with that.

Nevertheless, you pretend to be so absorbed in fondling your gemstone that you allow them to continue fabricating plans to have you legally a Dreemurr. It doesn't matter what your views on the subject of having a family are, so long as they don't yell at you again.

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When dinner is served that night, Toria is babbling to Frisk excitedly at the table. You've zoned out as you force your stomach to digest all of your food properly rather than pay attention to what's occurring on the sidelines.

Asriel prods your shin with his foot from under the table, and you jump when your name is called unexpectantly.

You swallow your morsel of food, aimlessly looking at whoever summoned you into the conversation. "I'm sorry?"

Asgros gazes momentarily in Toria's direction, then tells you patiently, "I said, 'Aren't you excited to meet Frisk's new family, Chara?'

You frown. "Why? Are they coming over or something?"

Toria answers, whilst lovingly smoothing Frisk's hair, "They'll be by tomorrow for a quick visit. We know that you've never met them before."

"They're really cool!" Asriel adds. "The dad is like a scientist or something!"

The word "scientist" makes your shoulders stiffen and the world collapses around you, creating a blockade to guard you from any opportunity of finding Frisk’s new father anything but mendacious.

Seeing your sudden change in expression, the family becomes aware of what they've just done.

"Oh, Chara," Aegros says softly. "He's nothing like that."

"He's a loving father to his two sons," Toria chimes in with a nod. "He works at a medical facility downtown. His son is even an intern there alongside him."

You don't really care. Scientists are all looming figures that probe you and put things inside your body and try to figure out what makes you wrong.

You can help but perceive that Toria and Aegros sound nonchalant at your anxiety. Like, oh dear, there they go again. You're just expected to be like this now; it's always entertaining to see what exactly pushes you off the deep end nowadays. Their soft smiles become curled into a mocking smirk that sears your growing distress. You're so silly, just a silly little child.

When Asriel pokes you again with his foot, you force a smile onto your face. You look at both Dreemurrs and reply, "That sounds wonderful. I'll be glad to meet them."

Your complacent tone, smooth like honey, is experienced enough so you can fool even the most discerning adults to leave you alone. It worked with many doctors at Murkoff, so you're not surprised to see both adults at the table loosen at your supposed approval.

"Splendid," Toria says happily. "He will be here tomorrow afternoon, so please be awake at that
"Yes, Toria," is your mechanical response.

"You don't have to look prim and proper, just be polite and be yourself."

"Yes, Toria."

The eating resumes, disregarding your existence once more. You pick at your food again.

When you lock gazes inadvertently with Frisk, you notice how oddly trivial their face has become. As Toria and Aegros are talking amongst themselves, Frisk has broken away from the attention just long enough to give you a long, long stare that makes unsteadiness squirm in your gut.

There is no payoff to this encounter outside of defensive bitterness that you attempt to shoot back at them with a glare. The impotence of the message you were trying to imply goes straight over their head it seems, and when all else fails you retreat to your plate, with Frisk's eyes anatomizing your every movement from across the table. Almost like they're trying to tell you something.

Once again, Asriel prods you. Since it's a bad time to do so, you make a show of leaning farther away from his reach and cramming the food down your throat so you can excuse yourself from the table.

Naturally, this causes you to vomit an hour later, but you call it a victory as you've avoided yet another confrontation with Frisk and your future parents.

They pushed you into this room, painted grey just like all the other recreational areas in the building, and left you with a doctor.

He is calm-mannered as he brushes his fingers along the open wounds you've carved into the skin. Again. His face is unnervingly blank as you force yourself to steady under his hand's inspections over your own.

When he pulls away, he tells you, "We've talked about this."

You nod stiffly, pinning your arms back to your sides.

"I thought you were going to learn how to substitute cutting for knitting."

"Yes, sir—" You can barely get the mumbled apology past your lips before the hand explodes pain onto the left side of your face, and you wince. The skin prickles at where he slapped it, but you refuse to bring a hand up to where there's certain to be a red mark now.

"What is it going to take for you to stop being such a fucking _bitch_ about this!" He yells, and the words bounce revoltingly in your chest. Your knuckles whiten as you dig crescents of pain into your palms with your fingernails.

"You're doing this to be inconsiderate on purpose, aren't you?"

"I—"

The other cheek receives a similar slap, but harsher and closer to your eye. His nails scraped the ridges of your closed eyelid, so there's sure to be a scratch from the fingernails.
You stifle a sniff as the pain simmers on your heated skin. "I'm sorry, sir," you apologize, trying to sound as confident as possible while your fear threatens to swallow your voice whole.

He pauses, and you ready yourself for if he decides to hit you again, but he doesn't. He pinches his nose with his fingers, crinkling the skin beneath it, and gives a noise of frustration.

"If you don't oblige to this treatment—"

"I will!" you exclaim reflexively, becoming more and more terrified. What if he calls your parents? What if they strap you into that machine again and force you to watch that unsettling film?

The panic is enough to have you interrupt a doctor. Upon realizing your mistake, you take a step back as he looks at you with incredulity. You cover your mouth with a squeak.

"I'm sorry, sir!" you shrivel, the words tumbling out of your mouth. "I'll be good! I'll knit, I promise!"

Anything to get him to go away. You'll be good, you swear on it. You don't know if your raw skin can take another beating.

For a second, you see a lightbulb pop over his head as his face brightens.

He tells you, "Come with me."

Of course you follow.

Your naked feet rap along the smooth floors as you walk behind him, making sure to recite his footsteps from behind with consensual respect to his authority. His own polished shoes tap the ground with ferocity, like he knows where he's going.

The blinding white walls of the place have always been horrendous to you, making you troubled at the cleanliness of the area, even though you're aware of every slap, every punch, every bloodspill that happens in these hallways. You've witnessed it, you've experienced it firsthand. It's all just a big cover to what really happens here.

Eventually you reach your supposed destination, and after a quick conversation with a passing doctor, he leads you into a large, empty room, save for a couple of seats and tables and a giant one-sided window taking up a good half of one wall.

Only one large man occupies the room, seated with a basket of sewing supplies and yarn to one side of his seat. He seems sober enough, despite his large demeanor that automatically makes you feel small and vulnerable. His patient outfit doesn't soothe your doubt.

You're pushed inside, and the doctor explains brusquely, "We will be watching you from that window." He points to the large black glass that you've already taken into account. "Don't stab yourself, don't kill yourself, and don't be a nuisance."

His unnerving advice sticks to you like thorns as he shuts the door, leaving you alone in a giant room with a prisoner.

The said man looks up at you roughly, his expression guarded but still furrowing into a scowl when he realizes he has company. You gulp and step towards the supplies laid out on the table, seeing as that's the only one that has a basket on it.

You step closer, cautiously, feeling heavily watched. This is all probably just a huge tease, for the
entertainment of the doctors that are definitely eyeing you behind the window. This doesn't seem like a sound therapy lesson—sure, leave a child with open, untreated wounds in a huge room with a muscular male prisoner that has needles and other potential weapons at his disposal, what could go wrong?

Speaking of, you feel the blood begin to clot at the itching cuts on your arms, and when you see the man raise a brow as he examines the scratches, you shakily attempt to cover them with crossed arms, your hands sinking into the flesh angrily.

Humiliated, you shuffle in place, curling your toes, before you remember that there is surely a punishment planned if you don't play the doctors' games.

Sucking in a breath, you walk over to take a seat across the table from where the man is now ignoring you and is working on stitching two fabrics together idly.

You're furiously trembling now, feeling like your heart is about to explode from your chest. But you observe your supposed opponent; he's strong, obviously, and his strength will surely leave a mark. But his face is downcast, darkened with something you can identify yourself with: uncertainty. Perhaps fear.

It's what has you taking a huge step of faith and holding out a hand. You're courteous enough so that you've learned that other patients don't enjoy having a hand suddenly jerked towards their direction, so you make a small cough to indicate the future movement, and when the man looks up from his work you hold out your arm to him, palm upward rather than sideways (you've learned that many patients don't enjoy having the handshake introduced in the position that you might hurt them, so you do your best to avoid any triggering actions).

"Hello," you say, maintaining posture.

The prisoner stares at your hand for a long minute, and your stomach eats itself alive with the crippling anxiety that he may strike you—

Then, mimicking your actions of slowly holding his hand out and skeptically taking your hand into his much larger one, he shakes it.

Immediately he snaps his hold away from yours and returns to his work. It's then that you realize that he's just as fiercely wary of you as you are of him.

It's almost funny. You snort back an instinctive laugh.

"What are you making?" you ask.

No response.

Perhaps he's mute?

You experiment with communication by bringing your hands up to your chest and signing, *What are you making?*

The fast movements catch his attention, but the look of placid confusion in his face indicates that he's probably not mute. Or at the very least he never learned American Sign Language.

Feeling stupid, you crumble back into your chair, knitting your arms and legs together. You wish this was over.
Then a gruff voice echoes along the room that is not your own.

"Why are you here."

You jump, staring at the man with widened eyes.

His voice is hoarse, like he's been yelling for a long time, but at the same time it's carefully reserved. There's a slight hint of an accent within the tone, but you can't recall where it may have originated from.

His gaze pierces into your own, and you recognize his reflexive watchfulness as a look you've performed many times beforehand. The familiarity makes you comfortable.

So you shrug. "I was brought in here," you reply meekly, but honestly. "They got mad because I—I can't knit."

The lie fumbles from your lips and drips into the atmosphere, making you tense. The consequences usually derived from lying makes you very inexperienced with producing believable fibs under pressure.

The man doesn't believe you. You can sense it. But he gives an apathetic "Hm," and continues to be uninterested in you.

You don't want to reach for the basket, since it's closer to him than it is to you, and you don't want to set off his impatience or anger. So you stay put, inwardly stewing with your discomfort.

"Can you teach me how to knit?" you blurt out.

The question makes the man stumble in the process on his task and he looks back up at you with automatic dubiety.

Your heart flips. "I mean— if you want to— I just, don't—don't want to get in trouble I—I'm sorry —"

Anxiety stirs your brain and words meld into nonsense, and your fingers begin to twitch and you feel your nails digging into the fresh cuts, ready to dig deeper if needed.

Your hair is blocking your vision, so when you see the man shuffle for something with an outstretched hand, you immediately spring back upward.

You watch helplessly as he grabs a set of knitting needles that are so big he can impale you with them in a second, and you sputter—

Then he sets them down near you.

You pause. Is he giving you power to hold giant needles?

When you look at him strangely, he almost scoffs, his eyes hard. "Do you want to learn to knit or not?"

Naturally you mutter, "Yes sir."

He narrows his eyes. "'Sir'?"

"I mean—yes."
You reach for the needles.

"Okay, now get some yarn," the man continues, placing an indicating hand on the basket that holds bundles of colors. "Which one would you like?"

Enticed, you answer, "Aqua, please."

He throws the aqua-colored wrap toward you, making you jump as it lands in your lap. You twist one loose strand of the yarn and marvel at the soft, wooly texture.

"What do I do now?" you ask calmly, still twirling the yarn through your fingers.

The man abandons his current project and moves to maintain the similar tools of knitting needles and a yarn colored a vivid red.

When he instructs you that you have to tie knots and insert stitches into the fabric, you follow his handwork with meticulous care, in fear of making a sudden mistake. But the process is pretty fun, you'll admit. Certainly keeps the hands busy.

The inevitable occurs when you skip a stitch.

"Fuck!"

The curse escapes you with instant frustration, and it was louder than intended. You clam up automatically, expecting punishment for your sudden cry.

But the slap never comes, nor the insult. The man seems more surprised than you, but for differing reasons.

He pauses his work to comment, "You have a bit of a foul mouth for someone your age."

Hearing that from him is a tad peculiar, as you feel that if you knew him well enough it wouldn't be uncommon for similar curses to be a part of his daily vocabulary. His hard eyes and slick, black haircut make for an intimidating figure that you can't portray as someone who is courteous and polite all the time. Everyone has dark sides, don't they?

You lower your head in shame. "I'm sorry," you answer lowly. "I missed a stitch."

Instead of prying, the man responds, "An easy fix. Not worth a swear."

"Sorry."

"And stop apologizing so much."

"Sorr—right."

He tells you how to atone for the mistake and you're on your way again to making a scrappy, but somewhat decent, fabricated square.

You admire your work. It's made the obsessive tingling of your skin subside so you can focus better without the overwhelming urge to scratch or scrape your exposed arms.

When you look over at the man's work, your confidence strains as you notice how smooth and beautiful his stitches are as they form into a long scarf. He's much farther along than you.

You stop knitting to wallow in pity.
He notices the sudden delay and says, "Why did you stop."

You frown, repulsed by how ugly your project is compared to his. "This is dumb."

"It's not 'dumb'," the man snaps, which surprises you. "You wanted me to teach you how to knit, and I've done that. You're doing fine."

You toss the yarn onto the table with an agitated huff. "I don't even *like* knitting! I just did it because they told me to!"

He rolls his eyes. "Then stop doing it," he responds curtly, his tone becoming edged with annoyance.

"I can't!" You whip out your scarred arms and force him to give a gander at the crusty wounds. "Because this is what happens when I can't knit!"

Then, in a moment of heated foolishness, you point to the throbbing scratch on your cheek from the doctor's fingernails. "And this is what happens when I refuse to!"

It becomes quiet. You feel agitation from the other side of the glass window, like you've touched on a subject that will surely have someone storming in and pushing you back into your cell.

You notice the man's gaze investigating the wounds with a keen eye, but to your shock he doesn't seem remotely interested, only giving another absent hum of consideration.

He clicks his needles and resumes finishing his scarf. "I don't see why that should be my problem," he tells you apathetically.

His ignorance to your pain is so familiar that you project a sudden wave of anger in his direction.

"It *should* be your problem," you say testily, "because they put us in here for a fucking reason, didn't they? They want you to teach me how to fucking knit and you're going to fucking like it!"

"Language!" the man snaps.

"Fuck you!"

He seethes internally, giving you a menacing glower that, in your rare moments of courage and persistence, you return to him. It's a showdown, a battle of will, and you aren't going down without a fight.

To your astonishment, it's the man that caves in. He exhales a sharp breath before he growls, "And why should I help you?"

You let your foolish determination make that call for you. You respond quickly, "Because you're in here for your own reason, aren't you? If you don't help me, they're going to take you back to your jail cell."

He stiffness at the mention, and you know you've struck it rich.

But immediately his discomfort is backtracked with a timed scoff, refusing to look you in the eye. "Maybe then I'll have a little peace and quiet," he retorts.

You pause, then you answer calmly, "So why don't you want to go back to your cell then?"

"I never said I didn't."
"It was implied through your body language."

The cross look of defense that darkens his gaze makes you confident that you hit a soft spot.

It's a long while of skepticism before the man gives a long exhale of defeat, which is music to your ears. "Fine then," he mumbles, displeased. "Go back to your knitting and I'll tell you what to do from there."

You give a cheeky grin at his proposal and retrieve the needles and yarn as instructed. "Thank you for your cooperation," you preen.

He's ticked, sure, but he doesn't say anything. It gives you a feeble sense of power that is rare and captivating around these parts.

"What's your name," he asks you, finally, as you're twisting the strings closer together and mimicking his movements.

"Chara," you say, and you don't feel yourself faltering for a moment because you're not lying. You are honest to your word. Your name is Chara. It has been and always will be.

When you see the man take into account your words, you don't see any suspicion arouse from his expression. It's a sensation of birdsong that lifts your chest and makes you excitedly click your needles a bit faster, ignoring the faults in the stitching.

"What's your name?" you return politely, feeling lighter than air.

The man runs a quick hand across his slick, black hair that is gleaned to the top of his head, the rest being shaven off. He looks reluctant before the same burst of confidence that you've recently obtained has him holding out his hand in a similar fashion that you had originally done with meeting him; arm straight out, palm upward. Harmless.

"Eddie," he replies, voice even.

You take his hand with a kind smile. "It's nice to meet you."

"Likewise." His voice is still unkind, but not scathing.

You retract your hand again, and you and Eddie fill the silence that follows with the clicking of your needles. He makes a few small comments when you find yourself in a pinch with your work, but other than that you find the quiet pleasant. It's the nicest tranquility that you've felt in a long while.

The doctors eventually become bored with monitoring you and the same doctor that struck you arrives to pick you up. As you get up to leave, Eddie stops you.

He looks unsure of himself, but in realizing that he's testing the doctor's patience, he makes swift action to hand you the red scarf that he's completed. You look at it, blinking.

Eddie brushes away your blank stare and doesn't meet your eyes again. He shoos you away from where you're seated and scoops up your own aqua-colored square (you're still not sure whether it qualifies as a crappy scarf or a potholder) and puts it back in the basket.
You don't like gifts. You *hate* gifts. They're too much work and they require you to be overwhelmed with gratitude and responsibility. They have so many subtle expectations that you're not sure that they are even meant for the purpose of indulging yourself. Quite the opposite, in fact.

But the doctor is waiting, so you give a rehearsed thanks and wave him goodbye. Eddie doesn't see it, as he's closed in on himself and stares gruffly at the wall with crossed arms. You may have just seen him at the most vulnerable and most open he'll ever get in this place. Maybe anywhere.

You cradle the scarf in your arms, thumbing the woolly texture and softness that you experience on a blue moon in this facility. It was made with little love thought into it; it was a reflexive gift used to keep oneself occupied from other hobbies or chores, and not a thought of you in mind. But it's the best gift you think you've ever gotten.

The doctor peeks at you with disregard at your enticement with the scarf, and he mumbles crassly, "Maybe it can be used to cover up your ugly arms."

Hurt strums a beat in your chest when you realize that despite his words, he has a point. Maybe it *can* make you look a bit cuter. So you do as he says and snugly wrap the scarf around one favored arm of yours, ignoring how leftover blood and ooze will infect the fabric of the gift. You conclude your work with a pat and continue onward, ignoring the taunting amusement from passing doctors.

From then on, you went back to that room many times to practice perfecting your work. You made therapeutic squares for yourself, or sometimes self-made bandages that came at the expense of mockery from onlookers, but they did the job so you continued. You were persistent in making the right scarf for when you would encounter Eddie again, mixing two color combinations of orange and blue, red and green, purple and yellow, anything bright and vibrant and memorable.

You always waited with anticipation to show Eddie what you've learned, and that even though you'd lost your first red scarf through many injuries and encounters with the wrong people, you'd never forgotten your gratitude.

You never saw him after the first knitting session, though. But you've always found yourself making many colorful scarves with the subconscious ideal that you'll meet him again.

- Sometimes, though, the knitting isn't a strong enough diversion. The thought of taking one of your needles can be a gnawing compulsion that you can't fight off in your weakest moments.

Tonight, you feel weak. Just looking around the room and thinking of proper weapons to hurt yourself with is extremely tiring, but it's all you can think about. You tried reading to take your mind off of it, you tried loosely braiding your hair even, but no such luck. However preoccupied your hands may be, it's not distracting enough.

When everyone is in bed, it strikes the hardest. Your body is screaming at you to hurt yourself, and you know you deserve it, you know that you haven't done it properly in a while and you don't deserve that luxury, but you also know that you'll be immediately caught by Toria or Aegros or Asriel or even Frisk.

The problem with people caring about you is that it doesn't matter how much you hate yourself, all that matters is making sure that it doesn't spill all over their lives and making sure that it's constantly bottle up. But it gets exhausting.

You anxiously disheveled your bedsheets as you try to stop your legs from shaking and stop your
arms from digging into your flesh with angry fingernails. You're all alone and the temptation is breathtaking; you need to cut, now.

Is there anyone you can call?

You can think of one person, but.

Well.

You look over at your clock. It's almost midnight; you're not even sure he's awake.

But you notice your fingers digging painfully into the soft tissue of your palms, and you realize that you don't exactly have a choice.

You consciously roll out of bed and tiptoe out of the room and down the stairs, wary of what would happen if you were to get caught. They might see your condition and think that you're going to go and find the knives that Toria had hidden in the closet. The appeal of that idea is captivating, but you trudge forward with a firm mind.

You're very agile in the dark. Not from night vision alone, but from the experience of sneaking around with impressive agility that you've had for a long time, even before the riot at Mount Massive. You've learned how to survive on your own, and sometimes in domestic situations that can still come in handy.

When you reach the kitchen, you spot the landline phone and pick up the receiver, but your realize that you don't even know his number.

Time to do some investigating.

It doesn't take long; Aegros keeps the phonebook close to the answering machine, which used to be convenient when you were younger and Asriel had introduced you to the wonderful world of prank-calling. It's a shame that phonebooks nowadays are a lost art, because you flip almost immediately to the correct page and within less than a minute you're punching in the numbers.

When the other end begins to search for the caller in question, your heart begins to thump with dread. He's probably not up, and besides, what are you going to say anyway? "Oh hey, I know it's late, but I was hoping that you would be willing to spare me a minute of your time to talk about this very self-conscious issue of mine!"

Stupid stupid stupid stupid! Just hang up now while you still have the chance to—

"Hello?"

Guess it's too late now. The universe is cruel like that.

Thankfully, it's Jackson. He sounds active enough that you didn't just wake him up, so you feel a bit better about that.

But then you remember why you're calling, and the embarrassment stutters your tone.

"Uhhh, hey Jackson," you greet clumsily, but hush yourself in fear of alerting anybody in the house that you're up.

"Chara?" His voice deters into concern. "Why are you awake? Is everything okay?"

His growing worry oddly touches you. No matter what Miles says about him, you've always viewed
Jackson as someone who is still a stranger to you, but he seems safe. It's relieving to hear at this hour.

"I'm fine," you reassure him, half-lying through your teeth. "Is Miles awake?"

Jackson hesitates, catching your drift. Then he murmurs apologetically, "It's pretty late, Chara. He's been feeling sick so he went to bed already."

You're guilty for wasting his time, but you've already come this far, and your limbs are itching like nobody's business. You refuse to give up now.

"Can you...is there any way you can just wake him up please?" you beg. "I just...I need to talk to him about something."

There's a long pause on the other end, and for a quick heartbeat you misdoubt that he already hung up.

But then Jackson sighs. "Okay, hold on for a second," he says, and you close your eyes with jubilated relief.

You hear the faint shuffle of feet and other background noises that can't be deciphered through the phone as Jackson makes his way across the (quite messy, in your opinion) apartment. Eventually you hear him creak open a door.

"Hey, Miles? You awake?" You hear Jackson whisper. Then a moment later you hear a harsher, "Hey, wake up! C'mon man, just for a second. You've got a call."

There's a lingering groan that churns regret deeper into your stomach. The receiver echoes a disheveled noise through the presumed process of exchanging the phone from one user to another, and the new holder of the phone suppresses a yawn from booming over the speakers.

"H'lo?" he grumbles, sounding muzzy with sleep and irritable from sickness, but it's comforting to hear his voice regardless.

"Uh, hi Miles," you fumble for words, not sure how to paraphrase your current troubles. "Sorry for waking you, but—"

There's a second of uneven breathing as Miles seems to adjust himself— you recall Jackson mentioning that he'd been sick. "Who is this?" he mutters, sounding like he's growing impatient.

You panic. "This is Chara."

"Char..." He freezes and almost immediately you notice a change in tone, attentive almost.

"Kid?" He tries. Then he yawns again. "S'really late. You okay?"

There's a warmth that you can't identify lightening the anchor that's burdening your heart when you hear how concerned he's beginning to sound. You relax instantly.

"Yeah, um," you sigh, but you're no longer as afraid of screwing up your wording as you were before. "Can I talk to you about something?"

You hear Miles further accommodate what you assume to be his bed to his liking, probably to improve his stature so he doesn't fall asleep again.

"I guess so," he murmurs, sounding uncertain. "There's probably a reason you called me at...what is it? Three? One in the morning?"
You almost giggle. "It's eleven."

"Eleven?" he repeats, incredulous. "Damn it. 'S not even midnight and I'm so damn tired."

You smile. "Jackson said you'd been sick," you remark.

Miles grouses with displeasure on the subject. "Seems so. Guess I'll never get a break but I should get used to it by now."

"Ah, you're Miles Upshur, you'll never give up," you tease.

There's a huff of laughter. "That's one way of putting it."

"Are you feeling better?" you suddenly ask, frowning.

Another yawn. "Guess so. 'M not throwing up everything I eat and I can sleep without too many nightmares, so I think I'll live."

Unexpectantly, you mutter with a dark chuckle, "That makes one of us then."

"What?"

"Nothing."

There's an uneasy delay in the conversation before Miles prompts, "You said you wanted to talk about something?"

You'd almost forgotten. "Oh! I did, yeah."

You become hyper-aware of your environment, heart thudding in your throat in case there happens to be any listeners nearby. Hesitantly, you whisper into the phone, "Can you hold on for just one second?"

There's a hint of suspicion as he answers, "Alright?"

You creep towards the back porch's door close to the kitchen and near the living room. Relived by the breath of fresh air that hits your nose in the crisp twilight, you step outside, careful of the creaks in the wood that you set your toes onto. You slide the door shut and revel in this new sensation of freedom that you haven't felt in a while under the Dreemurr's roof.

Stepping off of the porch and savoring the wonderful sensation of grass between your toes, you finally say, "Okay, now we can talk."

"Alright then," Miles answers, and you think he's curious about something but you're glad that he's not the type to press you on subjects you're obviously uncomfortable with addressing. This is no exception, and you're grateful for that.

"Shoot."

"Sooo," you drawl as you settle yourself into the grass. "I have a problem."

"Problem with what?"

"I..."

He already knows. No use hiding it anymore. With a huge breath, you decide to spill out all of your
cards on the table and bet it all. You know the risks, but you can't live like this anymore. You need to
tell somebody and have them listen to you.

"I cut myself," you admit with a stammer. "I scratch myself and I cut myself with knives and
anything I can find, really. I...I don't remember how or why I started doing it. It just happens! I just
feel...not better. Maybe relieved?

"I get really, really antsy," you continue. "It's like...it's like if a dozen ants or bugs or something are
in my skin and I want them to get out. It's happening right now, actually," you add with a bitter
laugh. "That's why I called. I can't really talk to Toria and Aegros about this stuff because I don't
think they understand. They hid all the knives and anything else I could potentially hurt myself with
and, I mean it helps, but it doesn't help, y'know?"

There's no response from the other end, but all of your concerns are spewing out of your mouth like
a waterfall so you haven't noticed.

You laugh again. "I guess I just needed someone to say, 'Nooooo don't do that Chara, you deserve
better. You can't cut yourself because that's bad! And I don't care how stupid that sounds, but
everybody's asleep and I'm not sure what to do because I know where Toria keeps the knives and
I'm really, really tempted."

You stop when you realize that you've said too much, and you clam up again with a mumbled, "I'm
sorry," and wait for a response.

There is none. There's no answer for such a long time that you begin to fear that he's hung up. The
distress causes you to hesitantly ask, "Are you there?"

When there's no direct reply, you feel heat prickling along your nose and eyes and you give a short
sniffle.

Finally, there's a, "Yeah, I'm here."

You're happy, but you're also anxious. You've just told the one person you've trusted in a long time
everything that's wrong with you recently (okay, half of what's wrong with you recently). What is he
tells someone? What if he says the wrong thing? What if—

"I don't know what to do!" you sob, and the misery explodes from your chest and you dry-weep,
reluctantly. You feel so naked and exposed now, it sounds like not even Miles knows what to do
with you.

"Kid—"

"I'm scared!" you wail. "I'm scared of being alone and cutting myself and I don't want to die! I don't
want to die but I don't want to exist and it's so scary what do I do! I don't know I don't know I—"

Someone starts laughing, and you begin to hyperventilate because you're a mess you're an absolute
mess and it's just—it's just so, so funny—

"Listen to me." The firm voice on the phone resurfaces into your stream of conscious, but your chest
is still heaving with laughter that you can't stop. "Kid. Chara. Listen to me. Listen to my voice."

You stop and take into account the caller, and the laughing slowly subsides into a mirthless chuckle.
Your smile is plastered onto your face and you're not sure if it's leaving anytime soon.

"I'm here," he soothes you. "Just calm down, okay? I'm right here."
You sniff, your eyes blurring. "I'm sorry," you say thickly. "I didn't mean to——"

"It's fine," Miles reassures, and he sounds sincere and maybe even a little scared. Then he repeats a bit more firm, "It's fine."

"I don't know what to do," you repeat helplessly, choking on the stones in your throat. Your nose begins to run.

"I say get a box of tissues if you haven't already," he says offhandedly, and when he realizes that it's probably not a wise comment to make at this time he gives a steady, "Sorry. I guess I'm not sure what to say either."

It's funny. You give a sharp laugh that seems to make him panic.

"Kid. Stop."

You sniff again. "And why should I?" you blubber uselessly, smothering your face with your arm to remove the sticky aftermath of any stray tears or snot.

Another long, long pause. You fill the silence with sniffs and chokes.

"I was in a similar position a while back," Miles eventually starts. "You remember I said I went to that rehab place?"

You nod, then when you remember that he can't see you, you answer curiously, "Yeah?"

"Alright, well I was unstable. More unstable than I am now," he gives a bitter scoff, then continues, "So one day I couldn't take it anymore, so I found a knife and——"

He doesn't seem eager to finish his sentence, so in awe you whisper hoarsely, "You cut yourself?"

Another pause. Then a heavy, reluctant, "Yeah. I cut myself."

Miles was always so strong to you. You'd seen him in the asylum, and you saw him scared and vulnerable just like you. But there was a demeanor of self-confidence that came with that. Maybe it was pure ignorance of the situation, or maybe it was fake. Either way, he was just better at handling things than you. He bandaged your burn, he went into areas first if things seemed risky—hell, he killed a guy for you!

To hear him stoop to this level of self-harm, like you, is staggering. Adults are supposed to be big and mighty beings that always judge you and are supposed to be better than you! That's what they're for!

They're not supposed to be like...like you.

Your shattered faith is distributed into your voice when you pitifully croak, "You really did that?" You sound so high-pitched and pathetic, and you know that. But you're too upset with him.

You like to imagine that Miles winced at your tone and maybe even felt a little sorry for what he did.

"It was a one-time..." then he hesitates again, and mutters, "Okay, it was a two-time thing. But it was for the same reason as you, it sounds like."

You don't understand, so he explains, "My skin was itchy and antsy. It was a compulsive action and I knew it was stupid, but...I guess that didn't stop me from doing it."
"It sucks," you barge in with a sympathetic murmur. Despite how disappointed you are with Miles, you can deeply relate.

"Yeah, it sucks," he responds without hesitation. "I also just did it because I could."

You blink. "What do you mean?"

He sighs. "I often felt watched. Like all of my actions had to be run through a radar. I felt like I had to be perfect and healthy all the time or else I was going to be stuck in that damn building for the rest of my life."

You bite your lower lip so hard that you think you taste metal in your mouth.

"I just did it to prove that I could," Miles concludes somberly. "And I could, so. I did it. I guess I just wanted to prove that I was still capable of doing something for myself."

You frown, and you feel a reciprocating sadness that is distributed between you both on your conditions. Like the universe has ceased to be this huge and unanswered being that made you feel small, and for once you feel like you're not alone in a shared circumstance.

"That...makes sense, actually," you murmur, and there's a newfound sense of respect for Miles that is different than the respect you've had for adults beforehand. Some form of authoritative regard that one had to rightfully gain, rather than one that you were automatically assumed to carry without question. For once in your life you feel like you have an adult that earned your respect.

"As for your case," Miles continues, sounding a tad more confident and less strained, "I know it's hard. I'm not gonna tell you that it isn't."

You swallow back the rocks in your throat.

"Hell, caring about yourself is hard in general! It's like detox."

"'Detox'?' you repeat stupidly.

"It's difficult," Miles rephrases. "Just find alternatives for yourself, is all, as far as the cutting goes. You like knitting, right?"

You nod, mumbling. "But sometimes it doesn't work."

"Yeah, c'este la vie," Miles says, and you can imagine him shrugging. You think for a second that you hear the clicking of a computer keyboard. He continues, "Sometimes it just doesn't work. Nothing wrong with that."

"I guess."

"...Okay, there are alternatives for self-harm," he tells you, "There's a whole list of it online."

"I don't like looking at stuff like that online," you argue. "I don't want Toria or Aegros to see it on the Internet history."

"Fair enough. Do you want me to tell you then what's on the list?"

"I don't see why not," you say, and you get off the floor and stretch your aching legs from their position on the hard earth. "But I'll need to retrieve a pen and paper from inside."

"Okay. Tell me when you're ready."
You sneak back inside with the same dexterity you tend to be known for, and you swipe a piece of paper sitting in the printer and a blue pen from the computer table. You don't feel Miles's patience waver with you through the receiver, and it's nice to feel like you can take as much time as you need.

Finally, you whisper, "Okay, go."

He takes his time telling you reasonable alternatives, allowing you to successfully write down what he's saying. A lot of the suggestions do seem reasonable and healthy, like crunching ice or tearing apart old newspapers and magazines or just screaming at the sky. You remember, vaguely, being introduced to these ideas, perhaps by a therapist or a doctor or maybe even your parents in their exasperation with you. But it's a time like this when you need to be reminded that these alternatives still exist and seem to be effective in one way or another, or else they wouldn't be listed.

When you're satisfied with your notes, you tell him, "Okay, I think I'm good."

"Are you sure?" Miles checks in. "There's a lot of—holy hell, there's like a hundred pages online of this. I had no clue that this was a thing people actually wrote about."

You smile, admiring your long list of self-harm alternatives that spill out onto the backside of the paper. "I think I'll be okay. There's enough on here to keep me busy, and knitting usually does the trick."

"So you're feeling better?" he presses. "Not gonna go find any knives?"

Curiously, as you've been talking, you've noticed the compulsion of cutting wash away like waves after a storm, residing back into the calming waters. Your skin still feels weird and unlike your own, but you haven't touched it and you suppose that's a start.

"I think I'm okay," you say, surprised at how calm and stable you've grown since the beginning of your conversation. Then you add warmly, "Thanks for talking to me."

You notice the demur that falters Miles's presence and poise over the phone, with some sort of inner conflict or trouble that he's not outwardly registering. He seems very unsure of himself as he replies, "You're welcome."

He probably doesn't even notice how weird he's gotten to acting around you, and you're not entirely sure why. You felt it on certain points in a conversation when he visited the hospital and topics became too severe, or when you were hanging out with him after your panic attack at school. You'd pretended not to notice, but yet you're always curious as to why.

But you don't expose it, like you wish you could. This conversation is already deep enough as is, and there's no use pouring any more salt into the wound if you can avoid it.

So you end the subject abruptly by stating, "I think I'm gonna go to bed now."

"Wise choice," Miles agrees, then he emphasizes with a well-timed yawn. "I might as well sleep too. This fever isn't gonna go away anytime soon so I might as well ride it out."

You manage a small smile. "I hope you feel better."

"I'll be fine," he replies dismissively. "Don't worry about me. Just go to sleep."

His parental tone makes you stick your tongue out childishly as you tease, "Aren't you gonna come over and tuck me into bed?"
"You can tuck yourself into bed with that attitude," he responds, equally amused.

"Maybe even read me a bedtime story?" you ask innocently.

"A bedtime story," he muses. "Alright then: once upon a time, there was an ungrateful child that couldn't go to sleep and they died. The end."

His words are all in fun, so you ignore the unruly term of 'ungrateful' and play along. "You're a bad storyteller," you remark playfully. "And here I thought you were an infamous investigative reporter."

There's mock impatience as Miles retorts, "Go to bed!"

"Fiiiiine," you giggle, laughing at his exasperation. "But you owe me a better bedtime story."

You say your goodbyes and hang up the phone, and you emit a lengthy, satisfied sigh. You feel like you've taken a fresh breath of air, like you're whole again, however temporary it may seem. You feel like you're not bound by tar or cement anymore; you can be useful again rather than wallowing in your self-pity.

You wish it could always feel like this.

You fold your paper of self-harm substitutes and head back upstairs, entering the bedroom again with hushed footsteps. Asriel is still asleep in his bed, making faint noises that sound similar to the crooning of a baby. You throw a smile in his direction that you don't question.

Tucking the paper away into your nightstand's drawer, you enter a dreamless slumber that you consider heaven.

Chapter End Notes

Pretty personal chapter for me to write. Hope you enjoyed

Chapter name from "Shitty Horoscopes" by Amrit Brar
You recover from your fever after a good couple of days of doing what you seem to do best lately: lying around the house like a useless sack and letting Jackson mother you back into health with food and medication.

Now you relish in the limited independence of having Jackson still monitoring your schedule, but at least he's allowing you out of the house after compromising his "house arrest" policy. You suppose that he grew a little tired of having you around constantly and decided to give you both a break. Under certain conditions, of course.

He let you borrow his car because you eventually had to spill the beans about wanting to go and confront Waylon Park about something. You showed him the address and after some sharp exchanges between you both, he eventually caved in and gave you a curfew of five in the afternoon when you were expected to be back home. He also advised to not stretch your body too much, since you're still recovering from the fever that wore you thin for days.

The hauntings of whatever vision plagued your eyelids and thoughts while you slept are like a persistent thorn in your side, begging you to extract it. So you're doing such by once again avoiding Jackson's supervision and heading towards a new location.

Your destination ends up being on the outskirts of the city in a neighborhood you don't recognize. Granted, you've been a wanderer of Colorado for a while now, never finding a permanent home for yourself, so naturally you're still becoming acquainted with areas that are less talked about in the media. Cliche, mundane suburbs that have a robbery at least every five years and don't provoke much attention otherwise.

The cookie-cutter houses make the journey a bit difficult as you nitpick your way through certain streets, trying to find the exact house numbers and location. Eventually you do end up finding it, and what do you know, it looks just like the rest of the houses along the block.

You park Jackson's car in the driveway— you doubt that she would mind—and make your way up to the front door, having to fake your own confidence in order to stop yourself from having a heart attack. Stupid mental health, always having anxiety crawling up your spine in unfamiliar environments nowadays.

Eventually you stock up enough courage to knock three times on the door. There's an exaggerated moan from inside the house somewhere, griping that if she could just have five minutes please and that she hasn't cleaned up her dirty laundry from off the floor so don't come in yet!

Safe to say, you know you're in the right place.

The door flings open and you're face to face with Nita, whom is still in her underwear and has covered up her chest with a large t-shirt that looks like it hasn't been washed in a while. Her hair is unkempt with her bangs covering up a good part of her eyes, which have smudges of eyeliner underneath the sockets that haven't been cleaned up.

When she realizes who you are, her eyes widen and she removes the bangs from her face in a way
that you assume is meant to be attractive, but it ends up looking a bit awkward.

"Hey! It's you!" she greets with playful finger guns and a wink. "Marco, right?"

"Miles."

"Eh, close enough," she shrugs. "What can I do you for, cutie?"

You ignore her flirtatious persona to get straight to the point. "You said you watched my footage, right?"

Nita leans against the doorframe and crosses her arms casually. "Heck yeah. They took it offline though, but I recorded it on my computer and downloaded it onto some video files. Professional hacking, amirite?"

"Fantastic, listen," you say shortly, becoming desperate. "You have the footage on your computer still?"

"That's what I just said, yeah."

Sucking in a breath and knowing exactly what you're getting yourself into, you lower your pride to ask earnestly, "Can I watch it?"

Her eyes brighten and she gives you a smirk that is tightening with suppressed excitement. You know you've hit the jackpot now.

"Hell yeah you can, dude!" she crows, uncrossing her arms and yanking you inside by the collar, which gives you a jolt but you calm yourself quickly. "Man, it'd be an honor to watch it with you!"

Ignoring her, you look around the untidy household to inspect any signs of a computer or something nearby. "Yeah," you mumble distractedly. "Sure."

"Great!" Then she heads off swiftly into another room before you can ask her where a computer might be located. "I'll get popcorn started! And maybe I'll put some pants on, but popcorn is main priority!"

You wonder how the hell someone like her become best friends with a guy like Jackson.

Investigating a messy house is what you're built to do, so that's your default objective at this point. Searching with an acute gaze over Nita's possessions and belongings, you paw and skewer your way from her home office and into the living room, but there's no sign of a laptop, just a couple of piles of garbage and a few bras that are slung over furniture.

You hear the microwave humming and the popcorn begins to bubble, and Nita heads back into where you're looking through some of her drawers. She eyes you curiously before she asks, "Is there a reason you feel the need to look through my belongings like a creep?"

You suppose that from a certain standpoint, this would look pretty sketchy. So you abandon your position near the drawers and say, "Sorry."

She shrugs it off. "Eh, not a problem. If you're looking for my laptop, it's up in my room. I can get it in a second."

"Or you could get it now," you retort impatiently.

"Yeesh, relax dude! I can see now why Jackson isn't planning on tapping that anytime soon."
Ruffled, you furrow your brow and give a presentation of looking agitated, like this is a waste of time. Truthfully, though, if there's even a slim chance of finding answers that Jackson and Holly and everyone else refuse to give to you, you'll take it.

"Come to think of it," Nita presses, "how did you even find out where I lived anyway? I doubt Jackson is telling you all of his deepest, darkest secrets."

Airily, and half-interested, you explain, "I just dug around in his belongings, found your name and phone number, and typed it into the computer. Problem solved."

With an incredulous grimace that expresses disapproval, Nita remarks bluntly, "Damn, ever heard of 'minding your own business'?"

"I'm a reporter. It's what I do."

"No kidding."

In the kitchen, the microwave beeps, and Nita perks up. "I'll be back," she tells you. "Take a seat."

You might as well. You push aside her filthy laundry that's splashed along the couch cushions, but your posture remains stiff as you continue to monitor the foreign atmosphere.

Nita returns almost immediately with a big bowl of popcorn and places it on the coffee table, brushing off the socks and food wrappings on the table onto the floor to make room for the large bowl. You think that the portion size is a bit excessive, but you're technically the house guest so you're not one to complain.

"Do you want something to drink?" Nita asks, gesturing behind her to the kitchen.

You shake your head. "I'm good, thanks."

She frowns. "You really wanna watch this thing, huh?"

You give her a firm eye to confirm her statement. "That's why I'm here, isn't it?"

Nita steps away at your serious demeanor, unamused. "Jesus, calm yourself, alright? I'm gonna get a beer for myself, just sit tight and I'll get the laptop in a minute."

It's a good thing Holly has recited anger management with you; you loosen your unwelcoming frustration so that it will be much easier to obtain answers.

Nita comes back with an opened bottle of beer in hand before heading up the steps, taking a sip of the drink as she does so. "Be right back," she tells you as she's walking upstairs.

The fact that she has beer makes you automatically hypothesize that there's much more where that came from in the fridge. You're tempted, quiet terribly, to head into the kitchen and grab one for yourself, just to kind of soften the edges a little and have you a bit more mentally docile for what you're about to witness.

But you've been conditioned lately with your former drinking habits, about how bad it is and whatnot. It's been a good few months since you've even touched the stuff; before you went to Mount Massive. You used to have strong urges to drink back in high school, where life was shorter and smoking and drinking seemed like a proper waste of time. It's never really left you in your adult years either, so you can imagine why your history with alcohol assumption has been a bit of an uneasy subject with your supervisors.
You're wallowing for so long on whether or not to say fuck it and grab a beer that you hear Nita's footsteps again, and your antisocial character is recovered as she approaches you, a blue laptop in hand that is covered with bumper stickers.

Nita begins to make herself comfy by grabbing blankets and pillows from around the room and tossing them on her future sitting location. You watch, reveling in agitation, before she settles herself onto the couch and takes up half of the space on it, making you squirm to the edge of the sofa so you don't have to make contact with her toes.

She settles back up to type into her computer what she wants, making a few mumbled, "Here we are,"'s and "There we go"'s before she produces a look of achievement.

"Bingo!" she chirps proudly. "I had to separate some of the files since the video was pretty long, hope you don't mind."

You pretend to fiddle with the popcorn bowl close to your table, even though you're really not that hungry. "Don't mind at all," you answer her.

In truth, you're way too anxious about what you're about to witness that you could care less about the final quality of the video. Finally, after all this time, you're going to see what you found in the eyes of your camcorder. You can interpret answers and fill in all the fuzzy parts of your memory with real and concrete evidence of what truly happened.

Nita sips her beer and reaches for a handful of popcorn before she displays the laptop on the table and makes the video go full screen. She turns to you expectantly, giving a toothy grin. "Ready?"

You lean back, pretending to be calm and collected when on the inside you're already getting cold feet. You nod. "Go for it."

She clicks play.

The first scene is something that takes you all the way back to when you were screwing around with your camcorder in the car. Making sure that the zoom feature worked, checking that the audio and video feed was clear and stable. It's almost nostalgic to watch.

"A real thriller already, isn't it?" Nita teases, poking your elbow with her big toe. You brush her away and immerse yourself into the video, trying to connect with the man behind the camera that filmed the documentary. Trying to piece it all together.

The scene transitions into the next so quickly it almost startles you. You always forget how choppy your footage is before you can take time and edit what you need. Looks like nobody seems to appreciate the effort made into smooth transitions anymore.

Nita chomps away at the popcorn whilst you grow unamused with the tape. You eventually get to the scene with the dying soldier, telling you to leave Mount Massive if you can, but it's...mundane. It's old news to you. You've seen this adventure, you've lived it! You know the beginning of the story.

You want to know how your story ends.

As the movie zooms in on corpses and guts, you turn to Nita. "Skip to the end."

"Aw, what!" She gives you a look filled with chagrin as she continues to sip beer and eat popcorn, making her complaint humorous. "C'mon dude, we haven't even gotten to the really cool parts yet!"
You give her a Look that has her giving a long, dramatic groan as she reaches for her laptop to pause the footage. "Fine. Hold on."

You hear her fiercely typing away at the keyboard, disgruntled, possibly because of your refusal to appear to be a decent houseguest with manners and discernment about how to make a person happy. It's kind of your thing, though.

It takes a while for Nita to find it, but you're more patient this time than before. There's this dripping unease that's beginning to make your stomach crawl. Finally, finally, you're about to understand how you truly escaped the asylum. You can't back down now, you refuse to.

When she victoriously tells you, "Found it!", it's pitiful that your skin begins to almost shake. Like something is telling you that this is the worst idea imaginable, what you're about to do.

No. You can handle this. It doesn't matter how you escaped the asylum so long as you clearly know how it happened. You're fine.

Nita sets the laptop back down again, with the paused scene of you holding the camera at an awkward angle, standing over Walker's guts. You recall taking a momentary capture of the event with Chara still being held in your arms, when they were limping along with a broken leg. A broken leg that you caused, mindfully.

"Soooo, what happened there?" Nita asks you, gesturing to the blood and gore splattered along the white room. "One minute you were recording a priest on fire, the next is...whatever the hell this is. What happened during that time?"

It's an awkward itch to scratch, still. But you explain calmly, collectively, "I didn't really have a lot of time to record anything else after that incident, since..." Your mind trails to how you were so occupied with coddling Chara, comforting them and holding them and making sure that they were okay. Watching Father Martin burn alive had been paralyzing for them, and not long after they cracked a limb in half. Doing your job as a journalist correctly had been the last thing on your mind.

You finish your thought quickly, eager to just get this doomed train wreck rolling down the tracks.

"I was running and I came across an underground lab," you say sloppily, quite possibly your worst storytelling.

It's not enough, but you're surprised when Nita retreats from her quirky, obnoxious traits to provide you with a mental retraction on questions. She just hits play.

The lab. The blood. It's all clicking that these are your memories. You lived this. You made this movie into what it was.

But it's not enough.

You reach forward not even a minute in, with Nita giving a squawk when you inadvertently trample one of her feet while reaching over to the coffee table.

She looks at you ungratefully, but the anger of her glare is washed away by the remaining bits of popcorn along her mouth and cheeks.

"Hey! What the hell?" she blurts out, obviously becoming tired of your shit.

"I need to see the end," you tell her, and you give her a look that means business, which she doesn't seem pleased with. "The very end."
Nita slams her popcorn bowl down onto the coffee table and shoots you a glare that's so fierce and so unlike herself that you actually cringe a little.

"You come into my house, you go through my house like a stalker, and now you're taking control of what I watch?" Nita scowls tartly, wiping her face clean from popcorn scraps. "You're like my mom."

You ignore her accusations and scoot the laptop over to where she's sitting, looking at her expectantly.

"Please," you implore, trying to dip your tone into a bit more genuine plea. You shut out all your displeasures of loosening your pride for the sake of wanting— no, needing to see what you've requested. Like it or not, Nita is your only hope right now.

There must have been a profound manner that struck the proper chord, because Nita seems to soften as she fumbles for her laptop again.

She heaves a sigh. "Fine, fine. Give me a second."

You listen courteously to Nita clicking at the keyboard for a while, sucking in one side of her cheek as she examines her files. Then she halts.

"How far do you wanna go back?" she asks you, regaining a bit of her quirky tone underneath the question.

Peculiar relief makes you slacken your tightened shoulders as you slump into the couch, releasing the tight muscles of anxiety that you didn't even notice you were gaining.

"How far does it go?" you ask.

Nita makes a thoughtful noise as she digs through her computer. "Ummm, looks like we've got a weird lab, and some guy in some bubble thing—"

Your heart jolts.

"There," you demand immediately, not letting her have another minute to talk. "Start from there."

Nita's eyes temporarily broaden with surprise at your reaction. She holds up a hand, with the other still managing the files.

"Whoa, dude, hold your horses," she tells you, but there's an overtone of hilarity directed towards you that you're slightly annoyed by. "Just give me a sec to get to it...here it is!"

This time, instead of placing the laptop back on the couch, Nita hands it to you, and you look at her briefly, perplexed.

"I don't wanna have to lean over and change it if you want to skip all over the video again," she shrugs. "You know how a video document works, don't you?"

You have to roll your eyes at that one. "Of course I do."

She prods you again to take the laptop into your own hands. "Just be careful with my baby. It gets me through life when coffee doesn't."

Oddly touched at her generosity, you take the laptop from Nita and angle it so you can view the paused image on the computer, currently at full screen.
You freeze.

The familiar environment, the dim lighting, the mechanical guts, the life pod.

You're looking at Billy Hope.

In a captured time frame, you find your heart aching for the Variant. You had forgotten a good chunk of your adventures running through the underground lab, and your doctors and therapists have informed you how natural it is—how okay it is—to forget.

But looking at Billy, seeing him suspended in air and wired to god-knows-what for dear life, staring vacuously at the Morphogenic Engine before him, you realize that you never willingly wanted to forget about this. Your pity for the Variants has been temporarily suspended, yes, and justly so. But it's hard, still, to see someone being imprisoned like a lab rat instead of being cared for like a human being.

You didn't want to forget this. You never planned on glossing over this moment, and still it's infuriating that you don't really know why you'd forgotten.

There's a snapping of fingers that lead your attention elsewhere, and you blink to adjust yourself back into your environment as Nita stares at you weirdly, sipping away at her beer.

"Hey man, you alright?" she asks. "You've been staring at the screen for like two minutes now."

You have to shake your head to remove the upcoming dissociation episode you feel blossoming in your brain. "Yeah, I'm fine," you murmur, half-believable.

Nita doesn't seem entirely convinced, but you admit that you've gained a respect for her newly-obtained ability to shut her mouth in sensitive topics. She's silent and lets you press play.

Immediately you're greeted to Billy Hope's blood being squeezed out of him via the corrupted machinery latched to his backside.

Now that, you have a faint recollection of. How foolishly triumphant you were for believing that killing off the Walrider's Host would solve all of your problems.

And then, as Billy continues to wriggle from the pool of blood spilling from his spine, the camera abruptly stops.

You stop and immediately frown.

"What happened?" You look back up at Nita, who seems more occupied with finishing up her snacks.

She swallows her mouthful of popcorn. "Do what?"

"To the footage!" You don't know why you find yourself growing angrier and angrier by the second, but you flail your hands towards the paused scene that has a blurry view of the bluish, metallic floor in the lab. "What happened to it?"

Nita looks at you blankly for a while, and it's so ruling that you could just, just kill her right now.

"What happens is that it ended," Nita finally replies nonchalantly, chugging down beer again.

It's trying your patience, lately, on exactly how far people are willing to go in order to properly condescend you. Like your worried and troubles are the perfect value of entertainment, and people
indulge in every time you feel your knuckles tighten or when your voice escalates through the apartment in rage.

This is one of those times where you can't afford to play along.

"That can't be it!" you scream, and Nita starts at your gained temper. "That's not it! I..."

You trail off when you spot something in Nita's gaze, making her eyes glisten. The same suppression of emotion that you've spotted with Holly when you get a little too angered with a topic. Fear.

She's afraid of you.

Feeling sympathetic, you settle down quickly, zipping your mouth shut in order to avoid a possible restraining order.

What do you look like when you're angry that makes people step away from you?

You don't know why this is information you suddenly want.

"I'm sorry," you mumble, avoiding Nita's eyes in case you see any more traces of apprehension concerning your presence.

It's quiet for a few seconds, and it gets under your skin fiercely. It's Nita that speaks first.

"I mean, there's like two seconds left of footage."

You perk up immediately. "What?"

Nita breaks the rut with reaching out for her laptop, and since you're in a raw state of mind you inwardly flinch at the outstretched arm. But she remains patient, maybe even watchful.

"It wasn't up for very long," she explains.

Dumbfounded, you blink. "What wasn't?"

"The two extra seconds. It didn't make much sense to me, because I didn't understand what the big deal was, but I guess it pissed the media off or whatever."

As she's talking, there's a dripping sensation of dread that you can't rightfully shake. "What. I don't —"

Nita flicks her fingers to indicate that you need to give her back the computer, and you blankly oblige, your thoughts growing numb.

"I downloaded it anyway," Nita continues as she scrolls through files again. "I thought it was cool."

"What was—what was on it. I don't—"

She flips the laptop back to you in less than five seconds with a gleam in her eyes that you don't understand. "See for yourself."

Curious, and maybe a little scared, you lean forward to press play.

The camera is clearly broken. There's television static that makes your head ache, and a red glitch that drawls along the screen of black. It makes you clench your teeth to keep the buzzing at bay.
When the camera manages to click on, you see a white floor, shiny and splashed with blood. The red contradicts the polished environment that you recognize as the lab.

In front of the camcorder is a sight that makes your stomach sick.

*Chara.*

They're splayed beside the camera, and their clothing is battered and stained with blood that melds into the floor. They're facing away from you, but if you didn't know any better, you'd be certain that they look dead.

And then there's a black mist that grows closer and closer to where the body is. It looks like a swarm of flies, almost, and they emit a horrible, horrible sound that makes you have to squint your eyes in order to help assuage your ringing ears.

Then the static emerges again, and you know that, somehow, the camcorder had breathed its last. The two-second movie felt like an eternity to you, but it's over now.

You don't know what to say. Looking up at Nita, you see her staring at you expectantly.

"You alright?" she presses. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

'You look like you've seen a ghost,' the Variant mocks you as he slams his head into the walls.

Immediately you get up and hand Nita the laptop abruptly, like the device is toxic. She arches a brow at your behavior.

"Hey, hey, hold on a sec," she protests, and begins to reach out to you.

'Little pig!' he crows as he reaches for your throat and flings you through a window.

"No! No, just. Just..." you sputter, feeling your heart pumping at this newly-gained adrenaline.

You don't understand.

Why do you not understand.

"Miles," Nita tries, her voice deterring into panic. "Hey, it's okay."

"Give me a second," you manage to choke out, but you feel like your skin has melded into the static you've just witnessed.

'It's the buzzing I hear in my bones.'

*The buzzing won't stop.*

There's a hand that reaches reaches for your own, clasping it tightly into a softer, more delicate set of fingers. With two digits more attached to the hands than your own.

'This thing is gonna sell itself!' he sings as he walks away with your fingers, leaving you alone to bleed out in the wheelchair.

"I'm sorry," you hear Nita say hurriedly, but your new plane of existence doesn't allow for pitch-perfect hearing on what she's saying. "God, dude, I didn't—I didn't mean to freak you out. I wouldn't have shown you that if I knew..."
No.

No, you needed to see that. You needed to remember.

Why can't you remember?

"It's okay," you breathe, and once you've gotten hold of your voice again, it makes it easier to drown out the Variants in your head. "It's okay. It's okay."

"Doesn't sound okay," Nita argues, impertinent.

"I'm fine." You manage to slovenly pick yourself off the couch, attempting to get your organs and bones and everything in-between functioning as a whole again so that you can get out.

Something about the Walrider's Host being deceased is rubbing at the back of your subconscious, like an itch you can't reach.

'You heard what Wernicke said. We can't get out as long as Billy is in control.'

'But what about when Billy is no longer in control?' Chara asks you. "Then what happens to the Walrider?"

What happened to the Walrider?

"Nita," you say quickly, managing to stop yourself from sprinting right out the door. "Thank you. For letting me see it. But I need to—I have to—"

"Calm yourself," Nita warns, still looking uneasy at your gained jumpiness. You step away as she walks towards you again, immediately flagging her approach as danger.

"Dude, just chill, alright? Maybe sit back down and I can call up Jackson—"

"Don't tell him I'm here!" you scream furiously.

Nita withdraws immediately, giving you a perplexed look with a tinge of fear that you can't stand anymore.

Mumbling a frail apology, you storm out the door and head for your next destination, the swarm in your eyelids entertaining your brain with visions of static and bleeding bodies all the while.

-You arrive at the marked location of Waylon's presumed residence after about an hour of long driving. Obviously the man has a family he prefers to keep under wraps, so unfortunately it's hard to point fingers at him for testing your patience.

The place is a shabby mess. It's out near a low-budget town that only gets passing cars to appreciate their town by serving branded cola in their gas stations. You'd have assumed that Waylon would have gone a bit farther off-map if he wanted to keep his identity a secret, but hey, he's close enough to your apartment and you're not complaining if it'll spare you another hour of driving.

You approach the complex—small, cheap, probably has a leak or two somewhere in the pipes. Not exactly a home, in your opinion. At least you've been glossed over with enough protection from whomever runs your life now that you can still keep your house.

With expectations and uncertainties weighing heavily on your shoulders, you park the car and trudge
up the steps, leading to a door.

Hesitation derives you of former confidence, but god, you need answers. The video session with Nita only supplied you with more questions than you know what to do with. You're not sure what you're asking of Waylon, still, but he's the closest person you have in helping you solve this mystery. You can shove your remaining anger away for now. You have a mission.

Gently, you knock three times.

There's no answer for a while. You end up knocking again.

This time, there are footsteps. Heavy and prolonged. Nervous, almost.

The door creaks open, but only slightly. You catch sight of almond-shaped eyes that don't belong to Waylon. Whoever answers the door is guarded, their eyes luminous and sharp. Like they're expecting an upcoming threat with your appearance.

"Um," you falter, then continue, "I'm looking for Waylon Park."

"Depends on who's asking." The voice is hard as nails, belonging to a woman.

You end up holding up your hands with defense. "I'm Miles Upshur, and trust me, I'm harmless."

A scoff. The eyes narrow.

"Do you want me to do a secret knock or handshake or something?" you ask caustically. This woman is testing your patience. "Look, I just want to talk, lady. I'm not going to hurt anybody."

"And I should believe you because of what reason?" she retorts.

"Because your husband would clarify that I'm not planning on murdering your children," you argue, and you're surprised at how forceful you sound, which probably isn't helping your case but it's too late now.

There's a long, long pause. Unpleasant, not promising in the slightest. Then the door shuts.

You steady yourself of a sigh. You should have figured that Waylon's family—assuming that you just encountered the wife he'd mentioned having—would be cautious and sensitive to newcomers. But with your bland t-shirt and jeans, you don't count yourself as threatening.

Still, you suppose you can understand the skepticism from a painfully personal standpoint.

Then the door opens again, much to your surprise, and Waylon steps out.

You flick a curious eye over his shoulder to the woman you're suspecting answered the door first and is now keeping her harsh expression downcast, her stature stiff.

Waylon, however, carries a different air of welcome. "Oh! Miles!" he greets you kindly, but his eyes are still casting a slippery gaze, seeming unsure of you. "I...actually didn't expect you to take up on my offer. This is a bit of a surprise."

You're not as unreasonable as usual, given that you can somewhat understand Waylon's off-put characteristics. You never knew him beforehand; maybe he was always a bit jumpy and skeptical, you don't know. Maybe he's always dragged his family to new hellholes wiped clean off the map. But now, he seems to understand the edgy persona that you carry— which is being intolerable and frightened of passing strangers.
You realize that you've been chewing on your tongue for a moment now, as though to serve as a physical aspect of your inner bafflement. Waylon is patient, but his eyes are burning into your skull, begging for further inquiries.

"I just need to talk to you," is all you say. It's all you *can* say, really.

Waylon exchanges a glance over his shoulder with his presumed wife. In the light, you can depict her dark-skinned features more clearly, with her long, curly black hair tied back and her piercing gaze searing into your own. Both seem to be wearing quite bland clothes, resembling hand-me-downs from two generations. They both could use a good shower.

When the two finish their silent discussion, Waylon turns back to you and gives you a nod that's stiff as wood. "Okay, come on in," he beckons, making room for you to squeeze past. "Excuse the mess, though."

You waltz into the Park's residence, and it's just as run-down as you'd suspect. Cramped and dirty, with old stains and chipped walls in the corner. Otherwise seemingly homely, you guess. You're not sure that you approve of the mismatched furniture and scattered paper everywhere, but then again, you're not exactly spotless yourself.

Still, as you're walking through with the woman's glare hot on your tail, you imagine that the residence is the result of a last-minute escape from Murkoff's clutches. It's most likely temporary. Neither seem entirely comfortable with the condo either, with their shoulders hunched and uneasy as they sweep you to the living room, equipped with a sofa, two chair, a table, and a lamp. All looking like they were on sale at a thrift store.

Waylon gestures politely to the sofa. "Take a seat?"

You shrug, mute for reasons unknown, and then settle yourself on the Parks' couch. It's worn and loose, like an old mattress under your weight.

Waylon sits down beside you, creeping farther away from your side with obvious discomfort. You're fine with that; you're already outside of your comfort zone and you don't see any reason to press down on the bruise any more than needed.

Waylon, meanwhile, turns to the woman and nods. "He's safe, I promise. Just go and tell the boys."

She continues to linger, independent of the given command, before eventually she reaches her own conclusions and give you a final look before she retreats from the room. You hear her climbing the steps a moment later, her footsteps firm on the bare floor.

You glance over at Waylon, wryly. "Your wife?" you assume.

He nods, but his eyes seem to avert to anywhere but your gaze. His good leg seems jumpier than usual. "Lisa," he nods finally, and he says her name with a humble tenderness. "She's my rock, honestly. I couldn't do much without her logic and guidance throughout this whole mess."

Uninterested—and perhaps overwhelmed at the giant stone you've accidentally overturned— you reply, "Hm."

This time, Waylon manages to give you a steady gaze. "She means well," he assures you. "I just didn't expect any visitors. That's why she was a bit stern."

You're apathetic to the thought by now. The end result is that you're confronting Waylon, and you don't care much about what sorts of conflict you had to encounter in order to do so.
"I'm expecting a reason for your visit?" Waylon prompts, voice even but deepening with an odd acerbity that encourages a reasonable explanation. You don't know a lot about Waylon, but his covert ambition is nonetheless admirable.

You sink into the worn cushions, adopting a loose air. "Does there need to be a reason to pay a visit to my dear friend Waylon Park?"

"We're not friends," Waylon asserts, then looks unsure, like he's supposed to have offended you when you just find his argument amusing. "At least, I don't think so? It didn't seem like our time at the diner did a lot to gain any sort of friendship."

"Guess not," you say brusquely. "But you said if I needed anything, I could come to you."

"I did say that," Waylon agrees, still looking skeptical for some reason. "I'm just surprised you took me up on my offer."

"You and me both."

"So what's the occasion?" He perks up a brow.

This banter has been able to temporarily banish any creeping cynic that you'd gained from watching the ending of your journey with Nita. It was so ominous it seems to have detached your attention entirely until you'd take any sort of distraction at this point—including interacting with someone you view as less than favorable—to take your mind off of it.

But you have to snap yourself right out of that mindset. You have to prepare yourself for the hardships of answers, and you've never been the type to shun from the candid verity of the world. I You manage to swallow your pride, because you know that you're never going to have this opportunity again. Something is still nagging you about the Walrider's disappear even from your mind, like a puzzle piece you can't find the space for, and Waylon might be able to soothe your worries.

You lean forward, towards him, and when you catch Waylon poorly suppressing a flinch at the movement, you can't help but feel a surprising pang of thoughtfulness towards him. He shies away from abrupt contact just as much as you do. Like it or not, he's been through almost as much as you have, and that's a rarity. A gift, maybe, if you were gonna get sappy about it.

It's what has you ultimately regretting the idea to drag him into your crazy schemes.

But you remember the vague memories resurfacing like underwater bubbles in your mind, attempting to reach the surface. You need to do this.

"How much access do you have to Murkoff records?" you prompt suddenly.

Waylon gives you a look that has you immediately reconsidering your current plan of attack.

"Murkoff records?" he chokes. His eyes are as wide as you'd feared that they would be.

But you need answers and you need them now.

"Park," you say firmly, grounding him with one hand on his shoulder. You force him to make eye contact with you. "Listen. I need files to Murkoff about Project Walrider."

"I—"
"No. Listen. I know I'm asking too much, I know I'm putting you and your family in danger, but—"

For lack of better terms, you give him a shake with the hand locked on his shoulder. "Something's missing, Park. I need to know what it is."

"What could possibly be so important that you would want me to access Murkoff files?" Waylon repeats, his voice growing into one of strained fury that you can't grasp properly. "Do you even know what you're asking me to do? Do you know about the pile of shit that I'm already simmering in since I sent that email to you?"

For the first time, you register it. How much Waylon Park had to lose and how much he balanced on the line just to expose the truth. He lost his leg, his home, his identity, probably a good bit of his sanity too.

There's static that's ringing in your ears now, subconsciously, and you realize you're out of options.

"Waylon," you begin slowly, "I think something's off. I don't...I don't know how to describe it, I just...something is seriously wrong with me. I don't know why. I—"

Waylon, in all his surprise, manages to bring a hand up to halt you momentarily.

"What do you mean 'off'?" he asks you curiously.

You've said too much. And you're not even close with this guy. To twist the knife even further, this guy is the whistleblower. He ruined your life.

But sadly, he's the only one who understands.

"Nothing's right," you admit, retracting your dominant hold and shrinking back into the couch. "I feel like I should be remembering things, but...I'm not."

"Like what?"

"Like just things, I don't fucking know!" You fling your arms into the air in exaggerated frustration. "Do you know I can't even get wifi at my house because I don't have access the new damn password?"

Waylon arches a brow. "What does that mean?"

"It means, Park, that I have to run my wifi through a router, which was set up by a supervisor, which prohibits me from looking up anything about my footage, about Murkoff, anything! Making me even more confused!"

"Um..." Seeming lost for words, Waylon just remarks, "That's...not normal."

"I know that! You don't think I know that?!"

"Okay, okay! Calm down!" Waylon holds up his hands defensively, and you recognize caution skirting through his stiffened gesture. It reminds you of Nita's reproachful posture when she saw how freaked out you were becoming.

Ultimately, the parallels have you freeze in your tracks and take a moment to register calming down. Waylon is your last chance to find what you're looking for, and you can't miss this opportunity.

A moment passes that you allow you simmer into the unsteady atmosphere. Glaring down at your palms, you try again.
"Waylon," you repeat again, obdurate yet calm. "Can you just...please help me. Help me figure this out. I'm sick of doing this alone."

The term 'alone' is heavily weighted. Usually, when hardships are encountered, you're more than fine in trekking your own path dependently. It's why you don't rely on friends or family to help you out, and when they do, it feels excessive. Their support and encouragement has always rubbed you against the grain in a manner you could never adjust to.

Being alone has always been fine to you. But being lonely...

Well, that's why you're here, isn't it?

The silence that follows is abysmal, but it's Waylon's sigh that makes the environment a bit lighter.

"I'm not a genie, but I'll see what I can do," he murmurs defeatedly, running a tired hand through his hair. He looks so...exhausted.

The whistleblower who ruined your life is now willingly putting his own into more danger just for a favor. A risky favor, sure, but a favor nonetheless.

With a blink, you realize that slowly, hesitantly, Waylon Park is gaining your respect.

"So you just want information about Project Walrider?" Waylon presses, still looking like he's walking on hot coals but sounding a bit more firm-footed than before.

You nod stiffly. "Just anything that could give me closure. I guess...I guess I just need information about the specifics. The details."

Then promptly, you clarify, "I need to know what happens to the Walrider when his Host is dead."

"His Host..." There's a moment of bafflement before Waylon's eyes begin to slowly obscure with thought. "Billy Hope..." He looks strained as he slowly pieces together what you've known for a long while.

Then Waylon's eyes widen and you know he's got it. "Billy Hope is dead?"

The way his tone dips into an awful shriek isn't making you feel any more confident, and it's doing nothing to relieve your own anxiety.

"I mean..." you fidget momentarily, finding yourself uncomfortable at addressing Billy's death. No, Billy's murder. You killed him.

You try again: "Yeah, Billy's dead."

Waylon's response is very despairing to your confidence on the subject. "Wait, what? So what..."

"—happens to the Walrider?" you finish grimly. "That's what I'm asking you."

With a long groan, Waylon props himself on the couch's arm as though he's close to fainting.

"God," he eventually breathes. "Yeah. Yeah, okay. I'm freaked out too. I'll do what I can." Waylon pulls forward to provide you an encouraging smile that's tight around the edges. You know you've handed him more problems that he has to manage, but you have to appreciate how far he's willing to go for you.

Then his eyebrows knit together with a sudden consideration that bothers you.
"Wait," Waylon drawls uncertainly, "How do you even know about Billy Hope and the Walrider? How do you know he's dead?"

A gulp roots itself in your throat.

_Wernicke spins towards you in his robotic body, hanging onto life with a wheelchair at his command and a crazed Variant keeping him alive. His eyes are wild with aged insanity when he pierces his intrepid glare into your tired one. Chara is heavy in your arms._

_You have to stop him. To...murder Billy._

_The expectations and aches and traumas nettle heavy in your battered chest._

'Turn off his life support, his anesthesia. You have to undo what I've done.'

"Miles?"

Waylon's question seems to come from another world, until eventually you're able to place one foot back on reality while the other trips over your memories.

"Hey, you okay?" Waylon presses, looking nervous. "You look a little pale."

You can't have another repeat of Nita again, but something about the memories is prodding at your brain like a million nails stuck in your skull. You hiss as another resurfaces.

'No one can get out of this place while he lives. You must kill him!'

You killed Billy.

Chara's question rings in your shattered eardrums.

_What happens to the Walrider?"

_The Walrider..._

Your arms begin to itch.

Luckily, before you can dig your nails into your veins to get yourself to shut up, you see Waylon's hand resting dubiously on your kneecap. There's a phantom jolt that shakes your body immediately at the contact, and you pull away sharply.

"Sorry," Waylon stammers, pulling his hand away like he touched a hot surface. "I just...asked if you wanted my number."

Still not entirely back in the real world, you mumble absently, "Number...number for what."

"My phone number," Waylon answers patiently. "I know I called you and all, but I'm still not feeling confident with using public lines. I have an old cellphone that the family uses, y'know. Have to switch it out every couple of weeks. It could help us keep in touch if we need to."

"I...okay."

Waylon gives you a pitiful glance that makes you angry, but you're not ready to be yourself again, so your stare down at your eight-fingered hands with spiders crawling in your skin.

"I'll go and get the phone," Waylon says, and he leaves momentarily after stumbling to his feet with
his prosthetic leg. He leaves you alone in the living room.

Your arms itch so bad.

It's not even beginning to itch so much as just hurt. Sting a little, even, like there are insects nipping and wriggling in your arms. You swear that your veins are becoming darker and darker the more you look at them.

Eventually Waylon walks in to spare you from another dissociative episode, with Lisa trailing close behind. Her harsh stare doesn't have you convinced that Waylon has fully bought over her trust in you.

You both switch numbers so he's able to text you the results he finds of Project Walrider (it's pretty upsetting that your original phone was confiscated too, so Jackson had to pick up a temporary phone that has the same filter as the rest of your apartment. The device is basically Refuge's property) and you haul yourself off the couch, much easier than Waylon was able to with his bad leg.

A thought tugs so suddenly in your mind that you physically freeze in place.

Fiercely, you tell Waylon, "I have another request."

Lisa raises a brow. Waylon mimics the reaction as well after they exchange a similar look of skepticism. "Um, alright? I guess it depends on the request."

"I want you to find out everything about the kid."

"What...what kid?"

Your loose temper stiffens your shoulders. "The kid I was with, Park! Christ, do I have to spell it out for you?"

Lisa takes a menacing step forward that has you burrowing your growing frustration with this family and having you mumble out the rest of your explanation.

"I want to know why Murkoff was experimenting on a child," you tell Waylon slowly. "I want to know why and when and everything else in-between. Understand?"

There's a reluctance as Waylon answers bleakly, "I hope you realize what you're asking of me."

You do. "Yeah, I know. Just...find out what you can, okay? Call it a deal-breaker."

He perks a brow. "Deal-breaker for what?"

"As in you got me in this mess," you snap, pointing a sharp finger to his chest, "and you're sure as hell gonna give me as many explanations as I need."

Lisa crosses her arms, vibrantly displeased with you. Her eyes narrow. "And what exactly are we getting in return? Murkoff is already on our case, Upshur. And unlike you, we have family to worry about."

She does have a point. You can't provide protection, you can't plant a bomb on Murkoff's bastards and have them blown to bits and pieces. You're really useless, and you never expected this type of burden. Waylon has a family; you have nothing.

When the thought of Chara plucks itself into your mind, you force it to vanish.
"I can't do much," you eventually admit, giving Lisa an earnest stare. She meets it evenly. "But if you guys...I guess, need me to help out somehow, maybe help you move out of Murkoff's radar as quickly as possible, I'll do what I can."

Then you turn back to Waylon, maintaining your formal posture. "I still don't like you, Park. But I think we can both agree that Murkoff is a bunch of ruthless pricks who are both after our asses."

Still seeming baffled, Waylon does offer you a stiff nod. "I guess you're right."

"It might be right," Lisa intervenes, still boring her gaze into your own, "but you're still not confident that you can even stop them."

"I'm not," you agree. "But you help me find out more about Project Walrider and more about Murkoff experimenting on adolescents, and I'll be in your debt."

There's a heavy silence that follows your vow, but to your surprise, the atmosphere has become a tad less heavy. More companionable, almost.

Looking at both Waylon and Lisa Park as individuals rather than enemies helps you feel a bit more in control of your situation. To view them as allies makes the former loneliness you'd felt hampering your mind loosen its grip. Sure, you still view their presences as cumbersome, but at least you have a common enemy to share. Hatred has always been easier for you to register, rather than mercy.

Eventually Lisa trails behind her husband and hooks a supportive hand around his arm. "Okay," she murmurs to him, still sounding unsure. "Do what you have to do."

Waylon takes into account his wife's hesitation for a moment longer before he gives you a sure nod of agreement.

"We'll help you," Waylon confirms.

There's a new admiration for the Parks that makes you wish you could help them more. But all you have to offer is a sincere, "Thank you."

You excuse yourself from their household as Waylon takes Lisa aside so that they can discuss what they've just promised more intimately. Besides, the house is beginning to feel more like a prison, making yourself feel too small and exposed and other emotions you can't properly comprehend. It's best just to get out, as you've learned to do in chancy environments.

As you're leaving, there are tiny shuffles behind you, making you immediately giving a full jolt at the sudden noise. When you whip your head around to assess for any potential dangers, you lock eyes with two small boys, watching you from the corner in a kitchen.

The smallest one shrinks fearfully when you spot him, but the oldest one has a firm gaze that dissects your appearance and structure almost immediately. If these are Waylon's sons, then the eldest definitely received his intimidating ferocity from his mother.

You've just put both of them in even more danger than they were before. They've probably both been viciously snatched from their home and school and friends already. Anything that a child is supposed to label as a normality has disappeared for these boys, probably for good.

You leave quickly afterwards, with an apology twisting like bile in your mouth the moment that you leave the house and the boys' gazes follow you to the parking lot.
As you're driving back home, your arms itch even worse than before.

You feel the spiders that are residing in your skin twist and squirm, attempting to claw their way out of your veins. It makes holding a steering wheel a daunting task, so much that you almost find yourself veering into passing cars when you're on the highway.

Being alone with your thoughts is the worst form of punishment you've ever had. The memories are scraping at your sanity, repeating over and over and over and over until your mind is no longer latched onto reality. It's in some distant abyss, drowning in every awful instance you've had the displeasure of encountering.

'You made the right choice here, buddy.'

'I hear a rat.'

'Silky, you look so silky. Let me just...I need to tell you a secret.'

It's too much.

You attempt to squeeze your eyes shut and try to momentarily shy away the darkening thoughts, but that's the dumbest mistake you've made.

There's something watching you. Its organs spill over your corneas and it twists and turns under your supervision. There are bleeding insects and bodies engulfed in flames that flash through your vision like a black-and-white phonograph. Flashes of copper and silver and red splatter across the figure and it just won't stop looking at you.

'Walrider'.

At first it's a word. An eight-letter word that means nothing but a name you might stumble over in a dictionary.

And then it repeats over and over and over and over and over

And you just

want it to

Stop

There's a shriek of a car horn that has you screaming out a panicked "Fuck!" as the car screeches past you.

Where are you where are you

You're in a car. That's all you know and all you know is that you're alone with a monster.

Monster.

'Walrider.'

The Walrider.

You can't take this anymore.

Fortunately, through your gaze of growing panic, you spot a rest stop right beside the highway.
Anything to get you off the road and out of control of a vehicle; you're dangerous right now, you need to relax.

You park the car and immediately head into the restroom. Just somewhere that you can splash water onto your face and practice some exercises at Refuge just to make your body belong to you again.

Fate is kind enough so that when you walk inside, you're alone. You head to a musty bathroom sink and douse your face with cold water, trying to forget. Trying so, so, so hard to forget.

*A crazy man once told you, before he sliced off your fingers, 'God died with the gold standard. We're on to more concrete faiths now.'*

Stop it stop it stop it!

Fingers shaking, you glance up at your reflection. The greasy stains fog up the mirror a tad, but it's not like you're eager to see how you look.

Your skin is really pale. Which is surprising, if not ironic. You'd always been rubbed the wrong way if people had assumed you were white, when your mother's side had granted you a skin color darker than acceptable on the school grounds. As a kid, though, you would gripe to your mother about being insulted for something you couldn't prevent in a whitewashed community, and she would chuckle and give you some sort of reassurance that there was nothing wrong with your color and she thought that your skin was beautiful or some other sort of motherly bullshit that you took comfort in.

—Ha. If she could only see you now.

You swear to god that you can even see your veins sprouting from your eyes and trailing down your cheeks, like you're visible right down to our bones and god god what's wrong with you what's wrong with you!

"Stop," you growl to the reflection, surprising yourself with the undercurrent of ferocity and rage and everything else similar to hatred, aimed at nothing but the man that's snarling at you in the mirror.

You keep swarming in memories that are so far back that for a brief second you're remembering the woods you ventured through as a child and in the next you're being grabbed by Variants with gnashing teeth and claws. Your mother's smile greatly contradicts the gore smothering your sawed fingers.

"Stop!" you say again, forceful now. The man in the mirror glares right back with pupils darkened in the harsh fluorescent lighting from above.

*You're saying the experiment needed…'*

'A proximity to death, to overwhelming madness. Only a test subject who had witnessed enough horror was capable of activating the engine.'

No no no no no!

*That film didn't scare you, right?* Chara asks you, *their eyes probing and watchful.*

Watchful.

**Watching you**

It's like someone has lifted your innards into your throat and they've brutally shoved them into the
pits of your stomach. Like something really bad is festering inside of your bones and all you see are webs of static and so many eyes—

The reflection isn't your own anymore. It's giving you a horrible look of fright and anger. Almost inhuman.

Exactly inhuman.

'Only a test subject who had witnessed enough horror'—

"No!" you scream at the thing in the mirror.

'A proximity to death, to overwhelming madness'—

"Stop it!"

'You saw the Walrider, didn't you?'

Didn't you?

"Stop, please..."

'Gott im Himmel...'

No no no no no no no

—You'll settle this.

There was a compartment in Jackson's car that he kept all of his necessities. In his absence, you had scoured through the supplied and found something you know he didn't want you to know about. Something that everybody has but refuses to show off.

You stumble to the car, having it already unlocked, and tremble horribly as you reflection and the Thing follow you all the way to the glove compartment.

Eventually, through hasty scavenging through napkins and papers, you make contact with something solid and smooth.

You enable the pocket knife and storm back into the empty bathroom.

'You have to rob Paul to pay Peter. There is no other way. Murder in its simplest form. But what happens when all the money is gone?'

Never mind the static that's turning your flesh into television snow through your psychedelic vision, and the god-awful thumping of your head that's compressing your brain.

What even brought this up? Why is this so bad?

'Little pig. I'll find all you whores.'

You confront the mirror again, detached from the man that's holding a knife to his throat.

It's crazy. This is crazy.

But it might work. If it's as bad as you think, then...
Then...

'You can't die,' Chara tells you with a sniffle. 'You can't leave me alone.'

God.

You really have lost it.

As the cold dagger presses against your neck, you think of everything you have to lose.

You think of everything.

But there were so many bullets in your body and you lived anyway. Didn't you?

Then there's a split moment of stinging pain as you slash your arm to the side. The man in the mirror gives you a glassy gaze as a line of red gushes down his chest and onto his shirt.

With numbing dizziness, you fall backward.

The tendrils wrap your body and the fading reminiscence leaves you.

'Gott in Himmel...'

It's dark.

-
meanner than my demons, bigger than these bones

Chapter Summary

Alt: 'but the pattern that has kept me safe is fading, now I'm crawling through the mess I've made. it stains my clothes with awful shades, that scream that I deserved the fate I've chosen, and all this emotion was wasted'

Chapter Notes

This chapter is explicit is heavy dissociation, relapse, and unhealthy coping practices. Please be careful

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Black swarm mist mist so many bees bees it won't stop

Listening to what.

Listening to w h a t ?

God god it hurts so bad where even are you where are you it's so white silver silver shiny

Shiny shiny like the bubbles popping in your brain

Could you just speak normally for just one damn second please?

Where even are you?

Is this some sort of dream what is even happening where are you where are you where are you

Is this real?

Is this real?

"Subject 12847, hour 1300, commencing Stage Four of Hormonal Extraction Testing."
There's a voice and it's not yours not yours not yours where is it where are you

"Walrider's Host seems fairly stable under massive amounts of anesthesia. Supervisors are still expressing concern for extracting an active Walrider whilst the Host still lives."

"So lets just kill him and get the bloodbath over with."

"Petryna, shut it or I'm sure Upshur will be more than happy to have a friend join him in the failsafes."

Would you just communicate normally please? Decoding binary on the spot isn't exactly helping my fucked-up brain at the moment.

"Brain activity increasing."

"Good, he's awake. And seeming to make contact with the Walrider."

"What does that mean?"

"For us? It means that we attempt to stabilize him again to prepare extraction process. But if it spirals out of control like last time—"

"We're fucked."

"Great."

They keep talking about us. Talking about you. Whoever you are. Whatever you are.

They want to kill us.

I can see that.

So we kill them first.

And you want to resist. It's humanly to resist. Killing is bad and morality is so important to you. You would screw it up by agreeing to whatever is housing in your soul but—

But—

"Hey Upshur, if you can hear us, this might hurt a little."

Okay. Okay, fine.

Kill them all.

And you do just that. Not a muscle loosened nor a single pang of guilt that lessens the thrill of the murder.

There are screams for a split second and it hurts you. Hurts your brain because they're so scared and painful and god can't anyone give you a break and shut up

It's one
Two
Three
Four

**Five** seconds
And it stops

*It's quiet.*

And that's when you know that it's wrong, it's *definitely* wrong, but the silence is so *enticing* and that's how you know that this body isn't yours anymore.

**It never was**

- 

The memory is foggy, but recalling it *as* a memory is what's the most disturbing about the scenario. The fact that it was brutally curtailed by the sensation of warm blood staining your ghostlike flesh isn't soothing. It's *not* supposed to be soothing, so thank god there's something left in you to be scared.

Everything is a dizzying blur, with the ambience of a car engine, heavy and muted, being like a lullaby to the brain that is home to a tar-colored being residing in your nerves and bones and soul. Anywhere else it can grab a hold of you is where it belongs.

Your throat feels choked by something tight and snug, which you recognize as a bandage. You've had to wrap yourself up with the same sort of cloth and webbed texture, back in Refuge. Back when you stabbed at the skin and thought that releasing all the ants in your veins would resolve your inner turmoil.

No such luck, it seems.

Some syrupy liquid flows through your brain circuits like honey, giving a mechanical power to enable further senses that have been dulled by heavy anesthesia. You know that you're breathing in something heavier than oxygen, with a mask encasing the toxic air and forcing it into your system through your mouth and nose. If you twitch, you can feel stabs of needles pricking into vital veins.

"He'll live, right?"

"Unfortunately."

There are two voices accompanying the silence. The thumping of machinery and the distant whirls of cars speeding past assure you that this is a truck similar to an ambulance. With you being tied down like the animal you are. You *are* happy about one thing, and that's how numb you are to the world. Like waking up after being heavily medicated for a root canal.

"And the Walrider?"

"Wants him alive, for some reason. Damn son of a bitch nearly cost us again."

"I'm just really surprised that Lawrence is still allowing him outside, y'know? The guy's a ticking time bomb."
"Oh, I agree. Horrible decision on the corp's behalf. But, not much of a choice. We're a bit cornered already. Squeaky wheel gets the grease, right?"

"I suppose..."

Bits and pieces of the actions from before are resurfacing like waves under the water, and you can't help but cringe. You basically just committed suicide for the dumbest reason known to man. What would Jackson—or Toria or Chara or Nita or Waylon or hell even David—have said if they'd learned that your corpse was found at a highway rest stop?

You don't mean to pry your eyes open, really, you don't. But the dreams from before are so vivid yet so distant that they could fall through your fingers like grains of sand, never to be interpreted properly. This might be the one time that you're awake as ever—well, awake as you can be with anesthesia being sucked into your lungs every two seconds—and you need to see where you are.

The world is still dimly adjusted, swirling into hues and colors that you recognize as a cream-colored ceiling, shining with fluorescent lighting that makes you blink when you stare directly at it.

The commotion between the men who you assume are watching over you has silenced, and your heart pounds.

There's shuffling on their behalf, and you feel a new presence piercing your eyes that are squeeze shut. But the man is patient, only settling closer to your side as he waits for you to come to properly.

"Miles, are you awake?" The voice belongs to a man, but it's unfamiliar and stiff with authority. You recognize this sort of apathy and the sort that it originates from. Your heart is palpating so violently that you're surprised the man can't seem to hear it.

"Miles, I'd like you to try an exercise with me," the man persists, his voice balanced. "I want you to open your eyes and follow where I'm moving my finger. Can you do that?"

You hate to admit that it's curiosity as to where the man is going with the dumb exercise that has you blinking back into the world, giving him a fuzzy stare because you're too tired and dissociative to glare at him properly.

Calmly, the man raises his index finger near his chest, where your eyes are already driven due to his placed position and your placement on the presumed stretcher. You're not sure; all you know is that your hands and feet and torso feel uncomfortably chained to whatever furniture you've been forced to sleep on.

Then the man draws his pointed finger to his left side, and, despite your aching vision, you force yourself to follow. In doing so, you find that it's enacted some activity in your brain that's able to override a bit of the sleepiness you're feeling.

"Good," the man nods. Then he moves his finger to the far right, and you follow. "To the right? Excellent."

Knowing the premises of the game, you're able to obey his orders and allow yourself to wake up a bit more with every movement he makes.


This time he sets his hand down and gives you a look of approval. "Very good," he praises.
The second voice you'd heard comes from somewhere behind you, and it's startling at first to hear a scoff from a place you can't spot in your current field of vision. Panic is beginning to pump back into your blood.

"Great, now he's even more awake," the second man tells his partner caustically. "Would you just hurry up and do whatever that hypnotic therapy is already?"

_Hypnotic therapy._ You remember reading an article about that. Somewhere.

"Give me a minute," the first man argues, looking over your body to wherever the other resides to give him a glare that's layered with agitation. "It's all a part of the process."

"Yeah, looks like you're doing a spiffy job at it," he snaps with a heartless chuckle. "The guy tried to kill himself and here you are playing games with him."

"In the end, Miles is still a patient," the man says with a dismissive wave of his hands. "If we don't treat him as such, we're as good as dead."

"I hope he's listening right now to how much we all hate his sorry ass," the second one pipes up again, tone still disparaging and it's making you shrink. "At times like these, you can't help but miss Ol' Billy, y'know?"

_Billy Hope._

The original Host.

_So they're saying that..._

"Think about it this way, Rich," the first man continues. "If we're able to sober up Miles, perhaps there's still leftover potential for us. For the company."

"Yeah, keep putting quarters in that dead machine of yours, Smith," Rich scoffs again. "Maybe you'll eventually get a gumball. Or some shit."

"I'm ignoring your absurd metaphors now in order to do my job."

"Whatever." You hear Rich scoot away from what he was formerly seated on and walking away to who-knows-where. Probably a distant corner in the limited space that this ambulance-looking vehicle provides. "Just fucking put him under again. Tell him that he's relocating to Albuquerque. Maybe hook him up with a pretty girl."

"Hypnosis doesn't work like that," Smith argues to his partner, his tone still evenly proficient. "It was hell just getting him to—"

When he remembers that you're still fairly conscious, despite your head feeling stuffed with cotton, Smith lowers his voice dismissively. "Never mind. Just let me put him under again. Make yourself useful and collaborate with the others on how we're going to explain this to Wrent."

The overfilled balloon that's substituting for your skull is still faintly pulsating with a distant thudding. You seem to have a visitor in your brain. Whatever it is, it's pretty displeased on how immobilized you seem to be.

"Now, Miles," Smith begins, relaxing into his chair. His fingers are laced together smoothly in his lap. "Are you feeling comfortable?"
It's a joke, right? He can't be serious; you have needles you know are slurping at your blood and a weird thing that's serving as an active subconscious being stirring in your guts. The insentient chemicals being forced into your nostrils is now becoming a sharp discomfort that you're not appreciating.

It's got to be a joke.

"You seem very tense," Smith comments, but his voice is suspiciously gridlocked. The lack of emotions, the lightened syllables along his rogue, make you suddenly aware that this all a part of the hypnotic process he was discussing.

"Is there any way that you could relax the muscles in your body for me?" he presses calmly. And he sounds so confident, so sure and precise, that you feel like you have no other choice but to attempt loosening your tightened nerves.

No.

This is part of the process. This is what he wants you to do.

"Relax your muscles," Smith persists, but you refuse. You refuse because you're surrendering some part of yourself into their control. You can't do that anymore.

"I said, 'Relax your muscles,,'" Smith's voice detours into something you can find yourself hating, thankfully. Concealed impatience.

You ignore him. A refreshing pump of adrenaline is beginning to slowly seep back into your bones. The familiarity of power. It's nice.

"Is there a problem?" Another voice joins the party, belonging to a woman now.

"Nothing too concerning," Smith assures her dismissively, making you angry. "Just a bit of apostasy over here."

"A bit?" The woman repeats, inching closer by the sound of it. "Even a tiny bit matters when dealing with—"

"I can handle it," Smith intervenes, his tone dipping into rigid frustration now. "I've worked with this patient before. He's docile once you get him into a certain state."

"Forget the patient," Rich adds in with a hiss. "It's the damn Walrider we're all on our toes about!"

The Walrider.

Your arms begin to buzz with the insects continually groveling in your veins. It's making your jaw harden at the itching discomfort.

"Smith—"

"Now what?"

"He's active."

"Wh— oh, shit."

You feel your vision stir with that familiar blackness. The same type that haunts your dreams and makes your head too fuzzy to think.
Smith is dragged away with more distressing matters, and you're left alone in the dark—metaphorically and literally, seeing as your peripheral vision is severely messed up at the moment—and the bounds holding you down somehow tighten their grip on you.

"God, these ratings... That electrical activity of his isn't promising."

"Well, hurry up and floor it! Jesus, has everyone lost their senses today? I'll put him to sleep, you both do your job and make sure we get where we need to be!"

There's an extricate silence that follows before the addressed personnel oblige their friend's orders and head to where they're supposed to be. You're shaking now, terribly, like you're wracked in horrible screams and protests that just can't seem to leave your body.

Smith returns hurriedly to his seat to where you can see him. He's nothing but colorful shapes that interfere with the dusk bubbling in your eyelids. Your eyes narrow towards his direction.

"Miles," Smith warns, and you're shocked at how nimbly equitable his voice remains. Like this is all some stupid, sick game.

"Miles, please calm down. Everything is okay."

He's lying.

"We are going to take care of you. Please, trust us. We want you to be relaxed and safe. Don't you trust us?"

*He's lying.*

A gigantic swarm is humming from somewhere in your soul, like a singing chorus that's been put at maximum volume in your heard. You glare at him as the mist begins to spill from your thoughts and into the world around you.

At first, you think it's all a hallucination. There's no way that... no, that swarm isn't real. It's all in your head.

But Smith's eyes are practically popping out of his head, and when the mist curls around his figure, there's a shocking bolt of adrenaline and anything else hormonally-reliable snapping back to life. Almost evaporating the anesthesia they've pumped into you.

"Smith! What the hell—"

"He's turning! My god! Mother of fucking Christ! Somebody get the—"

Whatever Smith was about to yell out is lost as he chokes on his own blood and the swarm from inside of your own body squeezes his organs out.

There are so many screams that follow that don't belong to you, and for a while of moving about your limbs and practicing escaping, you wonder if they're all just in your head. But eventually, you get smart.

You realize that the world is grayscale. Your reality is tipping over into a nonexistent being. Into shapes and patterns and images uninterrupted by the human mind. Something you could never prepare for, had you not obtained the skills to cope.

There's a lot of liquid explosions and more screaming that you can't understand. You're detached and
alone and all you can do is watch this other being steal your body as you ride shotgun, tiredly and apathetically watching the world around burn into the definition of chaos.

And you don't understand why it doesn't hurt you.

Eventually, you do get to experience some form of pain. It's whenever the vehicle you're residing in smashes into a tree off the road. But as you tumble down the hillside, alone save for the tattered corpses you're riding with, the world reels back into existence

and

you

panic

You zip right back into your physical body and mind with a shattered gasp, feeling the familiar sting of a cracked rib. Of untreated wounds exposed to the crisp environment around you. Of the pounding headache that delivers tremors through your neck and downward.

Being a human with a corporeal form sucks.

Eventually, after the dust has settled, and you're able to catch a breathe, you revel in how unnaturally calm you feel. There's blood on your outfit, some of it is yours without a doubt, but some belonging to others. There are piles and piles of human remains that are scattered along the skeleton of the bashed vehicles; it's a big car, you must admit. Enough for you to be strapped to some weird stretcher and for them to somehow monitor your brain activity.

Your mind trails to Billy Hope, and how he was locked onto computers and wires like a dead battery. His life support and the Walrider; that was all he knew.

Huh.

Strange.

You climb out, feeling the energy sap away at your weary bones. There's a sensation of liquid seeping from some area on your face, and you poke a tentative finger towards your eyes and mouth and nose. The blood—or whatever it is—is coming from everywhere.

And upon further inspection, it's black.

'Forget the patient. It's the damn Walrider we're all on our toes about.'

Shit.

Shit, shit, shit.

You're not stupid. You're not granted the gift of turning a blind eye to the harsh realities you're given. You like to think you have some common sense remaining.

All that talk about the Walrider, and missing Billy, and...

And...

"Fuck..."
You stumble forward, away from the wreckage, feeling like the human embodiment of a train wreck. The oil-like substance is spilling from your eyes and mouth and nose and probably even ears and god will the static ever just shut up?

"Fuck." One step forward. "Fuck." Nearly tripped, but you keep going. "Fucking..."

Every hazy memory that resurfaces is like a hard sucker punch to your bones. The Walrider, every little damn thing about that Walrider. Forget Waylon. Forget Father Martin. Forget Billy Hope. Forget even Doctor Rudolf Wernicke. The Walrider...now that's what ruined your life.

It's why you can't remember.

It's why you can't sleep.

It's why you can't...

Why you can't...

"Fuck."

It's like your bones are melded beneath the tattered flesh and rebuilding itself, making your body lurch uncomfortably with a wince. Your nerves and muscles twist into a new form until you're not even sure that this could be biologically classified as the body of Miles Upshur anymore.

And god, your hands. Your bruises, your stupid neck wound. Everything is just stitching itself back together in some phantom meshing of the flesh.

You heard what they said. What they've implied.

Wernicke's horrified whisper reverberates in your mind, worming through the endless, endless abyss of white noise.

'You have become the Host.'

The Host.

Huh.

Huh.

"Fuck..."

With every step forward, every crumbling lurch you force yourself onward, it sinks in. Slowly but surely. But the concept of understanding is like oil and water in your mind; it can't be. It won't be.

But you can't ignore it. It'd be hypocritical to shy away from the ugly truth.

'You have become the Host.'

Billy Hope is dead. So he can no longer be the Walrider's Host.

So that means...

God. God. God! Why can't you process? Why can't you think?

The blood is seeping through cracks and tears in your skin, from the wreck. You're covered in
bruises and god-knows-what, and in the dullest sense, you remember the asylum. The Variants. Everything that ever laid a petty little finger on either you or Chara.

Oh god. Chara.

What are you going to...

Your thoughts transfer immediately, trying to scope out a silver lining somewhere, but your brain is a mess. You've officially crashed, and all that's left in its wake is static and a nanoswarm munching away at your body.

Jackson will be so upset.

...

Heh.

You don't know why this makes a sudden bubble of laughter pop in your throat, especially when the chuckle, however tiny it was, did nothing but further pain your chest.

There's another crazed giggle that makes its way to the surface, and with it comes spilling blood from the corner of your mouth that perk into a crazed smile.

You laugh.

You laugh with black blood pouring from your lips and your bones shaking with attempted renewal. And god help yourself, but the Walrider is here! He's with you, and he's probably laughing too! He is you! Isn't it funny?

Isn't it all just so funny?

You laugh, and keep laughing. And it's just so funny that tears are pouring down your face.

God. You look horrible.

Why are you even alive?

...

No matter.

Just keep going.

Keep heading home with a smile on your face and a demon in your heart. That's probably the saying, isn't it?

It's not.

That's what makes it funny.

-

There's no clue how you're able to return home, especially since you had no idea where you even ended up in the accident. Maybe the Walrider has a photographic memory of your house and was somehow able to direct your footing.
You must look like the devil himself came to visit an old friend (heh), because the front office only gives you a terrified glance before they immediately return to their business and only provide idle gossip amongst themselves about your appearance.


You turn to the man and give him a blank smile. You can't even interpret his facial feature from all the noise fuzzing up your vision.

"I feel fan-fucking-tastic," you tell him. "I just need to...get home."

Last you checked, you're voice didn't sound so...peculiar. So detached from reality. Not even yours, really.

But then again, this isn't you anymore. You've been gone a long, long time.

The man complains, you think, but you watch as you brush him away and head up the steps. Turns out the Thing in your brain must be hesitant of elevators too.

How funny.

The black entertains your brain with vibrant memories being released through different areas of the brain, making it a thrilling experience all the while.


'Guard your life, son. You have a calling.'

You snort. A gush of black drips onto your chin.

By now you've reached your floor, and Trager and Wernicke and all the others have decided to accompany you. Visions of bloodied fingers, of coils of umbrage, and of children being choked until their faces turn purple are all sick and tiring but they refuse to stop coming. You limp forward, baring teeth whenever you halt to take a breath. You feel sick.

The door on your right. That's your apartment. That's home. That's where you've wanted to be for so long.

With throbbing hands, you open the door.

The smells and sights are so raw to your memories. The memories of reading, writing, cleaning, or typing away at a computer to create a story. Create something outside of this god-awful mess you're in.

It's too much.

It's all just too much

There's a thumping of frantic footsteps as you try vigorously to see what's in front of you. Try to register the world outside of the mumbling chaos in your mind.

"Mother of god!" The hands reach your shoulder and all you can see is a man grabbing your throat and all you can see is him shoving a needle in a vein and making you collapse and all you can see is —

"Miles!" Jackson is here. "What the hell?! Are you hurt? Are you okay? Can you hear me?"
The festering in your muscles throb uneasily, and you stand up as straight as you're able. You're nothing but dust glued to a scrap of bones. You're not of this world; you come from some nonexistent realm of blood and television snow. You don't have a home because you were built to destroy.

The scientists were all wrong. It was never Billy.

_It was never Billy._

So you feel a smile open up somewhere on your face. You drink in the horrified gaze you're given from the outside receiver.

"Sorry about your car," you whisper, smiling, smiling.

And then you fall.

- 

White powders the overall black sensation you're living in. The dark isn't so bad as long as you realize that misery enjoys company. And it's not like you're alone.

There's a figure with you, and you coexist. You offer him a vessel, and he provides you with power. A fair trade. It's what Billy forged and something that doctors could never achieve because they never had the skills nor the talent to truly understand.

The static, even. It's not so bad once you've grown accustomed to it.

It's a new being. You're completely new and you're a weapon. You're a war packed into a human body. You will consume and kill and you will _win_.

What's so hard about that?

_They locked us away._

_Why? We could help! We could be so useful!_

There's no response because there is no definite answer.

_So what happens now?_

Then you're reeled into some other aspect of the world, surging into your subconscious, where all bad memories come to rest until they choke and die. You're settled in the middle of it.

It stares at you with no face or eyes. Its organs thrum in your own.

_Now you remember._

- 

The world is cruel, slapping your senses harshly in the face when the internal numbness subsides enough for you to weave your way through forgotten times, unhappy terrors. Everything in-between.

The humanly sources began to sputter to life again and you can't breathe because you've forgotten how. You thought you'd never need to know how because you're special. You're a god now, aren't you?
Aren't you?
.
.

Do you want to be?

You answer. For once, you answer the Thing straight from your own mouth for everything and everyone to hear.

"No!"

You snap into reality, dragged away from the anesthetic insanity you've been plugged into, and immediately you wish to retract.

Your heart is the first thing you notice, how consumed it is with its own instinctive fear that you suffer the consequences of the racing heartbeat, and pumping veins that are foolishly offering too much blood. All you see is black spots forming into something unkindly and angry—

You have no clue where you are. You don't know where you are or who you are and you want to die.

Then comes a sound. Distant, but familiar. You beg your senses to tune in but nothing happens, but you're skin and bones and you don't know how to operate this mortal coil anymore. You were never a member of this race because you're a—

No no no that's not true that's not true—

"Seven."


"Six. Five. Four."

You feel your own uncertainties collapse as you focus on the words. On the odd words that make nonsense of noise form into a meaning. You breathe.

"Three. Two. One."

The voice stops, and you begin to shake. Tremors consisting of spiders and static overwhelm your blood and you can't focus again on the humanly instinct of breathing oxygen.

"Breathe in."

You attempt to, but it's still wrong.

He tries again. "One. Two. Three. Four."

Slowly sucking up the atmosphere into your human lungs, the black boils in your vision begin to hesitantly reside. You're able to depict yourself hunched over, wrapped in bandages, bleeding, breathing hard. So remotely odd that you can't identify the body that you're stuck in.

"Five. Six. Seven. Breathe out."

Your lungs become mandatory devices to fuel your suffocating body, and you allow the voice to
continue paving a steady heartbeat again with patient instructions. It's a moment later into rejoining 
senses with yourself again that you realize your wrists are being grasped tightly in a pair of brown, 
warm hands.

The hands squeeze at a steady rhythm, mirroring the pattern of counting to seven, and eventually you 
feel better, temporarily paralyzed from the hell of your hindbrain.

"Better?" The voice shifts into strained comfort, sounding balanced yet anxious.

You manage to give a stiff nod. The head motion makes black scribbles sketch themselves onto your 
blinking eyelids.

You watch the hands as they refuse to let go of your broken, eight-fingered ones; they caress your 
own with soft patterns being rubbed gently into your skin, mindful of any sensitive bandages.

It's quiet for a while, with your mind catching up with your physical form and the person is 
nonetheless calm and endearing. They keep a fair distance away from touching any potentially-
threatening areas on the flesh and only stick to kneading at your hands absentmindedly.

"How are you feeling?" It takes an embarrassingly long time to associate the voice with Jackson. He 
pauses rubbing your fingers, but you're able to relax without his support better than before.

It almost makes you want to laugh, his question. But as you attempt to process a snarky answer, your 
stomach twists so suddenly that you bend forward immediately and take a shocked gasp of air, and 
all of Jackson's breathing patterns dissipate from your mind.

The sweat beads trickle down from your forehead and you begin to think. Think about everything, 
think about the psychotic being wriggling in your brain and body and thinking about all the blood 
and bones and organs you were forced to smell and see while you were trapped, trapped in that god-
forbidden place.

You think you hear Jackson alarmingly asking if you're okay, but you don't hear him as you spring 
into action and immediately rush into the nearest bathroom with legs that don't belong to you.

Upon reaching the toilet you crash onto the floor as your stomach dry-heaves momentarily, with 
drool hanging from your lip. But eventually your innards gurgle with displeasure, and you vomit. 
There's an awful retching emitting from your throat as you cough up everything left in your stomach.

The substances leave your body with a final, wet cough, and the next thing you know you're 
crumpled up on the floor crying.

The wailing is this god-awful noise that you couldn't pinpoint to yourself if you tried to. But you feel 
the ugly snot and tears trickling from your face as you continue to shake and cry like a pathetic child. 
But everything is so intense that you feel like you can't store it away into your own thoughts 
anymore. Thinking literally hurts.

The pattering of frantic footsteps is familiar, but you associate it with danger as you scuffle away 
pitifully, cornering yourself beside your bathtub.

"Miles?" Jackson. It's just Jackson. He's not scary; but your heart won't stop exploding from your 
chest as you continue to shake with tears. "Miles, what—"

You bury your face in your hands and let all the gross liquid mingle with your fingers as you sob. 
You sob because the memories are too much and you can't do this anymore. You sob because you're 
tired of being scared of sudden movements. You sob because you're tired.
"Hey, hey, Miles," Jackson murmurs, but his softened voice is maliciously twisted into a familiar growl like Walker or a raspy accent like Wernicke. "Hey..."

When the hand touches your shoulder, some raw nerve is touched and your vision seeps into red. Your eyes widen and you scream.

"Don't touch me!"

You flail into anger and there's a vicious slap of your outstretched, clawed hands meeting skin. There's a flash of black mist that you see clouding your own hands before it's gone immediately. But it was there.

Jackson slams onto the floor beside you, his cheek meeting the unforgiving tiles, and his cry of pain makes ripples of panic echo in your beating heart.

You spot blood. And oh, god, you did this. You hurt somebody.

You're a monster.

A monster monster monster monster—!

You're shaking so bad and your ugly wails are somehow louder than they were before and all you can feel is the dumb, stupid "I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry—"

A scrambling motion makes you crumple away more, sinking into the wall behind you and wishing that if there was some god out there that could allow a sinkhole to swallow you whole right now. Just let you disappear and die.

When the hands gently extend towards you, you force yourself to steady amongst the swirling storm in your brain. The touch is gentle and they pull you forward into someone's chest. The contact of something real is able to ground you a bit more into whatever reality that you normally exist in.

It helps to have a physical structure to muffle your sobs into, careless as to how messy you're making the clothing. The person— no, Jackson! What's so hard about that to understand?—doesn't seem to mind though. His arms wrap around you, still holding you firmly to make sure that you don't drift away anymore.

"I'm so sorry," you sob, voice garbling into a gross speech of saliva and snot and syllables running too quickly together.

Jackson soothes the stiffened features of your back by rubbing his hands along your spine, your shoulders, your hair.

"I'm s-such a fucking monster..."

"No, that's not true," he murmurs to you, synonymous to a whisper. Somehow that makes you shake even more with upcoming sobs, lodged in your chest.

"God, I-I...I just destroy every—everything I t-touch I—just...fucking—"

"You're a human, Miles," Jackson assures you gently, stroking your greasy hair. The movement allows you to further accommodate your dissociative state.
He repeats, "You're just a human. You don't have to be anything else but that. Okay?"

For some reason, his kindness rubs you against the grain. You feel your internal grief, every anguish you've stuffed away for future reference, churning viciously in your stomach. Your brain does a double-take with reality, your chest and throat burn, and the next thing you know you've wriggled out of Jackson's hold to vomit again, this time into your bathtub.

All you can see is that whatever material you've puked out of your stomach is black and oozing, and it brings you spiraling back into the horrid realization.

That you, exceeding a murdered Billy Hope, are the Walrider's Host.

You give a final, pitiful excuse for a sob before eventually your vision dissipates into blurry shapes, and you're gone again.

- Watching your actions as an active Host, detached from yourself, is an uncommon experience. It's unlike the normal routine where you have to gain the Walrider's rushed and maniacal train of thought; now you observe through eyes that used to be your own, feeling like nothing but air as the Walrider drives the movements.

You'd forgotten about Chara. At least, their participation in escaping Mount Massive Asylum. You know that you both got out, one way or another, but thinking of 'how' and 'when' never truly crossed your thoughts until just now. Where you look like you've been doused in charcoal and you're holding a small, unconscious child in your arms.

It's an old memory, bringing you right back to where your usual reminiscing tends to cut short due to lack of knowledge. But here you are, looking idly at the torn corpses of Wernicke and more of his soldier grunts. They're scattered along the floor— quite literally scattered. In pieces, smothered in blood, with the occasional head that's still in moderate condition that wages among the piles of intestine.

You don't really understand why you have to suppress a chortle at the sight, but in some weird, twisted way, you find this scene rather funny.

And then you begin to walk. You're walking somewhere, but it seems like Past-Walrider-You has more information on the objective at hand rather than Future-Walrider-You. Which is strange, but, on the list of things that have qualified as "really fucking strange" over the last few weeks, this is just an honorable mention for top ten.

Regardless you follow because you have nothing else to do; but also because you carry the same amount of sanity you may have brought when you first encountered the asylum, oddly. This feeling of eagerness and bravery; the sensations you don't feel often anymore. You can associate your open curiosity of the situation with that, and it's almost nostalgic.

Or maybe it's just sad.

A couple of other soldiers attempt to stop you, but all you really seem to have to do is give some mental signal to the Walrider eating away at your brain, and he takes it from there. The men are ripped to shreds with only a few breaths to spare for screaming, and with a pang you remember every Variant that ever died screaming; clawing with all their might to prolong their deaths, in fear of an uglier hell waiting for them.

Without a doubt this time, that is much sadder.
So you appear to be sticking to a persistent regime of walking, with men attempting to fire at you and the kid, and the Walrider tearing the enemies to pieces. You can't help but wonder what you could have been spared from if you had this power during your travels through the asylum. Probably would have spared you two fingers. Probably would have come in handy for the kid's safety too.

No, no, no. Focus, Upshur. Answers lie ahead.

You allow the dream version of yourself to trail out to where the exit appears to be, where the orange sunrise blares along the god-forsaken walls of the wooden building. Making the asylum's layout an intense, fiery hue that stirs an odd, relishing comfort in your chest. A familiar feeling of home, of bonfires, of better times.

*Of home.*

Of course. Of course Past You is trying to go home. Where else would you go, at this point?

And then you encounter a man, dressed sharp for business, dying and holding a knife up to a crouching man near the asylum's door.

"No one can know!" the man yells, sounding crazed. "No one!"

The patient's outfit. Similar to Chara's. Hell, similar to lots of people you've encountered in this damn place. Doesn't make him any more special.

But.

He just wants to get out.

*He wants to go home.*

And you're not sure what sort of chimerical reason this Past Walrider You gives yourself for sparing the life of this man when so many other patients deserve to die—just like everything else in this god-awful place—but you have a feeling that it has something to do with the bleeding, unconscious child that you're carrying.

And you let the Walrider kill the man with the knife, tearing him open and clashing his splattered corpse against the floor of the asylum, bathing the patient in his blood. Which was admittedly an accident, but regardless, you suppose it looked intimidating.

The man limps off, reveling in the sunrise that he surely hasn't seen in days, maybe even years. He's in awe at the day ahead of him as he retreats, with his bad leg and bloody outfit and all.

And you like to think that was the end of it. But you walk towards him, following the man on his quest, and for a second or two, you swear that you're about to go back on your supposed word. Maybe you really are about to kill the man.

Tightening your grip on Chara, you saunter forward rather menacingly, your grey body buzzing with a phantom life force. The mist swarms your senses, and you're doused in dizziness again before you can even question the abrupt ending of the flashback.

No! No, don't stop! I still—

- "...have questions..."
The blurry awakening that comes with a crappy night's sleep is the first sentiment you greet upon waking up properly. Next comes the aftermath of being stitched up like a mummy, and next is the hollow groan of your stomach. Seems like vomiting your guts out left you with quite an appetite.

"Oh, good. You're awake." You're too tired to view the introductory greeter as a threat, but you still don't feel further pacified by the efforts.

"Miles, it's okay," the person—ah, it's Jackson, of course it is—brings a slow, tentative hand to your shoulder, making you flinch at the contact received without permission.

"Okay. Okay, good, you're alive." The seamless response demands a laugh, but Jackson's voice sounds too heavy and tired to be taken for an attempt for humor.

You try and perform the honors, but when you chuckle your stomach dangerously careens into your upper throat, and you give a violent hack of a cough.

"Shit," Jackson breathes, sounding sympathetic. He deepens the contact of his hand along your shoulder blades, giving them a steady massage that allows you to further connect with your physical body, rather than have your spirit or whatever the hell wander aimlessly.

You give a long, breathless groan, hunched over pitifully in your tossed bedsheets. They cover you, thankfully, from seeing too much of your bedroom. You don't think you can stand processing too many people and places and things at once.

"It's alright, Miles," Jackson murmurs, and his gentle voice is lulling you back into a restless sleep. "Everything is okay."

His lie is so profound that you're able to snap out of your sleepy trance before you can even catch yourself. You provide another huff of cold amusement into your pillow.

"Fucking liar," you mutter, your voice hoarse and throat sore. Probably from your rampant crying session the last time you were conscious.

...oh, god.

You don't even notice that Jackson is giving a supportive chuckle to your attempt at humor before you suppress a small whimper of shame into your sheets. When you shy away from Jackson's reassuring touch again, he retracts uncertainly.

"Miles?" he presses, upset. "You alright?"

His question is once again so absurd and but a distant concept in your mind that you almost laugh again. The burbling displeasure that's still rooted in your organs lets you think better of the idea, though.

Eventually, using every last ounce of energy left in your vocal chords, you just rasp, "I've been better."

You're not sure why the straightforward remark makes the smallest breath of amusement escape Jackson. He continues to skim his fingers along your spine reassuringly, which you're fine with, despite your usual restrictions on physical contact.

"I'll bet," Jackson says in response. You find yourself softening at his massaging movements, even if your shitty excuse for a brain is still a minefield and is bound to explode in your face any moment now with the wrong footing.
"You've been through hell, man," Jackson continues soberly. "Just rest for a while, alright? I'll go and get you some food."

However pleasant food sounds, the horrid emptiness of being alone and fighting off the evil in your body is unbearable. So unbearable, even, that you lurch forward, ignoring your upset stomach, and grab onto Jackson's arm as tightly as possible, latching onto his blouse's sleeve.

He stops, surprised at your impulsive actions, and so are you, honestly. But the idea of drowning in static and blood and whatever else is deciding to pay your mind a visit is too much. You don't know how much longer you can handle all the flashbacks without at least having a lifeline to latch onto.

You sit momentarily, with you clawing at Jackson's arm to keep him steady whilst you're catching your own breath and trying hard not to vomit again.

Finally, you're able to stock up enough breath to murmur a small, "Don't go. Please."

Your plea cuts through the air like knives, and immediately the atmosphere transitions into something a bit more companionable, oddly enough. Jackson's stiffened posture loosens against your frigid hold. He retraces his steps and joins you back on the bed.

With a small sigh, Jackson nods. "Okay. I'll stay."

You hate people and relationships and everything that demands emotional attachment; that's just how you're built and how you've always been. But you don't know how long you can keep that mindset of yours, nor how much damage you're going to create discarding your former policies against friendly correspondence.

But right now, with a psychotic god residing in the dark corners of your thoughts, you can't afford to care right now.

You release Jackson eventually, once you trust that he's not leaving, and he resumes his caresses along your shoulders and neck and back. It helps your stature deflate into the sheets until pure exhaustion sends you spiraling back into sleep.

- 

The next several days— you're assuming it's been days, but you're not entirely sure on your current perception of time—are the same excruciating pattern. Sporadic yet constant.

You wake up from blurs of nightmares and forgotten memories, and when you can't differentiate the two you panic and maybe cry a little until Jackson calms you down. You refuse to take your medication anymore, because you feel like you're unable to trust what's being forced into your system when you're in a cooperative, sedative state. You're scared of what you're being given. Hell, you're scared of everything now.

The time passes with you being confined to your bed, where you toss and turn or lie flat, staring at the ceiling and interpreting pictures that aren't there. Jackson spends his every waking moment by your side, even bringing most of his personal belongings like books or paperwork or his laptop into your room so he can monitor you whilst multitasking.

He's nice enough, but too patient and courteous to your liking. When you hyperventilate, he helps you breathe again. When you refuse to eat, he forces you to do so. When you vomit out all the fluid in your body, he cleans it up without complaint.

With becoming more adverse to unconsciousness comes the physical consequences. Your arms sting
constantly now, along with certain areas rooted near your knees and ankles. The wrists get the worst of the agony. It disables you from sitting up properly somedays, and a few days of being paralyzed with the pain has Jackson looking into it as yet another concern you're going to have to find a cure for eventually. Just another problem you can't solve by yourself anymore.

The Walrider is prominent more now. He preys on your solitude and emotions and everything in between. The stupid thing is a part of you now, and you don't know how you're supposed to allow that to sink in. So you panic and shake and yell and scream until there's no energy left in your body, but you remain sturdy amidst the grief because you're afraid of what will happen if you burn out entirely. Maybe the Walrider will wear your corpse like he did with Billy. You're not needed alive regardless; this wasn't a part of anybody's plan.

Some memories, though, you're not sure why they were even scrapped. Apparently, through the constant probing and internal analysis of your thoughts, you can decipher that you don't even fucking live here full-time. You were visiting Colorado from Washington, D.C.

Your real home is gone now. This shadow of one is all that remains; maybe that's why the apartment didn't fit your tastes when you stepped foot into it again, after Refuge.

Those Refuge bastards. They were lying to you too, weren't they?

Either way, you try to laugh off the whole D.C. scenario like it's the end result of a bad joke. So that's why Dr. Song was so nervous about you being persistent on visiting Washington, D.C., imagine that!

You eventually laugh until you cry, and Jackson has to placate you again and lead you back to bed.

You're a zombie for days, trailing through this strange apartment that's supposed to belong to you. You think a couple of weeks are shot, but you're still not certain. You practice exercising the dying nerves in your limbs by pacing around hallways and rooms, usually under Jackson's instruction. He keeps food and water in your system, and you pretend not to notice that he's buried all the accessible sharp objects in the house somewhere you can't find them.

You don't sleep. You barely eat. You flush all of your meds down the toilet, and this makes the nightmares and panic attacks and food avoidance and persistent limb aches more frequent. You try to convince yourself that remembering everything is worth more than your physical and mental health.

You're a mess. That's the summary of it.

Jackson shuts his laptop one day and turns to you, where you've shifted onto one side and are looking blankly at the pillow he's propped behind his back.

"Miles, I...I don't know how to tell you this," he begins, then trails off in an almost guilty fashion. A faint twist in your gut associates his body notions as ones of shame and hurt, and that can't be a good thing.

He continues: "Miles, I don't know what to do for you. This isn't...how you're acting isn't right."

Unsurprising. The scarred wound on your throat that he's referring to begins to feel bristly.

He sighs loudly, avoiding eye contact. "I'm going to get you re-administered. Maybe not Refuge, but... I think you're not ready to be by yourself. I think you need a little more time."

You don't respond.
"I was also thinking, about like...a mental institution. But I don't want to," he looks at you earnestly now, and you don't think you've ever seen a man look so pitiful, "and I refuse to let you be forced into any sort of asylum-like structure. That'd just be cruel."

You focus on some sort of buzzing that's beginning to pick up from somewhere in the bedroom.

"Miles, I'm really, really sorry," Jackson repeats, and his eyes are actually glistening. How sad. "I just want you to be okay. And I don't think I'm helping you."

You still haven't said anything, nor have you moved an inch since he started talking. You like to assume that you saw this coming.

"If I can't monitor you, I'll still...visit you, okay?"

No response.

"Miles, please..."

You only blink to answer him, but there's a dull version of some staticky picture that's waiting for you in sleep. So you try to dissociate the pain away.

"Please just answer me," Jackson begs, upset. "Tell me how fucking stupid I am, or how pointless and horrible everything is, or just something! I'm sick of watching a ghost!"

You almost laugh for an unknown reason, but you catch yourself.

There's a heavy pause following his plea, since you haven't given Jackson a proper acknowledgment. And then there's a sigh that's even longer than the last one.

When the fingers gently dance along the skin of your hands, you have to shake yourself out your blurry vision and watch Jackson's fingers attempt to lace with yours. It's an intimate action you could never gain, nor one you ever wanted. But here you are, holding hands with someone who was once someone you associated as an enemy, before you learned that there were other enemies to attend to first.

He squeezes your fingertips lightly, enough to keep your grounded but not enough to hurt your sensitive joints.

"I'm sorry," Jackson repeats softly.

You feel yourself give a gentle squeeze back, despite the sparks of throe shooting up towards your wrists.

God, you really worried kidding when you said you hurt everything you touch.

"It's okay," you lie.

- 

When it properly sinks in, your senses teeter into alarm. You can't go back to anywhere that might be mistaken for a hospital, you just can't. Let alone a mental institution, Christ! You might literally go ape-shit in there and who knows what sort of havoc would be wrought?

You become bitter and froth in your stewing pile of internalization, which is your mechanism nowadays for living. You have long since accepted how useless you are, since all you seem to be good for nowadays is to be a future horror tale for others' enjoyment. They'll say you escaped an
insane asylum and lost your fingers and legends will probably say how there are rumors on something otherworldly haunting your footsteps.

The madness, oddly, becomes easier after you've accepted the point of no return. You jot notes down when you're able to decipher the difference between hallucinations and suppressed memories:

-Lived in Washington D.C. Can't find address anywhere in the house. Possible inspection before moving in?
-Call Thomas (old friend from D.C.???)
-Why did they say Chara wasn't real????
-Look up corporations associated with Refuge
-Text Park
-Maria Sienfield? Old friend? Former co-worker?
-Call numbers scattered along house
-Who is paying Holly Stevens??
-Research Selective Memory Loss
-Potential Firewall set up in apartment?

Your thoughts scramble into the paper, like your every word will be swiped away from your memory the moment they're written, and it constantly drives you into this state of uncertainty that makes your notes more imprecise than normal for you. But you've become terrified of the oblivion that complete amnesia will bring.

A moment's consideration makes your pen drawl on the paper a bit more, and then with a ferocity you can't tame, you quickly jot down:

-Who is paying Jackson Wrent???

"Thank you for calling LibertyCare Insurance. This is Maria Sienfield, how may I help you today?"

"Maria Sienfield?"

"Yes, sir. Is there someone I can—"

"Maria. I don't know if you remember me, but...this is Miles Upshur? I found your name in my, um...old journals. I think."

"...Miles Upshur?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I was wondering if you could...I'm not sure. Maybe fill in the gaps of my memory. What I'm missing."

"Okaaay. Upshur, Upshur...." You hear the distant tacking at a keyboard. "It looks like you were a former customer of LibertyCare."
"Wait, what's LibertyCare?"

"...It's home insurance, sir."

"Ah, god, you're fucking kidding me. Alright, alright, fine. When did I break ties?"

"Let me see..."] A few more taps and clicks of a computer mouse. "Your contract was terminated last October. About five months ago."

"Five months ago, huh."

"Yes, seems so. Is there a reason for this call other than—?"

"No. Thanks, Maria. Bye."

-

"Hello?"

"Thomas, right?"

"Yeah...? Who is this?"

"Miles. Miles Upshur."

"Miles Upshur? Holy shit dude, it's been like months now! How've you been, man?"

"Oh. Um, I'm doing alright. Kinda. Not really."

"Ah man, classic Upshur. Listen, I was hosting a party next week, wondered if you'd be in town by then—"

"'In town?"

"Yeah, man! Good ol' D.C., remember? Home, dude! God, it's been so long since you've been back."

"Oh... Yeah. I know."

"Heh, alright well, what have you been up to, man? We haven't talked too much since you sucked off my brother at that party last summer."

"Wait, I did what?"

"Yeah, we had a couple of drinks and...wait, are you alright? You sound kinda weird, dude."

"I'm fine. I just...wanted to call, ask what was going on."

"Oh, alright. Hey, listen, my invitation is still on the table, should you choose to come to your senses."

"... How much do you know about Murkoff?"

"Huh? Murkoff? The hell is that?"

"Never mind. Goodbye."
"Whoa whoa wai—!"

- "This is Angelina."

"Hey, Angelina. You might not know me, but—"

"Wait a second. Is this Miles?"

"One and only."

"Oh my god, it's been months! I saw you on the news, are you doing okay?"

"Couldn't be better. Hey, listen, this might be a bit weird, but I was wondering if you could tell me...like, my relations to you?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean were we friends or...?"

"... Um, we worked together. Then you got fired, but...I assumed we still keep in touch. I don't know, you haven't exactly been a social butterfly lately."

"I know. I know, trust me."

"Is something up?"

"You could say that."

"Oh. Anything I can do?"

"Yeah, actually. Do you have any other numbers I can call? I'm having some...weird amnesia episodes. Can't remember people or places."

"Oh, dear. That's probably not good."

"Yeah, you're telling me. I couldn't even remember that I used to live in D.C."

"Really? Wow. Well, you've been gone a while, you were always a bit of a drifter."

"I was?"

"Yeah. Still are, I think. How's Leadville treating you? That is, assuming you're still in Colorado."

"It's fine. Listen, can you just call me back and get me the numbers or anything else you can find out?"

"... I'll see what I can do. One journalist to another."

"Thanks."

"Alright, bye Miles! I hope you feel better."

"Me too."
You call a few more numbers in hopes that you can make a conclusion out of it. You call friends, former co-workers, a few ex-boyfriends. Occasionally you pick up on an insurance company or former healthcare plan but that doesn't give you much information, outside of the fact that sometime during your administration into Refuge, you'd somehow cut ties with everybody, insurance-wise.

It's definitely weird. You don't assume that Refuge has any legal dominance into those sort of financial aspects, but it's an area that you're going to have to do a lot of research in.

So, you do just that. It's a natural passion you have, to learn how things tick and the strings attached to laws and corporates. It's a bit of a hassle, since you're limited from lots of common resources you tend to have in your investigations; the Internet and sanity being only a couple of them. You pick out whatever you're able to by maneuvering your way through subtle website searches and from what you pick up around the house.

You scavenge through Jackson's papers one day, when eventually the threat of having no food in the house was too much and he left you alone with sleep pills that you'd hidden under your tongue in order to head to the store. You have only a short amount of time before he's home, and you nitpick through your prescriptions and doctor's names and some business names attached to the files. You write them all down in the tiny journal in your pocket and spend the last five minutes of freedom you have covering your tracks.

You research constantly now, pawing through notes recorded and sites you've trusted enough to inspect. And you learn, through your diligence, that Refuge is a company owned by a company owned by Murkoff.

Because of fucking course it is.

That explains the subtle gaslighting in their techniques. Diagnosing you with schizophrenia and supporting their ludicrous claims of Chara not being real with 'evidence'.

Why the hell would they try and do that?

It takes serious pondering over the next couple of days, but you have enough time to do so when you're just slumped on the couch, pretending to be sleepier and more subdued than you normally are. Jackson dismisses your conditions with the same food and medicine you've been given. The repetition kills your brain. The repetition kills your brain. The repetition kills your—

Ugh, well. You get the idea.

You eventually conclude that encountering Chara was an accident. That wasn't supposed to happen. You were supposed to continuing thinking that they were not real.

But why?

Why put so much effort into making you avoid someone's existence?

The thoughts stitch together slowly as you focus on Jackson's bandage he'd applied after you'd brutally attacked him that one night in the bathroom. It was a surface wound, he promised you, and that it wasn't serious. But it's taken a while for the blood to clot up properly; the placement of the wound on his upper cheek made some of the areas around his nose and eyes swell, as if you didn't need more accommodation to your guilt every time you look at him.

Jackson types on his laptop for a minute and pretends not to notice your inner inspection of his injury before it becomes excessive. He ceases his work to give you a funny look. "Miles, are you okay?"
You respond with a halfhearted, "Mhm," just to ease any growing worries.

It seems to have the opposite effect. Jackson gives you a look that's too laced with worry for comfort.

"You're not looking at the stupid bandaid again, are you?" he inquires, but his tone is tired enough to have you aware that he already has assumptions of what's wrong.

You don't respond, furthering his theory.

Jackson's mouth tightens like he's tasted something sour. He takes a moment to adjust his glasses before he murmurs gently, "It doesn't hurt that bad. And I know you didn't mean to do it."

His words of encouragement come out as some sort of taunt in your ears, and defensively you bristle.

"It doesn't matter if I didn't mean to do it," you snap, growling. "I still did it."

The dreadful dip in your articulation makes Jackson suppress a flinch; your voice has taken a husky, darker tone since you've learned of...the Thing in your body. It's like your vocal chords are on the verge of collapse; it's not like you even practice speaking much anymore.

Still, Jackson has grown mostly adept to when you normally speak. But it seems to catch him off-guard a lot, so you're assuming it's pretty bad and pretty noticeable.

He's quiet, drinking in the tension you've built, before he loosens it with one of his signature, sincere gazes. There's no smile, no sappy reassurance that follows; but you find that even more upholding.

"You were attacking out of blind defense," Jackson sighs, shaking his head. "I didn't think anything of it."

"I don't care," you protest— no, not just that, you snarl.

Stung, Jackson's brows draw closer, his mouth stretching into a frown.

"You need to stop being so hard on yourself," he says.

His dissecting glare bores into your own empty one with no quarter, and you retract from the conversation to exit to your room.

-  

It's a day later that things make sense.

Of course. Of course. If you're dangerous and hosting something bad and otherworldly, then of course you shouldn't be around Chara. You were prevented from knowing about Chara's true fate because you're a threat to them.

The sensation of hurt pangs an awful beat in your heart, which you don't expect when you draw the conclusion. But you remember Jackson and how you didn't think twice when you sunk your nails into his skin to save your own. All that mattered was self-preservation.

Hell, everything has always been about self-preservation. It might be excessive, sure, and it's not exactly a friendly quality; but you've always been too emotionally flat. It was never an ideal trait you possessed but one you could never shake.

Now that you have actual problems that require you to detach yourself from others in order to save them, you can't help but view it as a sore excuse for solitude.
And it *hurts*, oddly enough. It's never hurt before. But, then again, everything lately has been uncomfortable territory that you could never seek tranquility in. Grounding yourself on the foundation of neutrality in relationships is the only way you can ever live.

And besides, you're *dangerous*.

The thought brews and pops along your brain in a tortuous repetition; just the idea of your one day waking up and loosening the muscles you've clenched and worn thin to prevent Walrider from having any foothold over your body and soul. You constantly feel like your very core is being tossed and turned, attempting to rip into two. Oil over water.

You're dangerous, and you hurt people.

If Billy Hope, a sedated patient, can keep the Walrider in such a dangerous condition long past his expiration date...who *knows* what the hell you could do?

You could hurt Chara. God help yourself but you might even kill them.

The buzz of your body hums with life at the idea of murder and you have to silence your thoughts with a firm crack in your spine as you straighten, refusing to drown in further speculation.

You know you have to stop this. It's easy to toy around with hypothetical solutions to make things better. But it's not working, and avoidance is what your doctors, however devious their true intentions are, have not granted you recommendation in practicing.

Reflecting on the odd unpleasantness that churned in your stomach when Toria told you of her family adopting Chara, you begin to have a blossoming horror on what you've assumed was the truth all along. And you realize now that the bitterness you felt on Chara's future adoption was, in a weird way, its own form of envy. And it's suffocating to acknowledge it, terrifying even.

But you have to accept that Chara isn't your child. You don't know why you keep checking in when you're not supposed to, stepping into boundaries and problems that you aren't granted permission to alter.

What's done is done. Maybe if you let go, it'll feel better. Maybe it'll make the bad dreams and thoughts go away.

Then again, it might not.

It will most likely—unfortunately—make things worse.

But you have to do this. For your sake and for Chara's. Even if the thorn in your chest is ascending into a bastion of prickles that hurt your heart in areas you didn't even know were accessible.

Your remaining fingers feel wooden as you dial in one of the emergency numbers you'd recorded down in your journal for safekeeping, when Toria had asked you to watch her child for the afternoon.

It's ridiculous that you have to call in order to make this preposition known; a cowardly move on your behalf, and you're *well* aware. But you don't exit your house anymore; the thought of interacting with potential victims by your own hands is enough to permanently paralyze you in your home that's not really your home. It's sad.
The phone dial rings and echoes in your hollowed chest. The weird emotion of grief for something you have yet to do for a situation you *know* you're not addressing properly is an ironic torture device.

Toria picks up the phone too soon for comfort. "Dreemurr residence."

"Uh..." You realize that you haven't exactly communicated with anybody lately, save for the old numbers you'd found around the house. *Especially* not the Dreemurrs, and it feels like consciously wearing a shirt on backwards. You don't know what to say.

"Wait a moment," Toria shuffles momentarily and a wave of shock radiates from over the phone as she recognizes your voice. "Miles? Is that you?"

You hesitate. "Yeah. It's me."

"Oh gracious! We were all so worried! We haven't heard a thing in two weeks and—"

"Wait," you intervene, dread creeping through your stomach. "'We'?"

"All of us," Toria clarifies. "Aegros and I, Asriel even. Poor little Frisk too. And of course Chara; they've been so upset that you haven't visited or called or anything. We didn't know what to tell them."

The unease is stifling as your tongue becomes lead in your mouth.

"Have you been well?" Toria asks kindly, but she sounds like she's concealing her own form of anxiety— over your wellbeing, might you add. "Chara is at home right now, I can go and get them if you want to talk."

Guilt guilt guilt guilt guilt—

"I...no. No, I think I need to tell you this."

"Me?" she repeats, baffled. "Are you alright? You sound a tad strained."

It shows, damn it. You give a cough to cover your tracks.

"Yeah. Sorry about that. Listen, I...shit, um..."

"Yes?" she prods, with a hint of a mild tone at your slip of the tongue.

You suck in a breath and let everything release into open air. "About Chara. I can't see them anymore. I can't be their friend, or their counselor or whatever they think about me. I just can't."

There's a steady pause. "How come?" Toria asks calmly.

"I... It's hard to explain. But trust me when I say that this is for the good of everybody involved. Please."

"Miles, I—"

"Just don't let them come near me anymore," you sputter testily, your tongue loosening as you speak with an awful freedom. "Don't let them talk to me or call me because I can't—I can't be there for them. I'm awful and dangerous and just don't let them get near me."

Toria is silent for a terrible moment that passes into a lingering quiet. The atmosphere is heavy with your proposal, and you focus on the dull beating of your heart in your ribs.
When Toria speaks, her voice is more grave than you've ever heard it. "You are asking for much."

Fuck. "I know, I know. I know... I..." You trail off, feeling the hole you're burying yourself in grow deeper and deeper.

Another long pause that shears at your anxiety before Toria gives a barren, "Very well."

There's a gaping abyss growing in the spot where the feeling of victory is commonly found.

"I don't understand this, Miles," Toria admits somberly, and she sounds— hurt.

"Understand what," you falter.

"I don't understand why you would leave Chara like this. You mean so much to them, and now..."

Fuck, fuck, fuck. You need a way out.

"I know."

"You're going to abandon them?"

_God_, no. "I'm not abandoning them," you argue, in a voice too sharp. "I'm... They're happy. They have a home and a family and I'm going to... I'm going to get in the way of that."

"Is that what you're worried about?"

"I... No. Well, yes. But. No, listen. I—I have to go."

"Miles, I don't—"

"Just tell them I'm sorry."

You force yourself to click the button on the phone to end the call. The guilt swamps you like there's no tomorrow and you can barely breathe underneath the pressure cramming itself into your ribcage, and the back of your eyes begin to boil.

Before the phone even dares to ring, you shove the extension cord away from the outlet.

---

That night, Jackson tumbles around the house in a frivolous attempt to pack away all your belongings, while you assist as much as you're able as your arms and legs all cramp up at the worst times.

"Don't worry about it," Jackson assures you, with a smile too forgiving and gentle for you to understand. "Let me pack all of this up."

You have to scoff. "These are just my clothes, not a fucking television set. I think I can handle this."

And although your wrists stiffen and shake you manage to shy the pain away and fold clothes naturally.

He nods eventually. "Tell me if you need help. I'll start on cooking, if you want. We've already packed up a decent portion of everything."

You shrug. "Refuge isn't exactly hasty in their requirements for living there."
"Not Refuge this time," Jackson reminds you. "A new place. I haven't been given the name yet."

You're going to take a shot in the dark that the new place is a company of a company of Murkoff, but you manage to bite your tongue about it.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Jackson says suddenly, and his voice is soft and fond and caring. Much too synonymous with pity for your tastes; you know he's not just referring to helping you fold your clothes.

You shake your head firmly, glaring down at the jacket in your hands. "Nothing you haven't done before."

Jackson picks himself off the bed carefully, and stalls at your side like he wants to say something else. For some offhanded reason, you feel the color rise in your face at his silent observation of you.

The moment passes, thankfully, when Jackson heads back into the kitchen, leaving with a storm cloud over his head. He walks in a slump, as though in pain. Something you wish you could comprehend.

You wait until you hear the pots and pans clanking together in the kitchen before you pull out the phone you keep in your pocket.

To: Waylon (8:38 PM)

change of plans. i need that info i asked from you asap

You'd lied to Jackson (again) and told him that amongst the chaos of returning home bloody and broken, you'd lost your phone. He was a bit cross, sure, but easily forgotten because of your condition—and also because finding out about his car being left at some highway rest stop was enough to worry about. The phone was stuffed away in your pocket; how it survived speculation from those Murkoff grunts and the Walrider-influenced car crash is a mystery you don't feel like is worth solving. As long as you have it.

You send the text and patiently fold some jeans. To your surprise, a few minutes later your phone hums.

From: Waylon (8:43 PM)

Im working on it. Dont worry. Why the sudden rush?

To: Waylon (8:43 PM)

none of your business. but im gonna need them at least by tomorrow or the day after.

From: Waylon (8:43 PM)

I said im working on it geez! Doing what I can with the little resources I have. Thanks for your consideration

To: Waylon (8:44 PM)

listen up you smarmy asshole. if you hadnt gotten both of our asses in this mess this wouldnt be an issue. now do whatever you fellow whistleblowers do and band together in some sort of forum or whatever the fuck and help a guy out
You set your phone down, frustrated at the delay of answers, but at the same time grateful for the company that Waylon Park brings. Whatever grudges you still hold against him, at least he's the only person who seems to view your personal struggles more intimately than anyone else.

Jackson calls to you and says that he's going to step into your office really quickly and take a quick call, which you're fine with. Despite your sudden suspicions, you hear the sweetened tone he takes when he's answering a phone call from Simon. He abandons the supposed pasta that's steaming over the stove and closes the door to your office to resume his conversation without interruptions.

As you step into the abandoned kitchen, you have the smallest urge to soak your arms in the broiling water from the pan, but obviously you think better of it.

The sudden stomping outside of your doorway is momentarily harrowing, more so when the footsteps cease right outside of your apartment and bang furiously on the door.

Your heart explodes into a ceremony of fireworks as you immediately assume worst-case scenarios. It's Murkoff, just grunts or angry neighbors or somebody that's going to enable a fight with you and the Walrider is going to appear and—

The banging on the door persists despite your pounding heart, and with Jackson still locked in the office, you realize you're out of options. With a gasp of air in your lungs, you straighten yourself and head towards the closed door, ready to sweep in whatever dangers are outside.

You twist the doorknob and allow the anonymous evil into your home, but you're even more offput when you confront Chara at the door.

You don't find any gleam of welcome or former friendliness they commonly carry when they're around you. Their glare is so fierce and violent and it makes you fumble backwards.

"Kid, what—"

Chara storms towards you, baring teeth, and their hands slam against your torso with such brute force that makes you flash back into the asylum, when you were surrounded by psychotic killers who preyed on pushing you around for sport—

"Fuck you!" They screech, and it's so loud and cracked that it reels you back into the present.

The scene is too much to process at one time so you're a bit short in responding properly. You try again: "What—"
"No!" Chara shrieks again, and your ears ring because of the higher pitch you're not used to. "No! Don't you dare say a fucking word because you don't deserve to!"

The realization hits you like a punch to the face, and your insides squirm when you look at how angry you've made them, and underneath their eyes is a raw layer of hurt that you caused.

You open your mouth, but nothing good comes from doing so. If anything, it makes the situation worse.

"How could you?" Chara gives a dry sob that makes you panic, and you notice trembling tears along the edges of their narrowed eyes.

You falter, because you know what they're talking about and you don't know how word got out, but it hurts all the same.

When you don't answer, Chara's mouth curls into one of empty malice. Their teeth show like fangs.

"I can't believe you would do this to me," they seethe, but it comes out more strained and agonized than furious. They begin to advance towards you, making you stiffen because of their threatening composure.

"You're the only person I know who actually trusts me worth a damn and now you're leaving me alone?!!"

"No. Kid, it's not..." You manage to find your voice again through gazing horribly at the wrinkles on the face that's scrunched with look of complete hurt.

"Don't you dare give me some shitty sobstory of an answer, you asshole!" Chara interrupts you viciously, and you flinch at the words. "You're going to say that it's for the best or whatever bullshit that you think is right! But you're wrong!"

Their hand meets their face and claws into the cheek and forehead maniacally, like the insane gesture will serve as an anchor for their fury. No such luck, but all you feel is yourself shrinking.

"How could you...?" Chara's voice clips, and you take this time to try and scrape up whatever sorry excuse you have for yourself.

"You don't understand," you beg firmly, "I'm doing this for your own good—"

The sour laugh that follows echoes ugly in your chest.

"'For my own good'?!" Chara screams, and their mouth tightens into the creepiest smile you've ever seen. Their eyes give away the remaining sorrow. "Are you fucking serious? You're ignoring me and you want to stop talking to me for my own good?!!"

"Yes! Yes I am because I care about you, kid! I—"

"Don't you fucking call me that!"

Their snarl roots itself to your tongue and you chew on it in a dirty silence.

"My parents always slapped me and called me names and took me to Mount Massive because they said it was 'for my own good!'" Chara fumes, explicitly upset. "The doctors hurt me and said that it was 'for my own good!' The Dreemurrs want to adopt me 'for my own good!'"

"But you'll be happy with them! Jesus, I just want you to be happy!"
"No you don't! You're benefitting yourself from this like the self-centered prick you are!"

"Ki— Chara, that's not true—"

"Fucking liar! You're a prick and I know it! You think only about yourself and you don't care about me and I trusted you!"

They begin to snuffle, albeit reluctantly with streams of snot and tears spewing from their face.

"What did I do wrong?" they whimper thickly.

The awful pounding in your heart is worse than any pain you've ever experienced.

Your look is downcast when you answer, "You didn't do anything wrong."

"Then why am I not enough?" Chara snaps, diminishing their vulnerable stature. "Why are you doing this?! Do you understand how scared I am ever since I left that damn asylum in the first place? Do you know how much I fucking needed you to survive?"

"Chara—"

"Shut up!" They scream, body stiffening and hands clawing into their hair with scrunched eyes that spill out tears. "Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Don't say anything you're awful you're awful you're awful!"

Every word is induced by grief, but that logic doesn't stop your throat from swelling in the way that it would if you were about to cry.

"Please, I just—"

"Shut up!"

You reach out for Chara in this state, attempting to reach for something and try and have them back in your grasp where you can let them understand. Help them know why you're doing this and it hurts as much as cutting a leg off but—

When you extend a hand to them, Chara's posture changes into a defensive one, taking a step backwards. Their hands quickly grab onto something you didn't recognize was in their pocket, and the object brings itself out into the atmosphere, making you cold when you recognize the shining features of the item.

A knife.

You freeze. "Chara, wait—"

"Don't get near me!" Chara blurts out, and you retract almost immediately, holding out your hands only as a gesture of defense.

The fact that they even considered bringing a weapon to this meeting makes your skin crawl horribly.

"Don't you ever fucking touch me," Chara seethes, and in that instance, their eyes are dark and you recognize nothing. You see someone who perceives you as a threat, but nothing attached to it. No love, no understanding. Nothing.

It hurts worse than bullet wounds.
Instinctively, you fight fire with fire. "I don't see what makes me so special, do you understand? I don't know why you're so willing to want to be around me because I'm sure as hell not gonna parent you for the rest of your life!"

Chara's eyes become blunt with a pained expression you wish you never saw cross their features. It makes your heart twist and squirm but you keep going.

"I don't want to be your dad! And I can't be your friend—!"

"Well fine then! I don't want you to be!"

When there's a silence that manages to simmer, Chara's stature loosens when you back away from them and allow them room to breathe. Their grip is still tight around the knife.

You don't know what to say. Everything is coiling in your heart and all that comes out are tears that you're keeping locked behind your eyelids.

"I'm sorry."

You hate saying those words, but there's nothing else you feel like you can say that could possibly alleviate the situation. And even that only provides a skim truce between you both. You realize that your throat is sore from attempting to yell over Chara's voice.

Their eyes are focused intently on the floor, curling fingers even tighter around the knife's handle until their knuckles are white.

A tear drips onto the carpet.

"I hate you."

The words produce a thunderstorm in the muted chaos. The atmosphere is submerged in a heavy darkness you can't help but drown in, and you think that the hurt gained from those three words is plastered across your face.

But Chara says nothing else. Within a minute later, they snap back around to return from where they came.

Shrouded in your pain, you make the same mistake and attempt to reach out for something, anything, but it slips through your fingers.

"Chara, wait. Wait—!"

"Go away!"

You don't follow them. You're trapped between the world of your apartment and the world of the living, and in the worst time you're disabled from stepping out and following Chara down the steps and into the streets, where they will walk out of your life forever.

The silence thrums in your being, and you're left alone, one man on the edge of a canyon about to fall towards imminent death. Trying to venture for something and someone that you know is worth the risk.

But you close the door slowly, manually.

The action is debilitating and you end up sitting down on the couch, slowly but surely crumbling into yourself and hoping that there's a god out there who's merciful enough to form a black hole around
you. Sucking you in until you're nothing.

The softer footsteps follow a good minute in. You don't cringe at the new appearance in the room; if anything, you're adept to it. Not like it matters. Not like anything did.

Testing your voice, you grumble in that transcendental tone of yours to him, "How much did you hear."

There's a hesitant pause, but then the answer comes in a murmur, "Neither of you were exactly quiet... So a good amount."

You don't move an inch. The world is frozen around you.

"Miles..." Jackson ventures softly, and when you hear the counseling sort of undertone you cut it short.

"Jackson," you begin, giving a harsh sigh that echoes the chambers of your soul. "Can you just...do me a favor and not do your job. Just this once.... Just leave me alone."

The semblance of knotted arguments and words left unspoken becomes thicker as the seconds tick by.

But Jackson leaves, extremely and reluctantly so. You feel him drape a blanket around your shoulders before he mumbles a pathetic excuse for an 'I'm sorry' and leaves you to mourn. You're paralyzed into a numbness you could never wash away. But god, god, this hurts worse than anything.

It's quiet, and not the pleasant kind. It's the kind you wake up to after bad nightmares and you wander through the house like a lost spirit. The kind people write poetry about if they're tragic enough.

And it stands as comfort to some. The Walrider, especially.

But it's the worst sound you've ever heard.

Chapter End Notes

I was excited to introduce the origins of some of Miles's chronic limb pain you have no clue. Give me all the physically disabled heroes you can tbh

Chapter name from song "Control" by Halsey, which I'm sure everyone and their mother already knows

Epitaph from song "Fading" by flatsound
we could sit in the fire for ages and feel nothing and it was only years later that we started to scream

Chapter Summary

Alt: 'we lived in the land of emotional backwash'

Chapter Notes

There's a brief discussion on menstruation but it's not entirely explicit, as well as the common misgendering and racism provided by Murkoff upon certain characters

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The bus hisses with finality as you step back out into the cold and into a much more familiar route than in the city. You pay with the change that you— very reluctantly—stole from Toria's purse and you silently promise to pay her back.

The knife is hidden in a concealed pocket inside of your jacket, and it presses into your abdomen until it begins to hurt a little, but you pretend not to care as much; there are other priorities.

Your judgement is clouded and the pain is raw and thuds in your heart, summoning the rocks in your throat to pile up until you're choking back a sniff. You know you shouldn't have said all of those things— you don't think you hate Miles, not really—but it's not like it matters. He probably hates you all the same now, so you might as well get used to hating him right back.

You assume that you're no longer wanted because you're dangerous, just like they always said about you. Ever since your parents curled your hair and powdered your face with makeup when you were too small for such treatment, you were never good enough. And you suppose it's fair; you're not exactly a perfect child, far from it.

Everyone hurts you eventually, and you're sure that it means you deserve it. Everyone leaves because you're scary or imperfect; you're used to wearing the title of 'bad' or 'evil' or whatever else they call you.

The words sting so bad that you squeeze your eyes shut and tighten your grip on the knife hidden under your clothing. You rush past people and ignore their probing eye with the determination to rush back home as quickly as possible.

Nothing can catch you if you're quick enough.

You sneak back upstairs after your adventure of slipping through backyards and hedges and fences. It's not anything you really think twice about, other than you're a bit out of breath; you're a bit out of practice in sneaking around in new areas.
Since you know where Toria keeps the spare knives, you're able to stuff the one you stole back away in the closet with meticulous care, avoiding the drained emotions tugging at your brain and attempting to only focus on the task at hand. You shut the door and attempt to make everything look exactly how it was when you left. Even if, emotionally, it can't be.

You'd first overheard Toria speaking in hushed whispers to Aegros about Miles's phone call. They were both equally concerned on the context of the call and how peculiar he sounded, but your professional eavesdropping helped you figure out that Miles doesn't exactly want you anymore.

That was the first mental double-take you'd performed in a while. The flashes of former people who gave a shit about your existence— however limited the list may be—all ended the same way. They left you and it was usually, somehow, your fault.

You can never figure out what it is that you do that's so wrong. Are you just toxic to be around? What can you change that makes you a good person? All you can do is apologize and try to be better and that just delays the inevitable.

Instead of snapping your fangs at Miles you should have begged him to give you another chance and you can be nice if you wanted. But you didn't; your mind is a haze of quarantined fury and you can only bite and scream when it's loosened. That's really the only time you ever acted so poorly, which only proves how terrible you are.

You sneak into the bedroom you share with Asriel, tiptoeing past his sleeping figure that's buried underneath sheets and blankets. He's a bit of a light sleeper, but his muzzy purring, like a baby's snore, lets you know that he's still asleep.

The mindless actions of changing clothes and acting like you just exited the bedroom for a simple trip to the restroom are like morphine for your soul and allows you to attempt to form an emotional blockade in your mind. It makes it easier to cope with the hundreds of differentiating sorrows that are building in your body until it's becoming too much.

You give a watery sniff to ward away any upcoming waterworks and tuck yourself into the sheets, ready for another night of incurable insomnia.

"Chara?"

The croaked whisper of surprise jolts your body upright and your heart performs somersaults before you can force yourself to calm down.

You whip around to face Asriel's eyes gleaming through the pile of blankets, cloaking his figure. His eyes are piercing in the dim light due to how wide they are. He's looking at you like you're the greatest mystery yet to be uncovered.

"What are you doing up?" he asks softly.

Of course, you naturally lie. Your face becomes plastered with a faux confidence and you have to prevent yourself from arching an exaggerated smile, because that would certainly blow your cover.

"I went to the bathroom," you explain, adjusting yourself into the bedsheets with a casual stretch. "I'm fine, Asriel. Don't worry."

He doesn't budge as his expression delves into one of suppressed concern. "Are you sure?"

"Yes."
"Okay..."

If even Asriel doubts your claim, you know you're going to have a lot of trouble later on. The oppressed pain is pricking at your heart and it's getting hard to act properly while hitching a breath or two.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Asriel asks you suddenly, his voice still quiet like you're a fragile being that he's addressing.

One could argue that Asriel would be as much use to you as Miles would with support and personal survival. But you've never viewed Asriel as anything but inferior to your sufferings; when he says he's willing to give an ear to your thoughts, he always ends up trying to fix it with a bandaid or a hug. Either that, or he gets upset because of your 'cynical' or 'depressing' story. You don't think it's worth it anymore.

And it's not like sharing anything has gotten you anywhere lately. Toria tried to take you to a psychiatrist the first week you were home; it didn't work out very well, to say the least.

So you sink further into the mattress, blocking the outside world from your thoughts as best as able.

"There's nothing to talk about," you murmur briskly.

Asriel is quiet for a second and it's worrying. But then he cuddles further into his bed with a sigh close to contentment.

"Okay," he sighs, and he sounds almost sad. "If you ever want to talk, Chara, I'm always here."

"Alright."

"Good night, Chara."

"Good night, Asriel."

His steady breathing ensues not even five minutes later, and the routinely crooning from his parted lips is a melancholy sort of tune. Maybe in a different life, it would have been the sort of ambiance you would fall asleep to.

But you lie awake, always, always thinking. Especially now, with the recent events being replayed in your mind like a horror film glued to your internal contemplation. Just what was said, what was done, and what's most likely going to be.

...Well, what good was Miles Upshur to you anyways? He's just like everybody else. He's an asshole and he doesn't want you around him anymore. So what.

And if he doesn't want to be some sort of weird parental figure or whatever the fuck he was on about? Fine then.

If you're portrayed as a bad person, there's nothing left to do but play your role.

- 

The scientists at Murkoff are almost never female. You've noticed that a couple of times whenever you're being inspected or tossed around to different doctors like a ticking time bomb nobody wants to detonate. There are some that stick around, sure, but they're about as subtle in their business as a sore thumb. It only makes you that more curious.
Sonya is watching you one day, making excuses to have you around in her office by ensuring the doctors that she's checking your blood or something of the sort. You haven't done much today but bear through a troublesome shot in your shoulder, and then you were given a book and allowed to sit in solitude for a while.

You mention the lack of women involved in Project Walrider as Sonya is thumbing through old files she's scavenging for an unknown use. You act like the question is an idle conversation starter.

Oddly enough, Sonya takes it as such. She gives a complacent shrug before explaining, "Many are in the process of being transported to another facility because of psychosomatic pregnancies."

The name itself is large and sounds pretty alarming, but you're not educated on the term. "What's a 'psychosomatic pregnancy'?" you ask politely.

"It's when your body reacts like you're pregnant but you're not. The cases happening right now are due to the exposure on the Engine."

"Oh," you say, pretending to fully understand.

Then something clicks and rolls around in your thoughts like a pill you can't swallow, and you pry further, "Why haven't you been transported away yet?"

Sonya doesn't respond immediately, her face somber with thought. "I don't have as many symptoms as others may. The women remaining are either slow in the process of gaining the disorder or they haven't even shown signs of it yet. Myself being infertile might be a cause of it too. The birth control pills I use for my menstrual cycles could also assist in slowing the process. An overall mystery, though."

A lot of the words such as "infertile" and "birth control" fly right past your adolescent mind, but your brain sticks to one out of naive curiosity.

"What's a menstrual cycle?" you ask, frowning.

"It's for people who are able to get pregnant," Sonya supplies, continuing to flip through papers. "Commonly called a period. Your body is shedding itself to have a baby. There's blood and cramps and bloating involved, so it's a messy process. It lasts for about a week every month before it's gone."

You make a face. "Gross."

"It won't be so bad," Sonya assures you, almost fondly. "You'll have your period when you're older. And it's just basic human anatomy, nothing gross about it."

Still, it's endearing to have someone put a bug in your ear about the cycle. It could give you time to prepare in advance; Sonya has always seemed to be convenient in that aspect of your life. Having someone help you understand anatomy and how things operate is something you're grateful to have, and you hope you don't take it for granted.

"I'm glad you told me," you tell Sonya. Momentarily you reflect on Sonya Bahandari's position in your life, and you begin to have a flicker of some weird form of hope entwining with your thoughts. It's pleasant, you think, to have a constant anchor. Ever since you'd been administered, you never had that. Maybe you never did to begin with, but it's a nice sensation to have regardless.

"Hm?" Sonya has abandoned her placement in the conversation and is instead hunched over the laptop on her knees, furiously typing something.
You shrug. "I was just saying that it's nice I have someone to tell me things like that."

"It's no trouble, Chara. I've told you before that you can ask me whatever you wish."

"I know. Thank you."

Sonya just gives you a nod of recognition before she returns to her work. Her brows are knit together, and her dark skin clothes the bags under her eyes, which she carries often. You look at her disturbed frame with a concerned frown that you can't help.

You know from the snippets of time you spend with her that Sonya tends to play her cards close to her chest; her probing eyes, yet guarded expression, and features are stiff with the experience of one who has learned the hard way that people are not always allies. You remember being told once in your youth to "Be mindful of quiet waters," and you think that the warning applies to Sonya Bahandari. She's someone you wish you could be compared to.

Almost like a guardian, you think. But you allow the silly idea to slip through the cracks as you begin to read to yourself. "Little House On The Prairie" is just too good to skim through absentmindedly.

Sonya's frenzied typing ceases about ten minutes later, and you look up from your place in the novel to give her atypical conduct a quirked brow.

"Is everything alright?" you ask.

She doesn't reply immediately as she begins to browse intensely through whatever is so intriguing on her brightened desktop.

"Sonya?" you ask again hesitantly, and this time you're able to grab her attention.

"What is it, Chara?" she responds, and her voice is so heavy. She sounds tired. Somehow even her eyes' bags are highlighted more as you focus on the sluggish lids and botheration-induced wrinkles that make up Sonya's face.

You frown sadly at your inspections. "Are you feeling okay? You look..."

"Tired?" Sonya finishes dully, and her sharp and conscious attitude seems to shift as she ponders this. She gives a sigh to accompany her words. "I suppose I am a little burnt out. But I'll manage."

"Any particular reason?" You hate prodding adults for information like this, but you can let that idealization of yours slide; you want to make sure that Sonya is still stable.

When Sonya doesn't answer, you begin to have a creeping sense of unease deep slowly into your blood. You hate when adults are skeptical or nervous because it makes you nervous too. They might lash out or worse.

Finally she closes her laptop and stops her work for a moment. When she stares back up at you, despite her exhausted features, you can see some weird spark in her eyes. Maybe determination, maybe anger, you're not sure. But it's there regardless.

"Chara," she begins cautiously, seeming unsure on her footing in the words, "I need to talk to you about something."

Your heart begins to pound. Authority figures asking to discuss any topic with you has almost never ended positively. You bite back the urge to gulp like a helpless crybaby.
"What's wrong?"

Sonya hesitates, and when she does that, it usually means something pretty bad.

But then she straightens with a phantom confidence you can't identify personally and looks you square in the eyes. Her gaze is firm.

"I'm going to be leaving soon, Chara," she says. "And I'm not planning on coming back."

You don't understand the pummel of earthquakes storing themselves in your chest. A new hurt opens itself somewhere and it stings like crazy.

It's experience of counterfeiting formality that allows you to ask, "What? Why?" You ignore the burning in the back of your throat.

Sonya looks down onto her closed laptop, almost with shame, which is unlike her. "Chara...I can't stay here. I know what they do to these patients. I know that this corporation is stacked with lies. This isn't right."

You feel this anger rise into your heart and pound right alongside the grief.

"They won't let me leave," Sonya continues, and she begins to sound distressed. "Hell, they don't let anybody leave. At least not alive. And...I'm selfish, Chara. I want to live. I want to be away from all of these people, this place."

It's your own anxiety that causes you to speak again, but your voice is too cracked for your taste. "So you're...you're leaving me? You're going to..." You trail off with a downcast gaze to the floor, watching your toes twitch.

"Chara," Sonya begins, and her voice sounds...very, very upsetting. It curls your stomach. "I'm so sorry. But I... I can't..."

Of course she's going to leave you. Doesn't everyone, eventually?

The thought brings a tart laugh to your lips before you can apprehend it. And then it doesn't stop.

"You're leaving me behind because you're a coward," you giggle, tears frothing your eyes. "Because you don't care about me enough to take me with you!"

"Chara..."

You don't care if yelling at adults makes you a bad person. You snap yourself upward and drink in the mixture of shock and desolation plastered onto Sonya's face. The smile creeps onto your face because it's all just so funny.

"You're just like everybody else, aren't you!" you yell, despite Sonya's widened eyes and tightened lips warning you to shut it in fear of listeners. "You only like me when I'm all pretty and obedient to whatever sick games you fuckers play on me! But the minute I no longer benefit you, you leave!"

Your knuckles are paling as your arms stiffen their hold onto the seat of the chair you're placed in. You bottle up the urge to sniffler as you pry your gaze away from Sonya, giving this god-awful whimper that makes you sink into the chair with discomposure.

"You're all I have," you whisper, and you wish your voice was big enough to hurt and you wish you were strong enough to handle betrayal, but you're not.
There's a rugged silence following your words that leaves your words hanging in the air, bristling above your heads as the problem dangles before you. And there's nothing that either of you can say to alleviate each other's pain.

You're not an idiot. You know that your protests will mean nothing in the long run; Sonya will leave, regardless of your pleas, and you'll be left to soldier through Project Walrider all alone.

Left to fend for yourself against those awful doctors and scientists...

This time, you feel the hot tear stream down your cheek with a watery sniff that follows.

Sonya's heels gently clack against the wooden tiles of her office. The sound is so oddly tight with a rigidness that you first assume is anger. Of course she's mad at you; yelling at authoritative figures is completely disrespectful, and now, once again, everything is all your fault. You shrink at her approach.

"I'm sorry." You wish the tears would stop coming but they don't. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to...I-I shouldn't—"

Your heart crackles with fireworks that implode in your ribcage when Sonya pulls you into her arms. It takes a moment for you to register the contact as an embrace.

Hugs are rare. They don't happen very often, hardly ever. You can't remember the last time someone sincerely hugged you. All of your recent associations with physical contact have not exactly been endearing. Hugs are supposed to be sweet and kind; they're supposed to make you feel okay.

You're cold to the touch at first, but when Sonya tightens her grip on you and doesn't harm you, it begins to feel reassuring, and safe, and warm. Pleasant things.

You melt into the embrace eventually, feeling like someone else has taken a momentary burden from the rough scratches received in the world and renewed something again.

The sorrow hits you like a riptide rising to the surface levels, and you give a small sob that causes Sonya to pull you closer.

"I'm sorry," is an apology that doesn't come from your mouth. It's Sonya that murmurs the words; it's so surprising to hear from another person and have it sound so broken yet genuine; you almost sob again.

You just bury your head in her shoulder and the tears leak onto her pristine lab coat, which you feel terrible about. But right now, you really, really, really don't care.

Sonya eventually dispatches first, giving you a final squeeze. She pulls away and meets your eyes again, but she doesn't have the same impertinence she often carries. Here, she looks vulnerable, close to tears. It's a horrible sight to observe. She's always so collected.

"I'm so sorry, sweetie," she tells you, and she never calls you 'sweetie'; it rubs you the wrong way, but you say nothing. "I wish I could take you with me. I really do. You're the only good thing that's come out of this whole mess."

It hurts so bad. Your heart feels raw and ugly and you bite back a wail at the words because it's not true, it's not true.

Sonya gives your shoulders a small shake as though to assure you. "But I have to go. They don't like me, Chara; you know that. And you know why."
You do. They don't like you for similar reasons. And multiple other reasons, of course, but the fact that you're not completely and totally white isn't something that Murkoff disregards easily.

Plus, Sonya was always too nosy for her own good. She's bound to dig up some sort of information she'll regret.

"I can't stand being constantly pushed like this," Sonya continues miserably, shaking her head. "I'm surprised they haven't done something...bad...to me already. But the suspense is just...it's maddening."

How ironic. You manage to suppress a bitter grin from appearing on your face.

"I'll do what I can to make sure that you're paired with...nicer doctors," Sonya assures you feebly. Then her face becomes sharp with urgency. "But this must stay between us. No one else can know."

You frown. "Why?"

"They won't be pleased," Sonya sighs. "And I'm not exactly removing myself from the premises with a clean slate. I have to cover my tracks. Make it look purposeful."

"How are you going to do that?"

"I have my ways," she answers swiftly, but there's not a hint of pride nor humor in her voice. "I like to think that Murkoff hired me for a reason."

You wish you could smile, but it hurts even more to know that you're never going to speak with Sonya again. And it's killing you.

"I want to come with you," you murmur pathetically, sounding close to crying again. "I want to get out of here too."

"I know," Sonya nods, her eyes glistening. "God, I know, sweetie. I'm so sorry."

"Maybe I could sneak out of the system too..."

"No." Her voice is firm enough to ground you back out of your fantasies. "It'd be stupid to even attempt that. They have a special eye on you, Chara."

"Yeah, because I'm so special." Your tone coils into a mocking one that makes Sonya almost wince.

"Unfortunately, by their standards, you are," Sonya agrees, sober. There's a short silence before she admits: "I wish there was something I could do, about you and Murkoff and everything else. But it's a dog-eat-dog world, unfortunately. Kill or be killed."

Your stomach churns at the cynical words, but there's not exactly a lot of evidence on your behalf to prove her theory otherwise. Humans are mean, and cruel, and ugly creatures, yourself included; you wouldn't trust one to save your life.

But with Sonya, it's like she comes from a rarer species; a different kind of human that doesn't exist except for once in a blue moon. To hear her stoop to that level of dirty trickery and abandoning you to the wolves doesn't sit well with you. Maybe it never will.

There's a knock at the door that snaps both of you away from each other and Sonya straightens to look like she's been giving you a lecture. The door opens without permission and you see Mrs. Granat poking her head from the cracked doorway, looking impatient.
"Babysitting time is up," she confirms, then gives an inquisitive glare in Sonya's direction. "You have the samples?"

Sonya gives a brave nod in the direction of the woman; you've always admired her for such actions. "I do. They were very compliant."

You pass a grateful smile to her just as Mrs. Granat gives an apathetic scoff. "I'm sure that she was. Now hurry up, we need her down on a fail safe."

"I bet you do," Sonya mutters under her breath, and turns to give her a practiced nod of approval. "Thank you for your obedience, dear."

You know that she uses 'dear' in the face of other co-workers, because no one calls you 'Chara', and 'sweetie' sounds like she's getting a bit too attached to you for the doctor's liking.

You nod as well, giving a small "Thank you Dr. Bahandari." You get out of your seat and mask away any signs of grief that could cause your posture or expression to lag.

Mrs. Granat looks down upon you with cold expectancy before she leads you down a hallway, where you'll be transported back into the underground lab and stuffed into one of those weird pods for god-knows-what.

When she turns her back, you toss a sad, tightened smile in the direction of Sonya, giving a goodbye that you didn't have the chance to morph into words.

Sonya nods in return, looking neutral again but somehow she's able to seem a bit more...*distraught*, than usual.

Then she closes the door to her office and you never see her again. And you're left alone again, in Mount Massive Asylum, barefoot.

*Special.*

-The house is exceptionally cheery when you walk down the steps, faking a good night's sleep. The kitchen is buzzing with life; you hear Toria sizzling bacon and pancakes whilst speaking to her husband in excited syllables that you can't catch over the hissing stove.

Everyone is up, save for you. But that's usually the norm of the house, and today of all days is not the time to screw up the schedule. You're still unnerved that Toria might question you later about the missing change in her purse or a misplaced object found in the knife closet. The more average-looking things are, the better.

You settle yourself into one of the chairs in the dining room, where you drink orange juice and wait for the rest of the Dreemurr family to join you.

Frisk is the first, surprisingly. They saunter into the room with a more vibrant air of exuberance that they don't flail around on their sleeve very often. Their smile is wide and threatens to expose their teeth.

Despite your grieving nature, you have to soften at Frisk's beaming aura. "What are you so excited about?" you ask curiously.

Frisk flaps their hands momentarily before they're able to calm down a bit to communicate with you.
I'm going to move in with my family today! they sign quickly, then they return to flapping.

There's an odd placement of conflict that churns your chest unpleasantly when Frisk declares this. For multiple reasons; one being that you've become acquainted with their silent companionship around the house, with them comprehending more about your personal boundaries than Asriel is able to. Another is that 'family' is just something you really, really don't want thrown in your face constantly today. There's a gross pang of hurt that you wish you didn't feel upon hearing the term.

But you're able to fake a smile, as you tend to do best these days. "That's great, Frisk. I guess the adoption papers and all that legal nonsense got sorted out?"

Frisk nods, still ecstatic. *I'm really excited! We're going to move all my stuff to the other house!*

"Oh? How far away is it?"

*Not very far. Maybe twenty minutes.*

"...Well, I'm happy for you, Frisk."

They don't catch the hollow undertone that you can't prevent from seeping into your voice; you're glad that this is the one time that Frisk isn't too discerning for their own good on your odd behavior.

You'd met Frisk's new adopted father the day after you'd called Miles about the self-harm issues. Naturally, you'd kept yourself away from his interest most of the time he was there; you pretended to read or knit or desperately explain to Toria that your bedroom absolutely needed to be cleaned right this moment. No matter how fondly Frisk seems to care for the guy, you're not touching a scientist with a forty-foot pole if you can help it.

But the man (you didn't catch his name; something with a 'G', maybe?) was...well, polite. Fairly rigid with his formal air of professionalism, but seemed very gentle in his features, his eyes wrinkled with age and years of wisdom. His accent was too thick for you to decipher his words, which was fine because he would often just retreat to sign language to speak. That was a relief to see, for both you and Frisk.

But you still have a bitter aftertaste in your mouth after his visit, and for a while you just assumed that it was your stupid self being all paranoid about the whole 'Frisk's dad is some scientist' thing. You're used to throwing a wrench into supposedly-heartwarming ideals, like the fact that Frisk was actually able to find a family, and you should be grateful for that you self-centered ass.

Now all you think of is how Miles just didn't want you. He doesn't want to be your parent or your friend or whatever— and damn it for hurting so much.

You didn't even want him as a parent in the first place. But now that you're seeing Frisk so happy with a newfound family of their own, you're not sure what you want anymore. But...you were always a bit too selfish for your own good.

Toria serves breakfast sometime after you and Frisk have settled at the table. She and Aegros sashay along the normal morning routes with a breezy mirth that makes you slightly uncomfortable; even Asriel seems too eager to start the day.

You learn that Frisk is going to be working on moving into their new home all day, and they're going to be skipping a day of homeschool because of it (lucky them for even having homeschool in the first place; you were willing to just stay indoors until the day you die but Toria was more persistent in getting you back into the real world; besides, Frisk learns at a different pace than the rest of you).
"I'll visit you all the time, Frisk," Asriel is blabbering, exchanging those insufferable smiles with them from across the table, full of naive joy. "And I'll bring you those cool comic books we always read, and I'll get Mom to make you some of her butterscotch-cinnamon pie, and—"

"Alright, alright son," Aegros holds up a calm hand to steady Asriel's excitement, but he's smiling too. "Let's allow Frisk to become acquainted with their new home first, before we barge in on them."

*I wouldn't mind*, Frisk protests kindly. *I will really miss all of you.*

You detach yourself from the situation, so that Frisk isn't referring to you. You know that you're definitely not someone that people miss when you're gone. Last night further proved that.

"And we'll miss you too, Frisk," Toria murmurs sweetly, smoothing their messy hair out of habit. "You're always welcome here, no matter what."

Your heart twists and you excuse yourself from the table early, blaming it on getting ready for school.

- Before you leave, there's a knock on the door that temporarily startles you as you're shoving textbooks and various papers into your backpack.

You turn and spot Frisk at the door, their face neutral.

"What?" you mimic the balanced distribution of emotions displayed between you both in your tone.

You notice their hands are behind their back, so they can't sign to you. But it makes you even more anxious as to what they could possibly be hiding. They advance towards where you're seated on the edge of your bed.

When they're close to you, they reveal the novel concealed behind them. With a temporary delay, you recognize the book; the same one Miles had bought for you, and you'd distributed it to Frisk. Scraping away the present like it was a bomb about to set off in your care.

Being handed the gift again is almost cruel; there was a reason you'd discarded the book entirely, however tempting it was to keep it for yourself (you had told yourself that Miles was just giving it to you to be polite, but that policy didn't stick after a while and you were engulfed with guilt). Besides, it's like a sudden pain in the side to see the novel again, reminding you of a more pleasant memory. An easier time spent with someone you thought you could trust.

All of this inner turmoil must surely show on your facial features, but if it does Frisk is thankfully unfazed by it.

They place it in your lap expectantly, and you just stare at it helplessly. You know what this is implying, and you don't like it.

"Frisk, no, I-I don't..."

*C-H-A-R-A, I want you to have this again,* Frisk tells you, ever persistent. *I already read it. I think you'd like it.*

You shake your head; the book is like hot coals pressing on your lap that you want to immediately swipe off of yourself. "Frisk—"
No. You almost have to double-take to make sure that Frisk signed that correctly. Their face is oddly firm. Take it.

Having gifts is weird. It makes your stomach coil uncomfortably. You thought that Frisk that already and you attempt to clarify: "I don't like presents, Frisk. You know that."

Their face stretches to piece together a look of sadness. That just makes you feel worse.

You can't tell them why any potential reminders of Miles have to be scrapped and out of sight, therefore out of mind. You can't tell them that your parents would gift you with dresses and dolls and make you "a better little girl", and when you refused you were punished for your selfishness. You can't tell them about the scarf that Eddie gave you and all the horrible side effects that came with the present emotionally.

You can't and you don't. You're able to stay quiet as Frisk finally makes effort to explain, delicately: I know you don't like them. But... Can you take it? Please? For me?

They're obviously aware that this request is something that makes your skin crawl, accepting a gift that you clearly don't want. But...you love Frisk, you really do. They've always been caring, it's in their nature; they restrain themselves from pressing too many buttons, and when they do, you know that they usually can't help it.

Even if you don't want to, you slowly pick up the book and cradle it close to your chest, nodding to confirm that you'll accept their parting gift.

"Alright," you sigh, "you got me. I'll take it."

You don't tell them that you'll probably burn the stupid thing whenever you have a chance, just to get rid of the poison you've been given.

Frisk beams, and all you feel is this compression forming in your gut because you're not good enough, you're never going to be good enough to deserve such kind people trying to reach out to you. Or maybe they'll use you later, you're still not sure.

"Chara!" Asriel suddenly calls you from downstairs, sounding impatient. "Let's go! We're gonna be late for school!"

"Fine, fine! I'm coming!" It feels nice to bite back and let a little bit of your anonymous fury settle into your tone. But you suppress it as quickly as it came.

You lay your book on your bed to handle later, when Frisk is gone. Zipping up your backpack, you shrug it onto your back and you straighten up to properly say goodbye to Frisk before they slam into your chest.

The contact is weird, you don't like this, you don't like people touching you why are they doing this let go let go let go—

"G-goodbye, Chara," Frisk whispers shakily into your chest, making you pause your internal downfall. Then, softer: "I l-love you."

You stiffen. Their sentence, dipped in sincerity and affection and everything in-between, curls your insides horribly. You don't know why you suddenly feel like crying, but you do. And it's awful.

But to be polite, you manage to pat the top of Frisk's head kindly. "Yeah," you mutter, absent in the gesture. "I...you too."
With a final squeeze, Frisk departs, and you race downstairs before you can catch a glimpse of their face again, afraid that you'll see something close to love on their soft features.

You can't handle it because you don't deserve it.

School is awful.

As suspected, the entire school system sucks a bunch of ass. Especially so when you're a traumatized child without a gender and therefore the staff views you as a "special case."

You're a loose cannon; you don't have any friends, you hate all of your classes, and the teachers look at you with a mixture of caution and empathy.

Though, you'll give the school some credit: acting upon a mandatory schedule tends to assist in easing some of the demanding emotions swirling in your subconscious, begging for attention. Besides, your public panic attacks are more often than not postponed due to the medications you take, so that's...fine, you guess. It won't change anything about how everyone looks at you, though.

Aegros and Toria still exchange controversy between them on whether or not allowing you back into school was a good idea or not; more often than not it's concluded with the solutions that a) you'll need to be inserted back into the real world eventually, and b) Asriel is there in all of your classes, so he's going to try and keep you "aligned". Make sure you're behaving and whatnot.

Being monitored like a bug under a microscope isn't a feeling you're unfamiliar with; it's terrifying, but you know how to cope; you like to think that you do, at the least.

Between classes, the chatter amongst the students are distant in your mind. It's routine; open locker, pick up books, close locker, walk to class with Asriel. Repeat on a five-day basis. Everything else is irrelevant

Sometimes you get pushed or shoved around on your way to the exit, usually followed by an apology or nothing at all. They're all mechanical beings, these kids. They attend school, they talk and laugh and they breathe and do everything that human beings are supposed to do. But they're detached; they're so...different. They talk about parents and crushes and all of these foreign terms to you that you can't comprehend. Things that were never introduced to you properly, if ever.

Usually you trail behind Asriel, picking your way through the students around you, in the bustling hallways that make you antsy. Asriel used to offer to take you up to your classes via elevator, and you'd accepted before you realized you were locked inside a tiny confinement and you cried and cried and cried. That was the last time he ever suggested it. And besides, people usually make efforts to stay out of your way; maneuvering through tight spaces isn't so hard once the students around you recognize who you are.

It doesn't matter anyway. Everyone's face is a blur that transcends into the atmosphere; they're not important. If they were, they'd come and hunt you down with sharp teeth and claws and maimed mouths and they'll devour you whole.

'Fake' is the closest synonym you can think of when describing your fellow schoolmates. Their smiles and laughter are plastered; friendships are temporary; even your school projects and lectures are but hazy memories in the grand scheme of things. Another reason you don't study; another reason you get lectured because you're bad.

But you're getting used to wearing that title like a badge. You and 'bad' are synonymous with each
A gentle prod on your back screeches you back into the present as you make a sharp turnaround to face your attacker with a beating heart.

"Oops!" The embarrassed squeak is recognizable enough for you to regain a bit more focus on the figure. It's Asriel; he's just managed to catch up to you during a class change—since your lockers are fairly far apart—and his arms are smothered with mismatched papers from homework assignments.

Asriel is fluttering a dark red across his cheeks; his eyes are shining with a worry that makes your stomach churn. "Sorry about that! I—I know Mom told me not to startle you, but you didn't seem to uh, s-see me. You were just...uh, you were staring at your locker a little weird. I—I was just making sure that—"

You do what you do best. You forge a wooden smile onto your lips and try to have the expression block out any potential emptiness your eyes may carry. You act like Asriel is just being a frivolous little thing with his worries for you.

"Az, it's really okay," you say calmly, adding a forced amusement to tilt your wording. "I was just looking for the right books for History Class."

"Oh." Looking embarrassed now, Asriel shuffles his toes beneath his shoes. He's one of those people that are easily fooled by your masks, which is useful. But this time, you feel something very stiff roll around in your belly.

"I'm just trying to stay class-y," you try, using one of your signature puns to alleviate any potential suspicion remaining.

It seems to work when Asriel gives a well-timed eye-roll. "Ugh, you and Mom are the worst at those."

Smile, smile. "It looks like you just got schooled."

"Chara, nooooo! That was terrible!"

"Guess I should locker up and save some for later?"

"Stooooop!"

The bell rings for fourth period, and the sudden noise makes you jump, like always. But you suppress it without Asriel having to give you a look that's sweetened with sympathy.

But something dark crosses his face to substitute for the usual pity, and he shows concern about something unaddressed. You crumple inwardly on yourself as you pretend to straighten up the books in your locker.

"You seemed really upset last night," he comments, and you can't help but flinch as though he physically struck you. Stupid, pathetic, dumbass—

No. Keep smiling.

"I didn't even notice," you say airily, finally coming across your gigantic history textbook and grabbing it, closing the door and walking away from the scene. Unfortunately, Asriel follows.

"Are you sure you're okay?" he ventures, and this time your visor is beginning to severely falter. Just
"I'm just fine, Az," you answer smoothly. "Smile. He'll go away eventually. "I...I just have a headache."

You concoct the lie that minute it escapes your lips, but you have to have some backup plan available if your disguise should waver. And it seems to work; Asriel looks worried, but is no longer persistent about the last topic. Which is fine with you.

"Oh dear," he murmurs, inadvertently sounding much like Toria. "Is it bad?"

"It's...tolerable."

"Okay...I have some aspirin in my bag, if you want some."

"No thanks. I think it might not sit very well with my meds."

"But you took your medication this morning! Mom says it should be fine after a few hours if you need to mix it with ibuprofen or something."

"...Asriel, stop mothering me about this. I don't want pills. The headache will go away," you snap, letting a bit of your inward troubles leak into your wording.

He steps off uncertainly, seeing as your tone has dangerously deterred, as it tends to do when you're being probed on a subject you want concluded. At least he seems skilled in that department.

For some strange reason, upon addressing a counterfeit problem that will 'go away', a tugged heartstrings plucks somberly in your ribcage, and the next thing you know, something is pricking the back of your eyes. You snoop down immediately and pretend that you're just getting something out of the corner of your socket.

When you reach the classroom, there are students around you on desks or on phones, talking and socializing, seeming pleased with life. They all avoid you like the plague.

"I have to pick something up in Mrs. Cauldron's room after school," you blurt out to Asriel, facing him abruptly. Which is not true, it's another automatic lie; traveling with Toria in the near future just doesn't seem doable to you right now.

Asriel seems curious, perhaps even suspicious, but he's asked enough questions and you know his mother has restricted him from prompting you too much about subjects you exhibit discomfort in.

"Okay," he nods. "Do you have a ride?"

"Yes," you lie.

"Great!" His eyes shine and he scoops up all of his papers back into a reasonable hold so he can walk to his desk without them flying everywhere. "I'll text Mom right now and tell her."

Christ, will he ever stop calling her "Mom" around you? Like she's your— well, you know.

You settle into your seat, ignoring that a group of kids right beside you have taken a few steps away from your location while trying to be subtle about it (they weren't).

"If you change your mind about the aspirin, Chara, just let me know," Asriel tells you with a smile. Real and genuine, unlike your own.
You offer him another trademark grin of thanks before he turns away and you wash the ugly thing right out of your facial features.

Everything about the argument hits in small crashes along your hindbrain.

'I don't want to be your dad! And I can't be your friend!'

'Well, fine then! I don't want you to be!'

The words sting so bad that you have to stop yourself from crying in class. Big kids don't cry, anyway.

- 

You suppose you could walk home. It's not like anyone will let you inside their family's vehicle, god forbid. Do you even know who you are? They say you escaped a nut house; you probably murdered someone too and ate their intestines to survive. The thing is the rumors aren't completely inaccurate (except for the part where you eat human organs; that's just gross and you never understood the Variants that did so. Maybe they were just really hungry?).

Then again, the school is close to downtown; it's not uncommon for taxis or city buses to drive through the area and pick up a kid or two. Maybe you could catch a ride from there.

"Heya Peanut!" One kid calls out to you from the side. "Peanut", meaning 'Nut', meaning 'from Nut House'. Not entirely original, you think.

His friends seem to think it's amusing just by inspecting their mocking smiles. "Murder anyone lately?" another one crows.

You ignore them; sticks and stones, after all. And besides, they hit like wimps.

"Hey Crazy!" another yells. He's the shortest of the bunch; his top tooth is still missing from when you'd slammed him into a bathroom mirror. "Remind us again what's in your pants!"

This has them howling. It hits a tough spot that has you tightening with a wave of fury so great that it makes you sore. At least you're far away so that you can clench your jaw and darken your gaze without them seeing it.

"Yeah!" his friend chirps. "Are you a boy or a girl today?"

Ignore them. Keep going.

The laughter continues as the subject somehow shifts onto sexuality and virginity, and you lose interest. You do find the satisfaction of flipping them off and pretending that they saw it.

A couple of taxis are parked along the sidewalk, anticipating awaiting students who can't get home in walking distance. You might as well head for one, despite your gnawing anxiety at going anywhere with a stranger in a car. High alerts are screaming in your brain, but for once you force them to hush and let you take the lead.

You're going to have to get used to being alone, after all. Your parents don't want you, Miles doesn't want you, even Toria and Aegros will grow tired of your company and constant need for reassurance and they'll throw you out soon enough. You're not wanted anywhere; you have to learn to do things yourself.
You have money that Toria gave you for lunch (which you don't eat). You can pay this taxi driver to drive you somewhere made up and you'll just run off into the woods or some city and be swallowed up by the earth, and nobody will notice. That seems ideal.

When you swing the empty taxi open, the idea begins to grow sour on you. You decide you'll go back to Toria's first before you run off. Then once you're packed with all your resources, you'll run away and never be seen again.

You slam the door shut and buckle in, satisfied with this new form of action. The taxi driver in front does a small turn to peek over his shoulder at his new passenger. He gives you a gaze that you think looks surprised—or something along those lines, but you're too tired to care.

"You're new," he comments. "I don't recall driving you anywhere."

"I don't like taxis," you say brusquely. There are better things you can be doing other than talking to a stranger. You tell him the address and shut up again.

He nods. "Alrighty. Buckle up."

"Way ahead of you."

From his rearview mirror, his eyes crinkle with amusement from a smile you can't see from this angle. "Well, that'd be a first someone's told me that! Safety first, right?"

You shrug, uninterested. "Sure."

The taxi rears off into the street and begins its journey to Toria's, and you watch the school shrink in the distance the farther you get. You pretend that it really is dissolving into the tiniest speck of dust, making everybody left in the building smaller and smaller until they're gone, nothing but an atom now; no one can hear them talk or laugh or say anything to you ever again.

It's just a thought, though. You know that'd never happen.

You lean against the window, mindful of not smearing your cheek against the glass, and watch the world blur into a colorful mess as you drive into the city. It's nice to see things as abstract beings for once, rather than stable buildings and people; it's easier to detach yourself from the world and from every horrible, lurid thing. It'll make it easier to run away from once you get to Toria's.

The driver is silent; you like that a lot. He might be a stranger—which is already a red flag waving crazily at you—but he's smart in that he obviously has better things to do than to waste his breath on you. He's the first one that's figured out how unworthy you are of attention.

You don't know why, but you hyperfocus on his fingers; you imagine that, since it's the right hand, his index finger is gone.

The realization of projecting that...whatever that was, onto another person has you looking away from the driver with a great sense of guilt. It's not his fault that you can't think straight right now because of that dumb fight.

Stupid idiot! Why do you even need Miles anyway? All he's good for is just...

Just...

...It doesn't matter. He doesn't want you and he's just like everyone else. You like to imagine that you knew the shoe would drop on that one a long time ago.
Didn't you?

A familiar flash of a red stop sign lurches you into the present, and you perk up. That was the stop sign right in front of the hedge bushes, wasn't it?

That means he missed your stop.

You try not to arouse any suspicions right away, so you lightly tap the driver's seat to catch his attention.

"Sir?" you begin, hesitant. "You're going the wrong way."

The driver shakes his head. "There's a bit of traffic that way around this time. I'm taking a shortcut."

He's lying. He said "around this time", like it was a constant thing for traffic to be backed up on that street. But you've never seen traffic on that end of town for as long as you've been there. Is there even a shortcut? Surely Toria would have used it when she was picking you up from school normally.

Your heart is slowly beginning to thud louder, because this was a horrible idea.

"Okay," you manage to choke. No need to let him know how terrified you're becoming; if he really is not to be trusted, then you know from experience that it's not wise to let the bad people know that you're onto them. Surprise him, if bad comes to worse.

You pretend to nonchalantly lean against the car door, covering the buckle with your backpack so he can't see you slowly fiddling with your seatbelt so you can unlock it.

The farther he goes, the more uneasy you're becoming. None of this is looking familiar; by now you should've reached home two minutes ago, at least.

Yet you say nothing, which makes the driver perk up a bit, like he's expecting you to say something.

You can barely talk, your heart is like a hammer bashing on your throat. But you manage the tiniest nod.

"I recognize this place," you say to him, forcing yourself to keep your voice steady. It's something you're fortunately familiar with, covering your panic, having gained years of practice.

He almost looks close to arguing, but he gives a small nod.

"Figured so. You should learn to trust me, kiddo."

"Don't call me that!" you snap, practically spitting in a sudden rage you can't grasp appropriately.

He seems startled, but just glances back to the road. Like he has an important task ahead of him.

His calmness against your brutality. It's this same wave of professionalism you've been so used to; a method of making you seem more insane and intolerable than you truly are.

You recognize where it comes from.

The city is behind you now; the Dreemurr's house is a good while away from here, so even if you were dropped off right now as a "shortcut", you wouldn't be home in the same time that Asriel is. You're not sure what this guy's playing, but you'd be an imbecile to fall for it.
"How much farther?" you ask.

He gives a hum. "Not much longer, I'd say."

You don't know if he's caught on about your awareness of the situation, but if so he doesn't seem fazed by it. Your head has become clearer now with the naturalized instincts you've adapted from fleeing for your life multiple times, with no one but yourself to save you.

There's a forest up ahead, rolling into a sloped curve and bushes that will surely have thorns. But you'll take it.

Casually you stretch your arms along the car's door, seeming indifferent as your fingers brush along the handle. Your seatbelt has been long discarded without him noticing. You position your footing properly, looking like you have nothing better to do with your time.

And then you open the door and jump.

He lets out a yell of surprise when you lash yourself into the cold air, and you hear the taxi screech in the middle of the road as he comes to a stop just as the side of your face hits the earth floor.

Pain explodes into your body as you begin to tumble down the small hill, picking up on the prickles of the bushes you're rolling in, and you let out helpless cries of pain when rocks jab at your ribs and something scratches itself along your exposed skin.

Then you stop.

The world is spinning in a circle, with blood swirling profusely around in your brain like a bowl of soup. You don't even look down to check on your position; you hear the driver above talking to someone, and it isn't you.

You run.

The automatic sensation of having your legs operate on a different timeframe is not something you've rehearsed lately, but it's grown accustomed to what you dare call your liking. Adrenaline is pumping through your bones and all you see is the forest in front of you. You don't dare look back.

There are people shouting and talking behind you, calling out numbers and codes like they're in pursuit. And they are. They're right behind you, breathing right on your tail and attempting to rush you into a corner so they can devour you whole like monsters.

You won't let it happen. You're outside and out of their touch. This is not what's supposed to happen.

Exhaustion is beginning to trickle down your weary legs; you're not used to running long distances, especially with your ankle that's extremely out of practice. But you know how to shut off pain; it can wait until later.

They're screaming at you— but not at you, specifically. Just shouting profanities that no one has caught you yet. Meaning that there are more of them.

But you're whirling through the trees and dredges, while most behind you sound unprepared for trekking through unfriendly environments. You're a natural compared to them.

The hill dips dangerously below, but you decide to just bolt forward. Wherever you end up is better than whatever they have planned for you if, god forbid, you stopped running.
But halfway down the hill do you have to do just that, because at the bottom of the hill is another road, crowded with black vans and cars and even a military force. You skid to a halt just below their reach.

'They' being a good number of people, dressed neat and tidy, with shades and suits, like they were celebrating your arrival. Like they somehow knew this would happen.

They look at you with a horrible lack of emotion that leaves you close to tears, with your heart thumping louder and louder in your ears.

*They found you.*

Someone grabs your shoulders to pin you to the floor and you scream with a raw fear that crawls up your throat.

It's abruptly cut short when you're slammed onto your knees with a merciless shove, and you're close to tumbling down the slope with the crooked angle you're locked in.

A woman with short, blonde hair gives you a gaze, blocked by her dark sunglasses, before turning to one of her sidekicks with a nod.

"That's her," she says. "We've got her."

You're panting hard already from your run in the woods, and your wounds from the fall are beginning to throb for attention. But you can't do this again. *Not again, please, please, please no.*

You try again to escape the tight grip they have on your shoulders, but then you feel a sharp push that sends you spiraling downward, tripping over rocks and twigs that bury into your face.

When you hit the floor, you're at the feet of the woman and the rest of the agents. Grunts of Murkoff.

*Murkoff.*

*They're taking you back to Murkoff.*

You sputter drool from your mouth, mingling with the dirt, attempting to try to gain any ounce of strength in your aching body.

"No...." You gasp, coughing for lack of air. "Please...."

No one is listening.

"Get her anesthetic and put her under," someone commands; they sound like they're coming from very, very far away.

No one is going to care that you're gone. But god, you can't go back. *Anywhere* but back there.

A pair of footsteps walk over to where you're still attempting to get onto your wobbly knees, but a hand locks itself in your throat.

You're paralyzed.

You just remember how that Variant just knocked you into the wall, over and over and over and over and—

You scream louder than you've ever screamed in your life, scraping your lungs bare of any oxygen
left in you, as the owner of the hand lifts you up ever so slightly. And you can feel the bruise again, the impact of the asylum walls on your spine—

"Hold still."

A sharp needle twists into your neck, and the substance in it is enough to immediately make you droop to the floor.

Everything drifts away, into an abstract, monochromatic blur.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter name from this prose post by Tumblr user inkskinned
Your phone buzzes just as the water you're wading in begins to cool. You tried to sleep after the argument with Chara but, as expected, to no avail. You ended up taking a bubble bath at three in the morning, just to try and calm yourself and wash away the grief from your body.

You feel dirty, and no amount of bath salts or soap seems to be assisting your turmoil. Once again, physical attributes seem to be failures in assuaging you. You like to think you know better by now.

The phone drone again from where it's seated on the bathroom sink, and you grumble. You're assuming it's Waylon, because who else would it be? And you should be excited; he's probably texting you because he has some updates on his investigations. This could be your chance to figure out more Project Walrider.

Aren't you happy? You're getting what you've wanted for so long now. You usually love it when you're able to place that final piece into the puzzle and have everything make sense.

You try to feel anything other than annoyance, but it's definitely a struggle.

Eventually you call bathing away your troubles a bust and drain the tub so you can dry off and see whatever Waylon wants from you now.

Those stupid scars laced all over your torso are not pleasing to the eye. Your bare chest is covered in stupid holes that you've later been able to identify as bullet wounds. It takes you back to whenever those stupid soldiers shot you and wanted you dead, ignoring the wounded child in your arms and the decrepit position you were in; all that mattered was that Project Walrider was supposed to be a secret for the dead.

Whatever. Your only complaint now, besides that your chest makes it look like you were run over by a lawnmower, is that they didn't finish the job.

Rushing away from the mirror, you towel off and answer your phone in a fit of abrupt frustration at the disruption of your alone time.

From: Waylon (3:53 AM)

Hey miles
-I know its late but are you awake?
-Lnk when youre up

You attempt to reason that Waylon sounds too patient to have wanted to cause intentional harm to your routine. It is pretty late, after all. Besides, it's not like you're stable right now; any distraction from your horrid reality would be heaven

To: Waylon (4:00 AM)

im up. any news?

Immediately you get a response:
From: Waylon (4:00 AM)

Oh, sorry about that. I didn't wake you, did I?

To: Waylon (4:00 AM)

don't worry about it. so what's the scoop

From: Waylon (4:01 AM)

Ok, I was able to find some info related to what you might be looking for
-Took a bit of searching and a lot of dead whistleblowers to lead me to it but I think I
got something

You feel your heart pound with anticipation. Fucking finally.

To: Waylon (4:02 AM)

alright great
-tell me everything

From: Waylon (4:03 AM)

Yeah I will
-Some conditions first
-One being I can't send pics of any documents I required. Too risky
-Two being that you delete everything I send you

To: Waylon (4:03 AM)

you weren't kidding about being paranoid

From: Waylon (4:03 AM)

Hey, finding this info was pretty risky shit as is! I still don't trust texting or calling so lay
off a bit. Some of us have a wife and kids to protect

To: Waylon (4:04 AM)

alright, alright. whatever family man. just send me what you found

From: Waylon (4:05 AM)

...it might take a while for me to text this out. Give me a minute or two

To: Waylon (4:05 AM)

k

In the span of waiting for Waylon's answers, you decide to stall the time you have by changing into
some comfortable pajama pants and an old band tee you still have around. You enter the bedroom
tentatively, scared that Jackson is still waiting for you and he might spot the phone clenched in your
hands.

He woke up when he heard the water running, probably terrified that you were going to try and
drown yourself on his watch, especially since you'd acted so poorly after the fight with Chara. After a confirmation that you weren't planning on suicide for the time being, Jackson eventually left you alone; you still suspected that he'd be waiting until after your bath to make sure that you're still alive.

But when you walk in, Jackson is slumped over on top of your covers, sound asleep. Guess you took too long; besides, he's been exhausted in the past two weeks of caring for you nonstop. The man seems to just run on pure willpower and caffeine nowadays.

You tiptoe out of the room and decide settle on your couch instead, where you'd been left to brood hours prior, reliving the fight like a bad dream you can't forget. Even now, the misery is stuck to your skin like thorns. There are so many things you wish you could have done differently; you try to tell yourself again and again that extracting Chara from your life was for the best.

—You're getting distracted. Your ever-present notebook and pencil is placed on your lap, ready to record whatever lurid secrets about Murkoff Waylon is about to hand you. Despite everything, your heart is still thumping excitedly.

To: Waylon (4:11 AM)

ready when you are

From: Waylon (4:16 AM)

Great
First things first: project walrider was apparently an alpha testing for this old theory that sprouted back around WWII. Turning madmen into war weaponry. But you already know the end result of project walrider, which was the walrider

To: Waylon (4:17 AM)

right
-wait, 'alpha testing'?

From: Waylon (4:19 AM)

Alpha testing, beta testing, omega testing. project walrider wasnt wernickes first rodeo
-So technically, the current walrider is entitled alpha-n
-Thats the title it was given. Thats what the files say. The rest is just numbers

To: Waylon (4:21 AM)

what does the 'n' stand for???

From: Waylon (4:24 AM)

Couldnt find that. Maybe 'nano'? Not sure
-Omega and beta seem to be the most successful experimental processes for conjuring a 'walrider-like' beast. There seems to have been more, just didnt last too long

You feel your skin begin to crawl, and you steady your shaking hands so you can continue to message Waylon.

To: Waylon (4:25 AM)

so what happened to the other walriders?? how were they killed????
From: Waylon (4:26 AM)

...it doesn't look like they were terminated
-More like 'tranquilized'
-Idk what happened to them, that's all I was able to figure out
-Maybe that's what they did with the current walrider?
-But even that contains way too many plot holes for comfort

To: Waylon (4:27 AM)

you're telling me
-fuck, dude

From: Waylon (4:27 AM)

It gets worse
-So omega testing was done entirely on children back in the 1970s
-That might have some offput tie as to why there was a child administered at mount massive

Your heartbeat falters. Chara.

To: Waylon (4:28 AM)

why?? why was it on kids???

From: Waylon (4:30 AM)

Easier subjects to manipulate, I guess
-A lot of experiments at Auschwitz were with kids. Vaccinations, dismemberments
-Wernicke could've been returning to his batshit-crazy nazi roots with that idea
-He oversaw all the walrider testings, as suspected
-As a coincidence, this was also around the time MKULTRA was getting exposed and shut down

To: Waylon (4:31 AM)

but where did they even find the kids??

From: Waylon (4:33 AM)

Same place they were able to conduct experiments on the mentally ill
-Asylums run by negligent counties and staff
-Some were donated via programs disguised as charity
-Others eventually found their way from the foster system, orphanages, off the streets, etc
-Bad homelife equals profit

To: Waylon (4:33 AM)

damn...

From: Waylon (4:35 AM)

they had a couple hundred kids by the time that they were ready to commence project
omega (fyi they called it project walrider before it was a total bust)
-Only six kids survived till the end

To: Waylon (4:36 AM)

fucking hell, only six??
-what did those sick bastards even do to those kids???

From: Waylon (4:37 AM)

Probably the same thing they were doing in current project walrider, just a little more...deficient, I guess
-The six that made it through all the trials and experiments keep being described as having a lot of 'potential'. Potential for what I have no fucking clue
-Interestingly enough, project omega sounds like their ideal walrider would be merging multiple minds and consciousness into one human body. Maybe they thought the strength of six children would make one giant superweapon

To: Waylon (4:40 AM)

...
-what happened to the kids?

From: Waylon (4:40 AM)

Doesn't say. But their death reports came a little while after the final experiments were initiated
-Could always be counterfeit, though. Murkoff is no stranger to that
-Either way, project omega was scrapped

This is so twisted and wrong that it makes you feel sick to your stomach. Just the daily reminder that kids like Chara were nothing to Murkoff but another way to progress their experimentations is just nerve-wracking.

And you pushed them away like their troubles were inferior to yours. Jesus, what is wrong with you? You both are suffering horribly by Murkoff's hand and you choose to twist the knife even further into Chara's wounds like the monster you are.

But still one remaining loose end begs for attention:

To: Waylon (4:41 AM)

so, why was the kid in mount massive administered about 30 years late?

There's a couple of worrisome minutes that pass before Waylon replies:

From: Waylon (4:47 AM)

Yeah, I couldn't find any definite answer on that. There were hardly any patient files left to scavenge from what I could tell
-Thank god for ex-murkoff employees who have some morality left in them to help a guy out

To: Waylon (4:47 AM)
so what did you find?

From: Waylon (4:48 AM)

I found one death report on someone who could be an adolescent

To: Waylon (4:48 AM)

who?? was their name chara???

From: Waylon (4:49 AM)

Uh, no. Pretty close, though
-Some girl named Charlotte Lancaster

You don't know why you can't tame your racing adrenaline. You're close to something, you know it.

To: Waylon (4:49 AM)

Charlotte Lancaster?

From: Waylon (4:49 AM)

That's what it says, yeah
-Administered to Mount Massive early last year
-It says that since she wasn't allowed to be properly taken in since Mount Massive was in the process of getting rid of their women patients and staff
-She seems to have been transferred a couple of months into her stay at the institution

You don't care.

To: Waylon (4:50 AM)

What does Charlotte look like?? Is there a photo??

From: Waylon (4:50 AM)

Well, I mean, yeah there's one attached to the file they gave to me
-But I can't send it. Safe than sorry

To: Waylon (4:50 AM)

Fine then describe them to me!

From: Waylon (4:51 AM)

Okay then..
-Shes little, says that she was around eleven when administered, and would be twelve now. Short brownish hair with bangs, kind of dark eyes
-Umm, eyes are a bit slanted, maybe from East Asian descent, small and slightly pointy nose, sharp features, cheeks are kind of blushed
--That's all I have

Your heart is palpating from your chest. That's it. That's them.
To: Waylon (4:53 AM)

that's chara

From: Waylon (4:54 AM)

Hmm
-Charlotte, chara...I guess that makes sense
-Says she was transferred to another facility a long time ago

To: Waylon (4:54 AM)

'they', you ass

From: Waylon (4:54 AM)

Sorry
- I mean, its weird. A lot of their files are obscured and blacked out. Its strange
- And I mean, most remaining patient files are, if they're not burned or scrapped already
- But chara's is almost...excessive in that matter
- Even billy had more files left than this
- All I can find is that they had this big panic attack and some weird heart stuff that
insinuated afterwards eventually made them die
- They sure enjoy putting big, elaborate words in the report to describe the event

To: Waylon (4:56 AM)

bullshit
- all bullshit, all of it

From: Waylon (4:56 AM)

I have to agree. Its all too fishy for my liking

That explains it. That explains Toria's desperation to protect them; she probably thought that she
would lose Chara all over again, and most likely heard of their death report somehow. It also
explains why there was no inheritance to be wrought out from Chara's parents when they died; they
thought their child had been dead for some time now.

Some sort of nasty bile is beginning to swirl in the pit of your gut. You feel like you're burying your
nose in areas that you should've left to rot. You don't get this feeling very often, even when being
meddlesome is a part of your job as a reporter. But this...this feels different. And dirty.

The fight with Chara is still ever-burning in your mind. What have you done?

To: Waylon (4:56 AM)

the kid told me that they were immune to the properties of the morphogenic engine. do
you think that might have something to do with murkoff faking their death?

The silence that follows your question is similar to a wet blanket, soaking up any potential hope you
may have carried beforehand on receiving answers you needed about Project Walrider. You got
what you wanted, but...

Your phone hums in your cold palms.
From: Waylon (4:59 AM)

Theres no way in fucking hell that theres anybody—much less a child—that's immune to the engine
-Are you sure you heard them right?

Uneasiness settles inside your bones and makes a home with the static ever-ringing in your ears. Something is very wrong.

To: Waylon (5:00 AM)

i can speak pretty good fucking english park. they were pretty clear on why the doctors hated them
-we watched a snippet of the engines activation sequence too
-i lost my shit and that kid didn't blink
-theyre immune as hell

You toss the phone to your side and lay your head into your sweating hands with a large exhale. This whole conversation feels less like a victory and more like yanking teeth from your gums. The abnormality of Chara's conditions is like a wrist out of jolt that you can't snap back into place; the responsibility weighs on you heavily.

Everything has just gone wrong and there's no way that it can be solved seamlessly. Plucking Chara from your life hasn't made any solution arise; meanwhile this stupid Walrider nonsense is still boiling in your skull like a muzzled hurricane. You really are an imbecile.

When the phone buzzes again, frantically, you're reluctant to even touch the device. But eventually the urge is too overwhelming, and you look at Waylon's messages with a mixture of dread and apprehension.

From: Waylon (5:04 AM)

Miles, thats not good.
-Immunity to a brainwashing, insanity-driven programming is bad.
-I cant say how, but I know murkoff must be going ape-shit if what Chara said is true
-Something is really, really wrong about that kid. I have a bad feeling about it

To: Waylon (5:04 AM)

wow.
-so youre telling me
-that a child who is unable to go insane
-is bad.

From: Waylon (5:05 AM)

Yes.
-Because you were basically either traveling with the messiah or the antichrist
-This could be the cure for the Engines effects
-Or it could be opening the door for more potential opportunities for murkoff
-in the end, it really does depend on whos the one in control

To: Waylon (5:05 AM)
-okay, you know what
- i think you have no fucking clue what you're talking about
-im not going to assume that chara is some god-given cure-slash-curse for the rest of us just because of your crazy assumptions
-everything else you've said has at least made a tiny bit sense
-until now
-im not gonna listen to your bullshit

From: Waylon (5:07 AM)

...Okay, that's fair
-Just be careful around that kid because something is seriously off with this whole thing
-They might have something to do with where the walrider went

I already know where the Walrider is! Would you like him to pay you a visit? You restrain the urge to illustrate your frustration colorfully over a text message.

You decide that Waylon Park is just losing his marbles to hysteria and try to pick out the pieces in the conversation that were actually of use to you. You have to admit, aside from his crazy conspiracy related to Chara and the Walrider, he's actually been pretty helpful.

You use the slim gratitude you're able to supply and insert it into your phone's keyboard:

To: Waylon (5:08 AM)

hey park
-i still think that your theories on the kid are crazy
-but thanks for the other info. it really helps

From: Waylon (5:09 AM)

No problem man
-Well, scratch that. It kinda was a mega problem to get this info without the threat of getting immediately shot from the back of the head
-But I think that, in a way, learning all of this was therapeutic for me. If that makes sense
-Also don't forget to delete all of my messages

You remember with a jolt to write down all that Waylon had sent you, and you do so with the swift abilities of a long-time writer. It's not the first time you've had to record something almost immediately before it was forgotten.

When you sit back, pleased with your notes concerning all of Murkoff's previous attempts at Project Walrider, your fingers ache with potential callouses in the morning. But it feels nice; you haven't written with something concerning a mysterious subject like this in a while, and it's a comforting sensation that you miss indulging in.

You delete the messages as promised too.

To: Waylon (5:13 AM)

done and done

From: Waylon (5:13 AM)
Great. Thanks miles
-Im heading off to bed, or at least pretend to be asleep until around seven when the boys wake me up

To: Waylon (5:14 AM)

not tired?

From: Waylon (5:14 AM)

God, yeah I am
-But there's also nightmares, sleep paralysis, chronic pain in power joints and back. All that fun shit that comes with surviving

To: Waylon (5:15 AM)

i get that
-Unfortunately

From: Waylon (5:15 AM)

Get some sleep, man.

You're about to close the conversation when a sudden thought consumes your brain and the next thing you know you're typing viciously into your phone, in hopes that Waylon hasn't completely abandoned his own phone yet.

To: Waylon (5:17 AM)

park
-you mentioned my car at some point, and that you stole it
-the hell was that about

Luckily, he responds like he never put the device down:

From: Waylon (5:17 AM)

Im...not sure
-You mentioned it pretty abruptly in that episode I told you where you tried to choke me out
-You were pretty pissed
-Said I stole your car

You frown.

To: Waylon (5:18 AM)

did you?

From: Waylon (5:18 AM)

Um, I stole A car
-Didn't realize it was yours though

To: Waylon (5:18 AM)
what did it look like

From: Waylon (5:19 AM)

Red jeep, parked just outside of entrance of asylum?

To: Waylon (5:20 AM)

FUCK YOU

From: Waylon (5:21 AM)

Im sorry okay????
-I didnt know it was yours!!!
-All that mattered was getting the hell out of there!! I didnt mean to steal your car!
Honest!

You're mad of course. You suck in your cheeks and you think repetitively on how much that damn car cost you in savings. How many journeys and lifetimes you shared with your precious jeep, and now some idiot steals her away from you!

You should be furious!

But...

There's a vivid flash of a suppressed memory that whirls past your field of knowledge. The man drenched in blood, limping towards the opened exit doors and wanting to escape more than anything. His fear mixed with your own and you could smell it off of him.

...Of course. That make sense, unfortunately.

So you suck in your anger for once; partly because putting two and two together in recognizing the patient as Waylon makes you feel a affiliated condolence with him you didn't possess beforehand. Another because you're terrified of letting your anger go off the rails again, as it tends to do so easily these days. Now is not the time to go on a genocidal Walrider spree at five in the morning.

You decide it's time to close this chapter. Quite frankly, you don't want to know about what happened to your car— okay, yes you do. But it's not worth it.

You have other worries to tend to that are bleeding out into the world like an infected wound you must patch up. Chara and Project Walrider, the actual Walrider... They're more important.

To: Waylon (5:23 AM)

park
-its fine
-you were trying to get out
-just
-dont do anything stupid like that with my shit ever again
-later
-and...thanks. again. for your help

You get a solaced reply not even thirty seconds later:

From: Waylon (5:23 AM)
Sorry again about your jeep. Had no idea
- Again, get some sleep, miles. If you have any other questions, lmk
- Night man

The ending of a long-lasting conversation is about as pleasing as you'd anticipated. Something about interaction sits as well as a troublesome cramp in your guts. Has always been there, always will be, you suppose. And it's not like Waylon isn't a nice guy, or whatever, but...

You resist the urge to pummel your phone into the wall for the hell of it. You're just so tired, good god. As if you didn't need any more shit on your plate; and to rub salt in the wound you have to meet with Holly tomorrow.

...Fine, then. Let the storms come. You're a storm yourself and you can handle it.

You sneak back into bed after hiding the phone under a compartment in your nightstand and try to resist curling up to Jackson's side like a defenseless child.

When you attempt to sleep, you think of Waylon's words of warning against Chara, which forms an unlikely alliance with the thoughts of Chara's words of anger directed towards you hours ago.

You can't do this. You can't do this. You're awful and you ruin everything you get close to.

So you sit in the quiet of dawn in your mourning, and you do your best to ignore the awful buzzing choir in your hindbrain, drowning you.

- Remembering your time as the Walrider doesn't come very naturally. It's like picking apart dreams and describing the scenarios with vivid details you don't have access to in your conscious state. It was like being this different...well, being. You were this disastrous chaos and you just accepted it to the point where it gnawed at your soul and mind until you can't really inspect your former actions as ones you would do on a normal basis. Killing people is usually on the 'no' list for you.

But there are lots of times, in your dream-memories, that you remember, amongst other things, the consistent weight of Chara limp in your hold. It was like they weren't allowed to die on your watch, and they were in this odd limbo you'd created where, through the Walrider's miraculous abilities to heal yet destroy, you didn't exactly rescue them from their wounds. But you didn't kill them either.

The thoughts are short, but they flash through your brain like a photograph snapped onto your eyelids. Wandering through forests, mountains, just somewhere you could get out and be free from those that would dare try and stomp you into the dirt again. Suppress you, imprison you.

Freedom. Now that, you and the Walrider were fond of, mutually. The one thing that kept you both going. Freedom.

Chara was...

...They were a negotiable topic. The Walrider didn't like them, of course...but...

...Waylon's words of bullshit begin to string into an eerie theory that you don't dare probe into. It's not like Chara will be encountering the Walrider anytime soon anyway, as long as he resides in you. And they won't be taking another step in your direction anymore, as long as you can help it. (You pretend that it doesn't hurt.)

Anyway.
You can't depict tons of details from these scenarios where you can reminisce an event without breaking out in a cold sweat. But you were gripping Chara's life in your hands like it was your own as you traveled farther from Murkoff's claws, just going away, away, away.

But it stops. It stops at the realization that the Walrider can provide for you like the robotic, needy Host you are with manual health. But it will not provide for the child that it wished to get rid of since day one. Not Chara; tiny, defenseless Chara whose frozen bullet wounds will surely begin to rust and melt into the flesh, and do irrevocable damage to them.

And this drives you to turn from the forestry. You return to civilization. You get help. You go home. You learn to heal, and you become better over time.

*Only that's not really what happened now, is it?*

Since you're supposed to meet with Holly for the first time in a long while, you feel obligated to procrastinate on preparing yourself for the day ahead as much as possible.

Jackson helps you haul your aching ass out of bed (you only slept two damn hours, and it's not like you were exactly walking on clouds and meadows in your dreams either) and he gives you pills and food that you trash when he's not looking. Well, *mostly* the pills; you hate to say that you're a sucker for when he makes scrambled eggs.

Chara's fight is a groggy hangover you can only slap yourself out of. And you do, multiple times, staring at the mirror and trying to attach the rugged, gross shell of a broken man with yourself. But the two beings retract like opposite magnets, and you can never latch them onto one another without feeling the overwhelming urge to rip them apart from each other for good.

You try, and you try, and you try. But Project Omega's depraved child experiments and Chara's ominous patient file burn for attention in the back of your mind. You stare into your coffee's rippling surface, attempting to discard the harsh words you two had exchanged and you try to shove it all under the carpet, like you have multiple times in the past with many other people.

It's harder this time around. And you wish and wish and wish and wish and keep wishing that the reason you feel so shitty about cropping Chara from your life is not the reason you think it is. That deep down, unfortunately, you've become way too attached for your own good.

Jackson calls you to finish up your food (which you can barely do, but his meticulous portions for you are often digestible), and luckily he doesn't have to push you into getting any fancy clothes on, since you have nowhere to go until around two-thirty And it's just therapy after all, not a board meeting. Although, with Holly, there's not exactly much of a difference.

You feel ridiculous when you have to latch onto Jackson's hand like a lifeline when you first leave the apartment. But your joint pains are spiraling up your spine and arms, making it hard to twist around too much and walk while looking like a functioning human being. The sour agony is torture to your already-flooding senses, so Jackson helps you balance your footing while you adjust.

But the world is just so full and vibrant, too full of unfamiliar things and sounds and dangers and people—!

"Hush," Jackson whispers, leading you down steps and clutching onto the rims when you fear tripping and falling. "It's alright. You're doing fine. I'm for certain that the stairs don't bite."
You can't help but almost laugh in spite of yourself.

Eventually you hobble to the car, still overwhelmed with the sharp air and distant noises that you wish weren't as enticing as they are. Sirens, honks, perhaps an occasional scream if you're wary...

...Or maybe it's all in your head. Like everything is.

You're buckled in and Jackson doesn't say how proud he is that you made it or anything overly sappy like that. He just tells you to be mindful of the car's cleanly surface since he just had it washed recently and he doesn't want any mess to occur within it.

At least he got his car back, you think. Unlike some unfortunate souls.

It's as he pulling out of the parking lot and headed towards Holly's that you begin to really think about things. Questions that don't have strings attached to their existence, such as: Who found Jackson's car in the first place? Was it the people you killed? And were they working for Murkoff? Were they performing the same weird sleep therapy you'd read about in some files on you? And if they died in the accident, like you remember, then how did Jackson receive his car back? Who gave it to him? What did they tell him about where they found it? Where they working for Murkoff too? Were you being watched? Are you being watched?

One after another, like a catastrophic hurricane that swirls at top speed through your thought process. The world is spinning and you just can't think, and you might collapse into the swarm of black maggots making up your body if you don't adjust yourself—

A hand clasps itself into yours and recites numbers of one to seven. You recognize this method and you realize what it's doing. You breathe.

Breathe in. You think, Why was Waylon so wary of Chara? What else could Murkoff be hiding about them? Why did they allow a child to be administered without registering them to another area?

What happened to the other Walriders? Surely they can't be killed off? And if they can be killed off, does that mean that I can get rid of mine too?

Who is watching me? Who keeps knowing what I'm going to do before I do it?

Was meeting Waylon a trap? Was letting me go and 'watch' the footage just a warning of what could happen if I stepped out of line?

Breathe out.

Breathe in.


Breathe out.

You pretend to be relaxed into the seat, like Jackson's method has calmed you, and you try and not let the tremors of incurable anxiety and stress reach your fingertips. To have your hand tremble while it's in Jackson's care is a death wish. He already thinks you've gone crazy.

Maybe you are crazy. Maybe this is all just a cruel joke just to see how far they can push you. Billy never really had a chance to be exposed to the outside world. Maybe they think that you can be their puppet without you noticing the strings they've tied to your back. You don't know many strings there
are or where they lead to, but that's what makes the game fun, right?

You squeeze Jackson's hand with the rehearsed squeeze, release, squeeze, release method that you'd seen Chara perform on you. A long, long time ago, back at Mount Massive, when you'd encountered the Walrider for the first time up close and nearly lost your lunch.

Well, it's certainly been a hellish five months since, and you've definitely lost more than your lunch during this time.

Jackson squeezes back sometimes when you skip a step or two, so it must be a practiced exercise for him, it has to be.

He can't be doing this for personal comfort; no, he can't stand you probably. You're nothing but a nuisance to him.

"I've already emailed Holly to inform her of what's been happening and why you've been skipping sessions," Jackson tells you, interrupting the quiet. "I told her as little as possible, I know you don't like her knowing all these personal details about you, but...she's your counselor. She wants to help in any way she can, I promise."

'Counselor' and 'help' do not fit in the same sentence, just from your past experiences with them. Holly is no different.

Which gets you thinking. Refuge is Murkoff property, right? Well, then if they've been keeping ties on you from a distance, why stop there? They've probably infected your doctors and therapists and—

Ah. Of course.

The nightmares-turned-memories of being probed and carved into by doctors are hard to dissect and analyze, but...they happened. Surely. And they all had this demeanor in their stature; subtle blackmail, manipulation at its finest with the most skilled villains to shape you into something you're not.

The schizophrenia diagnosis. Chara not being real. Being...intolerable and insane and incapable of functioning at all in Holly's eyes. They make sense because they wanted you to go nuts. Make you become this frantic beast.

For what reason, you have your theories. No definite answer, though. But the hand that's locked with Jackson's becomes cold and you force it away from you, removing the touch of someone who is probably being paid by the wrong people.

Jackson mistakes your reaction for a defensive fear on going to Holly—reasonable, yes, but untrue at the moment. There are other mysteries that have your undivided attention.

"Well go right home after this, if you want," Jackson reassures you.

But it's not home. Home isn't here anymore because Murkoff took even that luxury from you. Your jaw squares and you cover the stiffened muscles by bringing smooth hands to your face and looking solemnly out the car window. The world rushes by you and you wish it dead.

"Sounds good to me," you tell him, trying not to croak out the words in a frenetic manner. The questions brew in your soul like stew, churning, boiling, steaming under the surface, begging for air from your captivity.

Jackson seems pleased by your agreement and slides his hand away from you to put both palms back
You pretend to daydream, dissociate, wherever you wish to call it. Because now, you have a plan. You're going to figure out what's going on if it kills you.

And you have a word or two for your therapist Holly the first chance you get.

Holly is impatiently tapping her fingernail against the blank notepad rested in her lap, eagerly summoning you to speak your mind with an unbending glare you've numbed yourself to.

She's no less severe from your time apart, in fact the separation seems to have only fueled her restless ambition to get to the root of all your problems. Maybe even problems that aren't even there; maybe ones that she's just making up.

"Miles," she begins, taking a silent breath to assuage her sharp tongue, "would you like to explain why we haven't talked in a while?"

_Because I have better things to do with my time than talk to lying, upright whores._

You don't say it, but man do you _think_ it.

She takes your silence as an answer with a grim nod, chalking up her own petty conclusions on the subject.

You can barely look at her and she sifts through the notes, trying to find the topics of the session. Everything about her has this blatant scream of Murkoff and you have no clue how you'd glossed over that without too much thought.

'Who's paying you?'

_That question is none of your concern._

'It is my business if you're working with those Murkoff pricks!'

'I understand that you're paranoid, mister Upshur. But please, calm down.'

That bitch. She never answered your question.

"Mister Upshur?"

Holly's present words whip you into the present time like a cold splash of water to the face. Her expression is hard, unyielding. But her pen taps against the notes she's holding like you're wasting her time.

You give a cough and try to avoid arousing suspicion. "Sorry about that," you murmur, keeping your gaze downcast. "Just...zoned out."

Not entirely true, but not _false_ either. You're well known for stepping out of reality like it's nothing more than a footstep away from your grasp. In fact, if you don't get moving on your ludicrous idea, then you're probably going to dissociate as quickly as you came.

Holly doesn't look too concerned, transitioning her eyes back to the papers to study her words. Which is fine, since you're already kind of prolonging your stay as is.
"Jackson says that you've been having a bit of a tough time lately," Holly begins, not looking up. "Care to elaborate?"

_Not really._ "What do you wanna know?"

She perks a brow at your sudden deviated attitude for her sessions. "Perhaps how it all started. Then we can take it from there."

You don't reply. She takes this, somehow, as a consensual response to twist the knife even further.

"So, Jackson mentions in his email that you'd walked into the house 'looking like a rugged, bloody mess with weird black goop spouting from your sockets, nostrils, and mouth'," Holly reads, and her words tilt uneasily when she describe the black ooze. Not entirely something you would have caught if you weren't already hyper-aware of her every wording. You trust her as far as you can throw her.

You can't take this. The pressure in the room suffices with the equivalence of drowning underwater, with Holly waiting for your reasoning to begin some form of communication between you two, because like hell is she going to conduct a session that's actually _helpful._

The questions pile up in your brain amidst the ambience, and ultimately, you decide that you're not taking this.

You need answers.

"Holly." You stand to your feet and address her by her first name; which are two shockers to the conversation. The atmosphere stiffens when Holly gives you an incredulous glare.

"Mister Upshur—"

You don't give her time. "I'm really sorry that I've been a gigantic pain in the ass every single time we've met."

She blinks, cautious now. "Miles, I'm not—"

"Look, I think you have a firm footing on what you want to do and what you'd like to see accomplished in your life," you continue, and while you try to sound brisk and calm, it just comes out grated and very, very bitter. "And I understand that. Respect it, even. We're not exactly that much different from each other."

Her brow raises. You catch a glimpse of uncertainty crack through her usual mask of practiced demeanor. And that drives you forward.

"I like to think that, under different circumstances, we'd get along," you continue, and you manage to find feeling in your legs long enough to saunter around the coffee table separating you both and you come face to face with Holly Stevens, lounging in her chair with the notes of all your past sessions. The therapist that knows more than she lets on.

You crouch down to lock eyes properly with her. Something dangerous flints her gaze.

"But I don't trust the people you work with," you murmur, voice sharp as nails. "And ultimately, I don't trust you."

The quickest moment of exposure that waters down the usually-collected appearance of Holly furthers your adrenaline. You lean forward, unafraid of her now, narrowing your eyes and letting the swarm of your thoughts engulf the anger you've feeding on.
"Tell me everything you know," you growl.

The poised condescension returns to Holly's features, and she straightens to give you a lowered eye. Nothing empathetic or terror-driven haunts her motions. It makes your teeth tense.

"I think that you know just as much as I do," she replies coldly, and her voice is curling into a coy sort of tone that you can't skip over without your knuckles whitening. "Perhaps even more than I do."

Her stare doesn't waver. "In fact, I think a more appropriate question would be for me to ask you to tell me everything you know." And then her voice lowers dangerously.

"Because you're not without blood on your hands, Miles Upshur," she whispers, and it chills your blood. "I know everything you've done up to this point. I know why you can't remember. I know what you think you're doing. I know you want me to give you a prestige answer on why this is all happening to you."

You want to respond, but you feel like your mouth has been numbed to the core. So you just watch like the muted, obedient puppet that you've become as Holly removes her papers from her lap and stands up as well to join you.

Her heels clack as she heads towards a nearby bookshelf absently, hands behind her back.

"Would you like to know the mistake you're making with this logic, Upshur?" she asks you. She doesn't wait for an answer; your guts churn. "You think that you'll find the truth. You think that you'll uncover everything there is to know and that things will just...fall into place."

The buzzing commences and you thrive in it, angry and confused and yearning for her to shut up.

"I hate to be the bearer of truth, in this circumstance," Holly continues, and she sounds smug. "But even if you think you understand what's happening and why it's happening...well, you're only halfway down the rabbit hole."

You say nothing.

"It's always been the case," she explains archly, her heels clicking like a strained heartbeat, "that whoever is holding the money gets to say what the truth is. And, I suppose, that matter stands as firm as ever in the most recent struggles."

'But what happens when all the money is gone?'

You find your voice again, burrowed in your teeth that gleam under your snarl. "Fuck you."

"I'm not finished," Holly tells you, unfazed by your anger with her back still turned.

"You're not going to find what you're looking for, Miles, because it doesn't exist. So just let me finish my work and accept that there are things outside of your control. Leave the dominance of the situation to those who know what's best."

Her sudden change in mannerisms almost makes her previous words and actions appear nonexistent. Almost.

"Let's forget this happened, Miles," Holly says firmly. "I'm here to make you better, and I'm leaving some questions unanswered for your own sake. That's my job."
It's recently that you've had lots of time to reflect on the canned responses you've been given by authority figures in order to grip your sanity in the palm of their own hands. You've never realized until the formation of your hazy memories that they're labeling themselves as the commanding forces because they're afraid of you.

As Holly settles into her chair again, looking flustered by the confrontation but seeming flippant in her posture—like she solved something and ultimately made things better—you step away from her, temporarily handicapped by the overwhelming realization that these people, whoever they are, took something from you. Murkoff isn't just this evil corporation; they're these looming, omnipotent beings that are in charge of you. They think they own you.

But they don't. Because nobody controls the Walrider, not even yourself. You're being manipulated on the foundations of a lie.

You walk forward again.

"Sit down, Miles," Holly orders.

You say nothing, but when you surge forward and slam your fist into Holly's cheek, you think that the action itself says enough.

Some sort of supernatural entity must have been watching over you (you don't think too hard in that department), because that one punch is enough to knock your therapist out cold without a single protest.

That sensation of power over your oppressors is...a bit scary. Controversial, if you must admit it. Holly is bad, but, maybe there could have been some other method of shutting her mouth.

"Shit..."

...Well, it's too late now.

You fumble through the notes splayed across her lap, looking for something. Just some sort of secret code or just some clue that could help you get a running start in commencing a personal case.

The limp body of Holly Stevens isn't exactly a spotless surface to scavenge through, and in the space where adrenaline should be pumping through your blood you start to feel a bit sick.

The Walrider hurts people, and that's not exactly a consensual decision on both halves. You know that Murkoff is bad, their executives are bad, everything they stand for is bad. But killing people? That's a different topic in general. Murder is bad. Doing it with a conscious mind is even worse.

You try not to let these nagging thoughts affect your fumbling through the notes. Therapy sessions, patient files from your days in Refuge...

And then:

MURKOFF PSYCHIATRIC SYSTEMS
PROJECT ALP
CO, AZ, PN, MI
Case Number: 182
Patient Initials: MJU, "Upshur"
Consultation Dated: 2013.10.14
Initial Date of Patient Consult: 2013.09.30
Patient Age: 26
Gender: Male
Observing Physician(s): (The names are angrily scrawled out in black marker. You assume the worst.)

THERAPY STATUS:
Patient continues to be compliant with selective-memory therapy and shock therapy under heavy anesthesia. Walrider still continues to agitate the limbric system and remaining brainwave activity; too severe to properly dissect. Patient is unable to produce self-directed dreams; continue hypnotic amnesia treatment

You pretend not to be surprised. You try not to let your hands shake.

DIAGNOSTICS:
No no no don't read it don't read what's wrong with you you'll never stop just keep going keep going stop shaking

INTERVIEW NOTES:
Patient is drugged into constant domestic states in order to continue with dissection and shock therapy. Walrider seems to be heavily active in the membrane, unable to separate consciousness of Host without severe damage to the body, possible death. MRI scans expose damage to frontal lobe's electrical activity. Supervisors highly concerned.

UPDATE: Miles seems to have heavy brainwashing symptoms, including forgetting where his former home is located (Murfkoft's Mitigation Department has already emptied the residence of Miles Upshur, located in Washington D.C. Therapists are persistent in assisting Miles to gloss over former memories in the place of new or implanted ones. Seems successful overall.)

UPDATE: He remains unresponsive about the girl and her whereabouts. Multiple interrogation techniques have ended with possible Walrider activity, resulting in fatal agitation, and patient had to be sedated. Information points to Patient 2000-1 being alive, but location is still kept heavily under wraps. Will investigate further when Miles is in stable mindset

UPDATE: Hypnotic therapy successful. Will be administered into—

"Fuck!"

With a wave of fury and grief and a thousand other emotions you can't label you slam the file into the wall, watching the papers explode and float to the floor, encircling you.

Your hands shake. They won't stop shaking and you're dangerously close to crying.

"Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck..."

It's all been a lie. You knew that. You glued the pieces together long before you managed to stock up any form of courage and receive official proof. So why does it hurt?

You pitifully cross your arms and act like you're not holding yourself, but you absolutely are because your nostrils are stinging and you can't control the buzzing anymore because it's there, it's always there. It cracked your fist against Holly's cheek (haven't you ever been taught not to hit a girl?) and it drove you to observe the ugly truth hiding in the papers (snooping was never a flaw you could restrain).

But still. Still. You know you're awful and bad, but you're sick of all these people in your life just lying to you all the time.
And the one person that didn't, you pushed them away. Because of fucking course you would.

You turn to an unconscious Holly, ignoring the faint purple blushing her face where you'd punched her. You're about to say, "I'm sorry," because it's not like you usually enjoy punching people. You're just thankful that she's still breathing.

But then the anger makes its appearance below the surface. It boils into the premise of the static, forever screaming in your ears, and your hands curl into fists. Your breathing becomes heavy. This wasn't supposed to be your life; this isn't supposed to happen, god, why did this happen? Why did you do this to yourself?

Murkoff used you. They're still using you. And you're sick of it.

You rush forward, tugging at the crisp jacket that Holly is wearing over a collared blouse. She doesn't resist against your tugging at her clothing, but you try and tell yourself that your intentions are definitely not the direction that one might think if they walked into the room right now.

After shuffling rapidly through her jacket's pockets, her shirt's pocket, her pants pockets, you spot it.

It's tiny, microscopic, almost. Concealed under the back of her neck, tucked underneath the collar and running under the fabric like it was designed to be imprinted there.

A microphone. Of course.

You yank it out and place it into the palm of your trembling hand. You gaze at the device, wondering if there's someone listening right now.

You save the final words for when you crush the microphone between your palms, killing the device with the smallest, dying spark that stings your hands.

"Should've fucking done this to begin with."

You step backward to gaze upon the brutal scene. The air sticks to your throat like gel and suddenly the sight of what you've just done is too much. You could almost vomit because you know that you've severely fucked up. The hole you've buried yourself into just keeps getting deeper.

You do what you do best. You run from the mess you've made.

You had to steal from Holly, you tell yourself. There was no other option than to pickpocket a twenty from her purse, laying limp near her chair. It's the only way you can get home, and traveling with Jackson feels like rubbing salt into a wound.

You don't trust him anymore. To think that you would ever consider having him comfort you in areas of yourself that you should've kept under wraps is sickening. Besides, he was surely one of your supervisors when you were still with Murkoff? Or whatever the fuck that was on about. You're still unsure and you hate it.

Everyone is trying to hurt you and make you into this thing. You don't even understand their true intentions, and what a surprise! You hate that too!

The bus ride back to your apartment is just you, hunched over and picking at the skin converting your missing fingers, thinking, sweating, shaking. You're so absorbed into yourself that you don't notice until you're exiting the bus that the people alongside you are purposely shuffling away from
your crumpled figure.

You don't care. You have a job to do.

The bus stops close enough to your apartment complex for you to race to the lobby without breaking into a panting sprint. But your feet are still slipping across the pavement in a hasty attempt to get home and just try and get your thoughts together.

You can barely think. The information and foreboding warnings of Holly are still tossed through your mind and don't even attempt to stick to you. The thoughts refuse to burrow deeper for more clarification and instead you run on pure terror, with the unknown dipping under your toes and having you nearly drown into nothing.

Of course, the Walrider would get an absolute kick out of that. And so you swallow your fear out of spite and move forward.

As you head upstairs, breathing hard, focusing on the end result of being locked away in your bedroom, the fury comes. Pinpointed at the man whom you've shared tears and thoughts with. The man who's lived in your home and tried to make that word mean something again, even if his attempts were futile.

You don't recognize the burning taste in the back of your throat as hurt. Betrayal, even.

How could he?

That question is ever-present as you unlock your apartment's door and the opening scene makes you feel queasy.

Jackson is sitting calmly on your kitchen table, drinking coffee and laughing with a fair-skinned man beside him. Tall, brunette, sturdy build. They're smiling so wide and have this doe-eyed demeanor that's so prominent that you're easily able to identify the stranger in your house as Simon.

They turn to you in shock when you step through the door, and Jackson's stare shifts into a culpable expression.

"Oh! You're home!" Jackson sets down his mug, and Simon maneuvers out of his boyfriend's way so he can advance towards you.

"Sorry, I didn't think you would be back so soon," he apologizes. "How did you get here?"

"Bus." Your voice doesn't belong to you and runs on a motorized rehearsal of how to communicate appropriately when addressed.

"Ah," Jackson seems, fortunately, too amorous to be thinking hard about where you got the money, since he didn't give you any to start with.

Simon heads towards you, looking curious at your current state with a clearer expression than Jackson has.

"Hey man, you okay?" he hedges, concerned.

You don't know how much of your internalized collateral damage is showing, but you really don't have time to practice any sort of technique to look all prim and proper right now. You just need to sit
"I'm fine," you lie. A common lie these days, laced with tailored assurances and defensive insults. But it's all you have.

Both don't seem entirely convinced, and when you realize that Jackson is beginning to catch on that you might not be telling the truth, you break out of their encircled positions towards you and head for your room. You close the door tightly shut behind you, and in quiet you lock it so that nobody can interrupt your existential crises.

Finally. You're alone.

As you settle into the bed, enigmas racing to the front of your thought process for attention that makes your head spin, your phone chirps almost immediately.

You don't have the energy to act surprised that the identity of the messenger is Waylon Park. You stuff your tongue into your cheek to suppress a well-times groan of disappointment.

...Well, at least you'll be alone with Waylon. The optimism is entirely abortive on shifting your current mood, but perhaps being alone with nothing but a pesky Walrider and guilt buried in your stomach isn't the safest option right now. You'll have to take what you can get, even if that results in Waylon.

You examine the text, and you're unnerved at the ominous message:

**From: Waylon (4:02 PM)**

someone from murkoff is in our house and he knows where you are

Alright, scratch everything you'd said beforehand about finally getting a break. Seems like you really do put the theory of you ruining to everything to good use.

**To: Waylon (4:02 PM)**

what? whats going on??

**From: Waylon (4:03 PM)**

he found us please help
-dont call the police
-they know about you

You're aware that Waylon Park, the infamous Murkoff whistleblower, would seek justice against oppressors without the desire to save his own skin. So you're beginning to think about Lisa and the two boys you'd spotted hiding from your sight in their shabby home. Murkoff isn't above hurting families, you know that for a fact.

The simple cry for help in his texts, cut short with panic, aren't for him. He's asking you to save his family.

**To: Waylon (4:04 PM)**

distract him for an hour

You click the phone dead so you can concentrate just a smudge better without the weight of what
you've just committed to being an accessible reminder. The vindictive anger directed towards the whistleblower kept the blood pumping through your veins, but the feeling has abruptly dissipated, leaving behind only a stranded sentiment of helplessness.

Jesus, what else could you possibly get yourself into that you haven't already today?

You admit that you're the worst with committing to promises, but remaining in the Park's debt is a burden that roils in your guts, quite uncharacteristically.

If this strong emotion you're emitting towards Waylon Park is sympathy, you're going to be sick.

Nonetheless. You made a promise, and you sure as hell aren't going to let this vow slip through the cracks as easily as your previous accounts.

You storm out of your bedroom, uncertain on how you're going to convince Jackson to lend you his car, but you're relying on him being too wonderstruck by Simon's presence to really care what you do.

Hell, you're making this all up as you go along. But you've already disappointed the one person you ever gave two fucks about, what else do you have to lose?

The blind adrenaline comes to a screeching halt when Jackson is waiting for you in the kitchen, arms crossed, looking at you with a strange gaze that delays your mission.

You're not sure how he looks, exactly; some mixture of anger, disappointment, confusion, maybe even fear if you look hard enough. One thing's for sure is that you want to squirm out of his peripheral field as soon as possible. But he's firm in his groundings.

Seated at the dining table, Simon shuffles uncomfortably, avoiding your gaze and pretending to be texting a friend. Jackson's laptop sits beside him, where the desktop is opened to a freshly-delivered email.

Shit...

"Miles." The conglomerate emotions found within that one word and how Jackson has spoken it leaves your blood cold.

Damn it. Damn it, damn it, damn it...

Jackson attempts to calm his fury before he speaks, using his pinched fingers to push his glasses farther up the bridge of his nose, but the attempt is unsuccessful when he yells a sharp, "What the fuck is wrong with you!"

You try not to jump. You try not to let the words hurt.

His glare is brimming with wrath, and you try really, really hard not to cower away from him like a child.

Stand your ground. Say you're sorry. You have places to be...

"I'm so—"

"Are you serious?!!" Jackson screams, cutting you short and your lips are now glued together. "Are you fucking kidding me? What the fuck made you think punching out your therapist was okay?!"

His fury rubs against yours, and the shame you feel previously roiling in your gut veers into personal
defense, making your stare brittle.

"Jacks—"

"Oh no you don't!" He stops you again, fueling the fire. "You are *not* giving me some sort of half-assed excuse for yourself!"

He loosens his stiff footing on the kitchen floor and begins to pace angrily, and all the while you spot Simon watching the scene with extreme discomfort.

"Now, I'm sorry about what happened with Chara! I really am!" Jackson continues, refusing to soften his tone. "But that's no excuse to beat someone up! Especially Holly, for Christ's sake! Jesus! She's assigned to *help* you, Miles! She—"

"She's a liar!" you protest, because the thought of Holly trying to help you for your own benefit is too ridiculous—and sickeningly hilarious—for you to let slide.

"She's a bitch and a liar, Jackson! She *lied* to me! You understand?" you scream, and Jackson gives you a look of such incredulity that any sort of logical argument dies in your throat. "I shouldn't have punched her out, I'll admit that! But I—"

"Damn right you shouldn't have! Do you have any idea what the fuck you've just done? Do you think they're going to just skim over this incident? *No*! They won't!"

You grit your teeth. "Well, how about you see what I'm seeing, Wrent? Everyone is lying to me, I can't remember shit, and everything I know and care about is *fucked!* How *else* was I supposed to get answers!"

"Wh—" Jackson's eyes momentarily narrow through your tragic testimony, then they widen when he pieces together an idea. "You punched Holly for *answers*?"

Okay. You sound stupid. But, "Yes."

"What the— answers to *what*, Miles?!" He begins to yell again, reigniting the fury and having you dig your fingernails into your palms, digging crescents into the flesh.

"What the fuck— You think that something is being *kept* from you? You think I would *lie* to you?"

The possibility of Jackson being a potential suspect in your case is brought to attention. You square your jaw, hardening your features.

"I *know* something is being kept from me!" you screech back at Jackson, startling him. "I don't even *live* here, Jackson! I live in Washington D.C.! *Washington. D. C. Not Leadville, Colorado*!"

"What...the *hell* are you going on about—!"

Everything is coming to a head. Your suppressed anger, your inner hurt at betrayal, even the damn Walrider, is beginning to blossom into this fresh wave of grief and rage that you can't properly contain anymore. The release of your internalized conflict has the same overwhelming release as loosening a muscle after hours, *years* even, of intense pressure. Your features harden, and you fear nothing as you advance towards the strangers in your kitchen.

A humming mist is emanating from a source that you can't identify as yourself until you notice the sudden shift of atmosphere, into one similar to a predator stalking his prey.
You hear Simon insert himself hastily into the situation as you forcefully grab Jackson's collar and swing him around to where he brutally meets the floor with a surprised cry.

You snarl. "You lied to me, didn't you? You fucking bastard! You know why I'm acting like this, why I can't remember! You're part of 'them', whoever 'they' are!"

Jackson's eyes widen as you reach for him again, but you're halted by Simon clutching your shoulder so hard that there's bound to be potential bruises, and he whirls you away from his vulnerable boyfriend.

"What the fuck is your deal, man?!" he yells, and the buzzing sings in your ears. You dilate on the man's suppressed anxiety.

"Jackson didn't do anything to you! He's trying to help! He's trying to—"

A memory surfaces.

*The doctors pricks so many needles into your skin, butchers your skin, tears you apart.*

'We're trying to help, Miles,' he assures you, voice featureless as he hurts you hurts you keeps hurting you. 'We only want to make things right again.'

"Shut your fucking mouth!"

You barrel your fist into air as Simon swerves from your punch and you stumble.

Jackson attempts to make an attack from behind, but with a heightened sense derived from panic (and perhaps an occult ability) you spin away from him and you lurch forward to smash his body into the couch, scarring the furniture.

The scuffling is erupting into a brawl, with Simon pulling you away from performing any more damage to Jackson, and you screaming violent curses and threats in every direction you can, feeding the invalidated fury you've had to bottle up for so long. The inner hellbeast in your bones isn't exactly alleviating the situation either, and you swear to god that there's a black mist originating from some corner of the room.

You're about to inflict more damage and show these two who've they decided to mess with when, conveniently, the phone rings.

It's like the world is frozen, and you all pause your current fighting to soak in the sudden interruption. Simon is attempting to place you into a headlock, and you both simmer in each other's grasp for a moment longer before eventually you have to detach the claws you've buried into his clothing. Then you have to loosen your teeth's hold on his arm; realizing what you're doing, you begin to spit distastefully.

The new bruises and cuts peppering your own skin are but a distant worry; you can't feel them anyway. Whether that's the endorphins talking or the Walrider, you're not sure you care anymore.

Simon shoves you onto the floor in a shabby attempt to inform you to cease and desist, and he walks over to receive the call, still looking greatly unnerved by the previous events.

You're a couple of feet away from Jackson, panting heavily on the floor, regaining himself. The look he gives you from your hunched position is one glassy with fear and hurt.

You hurt him. Physically, also, judging by the wounds on his dark skin.
...You didn’t want this. Fuck, you didn’t want to do this.

You reach a helpless hand towards his direction, silently asking to assist him off the floor alongside you, but he protests, providing only a distrustful gaze at your four-fingered hand. Jackson just rubs at a burn on his arm, probably received from being run across the carpet sometime during your altercation.

You remember a third-degree burn, blistered and poorly bandaged under your care. Residing on Chara’s right shoulder.

_What the hell have you just done?_

Then Simon walks back to where you two are just sitting, staring at each other. He hands you the phone, looking uncertain.

"Uh...some lady wants to talk to you," he says.

Jesus, you can think of about ten women that might want to kick your ass right now.

You bring the phone to your ear as carefully as you would bring a ticking bomb close to your face. You practice hospitality and try not to let your voice sound scratchy or warbled.

"Hello?"

"Greetings, Miles. Is Chara with you?"

The words tumble out of her mouth and hang resolutely in the air.

You blink. Static in your eyelids. Growing panic. "What— why would they be—?"

"Oh, god, no..." Toria appears to momentarily step away from the phone call, sounding so unnerved that you’re beginning to get a very, very bad feeling that Chara’s foster mother is unaware of her child’s whereabouts.

Your theory is proven when you hear anxious mumbles exchanged on the other line, possibly between Toria and her husband. Then she returns.

"Chara didn't return from school," she explains, exercising composure. "Asriel said that they told him they had a ride. But...they haven't come back. I thought— we thought that they might have come to you."

_Remain calm. Remain calm._

"I..." Their family doesn’t know about the fight. Chara wouldn’t get near you if their life depended on it; and for good reason. But still.

Your discomfort is the answer received, and both parties of the conversation express their own anxiety.

"Okay, we're going to the school and see if they're still there," Aegros takes over the receiver on behalf of his worried wife. "Surely they wouldn't have..." He pauses before continuing, "Chara is sure to be at school. I'm sure there's no reason to fret."

Somehow, in some miraculous manner outside of your control, you’re able to piece a concordant resolution that your brain can’t automatically recognize, but it’s enough to have you kicking your senses into overdrive.

Waylon's visitor...

It's all connected, isn't it?

...You eventually find yourself saying, "Don't worry. They just walked in. I'll tell them to come home."

There's a wave of fresh relief both Toria and Aegros share that you can't participate in.

"Thank goodness," you hear Toria breathe, and then she takes the phone back to ask you, "Can you put Chara on the phone with us please?"

"No."

As expected, your flatlined response is not soothing. Toria speaks with an emotion you can only qualify as a harsh parental concern.

"Excuse m—?"

"Don't worry about your kid," you tell her, voice still eerily calloused. "I'll find them. I promise."

There's a protest you hear abruptly cut off from the call as you slam the phone onto the ground.

No, no, no, no, no. Chara is fine. You just messed up. Just apologize to Jackson and Simon. You'll be fine. Everything is fine.

They're not okay god where are they this is my fault this is my fault fuck fuck fuck—

You forgot you had company. "Miles?" Jackson kneels forward and attempt to reach you, but you snap back.

"Is he alright?" you hear. "Looks like he might be sick."

Sick sick they took them away they took them away from me took them away from me Waylon Murkoff fuck they took them away from me

Make them pay make them pay

You stand up, towering over the men in the room that once belonged to you.

"Where are the knives."

The static is an encouraging ambience that is able to help you shoot daggers through Jackson's incredulous stare. You feel something dark lurking through your voice, your body, your movement.

He starts visibly. "Wha—"

"Where are the knives!" you screech, showing teeth that should be as sharp as fangs, but you're trapped in a defenseless body and you can only claw and bite whatever you're able.

The smoke appears almost corporeal in reality, and it flicks across your field of vision as you storm towards your kitchen when Jackson doesn't give you an answer.
"Oh my god, oh my god, what the fuck is he doing?" Simon sounds like he's hyperventilating but you don't care.

**Murkoff liars Holly liar Jackson liar liars liars liars all liars Murkoff Waylon Murkoff took them took them get them back get everything back**

You're not going to hurt Jackson nor Simon. You have that intention in mind for different people, and they're not worth it anymore.

This isn't even your home. You can break as many plates and cabinets as you want so long as it's for the greater good. And this most certainly is.

"Miles, stop!" You feel arms attempt to grab you and force you away from your planned objective, but you shrug them off as easy as if it were a mere dust speck on your shoulder.

"Miles, what are you doing?! What— why are you looking for knives! Stop this right now!"

"I'm calling the police."

"Simon, don't—!"

You find the knives.

They're hidden under your sink, behind the poisonous equipment, where it's usually locked with a key that only Jackson has access to. You didn't even realize that you'd pried the cabinet door off with your bare hands, splinters and all.

You grab the biggest steak knife you can and whirl around to face Jackson, who has become pale at the sight of the weapon.

"Where's your car."

"W-what?"

You tighten your grip on the cool handle, relieved to at last have this sense of overpowering authority. Something you've been ripped and shunned of since Mount Massive. And granted, with your heavy breaths of building anger and the tightened fists, the screaming, the glares, the punches, the knife (the static, the mist, the Walrider's influence)...you're not surprised you don't look the least bit trustworthy.

But that doesn't matter. It doesn't matter because you made a mistake and you want to fix this.

*I can fix this I promise I promise please please—*

"Give me your keys," you repeat, and there's some background television snow that accompanies your claim. You can't tell at first that your voice is laced with the static that bleeds into your tone.

Jackson just watches with a look of horror as you spot the car keys he left behind him on the counter, and he attempts to stop you before Simon holds him back. Both men look too terrified of your frantic actions veered towards violence to appropriately stop you.

"Miles—" Jackson tries again. You hear nothing.

You storm towards the door, leaving behind everything that has ever attempted to chain the demon in your body. Everything that tried to convince you that this was your life, and that you were going to be okay, and that getting that kid out of your life would be okay.
That Murkoff prick, pacing around Waylon's house like he has the world under his heel. Knowing more than you. How dare he?

"Miles!" Jackson calls for you again, but you don't look back as you swing the door open. You hear him yell in a fit of panic, "Where the hell are you going?!!"

You don't answer. You slam the door behind you.

- 

Proper communication with the Walrider has often ended in bloody aftermaths and ultimately failure. You could never connect yourself to the guest in your skin because you were alienated by the blind destruction it wished upon the world.

But driving alone in a stolen vehicle with a knife and a firm mind of killing anything that delays your objective really puts some things in perspective.

You're really surprised that you can maintain enough composure to drive without destroying any cars on the highway. And in a way, you imagine the scene to be amusing. You could crack open someone's skull if your seatbelt wasn't buckled.

But through your meditative state, you're trapped between reality and this new realm of godlike fury, unmarked by man. Your fingers clench against the wheel so badly that you're pondering on whether or not your grip will leave your palms bruised.

**Took them away.**

*I know that! God, I get it, okay?*

Okay, you know for certain that you've lost it by now, since the inky patterns that haunt your dreams at night are blinding your field of vision, and all you can hear is blood pounding in your ears. The rage floods your veins and muscles like it's a physical essence.

The Walrider hates Chara. You know that. He thinks they're a waste of time waste of time—

**Shut the fuck up!**

He gives you a mental adequation of rolling his eyes and continuing to press buttons, making you clench your teeth and almost growl like a primitive animal.

You both want something. You can attempt to meld a form of negotiation, right? Just this once.

**They lied to you.**

Now he's just messing with you. Your teeth are so sore from you grinding down to the gums.

"*I know," you growl aloud, and the world transitions into greyscale, colliding fictional with reality, anger with grief, black with white.

You know why this is happening. It's because things are finally making sense and clicking into place after months of hiatus.

And because for the first time, you and the Walrider have a common enemy.
You almost crash the car into the parking lot of the messy condo, and you care less on whether or not the vehicle was damaged because you're so angry you literally can't think clearly.

The knife is pressed under the black jacket that belongs to you/him/it. The overwhelming desire to drive the weapon into your enemy's flesh is a compulsive order on both parties.

The whole trip has been summarized by the Walrider tormenting your brain with forbidden memories, forcing you to kick the car into an autopilot that belongs to you/him/somebody so you don't crash.

Memory after memory you remember the knives and needles pressed into the skin. You know that they wanted something with Chara that you couldn't offer.

Your vision darkens as you storm into the house, knocking the door into the wall so loudly that you're sure you hear somebody scream at the noise.

You race inside, finding the man in question monitoring Waylon Park, Lisa, and their sons. They're all on the couch, sitting as stiffly as they would if they each had a gun pressed to their temples. You don't know if they're not hurt. You don't care.

There's a surprised, "Miles?" from one of the captives before you grab the suited man, dressed sharply in black, and find pleasure in slamming his body into the wall so hard that you hear something crack.

More screams erupt from behind, but your glare is fixated on the man, glowering in the shock and fear paling his features.

"Where's the kid!"

You scream so loudly that you think that there's a second voice accompanying your own at the back of your throat. Two people sharing the same tongue.

The grip you're holding against the man's formal collar tightens like your life depends on it as a knowing gaze—almost a fucking smirk—crosses his features.

"What kid?" he asks you hoarsely, but his tone is sweetened with mockery so intensely it makes you show teeth. "Be specific, Upshur."

Hysteria commences when you slam the knife into the wall an inch away from his throat, making him jump.

"I'm not afraid to hurt you," you snarl, exposing the static in an undercurrent that seems to make him break out into a cold sweat. It's then you realize that the ground and wall and ceiling surrounding you are swirling with a blackened fog that the others in the room appear to see.

"Now tell me where's the fucking kid!"

_Took them away from you hurt us hurt us hurt us make them pay make them pay—_

The man attempts to chortle a humorless chuckle, but it comes out wheezed from your hold on his throat.

"Not gonna tell you," he croaks, trying to smirk. "Not a part of my job."
You remember how easy it was to slam that Variant that choked Chara into the wall so many times that it killed him. The familiarity of that action enables you to perform the same form of torture upon Murkoff's grunt, hitting his head against something hard in the wall so fiercely that you think you can hear ribs crackling.

You hear a, "Miles, stop!"

You ignore the cry. You listen to every other voice in your brain instead, driving you forward.

The man's nose bleeds as he gives a pathetic chuckle, choking on his saliva.

"Look at you, Upshur," he sighs, his voice clearly shaking but the ulterior purpose of taunting you enables his tongue. "Can't you see what you're doing? You're making things worse. And all for a little girl."

He tries to laugh again. His blood stains your knuckles. "You were fucked the moment you let that thing into your body. I'm not telling you shit. You'll never see her again anyway, so kill me and see what happens."

"Miles— what the fuck is he talking about?!!" Waylon.

You grab the knife in the wall, releasing all of the anger that you've inhaled from your time with the Walrider as you stab the man's arm brutally.

The splatter of blood taints your jacket and shirt, but you don't care. You don't care because this is what you wanted, you sick fuck, isn't it?

The man screams as you force the knife out of his bleeding flesh and hold it to his throat.

"I will fucking tear you apart, piece by piece, you fucking bastard," your voice seeps through your clenched teeth. Something oozy drops from your eyes and nose but you ignore its presence as you breathe in the man's pained cries.

"Tell me where the kid is now or I'll slice your head open!"

"Miles, stop it!" Waylon again.

The man looks at you again, firm yet terrified. His sweat bubbles on his forehead as he whispers forcibly, "No."

You stab his abdomen next, wary of busting open a vital organ in fear of killing him before you get your answer. He screams again and you try not to focus on the torment you're causing a human being.

He's not human, he's nothing but an evil machine planted by Murkoff, used to control you.

You seethe, "Tell me."

His eyes widen, dangerously glazing over, and on the brink of death he responds.


And then you drop him to the floor like a bleeding sack of potatoes.

You did it. You know where they are.
"Miles!" This time, you're able to understand that Waylon is screeching at you now, and he looks at you with the horror one would conduct if their family was in danger.

Lisa is gone, along with the boys. But you hear the boys crying upstairs somewhere.

You did this.

We did this.

You drop the weapon, leaving the man to die on the floor, and you head outside, the black smoke that was filling the room beginning to follow you out.

"What the...?"

You don't care anymore. You turn back to Waylon Park, the whistleblower, the prisoner you spared. His mouth is still agape.

"Take the white car outside in the parking lot and go, Park." You feel like the voice speaking from your throats doesn't belong to you, flat and unruffled from the unbending chaos around you.

He hasn't budged, but his eyes are wide and cloudy with fear-stricken tears. "Wh—"

"Take your family and get out, Waylon," you order, voice as calm as can be. "There's nothing for you here."

Then you leave, storming to the black car that's outside of the Park's residence. You hear the screaming subside as you move farther away from the crime scene, the mist around you being your only source of company.

There's nothing for you here.

There's nothing for us here.

You're so sorry. You should have never left Chara alone. You've made the worst mistakes possible today. You can never go back home— neither D.C. nor Leadville—and you've probably just committed your first conscious kill. The Walrider was only a secondary suspect in the murder; it was you who commenced it because you were angry.

But you're angry for good reasons. You force your remaining morality to quiet itself from any further guilt trips as you wallow in the dark pits of your mind, formerly secured by medication and hypnosis.

(The guy even left his keys inside, like he thought this would be an easy kill. What the hell was he even doing here?

You'll never know.

You just start the car.)

You know where you're going. You know why you're going.

Because they have someone that matters to you that you promised you'd never leave behind.

You're the Walrider's Host. And you're sure as hell going to act like it.

Chapter End Notes
Props to those who are able to figure out what Project Omega is nodding towards!

Also, some of Holly's monologue when she's talking to Miles originated from the dialogue of Richard Trager in an Outlast trailer; it's a shame they didn't keep it in, I enjoyed it!

Chapter name modified from this prose post by Amrita Chakraborty
A machine is on.

The sound, that similar sound...the kind you experience in your nightmares, over and over. The screeching of insanity pounds in your eardrums like an earworm digging at your inner temples.

Consciousness is as easy to grasp as clutching smoke with your hands, drifting in and out of touch. Through sheer will can you eventually make your way back into your corporeal form, and when you do, you manage to identify your own body as one that is strapped down by something.

Think. *Think.*

You are small and you are in some chair. That's all you know. You can't move and you can't think.

*Start simple.*

Okay. Okay...

You are...you're Chara. Chara Lancaster-Dreemurr-whatever. You're twelve years old. You...you like the color green. Your favorite flowers are golden. You like knitting and reading. You like being safe.

Slowly, the physical attributes of the situation come into play. And then your body begins to sting. Open cuts and bruises pepper your body and seep into the muscles to form the definition of a hurting body. It makes your teeth clench to experience it, but...at least you're using your head.

Okay. What else. What else...

Where are you?

Machine, chair. Strapped down to something.

Machine...

...Oh.

*Oh.*
Okay.

The panic surges into your stomach like a car collision, breaking your trance with a snap of its fingers. Your body becomes your own again with the adrenaline coursing through your exhausted veins and being able to pump pure fear, coursing through your blood.

You're in a hospital gown. No no no you hate these stupid things—

*The machine.*

It sizzles in your ears, and you remember how the static always seemed to entice Miles when you both were traveling through that damn asylum. You didn't understand what was so comforting about it, and you still don't. The high pitch makes your teeth feel raw.

When you're able to depict your situation, the memories come slowly.

*Okay. I'm Chara. I'm twelve years old. I was involved in Project Walrider. I escaped Mount Massive Asylum with an investigative reporter named Miles Upshur. But Murkoff found me. They found me they found me they found me oh god no no no no—*

Your breath comes in sudden hitches, pummeling at your ribs; as if anything couldn't get worse, the area you're trapped in is blinded by a golden light, forcing you to squeeze your eyes shut as engines all around you whirl to life.

Clicks of invisible machinery eventually poke at your instinctive curiosity, and you have to ball your fists and steady your heart rate before you can straighten into your chair and force your eyes to open into the illuminated projection whirring in front of you.

It's a giant screen. Greyscale, humming, furious. The images that follow suit overlap into patterns and flickering butterflies, insects, corpses, fires and alike.

Your limbs begin to throb from the metal straps tying you down, and you think that there are other wires plugged into your body, but...

...You begin to laugh.

*God almighty. Are they actually being serious right now? They think that any sort of software update on their previous engine is going to make you go crazy all of a sudden? It didn't work then, and it sure as hell isn't going to work now.*

You glare at the flitting screenplay and bark the harshest laugh you can, in order to evoke some sort of reaction from whoever the hell is listening.

"You fuckers!" you scream at the kaleidoscope of horror. "You can't do shit to me and you know it!"

The adrenaline rush is energy that saps your fear from your body in a somewhat foolish manner. But for once— for *once*— you want to replace your imminent tears with bitter laughs and mocking smiles. You want them to be staggered and *hurt.*

There's an awful silence that lets your giggles die into the machines. Murkoff can't hurt you. They can't do anything because they've done everything to you already. What else is there to lose? It's not like you have anything to go back to anyway. They should just kill you and spare the trouble.

You watch the butterflies onscreen twist into burning buildings for a moment longer, and that's when the electricity sparks your blood.
It's so sudden that you don't get a breath in your lungs because the next thing you know you're screaming all of the air out of your body. The searing of lightning meeting flesh brings great spasms into your body, and your mind flashes with brutal, bright pictures of everything onscreen but more intense, more painful.

The projection tattoos itself on your eyelids when the electric storm subsides, ebbing into your veins and settling you into a state of paralysis. You breathe, you breathe, and breathe...but you don't cry because you're sick of them seeing you cry.

Your sides heave with the burning pain crackling under your skin, making your muscles shake. But you stand firm, shutting your eyes as the projection in your brain is able to dissolve into sparks of dots, spastic but harmless.

Their plans failed. Again.

The Engine continues to dance along the walls, and the pictures flash along your skin as you attempt to breathe. Everything stings, like you've been strung and twisted internally. But outside of the frothy whine of the projection, there's nothing that accompanies your heavy pants.

It's hard to stop yourself from trembling, but you attempt to assuage any symptoms of fear showing on your quivering skin as a door opens behind you.

The angry stomping of feet stiffens you horribly, because you know that they're mad at you and they can do whatever they want to you. You're alone and helpless, and that can't be prevented, no matter how angry you may be.

Two men are arguing from behind, and you strain your ears to try and listen to their conversation over the Engine's screams.

"...really think it would work, you idiot?" One man is griping to his friend, sounding angry. "Look at her! She's immune as hell!"

"I see that, Patrick," the other sighs, carrying the other's name like it's a burden to even speak it. "I'm more concerned as to why."

"We know why," Patrick presses impatiently. "So let's focus on that objective instead of beating a dead horse here! Christ, am I the only one with common sense?"

"Enough." There's a new voice now, female. The amount of doctors being stuffed into an empty room with you makes your heart pound furiously. "Just get the patient into a cell for now. We'll transport her to Arizona when able, see if they can put that immunity to use as formerly planned."

"Arizona sh!t sh!t sh!t sh!t they can't take me there I'll never see anybody ever again what do I do what do I do—"

You know this is what you wanted. The desire to disappear from everyone's radar as quickly as you came. But this...being abducted by the people who only wish harm upon you is almost an ironic factor in the plan. You could laugh if you weren't still shaking.

The doctors finally make their appearances known when they trail out behind your stifled position on the chair, making you jump. You stiffen your movements under their watchful eyes, unblinking to your distress.

The only woman in the room—the same woman who forced them to sedate you in the first place—steps forward. Her apathy radiates from her sharp appearance and flat expression as she begins to
"Don't be hasty, now," warns a doctor, joining the woman in the attempt to get you out of your wiry chains. You wish that you could escape the moment that they unplugged your legs and arms, but you're not stupid. Failure to run away on previous occasions has only ended awfully.

"There," the doctor concludes, admiring his work. He pulls away as you feel heavy hands attach themselves anonymously to your shoulders, disabling any chance of potential escape that may have been lingering on your mind.

"Ugh," the other doctor grumble, distastefully staring at you. "She's a menace."

She she she she she she she she—

"A menace with a strong brain that holds opportunity," the woman adds, stern. "We can't throw her out into the streets quite yet. That Upshur guy is going to keep fucking us over and we need to get on our backup plan ready to go for when the lid is finally blown, understand?"

Her her her her her her her her—

You're forced away from the chair as the people holding your shoulders steady bring your forward, leading you away from the projection, which has since been shut down ever since the doctors stepped inside your temporary prison. A precaution, you suppose; not a lot of people are immune to Rorschach kaleidoscopes.

"She'll be of use to the Alp Project, don't forget that. She's our only hope."

"They."

Everyone freezes. The guards holding your straight almost loosen their hold on you. Your knees are wobbly, but for once your voice is strong against the tide.

You don't have enough courage to look up at anybody; you know they're mad. Your parents were always mad. They did not raise an 'it'.

Then footsteps approach, and you tense, waiting for the blow. It strikes the crown of your head, making you dizzy. But at least it wasn't any lower than that.

Still. The tears prick your eyes fiercely; you haven't been hit in so long and you've forgotten how much it hurts. You thought you didn't have to do this anymore.

"What did you say, 2000-1?"

You try so hard not to cry, but your gaze is downcast and the pressure in your nostrils and eyes begin to build, and you can't stop the palping heartbeat thrumming your ears.

But you're sick of being a 'she'. You're not a girl. You're not even a boy. And you are most certainly not an 'it'.

"I said," you force your eyes upward to your attacker's own stare as best as you can from this angle. "It's 'they.'"

You wait for the next slap with baited breath, as it usually comes after you've taken a foolish stand. Your mother and father would always be so upset when you talked back to them.

But the hit, oddly enough, never comes. The man appears too interested in your sudden bout of
courage to be intent on slapping you again. Not like the last one isn't still throbbing, though.

Your fear is subsiding into a bravery you don't possess very often, but time away from these bastards have helped you find your own grounding long enough to do so. You just wish that you had been given more time...

The man walks away, uninterested now. "Take her downstairs," he orders, and you deflate upon hearing that your fight for your pronouns was a bust. "We'll call in Lawrence and see if he can conduct any last resort plans before we kick into full Project Alp."

"Sounds good," another doctor agrees, and then you're being dragged away.

You're stiff at first against their tugging, unwilling to be easing anywhere with two guards-slash-scientists dragging you downstairs, whatever that holds in store. And as you descend further into whatever white-walled hellscape you're trapped in, you become more panicked.

The area looks a bit more enclosed than the underground lab at Mount Massive, but it seems complex and calculated in its structure, with clean silver walls and directional maps leading you to areas that you have no clue of their purposes. This similar layout was practiced in Mount Massive, and it sends shivers down your spine at the familiarity.

The guarded courage you'd worn upon facing your attacker has completely dissipated now, replaced with fear. You remember these places, these people who shoves needles and wires into you as they slapped you, called you names, kept trying to make you right and perfect but ended up failing...

You can't do this again.

You pull at the men holding your arms steady, walking you downstairs in a calm posture that makes you even more terrified.

You want to go home.

You want to see Toria and Aegros and Asriel again.

You want to be loved and nurtured and sheltered again.

"Let go of me!" you screech, but your plea falls on deaf ears. You squirm harder, trying to escape, just to run somewhere, anywhere. But your attempts are in vein. They both tighten their grips on your arms quite painfully.

"Leave me alone!" you scream, something hot burning your throat. You writhe with horror, trying to find a solid ground to escape on, but your bare feet slide across the polished tile underneath you. "Let me go! I don't want to go! You're hurting me! Please!"

When they lead you down a series of formulaic corridors, all as white and unwelcoming as the last. You don't realize until you feel the warm liquid sticking to your cheek that you've started crying.

"Please let me go! I promise I won't tell! I promise! Please don't make me go! I wanna go home! I want— I want to go back!"

No one responds, making you scream louder.

"Somebody help me! Please!" you wail, tears streaming from your face.

You're so scared; you never wanted this. You don't care if you deserve it, you never wanted to come
back to this awful place.

They drag you to an opened cell, bright with fluorescent lighting and too white and bland for comfort. Your eyes widen.

You remember your mother slamming the closet door behind you, locking you in the dark for refusing to wear skirts anymore.

You remember the doctors beating you into the wall, forcing you to stay quiet and think about what you've done.

*No no no no please please—*

"*No! Stop it! Don't make me go in there!"*

The men are ignorant, and you're beginning to wonder if you're even screaming at all. Maybe it's all in your head.

Either way, you're thrown onto the unforgiving floor, landing hard on your sensitive right shoulder. But your hear their footsteps retract, and your heart flips as you scramble to your feet.

"*Wait!*"

The door closes. You're alone.

*No no no no no no no no*

You force your body's weight onto the door, punching it with the side of your fist, brutally lost in your reeling mind.

The shadows you're locked in with begin to growl and crawl their way behind you, threatening to swallow you.

You've been bad. You deserve this.

...But it doesn't mean you *want* it.

"*Let me out!*" Your throat is raw and your eyes are stinging but you continue to punch the door blindly. "*Let me out! I'll do better! I promise! I'm sorry!*"

Your actions begin to dissolve into a choking, awful fit. You can't think as you sink to the floor, sobbing and gulping down heaving breaths.

*Think think think—*

"I'm sorry," you sob, leaning your forehead on the resistant door. "I'm sorry. I can be better. I can make it work."

No one unlocks the door.

You crumple to the floor, weariness beginning to sap your whimpers raw. You clutch your abdomen so tightly that you can practically feel your stomach paling.

"*Please...*"

You want Toria. You want Aegros. Hell, you'll take seeing *Miles* again over this.
It's either some omnipotent figure having pity for you, or just the after effects of whatever drugs they injected you with, but either way the lethargic senses drag your body into slumber, letting you temporarily escape your new prison.

The riot first starts when you're stitching together an orange hat, accustomed for your head size since you're the only person you're allowed to take proper measurements upon. You'd enjoy sharing the gifts if you could, so you're trying to stretch out the size of the hat. It could make for a nice present for Eddie. Maybe another kind Variant you'll run into sooner or later.

It's not like you'll be leaving this place anytime soon. Might as well get used to it.

You're locked in your cell, doing your best to tame your breathing and detach your attention from the cramped, window-deprived cell you've been forced into. You miss the fresh air that the upper Female award provided just because of the accessible outdoors, still beyond your reach but close enough to press a hand to the window and sense the tranquility of outside.

It's fine. You're fine. You'll survive as long as you do what they say. As long as you're good.

You're halfway through finishing the cross-stitches of the hat when there's a sudden scream from outside.

You don't pay much attention. Most Variants aren't exactly compliant with being exposed to the Morphogenic Engine. And it's not like you're inaudible either when you're being dragged away into the unknown.

But there are tons of them, following that scream. Garbled, maniacal, almost. An uprising of torment.

You're concerned, of course. A lot of Variants are as harmless as a fly, and those who aren't tend to be either sympathetic of your adolescent age or they ignore you entirely. Most patients here aren't as dangerous as they make themselves out to be.

Certainly you don't want any Variant to be getting hurt.

But then you start to hear doctors talking, rushing past your locked cubicle. Sounding extremely alarmed.

Ultimately, you're becoming way too worried for your anxiety to simmer appropriately. With reluctant tremors escalating down your spine, you place the current knitting project calmly onto your nightstand. You'll get to it later, you decide.

Hesitantly, you knock the door in the manner you would if you were requesting a trip to the restroom.

"Hello?"

Your voice seems lost among the screeches outside that are beginning to make your skin crawl. But you're persistent; you always have been.

Another knock, a bit louder this time.

"Doctor Maverick?"

You just listed one of your multiple physicians off the top of your head, but you're not convinced that
the said doctor is listening. It sounds like nobody is.

The thought of being trapped in a room until you die is something you've been threatened with since childhood. It's a vibrant fear you're accustomed with, but that doesn't make the shaking of your limbs any less wavering.

You slam your fist on the door now, frantic.

"Let me out! What's going on? Hey! Hey, somebody! Open up!"

Nobody comes to the door, and your breathing hitches.

'Next time think twice before speaking, you ignorant brat! Stay in here and think about what you did!'

"Let me out! Let me out, please somebody! I'll be good! I'm sorry! I'm sorry I'll be a good girl! I'll be a good girl please let me out!"

'You're going to need time to think about what you've done, you slob! Sunday mornings are for dresses, not pants! We did not raise a boy!'

"Leave me alone! Let me out I'm sorry please please please!"

'Spend a night alone, Charlotte. We will unlock you tomorrow morning."

"Stop it!!"

You sink to the floor, sobbing now. Your hands won't stop shaking and you want them to leave your thoughts now.

You don't care what's going on outside your cell. You just want to get out of here so, so badly.

Then the door swings open.

You blink at the rapidity of the door being almost whisked off of its frame, and the brutal nature of the action makes you start, expecting an angry yell or slap to follow.

But the avalanche of heartbeats crushing your ribcage dissolve when the only company you seem to have are the lights on the ceiling, bathing the corridor in a flickering red. You realize that the other doors of the cells around you have been snapped away from their framework in a similar matter, all spontaneously.

The fresh splatters of blood along the walls are not appealing, and they reek of a copper scent that makes your nose scrunch reflexively. The pieces of what's occurring click into place as you tentatively step out of your cell, twitching your head this way and that and inspecting the trails of blood along the walls.

Something bad is happening.

You squirm with disgust upon having to walk amongst the floor that shares fresh intestine— which you encounter a good couple of steps into your mission, and you suppress yourself from heaving on the spot at the sight— but you walk forward, alone in the prison block.

The hallways are lifeless as you attempt to find an adult; that's the only thing you can do now, however distrustful adults are. But they'll know what to do, surely.
You peek around corners, only to be greeted with more explicit gore that makes your stomach roil unpleasantly. You let out a meek, "Hello?" but there is no answer.

Something really, really bad is happening.

Your socks provide security among the exposed intestine, and you suppose that you'll take what you can get.

It's as you're counting your blessings do you spot your first corpse.

It appears to be an officer, male (of course). He's been eaten from the inside, it looks like. Not that you have experience with dissecting dead bodies, but it doesn't look like he died in peace. The opposite, in fact; the pool of blood would have taken his life first if his wounds didn't.

This time, you do vomit. You veer away from the body and empty the remaining leftovers of your lunch, trembling as your stomach heaves and you swear to god you can taste blood in your mouth.

You steady yourself as you continue moving forward, refusing to say a final word of mourning to the officer. However fucked up his corpse is, he was with Murkoff. He's not to be grieved for in death.

Caution anchors your footsteps, as you're still heavily oblivious on what's happening and why. The unknown of the situation is what's getting you most, but by the looks of it, you're not sure if the truth holds any more abundance.

And then there are voices.

"What the fuck. What the fuck. Tell me what the fuck is happening." It sounds like a physician, or a Murkoff supervisor. Somebody in charge; they have that tone they continuously carry, despite their rushed syllables.

"Maybe if you calm down, I can try and explain!" Another voice accompanies him, and you freeze at the concept of two Murkoff men alone in a room, close to you. Just around the corner, it sounds like.

"Yeah, I'm sure you have plenty of answers, don't you?" his friend snarls. "Jesus, Alton, what the fuck are we dealing with right now!"

"Keep your voice down!" Alton hushes him, and you shrink to the floor as though you're taking his advice to heart, wary of potential listeners yourself.

"You wanna get your organs eaten, rookie? Then shut up and do as I say or we're both dead."

"It's that Hope kid, isn't it?" His friends seems to ignore Alton's demand, keeping his voice too high-pitched for you to be completely soothed. Something's wrong. Something is really wrong.

"Listen—"

"William Hope! Isn't it? What went wrong? Why is this happening?!"

"Nothing is going wrong," the other presses, sounding impatient. "Kind of, in a sick way...kind of the opposite. The Engine worked."

There's a prickly quiet as the two begin to find even levels in their arguments, and you're left in the dark of whatever the hell is happening.

You remember hearing about the patient Billy Hope a couple of times before. The doctors really
liked him, for some reason; that thought only makes you more distressed.

"Listen, if we can make it to the administration block—"

"Administration block?! That shit's like forty miles away! And not to mention the elevators are probably blocked up!"

"So we'll take the exit stairs, Jesus, where were you during emergency drills? Let's head there, alright?"

"I don't know, Alton..."

Your mind is stuffed with this newfound information, and you soak it in thoroughly, feeling pure willpower force your muscles to strengthen.

Okay. So there are some stairs that will take me to the administration block. From there is an exit I can find. Just find that exit, and everything will be okay. Everything is fine.

You try to recall the specific layout of the administration block, but it's blurred from the mind-fuckery you've been exposed to that drains a lot of duller memories. Not that you mind, of course. But it's still a hassle to get a clear picture of where you need to head now.

It's when you attempt to clear your thoughts and try to exercise your cramped limbs, curled under an abandoned desk, that you realize the two men have stopped talking.

You assume that they left by now, but you hear a scream you can only qualify as one warbled and strained with insanity; the sound emits from the same position the two were standing.

You perk out from your hiding spot, which is your first mistake, because the second you decide to show your face there's a Variant turning to make direct eye contact with you.

His mouth is mangled with teeth and blood as he growls like a rabid animal, and at his feet are two bodies of men dressed in uniform, bleeding out and twitching.

Your eyes widen.

The Variant makes a blood-curdling screech and storms towards you, holding something sharp in his palms. Your legs kick into overdrive as you veer towards the left, escaping down a long hallway.

Your lungs burn but you can feel the patient's breath on your spine, pumping adrenaline through your wearied bones and enabling your youthful energy to be put to good use.

"Mine! Mine!"

You're still not sure what's happening, and the fear is blinding your vision as you swerve to the left and right, avoiding obstacles and making sure your feet just keep running, regardless of your aching throats and chest.

And then you feel yourself tumbling downward. The floor meets the side of your face painfully, making a harsh gasp escape your lungs the minute you contact the unforgiving tiles. You slam into some supply area, blockaded by file cabinets and alike that have been pushed and shoved into the exit door, almost exclusively.

All you know is that the exit sign towers above you, and you panic and sprawl along the floor in an attempt to escape the Variant's upcoming footsteps.
You scream as he unsheathes his weapon and readies to stab it into your body; but the impact of your crash into the supplies seem to have caused the cabinets around you to shake tremendously, and before you can register your upcoming fate a giant cabinet tumbles onto your attacker. There's a sickening snap of bone that makes your insides curl.

All is dead quiet, like a switch was turned the moment that heavy sideboard smashed the man's spine in.

Through your frantic pants of breath, you spot the Variant's head poking out from his metallic grave, with a trail of blood flooding from his mouth and his skull is dented into a crushed corpse, exposing way too much muscle for comfort. His crazed eyes are glossy with death.

You choke back another round of vomiting in order to attempt and squeeze out from your encased haven. The exit is still blocked, and you're too small to climb over the cabinet.

You're trapped. Again. And you still have no clue what's going on.

The hypothesis of something terrible occurring has been unfortunately proven. And by the animalistic manner that Variant tried to attack you, you're beginning to think it's involving the fellow patients.

Your heart sinks. You need to get out.

For hours, it feels, you bang on the cupboards and cabinets locking you inside this tiny prison. The only company being the corpse of your pursuer.

You try and try and try but you can't escape. Can't move. Can't feel anything but the beating of your own heart. The area becomes smaller and smaller.

"Hey!" you scream your throat raw, pleading for help no matter the consequences of the wrong person coming to your aid. You just want to get out because something bad is going on and you don't want to be out or alone anymore you want to get out get out!

You struggled and cried for so long, hopeless in your misery.

"Somebody help! Please!"

But nobody came.

-  

It feels you've been passed out for a good century when you finally come to, but your body still feels drugged with tons of medications and anesthetics in order to get you to properly shut up. A method you're not unfamiliar with; you continuously despise the useless, dripping muscles that make your bones feel like they're tied to a pile of bricks.

Your cheeks are still sticky and you feel the ugly old snot smothering your complexion, so it doesn't seem like you were out for as long as suspected. Either way, you're still exhausted.

You attempt to clear your throat, raw from sobbing and calling out for help that will most likely never come.

The grief hits in choppy waves when you remember where you are.

No, no. Don't plunge into that abysmal train of thought. Start simple.
You breathe shakily.

_You are Chara. I am twelve years old. I will be thirteen in June. I am living with the Dreemurrs. I do not belong in here. I don't belong in here. I don't want to be in here._

—There's a horrendous thud right outside your prison that shakes your core, making you slip away from the locked entrance.

**What the hell—?**

A hard crack of the familiar broken bone makes you shiver, and immediately a dent grows in the door you'd just scooted away from. Evenly-sized; the perfect proportion for a skull that's being crushed to death just outside your doorstep.

You try to gulp, but your saliva has dried and you choke on imminent tears instead.

Immediately the door swings open, like the locks have dissolved into thin air.

You're greeted with a twisted corpse that's been banged into the entrance of your block—which explains the loud crashes, you guess.

But questions are only being raised, and in the place of relief for the sudden opportunity of freedom you feel a hollow thumping.

You remember that dreadful day of the riot. Finding all those mangled bodies. Being alone and trapped more than once—

Stop. Don't think about that. You need to move.

Unfortunately, your self-conscious is right. If you strain your ears, you can hear the waning sounds of alarm, of people rushing around and of frantic conversations. The doctors only cleaned your ears slightly more than the average human, and is nowhere near as capable of a superhuman performance as your night vision.

_Don't be scared. Start simple._

You claw at your thin hospital gown, digging into the fabric so fiercely you think that you hear the hem of the clothing stretch.

_Start simple. Get out._

Finally taking into account your subconscious's words of wisdom, you steady your wobbling knees enough to walk over to the open doorway.

You gingerly step over the body of the dead officer, a security guard from the looks of it. Maybe he had kids. A family.

...It doesn't matter. These people deserve to die.

As you look around the dimmed hallway, you notice the abnormalities of the scene with a sharper instinct that comes with learning to survive with only a limited preparation time. The lights have all been blown out, like there was so much energy poured into their systems that they exploded. All of the similar prison confinements have been snapped open in a similar fashion as yours was. Farther down the corridor, you spot some more disfigured bodies smashed into walls and doorways. One guy even seems to have been dropped from the ceiling and drowns in blood that drops from a broken
light above him.

You can't help but provide the smallest, most feeble, "What the fuck..."

Get out get out something's not right get out.

Your feet begin to move robotically, against your own will and against the pounding of your ribcage. But you allow yourself to walk down the hallway cautiously, looking down at the bleeding bodies around you, like you expect them to jump out and give you a surprise.

What the actual fuck happened here?

The event appears to have occurred recently, and from the previous banging on you prison door, this might have just happened. And maybe you slept through the first half of it.

You think back on the day of the riot, knitting quietly in your confined space to your heart's content, and you suppress a shudder.

Talk about déjà vu...

You bite back the urge to snicker at your instinctive sense of humor at the very, very unfunny situation at hand. What matters is to keep moving.

Everything seems eerily empty now. You're able to find some steps that lead up to...somewhere, you're not sure. But you find more bodies, all looking like they were severely pushed and shoved around until they became damaged beyond repair. Occasionally you spot an organ and gag, because you remember when you were surrounded by vital intestines torn from Variant bellies.

If this was just a dream, just a fucking dream, this would be fine...wake up, Chara, damn it! Wake up!!

You pinch yourself. Nothing.

You steady your heartbeat, or at least attempt to. You try to reason to yourself that you've been through this exact scenario before, and you came out alive. You're fine. Just keep going.

Start simple, Chara. Just don't look at the bodies. And don't laugh, you sick fuck. Just...think. Think! What can you do?

You don't know. You don't know. And it's terrifying you.

You try to tell yourself as you sift through the corpses that it's fine but it's not. God, at least it doesn't feel of anything more than medicine and chemicals. And blood, of course. But the asylum reeked; this smells more pristine.

You walk up the steps and you hear faint screams piercing the air. There are a couple of gunshots and sirens to accompany the background noise as well; none of the sounds are the least bit appealing.

What on earth is going on? You're the only Variant they have, right? You didn't spot any others. What could possibly be putting Murkoff in a hissy fit?

And then, as you venture forward into another maze of white walls, you hear the faded swish of a whisper, familiar and dreadful. Buzzing and black. Misty. Bad.

Your heart stops and you freeze right where you stand.
Walrider.

Oh no. No no no. What's he doing here?

Billy is dead! You killed him and you watched the Walrider die with him! How could he have...?

More screams. More bones torn from sockets and gunfire that is abruptly interrupted.

It's the idiocy of your determination that fuels you to walk forward, despite the horror that all of the atrocities of Mount Massive have followed you here.

You can't think about it. You'll be immobilized, killed, useless. Nothing left to do now. You don't even know where you are!

By chance you encounter a dead officer that grips onto some crowbar, of all things. Seems like the weapon was a last resort, or an impromptu option; his pistol lays limp near his side, probably useless in ammo now.

You frown, glaring down at the weapon with a knot forming in your stomach. You don't like fighting, you really don't. Fighting is for powerful adults that suppress other people with their power, balancing life and death in the palms of their own hands. You haven't earned your position in the ring yet.

But you remember Mount Massive. All the patients that hurt you, choked you and beat you...

...You tell yourself that this is for the best.

You gently remove the crowbar from the officer's lifeless palm, mindful of the stiffened fingers that almost crack as you detach the man's death grip (ha ha).

Kill or be killed.

It still has rusted blood on it. But you'll take used weapons over nothing.

Kill or be killed.

"Jesus...how many floors does this place have?"

You stare dumbfounded at the directional map you've stumbled upon, explaining the layout of the underground lab you've been forced into (not an unfamiliar environment, unfortunately). There's about three stories to this lab, definitely reaching for the same size of Mount Massive but with limited success. Still, the whole area seems clean and too-notch for a secret department below what looks to be a pharmaceutical company. Whatever that means.

At least when you feel your mind reeling into the darkest areas of panic, you begin to feel woozy. Those stupid drugs are still in your system, and you find your steps murky and awkward, like you could fall asleep on your toes in an instant.

But you try to keep pushing forward. That's all that matters, you remind yourself. What's important is getting out.

You heave a sigh, tightening your grip on the crowbar's handle. "Let's see...elevators, emergency stairs..." You guide one finger along the colored paths of the facility, directing you through the lab (albeit poorly). Jeez, do these people not have any stairways to take you immediately to the surface?
You eventually find your current location and your heart deflates with dismay. Seems like you've been imprisoned in the belly of the beast. As usual.

Concealing a groan, you eventually find an administration desk that seems to be the heart of the facility. It will lead you to an elevator that can shoot you right up if you can suck up your fear of elevators for maybe thirty seconds.

Okay. You have a plan. You're still alive. You're going to be fine.

*God,* you wish that were true. You've never felt so exposed and horrified before, but at least the drugs they inserted into you seem to be taking way too much of the edge off the situation, which helps.

You go along your way regardless, minding the corpses. All bashed and broken, all randomly smashed into the area nearest to them and leaking out their fluids and muscles like a sickening pumpkin.

No use for finding astute analogies for the scene. It's pretty disturbing to know that the Walrider is behind this somehow.

*But why is he here?*

A good question. But it needs to be ignored at the moment, in favor of escaping.

You keep your bar at chest-length, trying to look as intimidating as you can when you cross into new corridors and peek into hallways. You've seen cop shows and movies, so you try to mimic their slouched positions and readied weapons and hope that it makes you look dangerous to mess with.

As you get closer to your destination, you notice how much more explicit the murder scenes are becoming. Most seems to have been blown open from the inside, if that's even possible. Their organs are splattered along the hallways; some are decapitated, some are so butchered that you almost cry at the inscriptive gore smeared along their torn limbs and bones.

*Jesus.* *Is the Walrider going to do that to me?*

...Keep moving. Don't look at them anymore. You're so close now.

You've done this by yourself before, and you only had dented soda cans to protect yourself. You'll be okay.

But still. You were so secure with having a partner in crime to assuage the hardships of the journey, and with a sudden pang of hurt comes the inevitable loneliness, swallowing your grief and leaving a shivering little child in its wake.

That's all you are, isn't it?

You luckily reach your destination the moment your thoughts become a bit too negative for your taste.

As expected, the place is abandoned. Computers are cluttered and scraped along the encircling desk placed in the middle of the empty room. The administration block. Pretty fancy, you think, if the blood and bodies were cleaned up.

Obviously this secret lab hasn't been around for a long time, seeing how polished and preen the whole layout appears to be, inexperienced with long-time torment of prisoners or whoever else they
keep here. The equipment seems pretty new, too.

You're not stupid. You knew that Murkoff having their cover blown since the footage of the asylum would only be the top of the iceberg. This place is evil, and littered with bad people. Nobody can expose all of Murkoff's deepest and darkest secrecies within a matter of four months tops.

There's an elevator to your left, and eagerly you approach it. Finally.

When you remember the asylum's elevator spiraling you down into the heart of Project Walrider, you delay pressing the button. But ultimately escape is what's important.

But when you press the button, nothing happens.

You frown, panic rising in your chest.

Again.

Nothing.

"No..."

You press again and again and again—

You try to reason with yourself. Maybe the lights are dead but the system is working. Maybe it's busy. Maybe—

You feel a minute pass and there's no sign that the elevators are even alive. They're clogged, or something.

"Damn it!"

You slam your fist into the wall, busting something by the horribly pang of agony that shoots up your muscles, but you don't care.

You're not going to cry. Big kids don't cry.

Big kids don't cry...

You sniffle. "Damn it..."

Fine, fine. You'll find another way out.

As you depart from your only chance of a solid escape from this god-awful nightmare, you hear it again. The wisps of the Walrider. And he sounds close.

Your heart pounds. You need to leave now.

You race down the hall to your right, away from the administration desk and into the unknown. Anywhere to get away from the fate of encountering the Walrider. Your grip on the crowbar pales your knuckles.

Rounding a corner, you hear somebody running frantically.

In the heat of revolution, you decide that you don't care if it's the dumbest thing you've ever done, you follow the footsteps. You need assistance from somebody because you don't know how reliable a crowbar borrowed from a dead man would be in securing your safety. And if the person is familiar
with this place, then maybe they can help. You can always follow them a safe distance behind if they
don't seem trustworthy; that strategy helped you avoid a lot of tight squeezes back in Mount Massive.

You peek around the corner into the next hallway, curved and pretty futuristic in your opinion. 
Almost like an industrial fallout shelter.

You spot a man rushing down the said corridor, turning sharply. And you swear to god you're
delusional because that man looks exactly like some rugged, alarmed version of—

"Miles?"

The question bounces along the emptied hallway, seeing as whoever it was has rounded the corner.
Still, there's a creeping dread that something is very wrong here.

Your footsteps are hollowed on the tiles as you dare to step into the corridor. The man sounds like
he's frozen in his own steps entirely.

You frown, trying not to have your heart explode from your chest. "Hello?"

Something weird is definitely going on. Maybe it's all in your head and this is some weird hypnotic
experiment pulled by the Engine, you don't know.

But as you're continuing your path down the endless chamber of white, the person comes back into
view, looking ruffled at your call.

You falter in your tracks and blink. Then your brows narrow incredulously, like your mind is pulling
tricks on you.

"Miles?" you repeat.

You barely have time to register the avalanche of questions tumbling through your brain before
you're being swept into a hug faster than you're able to process.

Your heart flips before you recognize the conductor of the action, and you find yourself instinctively
softening.

There's a choked, "Oh my god. Thank Christ..."

The words are interpersed with guilt, with gasps, and with a form of relief that you're alienated to, in
your own bewilderment. Your gown is clutched in fistfuls behind your back. The words repeat like a
mantra, a prayer. Like your wellbeing is a rare treasure, and it's treated at such in his arms.

It's him. It's definitely him.

The lagging of your bones begin to fully sink in, making you collapse into his tight hold, even if you
don't want to. You don't want to be held, you don't like this anymore—

Luckily he pulls away, only to immediately cup your face and grasp onto it like a lifeline.

"Did they hurt you?" Miles presses urgently, and he sounds so distressed and relieved at the same
time that you're beginning to grow even more dumbfounded.

And then his eyes snap into something darker, more dangerous. "If they hurt you, I swear to fucking
Christ—"

His anger isn't directed towards you, but it's enough to have you able to snap out of it and wriggle
out of his grasp.

You step away, remembering the crowbar weighing heavily in your hand.

"I'm fine," you snap, then a bit more sternly, "Miles, what are you doing here? How did you—"

The mixed signals of the scene are causing a thousand questions to race along your train of thought within the span of seconds. You only fortify your glare at him.

Doesn't he remember? He doesn't want you anymore...

"No, just listen," Miles interrupts quickly, sounding like he has no clue what the hell he's on about, eyes darting every which way. "Okay. Okay, I'm gonna get us out of here, alright?"

You're barely listening. "What are you even—?"

"No. Listen. I saw an exit and I traced my steps. Just follow me, okay?"

You hesitate, giving only a darkened gaze at the man who threw you out of his life.

"What are you doing here, Miles," you repeat, but your tone is frothy and brittle.

You wish you were relieved to see him. You wish you could be thinking about other things rather than how furious you are with him. You wish that the alleviation of the circumstance wasn't found in the visible wince of Miles's face when you ask the question and provide a bristling atmosphere.

At least someone between you is attempting to think with a clear head. It's Miles that admits weakly, "Look, I'll...explain things later. I promise. Just...fuck. Fuck, just—just come with me, okay? Please."

He attempts to grab for your hand, but you snatch away the access he may be able to have for touching or hugging you again. You find that sort of comfort in having a weapon at your side more than anything.

"Kid. We have to go. Now." This time, Miles sounds testy. You know you're pushing too many buttons.

You sigh, glaring at the floor. "Where are we going."

He loosens his shoulders only slightly at your reluctant compliance. "Upstairs. Maybe if we take the elevators—"

"Elevators are dead," you interject.

You're surprised to hear Miles sigh a muttered, "Oh, thank god" at the deactivated elevator system, therefore killing off his original plan. You didn't realize he'd be hesitant to step into one, but now is not the time for interrogation.

"Fine. We'll take the stairs. I mean—I think most aren't locked off, and if they are, we'll just— fuck, blow them up or something. I don't know."

As he's talking, you realize how odd Miles is behaving; he has this somewhat calm demeanor about himself, yet seeming unhinged, which is quite the conglomerate of emotions to be enabling at the moment. Not only that, but he's exceptionally pale. Like, translucent pale. You swear you can see the dark, sharp shadow of veins crisscrossing his visible features. And he looks slick with sweat; maybe from running, you decide.
There's no more time to dawdle. You both simultaneously decide to just keep walking forward. Nothing else to do or say.

In a burst of rebellion, you surge forward in order to mark your own path. Miles appears to protest, and you catch him reaching out to halt you.

"Hold on—"

You spin around, facing him. "What."

He stumbles at your severity, and you try so hard not to be guilty. He came here for you, why else would he have approached this hellhole?

You can't understand.

You're even more offput when he murmurs, "...I'm glad you're okay."

Is that meant to atone for what's happened? What will never be fixed?

Miles ventures hastily, "Look. I...didn't mean to— I shouldn't have— it's complicated, alright? And you...you shouldn't...—"

There's a vicious slam above you both and the misted warbling of the Walrider is heard, along with detached screams.

The intensity of the situation is regained, and in an effort to get moving you try to open your mouth to lie and say that it's all okay now. But you stop when you see Miles suddenly hunch over, clutching his sides and breathing hard.

He looks really sick and discomposed, like he's transformed into a panting and sweating mess with the snap of his fingers. You notice his nose is bleeding.

Despite your inner conflict, you creep forward, concerned. "Whoa, are you okay—?

"Yeah. Yeah. Just. Hold on." The reassurance comes out disjointed, defeating the purpose of the argument. For a brief second, you swear you see Miles's form almost flickering into a grayish hue.

...You're hallucinating. That damn Walrider is getting to you.

"Alright." Eventually Miles straightens his posture, snorting away the blood on his face—along with some weird liquid dripping out of his sockets that you're not sure identify as tears. "Let's—"

"Yeah."

You both start running again, with you still in the lead with your handy crowbar. You just need to be anywhere but here, that's all you know.

Above you, the Walrider continues to unleash chaos upon its victims, charging your speed.

Get out.

-

Every now and then you'll hear Miles behind you, muttering nonsense to himself. The more you look back at him, the sicker he seems to appear. More fluid is spilled from his face that he's desperate to clean up, and at first you're unnerved to see the dark blood streaming from his eye sockets.
You keep asking if he's okay. He says yes.

"Fucking..." You don't comment as Miles continues to mumble like a madman behind you. Almost like he's communicating with someone. "Damn thing. Can't control it... Thought I could—"

Another bang from upstairs and another heavy groan from your companion.

You can't take much more of this. However **reluctantly** grateful you may be for Miles coming to your aid and attempting to get you out (how he knew where you were is still a mystery), you're beginning to view his constant babbling and odd condition as more of a hindrance.

"Miles, we have to keep moving," you urge, almost rushing to his side to help his fumbling steps but stopping yourself. "The Walrider—"

"I know," he gasps, between aching moans. "I know. It won't...it won't hurt us."

You cock a brow. You're about to put your crowbar to good use and whack some sense into this man. "Right, and I'm Ferris Bueller."

You dart your gaze around your environment, still distrustful of the clean-cut, industrial lab. The place is still empty, but the Walrider is pretty capable at appearing at the worst times.

Miles just lets out a shaky sigh and moves forward, attempting to match your pace.

"Okay... there's an exit door to our...to our left. Head down there."

However hesitant of himself he sounds, you don't really have a choice. You'll take any directions, so long as you're heading at least somewhere that's upwards rather than down, which seems to be the case.

You restrain yourself from assisting Miles any further, since he's obviously going a little bit too crazy for your liking. You're still not fully understanding how he even figured out where you were, or why he bothered to come back for you in the first place.

Lo and behold, there is an exit door once you've both scrambled your way into, only leading to more endless loops and hallways.

"Their definition of an 'exit' door is rather different than mine," you remark, in the saddest attempt to lighten an icy atmosphere.

Miles doesn't even seem to hear you; he looks like he's either going to burst out crying or throw up. Maybe both.

There's another unchained wail from the Walrider up ahead, and you backtrack your footsteps without even realizing. You raise the weapon you're holding to your chest and grip it with both hands, foolishly ready to fight the nanotechnology-driven beast.

A hand gently nudges you forward, making you flinch and jump out of the way to avoid the contact. You glare at him ungratefully.

Miles just gives another wet pant of breath before murmuring softly, "Not gonna hurt us. Promise."

*He's crazy.*

...But he's all you have. You hate to say that you've missed him. And he's the adult in the situation, he's logical. Being a bad person kind of comes with the contract of being an adult, so you're out of
Still. You're used to being bitter, and you continue to do so by purposely avoiding Miles's efforts of comfort in hopes that it stings a little.

His position continues to remain unnatural, and the pulsing sensation of escaping just to be free of Murkoff grunts has deteriorated into staying free from any more of Miles's nonsensical ramblings to himself. You're not fond of the way his facial structure is sharpened and dark, no matter the differential ambience of the rooms you encounter. Something is wrong, but you can't think about that. Not now, at least.

You can't help but provide a frown stacked with pity as you recall a similar time of silence between you both. Running for your lives, similar to now, but trapped in a clogged sewer.

You'd asked, 'Miles, why did you come here?'

You wonder this now. You're beginning to realize that his answer never truly satisfied you.

Why did he come there? Was it foolishness? Was it fate?

—Don't go there now.

A guttural screech of wires and machinery cuts through the quiet like gunfire, and you whirl around as you come face-to-face with a large garage that you'd expect heavy military equipment to be kept in. But the place is empty.

Black mist travels between your legs, gathering near the center of the lot, and you whirl around to face Miles and warn him that it's time to run if you value your life but—

His face is clenched horribly, and the liquid from his sockets that you'd first associated with thick tears are unmistakably black, or at least a very dark color. Both nostrils are bleeding and the droplets of red splash onto the white fabric of his tee.

Most noticeably are how dark and inky the aforementioned shadows crossing his face are, and at first you excuse this for the constant writhing of pain contorting his snarl. But now... you're not sure. You find yourself stepping backward, into the belly of the military's core, to avoid him.

You find your voice, eventually. "Miles..."

Whatever you planned on forming into a sound statement is cut off abruptly by the clicking of guns and thousands of firm voices calling out.

You both twist around defensively, searching for the point location of the threat, but so many men and women armed with uniforms and weaponry have absorbed any logic remaining on your attention span. Your thought process grows primal.

They found us they found us they're going to take us back take us away they're going to hurt us hurt us hurt us for running away no no no no please—

"Freeze!"

Multiple commands are shot into your ears, all strung together into a similar, desperate message of surrender; and with time you and Miles are both cornered in the center of the hellscape. Outside of the opening bay doors, you're introduced to more helicopters and police cars and army trunks, their sirens of warning stinging your ears so badly that you square your jaw
"Drop your weapon immediately, miss!" The order is directed to you from an officer, coated with medallions that elevate his status to onlookers. He's pointing his gun at your chest, and his gaze is set.

Yet you hesitate, a gulp burrowed in the back of your throat and hot tears attempting to leak from your watery vision.

You should have stayed out. You should have done as told. You're such a silly, misbehaving little creature, aren't you?

The same woman as before, with the shortened, blonde haircut, steps forward. Amidst the chaos, you somehow hear her heels clacking.

"Pauline—" one of her own men attempts to stop the woman, but is silenced.

You feel hundred— maybe even thousands—of guns aimed at your heart, and the pumping of blood through your body increases dramatically.

You don't want to die here.

"Charlotte," Pauline says, your dead name nothing but a hollow ache in your thumping chest. "Hand over the crowbar."

You only find your hands clutching the bar fiercely, like losing it would be the equivalence of losing an arm.

"I will not ask again."

You don't respond. Instead you look to the floor; your naked toes curl into the tile.

"...Very well."

Pauline steps away, seemingly discarding her demands as she heads back towards the hundreds of soldiers at her command, waiting to pull the trigger.

You lean farther away from your captors— still acutely aware of the thousands of other eyes pinned to your every movement from behind— when your spine brushes along the fabric of a familiar fabric, a familiar structure.

You peer slowly over your shoulder, mindful of sudden movements that may cause the gunshots to commence in a haze. But at least, if that were the case, you could be shot down while leaning your back against Miles Upshur. Supposedly that should be some sort of reassurance.

Unlike your own feebly posture, loose with horror, his stance remains firm. Like he can withstand all the traumas the encircling force will equip on you both if nothing gives. You don't notice the humming fog that has followed you into the room until you hear mumbled complaints among the band of armed Murkoff men, and you realize that if the mist is an illusion, then everyone else has gone equally bat-shit nuts. Which is somewhat comforting.

You find your crowbar being brought up to your face, almost to strike away the bullets that are soon to be piercing into your body any time now. Pauline looks impatient in the quiet words exchanged with a fellow officer. The sirens outside continue to blare.

And then you hear a: "Kid, close your eyes."

You have to strain all the muscles in your neckline in order to prevent yourself from turning back to
Miles again, dumbfounded.

Did you hear that right? "W-wait, wh—"

"Don't open them until I tell you to," he continues, unfazed by your confusion and almost sounding...calm. He's awash in the adrenaline so much that he's lost all fear, seemingly. "I promise everything is okay. Just...don't look."

"Look at what?" you snap, hissing through teeth in a senile practice in keeping your voice down. The guns are clicking to life now, ready to strike when the command to kill is delivered.

You hear a distant whine of a mechanical being, a tongue disowned by humanity. The Walrider.

He's here.

The appearance of something more deadly than a child with a metal stick within the premises instantly wavers the attention of Murkoff's men. You hear a distant, "The hell...?"

"Don't look!"

You squeeze your eyes shut the moment Miles's frenzied demand is spoken amongst the chaos, and you hear the second you carry out the orders that all hell breaks loose.

You hear ear-splitting wails from the soldiers as they're torn limb from limb. You hear the vehicles outside whirring into life, frantic, before the coils of dissonance seem to approach their doorstep and the violent twisting of metal and bone is combined into a gut-twisting cacophony.

There's no way you're going to stand here as the events occur. Miles has lost his shit, that's official; he's telling you now that if you close your eyes, maybe the Walrider won't hurt you? Like this is all some childish banter meant for laughs?

'The Walrider won't come near his Host,' he'd told you, a long time ago. 'If you stay hidden near Billy, he won't hurt you.'

...You refuse to play this game. Miles has gone off the rails and you're not going to appease to his wishes for his own enjoyment any longer.

With hesitance, admittedly, you force your eyes to gaze upon the chaos swirling around you, almost in a slower timeline than your own, distant and unreal.

You watch with paralyzed dismay as the fluids and viscera are painted along the streamlined walls, melding into the current agonies of the still-living. Scraps from destroyed cars are scattered along the floor, but the severed chorus of automobiles in the background assure you that the area is still heavily under attack.

You need to run.

Screw Miles. You're not sitting here on death row and waiting your turn for the Walrider to tear open your insides.

The fluid rushing of adrenaline seeps back into your wearied bones, and through your fear you're able to identify the growing lethargy slowing your thought process.

Damn drugs. You're about to pass out at any second from the stress that's waning on the medication in your system. You don't have a lot of time before you're in danger of passing out on the spot.
Your legs recover from their state of awe at the explicit scenery, and you're able to run again.

You race into the storm, attempting to find solid footing amongst the wind, obviously summoned by the nanos that slam into bodies and walls and ruin everything they're able to fly into. The form of the Walrider, from what you've seen, is fairly dispatched, but there are occasions where its more...human-like features are shown. But you're assuming that the blackened, humming swarm sailing into nearby cars and corpses and withering away at everything in sight is the Walrider's being through and through.

Oddly enough, as you wade through the violent typhoon of nano-clouds and screaming static, emitted from a science experiment gone too far, you realize that none of the swarm is really aimed for you.

Not that you're complaining, of course; you do encounter a bit of the festering mist that scrapes too harshly at your heel or bites at your exposed limbs, but overall no purposeful intent of killing you is ever performed. You almost cease your actions in getting towards the exit doors ahead, just to test the theory that you're invincible to the weathering black aura. But naturally you decide that it's not worth it, and so you trudge forward, despite your stinging calves and tugging sleepiness. Rest can wait.

And then, just as you're a couple of feet away from escape, you're halted by a translucent figure towering over you.

You watch with icy blood running through your veins as the skeletal being begins to take a full form, exposing a humanoid stature that is deprived of eyes or a face. The sharp electrical wiring placated in the areas where eyelids should reside are pulsing with programmed activation. It stares into your soul, dissolving your confidence and any remaining symptoms of bravery as it begins to emit horror onto its newest captor.

*The Walrider...*

You've locked eye contact with the Walrider.

You can't even gulp, and the endorphins that drove your body forward in the midst of panic have vanished from your body. Every drop of courage you may have carried is gone, leaving you helpless as your lower lip quivers uncontrollably.

It stares, waiting for something. Perhaps teasing you of its presence. But no effort of advancing towards you is made.

You dare to blink at the delayed torture, letting a few overwhelming tears spill onto your dirtied cheeks.

*What the...?*

It's like the damn thing is in lockdown. It waits patiently, eyeing your movements and making you shuffle under the eyeless glare of your future killer. Around you, the death tolls continues to rise, and more debris is crashed and strewn about through the foggy hurricane.

You almost dare the Walrider to do something. *Kill me! I know you want to!*

If it's capable of telepathy, you're not spotting any signs of such. Yet the glowering figure does not falter in its position a smidge, leaving the exit door blocked.

And yet it stares, ever-present, unmoving.
You're beginning to grow frustrated, rather than fearful (although your anxiety levels are still way too high for your head to be free of the dizzying migraine of stress and drugs). You're about to leave, and instead of killing you like the others, this is when the Walrider decides to have fun with its victims? Unbelievable.

You force your voice to steady as much as possible. You say to the demon, "Let me go."

As expected, there is no response. The Walrider is persistent in keeping you locked in its storm.

Irritation begins to bubble within your stomach; you're finally close to freedom, and you're just going to stand here while people are dying around you? Why isn't it hurting you?

"What do you want?!" you scream at it, feeling tears boil in your eyes. "What are you waiting for? Kill me already! Do something!"

There is only the ambience of discord around you to answer your question. Not even a confused cock of the head from the Walrider to explain itself.

The vague sense of dread begins to imprint itself on your heart when you remember with a pang that you have a partner that you'd forgotten.

Oh no. Miles...

You spin around, calling his name as thousands are ripped to shreds by the wandering nanites. Despite the deity of the storm remaining civil and unbending, the mayhem continues.

There's so much blood and bone that you're practically drowning in it, and you suffocate your senses as you try to scope out the only person you care about. The only person that shouldn't be maimed so brutally, like those around you.

"Miles!"

No response. At least, not that you can decipher. The foreground is too heavy with commotion.

No, he can't be...

You wander away from the Walrider, taciturn now to its means of keeping you imprisoned. That doesn't matter anymore.

"Miles! Where are you!"

Your voice is lost to the swarm and the voices of the damned.

And then you spot something that makes you freeze in horror, your feet heavy on the blood-stained tile.

There's a man standing in the eye of the storm, his posture unyielding to the Walrider's attack. His figure is cloaked with grey shadows, gleaning the corded muscles highlighted in the dark like silver brush strokes.

The nanites...they're emitting from him.

Billy?

You'd step forward again, despite the stiffening throb in your head caused from the damn analgesia. And by some cruel, ungodly coincidence, the man turns the same time that you attempt to catch a
glimpse of his face.

You wish you hadn't.

No...

The minute you lock gazes, Miles's face drops, and his mouth opens like he wants to have some steady excuse for bleeding black from his eyes and mouth and being coated with smoke.

You just remember the being that tore into his guts the moment you flipped off Billy's life support...

You don't recall ever hearing from Murkoff staff that they ever contained the Walrider...

Oh, god. That's why...

It's surprising how this overwhelming realization is the key to properly enacting the medication and having you slip into unconsciousness as easily as the blink of an eye.

You drift forward, watching the world smear into nothingness as oily hands reach for you.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter name taken from this prose post by tumblr user inkskinned

Epitaph from the novel "A Beating Heart Beneath the Floorboards" by Anna Corniffe
we are both made of the same danger, but made of realities we can't run away from

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Eventually you're able to squeeze past the tumbled cabinets, locking you from freedom (or however loose the definition of 'freedom' should be upheld) and you have to take a moment to soothe the compressed ribcage you had to bruise.

The deadened legs of the Variant you'd been trapped with are splayed behind the heavy cupboard he'd been snapped down by. You can only be grateful for so much in this god-awful building, and you try to be scathing in humor amidst an awful tragedy, just to ensure the corpse of your pursuer that you're still alive, son of a bitch.

Nothing comes but a rotten taste in your mouth. So you leave without final wording.

You wander aimlessly through areas, formerly restricted, attempting to find someone—or something—that could explain the odd phenomenon that's occurring. All the while, you attempt to maintain accord as your heart frantically pounds against your chest. You force your shaking hands to settle; no one should ever know when you're growing scared or upset, or else they will hurt you even more.

The sharp agility you've gained from years of dodging beatings and bullies seem to have paid off as you encounter more suspicious people through your travels. Some are remaining Murkoff men, others are Variants—bloodied, mangled mental patients that appear to be either burnt, bloated, or butchered.

You don't understand. There have been more than several incidents where the Engine scraped at a patient's skin, sure, but never to this degree. They almost look like the undead now, traveling with fanged smirks and limbs stained with blood and fluid. Their eyes aren't exactly pleasant to scour, either.

But most aren’t much hassle, at least, so long as you know where to hide. The Variants don't seem intent on practicing any sort of logical strategy on their victims; rather, it appears that if you're in the wrong place at the wrong time, you're fucked. Which seems to be growing more common, the more you travel farther into Murkoff's hellish corporation, searching for escape.

You're used to distracting enemies; back in school, those kids would always trail off and lose interest if you threw one of your shoes or any other decent object in the opposite direction of your hiding spot. The reliability of that tactic waned at times, but in here it seems to be enough. For now, at least.

Despite how confident you try and paint yourself, there can only be so many instances where your anxiety is pacified before you feel your breath shortening, and you begin to creep into the depths of a panic attack. You still don't know what's happening; the patients you've been surrounded with were perhaps violent to a degree—at best, if given that—but never like this! You don't recall ever having to witness a man digesting human organs, or brutally slamming his own head into walls until you think you see brain.

They were always so reserved, dare you say gentle. Why is this happening?

And why isn't it affecting you?
Oh, yeah. Because you’re the fucking ‘special one’, aren’t you? The token patient, immune to the treatment.

The Morphogenic Engine.

But why has it gone awry? And why now?

You’re cramped underneath a bed, hiding from potential predators, so maybe now isn’t the time to reflect on getting conclusions for your theory. This is already too bewildering as is. Getting out of this damn building unscathed is top priority.

Eventually the suspected footsteps reside from their placement in the abandoned office you’re crouched under. The routinely mumbling, vaguely heard from the Variant, is gone as well.

Now’s the time to bolt.

So you do just that, running with a small, metallic item you’d snatched off the floor as a backup, in case he hears you and decides to chase you down.

You scramble down the administrative corridor, attempting to try and find some sight of direction because you’ve never realized how fucking huge this place is.

And then you slam headfirst into the man you’d been running from.

You both topple over the other quite messily, and you’re surprised that your organs haven’t imploded on themselves due to the freezing terror that makes your body double-take itself entirely. Your senses are heightened to the extreme and oh god—

He’s raising for his handmade weapon and is about to strike you down no no no—

It can’t end like this—!

And, surprisingly, it doesn’t.

Your body is still stiff, horror rolling around in your gut, as you’re sprawled on the floor and instinctively raising your arms over your face and chest to protect them from the worst blows.

But all is silent.

It’s the bafflement on the delay of the beating that makes you perk up, and you see that the Variant is staring at you like you’re the complication.

He cocks a brow, but that doesn’t normalize the stuttering of his jaw, the twitching of his bloodshot eyes.

You’re about to catch your breath but the air is hitched in your lungs once more when he whispers, “Small.”

You stop. Confused. Terrified.

"W-what?"

The Variant claws one deformed hand into the arm holding the machete, scratching at the veins absentmindedly. His pupils twitch madly but overall his stature is docile.

"Small," he says again, voice raspy and tilted with insanity. "Too small. Too small. Can't be..."
shouldn't be... small."

It takes a moment for you to realize that he's talking about you.

"I—" your voice chips into a squeak, and you swear that something awfully close to concern crosses the man's features. You find yourself able to scramble to your feet.

He backs away. "Small..."

"Y-yeah," you stammer, espousing false bravery. "Yeah, I am. I'm looking for—"

He steps forward again aggressively, and you back away with a flinch that makes another short squeak of fear erupt from your throat.

"Can't be here!" he repeats again, and he sounds like he's angry but his gaze is too cloudy to ensure that he's mad at you, in particular. "Bad men! Bad men they'll... hurt you. They hurt men. They... don't like smalls. Don't like them."

Your mouth is agape, trying to find something reasonable to say, but his stern posture only directs your eye to the machete, still in his grip.

"Hurt you," he murmurs gruffly, then makes a gesture with his hands like he's motioning you forward. "Won't let them. Too small."

Is this guy trying to help?

You walk towards him, throwing all the caution to the wind for this one patient who's not intent on killing you this exact moment. In which case, you probably deserve it if, at this very moment, he decides to decapitate you or eat your throat out or something.

But he doesn't, instead continuing to mumble about how small you are. And, in all honesty, you never thought about that until now.

You never stopped to think how truly fucked up it is that you've never spotted any other child in the facility. Never stopped to think about how your birth body was the only one of its kind left anymore, since they were in the process of transporting females elsewhere when you'd first arrived. Which sucks.

This sucks.

"Small," the man prompts you to a caged door, blocking off a stairway leading downward. "Saw men go there. Bad men. They know out."

The concept of getting out is pleasant, of course, but the departing tone the Variant has applied to his statement is...quite upsetting, if you're honest with yourself. You're well aware that Murkoff isn't picky in scraping out the "smalls" in their projects, and to be descending into a new gateway of hell, alone, with only Murkoff employees' footsteps to follow, it's quite harrowing.

You whisk around to the man. "Come with me."

He stares at you blankly, never blinking, and never twitching with recognition either.

The hollowing gap of the loneliness you've been suppressing since Sonya's departure reopens tremendously, making your chest physically hurt at the thought of taking one more step in this building without having someone with you.
You're confused. You're lost. You're scared. And, yes, you're small; you're a *kid*. Doesn't that mean anything?

"Please," you persist, desperate. "I'm...I'm scared to go down there...alone. I—I want to make sure...that..."

And then you think outside yourself, miraculously, to ponder on the Variant in question. *He's alone too, isn't he?* You both can go together; you could get out and be free of Murkoff's clutches. And you'd both have someone to have your back, in a place that seems to be crumbling apart with every moment that passes.

But the man doesn't budge. He reaches out, and at first you shy away from the touch before he places a tame hand on your head, mimicking a pat.

"Small. Too small. Leave."

And then he walks away, continuously mumbling to himself about something or another, occasionally blubbering the word "small" as well.

You feel emptiness claw at your stomach as he disappears behind a corner. Once again, you're left alone, to fend off the monsters in the dark.

But you try to look at it in a different light: the guy could have *easily* killed you, but he didn't.

Surely there are some Variants that managed to keep their sanity, right? He can't be the only one. He shouldn't be the only person in this building with any speck of morality left in him.

You sigh, almost longingly, as you trail down the stairs, alone again, wishing for company. But, you try to be grateful in areas that you can be:

*I guess some people in here aren't so bad...*

- 

You wake to a softly-throbbing headache, due to the immense chemicals injected into your veins much more than necessary. Weariness burdens your bones as you attempt to wake, fluttering your eyes open ever so slightly.

Your mind catches up to your body a smidge too short, because you remember with an inner jolt that you've just fallen unconscious in the middle of the Walrider's rage.

*The Walrider...*

You perk up, and in the process you can't prevent an achy groan from escaping your rasped throat.

But as you adjust your vision to the sights around you, you begin to realize that the blurry environment isn't familiar. This isn't the same location you passed out in; the humming movement below your curled feet indicates that you're in a car.

There's a weight that presses uncomfortably against your neck, and it takes a moment for you to recognize that you're buckled to a car seat.

The faint beating of your heart has doubled as you fail to recognize where you are, unable to move much without a sore aftermath, whilst failing to interpret the smeared atmosphere around you with squinted eyes. The headache only drums into your brain further.
Then, a distant voice accompanies the supposed engine of the car, filling the ambience:

"Oh hey, you're awake. Thank goodness."

The person sounds pleased with your awakening, but the tone is a bit strained, perhaps even rehearsed. The stiff undercurrent only adds to your increasing stress levels.

You sit up straighter, perhaps from foolishness or carelessness; but it's not like your captor isn't already aware that you're not sleeping anymore, so there's no need to pretend. You adjust from your formerly-fetal position on the edge of the car's door, leaning so heavily against the seat and buckle that you're certain the pressure of the bedding left unhappy marks along your skin.

A new pain flickers among your body, and you stoop down to manually observe the multiple cuts and bruises battering your frame. The hospital gown you're still wearing is dirtied and torn at the hems.

The person speaks again: "Be careful. I'm guessing you're a bit dazed from the anesthesia. Just relax, okay?"

Wait, where am I now?

Identifying your new captor is first on the list of things to do. Still having trouble linking your actions to emotions, since you're running at an almost robotic pace now, you face your attacker.

You're even more confused than relieved to see Miles behind the wheel of the car you're sitting in, unable to properly skim his features for signs of a threat since your vision is still questionable. But you can notice that he's gripping the wheel very tightly, almost making the grasp of his knuckles look highly uncomfortable.

You remember with a flash the maimed soldiers, the nano-flavored beast that tore into the bodies...

With a painful start in your spine, you adjust yourself upright, grumbling at the bruises that decide to make themselves known throughout your skin as you attempt to stretch.

You're buckled into a car, as suspected, and when you look around as best you're able you can see that you're driving in some desert, alone and abandoned.

Alone...

With the host of...

Immediately you turn to Miles, who you think is asking if you're alright but you ignore him as you pummel your heel into his side with abrupt force.

He lets out a shocked, "Ow!" as the car dangerously swerves along the empty road, emitting an awful screech that helps you snap some areas of your brain back to life.

You stifle your inner cowardice as Miles eventually regains control of the wheel and has time to give you a glare at having his ribs kicked.

"Kid, what the hell?!!"

Your anger returns, in place of betrayal. You glower right back, pleased to see a flicker of withdrawal across your captor's eyes.

"Don't 'kid' me, buddy!" you retort sharply, watching as Miles flinches at the words. "You better tell
me what the fuck was up with the Walrider back there!"

The instant reluctance clams his mouth shut, and his muscles seem to ripple under clothing with defense. You find nothing in your heart left for him but fury. Fury because he kept something from you— is still keeping something from you!

You bristle. "What? You think I didn't see? You think—"

"I know you saw," Miles interrupts, and you notice, through his sharpened voice screaming discomfort on the subject, that he's looking quite pale. "That's the problem."

"Oh, so that's the problem now, is it?" you seethe, fuming at the words. He cannot be serious. "How curious! I suppose that the whole 'being the Walrider's new host' is just water under the bridge, yeah?"

You see Miles gritting his teeth as his gaze darkens, but there's not a drop of reciprocating wrath you feel directed towards yourself, and the atmosphere smells of suppressed fear from your captor. He doesn't dare to look at you.

And of course, you're going to use this opportunity to your advantage.

"So let me get this straight. You're now in the place of Billy Hope, and instead of telling me, you threw me away like garbage?!"

"I didn't 'throw you away'!" Miles bursts out, still firm in his wording and you still your tongue momentarily. "What? You think I was supposed to just tell you? You think that was the right thing for me to do?"

"Well, why didn't you!"

"Because—!"

Then he stops, looking uncertain of his next wording. The continual silence swallows any sort of reasonable argument and he just murmurs, "...Because."

He sounds really helpless— desperate, almost—to have you understand his actions.

But you ignore Miles's vivid hurt on the subject, because in the moment you remember Billy Hope. He was so, so angry at Murkoff's abuse, and although you know so little, you know that the anger drove him to become a destructive host for the Walrider.

You think of him now as you stare down Miles Upshur, the new host. It can't click automatically; both Billy and Miles seem to share an equal hatred for Murkoff, but from the reports you've heard, Billy seemed more soft-spoken.

A cynical and furious host does not a stable Walrider make.

"Do you even know why it happened?" you ask, dropping the subject instantly and instead finding yourself feeling even more hurt and betrayed.

Miles doesn't look at you as he mutters, "I don't know."

Automatically, you know you're touching a bruise that you should have never acknowledged. But it's too late now; you're angry, and you're going to force more answers out of him regardless.

So you reach out and jab at his side again, earning you another howl of protest.
"You have to know!" you exclaim, aware that you're gnawing at wounds. "How did the Walrider—why did—how—"

"I don't know!" Miles screams again, and this time his eyes glint with a dangerous light that makes you immediately regret probing him—both literally and allegorically.

He continues, fluent in his exasperated gestures. "I just don't! Okay? I don't know why the fuck that thing chose me! I don't know why I can't remember anything or why I—decided to just ignore you! Or whatever the fuck! I don't!"

"Oh, don't give me that!" you scoff, unreasonably rolling your eyes as if Miles Upshur is the dumbest man you've ever come across just because he doesn't know how to resolve an impossible problem. "You were ignoring me because you're a selfish asshole!"

"I was not! I was trying to protect you!"

You try to prod his ribs again, but he shies away from your contact just in time, swerving the car again in the process.

"Stop that!" Miles snaps, sounding more exasperated than anything. "What the fuck do you want me to say?!"

"I don't know! Just some sort of answer, I guess!"

"Well, then we're both out of luck because I have no clue what to tell you other than we're fucked!"

"Great!"

"Fine!"

You flip over to glare out the window in a troubled huff whilst Miles goes deadly silent. Admittedly, you're both acting a bit...immature, for the time being. But the frustration that's bubbling in your gut has to have some sort of direction on where to target itself, and the fact that neither of you are being the knowledgeable voice of reason is just making you even more antsy.

Through the clouded anger, you hadn't the time to reflect on where exactly you're driving to. Outside is just a lonely, bland desert, and when you look out into every direction you're able you see that the landscape is covered with nothing but sand and the occasional band of rocks. There's a smoky figure of a couple of canyons—maybe just hills, you're not sure—out in the distance, clearly unattainable.

In spite of your argument, you have to look over at the person who might know a bit more on your current location. "Where even are we?"

Miles doesn't hesitate, his voice derived of any irritation that might have lingered from the slight altercation. "Somewhere in Wyoming."

You start. "Wyoming? How did we get all the way out here?"

"Long drive."

You're about to pester further because how the hell did you travel all the way out to Wyoming's desert while you were unconscious but you stop when you turn and remark to yourself that Miles looks completely ruffled. Anything you were about to say dies in your mouth and you swallow it distastefully as Miles continues to clutch the wheel like a lifeline and make it some sort of private goal not to turn and look at you.
You've noticed this before, but again, he looks exhausted. A twinge of sympathy ticks in your heart when you realize that coping with the Walrider's violent tendencies—on a regular basis, mindfully—probably takes up way too much of his energy. Sapping him of the dominant bravery he upheld back when you were still trying to escape Mount Massive.

Despite this, you test the waters of his sanity with an inquisitive, "You're not...going to kill me, right?"

You'd think that normally, Miles might be amused at the question. But this time, it only seems more grating on his temperament.

He exhales sharply, "I'm not going to kill you, Christ. You think if I was planning on murdering you, I would have done it by now?"

You shrink at the words when you spot the first flickers of umbrage paint his gaze much darker than needed be. As offended as Miles sounds at your accusations, underneath the fury is some sort of hurt.

You have to furrow your brows at the appearance of his pain, but it dissipates immediately when Miles just grumbles to himself what sounds like the word, "Sorry."

Jesus, what a mess you've gotten yourselves into. You're so far away from home and you don't even know where Murkoff has gone. This seems to be a stolen vehicle by the looks of it, but the questions as to how you got out of that facility and drove all the way out without being caught are rather infuriating.

It becomes a tough pill to swallow. You mumble to nobody, "You should've just left me back there to die."

"Don't." Miles turns to you viciously, and you stumble at the ferocious set of pupils you're greeted with when he finally decides to glance at you from the corner of his eyes. "Don't ever say that to me again."

You're about to be severely wounded at his command, but you backtrack and immediately realize the fault you'd made. Miles Upshur is now a thing of death; he's possessed by it, even. To even suggest that his meek attempt to rescue you was nothing but a worthless waste probably poked at something fragile.

Maybe you really don't know Miles at all. You don't understand what that thing has done to him. You don't know where he ends and the Walrider begins, or if there's even a line that differentiates the two.

Ultimately any sort of apology you can conduct would be futile. So you boil aimlessly in the bristled atmosphere, hesitant of your words.

*Start simple?*

...*Shut the fuck up*, you tell yourself. Everything's a wreck now; there's no 'simple' to begin with, if that option was ever on the table.

You're lonely. You want...

You want Toria, actually.

The thought of the Dreemurrs is toiling with what little strings of calm you have left to maintain, and
you choke back a sniffle. You don't care if the Dreemurrs were never your home, you miss them terribly.

Minutes pass where you're wallowing in the endless turmoil in your brain, only fondling the battered gown you're dressed in. You haven't dared to see Miles's expression, and it's not exactly rocket science for you to avoid the eye contact of adults; you've grown adept to the callings.

It's a long time later, maybe even an hour, of just driving through the monotonous background of sand and rocks (sometimes a cactus) before Miles rears into the sand. You stumble at the transition in direction, your heart crashing into your ribs as you grasp at the sides of the car.

"What are you doing?!" you scream at him in a fit of panic, voice tumbling as the car shakes with the bumpy surface underneath.

Oh god, he's really about to kill me, isn't he...

No he's not! Shut up!

For a moment, there's no response as Miles focuses his remaining attentiveness towards driving through the desert, heading farther away from the road. The lack of percussion whilst trampling the sandy floor is what ultimately makes you a bit on edge about busting a tire, or flipping over the car entirely.

Then there's a massive shriek of the engine as the car swirls into a halt, and you're left to catch your breath and pace your heartbeats.

Miles yanks the car's keys out of its designed outlet and throws them to the floor hastily.

You hope your voice breaking isn't too noticeably when you ask him, "What on earth is up with you?"

Thank god he finally answers. "We can't get off the maps with a charted vehicle. Might as well scrap what we can."

"Wh—" Your eyes widen when Miles opens the car door and steps out, and despite your dizzying temples and throbbing scrapes you unbuckle and follow him out.

The sand isn't as hot as you'd assumed it to be, which is a relief for your bare feet; but still the uneven groundings of the earth leave you to sloppily make your way around to where Miles is fiddling with the license plate.

"You're going to total the car?" you exclaim, incredulous. "You can't be serious!"

The plate clips out of placement with a satisfied grunt of approval from Miles, and you marvel as the metallic dish is slightly crushed in his grip. You raise a brow at the sudden strength he retains but decide not to question it.

Then he heads around again to trash the dented license plate in the back. You follow him helplessly, unsure whether you should stop whatever the hell he's doing or not.

"Alright," Miles sighs, sounding like he has an agenda to take to. "First things first is to set the car on fire."

"Wha— wait, what?!"
He turns to you. "What did you think was gonna happen? Murkoff is gonna be all over scoping out this car! The less evidence intact, the better."

As much sense as his absurd logic is making at the heat of the moment, you can't help but provide a few blubbering protests. "B-but... we need a ride, Miles! We're in the middle of nowhere! How are we supposed to—"

"Easy," he interrupts, gaining a placid air that's leaving you furious. "We'll walk."

You clutch the ends of your hair with an embittered, "Jesus Christ," as Miles begins to rummage through items located in the glovebox and underneath seats.

There's something odd about Miles's brash movements (obviously) as he yanks the hood of the car open and begins to fumble through wires and machinery you're unable to view from your current position. He's definitely acting strange; however collected he's attempting to behave with forming a somewhat decent plan, you're not blind. You recognize the shaking hands, the bated breath, the eyes too raw yet clouded for proper interpretation of the mind.

*He's scared, too.*

Then Miles abruptly turns to you. "Okay. Get the keys and...and restart the car."

You blink. "I beg your pardon."

His posture tumbles every which way and that, like he's conducting a scheme through the jittery movements of his limbs.

"Just," Miles puts a heavy hand through his hair, visibly shaking now. "Just start the car, and...fuck. *Fuck. Just..."

To your credit, you're actually able to restock some sympathy for the wellbeing of someone who's usually your friend. Long enough to where you meekly ask, "Are you okay?"

The despondent reply comes in an exhale. "No." Then, stronger with a firm shake of the head: "No. But...never stopped me before, I guess."

You have to smile at the shallow attempt for self-comfort. But you shove it down right before Miles looks back up at you expectantly. He doesn't know what he's doing either, you remind yourself.

Despite, you make a show of putting your tongue in your cheek as you mumble, "*Fine. I'll start the car so we can set the stupid thing on fire.*"

"Be sure to blast the heat!" he calls.

"Um. Sure thing..."

Without waiting for a thanks or another piece of advice or anything else your partner has to offer, you rummage through the backseat to retrieve the keys and plug them into the ignition. Within a second the vehicle purrs to life. As demanded you also raise the temperature in the car as high as it will go.

You poke your head out of the window as Miles continuously pokes through the car's engine without your knowledge of what he's doing specifically.

"So, what now?"
Without looking up, he yells over the engine, "Now the engine will overheat, and the leaking fuel and broken wiring will come into contact with areas of the car that are hot enough to ignite a flame."

You frown, arching a suspicious brow. "Have you done this before?"

"Not to this extent," Miles replies, and when he catches your dumbfounded stare, he seems a bit snarky when he adds, "What? You think a good reporter goes through his life without having to run from authorities?"

You don't know why the slimy amusement in his tone rubs you weirdly, but you just shake your head with a disgusted scoff and get out of the car. If this thing is gonna blow, you refuse to stay within its borders one minute longer.

And besides, you need to get back on the road. You have places to be. Probably.

The chemicals left in your system are shredding whatever reasonable traits you possess as you stumble forward like a zombie. You don't attempt to look back on the disastrous creation you've participated in, and you don't slow your pacing when Miles's footsteps begin to trail behind you.

He catches up quickly, since he's actually wearing shoes. Without glancing over at your gained company, you sigh, "Where to."

There's a momentary delay in response that tests your determination to not look behind you. But eventually, there's a grumbled and tired: "I don't know."

"Well," you say to no one, breathing into the wind, "I guess acknowledging the problem is the first step to recovery."

There's an airy laugh from behind, trying so hard to aid the prickling quiet but falling short when you both realize that the situation had grown more dire than anticipated.

You find yourself picking at the ends of your thin gown again, as your fingers trail along the beaten fabric, bloodied and coated with a layer of black mud (you're not sure you want to know what specifically stained your garments, but ignorance can be bliss in that department).

A thought flutters and settles uncomfortably into your brain, until eventually you decide to acknowledge its existence.

As the trembling vision of the road you'd swerved off of comes into view, you ask pointedly, "Why are you not bloody?"

Miles sounds like he's misplaced a step at the accusation, and there's a mild, "Huh?"

"You were pretty beaten up back there," you clarify, "and I'm pretty sure that the white tee you're wearing stains pretty easily with blood on it. So why are you looking exceptionally spotless?"

There's not a response for a while, and you try to practice patience with Miles's reluctance to discuss the subject. You're going to assume that it had something to do with the Walrider, which further screams at you that maybe adding insult to injury wasn't your wisest move.

Both attentions wane as you topple onto the heated pavement of the one-way road, marked with the black stains of the vehicle's tires and where you'd jumped off of the designated drive to set up a car explosion.

Your feet dance along the road, biting back a hiss at the exposed flesh cooking under the asphalt,
before eventually deciding to just travel alongside the path with your feet in the semi-forgiving sand. Miles shows up alongside you, and you suppress a cringe at the intimate distance you two are walking. Side by side.

_Just like old times_, you note bitterly, and something in your subconscious laughs at the humor.

"This way?" you signal to your right, and Miles just nods firmly. You quickly move on.

You haven't even taken two feet into your journey before Miles breaks the wind-filled ambience: "The...the Walrider sort of... It's kind of a resurrection thing, really. It's why, um... the bullets didn't..."

When the pieces connect on their own, you have to stop and twirl around to face Miles's disheveled figure; his eyes are glued to the watery illusions within the concrete.

You think back, briefly, to that blurry memory of the soldiers trying to shoot your guts out once Billy's life support was deactivated. You remark inwardly about how Miles seems, indeed, pretty spotless— or about as spotless as one gets in this sort of situation.

Gradually, you feel a dreadful gulp stem in your throat. "So, the Walrider can..."

As if reading your thoughts, Miles nods somberly. "Yeah. Back there, I kinda...died."

You still have to jolt at how poised the term 'died' is used in the sentence. Like it's an everyday discussion to confront a dead man on his appearance.

The gulp tastes nasty when you swallow it down, eyes spearing into Miles's avoidant stare.

"You died?" you try, choking on the words.

He nods again. "Yeah."

The buried distress that Miles is clearly showing about the said event makes the multiple list of questions in your mind draw into a blank. This man is supposed to be better than you, is he not? Adults aren't supposed to be like this!

_Why is this so different?_ Why is this a new form of hurt for you?

_It's empathy_, something decides.

So instead you ground your mind as you scan the features of Miles's current physical status. Aside from the concerning signs of malnourishment and eternal anxiety plastered across his flesh, you do find the outfit to be...exceptionally clean.

_The Walrider healed him?_

You turn back up to stare at him, abruptly noticing the endless creases of age etching into his protruding bones and the bags of exhaustion contouring his face.

Awkwardly, you bid, "So...is the Walrider like a portable laundry machine?"

It takes a long while for the joke to dawn onto Miles's expression, but when it does there's the smallest glimmer of— something. You want to say humor, or maybe even happiness. But you cherish its fleeting presence within the desert.

There's another snicker that follows, sounding unpracticed yet surprisingly genuine.
And then a ghost of a smile as Miles says, "Yeah. A washer with the worst fucking warranty."

You try to laugh, for both of your sakes.

The road is endless and hot under your heels. You shy into the sand multiple times, disliking the grit that's sticking in between your toes.

It feels like you've been walking for hours, and the heat of the pale sun isn't assuaging either of your tempers. You brood in silence, keeping separate paces as you limp forward. You pray that no car drives past and tries to help; you're not even sure what you'd say to them.

It's time-consuming to analyze all that's occurred during the span of a day. You don't even know if you'll ever see the Dreemurrs again—or if you even want to! If Miles is telling the truth, and there are bad people after you now, then you're not sure you can position them in the eye of the storm. They could hurt them, kill them, even.

*If they haven't already...*

You brush away the thought immediately, shrinking as the weight of the circumstance begins to weigh on your shoulders, sinking into your bones.

And don't even get started on the Walrider. Miles said that he died, and okay, that explains why he wasn't executed by the bullets pummeling into his backside, back in the underground lab. So the Walrider has resurrecting abilities, then.

...*Yeah. Okay.*

It simmers in the surface of your hindbrain that Miles just admitted that he died while getting you both out of the facility, somehow. Maybe a stray bullet, a car crash, even? You don't know.

Did he just *die* for you?

—You haven't even realized that you're digging into your arms with dirty nails until your breath begins to snag. It's too much, this is all just too much; you just—you just want to *go back*, you want to go home—

There's a ruffling noise from behind, and you flip around to spot Miles peeling off his black jacket. You're paralyzed, mouth still parted in a pathetic attempt to gulp air into your lungs, when he hands the jacket to you.

You take it reluctantly, holding the coat in one hand, secretly admiring the texture of the cotton fabric, before giving him a blank stare.

"Cover up your arms," he advises you. "Don't pick at them. Alright?"

Instantly you realize that he spotted you trying to hurt yourself again, and you lower your head in shame.

"Why are you being so nice to me," you mumble.

The question doesn't register as anything more than a tiny mumbling, but regardless Miles responds with sweeping forward to assist you, overlooking the question entirely.

The sleeves are a couple sizes too big, making your appearance a bit laughable as you try not to
drown in the jacket, holding back a snicker yourself when the hoodie almost makes the jacket drape off of your shoulders completely.

"There," Miles steps back, pleased with his work. Then adds, "Besides, if a car drives past and they see a kid with a hospital gown on, I think it'd arouse suspicion."

He's unfortunately right; you conceal the patterned dress as best you're able to without zipping up the jacket because you really don't want to look any more ludicrous than you already do. Low standards concerning fashion are still standards.

But you'll admit, the coat feels nice; it's soft against the skin, and still warm from the previous wear. You wrap your arms over yourself to feel a bit more comforted as well.

You murmur a, "Thank you", that's much too small but sincere, irrespectively. Covering up your body is definitely key to preventing any further anxious scratching.

You try to mimic a teasing grin as turn and ask, "You thinking about ditching those shoes anytime soon?"

Miles just provides a empty chuckle; his eyes are still dark. "I doubt you'd want them. They're a bit sweaty."

"Thanks for sharing."

"You asked."

You kick a lonely pebble alone the road, biting back the flick or pain commenced from your exposed toe. "I did..."

The remaining wisps of a friendly conversation dissolve into the wind, spitting more sand onto your naked legs as you grimace at the touch.

There's nothing to do but continue moving forward. Just like back at Mount Massive.

...You'll admit this much to yourself. You're coming to a rusty conclusion that the inability to feel like you belong in the Dreemurr's house had something to do with Miles. You're not going to explore any farther than that, but you really did miss him.

He was your friend. And even if things went awry at the end, you really meant it when you said that you needed him to survive.

You always have to have someone to help you survive. You can't do anything alone, or else everything goes to shit.

The gravity of the fight, and then the fact that he came back for you regardless, crashes into your heart, making the whole scenario a tough pill to swallow.

You don't forgive people; they'll make the same mistakes again, and if they fool you twice, shame on yourself.

That doesn't stop your lips from parting, however cracked from dehydration they are, to speak to the wind: "I don't hate you."

There's no reply from behind, and for a second you think that the confession fell on deaf ears.

All the more reason to keep talking, you suppose.
You sigh despondently, flicking sand into the air with an absent kick. "I don't like it when people leave me. And I don't...forgive people very easily because of it."

And then there's a misplaced cough that pronounces Miles's attention to the testimony; he mumbles, "Yeah, well, I don't like it when people stay."

He doesn't say it sourly, but somewhat forlornly. You gnaw on this for a second before slowing down to be by his side. There's no protest when you do so.

Still, without caution, and without looking up you continue: "I don't like what you did. And...I know it's probably unhealthy or just plain shitty, but relying on people is kinda how I get by. So it hurt that someone I care about cuts me off like I'm...dangerous, or bad, or... just something they have to get rid of as soon as possible."

Then, with a desperately-unyielding gaze, you look up at him. "What you did hurt. A lot. And I don't think I'll forget it easily.

"But you're my friend—and you're still my friend. I mean, you came back for me! I don't— know why you would do that..."

"I wasn't just going to let them take you," Miles interjects, his expression remaining sullen.

You can't ignore the explicit hastiness glossing his tone concerning your awe of his rescue mission. It just leaves you even more baffled on Miles's stance of the issue at hand.

The old pain of all he said to you peels back into the open, and you slump your eyes downward again. "I don't know. It's just...all that stuff you said, and—"

"I told you that I wanted you to be happy."

"And you suspected that ignoring me would be the key to my happiness?" you venture, incredulous. Miles supplies nothing to debate against your answer but a discomforted rub of his own arms.

"You don't have to say you don't hate me if you don't want to," he says. "I'm a grown-up. I can handle rejection. But at the end of the day," he pauses and then sighs defeatedly: "I really am just glad you're safe."

The execution of his confession is albeit a bit sad, sounding undercooked, but you detect honesty behind the words.

And you along a teasing undercurrent beneath your tongue as you add: "'Safe' being a flexible term."

No reply, and you feel the mood dampen at the words. You realize you may have said it a bit too sharply.

So you hedge, "What I'm trying to say is thank you."

As you're walking, the wind ceases and leaves you both to fry amidst the spring's heat. You bend down to brush some sand off your knees.

"You got us out of that asylum alive, you listened to my rants about self-harm, and you...you wanted to alienate yourself from people just to protect them from the Walrider."

A humming noise commences from some source you can't identify, but you ignore it for the time being.
"We don't have to talk about...you know." You gesture to Miles's body, and he gets the gist with a sour nod of thanks. "At least, not right now. But I do demand an explanation sometime soon."

Reluctantly, he eventually nods again, stronger this time. "I guess that's fair," Miles sighs.

The smile that crosses your face is sudden, and rather tight around the edges, making it an uncomfortable wear. But you think that the dawning of the situation is...a bit overwhelming, to the extent of becoming humorous.

"You know, I should be in school right now," you say with a huff.

Your companion's wiry aura begins to loosen, and in that second you both begin to actually look around and see where you are.

To exaggerate the setting, you spot a tumbleweed bouncing along the sand in the distance. You smirk at the scene. "Wyoming, huh?"

"Yup."

The whole situation feels like a bad joke. But jokes are funny, right?

So you bitterly chuckle. "In a hospital gown."

"With my jacket on," Miles supplies, his gaze twisting into something teasing.

"And after setting a car on fire."

"After escaping an underground facility."

"With a nanite ghost."

"That came from a deranged asylum."

You find your grin beginning to expose teeth. "Well, we've been through worse, right?"

There's a laugh from both of you this time. Languid and very, very shaky; but you suppose that sharing it with someone else is much better than being broken all alone.

Chapter End Notes

Some snippets of deleted scenes from Chapter 19

Chapter name from "Bullets" by Salma Deera
we came down to the water and we begged for forgiveness

Chapter Summary

Alt: 'Shadows lurking close behind, we were fleeing for our lives

'Will you lead me?'

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The heat eventually begins to root from your own exhaustion, rather than the lackluster warmth the desert's atmosphere provides.

Several times have you considered the possibility of calling an official break in your hiking, but you and Miles seem to have entered this silent competition to see who will be the first to complain about how much everything sucks in the Wyoming wilderness.

You're certainly not one to chicken out of such battles of will, so you bare through the blisters you feel sprouting along your feet.

So you walk on, in a quiet that continues to grow a bit more companionable. The only goal of finding some form of civilization before you wither into the sand dunes has kept mouths shut and legs moving.

It's as you occasionally inspect the status of your partner that you notice that Miles has a bit of a limp in his step. You also recognize that his face is glossy with sweat, and his muscles are all clenched weirdly, as though to balance any vexing throbs in the system.

Back in Mount Massive, you've spotted several instances when Miles was on the verge of collapsing into dissociation, even when he always tried to reassure you that everything was fine. Commonly you held his hand, squeezing and pulling like impatient doctors in the past would to send you plummeting back to earth.

You try this now, extending a hand of yours and touching a knuckle, but that's all that is needed before Miles quakes almost immediately at the contact with a pained hiss.

You're taken aback by the arduous reaction at your gesture. But your shock turns to a sensation of immense horror chilling your spine when the shadows of veins begin to protrude along the extraordinarily pale skin. You watch the discoloration of the flesh gruesomely highlight the black swirls emitting from the fingertips.

His hands have morphed into pitch-black.

But the minute you blink to register the transformation it seems to disappear entirely, melting back into the shaky, perspiring skin.

You're about to give Miles a good old fashioned 'What the fuck just happened there' before Miles dangerously tips over in your direction, eyes half-lidded like he's about to collapse.
Before you can move forward to soften the fall, he regains himself quickly and attempts to erase the intoxicated glare that's glazing his eyes. The former symptoms of another Walrider ascendency seemingly vanishes into thin air.

"Motherfuck..." You watch with inert features as Miles sways, clutching his wrist horribly with teeth nibbling at his bottom lip, chewing on it so deeply that you think you spot blood—or a substance similar to blood. "Fucking limbs are killing me..."

Concerned, you advocate, "Should we take a rest?"

It's more important now to abandon the opposition at hand of 'whoever-complains-first-is-a-sissy' for the greater good. Yet Miles seems reluctant; his body language comprising of a trembling, agonized man dominates his resolute glare.

"N-no," he stumbles, then clears his dry throat to repeat, "No. Let's keep going."

You don't move, providing yourself a quick glimpse back to the icy-pale fingers, which Miles is still viciously clasping with his other hand. He looks about as stable as a tree bending in a hurricane, ready to break with the right amount of pressure.

You're not exactly sure why he's so bent on hiding anything anymore, and it's really starting to get on your nerves.

Childishly, you pout with an airless 'hmph' and twirl back to the path at hand, hoping to get some sort of guilt-infused rise out of the action.

There is none, only more dishabille footsteps from behind. It just buries into your skin even more.

You wonder if the Walrider has weird telepathy powers among everything else when Miles calls to you, "I'm fine, kid. Don't worry. I've, um...I've had this issue for a while now."

It's enough to peek over your coated shoulder to implore, "What issue is that?"

To emphasize, Miles weakly gestures to his limbs, still encased with a grotesque pigment that is disheartening to his assurances.

"My whole body's been a whining bitch lately," he explains, sullen. "Not a lot I can do about it."

You cock a brow. "Do you think it could be because of...?"

You don't finish the sentence on behalf of respect. Just the mention of 'the being that shan't be named' makes Miles's face explicitly twist into discomfort.

But he sighs, casting his burdened gaze downward. "Maybe. I don't know."

The stress he's been building onto his chest, anchoring the confidence of moving forward, seems to slip and fade away entirely. In its place: a lost, broken man.

You don't know what to say. Children aren't therapists for a reason.

And thank god to heaven that Miles recognizes this too. He's the first to perk back up when he remembers that you both might literally die in the desert if you don't get a move on before sundown. Already the sky is morphing into a prettied lavender as the sun careens to land atop the mountains. You'll expect a sunset in the next hour or so.

Miles raises a brow suddenly, unsure of something ahead of you, and momentarily your heart flips at
the cons of the unknown, barreling into your stomach as quickly and as suddenly as a car crash.

"Is that a diner?" he asks to no one in particular, sounding as baffled as one might expect.

Deserts cause illusions, don't they? You bare this in mind— plus the theory that the Walrider plays dirty tricks on the brain, just from an outsider's standpoint—and you don't waste your sapped energy in turning around. If you see nothing, you will be even more distraught.

So you mutter, "Very funny."

"No, look." The command is laced with something soft and frightened— you're in the same position as an adult man: fearful yet struggling to stay intact. The way Miles says it is desperate enough to plead sanity, so you look.

And you blink in surprise to see that, in the wavering distance, there is in fact a diner.

An odd place to be, you think, for a business to reside in the lonely heart of a desert road. Surely there's no money to be made in such an isolate location.

This makes you force an afterthought, and then a double-take, and then a couple more blinks before you can verify that there is indeed a diner in the distance.

Even Miles appears to be scratching his head, disinclined to the scene. You suspect that his mind hasn't been the most stable, and if he really is making up the sight, then—

You're screwed. Both of you. Definitely.

Neither asks if the other can see it too. Nothing needs to be said. You just start walking, and Miles follows. The only reason he's not matching your pace anymore is the assumed limb troubles aforementioned.

You're the first to crack, eventually, when you step closer and the diner only continues to exist. "We're not... you don't think we're hallucinating, do you?"

The look on Miles's face proves that you weren't the only person thinking that, thank goodness. "I really hope not. I could go for a sandwich."

Man, he shouldn't have mentioned food. You shush your belly before it has a chance to input its opinion on the matter.

"I think we've lost our minds," you decide.

There's another dry laugh that you take as an answer. Miles just grins with an empty expression. "Glad you're just now realizing."

"Hey!" You're about to give him a good-natured slap on the arm, like old times, but you refrain for multiple reasons.

Nevertheless you both walk, and you realize you've slowed your own tread to even with Miles's unkempt steps.

A prickle of doubt begins to seed within your core when you realize that a diner, if it isn't an illusion, means people. It means explaining yourself.

...It means people.
"What if there are..." people. You can't say that awful, two-syllable nightmare of a noun. People. "What if they ask about us?"

You think Miles is on the same level of thought as you, because you know he doesn't like you-know-who either. He flattens his lips and furrows his brows like there's something sour on his tongue.

And then he murmurs, "Then we won't talk to them."

That's fair.

The closer you walk, the more apparent the details of the diner become, and then your steps fumble like you're sinking into quicksand because of people awful people and there are cars and people and —

The hand that meets your own isn't yours.

And you squeeze back fiercely, abandoning the former worries of Miles's pain being too much to handle, because you'll squeeze his hand so hard that it'll eventually hurt you too.

- When you enter, your heels feel immediate relief. Loathed as you might be to have to encounter more human beings, at least the blast of the air conditioner refreshes your dried skin.

The low-toned country music is only audible with a hearty bass wafting through the diner's kitchen. There are only a handful of tourists— if even that— picking through postcard stands, while the resounding ambience of clattering pans and sizzling food implies that the rest of the staff is too busy to greet their new customers.

You worry your lower lips with your teeth, feeling that all-too familiar whirring of your senses as you scope any potential dangers within the notoriety.

You're glad no one cares you're here. You both look like wrecks.

Miles directs you to where a magazine stand is, desolate. He shoulders you to stand near an untouched corner, housing themed issues of tourism crowding the bend.

"Stay here," he instructs, his tone lacquered with fret that you can't overlook. "Don't talk to anyone, don't even look at anyone. I'll be right back."

You plaster a grim smile across your lips, contrasting your growing concern that you feel bedimming your eyes. "Better hurry up. I think that guy inspecting his map outside is looking pretty suspicious."

The mischievous nature of your words soars overhead as Miles flips around to inspect said man, walking out of a vehicle with a woman. Both seem entirely uninterested, and instead fumbling over the aforementioned map the man is gripping.

A drop of trepidation hangs over your heads when you stop and mull over how terrifying strangers have become.

Miles is the first to shake his head, gaining control of whatever worries are possessing his inner monologue.

"Just stay right there," he repeats, promoting forged confidence whilst his disparate gaze states
otherwise.

He doesn't leave until you nod.

And then he heads towards the restroom, though his stance is brooding and quite frankly much too intimidating to leave you gaping from the absence. *Has he always looked like that?* Statuesque in his movement, as though blocking out the undercurrent of aches, his eyes a pool of dark reminisce when too distant to see clearly.

You don't want to say what Miles Upshur looks like, specifically. You choose not to apply the term 'beast-like' for his own sake.

The temporary abandonment hits in choppy waves; you don't like being alone. You *hate* it. You're supposed to be strong by yourself, defend for yourself; and you hate to say that the first reason in missing Miles's company is because you remember the Walrider looking straight past you, subduing the rest of the threats but refusing to expel any nanites in your direction. Without that sort of security, however unreliable the demon may be, you're not sure what you're supposed to do now if any dangers arise.

You avoid eye contact quite successfully— years of expertise in becoming invisible for safety purposes pays off quite well. You hunch your shoulders, glare pointedly at the spaces between your wriggling toes, looking to be as unapproachable as possible.

It seems to work. No one looks at the child crumpled in the corner, shoved between magazine stands and wearing clothes too big and tattered for their own body. Although, fairly, there aren't too many people to be concerned about; it *is* a desert store— literally. No customers for miles.

But then there's a sharp, "Hey!"

You jolt at the heated call, but in case it wasn't meant for you and in fear of causing unwanted attention, you don't look up, focusing on the blotches of sand dusting your shin.

"Hey! Girlie!" This time, you can feel the breath on your back and the denoting bellow rippling into your pulse. "You deaf? Look at me!"

With jelled muscles, you slowly move your head to peek at the angered man. He's leaning his head over the bar, and the wrinkles lining his face direct your attention to his distemper.

"The hell are you doing over there?" he exclaims, but his question makes you shrivel. "And where are your shoes? We don't serve hobos!"

He smacks his hand to a poster on a wall, near to where he's standing, and a phantom flinch passes through your body at the harsh movement.

"'No shirt, no shoes, no service!'" he reads heatedly. "And I ain't even gonna qualify those *rags* you're wearin' as proper clothing."

You fold your toes, your hair falling into your face and helping to conceal the tears prickling behind your eyes.

"For the last time, get out!" He shouts even louder, and you know that you're certainly drawing attention now and you don't like this one bit. *Stop it. Stop it stop it—*

"Don't make me come over there!"
"Excuse me," a new voice barges in, calmly and feminine. You hear the person approach the man. "Is there a problem here?"

You don't look up, but you can already feel the cook's finger boring into your skull accusingly. "Is that your daughter?" he asks the woman.

"Uh, no." There's another pair of eyes watching you, searing into the skin. Crosshatches of hair strands continue to cover your expression, tickling your nose.

Then the woman asks, "Why? What's going on?"

A rude scoff. "Would ya' tell the girlie to get out of the diner? She ain't exactly dress code for the shop. Disrupting the peace, if you—"

"'Disrupting the peace'?" comes the reply, almost mocking at length. "You do realize you can only get so many customers in the middle of the Red Desert, right?"

"That's not the point," the man snaps, but his tone has become more docile, perhaps from humiliation on the woman's patronization. "She's just creeping in the corner barefoot! How the hell am I supposed to handle that without thinking about calling the police?"

You suppress a shiver at the idea of being carried away by any law enforcement. You pick at your fingers harshly. *Miles, where are you?*

"Quite frankly, sir, I doubt she's being a nuisance. Look at the poor thing! You're scaring her half to death already!"

"Are you not reading the sign?" The cook retorts, plainly agitated. You imagine his finger shooting to the sign again: "'No shirt, no shoes'—"

"Really. You keep those sort of standards in Wyoming?" You can't help but admire the woman's unfazed stature in the heat of the minor altercation.

There's a brief silence on both ends before the woman gives an irritated sigh. "Look, if I pay for her food, will you leave the kid be? You get your money, and I don't have to waste another three hours on the road attempting to find a more civilized place of food service."

The man doesn't respond. You feel the woman openly preen with victory as she trades a long-suffering quiet with the cook.

And then you hear a mumbled, "Fine."

"Thanks. I appreciate it." The woman continues to flush her voice with conceit. Then you hear the lightened footsteps heading your direction; and despite how the person was set of defending you, you cringe at the approach.

The woman towers over your buckled-down figure, with the orange rays of the desert sun that pools through the windows darkening her silhouette. You drown in the presence of having an adult see you in such horrid conditions.

She leans down, aiming to find your eyes. Her stature is inquiring, yet refraining from being meddlesome.
She looks about Miles's age, with silky brown hair strapped backward in a ponytail, looking sheen from perspiration under the sun. Her eyes are kind, soft even, with skin folding in the upper eyelids to promote an Eastern Asian descent, much like you.

You can't help but admire the beauty of the woman, however indifferent her relation to you might be. You fear that she is lulling you into false security, and the realization that she looks a lot like your biological mother makes your spine crawl upright in alarm.

The woman speaks first: "Are you okay, sweetie?"

You haven't been called 'sweetie' in a long time. And the name on the woman's tongue sounds much more concerned than haunting; you're silent, nonetheless.

Her lips thin with heed. "Are you waiting for somebody, then?"

You manage to nod.

"Is it a family member? Where are they?"

You can only speak by shaking your head, your mouth sewn shut, despite how fair and balanced the woman's voice is.

Before she can whisk you away, you manage to stutter in a tiny voice, "H-he's in the bathroom. He'll... he'll b-be, right—right..."

Then the woman's eyes sharpen, her mouth curling into a frown.

"Is the man your father?" she asks, tone odd.

You don't respond.

"A brother? An uncle?"

Your throat clogs with an awful stone pressing on your chords, enabling you from speaking.

That's when the woman's face becomes more urgent, surprising you with her sudden ferocity.

"Is this man hurting you?"

No! No, it's not like that...

You gulp, ants crawling up your bloodstream and into your eyelids. "N-no. No, I-I won't...it's n-not...he's— he's a friend. And w-we...we...— I just—"

You don't know why you begin to sniffl like a pathetic little crybaby. But the heat of tears begin to sting your eyes and all you want right now is Toria and you're never, ever going to see her again nor Asriel or Frisk—

"I w-want...I—I—"

You start crying.

It's the most childish thing you think you've ever done, to be put on the spot for less than a minute and burst into tears. But your burdens are heavy and the asphalt was so hot under your feet and this jacket is too big. And you're tired and cranky and hungry and you want Toria. You want Miles to be okay and to stop acting so weird and you want to be back home with the people you took for
You shake and sob, muffling your whimper with your sleeves, cupping your trembling mouth and running nose.

There are soft hands, alien but nimble, that reach for your own and you try to step away but your spine is already pressed against the wall, and you begin to tremble at the lack of escape plans available anymore.

The hands squeeze slowly, and gentle shushes soothe your tears with the experience of one who is foreign to the concept of properly bottling panic attacks. But there is a sense of heart behind the actions that makes you feel a tiny sense of comfort from the stranger.

It does the case in helping you prevent those god-awful, babyish weeping from escaping your throat. But the tears flow regardless, because the barricade has been forced open and you're a mess and you want to see the Dreemurrs and go back home.

"Hey," the woman croons, still sounding hesitant. "Come over and sit with me and my husband, okay? You can...you can wait for your friend with us. And we'll get some food in you, how does that sound?"

The mention of a meal makes your stomach growl with anticipation, and your face droops with shame at the noise, covering your thin belly as best you're able.

The woman releases her hands soon enough, taking the time to stand up before holding a welcoming hand that you prematurely shy away from.

Immediately she retracts, the authoritative poise she once carried shifting into the confidence of one walking along heated coals. Eventually the guilt of antagonizing this woman causes you to step forward, and you extend your own hand, still slick with snot. She takes it regardless and leads you to a booth.

"My name's Lynn," she says kindly. "What's yours?"

But your voice has gone limp in your throat again, and you continue walking with your head down, feeling like a man on death row with a gun aimed at his skull from behind.

Lynn asks for no further inquiries. But the quiet doesn't stay for long, since in only a couple of seconds it seems, she nudges you in front of a table.

You look up at the man—Lynn's husband—seated on the opposite end of the table. You recognize him as the tourist outside, fumbling through his road map. He's still heavily monitoring multiple maps now, as though humorously still trying to interpret where he and his wife ended up.

He glances up at you once absently, then twice. The man shifts a baffled gaze over to Lynn. "Wha —"

Whether with a signature look or just from a telepathic hush, Lynn silences her husband's future protests. "This girl was hunched in the corner and the cook was yelling at her. I told him we'd pay for her meal so he would stop harassing her."

With an arched brow, the man says adversely, "Lynn...we're not made of money. And she doesn't look exactly..."

Whatever he wanted to say, you're glad he didn't say it. You want to melt into the floor already and
disappear. What the hell is taking Miles so long? He didn't—he didn't leave you again, did he?

You feel more tears begin to accompany the sticky stains on your reddened cheeks, and your chest heaves with more wet sniffs.

Ultimately your internalized bawling softens the atmosphere, and with a humbled sigh the man tells his wife, "Fine. We'll pay for her food."

"Thank you," Lynn murmurs warmly. "Besides, she said she wasn't alone. We'll wait and see if someone comes out and claims her."

"And if no one does?"

"...Then we'll deal with it from there." Lynn looks back down at you with a small smile. "Have a seat."

You're pressed into the booth, where you sit parallel to the man, and by peeking up you're able to decipher a few features of him from your blurred vision. He has lighter hair than his wife's, fairly long and artfully tousled; paler, olive skin, but with similar slanted eyes like Lynn, just a little more close-knit. His eyes squint at the tiny descriptions of the pamphlet he's reading, even with the assistance of the black-rimmed glasses he wears.

You stare at him for a while before you inevitably exchange a quick glance, and you shift away to stare at the dust collecting along the rims of the window.

The man sighs again. "Lynn, I don't know—"

"Let's just get her some food, Blake," Lynn interjects mildly. Then, in your direction, she asks: "What would you like to drink, sweetie?"

You don't answer. You really, really want food, but... isn't this just a pity party? Aren't you coaxing this poor, nice couple out of their money?

*Don't they deserve better?*

"Do you want water? A soda? A milkshake?"

The thought of a milkshake, unfortunately, is too irresistible, and as if by second nature you find yourself viciously nodding.

Pleased, Lynn presses, "What flavor, then? Strawberry, chocolate—"

You nod again at the mention of chocolate. "Y-yes. Please."

Before you can have time to double-take and try to convince Lynn that no, she doesn't have to waste money on you, Blake calls to one waiter, "Excuse me, can we get a chocolate milkshake, please?"

"Certainly!" comes the cheery reply.

Guess it's too late now.

You watch Blake slowly lean in towards your direction, his expression still heavily uncertain on your presence. "So, uh, what's your name?"

You fondle the dirtied nails that protrude from your jacket's huge sleeves.
"How old are you?"

Your mouth tastes sour.

"Do you have a family, a sibling, maybe?"

The fleeting memory of Asriel's figure bundled into bedsheets lurches a heartstring, and you sniff again to avoid any snot running down your nose.

Mentally retracting, Blake mends the position of his glasses and turns back to his wife with an awkward cough. "What do we do?" he whispers way too loudly.

"We just give her a milkshake," Lynn whispers back, still within earshot of you. "I don't know Blake, something seems off about her."

"Should we call child services?"

To your aching relief, Lynn opposes gently, "I don't think so."

The waitress thankfully claps down the milkshake just in time and you hear both Lynn and Blake give a thanks in the girl's direction before Blake passes the glass to you.

You want to deny the offer. It's polite to, really, because getting them involved with you is a mistake —

Your stomach falls again, because damn it they even put the mandatory cherry on top.

Reaching for the straw, you grasp the chilled fountain glass in your hands and clutch it to your chest like it's something precious. The first sips are cumbersome and thick, but god you forgot how fucking delicious chocolate milkshakes were you could cry right now.

Despite himself, you hear Blake chuckle a bit at your rapid slurping of the drink. "She's pretty thirsty, isn't she?" he comments to his wife, laughing a little.

You'd be a bit more ashamed of your vulgarity if this didn't taste so fucking good in your hell-dry mouth.

Even Lynn seems amused at your antics, but doesn't attempt to reach for you again, which you're happy with. She begins to form an idle talk with her husband concerning the scattered maps on the table. You lean against the wall and try to get a better angle of the diner outside of your booth, desperately hoping to see Miles somewhere in the background.

Blake eventually asks you what you want to eat, and when you don't reply he reads off the menu until you enthusiastically nod at a simple cheeseburger and fries combo. Immediately your order is taken into account by the same lady, and thank Christ these wonderful humans have given you another milkshake as soon as you suck up the last remaining bits of cream in the glass. Life is fucking beautiful.

As though an answer to prayer, your heart lifts when you spot Miles again. He's frantically searching the place, looking beyond hysterical, and then you remember that you promised to stay in one spot. He thinks you've disappeared.

You're about to call out his name when, surprisingly, Lynn does so first.

She whirls around to where he's furiously badgering a poor waiter, and sputters. "Miles?"
Your heart freezes in place. The digested shake in your system begins to clench painfully at your guts, and your skin roils with a raw fear at Lynn's recognition of Miles.

He seems the most surprised, but when he finally catches your eye his gaze only raises more questions. Still, his shoulders visibly slump with relief upon seeing you hunched in a corner, with your lips peevishly toying with the straw.

Blake gives a keen look of confusion towards his wife as she stands and walks to Miles. He steps back at Lynn's presence, and flinches just as horribly as you when she holds out a friendly hand.

"Miles Upshur?" she says again, excitedly inquisitive. "Right?"

His mouth opens, only to give a bumbling, "I—um...u-uh..."

Then Lynn retracts her hand to gesture from herself, and even though you can't see her face from where you're settled, she sounds pretty happy. "Lynn Jhoun? College? Journalism, yeah?"

Miles's expression lifts with a flicker of a memory, but it fades almost immediately. He hedges, "Y-yeah, uh...sorta. Lynn..."

He chews on the name momentarily before Lynn laughs, "Holy shit, dude! It's been literal years! Of course we'd meet by chance in the fucking desert, of all places."

Blake shuffles over to the scene, ever-curious now, leaving you alone in the booth with your chocolate milkshake.

"Oh! Blake!" Lynn grabs her husband's arm and yanks him over to Miles, showing him off proudly. "You remember Blake, right? He didn't go to college with us, but we did tons of video chats."

"Yeah, um," Blake intrudes hesitantly, giving Miles a wave. "I think you were the one that accidentally sent me pictures of your dick?"

Miles blinks, stupefied. "I did?"

"I think so. You and Lynn were pretty tight, I remember."

"Sounds like something you would do," Lynn reassures, still beaming at the recovery of an old friend. "We had some pretty good times back then."

The funny thing is you can see the creases of nightmares and precious haunting encircling Miles's face as the couple talks to him. His eyes aren't brightening with any form of recognition, and it's making you worry. Is he having trouble with memory, or are Blake and Lynn trying to gaslight him into assent for something?

Both ideas cling to your insides and your milkshake churns disagreeably in your stomach.

When you catch Miles’s face, you realize that whatever you might wish to ask of him concerning the two will only result in more questions than answers. Still, your mind trails to his dishevelment like magnets, and in a sudden bout of shame you continue to tease the straw in your mouth, gnawing on it now.

Lynn notices the subtle interaction you both are allocating, and she looks back at her alleged college friend. "Is that your daughter?"

Miles nearly chokes, it looks like. “W-what?”
A finger of enquiry shoots to your cloistered body, and you tighten immediately at the attention being wrought onto you.

“Your daughter?” Lynn repeats, sounding more interested than condemning. “We found her in the corner. Poor thing was bawling; I had no clue!”

You’re waiting for the sharp retort that you are not his kid, nor will you ever be his kid, but all you hear on Miles’s end is silence. Looking back up at him with surprise, you find his face creasing with abysmal perplexity.

“I-I, um…”

Blake makes a soft sound of agreement to assist his wife’s theory. “Y’know, I should have guessed by first glance! She has your nose.”

*I do?*

Lynn hums, and you feel a pair of eyes shift from one uncomfortable individual to the next, trading hot seats. “I can see that. It’s in the chin too, I think.”

“She’s not as dark, though,” Blake comments, nodding thoughtfully.

“Hm. Maybe she’s adopted? Miles, is your daughter—?”

“Stop.” Finally, Miles stops this silly charade, relieving you of the compression that crushed your stomach as they hypothesized. He shakes his head, with eyes still clouded but firm. “They’re… they’re not my kid, alright? But they… they are with me.”

The words tilt a string in your heart, and you avoid commerce with any other ogling you feel directed towards you.

There’s a rumpled silence that ensues from Miles’s claim, but eventually you hear Lynn speak to him, in a lower tone, “We gave he—them a milkshake. Is that okay?”

Their newfound respect for your pronouns is an equivalent of wrapping you in a warm blanket, and you feel something nice and pleasant flutter in your heart.

There’s hesitance on Miles’s behalf; and then, mumbled: “That’s fine. I…thank you.”

“No trouble,” Blake perks up, even though you remember his reluctance to allow you to sit in the booth. But you say nothing of it because there’s no way in hell you’re dragging yourself into the conversation; might as well see where this goes. Blake continues, “Would you… would you like to sit down with us?”

“Oh, yeah!” Lynn accords, her voice sunny with approval. “We have a lot to catch up on! Would you like something to eat? You look famished.”

The footsteps tread closer now, followed by a stumbling pair like Miles is being dragged to the booth against his wishes. “I—”

“Oh, please. We bought your kid something, we’ll treat you too. It’s on us.”

The leather you’re sitting on tumbles under the added weight when Miles seats himself next to you, and before you decide to look up at your new seatmate your gape falls upon battered knuckles, stripped to a polished, angry muscle underneath the flesh. Dewdrops of blood seep from the grid of
You blink, astonished at the furious beating that Miles has apparently endured; the injuries seem relatively new, as you surely would have spotted them by now.

When you lean forward, mindful of Lynn and Blake squeezing together on the opposite end of the table to make room for you, you whisper, “What happened?”

You know that Miles is coherent to what you’re talking about. Eyes on a different plane of being, features as darkly irate as the knuckles, he mutters, “I punched a mirror.”

That sentence says enough. You gulp down any further investigations because you know that the action had a much dire undertone than you want to know about. Besides, Miles doesn’t seem like the wounds are a big deal; and maybe they’re not, who knows? The Walrider has already proven to have an immense healing proficiency on its Host.

The waitress arrives as you find your eyes gravely contemplating the state of Miles’s knuckles; he doesn’t flinch under your stare, nor does he seem entirely up to speed on any of Lynn’s continuous chats about their former college life together.

The burger and fries are placed before you, and the smell of fried foods is enough to tear your focus away from the bloodied hands and you almost drool at the sight of it because *good god almighty,* when was the last time you’d eaten?

You guzzle into the burger in less than a heartbeat’s worth of time, nearly crying with relief upon being fed because the meat is tender and the cheese is gooey and warm. You don’t even bother to give an ear to what Lynn and Blake might be thinking, considering your poor and animalistic eating skills. But it doesn’t matter, because you don’t think you’ve ever tasted something this perfect in your fucking life.

Through the corner of your vision, you spot Miles staring down your burger, body tensed with hunger. He immediately turns to Lynn and demands, “I want that.”

His stern request makes the friendly atmosphere wane, but he doesn’t seem bothered by how rude he might have sounded; you’d gawk at the lack of his manners too if you weren’t shoving fries into your mouth.

You hear Lynn hedge, “Um, alright, I’ll see if—“

“And the chicken sandwich,” Miles interjects. “And the pot roast. And also…” You lick salt off your fingers while he scans a menu closest to him, reading off the items. “I’ll take that meatloaf. Oh, and soup of the day, maybe? And chicken with waffles.”

Blake gulps his portion of a sandwich slowly.

“And that. I want whatever you’re eating. Both of you,” Miles finishes, gesturing to both Lynn and Blake’s separate sandwich baskets. He puts away the menu and sits like he’s done nothing impolite.

The table goes quiet, and when the waitress comes back, Blake uncertainly recites the list of Miles’s wanted items.

Even the waitress gives Miles a side glance. “You ordering for one?”

“Sorta,” Miles replies, nonchalant. You don’t ask.
“I…o-okay. Anything else—?”

“Oh! Yeah, I think I saw some fish filet on the menu too? Gimme that as well.”

It’s almost becoming funny. You hide your smile of amusement by continuing to stuff your face full of the burger.

The waitress hurries away, possibly before Miles makes any other insertions to the ever-growing list. *Poor girl*, you think, and then your stomach gurgles with fulfilment.

You sigh. That was probably the best damn food you’ve had in a while, and often it takes you a good hour to finish up that size of a meal. Touched now by the kindness of Lynn and Blake, you tell them both sincerely, “Thank you.”

Both look to your finished plate with notice, and their eyes gleam despite their reproachful behavior towards Miles’s greedy appetite. Lynn nods to you supportively.

“You’re welcome,” she says, smiling a little. “I’m glad you’re fed. You both look like you’ve been run over by a bus.”

When she pointedly directs her comment towards you both, you and Miles shuffle uncomfortably, seemingly for the same reason: how are you supposed to tell this kind couple what hellish chamber you’ve just managed to crawl out of?

The first plate of soup that Miles ordered arrives, and you scowl when he slurps it down in less than a minute. He’s not exactly shrewd with manners either; the amount of soup drooling from his lips is absurd.

You trade an uncomfortable glance with Blake, of all people, at your partner’s erratic eating habits; but you’re not going to be the first to remark, so you just bite your tongue and decide that Miles involuntarily terrorizing these people is a little bit funny.

“So, how exactly did you both end up in the middle of Wyoming?” Blake asks Miles, rehearsing normalcy amongst the four of you.

“Research,” is Miles’s short response.

“Ah. Research for…?”

“Cacti.”

Blake just twitches an eyebrow at the offput answer. “I see…”

Lynn ignores her husband’s ineptness to ask, “So where’d you pick up the kid? They’re really cute. Never considered you to be the parental type.”

You smother a blush by wiping grease from your chin, averting eye contact.

“Um…” Evading a conversation, you feel Miles’s gaze briefly switches to you as a cry for help. Panic rises in your chest when you realize you haven’t thought of a lie either.

You twiddle your thumbs. “I-I, uh, I…my mom is friends with…my parents are out, and—”

“And I’m babysitting,” Miles finishes clumsily. “I’m…teaching them about…cacti…”

“It’s interesting,” you supply, inwardly draining a gulp. “They drain…all the water into
themselves…”

“Yeah. Fast learner, you see?”

There’s a long pause from Blake and Lynn, and your food congests in your throat and you might actually throw up—

But then, in sync, they nod: perhaps a routine they’ve picked up from each other through their years of marriage, you don’t know; but you’ve seen Toria and Aegros behave the same way.

“Riiight,” Blake drawls, adjusting his glasses. “So, would you like to tell us why you’re really out here?”

You gulp. You give Miles a soft kick in the shin and he whips his head to you as you give him a dirty glare.

You want to scream, ‘Cacti?’

His widened eyes scream right back, ‘What the fuck else do you want me to say?!’

You find mutual defeat when you look over at the couple, with their shoulders touching and expressions neutral, and you collect a long exhale together.

“We’re in trouble,” Miles admits lowly. “A lot of trouble.”

You nod quickly. “Like ‘running from the police’ kind of trouble.”

Neither reply, but you see a mien of mild interest tilt Lynn’s eyes.

Two baskets appear with more food in them, and more on the way. Miles dives into them without a second notion, and you watch him, still entertained.

With food in his mouth, he asks the two, “How much have you heard about Murkoff lately?”

The word makes lead weight drop onto your chest, and you inwardly writhe at the thorny reticence the question wrought.

Then Blake replies soberly, “We’ve heard a couple of things. Nothing solid, though.”

“‘Murkoff?’” Lynn interposes. “Aren’t they the current Nazi party or something like that?”

Stiffly, Miles nods. He continues to relish in his meal when explaining, “Yeah. Bad guys, Lynn. Really bad guys. We barely escaped with our lives.”

“And even then…” You trail off, pricking at the pink cuts on your shin.

“Murkoff.” Blake repeats the name like a bad taste he can’t swallow. “I…we haven’t heard much, but…we’ll keep an eye out.”

“Definitely,” Lynn nods encouragingly, eyes flicking back to her friend. “We don’t have a lot of leg room when it comes to picking and choosing stories. Our network really likes tossing us around the country, so we only get snippets of current happenings.”

Miles takes a sip of his drink, for once looking actually interested in what someone is saying to him (you’ve noticed his distance with people; sometimes you like to believe you’re an exception, but it’s a stretch).
Then both turn to you and Lynn speaks up: "I don't think I asked your name."

You think about lying for a split second, but your life story has already been splayed out on the table and you don't see any need to even attempt at cleaning up this mess. You mutter, "Chara."

"Chara?" Lynn repeats, and you nod. She hums. "That's a nice name."

Miles, on the other hand, is completely lost and has deterred himself from the subject altogether. You look at him, a little worried.

“Lynn Jhoun…” he mumbles again, half to himself, still ever-confused.

*Does he still not remember her?*

“Lynn Langermann now,” Lynn assures him, swiftly yet proudly flashing a ring on her finger. In the corner, you see Blake give the smallest smile. “Both of us work for News Tomorrow Dot Net. Crazy, right?”

Miles sets his glass down. “Lynn Langermann, huh?”

She nods happily. “For about four years now, yep. What about you? Got anybody special?”

Miles just scoffs, and you snort back a laugh yourself at the idea. “Too busy getting fucked by life to ever worry about it.”

“Not even that Jake guy you were seeing?” Lynn presses.

“Who?”

You don’t understand; he’s not *that* old, is he? Surely he must remember a *few* things…

Luckily more plates are set down and Miles focuses on those solely instead, brushing away the dishes he’s already wiped clean. You watch him idly, wishing you could apologize for his sloppy behavior but continuing to keep your mouth shut about it.

As if arriving upon angel’s wings, Blake steers the conversation away with an awkward cough. “So Miles, is there, uh, any place we can drop you off? Do you need a ride or anything?”

There’s a hesitant, “…Where are you guys headed?”

“We’re going to this small town up in Canada,” Blake shrugs, taking a bite of a fry. “There’s this segment about water poisoning and—“

Instantly Miles perks up, and you flinch at the movement.

“Canada?” he repeats.

“I…yeah, why?”

He wipes off a smear of sauce along the corners of his lips with his arm. “Can you drop us off in Montana?”

*Montana?*

You burrow into your jacket, finding safety in the fluffy cloth. Montana is even *farther* from the Dreemurrs! What if you’ll never see them again? What if yesterday morning would be the last time
Toria gave you a forehead kiss, then told you that she loved you? What if your last words to Asriel were a lie that cloaked your grief?

Your vision dangerously blurs and you blink hard and fast, ridding the world of spotting any more weepy breakdowns from you; they’ve seen enough today.

Lynn begins to chat in murmurs with her husband, leaning closer to his side as the two seem to be enabling a quiet confrontation, probably concerning Miles’s demands. You find yourself inching towards Miles as well to whisper, “Why Montana?”

Perplexity converts to annoyance when he transfers you an ‘I have more information but I’m not going to tell you’ kind of look. Your mouth curls into a displeased scoff at Miles’s blatant illiteracy and you switch your attention back to Lynn and Blake.

Their faces are clotted with thought, but you find that they haven’t said “no” either.

And then Blake exhales meekly. “It might depend on where exactly you’re headed in Montana, but we can give you a ride if needed.”

Miles brightens and something nascent flashes across his eyes. “Elliston! Elliston. Are you heading there?”

He says the word like it’s a reward he’s just now received; like he’s scared to lose it again.

And once again, you’re completely lost.

Both Lynn and Blake seem unbothered by his weird behavior (then again, he’s already on his seventh dish of food and they probably think he’s lost his mind long before this encounter). Instead they mutually shake heads, looking a touch regretful.

“Afraid not, doesn’t sound like a town we’re going to be stopping by,” Lynn declines, then adds, “but maybe we can insert the location into the GPS and we’ll come up with something close to that. Elliston, right?”

You switch attention back to Miles, glaring at him because he’s not looking at you and when he answers, “Yeah,” you spot a shadow of doubt flicker in and out of existence on his expression. Like the words are slipping like sand through fingers.

To your own credit, you have enough self-sense to decide that kicking Miles from under the table might draw attention.

With another long, ever-suffering trade of glances, both nod. “We have a big enough van, we’ll get you where you need to go,” Blake declares, but he doesn’t sound particularly ecstatic about the idea; you can’t say you’re excited yourself on the idea, but since somebody burned up your ride, you’ve long since felt excluded in making the final call.

Lynn is the sole token of encouragement at the table and her eyes are all smiles when she looks at her former colleague. “Anything for an old friend,” she says kindly.

The support gained from her appears to pluck a sour nerve, and Miles just chews at his remaining scraps of food in an unkempt silence.

He looks really tired, you think. The crinkles of age encircling his features portray a man that’s too old, too barricaded with stresses that you don’t think you want to delve into. But in a weird, reverse sense you’re unaccustomed to—you think the sight is comforting.
You haven’t even realized you’ve started to drift towards him until he almost bumps into you when he reaches out across the table, pointing at Blake’s nearly-empty basket. “You gonna eat that?”

There’s nothing there but a couple of stray fries and the skeletal remains of a burger, and you try not to snicker a little when Blake just stammers, “I-I…I guess not.”

Defeatedly, the bespeckled man pushes the basket towards Miles, and he gulps it down within less than a second.

This time, you do manage an apologetic shrug over at Lynn, who is looking both confused and intrigued at her friend’s massive appetite. But her shrug in return is cordial, and a weight releases from your stomach without notice.

- 

The van parked outside is one of the last cars remaining—the staff seems to be the only residences of the diner now—and you’ll admit, it’s a bit bigger than you’d expected.

Blake hastily explains that it’s a rental, since they needed to carry their filmmaking equipment across the country and their boss doesn’t exactly look upon their travel necessities with favor. It’s a bit dented, sure, and there’s an ancient scent whiffing from the car seats, but the sight of something remotely homey makes your legs ache for sleep.

The stupid drugs are still clawing their way out of your system, and the moment you recognize the lethargic fog in your mind, you stifle a yawn. And even though you think you’re successful in covering it, Miles notices.

He falls behind to check, “You tired?”

You’d make a sarcastic remark or straight-up lie to his face if the humorous aspects of your brain weren’t shutting down. You nod. “A little, yeah. I think they knocked me up bad.”

Without further examination, he nods in return, sympathetic. “Yeah, climb in and rest a bit. If they try anything, I’ll kill them.”

You’d brush off Miles’s words at a sorry attempt at a joke if his words weren’t hard and sapped of jester. They send an eerie shiver down your spine because you know that he could snap and tear apart this married couple, and he’s still not over the Walrider’s influence of homicide.

Unless this is the Walrider, and it’s wearing Miles’s skin like a cloth… Maybe Miles isn’t there at all…

You yawn again.

Not the time to think too hard about this, you decide.

With reluctance, you crawl into the back and sink towards the seat maybe a bit too early, because you trip a little on the carpet and immediately a pair of hands reach for your sides to steady you.

“Sorry,” you mutter, cheeks red from embarrassment.

There’s a metaphorical shrug coating Miles’s tone when he replies curtly, “Hey, I don’t blame you. Like you said, they knocked you up pretty hard.”

Cheers to that.
Eventually you buckle yourself in without help, and the doors are closed all around you, sealing your fate. And you try not to imagine the lab, and being trapped inside closets and lockers and—

“Okay, looks like we can take you to a town fairly close to Elliston!” Lynn announces, and your heart bounces because you’re still unaware of where Elliston even is. And it’s starting to sound like Miles might not even know where it is either; he’s acting on whims and you’re not okay with this because that tactic equals no regulator.

*We are straight-up fucked.*

But the van is moving and there’s a broken air conditioner blasting frothy gusts into your left ear, and there’s no turning back anymore.

Not like you had any choice in the matter—or anything, really. You’re a wriggling fly trapped in a spider’s web, and you can keep running and running all you want—like always—but that’s not going to *solve* anything! The spider will just come and inevitably swallow you whole.

And it’s not fair.

*It isn’t fair!*

You feel like crying again, but you can’t make them pity you anymore, so you stay put because the point is—the whole point of this stupid monologue is this is *stupid* and ultimately delaying your demise. These people are ruthless and they will stop at nothing to hunt you down and use whatever they want to *destroy* you!

*And destroy good people along the way, too…*  

Like Toria, and Asriel (*god, they better be okay…*), and even Blake and Lynn don’t deserve to be torn open for helping you.

*If Miles doesn’t get to them first…*  

Instinctively you take a peek at your partner through the jacket you’ve shuffled into, and you realize how poise he’s maintaining himself to be. Like he’s not sure whether to relax or not, and sweat beads sparkle in the lowering sunlight.

You think that you should be happy, for once, to be blissfully ignorant to whatever it is that Miles is inwardly fighting; you can make assumptions, however.

“Do you want any radio?” Blake calls out, after a while of the van’s rusty engine being the only background noise for your thoughts.

You think you’re about to decline, but Miles quickly speaks out first, “Is there static in the music?”

Surprised, Blake looks at him oddly. “Uh, we’re out in the desert, sooo, maybe…?”

“Then keep it *off.*”

And you swear to god there was a trace of a *growl* in Miles’s voice. He sounds testy and very dangerous, and this is from the point of view of one who’s seen this man murder hundreds (it still doesn’t click, maybe it never will, maybe it’s never supposed to…).

Blake retracts immediately, stage-whispering to his wife at the wheel, murmuring about something probably related to Miles’s behavior. They haven’t spoken a word to you both since they offered you
a ride, and you’re beginning to suspect that they think you both are absolute weirdoes.

Not like you’ll correct them. But still, haven’t they heard not to judge a person by their looks?

…The sunset is nice. It dips into pretty pinks and blues and purples, igniting the distant canyons into an orange flame.

Focusing on the fleeting scene is a vessel for normalcy, because otherwise your thought process will eat you alive.

Weariness comes in waves as you sit, thinking yet trying not to think. Because you want to be home but you don’t want to be home, and you want to thank the Langermanns for being courteous but you’re scared of them, and you want to feel safe with Miles but he could rip your throat out within a millisecond even if he didn’t mean it…

His jacket is warm. The sunset is nice.

Start simple.

You haven’t noticed yourself tumbling backwards, into the warmth of the seat, looking for a sleeping ground. It’s instinct that possesses your bones to faint, and true to type you allow it with a murmur of drowsiness.

The sunset is fading.

Your head hits something—someone—soft and secure. You lean in as your thoughts dissipate like leaves in a breeze, sighing at the contact that doesn’t waver.

You don’t know where you’re going at all.

(The jacket is warm. You are warm.)

So you focus on that. That maybe you can pretend to be safe, in this moment.

Even if you feel nothing but the opposite.

(And that’s fine.)

- You lie to yourself and decide that you'll just figure it all out in the morning.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter name from song "The Valley" by The Oh Hellos
To say that you fucked up is an understatement.

Your ever-growing list of atrocities committed by your hands pesters your brain endlessly. The blood and gore you've smeared—because you allowed the Walrider to perform such evil acts, melding the areas where you and the beast differed—and not to mention the men and women that will never head home tonight, or ever.

The fact that people are *people*, regardless of morality, has never sunk in, only simmering on the surface of your mindset, never to be digested. The idea of their emotions, perspective of the world around them—hell, that's as alien to you as ever, especially with a foreign encouragement from your new brainmate that people are just distractions. They get in the way of objectives. They're *useless*.

And blindly, you bent under the pressure. You agreed with the ludicrous argument, and you murdered without second thought.

The weight of Chara's head innocently resting against your side grows as comfortable as lead weight pushing into your ribs, mended only by a subliminal force. You sigh as their eyelids flutter with dreams.

At least one of you is getting a good night's sleep. You wish that the doctors had some more time to inject your bloodstream with drugs too, just to get some of the weight off your eyes.

*Elliston...*

It echoes in your brain like a song that demands to be heard. You can’t remember shit, your brain is a fried mess, and the only thing you feel like will lead anywhere is Elliston. Elliston, Montana.

You feel like you know why you need to go there, and you don’t want to. But this isn’t about you anymore. It’s about keeping the hell away from Murkoff and making sure they don’t get their venal hands anywhere near their little science experiment.

The hum of the car's machinery is a fair ambience provided, giving you another sound to focus on, since the well of television noise in your skull has run dry. You know you drained the Walrider with the recent genocidal spree, and without the proper resources that Billy was granted in Project Walrider, it's becoming a tiring journey for both of you.

That incident back at the diner where you got pissed at your reflection and punched the glass in hasn’t assisted in your physical condition, either; your knuckles sting.

*Recharge.*

You feel your teeth ache at the demand of the Walrider, his presence slamming into your body with a
rude shock. *Not now,* you protest, stifling a yawn.

**Recharge.**

Despite the large proportions of food you practically inhaled back at the diner, it doesn't seem to have been enough to cure you of inevitable bloodlust.

Stomach abruptly lurching, you have the impression that the Walrider is throwing a sudden hissy fit at your implications of dominance. Chara's head lolls forward like a corpse as you choke back a sudden pang of hurt coursing through your rusty joints. The nerves become specified with aches, fizzing and roiling. Your lean forward, gagging at the vomit locked in your esophagus.

The commotion of your newest episode causes Blake to look back at you, and although his expression indecipherable in the night you're taking a wild guess that he's concerned about you.

"You okay, man?" he asks. "Getting carsick?"

You almost laugh. You're just glad that you're not leaking black ooze again. "Something like that, yeah."

Lynn shifts her gaze at you as well, only for a hot second before turning back to the lonely desert road. "Do you want us to stop the car? We're not in any hurry, you know."

The last thing you need is any attention wrought into you by a pesky, carnivorous nanogod. However compassionate these two are acting now, you doubt their grace towards you will stick around if you happen to lose the tug-of-war with the Walrider's genocidal urges.

You pant, reveling in the fact that the Langermanns are unable to depict your facial features as you twist and shake, your body engulfed in a disorienting fog that suffocates your skin.

"No," you exhale, stiffly. "Just...I just need to relax. That's all."

‘Relax’. That’s a word you don’t think you know anymore. It spikes at your skull like a distant stimuli, almost mockingly, as the bustling in your bones continue. Your body feels like one that is shards of porcelain glass glued together, able to break apart with the smallest modification.

It’s amazing how long you’ve gone without alcohol at this point. How the fuck are you still standing?

In the longest, most insufferable moments of your time in the Langermann’s van, they try to offer small comforts in telling you that they’re going to stop pretty soon and switch drivers since Lynn is becoming tired. They say if you need to walk around and catch your breath, then that’s fine.

As pleasant as the outdoors sounds, in all its crisp scents and quiet scenery, you’re not stable. And the idea chains your indulgences as you just decide that pretending to fall asleep is a viable tactic here. The less options you’re given, the more restricted you are; and ultimately, this equals the safety of Lynn and her husband.

You’ll admit that your time in college hasn’t been top priority when regaining memories. But you like to think that Lynn is telling the truth, partly because you don’t really have any other options. If she’s driving you to a Murkoff corporation after all, you suppose you can just do away with her and her alleged husband just as easily as the others.

Even her name sticks to your tongue, demanding recognition, of maybe a past life where that word easily clung to your mouth. She said you were college buddies; you don’t think you were very social
in that time of your life—or at least, more antisocial than you are currently. But Lynn…she has some weird spark about her stories. Something that is desperate to believe her truths; maybe it’s sad that you’re beginning to think your seclusion is a factor in allowing yourself to get in a van with her.

When Lynn swerves off to the side, you force the contents in your belly to stew without verbal complaint, but you can’t help a risky gasp from plummeting past your lips. Nevertheless, as long as you don’t end up spewing black drippings along the car’s floor, then it’s a victory.

Chara’s head flops back to your shoulder, but they’re still out cold. The action is stiffening, since you certainly don’t want them to spot you in current conditions; but the anesthetic must have been a heavy load, since they don’t even shift in their sleep.

As Blake and Lynn get out of the car, your mind wanders out of the van and into the woods beyond. It ventures into the shadows of the trees, the twisted roots that are buried so deep under the ground that they’re impossible to cleanly dismember with one sweep.

Is that what you and the Walrider are now? A parasite? If that’s the case, then…you’re not exactly confident that you’re not the parasite. Maybe this soul isn’t yours at all; if fate was a thing, then maybe this was never meant to be yours.

Don’t be ridiculous…

Recharge.

I will fucking end you, shut the fuck up.

In this turmoil, your mind is weighed down by the small head snuggling into your shoulder.

You look down at Chara leaning into your side, seeming unfazed by nightmares for now, and maybe the drugs will keep that at bay for a while longer.

Blake gives you a quick peek again once he’s buckled himself into the driver’s seat. “Everything alright back there?” he checks.

You know that he means well, but the subtle patronization provokes a malice to curdle your demeanor. You’re done with being treated like a helpless patient, like putty in their hands. You don’t need any more babysitting; if you ever spot a doctor or therapist one more time in this life, it’ll be too soon.

“I’m fine,” you snap, but your sharp tone is hushed when Chara stirs, then plops their head onto your lap with a soft inhale. Their eyelids quiver and their brows squirm, and you’re scared that you woke them up, but the movements dispel as quickly as they came.

Neither Blake nor his wife comment on your harsh response, and there’s a spark of guilt upon treating them so poorly. But you’re tired, and you’re hungry, and your mind is a blank page, reeling with thoughts you’re unable to jot down and conceal.

All you know is that you’re going to Montana, and hopefully you’ll be okay there. Maybe not safe, but…moderate. Average, maybe.

You don’t know.

Devour.

You start at the jolting hunger coursing through your muscles, like a predator encircling prey. The
thumping of your own heart becomes an extensive alarm, since you were so stupidly out of focus in making sure the Walrider was caged up for the time being.

Like *that’s* doable.

**Devour.**

You haven’t realized a pair of eyes that don’t belong to you but they’re yours anyway are staring down at Chara’s sleeping figure intently.

You freeze, then your teeth are sore against your grinding snarl.

“You don’t even *think* about it, fucker.”

A retraction of surprise on an anonymous behalf switches seats behind the wheel as easily as Lynn and Blake had done, and you’re able to whirl your eyes away from Chara out of primal fear of hurting them.

*Anyone* but them.

Blake turns when he hears you talking to yourself, and for good reason you decide.

“Uh,” he hedges, frowning, “what did you say?”

**Recharge.**

You shake your head, feeling like a jar of marbles being viciously shaken at the minor action, with the balls clacking against your temples.

“I was mumbling to myself,” is all you have to provide.

It’s relieving that Lynn hits a bump in the road with a hissed curse, and Blake’s attention immediately switches to his wife’s driving to ensure that they’re on the right path.

**Recharge.**

*No.*

Your jaw is hard, your bones are brittle, your mind is elsewhere. You want to die but you don’t really because there’s so much to lose if that happened; not just for yourself anymore.

And perhaps the most terrifying thing is that you must supply for another’s needs. You’ve snatched Chara away from the only real chance they had at settling down with a loving family. They never needed you; you don’t care what they say.

Except that you do.

What sort of ungodly punishment is it that this child is attached to the hip of you, of all people? You ripped apart organs without a blink.

**We were angry.**

*Hey, will you shut the fuck up for a second? Jesus Christ.*

Lynn and Blake continue to mumble in intimate whispers, with a connection you’re alienated from. And you sit, allowing the Walrider’s punishment to prickle at your insides and beg for attention,
begging for a handful of your sanity. It’s about as time-consuming as one would think; like taming a lion, but ten times worse.

The small puffs of breath escaping Chara’s nostrils blow against your jeans, and they crumple fingers into the denim in their slumber.

They’re really, really small, aren’t they? And carrying burdens just as heavy as yours…

The hand is hesitant when it first strokes a finger through the kid’s hair, enthralled by the silken texture. It’s been years since you’ve run a hand through someone else’s scalp to serve as an act of intimacy, but today seems to be the exception for a lot of things.

You don’t sleep. Not one bit. But it’s nice to pretend that you’re in a different place, untouched by the swirling currents of your dark conscious, as you trail your marred digits along Chara’s hair. Their frown perks up a little as you do so, and you stare out of the car window in the meantime, making shapes out of shadows that may or may not exist.

The morning sun is a pale cream that trickles into the lilac sky, bursting into patterns of orange and pink so vibrant that they mingle with the phantasmagorias possessing your thoughts.

All of last night is a blur, but you remember once or twice having to pretend to be asleep when either one of the drivers up front check on you. You almost vomited more than a handful of times, with the eldritch soulmate in your guts continuing to morph your inner recesses, attempting to nest itself into your brain.

You think you’re difficult. You know you’re difficult. Billy wasn’t this resistant; quite the opposite, really. His brain was prepared, and he was compliant with being granted godlike abilities. And that bias sort of perspective that the Walrider carries onto his next Host is making things…rather troublesome.

But you stuck your grounds. You didn’t devour, and you didn’t recharge either, no matter how much your stomach withers into the sinkhole inhabiting your digestive tracts (an apple slice or something like that would be worth dying for at this point). You just smoothed out the brown locks entwined with your fingertips, trying your hardest not to be heard or noticed.

Your moves are premeditated, calculated; you’re scared of jumping off the rails and clawing into flesh as you breathe and blink and run a hand across Chara’s crown of tresses. You’re not affectionate; neither of you are affectionate. Two wrongs have never made a right.

Out of spite, you are gentle.

A gas station comes into view a short time later, and you catch specks of buildings, hidden between pines and oak, climbing up mountainscapes. This is a smaller town, but a town nonetheless. Meaning people. Meaning being spotted.

Your chest begins to tighten, your mind encountering an ulterior guest that drips into your head and tugs at your panic like it’s a plaything.

You’re in control. You’re in control. You’re in control.

The Langermanns halt for gas at the station, as suspected. The engine dies and with it a tab in your brain you didn’t remembering opening, where the hum of the machinery was a lulling sensation, and you’re left awakened like a harsh slap in the face.
Lynn escapes the car and stretches with a pleasured sigh, a smile creeping onto her thinned lips. She left the door opened and unoccupied, so you hear her sigh, “Ahhh. Nothing like a two-hour nap on a hard seat in a rented van. Gives you a certain rush in the mornings.”

Blake follows his wife outside, slamming his door behind him and going over to her. He arches a pained back with obvious vexation on the subject, contrasting Lynn. “Jesus. I hate all-nighters behind the wheel.”

She scoffs in good humor. “Yeah. Less expensive than buying plane tickets, though.”

“Can’t wait until we’re finally given that raise.”

“You and me both.”

You sit in the car, stiff as wood. You’re afraid of stepping out; things are violent now, and people will see you, and snatch you…the world just isn’t under your thumb; not like it was when you had the grandiose, bastardized air of a Walrider Host. Now you’re not really sure what you qualify as but it’s not exactly anything remotely courageous (or bravery out of foolishness).

Things will hurt you. You’ll lose control and you’ll bite and kill, and you don’t know what will happen if you get the bloodlust pumping again.

A groan ascends from your lap, melting your worries of vain, if only for a second. There are new priorities to pander to.

Chara squints their eyes and revives into the world around them, momentarily stumbling when they realize their scrunched position atop your legs, which have long since fallen asleep. Pins and needles jab at your inner skin as they lift their head lazily, and then withdraw with a sound that’s similar to a punctured tire.

“Shit,” they breathe, voice raspy. Their eyes are rigidly scrunched and don’t reopen.

Concern floods into your gut faster than the Walrider’s internalized torment does as it prods from the subconscious. But you don’t care, because Chara’s face has marks from where they laid their head to rest on your jeans; and they look so disheveled, so pained and so quickly, too.

You frown, finally being able to unbuckle and get a better handle on their sides, helping them sit up straighter, but their head is lopsided. “Whoa, hey, what’s wrong?”

Chara tries to shake their head, but their lips fold and their skin whitens at the attempted action. Their teeth show when they grit out, “Head. Hurts.”

Your first assumption is the drugs really left an aftertaste in the kid’s brain, because you’ve done research and you’re not an expert, but you know what affects that drugs have on an adolescent’s brain. And then you begin to link personal experience with their headache, and hypothesize with prowling dread.

Oh. “When was the last time you took your medication?”

Chara tilts forward, plopping their head onto your shoulder, their face creased with agony. “Don’t…don’t know.”

“Before you were taken?” you press.

“I…yeah. I think. Yeah.”
You frown. The symptoms of abandoning pills that get the chemicals composed in your shitstorm of a brain are all too familiar. Headaches would keep you bedridden for days, if not the crushing dysfunction you encouraged by making things worse for yourself.

A knock outside your window makes you jump so violently that the only thing keeping you in your seat is the kid’s support on your left side. Blake awaits outside, looking in on the scene. His face darkens when he notices Chara’s crumpled posture.

You have to get out of the vehicle now. No way around this one.

**Recharge.**

You can ignore it. You *can*, because there’s a task at hand.

With arms as gentle as you’re able to manage, you help Chara out of the car and dismantle yourself from the van as well. Blake assists and gets the car door for you, looking patient; when you step outside, your corneas sting at the appearance of the sunrise bleeding through the trees.

“C’mon, kiddo,” you murmur, trying so hard not to upset their senses any more than needed be; the sunlight is already a pain in the ass for yourself, and you’ve been personally discharged from prescription drugs for a good while now to be used to it.

They shrink into your chest, mumbling something disjointed, and rather miserably too.

Lynn immediately steps over from where it looked like she was stretching near the van. Her eyes are instantly painted with worry, corresponding to her husband’s identical unease. “What’s wrong?”

You don’t respond at first, your mind transferring all your worn attention to the kid. Then you explain, “They don’t have their medication with them. They have a really bad headache.”

Chara groans in agreement, confirming your statement.

The Langermanns exchange private looks before Lynn pries cautiously, “What meds do they take?”

*How the hell would I know?*

*Because they think you care about them enough to know, dumbass.*

Helpless, you stammer, “I—I don’t know.”

Chara says something into your shirt, saving you from being smothered in the predestined silence from your announcement.

None of you catch it, though. But when Lynn steps forward to have another listen, instinctively you view her as an upcoming threat, tighten your hold on the kid, get ready to run, attack, hide, die—

She crouches to Chara’s eye level instead, and if she saw any sort of perilous flicker cross your expression, she doesn’t act like it. Good on her.

“What sort of pills do you take, sweetie?” she asks them. Her voice is velvet on the ears, carrying a parental sort of tinge that makes your heart oddly curdle.

She receives nothing but another buried groan on your abdomen.

Then Blake perks up, of all people, from behind: “What do you have with you, Lynn? Do you think they could be anything useful?”
With a frown, you watch Lynn ponder below you; you grant her this and sit still under the couple’s surveillance.

Finally, she looks to her husband and explains, “I only have some of those antipsychotics. I didn’t think to bring any antidepressants with me since I haven’t had a depressive episode in years.”

“Hm.” Blake looks to you, and the idea of discussing medication with another human being begins to make you sick. But he simply asks, “Miles, do you think an antipsychotic would work?”

“I—” You don’t know. How the fuck would you know?

Thankfully, Chara arises for the occasion with a firm shake of the head and a mutter of displeasure; whether from neglecting the antipsychotics or from the movement aggravating their headache is unclear.

Then Lynn snaps her fingers. “Oh! Blake! Did you bring your Prozac this trip?”

Her tone dips into one that a nuance that implies that Blake had better have brought his medication. And once again, you feel like an intruder.

Luckily, he nods, but he seems heavily upset at the mention. “Yeah, I did. Even though I don’t need it—”

“Yeah yeah, you can bitch about your pitch-perfect mental health later,” Lynn cuts him off dismissively. Her attention is all on Chara again. “What about Prozac, sweetie? Does that sound like a familiar name? Do you take it?”

Chara responds almost instantly, to your relief; they turn their head to the direction of Lynn. Their face still looks muzzy with sickness, only peeking out with one eye. “Mhm.”

For clarification, Lynn asks you: “Do they take Prozac?”

That’s an antidepressant, isn’t it? The name is familiar.

But you really don’t want to feed Chara the wrong pill and get them feeling perhaps worse off. You’re no doctor, but mixing up medications sounds risky.

Then the kid plucks themselves off of your chest with a heaving sigh, drinking in the inevitable environment of a sunrise. Surprisingly, they are strikingly bold in posture, and their eyes are firm when they tell Lynn, “Yes. I take that.”

Lynn nods. “Okay, good.” Then she nods again, to her husband, “The meds are in your suitcase, right? Can you show Chara where it is and you can help them figure out an okay dosage?”

Hastily, she tells you almost apologetically, “I’m really sorry we’re no expert in helping out the kid. But we’ll do what we can.”

Oh. Are you supposed to be considered a figure over the whole operation right now? Like a parental…

You halt that thought process before it trails anywhere it’s not supposed to.

But both Blake and Chara seem uncomfortable with the other, and even though Blake looks harmless you don’t know him. You don’t care if Chara is going less than a foot away from you, Blake is a stranger. He could hurt them. He could kill them…
“Hey Miles, care to stretch your legs a little?” Lynn asks you, snapping you out of your spiral, but you’re hesitant. She gestures to have you escort her to the gas station’s store, maybe stop in and grab a candy bar or something. But the notion hammers at your heart and insides, twisting them horribly.

She’s taking you away. They’re planning something; this was their plan, wasn’t it?

Devour.

Devour…

Chara grabs your hand, and with a heated ache trickling up your veins, you whip around and look at their widened eyes, their breath shortened.

“Don’t go,” they pant.

Like *that* was even brought into debate.

Lynn breaks away from her precalculated route of heading to the gas station, perking up at the imminent air of Chara’s anxiety. Her face contorts gravely.

“Blake won’t hurt you,” she soothes them, before you have a chance to speak. “He can’t even squash a bug without bursting into tears.”

“My god, Lynn, that was *sixth grade,*” Blake groans in the background, embarrassed.

But in her voice, there is sincerity. Familiarity. You’ve heard her voice before, somewhere…

And so you trust her. You gently unhook Chara’s fingers clawing into your arm (which is already stinging like a bitch but it’s not like *that’s* anything new). They look pale but your nod is one of approval, and with reluctance they turn to Lynn’s husband.

“It’s okay,” you tell them.

They look like they don’t believe you, but regardless they walk over to Blake, anticipating their makeshift prescription.

“C’mon, squirt,” Blake says softly, appearing mindful of Chara’s headache, and he stretches out an arm to offer companionable support but Chara ducks away quickly from his hand’s reach.

He tries again after an awkward cough, turning to you and you give him a small shake of your head to indicate that Chara doesn’t like being touched, it’s not his fault, and it’s fine just don’t do it again or else.

In the midst of making sure that Chara is growing accustomed to their new prescriber, you jump thirty feet into the air when Lynn patiently taps your shoulder from behind, reeling you back to your former conversation. She holds up her hands when you act a little too anxious upon physical contact, your blood hammering at the insects wriggling under the flesh.

“Oh! she starts, looking contrite for her actions. “I was just asking if you wanted to head inside. I can get you a soda if you want.”

Recharge.

“I…yeah. That’s fine,” you sigh, your intestines squirming. You need to have something in your belly before the Walrider decides to perform the action itself.
Lynn nods kindly and then you two are walking to the store, in a silence you wish you could identify as companionable. But your fingers are too tight and they hurt so much from your strained muscles; you keep wanting to look back and make sure that Chara is okay because you don’t know Blake Langermann personally.

You step inside with your mind racing, making the world around you a dangerous blur. The echoes of your footsteps against the tile are degrading your patience, because noises are scary and they hurt your ears.

“I’m gonna head to the bathroom real quick,” you think you hear Lynn say, and then her tone deters when she notices that you’re not exactly present. The fluorescent lights above are menacing, twitching, making you remember blood and the bad lab…

“Hey, Miles, are you okay?” you hear, but you don’t respond. Your breath is flooded, your brain swarming with blackened vines, devour, devour—

Gentle hands lead you back outside, where you try to breathe and you try to think.

Seven.

Six.

Five.

“Miles. Miles, c’mon, talk to me. What’s wrong?”

You keep counting, because Jackson counted.

Four.

Three.

Two.

One.

Breathe in.

You breathe. A manual sense of calm engulfs your body, and the tendrils disperse.

“Here, sit down.” Lynn guides you to an area behind the store, but you lean forward with an instinctive urge to make absolutely sure that Blake and Chara are still fine.

They’re talking, and Chara is drinking from a water bottle Blake has handed them. They look okay.

“Breathe. I’m here, okay? Miles, just breathe.”

You do as instructed, counting backwards from seven, like Jackson once did. It helped then, and it helps now. Slowly you begin to sink back into your own body, processing images and scenery from the abstraction in your hellhole of a brain. But the raw entity of a threat is always present, seeping into your blood and making it pound.

You’re not safe. You’re still a murderous thing that needs to be captured, modified, terminated—

Lynn’s hand is soft, unlike your sweaty, clammy hands that are missing fingers but she hasn’t said anything about it so maybe it’s okay. And she hushes you like when your mother would comfort
nightmares and she’s real, and you cling onto that shred of sanity like a lifeline.

With a gasp or two, you’re back.

You’re on the ground, on the side of the gas station that you and Lynn were supposed to walk into. Instinctively you find your gaze fixated on Chara, who seems to have made idle talk of Blake, but occasionally your eyes do meet and you realize that they’re ensuring themself too that you’re still in radar.

Lynn releases your hold after a moment’s breath, then hesitates. “Are you okay? You were having a weird panic attack or something.”

You distrust your voice, but you find that you have to maintain some sort of dignity; the Langermanns deserve as much for letting a monster inhabit their vehicle.

“Yeah. I-I’m… I’m okay.”

There’s a defective hum of supposed approval that Lynn eventually asserts, but her touch is nice against your back, giving you a physical source to lean on as the searing existence of the Walrider nestles into your body, finding a place to stay for the time being. It hurts and it makes you clench your stomach a bit tighter than normal, but the numbers help. In beats of three, two, one, you exhale.

You can’t help but note Lynn’s lack of training when it comes to cleaning up bad panic attacks protrudes in her awkward movements, so unlike Jackson’s motions, nimble with practice. It leaves a weird twinge in your heartbeat and you try to shake any sort of nostalgia away before it gets to be too much to handle.

You left that behind. And that’s okay.

Really.

“Blake’s not gonna hurt your kid,” Lynn snaps, and her tone draws an outlining frustration you don’t comprehend. But then you notice that you’ve lost contact with what your gaze is locked on, and you realize you haven’t looked away from the sight of Blake trying to make a conversation with a timid Chara, on the other end of the parking lot.

She sighs, retracting her hand and leaving you adrift, but the sour aftertaste of lingering touches doesn’t stay for long. You turn with a pang of ache in your eyes to see Lynn staring at something in the distance, opaque in thought.

“I feel like you’re different,” she admits, sounding very remote on the subject. It interests you, but you frown as she explains, “I guess I should’ve expected as much. I mean, we haven’t properly communicated in a really fucking long time. But like… I don’t know. You’re not telling me something.”

It strikes a chord in your heartstring for an unidentified pain. You really feel like you knew Lynn, but if your brain could cooperate for one second, maybe you could share in her reminisces.

Instead you just remark to yourself how bruised your knuckles have become. They’ve scabbed over a bit overnight—almost unnaturally. Possibly a Walrider-influenced heal, but you don’t know why you’d be wasting energy you don’t have on a measly scrap or two.

“Miles?”

You turn back to Lynn. She seems frustrated, but tired at your incompetence; you can’t say you
She just sighs, stretching out her back. “Hope you don’t mind me interrogating you a bit. I need an explanation for yourself, Upshur.”

You’d already bid away your most honest explanations towards Chara, whom you’re assuming will ask you exactly what the fuck is up with the Walrider later on. For now, you chew on your tongue, because you’re not really sure where to start, or whether you even want to start.

You just mumble tepidly, “Fair enough. Shoot.”

Lynn is pleased with your alleged willingness to cooperate, and her eyes scope downwards, towards your gory hands.

“First off: what the fuck happened to your hands?”

Ah, yes. The mandatory question.

You unfurl your fingers to further expose the freak show, and you carefully watch Lynn’s expression when she takes full observation of your fingers. To her credit, her eyebrows only raise a little.

“My question still stands,” she finally says, peeking at you from the corner of her eyes.

“I...” With a great amount of hesitance, you defeatedly bring your four-digit hand to rest your face upon. “Long story. Which one do you wanna hear first: missing pointers or the knuckles?”

She folds her lips a little, thinking. “I guess the fingers?”

Figured so. “They got cut off.”

“Huh. No shit. By what?”

“Um…a crazy guy.”

“...Wow. That clears it all up. Thanks Miles.”

You just exhale in growing annoyance. “Look, I really don’t know what to tell you, Lynn. How much do you really think you want to know?” With anger, you explain rashly, “I’m fucked up Lynn! I got my fingers chopped up by a madman and I got into trouble with a Nazi-driven corporation. You have no clue what you’re doing by helping me escape some greedy bastards that just want me and that kid to croak!”

…You stop. You said way too much, and you might have a few tears pricking your eyes.

God, you’re so, so tired. You want sleep.

Lynn, meanwhile, has retracted. Her expression an oddly stoic, which you try to recognize as a reporter’s neutrality whilst interviewing (with you being the interviewee, in this circumstance), and it tears at something sensitive.

She keeps saying you knew her. You wish you didn’t know anybody anymore because they’re just going to get hurt.

Ignoring your sore hands, you bring them to your face tiredly. Your body lags with insomnia, like your battery is draining because someone else is mooching off whatever little vivacity left in you.
“I’m sorry,” you rasp, voice muffled by palms. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have—you should’ve just left us at the—”

A hand begins to rub your back, into the protruding spikes in your spine from where you’re curved over, with nimble fingers that massages between your shoulder blades. You allow it with a dull sense of alarm, but that’s not abnormal anymore.

“Miles,” Lynn whispers, “what did you do?”

You just tighten your fingers into your scalp. You’re tired. You’re so tired. Patterns scrawl onto your inner corneas.

“I fucked up. I fucked up so bad, Lynn.”

You’re brought into Lynn’s side, and you feel her face presses comfortingly into your crown. It’s a stifling attempt of reassurance, as hugs have always been an alienated shock when you’re on the receiving end of the line. You’re nowhere close to a professional at proper consolation.

“Miles…” she starts.

“Please. Just don’t touch that kid. Don’t let Murkoff hurt them.”

They’re all you have anymore. Jackson is gone. Waylon is gone. Everyone is gone.

There’s only one more option available, and you really wish it wasn’t on the table…

“We won’t,” Lynn promises, sounding sober, despite the recognized oddity of the plea. She rubs your back, and you remember Jackson drawing patterns into your skin. Your panic attacks were convoyed by fingertips sketching onto scars along our exposed backline, soft and real.

You breathe.

“You always were a bit too adventurous for your own good,” Lynn says with a laugh in her tone, and you have to manage a smile yourself. “Not surprised to see it got you into trouble.”

“I think I’ve learned my lesson,” you huff.

She detaches eventually, parting with a solid pat on the back. By a phantom grace, you feel something unknot in your stomach; even if confronting a small thing with Lynn solved nothing in the long run, it still helped, you’re certain.

Lynn gives you a free-spirited smile, and the tension you felt arising from your mini-anxiety session dissolves. “You wanna head inside super quick and grab something? I still have to go to the bathroom.”

Guiltily, you remember that you’ve delayed the true objective of your trip to the gas station. You nod, although tautly; but by now, you feel like you’re wasting time. The sooner you get yourself cleaned up, the sooner you can get back on the road.

And the sooner you get to Elliston—or somewhere near Elliston, at the least—the sooner you can hopefully explain yourself.

You’re helped upward—thankfully, since your legs have gone stilted from the concrete and the aches are sharp when you stretch yourself out—and Lynn guides you back inside, where you try and keep your thoughts tame as you randomly pick out a bottle of water. The alcohol section calls to you,
but you’re able to stay put because that’s one demon you feel like you can tranquilize much easier.

And then, with a pang of sudden amity, you hand over a chocolate bar to the cashier, because once upon a time, Chara had mentioned enjoying the stuff. Lynn pays for it without complaint; you definitely owe her.

You return outside with a lightened load on your brain, but that falters when you see Blake in a wooden position, awaiting you. Chara is not visibly seen with him.

Immediately you rush over to him, and his eyes are wide with fraught. “Where’s the kid.”

Your heart begins to pound in your ears as you imagine audacious scenarios that could have occurred in the time that you were gone. You weren’t even that far away; but did something happen? Did they run off? Is Blake not who he says he is? Are they—is he—?

“I—I’m so sorry!” Blake blurts out, looking upset and shameful, and your lungs begin to wrestle for air. You drop the water bottle onto the floor and you’re about to lung at him for answers when he hastily explains, “I meant to stop them! I did! I didn’t mean for them to—!”

You grab his shoulders harshly, mind racing into perpetuity. “Mean for them to what, Blake! Where are they?! Where’s my—where’s the—!”

The same hands that graciously kneaded securities into your spine now claws at your torso, ripping you viciously away from her husband.

“Calm down, Miles!” Lynn shouts, and her glare is furious enough for you to regain some sort of mental recollection. Then she turns to Blake again, looking calm but minorly frantic as well. “Blake, what’s happened? Where’s Chara?”

He opens his mouth to try and explain, and you cast daggers with your stare into his widened eyes before a flicker of movement draws your attention to around the van. Immediately you spot the person of interest with a sweeping air of relief, but then you freeze.

Chara saunters over to you, looking perky and excited—almost uncharacteristically. You’re supposing that the newfound excitement might have something to do with their new haircut—short and choppy, and goes right up to just below the ears. They’ve kept their bangs, but the front strands seem a bit longer than those in the back. Obviously they did it themself.

You stare in disbelief while they grin right back.

“Like it?” they ask, and behind their proud tone is something timid and reproachful. “I found some scissors in one of the bags and—”

“I’m so sorry, Miles!” Blake bursts out, still seeming crippled with shame. He looks like a beaten puppy, god help him. “I lost track of them! I-I thought that they were getting s-something else b-but I saw the scissors…and I was so worried and then—”

You pause him, holding up your only index finger in his direction, and then slowly inspect Chara’s new haircut. They allow you to do so, only withholding a darting gaze to the ground and nervously picking at uneven strands they hadn’t the time to modify.

From behind, then, you hear Lynn snort a little. All eyes turn to her immediately, and she covers her mouth, but her mirth bleeds into the sparkle of her gaze. You hear Chara retract into a more curled position behind you, and you’re ready to defend them if needed.
But Lynn’s expression is kind, not taunting. She looks to Chara and chuckles, “I think it suits you.”

She budges her husband with a stray elbow, and Blake coughs a little to adjust himself before looking over at the kid, admitting in stammers, “I—y-yeah. I mean, it is cute. You just—I didn’t mean to…scare you or anything. I-I was just a bit worried when you…”

Chara is unresponsive at first, but then you look behind and catch another glimpse of their new look, which is still a shock to see, given that you’ve only viewed them with shoulder-length hair. But, admittedly, Lynn is right: it does fit them well. You think it’s relieved a tense sort of undercurrent they’ve burdened themself with too—looking less stodgy, perhaps. And maybe a bit more…not relaxed, but refreshed.

“I like it,” you tell them.

They blink and look up at you, nonplussed at your compliment. And then their eyes glisten, with a fresh smile goading the corners of their lips. “You do?”

You nod. “You said you wanted shorter hair, right?”

This time, they nod but they don’t meet your gaze again. They smile to the concrete. “I did, yeah…”

“You look adorable,” Lynn coddles them, rushing over and plucking a few stray hairs that hadn’t floated to the floor quite yet. Blake joins her as well, still a bit of an outsider, and he mumbles another stray apology into your ear.

“Honest to god I wouldn’t have let them do it without your supervision,” he says in a murmur. “But the kid is so quick, I swear. It was over in like five seconds before I could say anything.”

You just find yourself laughing a little. It’s an ancient, bubbly sensation that tickles at your sides, but the smile you wear feels carefree and open. Chara just revels in Lynn’s adjustments of their creation, as she carefully snips away any loose strands. They beam at you, bouncing on their feet; you realize that they’ve waited a long time for a trim.

“Don’t worry about it,” you tell Blake, and you really mean it. “They like it. No harm no foul, right?”

You receive a similar smile when Blake answers in a relieved breath, “Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

When she proclaims that she’s finished, Lynn gives Chara an encouraging smoothing of their pixie-like cut, leaving the bangs to be. She reunites with Blake as they settle back in the car, and you know you’ve got another long trip ahead of you. But at least the fresh air seems to have done you good, and the weight that was once pressing on your system is slack now, allowing yourself leg room.

You turn over to Chara, whom is still glowing and feeling at the abridged curls in the back. They relish the wind on their neck, it seems, shivering in the breeze.

“Your parents are gonna kill me,” you mutter as they walk back to you.

Chara pauses at your words, and then they burst out laughing. Their giggles are raucous with sincerity, and their smile exposes teeth.

It’s the nicest sound you think you’ve heard in a long, long time.
You catch yourself trying to manually drift off many times throughout the journey, and you’ve been continuously persistent in making sure the radio stays off. And given that it’s your only real source of entertainment, much of your ride is spent staring out the window and trying not to think too hard. The mind isn’t friendly anymore.

Chara continues to sleep off their cruel dosage of anesthesia and slumps onto your side, which you allow. The lack of their hair spilling onto you is a dull sense of unnerve, since it’s so unlike the familiarity you’ve grown accustomed to. But the baby strands on the back of their neck is soft and fluffy; you smile warmly as they snuggle into you, thinking that you’re a pillow of some sorts, and the hairs tickle a bit. But that’s okay.

A couple of times throughout the ride, Lynn and Blake will try to form a conversation featuring yourself, but to no avail. The sloppy explanations to Lynn, you feel, were a bit much, and you’re scared that the truths will all spill out like a dam overflooding. They don’t deserve to know everything; it could kill them if you just so happened to mention the Walrider. It might get cocky. So you’re quiet.

Hours pass, you think, but you’re not certain. Nothing is certain anymore, it seems, because many palpable facts are susceptible to slipping your mind, whether it be the time of day, or eating, or… Oh, you shouldn’t have thought about that. You’re fucking starving. If the Walrider catches wind of that, it’ll surely want to—

Devour.

*Right on time,* you sigh, and your breath fogs up the glass you’re heavily pressed against. *Fine, fine. Let me figure something out.*

You call out to the driver, “Hey, uh, Blake. Any chance we’ll be stopping for lunch anytime soon?”

He hesitates on your question as he scopes out a safe space on the freeway to glance over at his wife and have a brief, quiet discussion discerning your question. Eventually he calls back, “We’re almost in Laurel. We’ll stop and find a place after we’ve done a little shopping.”

You perk up a little with a heightened sense of bafflement. “‘Shopping’?”

You catch Blake’s eye from the mirror. “Well, you said you were on the run, right? It’d probably be ideal to toss the clothes you’re wearing,” he continues.

“It was actually pretty convenient for your kid to get smart and cut their hair, honestly,” Lynn admits, asserting herself into the conversation with ease. “We’re gonna help you hide from authorities and we’ll do it right.”

Blake switches an exasperated gaze upon his wife without a turn of his head, which you can still see through the rearview mirror. “I still think this is risky.”

He’s only answered with a shrug. Their voices have become stage whispers again, but you listen regardless. “Of course it is, babe. But this is our friend and a poor little kid. I’m not just going to toss them out into the street.”

“…I know. And it makes sense, but…I still feel a bit dirty.”

There’s a soft snicker. “Welcome to journalism, Blake.”

“Point taken.”
The air around you becomes drafty, and you hold your arms in a feeble attempt to get yourself warm. But the temptation to claw into the flesh becomes an impulsive nightmare and you have to force yourself to bear the cold.

A selfish half of you regrets ever lending your coat to the kid; but it’s gone when they huddle closer into your side and sigh a little, content. In sleep, they look so helpless.

Fuck the Walrider. Fuck the cold. You’ll freeze if you damn well feel like it.

A small town eventually lends a cheap thrift store in your favors, and you walk in with Lynn and Blake’s guidance and a very tired Chara, who groans and sleepily clings to your back like a koala. They make you trip a little, but that’s fine.

“Okay, Blake? Mind helping Miles out in finding some old clothes?” Lynn declares, turning expectantly to her husband. He complies with a nod and directs you to a specific men’s section, with Lynn escorting Chara into another part of the small store. You’re fine with being separated on account of these county only seems to be populated with like ten people. Murkoff probably won’t find you here for the time being.

They’re probably on your tail, though…

With a few amused chuckles at your own expense, Blake hands you a couple of faded tees and a couple of flannels to try on, and eventually you decide that you’ve lost enough dignity so that you’re fine with walking around looking like a homeless man. Any potential professional air you may have continued to carry throughout your travels have melted away, and at this point you could probably be dressed for anyone’s entertainment and not bat a lash.

You’ve long since stopped considering your taste in fashion a priority.

The end result is Blake purposely tangling up your hair—which has grown a bit too long for your personal tastes—and cloaking you with a buttoned shirt and a jacket. Which sounds fine, if the clothes in question weren’t literally a dollar each, and they look and smell like a deceased elder. The supporting element that you haven’t shaved in a while either is just further nailing the coffin shut, it seems.

“Yeesh,” you grumble, not bothering to give yourself a gander in the mirror. “I look like I’m wearing the dirty laundry of my dead grandfather.”

Behind you, Blake chuckles a little. “Yeah, I’m not gonna lie, you look pretty scrappy. But being a fugitive of the law doesn’t have fashion standards.”

You shrug absently. “Guess not.”

These people are being too nice. They need to sweep you away as quickly as possible before they’re potential victims, from either Murkoff’s wrath of the Walrider’s.

Speaking of which, you’re feeling queasy again. Best to just pay and get away from public territory as quickly as possible.

Lynn and Chara meet you both at a register, and you’re pleased to see the archaic, battered hospital gown has been discarded. In its place is some worn jeans, hiking boots, and a striped shirt—long sleeves, thank god. Your jacket is now hugging their hips, and they haven’t given any hint of wanting to return it to sender anytime soon. You’re not sure whether to be a bit troubled or honored at the fact.
You tell Chara that the clothes look nice, to which they give a sort of paralleling grimace of how you inwardly feel. These fabrics are not esthetic, but it’s your last resort.

And, of course, you thank the Langermanns for their financial sacrifice, even if your jacket reeks; you’re not seeing laundry in your future, so you feel privileged to gripe about it. But you keep your complaints silenced for now.

They both smile and hand over their debit card with a bit less reluctance following your gratitude.

- 

You’re back on the road again, and with enough persistence (and maybe a bit of manipulation, you’ll admit), you were able to convince the Langermanns to just go through a fast food restaurant, rather than stop and have the threat of being a) spotted by the wrong person, or b) giving the Walrider any sort of leg room. Both intimidations heavily suffocate your freedom, but for the child huddled near their car window, slowly chomping on the chocolate bar you’d given them a while ago, it’s a liberty you’re willing to sacrifice.

There’s a mutual silence you feel that you’ve earned from being a little less of an asshole whilst being around Blake and Lynn, and you don’t feel guilty about not wanting to talk anymore. If they have troubles with that, well, then they wouldn’t be the first.

Chara nudges you, and they look a little sick. You lean down when instructed to do so by their reserved body language, and hesitantly they whisper, “I want to get out.”

You frown, a bit surprised. “How come?”

They shake their head, and they do look a bit pale. A case of carsickness, maybe? “I don’t even know where we’re going. I just want to…I want to clear my head a little. Maybe…shit, I don’t know.”

They’re in a sticky situation too, you remember. They left behind much more than you did; you were only half-kidding when you’d implied that Toria will kick your ass.

But it’s all for their own good, isn’t it? It’s why you’re dragging yourselves farther away from normality…

You pat their head a little awkwardly, seeing that Chara was never huge on physical affection given without forewarning. But, oddly enough, they are acceding with your touch.

“How troubles?” Lynn calls over her shoulder, and almost instantly Chara pulls away to regain their position on looking wistfully out the window.

Of fucking course that the moment Chara begins to crash, there’s false television snow worming its way under your sockets, morphing into patterns and noises that are making your teeth grind together.

Upon seeing your conditions, you’re pulled over at a rest stop, filtered with thick forestry all around and barely another spot of life in sight. Just like back at the diner, you suppose; only when you step out to expose yourself to the outdoors’s ambience, you’re met with a cooling breeze that seems to detox your ribcage of its gel-like structure. The building weight releases, and your heartbeat discovers normalcy.

Jesus, how long are you going to have to go through this process? Dissociate. Panic. Breathe. Lather, rinse, repeat.
Chara walks on over to the exterior of the rest stop, but not far from view, thankfully. They crouch in the grass and are motionless, which worries you.

You’re tapped from behind, but you don’t jump out of your skin this time. You’re stronger than that. “Miles?” Blake pries, “Are they okay?”

With two sets of eyes now focusing on Chara’s huddled figure, you feel an urge to shake your head to ease any worries. “They’re fine,” you promise him, even if you turn and see his eyes still clouded with a type of maternal concern you don’t carry. Maybe something deeper within his intents, you’re not sure you don’t know Blake, nor his experience with children. But he doesn’t seem as naïve as you in that sense.

Either way, you shrug off his qualms and peel away your own anxieties as well, given that you know Chara a little better than the Langermanns, and their behavior doesn’t feel like anything you need to get in a twist about. Not yet, anyway.

“They’re just a bit overwhelmed,” you continue. “Let them breathe for a second. I wouldn’t suffocate them about it.”

An odd stir of pride festers when Blake obeys your authority over Chara’s wellbeing, because you’re more experienced in that department than him. He nods, although slowly and with great reproach. “Alright,” he concedes. “You know best.”

You’re not sure you absolutely agree with him on that, but then Blake is being dragged away by Lynn to the side for a small chat, and you dwindle alone for a bit. You hear their hushed tones and quickened dialogue, and you begin to have the burrowing thought that something is wrong.

But before you can walk over and analyze their behavior, your name is called. You spin around to see Blake and Lynn looking at you with similar looks of pensive sadness. With smiles that are a bit too shortcoming for personal ease.

You feel like you know a bit of what’s about to happen, but still you ask, “Is something wrong?”

Blake speaks first, surprisingly. “We…have to get back on the road. We have a deadline to meet.”

“I see.”

Not that you’re upset. You’re really not, but your stomach tightens anyway.

(Since when have you ever feared loneliness?)

“We were…” Lynn hesitates, breaking her darkened gaze from your own. “I mean, we were planning on dropping you off sometime farther down the road. But we’re on a tighter schedule than anticipated.”

“And so you’re just dumping us at some random rest stop?” you challenge; you haven’t notice how your tone has gotten a bit more heated than when you’d last inspected.

Both seem to wince. They give you an identical expression of contrition; the sincerity of the looks makes you swallow the anger trickling up your spine.

(Weren’t you just now complaining about how these people need to get away from you? God, grow up, Upshur.)

Then Lynn pulls out a card from one of her jacket’s pockets and extends it to you, and you take it,
giving it a brief inspection but skimming over most details. It’s a business card.

“Call us if you ever need anything, Miles,” Lynn persists. “I’m serious.”

You tuck the card away in one of your own pockets, murmuring a halfhearted, “Thank you.”

Blake nods, and just like that you’re giving him a farewell handshake, all in fair politeness. And Lynn sweeps you into another hug and you endure it, even if being touched isn’t on your wishlist at the moment.

Then Lynn softly whispers into your ear, “Just be a human, Miles. Don’t worry about anything else.”

The words sting. You’ve heard them before, and they don’t carry the same value that they did back then. Maybe it’s because a different person voiced it.

"Here." Blake hands you a map, pulled from one of his pockets. One of which that you remember him analyzing back at the diner. He points to a specific route, colored poorly and hastily with a bright red pen. "If Elliston is where you need to head, then just follow the road out back. It should get you there as soon as you can. If you hitch a ride, it'll be less than forty minutes away."

You nod, stuffing away the paper. "Thanks."

Like hell you'll hitchhike. You'll just take your chances on foot.

The Langermanns continue to apologize profusely, and they seem genuinely sorry that all of a sudden they're dumping you at some random stop in a town you know nothing about. But, loyal to your advice, they leave Chara alone amidst the departure. Lynn tells you to give them her best regards. The she hugs you again and you promise again that you'll try to get into contact with them whenever you're able. Logical aspects aside, finding someone who remembers you and seems like a faithful friend isn't something you want to waste anymore. You'll miss her; you just try not to let it show.

And then, just like that, they pull out of the rest stop and they wave a little, pull down the window and yell out some goodbyes and ‘call us’ and ‘stay safe’.

And then they’re gone.

The horror sinks in like a snap of the fingers. Alone again, defenseless. What kept the nanite hellbeast away was petty distractions of company. And if that’s gone, then…

Damn it, your arms itch again. And Christ, have they always stung this bad?

No questions are fully answered because the recollection of the child behind you reclaims your attention, and with a sweeping wave of something instinctive and visceral you run over there so that Chara isn’t sitting alone, in a foreign rest stop in the middle of nowhere.

You crouch down, becoming highly mindful of any new pangs throughout your awful body, and the grass tickles at your pant legs. They haven’t budged; they didn’t even say goodbye to the Langermanns.

Before you can try and think of something useful to say, Chara asks aloud, “So what do we do next?”

Asking the real questions, and so early on into the new chapter of the adventure. You just wish that you had more time to think of a proper answer.
But there are none. You just sink down into the grassy bedding, poking at a particular weed of your remote interest. “They said we were out near Laurels. Maybe if we could find a map and figure out where it is, we can—”

“We’re not hitching a ride again, are we?” Chara challenges, peering at you with a dangerous gleam.

“Absolutely not.”

There’s silence for a minute longer, but it’s not so quiet that you hear the static again; there are cars in the distance that keep you entertained.

Chara starts picking at the grass around their feet, and they eyes are heavily glazed. “Why didn’t you just tell me you didn’t want to see me anymore?”

Their question reels you way back into the past, shocking you at the peculiarity. “I’m sorry?”

They sigh, seeming a bit annoyed. Their fingers trail to their shortened hair’s wisps. “When you called Toria and said that you didn’t want to see me. Why couldn’t you just have told me in person?”

With reluctance, you weigh potential answers in your mind and poke at whichever ones will leave Chara less angry; although they’re all pretty shitty explanations for yourself. The background cars do well in providing an ambience, but the weight of Chara’s queries still stand.

Eventually you just have to give some sort of response. “I just felt like telling you straightforward wouldn’t be wise.”

Chara’s eyes, although downcast, momentarily flare with something testy. “Why? Because I can’t handle being dumped like garbage?” And then they scoff, and the noise emits an ugly thump in the ribs. “Wouldn’t be the first time.”

In defiance, you shake your head. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Then what do you mean?” Their eyes glint as they turn to you suddenly, making you jump. You remember the fight that seemed to have happened years ago, yet at the same time it feels like it occurred only hours prior.

“I…” What do you mean?

“I never wanted you a part of this,” you finally exhale, and your hand runs astray through your greasy hair. “I know I’m shitty. I know this whole situation is a giant shitfest. I’m already singlehandedly airing out dirty laundry and I wanted you as far away from all of this as possible.”

Chara knits their brows closer, dimming their features. “That doesn’t explain why you couldn’t have just called me yourself.”

You try not to cringe at the grave drop in their voice. “I’m tired of hurting people,” is all you can say. “I wanted you to be okay. I guess the fact that I was some weird source of happiness for you is… was… too risky.”

“Were you scared?”

You blink. “Scared of what?”

“Commitment,” Chara explains, their fingers twisting a glass blade. “Being like what you said: someone that made me happy.”
You can’t picture yourself as somebody who would make anybody happy.

When you don’t reply, Chara just draws up their own muddy conclusions and stands up, brushing the dirt off their already-stained jeans. “Whatever,” they sigh, and it makes you wince a little at their poorly-concealed icy undertone. “You can do whatever you feel like. I’ll just fucking follow you wherever we’re headed because I have nowhere else to go now.”

They whip back around, refreshing their cold expression with a mock look of buoyancy. “Where to, Upshur?”

- Terror emits from the fear that someone may consider you walking alongside a road with a child, alone and in poor conditions, a source of suspicion. Every car that drives by makes you physically cringe with the dripping dread that one of them will stop and ask you for a ride, or confirm your anxieties that the public has deemed you a wanted citizen.

Seems that the common apathy humanity wears has worked in your favor, though. No one stops to ask if you’re okay, even with a young kid in tow. Even if they trudge along, still a bit disoriented from the medicinal imbalance in their system. If they trip a little, they’ll instinctively lean onto you for support before immediately withdrawing once they get a better handle of themself. It hurts a little, but you try and remember that Chara confirmed that they don’t hate you.

Which was pretty surprising, all things considered; you’re not exactly your biggest fan yourself, and if you were Chara, you’d think it would be pretty easy to despise you.

You begin to theorize that it was your deviant mannerisms that ultimately drove the Langermanns to ditch you, because they seemed pretty happy to abandon you at a rest stop and make you walk all this way to a town that’s relatively close by. Key word being ‘relative’: you’ve still got a fairly long way to go.

Rest breaks become more frequent as you trudge along with your sore, crumbling bones, and often your pants fall a bit short as you knead into the sensitive areas with impatience. There are many things you wish you could be doing right now, and walking along a road out in some countryside with achy limbs isn’t one of your favorite options.

Chara kneels down next to you, out of an automatic concern. “Doing alright?”

“Yeah,” you grunt, continuously massaging into the tissue but feeling that your efforts are more harmful than helpful.

They frown, narrowing their eyes. “Walrider or limbs?”

“Limbs.”

“Ah.” They watch idly as a car screeches by you, and the sound of rushing tires on the cement is penetrating your skull more than usual; probably since you’re so close to the ground and all. But still, it’s like nails on a chalkboard; you hiss at the pain reared from the sound of it, clashing with your sanity like flood waves on a shoreline.

When you’ve pacified your legs enough so that they’re not a severe threat to your walking stature anymore, you lean back with your arms as shaky supports. You stare onto the temporarily-desolate road, numbing your thoughts.

“Have you tried talking with it?”
You turn, surprised. “What?”

Chara gives you the expressional embodiment of an eyeroll. “I was just curious, is all. Maybe you could like, I don’t know, talk it out? Like a noisy roommate or something.”

You could not be anymore lost on the topic. “Talk what out?”

“You know! The problems with…you know who,” Chara exhales, sounding resigned, and with their hands they make a very clear ‘W’ with their fingers. It hits you hard; you gulp.

The concept of ever trying to summon the Walrider from wherever it’s hidden now—in whatever crack of your brain cells it nestles in, waiting to strike—is nonetheless unsettling. You just got it to shut up! Why would you ever want to ‘talk things out’ with a deity that’s only hellbent on destruction?

(…Okay, maybe the raid at Pharmatech was a little piloted by yourself, but that’s not a case in point.)

You remain neutral on the subject instead, breathing out a very apathetic, “I don’t know…”

“It could help,” Chara presses. “I mean, probably. Not that I’d have any sort of personal experience in this field, but it could be worth a shot.”

There’s a question hanging like bait in the air that you wish to ask: on whether your hypothetical negotiations with the Walrider would equal a safer partner for Chara. Maybe they’re worried that you’ll snap on them. Maybe your constant orders barked at the Walrider that it can devour anyone but the kid in the hospital gown, back in the underground lab, was a wasted effort.

It drives forth a very low, “I’ll think about it.”

You’re not sure why you’re upset, but you are. Wouldn’t Chara have known by now that you’re not the man back at Pharmatech? Maybe they should be a little more grateful that you blew up a couple of stomach intestine back there just to save their ass.

Holy shit, this stupid fucking parasite is getting to me.

Time to move, then.

You haul yourself upwards, with a little bit of stubborn assistance from your kid-partner, and wander on your way. You just cross your fingers and pray that the map you practically psychoanalyzed back at the rest stop will lead you in the right direction.

“You say you’ll think about it and you mean it,” Chara remarks, and looks at you square in the eyes. Their emotions are carefully reserved. “Right?”

Due to the sensitivity of the topic, you just nod. “Right.”

They glare at you with disbelief, and they walk on behind you, purposefully keeping distance.

You’ll admit, it stings.

- 

The clouds blockading the moon above promise a heavy rainfall, and in the crisp air you sense a thunderstorm. Your footsteps speed up at the natural wish to find shelter quickly, especially since the
dark is ghostly and full of potential corruption initiated by yours truly. The Walrider really loves the shadows and you’re more than happy to not provide him a foothold.

Chara yawns beside you and stretches their arms over their head, promoting their exhaustion of the long walk. Unlike the desert, though, you both are tamed by the cooling breeze whistling through grass, the elongated birdsong that makes things slightly less senile.

“Ugh,” they grumble, looking up distastefully and holding out an expectant hand. “I felt a raindrop.”

True to their word, a few droplets prickle at the top of your forehead, and you groan because although this is the greatest equivalent to a shower you’ve had as of late, it means a downpour is imminent.


Chara hums, looking towards the silhouettes of forestry outlining the landscape. “Maybe head towards the trees?”

“Maybe. I don’t know, keep walking and maybe we’ll come across something.”

“Sure thing, captain.”

The black tendrils of sleep threaten to drag you downward as you walk monotonously, trying to find anything but a dark menacing forest to rest your head. You’re a blink away from letting the Walrider take the wheel and the concept of being a local cryptid amidst the woods is not the fate you desire.

A fluorescent light source blinds your vision when you round a curve along the road, and you’re greeted by a lonely gas station. Déjà vu recognizes the similar sort of solitude found back in Wyoming, and you’re not sure what to feel about it. The only familiar emotion is a twitch of nostalgia, possibly leaning towards the presence of the Langermanns.

Jesus Christ, I’ve lost it…

“Well, I guess we could always sleep under there.” Chara points rather unenthusiastically to a hanging roof, blockading the vending machines and sheltering them from the upcoming rainstorm.

Fantastic. Being huddled up between vending machines at a gas station in the middle of god-knows-where. Cross that one off your bucket list.

But wordlessly you walk forward; what other choice is left? Either keep going and risk being left out in the rain, or discard your makeshift dignity for sleep.

Maybe the lights near the machines will keep us warm…

The store seems nearly empty, saving a few couple spots for the final truck drivers filling their tank, just so they can speed back home as soon as possible before the storm properly sets in. You envy them; you wish you still had access to your Jeep, because god in heaven she would be labelled your savior right now.

You find that your side brushes against Chara’s a couple of times; it’s astounding that they’re still gravitating to you like magnets, even when you don’t think you can make it any clearer to them how awful you are with maternal necessities. Toria would probably know what to do; man, you don’t even know her that well and you miss her.

You miss a lot more things than you’d thought, actually.
Memory lane begins to gnaw at your heartstrings, but it halts when you spot a man popping out of the store with a fresh pack of cigarettes. Your eyes go to them immediately; you need something to get the edge off, and if old habits start kicking in, well then damn it all to hell. It’s better than being labelled an alcoholic.

You go up to the man with as much deadened confidence as you can muster, and your hands cup Chara’s ears instantly, earning a yelp of protest. “I’ll suck your dick for a cigarette.”

The man— heavyset, bald, looks like a retired truck driver—almost gags on his spit. “What the fuck, dude?”

“You heard me.”

He throws the whole thing at you, still theatrically retching.

“Shit dude, just take the whole thing! Jesus Christ…”

He storms away in less than a second, mumbling something angry and incoherent under his breath. You fight back a smirk because not once has that tactic never worked.

You release your grip on Chara’s ears as soon as the lewd conversation is done, and as predicted they’re not pleased. They whirl to you with a fiery glare.

“What did you even say?” they prompt. You just shrug it off and reach down for the pack, temporarily wondering how to light them but realizing that he’d thrown a stray packet of matches in your direction as well. The guy must have not been feeling up for it.

“How ‘bout I tell you when you’re older?” you reply curtly, striking the match.

Chara just sighs in heated exasperation. “Alright, fine. You have your cigarettes. But we don’t have food. Why couldn’t you have just threatened him for a candy bar or a bag of potato chips or something?”

The cigarette flickers to life; you drink in the manual composure of smoking, an old vice back in college days. It got you through study-less nights, and it will surely get you through this catastrophe.

“Not a problem,” you tell them, and you walk over to your assigned bedding for the night: the space between two vending machines, with one serving drinks and the other with crappy snacks.

It takes a little more effort than you’d hoped, but with enough jiggling and pounds of your fists—and a bit of instructed assistance from Chara—you’re able to rob the machine of a couple bags of chips and some soda.

Chara collects the prizes with awe. “Wow! How did you know how to do that?”

You blow out puffs of smoke and aim for the woods, rather than Chara’s excited grin. “I was a college student once. This shit got me through if smoking didn’t.”

The kid stifles a small giggle as they plop to the floor, leaning against the machinery. “Fair enough.” They burst open a bag of cheesy crackers, gleaming down at the snack. “What was that thing my mother said before big meals…? Oh, yeah! Itadakimasu!”

With that they crunch on their chips, and you enjoy your fill of the junk food as well. It doesn’t have the same affect on your stomach as the more wholesome meals you’ve had with Lynn and Blake; but it’s better than nothing. Anything to keep the demons at bay.
And it prolongs when you’ve have to encounter the damn nanogod again; if you ever had to hear its stupid, robotic, detached excuse for a voice ringing in your head one more time, you swear you’re going to lose it.

You finish up and trash the remnants of the meal in a nearby dumpster, and that’s when the sky cracks open and the rain corners you both into the small shade. Artificial lighting buzzes above, to your great disgust, and moths swarm to the glow. You pocket your cigarettes for now; you’ll need them later.

A weight snuggles into your side with a surprising amount of softness. You look down at Chara to see their gaze is heavily downcast, and their brows furrow together. Even if they’re still mad at you, you tuck them into your worn jacket as best you’re able to try and shield them from the chilly temperatures.

They bounce back with a squeak. “Yikes!” they exclaim. “You’re cold.”

You are?

You press your own hand against the side of the ribs that they were leaning on, looking like an imbecile as you try to find an icy area along your chest. But it feels just like your skin, is all; you take their word for it, though.

However, Chara seems more confused than upset at the fact. They burrow farther into the jacket that once belonged to you, but then try again to cuddle back to where they were originally seated on your side. They don’t flinch this time, but you can tell from their tense body movement that they’re still not comfortable.

The raindrops provide a softer ambience to focus on rather than the lights above. Your arm draws Chara in tighter without you fully acknowledging the action.

And then Chara says: “Asriel and I would sometimes play this game, if we were really, really bored. It was like truth or dare, but kind of lamer. We took turns asking each other one really hard question, and then we’d soften the load with a really easy one.”

Your frown buries itself deeper into your mouth. “So are you suggesting we play a round?”

Hesitantly, they nod into your chest. “I’ll go first.” They straighten up instantly, and their altered demeanor makes your heart flop with unease.

“I’ll ask a hard question,” Chara announces, then falters, then sucks in a breath and looks at everything but you when they ask: “Are you still there, Miles?”

You’re a bit unsure whether or not that was the question, but you nod anyway. “Of course.”

They still shake their head no, like they’re ridding their mind of a devious thought. “No,” they murmur coldly. “I mean are you still here, or is it just the Walrider now?”

Oh.

Your guts twist and tangle, and your mind travels into dark locations, poking at the unknown and wallowing in your building grief.

The thing is: you don’t know. You just know that the man who walked into Mount Massive is not the same person who walked out. But how literal that fact can be taken still seems up to your own interpretation.
You don’t know how to process this anymore: where you are and where the Walrider is. If it’s always going to be some coy thought that worms its way into your brain, or if it’s a more sinister, puppeteer-like relationship. You only remember snippets of colliding with the Walrider, and none of the episodes appear to be directed by a two-thought processor, rather than just the nanite getting what it wants and leaving you to clean up after it.

But when Chara got kidnapped…it was different. It was you, but it wasn’t.

How are you supposed to explain all this to a twelve-year old?

They’re gazing up at you with bug eyes, glistening pupils, probably wondering why you’re taking so long to respond.

You just stare out onto the rain, helpless.

“I don’t know right now,” you admit. “I just don’t think that the…the Walrider is me. It wasn’t built by me, or originally hosted by me, so it’s not always me. And the lines get blurry sometimes. I forget and I’ll snap and do something pretty awful.

“But I know this: even if the worst happened to me, and everything that was me disappeared and the Walrider was left behind, I would never let it hurt you.” You lower your head, catching it with a palm. “I’m tired, kid. I’m tired of running but I don’t know what else to do. I’ll stand up to this son of a bitch as long as I can, but I want you to know that I refuse to let that thing get its hands on you.”

Chara has now wriggled their way out of your grip and looking at you agape; their eyes spilling with tears, and their mouth is stitched shut but it wavers so dangerously that it breaks your heart.

“I can’t take back what I’ve done or said,” you sigh. “I’m sorry I don’t know what to do for you. I wish I could be more like your foster mom, or even Lynn, for Christ’s sake.” Or Jackson, you think, but that a thought you keep bottled up to yourself for now. “I’ll just…do what I can. I promise.”

You finish and Chara reaches forward to wrap their arms around you, choking you with their tightened hold. Their body heaves with tears and you shush them, guiding your arms around their figure and just trying to do something for once.

“I’m sorry,” they sob.

“Me too.”

They snap away to stare at you with a reddened, moist face, and you press a small kiss to their forehead. Like back in Mount Massive, near Billy’s life pod; where it was all supposed to end.

Chara just laughs a little when they huddle to your side again, their back now pressed to the concrete like you, but they’ve drifted towards you with a bit less solidity in their form. You cover them as best you can with your jacket and just eye the shadows of the trees.

“I didn’t ask you the easy question,” they sniffle, but their tone hides a broken smile.

You blink to rid your eyelids of the images growing below the umbrage. “What’s the easy question, then.”

They think for a while as you relish in the thunder above your heads. The slow drumming reminds you of a heartbeat.

“What’s your favorite season?” they finally ask.
You think momentarily upon this. “I like fall,” you decide. “The breeze is nice, and the leaves are vibrant with all the different shades and hues. Also wearing jackets is always a plus in my book.”

Chara chuckles a little. “Mine is spring,” they say. “Everything is just so new. Like the world is staring over again. And all the birds are singing, flowers are blooming…”

They yawn.

“Get some sleep,” you advise. “I’ll keep watch.”

“Y’should sleep too, dummy,” they slur, muzzy with fatigue.

“I will,” you lie.

They’re out like a light, their breaths even against your torso.

You’re alone for now. You look out into the dead of the forest, making shapes out of nothing like you’d done in the Langermanns’ van. You’d said a lot of risky shit that could come back and bite you, like vows always tend to do with you. Hell, you still don’t know whether you’re just the skin of Miles Upshur, a man that once was. You’re not even you anymore; who knows what the Walrider could do?

But the figure in your lap seems unfazed. They dream in silence; they don’t even know where you’re taking them, and still they follow you. You really mean that much to them.

It’s not supposed to be worrying, but it is. You’re not good, you’re not even stable. You’re just…a man possessed by a demon. A former journalist. A once-was.

The rain comes closer, influenced by wind, and you tuck yourself in tighter, bringing the kid to your chest.

…Fuck it.

You’ll save this kid. You couldn’t save any Variant back there, no matter how much you may have wanted to, in your empathy. You couldn’t spare Jackson or Waylon from your wrath, and you couldn’t even save yourself. But you don’t see yourself as anybody worth scavenging for, anymore. Whatever you’ll be, you’ll just be.

But you’ll save Chara. You’ll protect them. You’ll do this much because you owe it to them, to try and strive for a better ending. A better life, even.

You cradle the kid to your heart as the storm blows over, and the pelting downpour subsides into a tamer rainfall.

I promise.

Chapter End Notes

"Itadakimasu" - A common phrase in Japan, translates to "I humbly receive." Usually given as a thanks for a meal

Chapter name from this prose post by tumblr user byegods
One more chapter in this story to go.
make yourself a home from the bricks of the moments you felt something like love

Chapter Summary

'there is still light to be found. it is in us, and we will survive.'

X

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It seems like both you and the Walrider were equally tuckered out last night, because the second you close your eyes just to rest them from the blinding lights above your head, and the next you’re being shaken back into consciousness.

“Hey, sleepyhead!” Chara prods you in the side of the ribs, and it hurts but it also tickles a little. You make a noise of dissent, but it only seems to encourage them. You think you’re legally braindead now.

“Get up, you ass!” they huff, and you open your eyes a little to see a blurry scene of Chara towering over your figure, crossing their arms and looking a little frustrated with your lethargy. “We have to get going or else we’ll get arrested!”

The word ‘arrested’ activates a frozen section of your hindbrain, and your body whirrs to life. First you find your hands to place on the concrete, then you sluggishly climb to your feet with a little bit of help from your partner.

The sleep wears at your eyelids and dismembers into familiar black-and-white patterns, morphing into monarchs and church buildings, mutilated organs… “I’m up,” you sigh, voice incredibly hoarse. You try to shake the slumber out of your system by harassing your face and hair with your hands. It helps a little.

And then you pause, slowly seeping back into the reality set before you. “Wait, why are we getting arrested?” Your tone restrains a yawn.

“We’re not,” Chara assures you brusquely. “I just said that to get you up.”

Irritated now that your one chance of a dreamless sleep has been snatched away, you let out the yawn stuffed in your chest. “Mission accomplished.”

They just laugh a little, albeit dryly, and without having to verbally enable the journey, both of your feet start moving. Your map is still in your pocket, and you feel it pinch at your thighs when you move a little. You’ll take it out in a second and make sure that all is well.

But man, you’ve completely forgotten how amazing sleep is. Exhaustion really does take its natural course when it comes to ensuring your natural schedule; the less you sleep, the more likely you are to pass out at any given time. You speak from experience, of course.

This occasion doesn’t seem different, but there is a menacing trace of the tiredness that makes you
worried. A pitched whining is coming from somewhere, and you’re more concerned now that the Walrider is just lurking, fully recharged and ready to pounce when the moment is right.

Chara looks back at your slumped posture, even when you trudge forward in a feeble attempt to catch up with them. Seems that the drugs did their time in Chara’s body, and they look like they’ve been splashed in the face with cold water; their gaze is more open and alert than it has been for the last couple of days.

“Where are we going?” they ask you.

You’d figured that they would begin to ask more uncomfortable questions, given that they’re more inquisitive, thanks to their recent good night’s sleep. And yeah, you begrudgingly suppose that it was a little well-off that you both got rest; but at what cost to either of you…

“No,” you tell Chara, but you avoid shaking your head because your cotton-stuffed skull is delicate now. “I know where we’re going.”

“Do you.” They saunter up to match your paces with ease. They sound a bit sharp in tone, but the curious nature dampens their insolence. “You said Elliston?”

“That’s right.”

“Sooo…what’s exactly in Elliston that’s of utmost importance?”

You hesitate; you’re already on dangerous territory, and there’s no need to darken your conscience up anymore than needed, especially at a vulnerable moment in time. “Well…it’s…stuff.”

Chara indorses a theatrical expression of astonishment, widening their eyes and dropping their jaw. “Wow!” they say, clasping their face in their hands. “‘Stuff’? Well, no wonder we walked all this way! What a marvelous surprise! Mister Upshur, I am deeply humbled to have been your traveling acquaintance for such a journey. To have the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to have witnessed the magnificence of ‘stuff’ will have made this tiring voyage worthwhile.”

Chara ends their exaggerated testimony with a large bow, and you look on, unimpressed.

“Are you done yet?”

They perk up with a toothy grin, and you realize that you’ve missed their doting mischief.

“I believeth that thou hast suffered enough,” Chara sighs, but they’re still smiling. “But if thee acteth like a dick once more, then terror would be wrought.”
You blink, still feeling out of the loop at their sudden mood change. “Understood…eth.”

Chara bursts into giggles and they trample on ahead, despite not knowing where you’re taking them. They check behind to ensure that you’re still following, and you’re trying not to chuckle with amusement at their bouncing steps.

They’re so upbeat; you want them to stay that way as long as possible.

Then they turn right back around to you, and the playful banter vanishes once you catch sight of their sincere gaze. A frown has creased their lips as well, thin with contemplation.

“Jokes aside,” Chara murmurs, “we’re going somewhere safe, right?”

‘Safe’ is not a word you would immediately associate for who you’re going to, out of personal preference. But there’s a sharp contrast with your own definition of security versus Chara’s, so you nod in agreement. Their shoulder slacken a bit at the silent reassurance.

“Somewhere safe,” you tell them. “I swear.”

The promise tastes filthy in your own tongue, but the flavor is gone when Chara seems reassured. You both continue to walk forward, with you taking out the map to confirm that you’re headed the right way.

Unfortunately, it seems that you are.

In an uncharacteristic sweep of leadership, Chara leads you off the roadway. And you’re naturally concerned that you’ll get lost, with them crinkling the underbrush and delving deeper into the forestry, where you’d both promised not to involve yourselves. Partly because of the unknown factor of your area already being a sensitive region. The other being that you’re already so enticed with the mysterious woods, and you don’t want that passion to fall into the wrong level of power.

The woods are thick with sparse vegetation, promising a thriving spring. Crickets and birds rustle about and deafen your footsteps as leaves crinkle under your boot. You get entangled in underbrush more than a handful of times as Chara leads you forward; they seem to be trying to find something of interest.

“So, what exactly are we looking for?” you pry, scraping away a cobweb sticking to your face.

Chara just heads down towards a hidden river and unleashes their hold on your hand to go down and admire the shoreline. The water ripples along the soles of their feet, and they seem to be thinking intently while staring down at the bubbling creek.

The sandy is marshy under your weighted steps, but you join them regardless. You remember when you’d taken them out of school for the day, and you’d taken them to a park. They’d regarded the river, alike to how they’re acting presently. They idly watch a small fish travel upstream.

“I think here is a good place,” Chara comments aloud, but they seem to be talking to themself.

Regardless, you perk up with a raised brow. “A good place for what?”

They turn back to you with a look of interest, giving a slight shrug. “Meditation.”

“Meditation?”
Another shrug; they kick a stone into the water. “You said you wanted to talk to the Walrider. So, here’s a nice place to do it.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Look!” Chara sounds slightly agitated as they sweep their arms around the area. “We’re in a forest, the most peaceful fucking area on planet Earth. Plus, if trying to communicate goes horribly wrong, no one will be harmed.”

You sigh; this all seems too risky—and a bit too hippie-centric for your taste. You think you’d rather have another finger chopped off than to do yoga or meditate or some shit like that. “Kid, I don’t know—”

“You said that you would,” Chara retorts. “And this might be the only way to properly contain that thing. Just— assert dominance or cuss it out or something. I don’t fucking know.” But they narrow their gaze with a sharp emotion that takes you by surprise. “But that thing needs you. It needs a Host, so it chose you. And it might be just me, but…it sounds like it relies on you way more than you rely on it.”

You chew on your lower lip and look to the sandy floor. You hadn’t thought about that…

But the soldiers buried all those bullets in your body, and the Walrider had taken them all out of you. If it decided to leave, then would the wounds reopen? Are you really just a walking corpse now?

The sloshing of hiking boots scuffling in the soggy waterfront catches your attention. Chara now seems to be a bit more sadly sober. Their eyes are heavyweight as they stare at you.

“Just try it,” they murmur to you. Then, softly: “Please? I hate seeing you like this.”

A lot of people did. Jackson hated it when you were chronically broken and fragile. You’re sick of seeing yourself like this, too.

But there are too many threats on the line. You walk forward to Chara, frowning with worry. “What about you?”

Chara just seems unconcerned about possibly encountering the Walrider again. They just sweep away your question. “Don’t worry about me. I’m an excellent hider. I’ll be in a bush or some shit nearby.”

Their red-and-white shirt will make them stick out like a sore thumb, you think. As if reading your thoughts, though, Chara tugs your black jacket onto their small body and zips it up.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me,” they proclaim with a slight smile, “I’m off to become one with the forest.”

They give you a small salute and they’re about to run off, into the forestry, but you pull them back to wrap them into a hug. They’re stoic at first to the touch, but eventually they melt into your tight hold.

“You’re not worried about the wildlife, or them getting lost; they’re smart, and you’ve seen them back in Mount Massive; they’re resourceful and quick under large bouts of stress.

Surely this is a mission set up for failure; the damn monster will get one whiff of fresh air and seek out some fresh blood. You’re still skeptical on why Chara wasn’t killed in the massacre, and you like to think that it had something to do with you. But there is such a thing as luck; you’re scared to lose
the fight and the kid will wind up in the wrong place at the wrong time, and…

*Don’t think about it. Don’t give it any ideas.*

Chara squeezes back. “I will,” they promise.

And then they scurry off, quite excitedly, into the dense brush. You have to find a spark of entertainment in their actions; you know that they get quite perky when they’re out in nature. You just hope that they stay out of sight.

So now you’re left alone, on the edge of a shallow river in some place in Montana. You’re not sure whether this calls for a laugh or not, but admittedly the air is nice on your lungs. It makes breathing feel easier.

Since you’re planning on trashing these jeans the second you’re able, you find no indignity when you settle onto the shoreline, despite the soaked ground beneath you. It’s cold, nonetheless, surging an awakened sensation through your brain, and you try to tranquilize yourself in place. You cross your legs; it seems appropriate.

“Okay,” you breathe. “Okay…”

Now what?

The atmosphere is quite calm, and the mood is overall comforting. It brings a sort of mechanical peace over your body; even if the feeling is fleeting, it’s nice for the time being.

“Okaaaay…”

*What the hell am I supposed to be doing…?*

You try closing your eyes; people do that when they’re meditating, right?

But none of this feels right; and poking at an open flame already promises an inevitable scorch.

The tides underneath your skin bubble and froth with this foothold you’ve foolishly provided, skimming seafoam and hibernating torrents.

*Breathe.*

Whether it was summoned by a passing thought, or if it had access to your sprouting impatience, a white flash of shock radiates your senses, like being doused in a sudden light, sharpening your senses. The intensity of it all shakes your inner flesh, pain searing like a soul being ripped in two.

A collection of black, oily constellations dizzies your vision, choking your throat as the patterns of gore and flames clash into your corneas.

And then, as easily as a loosening a muscle, you relax.

A figure hovers over your panting form, waiting. The black, singing fog around you screams like cicadas and the electricity sparking the facial construction of the humanoid makes you shiver.

It makes an odd, robotic noise, and you jolt upright with a refreshed mind. Like you’ve slackened a leash in your vertebrae. It’s a rude shock to the senses.

*Walrider.*
It tilts its head like it’s heard your thoughts.

Dull aches from where you’d been maimed and tortured for it to enter your body make you lose your lungs. But you stand still under its eyeless glare.

“What do you want from me.” Your voice is husky.

Atomic-clogged static piercing the atmosphere feels to be your only answer.

It’s…oddly obedient, if you say so yourself. Perhaps it’s pleased?

"Say something. I know you can."

It’s like your insides are coiling, rearranging itself as you speak. But for once, once in your damn life, you are not letting this get the best of you.

There's nothing on the line. Yet everything is on the line.

It waits, morphing, growing into absent forms of chaos. Awaiting the command; seems like you can't shake it for some reason.

You stand up, wobbling a little at the immense pressure your body is under, and glare into its eyeless face.

You seethe, exposing teeth: "You..."

It strikes into your veins, pelting you with electric strength.

Devour.

No! Everything splinters in your brain but you can’t let it have anymore power over you. You've done awful things, you know that; but this... Allowing some ungodly nightmare to reside within you, is something you're no longer allowing.

Chara is all you have. What if it attacks them without your knowing? What if it scopes out the only handful of people that ever mattered to you? What if it hurts you until you deteriorate like dust in its palms?

You don't know who you are, or where you are. But you know that you are not this Thing in front of you.

"No." You gasp under the weight of it all, as the static grows louder, broiling and writhing under your skin. But this has gone long enough. You don't need this. You don't want this.

"No." Standing as you hold the world on your shoulders, you gaze on it again. "Never fucking again."

It's amazing how strong you feel your voice is becoming. Like you've pent up so much of its wallowing fury, aimed at no one, and tossing it right back to the source of it all. You can't escape anything as long as it's there. And you don't want this anymore. Enough is enough.

Enough is enough...

Host.

Its word pulses into your lifeblood as easily as it could have slipped a drug into your system. You
bend under the term, almost submitting like yes, that is who you are. You're not alive. You're not dead. You might as well be called something.

But yet, oh, and yet...

**Host.**

...You look back up. Blood is streaming from your nostrils now, and certain areas are tightening up. But the fear is vanishing, into the transparent smog you're surrounded in.

"Yeah." Your teeth show like fangs. Your fists are white. You want to collapse so, so badly; the pressure is making you spin. "Yeah. I'm the Host."

**Host,** it agrees, narrowing. Almost confused at your compliance.

"Damn straight. And you know..." You swear you're blacking out from both terror and adrenaline because holy fuck, holy *fuck,* what the hell do you think you're doing? What are you even *saying?* "You know what? You're fucking *lucky* to have me."

You stoop in closer, breathing in its face; the mass of black atoms that encrust its features, giving your troubles a physical form. A symbolic taunt of everything you can't escape.

And you're *sick* of it.

"Do you hear me?!" You scream abruptly, and it sits unfazed. "You *chose* me, you sick fuck! You wanted me, and now you've *got* me! And now *I'm* the Host!"

The mist thickens, seeping into your senses like a storm gaining speed.

"And I'm gonna play my *part* as the Host!"

It rises up, obviously displeased, and you keep going.

"I'm in control of you!" you scream, furious, bleeding, sickened, trembling... "I'm your Host and you will *listen* to me!"

**Enough.**

Answering a question you hadn't yet to ask, it explains: **We are built upon necessities a Host must provide. You are not our Enemy. You are a god, and we will bend. But we will not allow for intrusions to objectives. You...are an intrusion.**

You cough, liquid dribbling from both your mouth and nose, staining the sand at your feet. But you're not a puppet; this being is *not* your puppeteer, now your master. You have just as much control now, and you see this. Because you were able to tuck it into your chest for this long now. And you've faced it and won, without realizing.

Every breath you take without yielding, every single conscious effort you've attempted at having the Walrider obey your commands, should not be a wasted effort.

"No." Your voice is icy when you repeat the words, the panacea for your troubles. It raises its hackles in defense. "You're useless without me. I know that. So from now on, you listen to *me.*"

It attacks.
Just like when it first grabbed hold of you, the Walrider sinks underneath like it was meant to belong there. But now...

It fucking hurts even more.

White-hot pain sears into your flesh and you scream into the sky. And holes open up everywhere, from where they’d shot you and bled you dry. Where the Walrider clung to your life and wanted to trade the dominance of this body. The body that is still yours, still yours, over everything!

And you're sick of being tossed and twisted until you obey. You bare through the pain, and you screech under its adjustments, but no, no!

You won't let it do this again!

You're the Host!

You're the Host

And you will obey

- 

You open your eyes to a pixelated version of Chara’s face looming over you. Their features seem widened with fear. A hollow voice echoes in your head on mute, asking for you to wake up and saying your name in the form of a question.

The former episode of the Walrider seeping back into your body clashes in your sides when you remember how much it all hurt. You wake up immediately, expecting the thing to still be in front of you, prowling and waiting to strike again.

But there is nothing. Not even birdsong fills the air anymore, leaving you in wonder. The gentle splashing of the river is still prominent, though, given that you’ve seemed to pass out right next to it.

Your face feels blotchy with the drying liquid you've yet to wipe away. But the Walrider's pains have ebbed away entirely, leaving you blank.

A hand on your arm grabs your attention; the salt in your open knuckles begin to eerily sting. You feel like all your wounds have been cut right back open again, and your lungs are raw with your harsh breaths.

Chara is looking at you intently, but their expression carefully shields the anxiety you woke to them promoting.

“Are you alright?”

Their voice thumps in your skull for a quick second before it dissipates. You wrap one arm weakly around your knees and settle for trying to massage your scalp.

“Yeah,” you say, your voice reduced to a harsh sigh. “I…I think so...”

“How many fingers?”
You look up to spot Chara holding up a pair of fingers, tucked close to their chest. It takes you a minute to focus on them without getting dizzy again.

“Three,” you tell them.

It seems to be the right answer. Chara’s face droops with revealing sorrow and they barrel themself into your hold. You embrace them just as tightly.

“I’m glad you’re not dead,” you hear them muffle into your chest.

Running a finger through their hair, you rest your chin on the side of their crown. Your whole body feels like it’s recovering from a freak accident, but the overall sensation of victory makes the smallest grin flush your muddied face. The damn thing; you’re its Host and you’re damn well in control.

(For now, at least.)

“Me too,” you whisper. The forest is still silent, and your answer seems to echo along the riverbank and into the woods around you.

Chara pulls away, and their face is awash with a new, opened look of energy.

“I found some cool little cave and I hid in there!” they announce proudly. They bounce on your leg when they explain, “It was made of all these small rocks piled on top of each other. And at one point I heard you screaming and I was really scared and then all of these animals started, like, evacuating the area! All these flies and bugs and one rabbit even fell onto my lap for a second! Oh, and I saw a deer and—”

“Okay, pause, time out.” You hold your temple with your one index finger for a second, trying to process what they’re implying. Apparently the Walrider can scare the shit out of animals, go figure; it probably kills off your wish of getting a dog one day, though. “Are you hurt is my main concern.”

In a bout of defense, Chara gets off of the leg that they were seated on and brushes themself off, making a show of annoyance now that you’ve asked.

“I’m fine, yeesh,” they groan, exasperated with your inquiry. They turn back to help you up with one arm, and you accept. Your legs still ache, but not as much as before, and you wobble a little but you stay awake.

“Are you okay?” Chara then asks, putting you on the spot. They seem earnest and a touch of sincere concern dampens their eyes.

“I…” You look down at your hands, missing eight digits, and your scraped-up knuckles from when you’d foolishly taken anger out on yourself. You look at the ghost of white lines along your wrists, from the time you’d spent in Refuge trying to get nightmares out of your blood. You look at how dark your veins have gotten.

You’re still not sure what you’ve accomplished in this session of contacting the Walrider. It seemed to have subtlety confirmed what you’d dreaded all along; you’re dead, and you can’t survive without it, or else your injuries will creep back into your system and then you’ll really die.

But, the Walrider made something clear: you still have a choice. You can lose control, or you can fight for it.

The kid waits patiently. You first scrub off the black ooze on your face with droplets of water, provided by the creek. And then you reach out to them, minding the small withdrawal on their
behalf, and despite the leftover pangs in your hands, you ruffle their hair.

“I’m okay,” you promise them, and they smile when they have to push away your hand as you mess up their shortened cut.

“Agh! Stop it, you nerd!” Chara protests, but they’re still grinning. “I’m just glad you figured out with it…or, him, or whatever it is.”

You hadn’t considered the Walrider with any specified gender. You’re going by what it had told you, that a Host will shape it into its personal necessities—genocidal purposes aside, viewing the Walrider as a ‘he’, rather than just an ‘it’, lifts something off your stomach. The less you alienate your partner, the better.

“I think we’re safe for now,” you decide, and your teeth show with your stretched lips, forming a similar smile. A heavy burden feels gone; you’re still here. You talked with him, and you’re still here.

You’re in control.

“So, no more killing spree?” Chara questions.

“Not that I’m aware of.” You still feel too confident. But when has a faux sense of pride ever let you down? “I won’t snap any necks today, though. I think both of us are beat.”

Chara gives a huff of laughter. “To Elliston?”

Another battle you have to encounter…

But, with the Walrider tamed and deactivated for now, maybe you can tackle this too.

You nod. “To Elliston.”

- 

As close as Elliston may seem on the map, the sun is beginning to lag towards the mountains, and you’re both equally exhausted. You’re starting to suppose that maybe trusting a stranger for a quick ride would be wise. But you know the idea is a delusional thought; they could recognize you from somewhere, and it’s not worth being noticed.

What’s worse is that Chara keeps moaning and demanding a ride on your back to give their feet a rest.

“Come ooooonnnn!” they wail, tripping over themself as they broadcast their woeful hike. They seem dedicated to their role, and it’s itching you the wrong way now. “Just five minuuuutes. You gave me one before!”

“That was in a sewer,” you counter tersely, “and that was because you couldn’t swim.”

“That was in a sewer,” you counter tersely, “and that was because you couldn’t swim.”

“Ugh, you’re such an asshole!” Chara grumbles, still scraping gravel under their boot.

Truth be told, you have nothing against giving the kid a piggyback ride; dignity has long since been drained out of your system entirely, and they do seem ready to fall asleep whilst standing up. But your limbs still feel crooked and misshapen in your skin, and encountering the Walrider took tons of physical effort as well.

You just offer an: “Maybe if you stopped trudging so heavily, you wouldn’t be so tired.”
Chara just gives another lengthy groan, throwing their head back to the darkening sky. “Ughhhhh. You’re an asssssss.”

“An ass with common sense,” you reply, still walking forward and leaving the kid in the dust. “Now hurry up, I’m not sleeping out in some cow field.”

To accompany your proclamation, a herd of cattle can be heard in the distance stumbling over each other, mooing loudly.

“When are we even gonna get there?” Chara exhales behind you, but they’re pacing faster now, meeting your side within seconds.

Admittedly, traveling on foot is seeming to be the worst idea you’ve had—outside of traveling to Mount Massive, but it’s not like that’s already your token ‘Worst Idea Ever’. Just another medal to shelf on your trophy case.

“I don’t know,” you mutter.

“Well, that’s just great. Hope those cows have room for two more bunkmates.”

You’re mostly upset with yourself. A lot of obstacles could have been avoided, had you just…

Had you just…

What could you have done differently? You were possessed, brainwashed, and tortured. It’s not like you had much leg room in what was permitted to occur; quite the opposite. They put you out of control on purpose. They wanted you to suffer. They didn’t care about you; they just wanted the Walrider.

But Jackson seemed to be the only person, you think, that deserved an answer. You’re nitpicking his actions and realizing that maybe he really did want to help. You don’t know what Murkoff told him; he was too kind for their type, though. He wanted to even out your dosage and have you receive the help he said that you deserved. Maybe you’d just make shitty assumptions and left him in the dirt…

But it’s too late now. You can’t go back, you can only keep walking. Just like Mount Massive: just keep going and find out what happens.

Although you really don’t want to have to take shelter with cattle, so chances are becoming slim…

The distant rumbling of a vehicle from behind makes you duck Chara from the approaching headlights. You’d rather appear to be a homeless man wandering aimlessly than have a kid be spotted with you; passersby’s suspicions be damned, you’ll take the humiliating hit of being alone on a road than have Chara suffer the same fate.

You hear the vehicle slowing down. Shit, shit, shit…

A rusted truck yields to your side, and your heart starts pounding out of its chest. You hear the window roll down and you have no choice but to face the man.

A bearded elder—perhaps a local farmer—peeks at you from the driver’s side curiously. “You folks need a ride?” he calls.

Well. Looks like hiding Chara from sight seems to have failed. On cue, they poke their head out and eye the man.
Neither of you respond, shuffling awkwardly.

He gives a shorted noise that makes you look back up at him. “Look, I ain’t gonna murder ya’. Got’a wife back home that I need to head back to. It’d take too much time to hide your bodies.”

The man sounds like he’s kidding, but something foreign gurgles displeasingly at the man’s sour attempt to lighten the atmosphere. You feel stiff and frozen; Chara doesn’t budge either.

This time, his face contorts into an emotion much more gentle. His eyes are probing, still, further enriching your apprehension.

“Ya’ll are in trouble now, aren’t’cha?” he rumbles; though he doesn’t sound accusative.

Damn. *Is it really that obvious?*

It’s surprising that Chara speaks up first between the two of you, but their voice is still small. “Where’s Elliston from here?” they ask the man.

He seems taken aback at first, then gives a throaty laugh. “Elliston! Jeez almighty, if ya’ll are headin’ there on foot, you won’t be seeing Elliston for another week!”

You swallow coldly.

This time, the man is persistent. He pats the seat next to him. “C’mon now, lemme get you there. Won’t ask no questions ya’ don’t want me to. It’ll take two hours tops.”

With hesitance, you are once again thrust into a situation that is out of your hands. You’re not spending the night alone, in the dark, engulfed by shadows with only distant farm animals for company. You push the kid in front of you with a reassuring pat on their shoulder, and they cautiously open the truck’s door.

You both scoot in to the front, with Chara in the middle and you slamming you inside, concealing your fate. The conditioner blows in your face and the radio hums a low country tune. Chara takes notice in a bobblehead perched up on the glove compartment.

The truck begins moving, whirring past the fields where you’d been endlessly hiking. Your feet take an immediate sigh of relief; it feels like you get exhausted at twice the rate of a normal person nowadays. At least now you have approximate theories as to *why.*

“Get comfy,” the man announces. “Gonna be a while.”

Chara turns to the man, his face red with outdoor work and highlighted in a bright orange against the sunset’s glow. “Thank you for the ride,” they tell him politely.

He grins at them without taking his eye off the road. “Aw, it’s nothin’. We’ve all been in a rut every now and then. ‘N since I’m heading there myself, no harm done.”

You look over at him. “You live there?”

The man nods, puffing out his chest a little. “It’s my hometown,” he answers warmly. “A good town. We look out for each other there.”

You’re barely listening, your blood rushing to your head. “I—do you—do you know a lot of people in that area?”

This time, he does turn to glance over at you, accompanying Chara’s curious gaze upon your

Even if it takes a large sum of willpower, you reluctantly nod. It’s hard to even stare at the man anymore, your fingers knitting together. “Y-yeah. I am.”

“Well, shoot son. Just give me a name and I’ll drop you off there.”

You tell him the name, and he gives a holler of a laugh. Chara seems lost and detached from both parties, exchanging a strange eye with you for ulterior reasons.

“Shit, boy! Why didn’t you just say that in the first place!” he crows, beaming. “I’ll get ya’ where you need to be. I know that bastard like the back of my hand. Y’know he’s plannin’ on gettin’ a farm for himself?”

You look out the window, your gut curdling. “No, I didn’t…”

It goes quiet for a while, and then a beefy hand is extended your way, startling you.

“Name’s Joel,” he introduces. You politely shake his hand in return, hoping that he doesn’t look down to monitor your mangled hands. Thankfully, his attention is all on the desolate road ahead.

You don’t say your name, even if he assures that he’s safe. Chara follows in your footsteps and slinks closer into your side. The guitar on the radio strikes a set of rambling chords.

Joel says nothing about it. He just gives a sigh: “Well, if ya’ ever wanna talk, I’m here. I can tell you’ve both been through hell.”

And you have to chuckle a little, but it’s not funny.

“You could say that.”

The awkward car ride is two hours as you’d been told, and they consist of Joel humming to a few songs in particular, or Chara pretending to be dozing on your lap just to have you rubbing circles on their back, like Jackson used to do. You realize you’re not looking for static in the radio station.

But still, it all abruptly ends too fast, and the emotional collision strikes you like whiplash. The cluster of shabby homes, in the type of condition often found in a poor countryside, makes your heart pound with every house you pass by. But the truck has slowed down, and then stops altogether. It’s synonymous with your heart rate.

You don’t think you’ve ever felt colder than when you force your eyes to probe the home set in front of you. You’ve never seen it before; he must have moved, and of course he would have done it without informing you of the new whereabouts.

Or maybe he did, and you’d just deleted the phone call, or the text message, or the email…

Chara lifts their head to observe the place with more instinctive reproach than you, but if they’re skeptical of the location they say nothing. A part of you wonders—hopes, even—that this isn’t the right destination.

“Here we are,” Joel declares, and your fleeting moment of optimism is squelched. “Looks like he’s home, too.” You feel the man’s observation direct you to the windows next to the front entrance, with curtains thinly veiling the dimmed light sources. You know that he loves this type of night.
You gulp down a hard lump in your throat. “Yeah…”

An automatic movement rushes you both out of the car and you push on the door and release yourself into the outdoors again; but the air doesn’t feel as relieving anymore. You hope he doesn’t see you in his small front yard, approaching the walkway.

Chara hops out and immediately grips to your back, their fingers tearing into your clothes. You think they’re shaking, and you don’t think it’s that chilly outside, so you have your theories.

Joel gives a shout of farewell, and asks that you to tell him that he’d said hello. You both exchange thanks with him, despite your wooden postures; if not for his generosity, you'll admit, you'd be sleeping out in some pasture.

He drives off, and you’re left alone. Again. Left to burden all of this yourself.

*Okay, just calm down. You’re in control…*

The house has been scraped clean of paint, leaving behind a pile of bricks to accommodate its exterior design. Piles of logs, probably chopped from the forest out back, settle near the door’s stoop. The garage is closed, but a used truck sits outside; and in the backdrop, you can hear a dog barking. It sits in a cornered neighborhood, where the trees dot the yards and the houses surrounding this one don’t seem any better off.

You’re in control…

“Is this the place?” Chara questions, but their voice is shaking and tiny. You wonder why this bothers them so, but then again, you’re not feeling up for the challenge either.

“Yes.”

“Oh. It’s…nice.”

You take a step forward.

“Oh, yes,” you breathe, “let…let me do the talking, okay? He’s…this guy is safe, I promise. He won’t hurt you.”

Chara doesn’t say anything right away, but they bury their face farther into your jacket and you think they mumble a small, “Okay.”

You’re in control.

*I’m in control.*

The concrete of the stoop eventually finds your feet, and you stop right in front of the door. The dog is howling wildly now, announcing your presence if nothing else will. The sky is turning a dark navy hue over your heads.

*Now or never.*

You’ve conquered the Walrider, for Christ’s sake. This should be easy.

You knock.

No one comes to the door at first, and your heart fidgets a bit more loosely in the gel that seems to have packed up into your ribcage. You’re thinking about knocking again, just to bury your grave
even further.

The door swings open casually, with a familiar face drinking in the presence of his guest. His hair is longer now, and his five-o’-clock shadow has grown into a dirtied, profuse scruff. The clothes are raggedy and worn, like he was doing yardwork. But his eyes haven’t changed.

He freezes with his mouth agape, like he was about to airily greet you, perhaps ask you how you’re doing on this fine evening.

But he’s silent, and his eyes are wider than you’ve seen them in years.

He takes an entire step back, like his body has become too heavy for his feet. “Miles?”

Your name is breathless on its tongue, like it hasn’t been used.

You frown, taking a breath, grinding your teeth, closing your eyes, opening them again, looking at him.

“David.” Your tongue feels like it’s coated in rust. “We need your help.”

He doesn’t say anything.

He doesn’t say anything.

This was a horrible idea. What made you think that one person on this planet would want to help a bastard like you? You haven’t done anything but make things worse, you’re fucked up in the head, you’re—

You’re pulled into a giant hug before you have a chance to punch out your attacker.

“What the hell…” His breathing is horribly hitched and warm against your collar, and his face digs into your shoulder that’s sharp with hunger and exhaustion. He hugs you so tightly that you think something will burst, and he’s instinctively pulling you inside.

You don’t return the hug automatically, because it feels like something you don’t belong to—or what you deserve to belong to. So your hands go to his hips like an awkward middle school dance, unsure of what your move should be next.

“Where were you, where were you, fuck…”

Okay, you’re not crying. You’re not tearing up because holy fuck is this what it’s like to be missed? To be wanted?

David draws away too quickly, because now his hands are clasped on your shoulders and crap now he’s going to ask questions.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” he snaps, but his voice is still wobbly. “You could’ve—you could’ve at least answered my calls, you asshole.”

“I-I know. It’s…it’s complicated.”

“I saw the news!” David is yelling now, shaking you horribly. You feel prickles of dread chill your spine. “I saw what happened and you—you didn’t call. You didn’t do anything. We were worried, Miles. You didn’t—!”

He pushes you violently, making you trip over Chara, whom is still right behind you and has shrunk
into your spine. Suddenly, David’s company is becoming a threat. Your mind darkens precariously.

*Stay in control…*

“David, let me—”

“I don’t understand!” He yells, but his tone is still raw with hurt. “Why did you—I didn’t know what happened to you! I thought something went—I…”

He trails off, and his eyes flit downwards. Your heart plummets when his expression mildly softens, almost drooping.

Chara sniffs thickly, and you panic.

You immediately whip around to the kid, where their features are slick and red. They’re shaking violently now, and your brain is circuiting like crazy. You grab their hands.

“No, shhh, kid,” you whisper, talking in smooth manners as they gulp for air. They’re twitching with panic. “Shh, it’s okay. It’s okay. He’s not gonna hurt you. It’s okay.”

*Shit.* What made you think that bringing these worlds together would cause anything but turmoil? You should’ve just let loose ends to tie themselves…

A pair of footsteps accompany you, but you shoo him away; not out of anger, but because you know that when you’re losing it, being surrounded by one too many people will make things worse.

You bring them to your chest and just smooth their hair. “It’s okay. He didn’t mean to scare you.”

David speaks up: “Is that—?”

“Hold on.” Your main priority right now is soothing Chara’s anxiety, which seems to work the more you hold onto them and speak in a quiet, calming manner. Even if therapists and doctors had other intentions when comforting you, you remember being calmed when they just kept murmuring nonsensical words of encouragement, telling you to breathe, and everything’s fine now…

*You’re in control.*

When they’ve curled back into your hold and have gone limp with a bout of enervation, you look back up at David. His features aren’t hard anymore, but humanized and gentle. Like you remember him being.

(You hadn’t remembered the small strands of grey popping up in his dark hair though. That’s new.)

This time, you both meet a common, mutual understanding. Without words spoken, he nods, and the questions melt away for now.

“Let’s get you both inside,” he sighs, mandatorily placing his hands in his pockets. “I’ll get you some food, and we’ll talk it out like adults.”

A short breath of a chuckle escapes without you realizing it. “Mom would be proud.”

It takes a minute, but the laugh is returned in just the same inept manner. “Heh, yeah, seems like something she would say, wouldn’t it?”

You’re escorted inside, with Chara still clutching to you, and the warmth of the home feels fresher than the outside air.
David closes the door behind you with another long sigh. “Welcome home, little brother.”

- Gravity of your travels plummets into your knees and upper arms, and immediately you hit the closest couch available with the intention of getting your body to shut the fuck up for one damn second, Jesus fucking Christ…

After handing out some stray bowls of fruit and cheese, David rummages farther into his fridge and is able to find a chowder that’s near its expiration date. But quality of a meal doesn’t seem to be an issue as long as it’s not garbage. And if you and your demonic soulmate are happy, then it’s fine.

It took a bit of coaxing for you and David to eventually get Chara to eat a handful of grapes; they snuggle deeply into your side with a blanket draped around them, eyes glazed and pointed at their toes; both of your dirty shoes had been discarded long ago.

Your brother seems eager to make it up to the kid, though. He comes out with a steaming cup of liquid and places it gently on the table near them. Chara lazily eyes it, but makes no movement towards the mug.

“You like hot milk?” David prompts them, sitting on an adjacent chair while the chowder is reheating. “It might calm you down a little.”

Chara makes a small noise, perhaps of thanks, but they seem glued to your side regardless.

“Sorry again about freaking them out,” David apologizes. “I should’ve seen them hiding behind you. Didn’t even bother to check.”

You just shrug a little. “Don’t worry about it. Wasn’t exactly a picnic for me either.”

He huffs a little, with a lopsided grin that doesn’t match his eyes.

“So,” he starts, “that’s the kid from the video?”

You nod. “That’s them.”

“Hm.” He crosses his arms and leans back a little. Chara watches him carefully. “And you’re probably not gonna tell me all of what the hell happened?”

“Mm.”

“I figured. But, I mean, you still could’ve called—”

“I know,” you interrupt, motioning at the kid huddled into the blanket with your eyes. “Let’s just not…talk about it right now.”

Your brother seems displeased at your proposed intervention, but he seems to swallow his protests because you do have a point. A lot needs to be said now, and maybe doing it in front of a traumatized child isn’t a good idea.

“Point taken,” he retracts, then flits his attention immediately back to the untouched mug. “Hey, if it helps, I didn’t…poison it or anything.”

The weak humor flies overhead; Chara doesn’t even twitch a muscle.

With a small nudge, your eyes pointedly flicker to the coffee table. Chara shifts when you push them
slightly forward. “C’mon, kiddo. It’s good for you.”

David just watches with interest as Chara decides to ultimately take your word for it. They wriggle their way out of their blanket cocoon to reach for the cup, still warm, and nestle it back into their chest. With a few blows beforehand, they take a hesitant sip.

A small cough draws your attention back to your brother, once you’ve allowed Chara to settle back into their former spot. His eyes are aged now; darker and baggier than normal. His frown tugs at your chest with a foreign jolt of shame.

“Why did you come back,” David finally asks, his chin on his entwined fingers.

Thumps echo throughout your body, and you’re unknown on how you should start; this is just a giant can of worms you hadn’t planned on opening this early.

Then again, it has been a couple of years...

Your fingers can’t knot together as easily as your brother’s, with their slight disabilities and stings. So you just stare down at them with disapproval; you remember faintly when the doctor brutally tore away your pride, and you had to carry official, physical battle scars from a day you can’t seem to run away from.

The quiet slowly chomps on your brother as well. His tone dawns with a sudden empathy when he murmurs quietly, “You must be pretty desperate to want to come to me for anything.”

It hurts. But it’s true.

You sigh, clenching your throbbing hands into fists, your eyes still downcast. “David, I don’t have anywhere else to go,” you eventually admit, then correct: “We don’t have anywhere else to go.”

Chara continues to sip on their warm milk in a spinous quiet.

“I didn’t tell you this address.”

“Joel gave us a ride.”

There’s a bitter noise that rumbles in David’s throat, his frown a tight grimace. “…Yeah, he would do that. He’s a good guy. Part of a good town. We look out for each other here. Good community too.”

You don’t know what’s he implying, and it sticks to your chest like thorns whilst Chara slurps up the final drops of their drink. They lean back and smack their lips, blissfully satisfied.

“You want a refill?” David asks them good-naturedly.

They shake their head.

“Alright, well, there’s plenty more where that came from if you change your mind.” He motions to the table, where a plate of fruit rests, barely-touched. “You’re probably starving. Eat your heart out, squirt; traveling with my little bro must’ve been a pain in the ass. As far as I’m concerned, you’re a war hero.”

Chara does as instructed, plucking a few grapes into their palm with a shy smile; you yourself scowl at David’s passive insult, but you let it slide.

“Look, if you’re trying to get me to let you crash here for the night, you already know you can,
“Alright?” David says to you, but he doesn’t seem thrilled about it; you can’t say you’re enthusiastic about the notion either. But nonetheless, you’re grateful.

He stands right up, just as the kitchen whines for attention and indicates that the chowder is consumable. “And I’ll get you some less-crappy clothes, while I’m at it. I mean yeesh,” he makes his point by gesturing to your wrinkled, stinking jacket and shirt, “you look like a walking discount section at a thrift store.”

Then Chara shakes with a stifled giggle. You peek over at them, a bit surprised at the outburst. But they just turn to you and tease, “I can see snarkiness runs in the family.”

You feel warmth lighten the heft in your chest; the kid’s joke was thrown over the shoulder, but you’ll take anything that might relieve the mood.

A dog bark makes you all jump, and followed shortly after is the persistent scratching of an anxious animal. You try to glimpse at the source of the noise from where you’re seated on the couch, and you find a backdoor on one wall farther out, leading outside. A border collie waits outside, demanding to be let inside when it catches your eye and wags its tail.

“Um,” you notion at the pet awkwardly, “your—”

“Yeah, I’ll get her,” David stretches while he stands and pops his back, dwelling for a moment longer before heading back to where the dog waits. It barks again when he approaches.

Chara hops upwards immediately just as the door swings open, and excited skitters of the dog’s claws indicate its imminent approach. You’re a bit shocked to see Chara unravel their stoic mannerisms as they rush off the couch to excitedly greet the dog.

They giggle as it eagerly licks their face, lapping up their loving croons as they run their fingers through its fur.

“Hi there!” Chara squeals, and you think this is the happiest you’ve seen them. You look on with fondness as they continue to baby-talk the dog and give it affectionate scratches. “You’re so cute, look at you! Look at how cute you are! What a good dog, yes you are!”

David walks in and looks on with just as much astonishment as you; he hasn’t even been properly introduced to the kid and here they are, splayed on his floor as his pet dog wags its tail ferociously while it’s coddled.

He looks on with amusement and a small, encouraging smile; but he says nothing about it until Chara speaks first. They grin widely and ask, “What’s their name?”

“Uh…Lady. That’s Lady.”

They repeat the name happily, almost in a loving sigh. Lady just holds out her tongue with a lopsided grin, as though pleased with Chara’s approval.

You both continue your roles as helpless onlookers while Chara plays with the dog, content and blissful of the harsh silence you two have commenced; you don’t plan on looking your brother in the eye anytime soon.

But your coarse is set, and there’s nothing left anymore; what are you going to do? Run away again? To where? Everything’s gone now.

And whose fault is that, dumbass…
Then Chara whips their head over to David so suddenly that his brows raise. Their face is gravely serious when they ask, “Sir, may I have the honor of playing fetch with your dog outside?”

“Um,” he starts, offput by Chara’s request, “I mean, she just came in, so she might be tired, but…” Then he gestures towards you and crosses his arms with finality. “If he’s fine with it, then I’m fine with it.”

You can’t help but perk a brow at your brother, despite the tension, as if to say, Really?

Chara slams their hands together into a fake prayer, looking at you pitifully with large, pleading eyes. You just scoff at the effort. “As if I could say no to that face,” you say, all in loving sarcasm.

The kid doesn’t even waste a second after having gained your consent. Lady bolts away with her new friend, and you watch them pummel out into the night through the backdoor.

You both just stay in place, with a thick disquiet churning your thoughts.

“So,” David finally says, his tone ample with an unnamed emotion. “Cute kid.”

You shuffle. “They’re not mine,” you argue. “I just…saved them. That’s all.”

“I see,” he sniffs. “You were their savior back at the asylum and now you just can’t seem to let them go.”

Silence.

“…Look, I’m not trying to accuse you of anything, Miles, alright?” David says, then drops back onto his former position on the chair. The chowder in the kitchen seems to have been long forgotten. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m still mad but...”

“I’m sorry.”

His squares his jaw. “You’ve said that before.”

“Well, I’m saying it now.”

David puts his face in his hands, and at first you think he’s irritated with you. A dripping sense of maudlin crawls up your chest as he reappears, looking tired. His eyes dissect your expression when his solemn glare bores into you.

“Just tell me what happened,” is all he asks.

Don’t. No one needs to be involved in this...

You do it anyway.

For once in your fucking life, you tell somebody everything.


Everything meshes into a cluster of words that tumble out of your mouth without given consent. You only just manage to catch yourself upon enclosing any particular information about the Walrider, because you know that it’s just going to trap him in your web and David deserves a lot better.
But you still tell him about Refuge. And Jackson. And finding Chara again. And the Dreemurrs. And Holly. And Waylon and his family. And Chara’s kidnapping. And Pharmatech. And even the Langermanns.

And you eventually just shut up.

You gulp a breath, your twisted fingers barreling into your skull. A prominent headache pounds at your temples.

“There. Happy?”

David hasn’t said a single word since you’d commenced your story. His eyes are the only feature that remained alert, ever-conscious yet ever-reserved. His lips fold slightly on the more gruesome details—he didn’t take kindly to when you’d recounted losing your fingers, and it helped sew your mouth shut when it came to discussing the Walrider with him. Overall, he’s stiff as a statue.

And then he stands back up.

And walks over.

And wraps you in a tight hug.

It’s not the first time that someone has offered you a pity hug, and it probably won’t be the last at this rate. But you sink into it anyway, giving a long exhale against his shoulder. David gives you a solid pat on the back in return.

“Don’t ever do that kind of shit again,” he says firmly, tone hushed. But his constricting hold only broadcasts his concern; your heart feels thick while your head spins with pain. “Mom and Dad…they were so worried and I… I didn’t know what to tell them. And I didn’t know if you were even alive. And I just kept calling, and calling…”

You wrap a stray set of arms around his figure; the action feels like it’s performed by someone else.

“I didn’t want you to—”

“I know. But I’ll worry anyway, damn you. No use trying to prevent that.”

“A bunch of shit was happening and I didn’t—”

“Just…” Your brother pulls away, his eyes glistening and he takes a minute to furiously rub his face, “just stay. We both know you don’t deserve it. But stay for a while. I’ll… I hate to admit this but you know I’ll do what I can to get those bastards off your tail.”

You just look down at your lap, frowning. “You don’t have to do all of this. Like you said, I don’t deserve it.”

“Hey, then let’s say we’re doing this to keep that kid outside smiling.” He tosses his thumb over to where you can still see the shadows of Chara and Lady actively playing in the backyard. You swear you can hear faint laughter, and it makes your head feel a bit clearer to hear it. “You’ve both been through hell and back. And that kid needs you, it sounds like. So let’s help them get off the charts, and we’ll take it from there.”

It’s not about you anymore, so it’s not like you’re going to say no.
You expected yourself not to sleep tonight. Sure, dinner was nice, the shower was nicer, and finally being able to trash those antique clothes was a blessing; but you’re still not comfortable in the pajama bottoms and old tee that David had tossed to you. They carry the touch of soft cotton on your battered skin, but it feels like an alien sensation. They’re not yours is the problem; none of this is yours. And that just grates on your composure a bit more than usual.

This doesn’t seem real either. You feel like you’re casting away the last couple months of trying to fit your life back together; like it was all for nothing. Like everything was all for nothing; even subduing your role as the Walrider's prized puppet was a vain effort.

You sit at the corner of a guest bedroom, flourished with items and furniture and making you feel more welcome than you deserve. You’ve snapped the blinds closed and you sit there, thinking and thinking and thinking again: What was the point of anything?

A gentle, shy knock isn’t enough to scare you, but it’s enough to assist you in getting your head out of your ass enough to practice a civil “Come in.”

The door creaks open diffidently, and Chara walks in, picking at their oversized shirt. David had lent them some clean boxers and an old band shirt of his for the time being; thus they continue their streak of consistently wearing items of clothing that are much too big for them.

“Hey,” Chara murmurs.

“Hey.”

They join you on the foot of the bed, looking just as skeptical as you about their borrowed nightwear. You’re a bit relieved to find that Chara is just riffling the shirt with a dull interest, instead of the skin. But, given that it’s short-sleeved, you can clearly view the years of scratches and cuts that have angrily buried themselves into the flesh. Some are a pale white, like your own, but some are so deep that they’re still a pinkish hue.

You try not to stare. It’s just that they’ve never exposed their arms to you before.

“You’re brother is nice,” Chara finally admits.

It feels weird to have someone acknowledge David as such, outside of yourself, but still you just nod. “He means well,” you promise.

They seem to roll their eyes at your reassurance. “Obviously. Anyone who has a loving dog, I trust. Animals are excellent judges of character.”

You just manage a smile at that. “So because he let you give his dog belly rubs, he’s a taker then.”

“Well, that,” Chara hesitates a moment, drawing their knees to their chest, curling into a mass of cuts and bad things, just like you. “And he’s your brother.”

You look away for a moment, and that seems to be enough. Chara lowers their head, their bangs spill over their features.

“Why didn’t you tell me,” they ask.

“…It was just personal,” you admit to them. So much has already been spilled out into the open, you don’t see the need to keep it bottled up anymore. “I haven’t talked to my family for years. The fact that we were headed there was just something I didn’t…really want to talk about. That’s all.”
Chara makes a soft hum of consideration. “So, what made it change? What made you go back?”

“Because like I said, there’s nowhere else to go.”

And I’m scared. And helpless. And I can’t do this alone anymore.

You don’t say anything farther than that, but Chara seems to get the gist overall. They still don’t appear satisfied; their hands twist into their inner elbow suddenly, and their eyes start to dangerously water.

“I miss them,” they say thickly, and then they blink too much.

Nothing more needs to be said. Guilt surges you forward and you indulge them with a hug, pulling them into your lap as they sniffle. They don’t cry, but they claw into your back and that says what it needs to.

The last thing you wanted to do was snatch Chara away from their designated family, and for multiple reasons. One being the obvious: that it’s illegal; two being that you’re incapable of handling children; third being that the Dreemurrrs were just better with them. They were happier with them too; weren’t they?

Now they’re stuck with you.

“This’ll blow over,” you finally say, rubbing their back. “We’ve been through worse.”

“Yeah…”

Neither of you believe it.

You wish that you knew what would come next; hell, you wish you could greet the next day with confidence, but you don’t know what’s going to happen now. And damn it all, it scares you to death.

“We’ll figure this out tomorrow,” you conclude, pushing them gently away and Chara crawls out of your lap without instruction. They stand in front of you, making no attempt to leave the room.

“Kid—”

“I really don’t know if I can sleep.”

You run a hand through your hair. “Okay, okay. How about I just…stay up here, then. Until you go to sleep.”

Chara just nods a little.

They pummel into the guest bed, obviously exhausted, and as much as you would’ve loved to have the bed for yourself, you doubt you’ll be getting much sleep anyways. Might as well give the room to someone who’s going to properly use it. Besides, the couch doesn’t seem too jarring.

You sit on the untouched part of the bed, and Chara flips over to your side as you just comb out their hair. You stare up at the ceiling fan whirling around as the kid curls up under the sheets, even with the light still on.

They aren’t bothered either way; you know that they have no fear of the dark due to their enhanced vision. It’s you that decides that eyeing the shadows in any state of stupor might be risky.

“G’night, Miles,” Chara mumbles into your shirt, quite abruptly, before sinking deeper into the
sheets.

Your gaze wanders away from the night bleeding through the window’s blinds in order to cast down a very tired smile, ending your hair brushing with a kiss on the side of their head.

“Night kiddo.”

As figured, you don’t sleep. You wander through the hallways of the unknown house, trying to grow accustomed. But the house isn’t yours; it’s shown in the little things. Like how you don’t style the pictures on the wall in that manner, or you wouldn’t place a drawer in that corner. If it were up to you, of course, things would be different.

But it’s not.

Your thoughts are an entangled string of curses, clotting into a thick web that accompanies the conglomeration of static and tendrils encircling your mind. It brings phantom shocks that course through your body like needles and electricity, sparking in all the wrong muscles. The intimacy that you’ve exposed the sleeping nanites to, regarding your personal anatomy, makes it all that more horrifying.

So after hours of snooping through your brother’s belongings, feeling very unwanted, you wind up on the couch, staring at nothing.

Your brain decides to play on its own terms. It slices at memories like knives and slashes into wounds, hoping to get a rise out of you. You recall how your back ached greatly when you’d first been thrown by Walker. How your fingers will skim over certain keys on accident and you slip backwards, remembering.

You poke at open flames when you ask, *You there?*

He responds instantly, chilling your blood. *Yes.*

There’s the terror that always triples when the Walrider is present, alerting you of wary shadows or threats of another human. He’s present and awoken; and, in some twisted fashion, it eases your loneliness.

You stumble backwards and rest your head on a pillow. The ceiling above morphs into absent imaginings while you think. *Why are you not fucking this up for me? Why aren’t you flipping out or something? Shouldn’t we be like, I dunno… more aggressive?*

*No threats detected,* is the reply. Like it’s that simple.

You sit up. *Excuse me?*

*No threats detected.*

You lean back down and just try to interpret his meaning. But you still feel cold, despite the… encouraging…words from the Walrider himself. Maybe he’s respecting you now?

...Probably not.

*There’s plenty you could screw up for me.*
You are compliant. We are designed with orders.

*But that’s the problem. You’re a machine.*

We are god.

*No. You plop your face headfirst into the pillow; you hadn’t noticed how lightheaded you feel. *No, we’re not.*

Inconclusive.

You scoff. *Quite the narcissistic type, aren’t you?*

We are one.

*Shut it. I’m sorry for even summoning you.* Your nose begins to tickle with a sharp air as you sniffle, and you bring a finger up to catch some blood falling from a nostril. You huff, wiping it on the inside of your shirt. *Just sleep.*

Recharge.

*Yeah, yeah. Just don’t kill anybody while I’m out.*

No threats detected.

...Okay.

It’s amazing how that’s what soothes you enough to get some shut eye. But to be fair, it’s the first time you’ve believed that sort of statement in a while.

Your mouth tastes sour with sleep as you hear the sizzling of a frying pan attract your senses awake. It’s not the promise of food that first gets you moving, but how oddly hypnotic the crackling of the stove is against your ears. *Don’t do this now.*

The couch was much better than a corner on some street, you think. While it’s not your former bed back at your apartment, it was still moderate enough to doze off upon.

You briefly wonder about the status of your old (and temporary) home back in Leadville. Murkoff probably quarantined it off to the public and washed it out like you had the plague. The concept shouldn’t hurt as much as it does.

The pangs arrive in your heel first, when you dip your feet onto the floor, then hiss and backfire. This, oddly enough, spins your brother around from where he appears to be cooking eggs. His apron and oven mitt really set the tone for how serious he takes his cookery.

“Morning, sunshine!” he calls, naïve to your petulant senses at dawn. “Sleep well?”

You shake your head no with a groan and try digging your thumb into the inner tissue of your heel, trying to get it to feel better son of a *fucking bitch.*

This nabs David away from his culinary habits. He sets down the spatula that he was occupied with
and heads right on over to where you’re crumpled on his couch, apron and all. “Hey, everything alright? You look—”

“My limbs,” you grunt, continuing to hopelessly knead at the fire dwelling in your legs, sprouting in other nerves now. “They hurt so fucking bad these days. Don’t know what’s wrong…”

“Hm. Lemme see.”

Pride slows your motions as you reveal the areas of pain to your brother; but the only exterior attributes seem to be the redness of the locations from where you’d savagely squeezed into the muscles, trying to speed up their recovery process but with little to no effort (surprise, surprise).

David rubs at your ankle and you cringe outwardly, stumbling a little at the touch. He takes this into thought.

“You have been walking a lot from what you’d told me,” he opines at length. “And you’re incredibly stressed. Maybe the loss of fingers screwed up something in your nervous system, I don’t know. But I know a guy in town who can look at you.”

Doctors are disgusting creatures, and you wouldn’t touch one with a thirty-foot pole; but you’ll cross that bridge when you come to it, you decide.

“Thanks,” you mumble.

“You owe me, though,” David calls over his shoulder; he’s already quickly made his way back to monitoring the food. “How do you like your eggs?”

“Scrambled.”

“Ah, like always. Should’ve suspected. Scrambled eggs coming right up!”

You listen for a while to him preparing your food in the kitchen, warily drifting back to how Jackson had enjoyed exhibiting his culinary expertise. He’d always made sure to be precise in his cooking, and remembered your preferences for certain foods.

*That guy wasn’t always bad…*

You hope he’s doing alright. You’d left him to clean up a lot of your mess. And you *did* technically give Waylon the thumbs-up to steal his car…

Maybe they’re both doing okay, despite everything.

A sluggish trail of steps indicates your gained company. Chara appears from behind, having trudged down the stairway, sleepily rumpled. Their shortened hair is askew, puffed into a similar styling of a bird’s nest, and they groan in displeasure at having to tame their muddled locks.

“Sleep well?” you ask them. You get a loud yawn in response.

David pokes his head out to view Chara as they slump onto the couch, propping their feet unceremoniously into your lap. “Oh hey! You want some eggs kid?”

Chara moans their response into the couch.

“They said yes,” you call back.

“Awesome. Any preference?”
“Probably scrambled—”
Chara makes a muffled noise of protest.

“Poached—”
Another no.

“Uh, sunny side up?”
Finally, you get a loud, “Mhm!” from Chara’s position.

“Guess it’s sunny side up, then.”
David nods in return. “Cool. Oh, and we’ll need to eat fast.”

You blink. “Why?”

“Well, I said I’m gonna help you guys hide from those Murkoff freaks,” David replies; he turns back to the stove and casually continues, “I know somebody that can help out, but we’ll need to get to her place because I think she’s busy for the rest of the day. If I can flag her down quick enough, she’s bound to help.

“Plus,” there’s a smile in his tone, “she’s a sucker for kids. I doubt she’ll be able to say no.”

It does sound promising. At least your brother’s stance on assisting you hasn’t faltered overnight; if you can get yourself out of sight and out of mind, if only for a little while, then maybe something good can arise from all of it.

Maybe you can even get Chara back home.

Lady appears with a wagging tail, anxiously awaiting for her friend to play with her again. She sits right beside the couch, nosing Chara with anticipating whimpers. You catch a glimpse of a huge grin splitting the kid’s face as they’re licked by the dog, with the incised strands of hair barely concealing their expression.

You try to exercise your legs a bit if you’re able and remove Chara’s feet from your knees to accompany David in the kitchen; Lady looks at you as you walk away, and over the noise of the stove you swear she just growled at you.

At your brother’s side now, David glances over at his dog, equally perplexed by her altered behavior. “Huh,” he says, taking a moment longer to observe Lady continually showering Chara’s face with kisses, making them laugh. “That’s odd; never heard her growl at anybody before.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it,” you respond brusquely, quickly wishing to drop the subject. Then you lean against the counter, trying to tame the ants under your blood by forming some conversation between the two of you. “So, what’s this friend’s name.”

David uneasily switch topics; his eggs are pampered with various seasonings when he answers. “Uh, it’s Carla. We’re…she’s my ex.”

You cross your arms, hiding your surprise. “Ex?”

“Ex-fiancée,” he elaborates. You almost lose feeling in your knees altogether.

“Fiancée?” you try not to sputter, but it comes out more loudly and abruptly than you’d wished. But
you can’t help it. “The fuck? How long was *that* a thing?”

He shrugs, obviously trying downplay the fact that he was *engaged* at one point in time and you didn’t know it, what the *fuck*. Purposely his eyes are all on the boiling food. “About two years.”

“Two yea—what the hell, man? Why didn’t you tell me?”

David just shrugs and turns to you, looking at you with some weird form of slyness on his face. “That’s what happens when you don’t contact your family in four years, little brother.”

…Point taken.

“She’s still a good friend,” he concludes, with a tinge of wistfulness that doesn’t skim over well. “Let’s just head over there with heads held high after breakfast. She knows some people that could hide your identities.”

Once David deters from the apparent fiancée debacle, he doesn’t hop back on it. And with both of you containing the same amounts of obduracy, you don’t suspect that he’ll yield to your demands so easily.

So when the eggs are done, all of you gulp them down in a tense hush, with the new objective fresh on your minds.

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David rolls up to a condo; unlike the previous condo you’d stepped foot in, these are nicer and more clean-cut, more pristine. Fresh coats of paint are spilled over the houses, with the gardens spoilt and doted on by each owner.

“Lemme see what I can do here,” David mutters, seemingly to himself, as he yanks the keys out of the ignition. You’re all huddled into his dirty, matted truck, stockpiled with garbage and a few stray boxes in the backseat. Chara had the misfortune of being crammed next to a huge pile of packages, and they sprint out into the fresh air the first chance they get. Both of you are dressed in cleaner clothes; given that David has no means of stocking up children's clothes, though, he'd just tossed the ruffled shirt and pants that Chara was wearing yesterday into the wash and promised to help them find more options later on. They hadn't complained. Both of you just revel in the soft fabric and decide that this is enough.

You take a bit more meticulous effort when exiting the vehicle, given that you’re still fragile. David had handed you a few pain relief pills before you’d left, and didn’t leave until you’d gulped them all down (with the threat that he was unafraid to give you mouth-to-mouth if he’d suspected you of hiding the meds under your tongue). It hasn’t kicked in fully yet, but the numb torrent slowly prickling into your lower limbs induces optimism.

He makes his way up to one of the condos, with trimmed grass and a floral garden that makes Chara outwardly sparkle with delight. But they continue to remain discreet, and you don’t blame them. They naturally duck behind you when David knocks on the door.

It takes a few seconds for a dark-skinned woman to appear, short and a bit heavyset; her wavy brown hair shines as it dips down to waist-length, and the large flower pin in her hair coincides with the patterned sundress she’s hastily smoothing out.

Now, you wouldn’t know heterosexuality if it hit you on the head, but you can understand why your brother would find an interest in this woman. She’s very pleasing to the eye.
The woman registers who’s at the door with surprise, then sadness, then irritation, then a passive form of restraint. “David? What are you doing here?” Her voice is thick with a distinctive accent.

“Hey Carla,” David greets her. “I need you to do me a solid.”

She blinks, and her brows crease. “Hm?”

“Okay, so long story short, my brother over here,” he waves over to where you stand behind him, shuffling in place when Carla briefly observes you, “needs to start fresh since bad people are tracking him down. Do you think you could call up your friends and help us out?”

Carla registers the conversation slowly, it seems. But she quickly retracts when it sinks in properly. She glances over at you again with an expression of mild interest, then repeats, “¿Tu hermano?”

“Yes, that’s him.”

“Es…es hard for me to get in touch with mi primo, but he is best at this stuff,” Carla says. “I will…think about this.”

“No, c’mon Carla, I need this soon,” David pleads suddenly, leaning in and having her retract a couple of time. “My…he’s been through a lot, hon. He’s got this, this kid and—”

As if it was a magic word, Carla’s face drops and seems to soften a touch. Chara is still pressed to your back when she appears to spot them. Her mouth clips apart and she gasps a little.

“Oh!” She rushes past your brother and kneels down to Chara’s eye-level, and your hand finds their head in a surge of innate defense. “This is your child?” she asks you excitedly, and Chara crumples farther away.

“N-no,” you say, taken aback; you’ve never even met this woman. “They’re…they’re a friend. I’m just watching them for now.”

Not entirely a lie, but you’re not giving yourself props for that one.

Carla looks past your blatant inelegance to smile at Chara, her warm and welcoming smile melting the wooden stature of the kid. “Hello!” she chirps, then lowers her voice a little when she sees that Chara is still highly uncomfortable. “What is your name?”

They scrunch your jeans a little between their fingers, as though asking for permission to speak. You grant them such by patting their head; you know they’re wary of strangers.

“I’m…Chara.”

“Chara,” she says again, and they nod; the way Carla’s pronunciation sweetens the name like honey, and you briefly reminisce that this was almost how your mother spoke. “What a very pretty name.”

They duck their head, but you spot a red coloring their cheeks at the compliment. “Thank…thank you.”

“De nada,” Carla beams, then places herself upright to give you a gander. “And this…es your brother?”

“Yes.”

You note that you don’t have much to say for yourself, so you just awkwardly look for a handshake. “Hi, uh…Miles Upshur.”
Carla takes it and doesn’t look down at your hands, god bless. “Carla. I’ve heard…much about you.”

David clears his throat before you can press her. “So, you think you can get it done?”

She looks to David, then to you, then to Chara, then back to you, then back to David. Her neutral gaze exposes nothing, and slowly you’re beginning to feel more uninvited here than back in Leadville.

Then Carla sweeps her hand near the doorway, which is still cracked open. “Come in,” she insists calmly. “We will talk about this.”

You’re unsure, because you haven’t been an embraced guest anywhere lately. But David is nudging you all inside, insisting on politeness, and it’s difficult to back out of it now.

The small housing is placated with aesthetically curved designs, from lamps to chairs; all of it coincides with the rest, like puzzle pieces. It’s bright yet homey, decorated with a few flower vases spotted along the walls and shelves. You spot the occasional sight of a thread spool, or a lost fabric slanted over a table, indicating that there’s more than meets the eye.

Chara looks at these subjects with a fascination, picking up a sleek pattern that’s been aimlessly tossed aside, and they thumb the colored silk.

David is called away from the living room so that Carla can speak to him privately on the manner, and from the tone of voice, it sounds unpromising. He just plasters a grin to you both, tightened on the edges, and says he’ll be back.

A moment later, as Chara marvels as the appearing sewing supplies littered over the area, you hear them speaking in harsh, low murmurs.

“You know that the work of mi primo is dangerous!” Carla hisses, and you listen. “I will not put my family en a bad place because of what your brother has done!”

“Carla, I know it’s a lot, but you’ve seen the news too! You know that he didn’t do anything—”

“He went to that asylum! He knew what he was doing!”

You feel a harsh kick in the stomach because you’ve only been viewed as something of a foolish hero, rather than just a fool. And it’s not like you really knew what you were getting into, but…

Still.

Chara is hunched over a fashion magazine, pawing through certain contents and pretending to not be listening, while you’re adamant about eavesdropping. They stoop in on a color palette section whilst the two in the kitchen begin to grow more vocal.

“I’m not gonna try to understand what the hell happened in that asylum,” David snaps. “But I know that there’s a kid that didn’t deserve to be placed in that situation at all, and they need my brother right now. And I need to get them off the map until this blows over.”

“It will not ‘blow over.’” Carla’s voice is dry.

“…Carla, honey, please. Just get in touch with them. They’re…I’m all they’ve got.”

If she protested, it’s too quiet to be recognized. But David goes on, “He told me what happened in that hellhole. I can’t just…throw that all away.”
You and Chara shrink in equivalent levels of self-deprecation as you briefly remember what was said. What you went through. The earthly pains of that time is a fleeting incapacity; the real sickness is resolute, and it sticks to your brains.

Carla’s undertone is gentle, but an air of solution that washes over the two calms your uncertainties. They reappear separately, with Carla trailing behind. David seems worn at the confrontation, but confident.

He gives you a thumbs-up, maintaining a stiff, toothy grin. “We’ve got you covered.”

It washes over you in currents. You breathe easier.

“I will see if my family can help,” Carla explains. “They are…experienced. We will try and make you not a person of interest in the town.”

You’ll take anything at this point, hell.

Before you can thank her for the help, Carla’s eyes follow the trail of discarded sewing patches and read magazines; her gaze goes to Chara like magnets, shining. “Oh! You like sewing?”

Chara looks up from where they’d been matching colors together, and in shame they tuck away their evidence, looking to you for approval. You remain passive and still, so they reach their own conclusions.

Uncertain, perhaps shaking a little, they nod. “I…I’m not very good at it. I can knit some.”

You want to press Chara to give themself more credit than that, but you know that it’s harder than it seems to have them soak in their talents. Like it all has to be run by a systematic checklist. But Carla looks thrilled, straightening her formerly-crestfallen structure.

“Wonderful!” Her hands clap together, engulfed with a renewing glee. “Perhaps we can talk. I would love to teach you!”

Chara’s face goes red, looking precisely at the vast majority of expectant adults in the room. Their hands meet the end tips of their hair, and from this angle you can clearly inspect the crescent shadows lining their eye sockets.

You tap them with the tip of your shoe and you give them the smallest nod. Carla is a stranger, but she wants to help. And unlike the other people that ever seemed to want to help you, she is supported by evidence; that your brother is safe, and he knows her. And her skepticism but steadfast determination to help only traces your thoughts back to the whistleblower that, despite his worries, found you answers when no one else would.

“I…I would like that very much,” Chara says quietly, but a raw smile is positioned to where their heavy frown once lay. There’s a sense of earnestness behind the words, supporting your muted encouragement. Maybe this will be good for them. “Thank you.”

Carla’s eyes shine. “Sí, sí. Es a pleasure.”

For yourself, to accommodate everything, you give her a rusted, “Gracias.”

She blinks and looks at you like she’s seeing you for the first time.

And then she smiles.
And while you don’t smile back as easily, you still attempt it.

David wasn’t done showing off his hometown to you, and since it takes a lot of willpower and a crowbar to even get you out of bed, he decided to seize the moment of dragging you out of the house. He spent the time flaunting shops, people, and areas to you both. Starring as the sadly-reliant tourists, you and Chara just stuck to David’s side, pretending to drink in the sights when really you were making sure that no one was able to catch a good look at your faces.

You’d ducked away from strangers, and when David had introduced you to friends as his brother (and Chara as his brother’s kid), you were stranded and could only shake hands, pray that they didn’t look down, pray that they didn’t look at you too hard. And above all, pray that you never heard the death sentence of, “Haven’t I seen you somewhere before?”

But overall, Elliston is small. David assures you many times that some don’t even know who the president is around these parts, and his eyes crinkle like he’s telling you a bad joke. But you want so badly to believe it.

He takes you all home after a failed lunch at a restaurant near the middle of downtown, but you and Chara touched nothing on your plates and were constantly eyeing the television overhead—which was just a local station, thank god. Your to-go boxes now reside in your brother’s refrigerator; you’re expecting to get them out first thing when you’re inevitably kicked back onto the street.

Back at David's home, you eye Lady as she buries her head into the grass, scoping out whatever it is that keeps dogs entertained when they’re in a fenced backyard, with only a few toys for play. She leads herself into a stray, picketed garden along the side, and you have to whistle her away from chewing on a long tomato leaf.

Chara is busied with monitoring a tiny chicken coop on the parallel end of the fence, housing about five chickens. They talk to the hens in whispers, cooing at the animals with the identical tenderness you’d seen them perform with Lady.

And you sit in the middle of it all, bogged down by the intensity of your own mind too much so to really do anything else. So Carla had agreed to do…whatever her cousin does to help you. But Murkoff is ruthless; they want you and they’re not going to just scratch you off of their radar. You have something they want, desperately. And it seems like Chara has a similar case of endowment, because why else would they have been torn away from the Dreemurr’s, so suddenly and so brutally?

This wasn’t all a big coincidence, that’s for sure. But it all makes your head hurt, and then Chara jogs up to where you’re seated on the steps, watching it all whirl by you helplessly.

“You okay?” they venture, and it’s almost hilarious at how they’re asking you that question.

“Kid,” you sigh, face held up by your hands, “what if I…can’t get you back.”

They stop. “Back?”

“Back home. What if this is it. What if you’re stuck here, in some ruddy town in the middle of nowhere, because of me.”

Chara sits right next to you, unresponsive for a long moment. And you both just simmer in the moment, blending thoughts and worries into a single tranquility. You wonder what they’re holding in, what anxieties they contain in that small, adolescent soul of theirs. Whether it’s the same as the
terrors you’re struggling to button in yourself, on the fear of losing control, or failing.

It’s a tad humiliating, you think, to have gone through all of this and have it spew out into wounds you’d kept stitching together for months, when Chara is reserved and overall quiet. But, to their credit, they’ve had to conceal heavy blows for years now; this makes no difference.

Lady picks around in the yard some more, following your line of vision, and then the kid speaks up: “I’m fine with being here.”

You just frown. “You don’t really mean that.”

“I do, actually.” They rest their chin atop their curled knees, gaze distant. “We’ve been through a lot together. And, yeah, I miss them. I really, really do. But… I don’t know. If you’d… if you’d decided to eventually run away to where you are now, on your own terms, I’m glad I got to come along. I miss the Dreemurrus, but I’d miss you a lot too.”

They look over at you when you can’t seem to provide any common sense to what they’ve said. Even if it’s minorly fucked up, in some way. “Does that make sense?”

You wish it didn’t. You want to push away everything dear to you, as you’ve done for so long. Acts of intimacy, of companionship, are not your strong suits, and you can’t provide. The asylum was a rarity in which you were moderately okay with having a partner to shoulder burdens with you, but now…

Chara’s eyes are sharp, shocking you. “I’m not afraid of you,” they declare. “And I don’t care about the Walrider. It hasn’t hurt me ever before. And I’m not scared of it, because of you.”

Their tone is thin, and glossy, but the value of their word is real. It sends a bladed contortion through your troubles, slaughtering them for the time being.

You’re gratified beyond words; all you’ve been informed is that you’re unstable, deadly, dangerous. And now this kid— this fucking kid—is safe because of you. Says that they want to stay, even if you can’t bottle the Walrider up forever. Even if you could morph into an unkindly being the first chance you get.

So you hug them fiercely, vision blurring, and they dig their face into your chest with an elongated sigh. You’re shaking when you tell them, “You’re such a good kid.”

There’s no follow-up retort, as you’d expected. There’s just a fist that wrinkles the back of your shirt, and a whisper. And it takes you a moment for you to realize that they said, “Thank you.”

You head back inside, leaving Chara to nurture the garden and hens, which they were more than pleased to do on their own. David is sitting on the edge of the kitchen counter, almost expectantly, with his hands filling his pockets.

“So.”

You ignore him for the time being. The house is stacked with boxes, you realize; it’s a bit of a task to maneuver your way around the place without stepping over something in disarray.

“Joel mentioned that you were moving,” you say to no one, slightly pushing a box further into a corner.
“Yeah,” David says. “I bought a nice farm up near the mountains. It’s not too far from the town, and it’s pretty spacious. Cozy, too.”

“When.”

“Sometime this fall. It’ll take a while to properly adjust, but I worked for years to save up enough to buy it. So I’m not letting it slip away now.”

The domestic setting has an area in your chest sting. The fact that it’s also temporary makes it that much more precious; and you’ve never dwelled upon how short-lived everything is until recently.

Even if your apartment wasn’t home, it was becoming something of a foundation for it. And you relish the moments of waking up there, in the handful of days when the nightmares weren’t too spastic and you could choke down Jackson’s food easier.

“I’m not liking that look on your face,” David says, disrupting your spiral. “What’s going on in that head of yours.”

Conflict swims in your gut for a long second. You’re despondent when you explain, “What do you do when you don’t know what to do.”

You don’t have to turn around to see that the question unsettled your brother greatly. It sets into the atmosphere like mist hanging over your heads.

“I’m guessing this is talking about more than one thing,” David eventually answers, voice artificially balanced. “But, if you want my advice, I say you just wait for the solution to come to you.”

You grimace in displeasure. “It’s not that simple.”

“Well, I wouldn’t know what exactly you’re talking about, given that—”

“Given that what?” you challenge, whipping around to him with a heated courage. “We haven’t talked in years? Yeah, I know, David! Add it on the list of things I just can’t seem to get right! Just one more fuckup that I have to deal with!”

His eyes flare, but then subside, surprising you. Your bitterness still viciously roils around, trying to find a home in your blood. But you just chew on your words.

“I—”

“Look,” David interrupts you, tone firm enough to make your spine numb. “I’m not going to sit here and pretend that I know what you’re going through. I’m not. And a lot of that shit you told me last night—I’m not gonna lie, it was hard to hear! You’re going through some fucked up ordeals, but I’m not going to tell you that all of it wasn’t your fault. Consequences for actions are a bitch to deal with.”

His words are daggers in your chest. “You’re saying I just suck it up?”

“I’m saying that you’ve rolled with enough punches, and you can still be upset about what happened,” David explains, “but it’s also about time you start taking action for it. You can’t feel sorry for yourself forever.”

Your mouth opens in an empty retort, but he spares you the trouble: “What you went through was god-awful. And you’ve definitely earned your medal of ‘gone through hell and back’. But just…try to balance it out.” He points to where Chara is idly petting Lady as they look into David’s tiny
“Right now isn’t about you. It’s about the kid that you chose to risk your life for. Nobody told you to go and retrieve them. Nobody told you that you had to come here. For fuck’s sake, no one forced you to go to that asylum in the first place! Save for your own thick skull.”

“I—”

“Like it or not, you chose this,” David argues. “And there’s no going back. There’s only figuring out what to do, and if that takes a while to figure out, that’s fine. But there’s no point in just moping about all of it. That never gets anything done.”

…He’s right.

And it’s not easy to say, so you twist your tongue and don’t say anything. But you’re deferential to fight back the urge to debate about it. As hazed as your judgement may seem, you know that, however much you loathe it, David has a point. No use throwing a pity party about all of this.

Your brother’s taxing advice is an odd, clotted mixture of what you feel like people have been trying to shove down your throat for a while now. And if the past repeats itself through the multiple lectures you’ve been given, there’s no better time than when you’ve lost everything to start listening.

“I’m sorry I dragged you into this,” you mutter, flat and a little disheartened. You feel the hollowness in your guts as tangible as spikes in your system.

David’s demeanor immediately retracts into a gentler type of character.

“In an ironic sense, I did give you a roof over your head. So I chose this, too,” he says, almost briskly. “And in an even bigger twist, I’m glad you came to me about this.”

You swallow harshly, looking anywhere but at your brother; the only reminder of family you’d shoved out of your life.

“If you choose to stay, I’m not going to question it. But this isn’t some…vacation, okay? I’m not gonna baby you around. You gotta clean up what you can.”

You just nod. “I know.”

David lingers for a minute, like he has more he wants to say. But you get the gist of it all; he’s still angry with your methods, and one pep talk won’t rid yourself of the consequences you have yet to face. He’ll need to forgive you, and then you’ll need to forgive you. Easier said than done.

Maybe he’s right that you should stop modifying the time of which you need to heal.

He leaves it at that, with a brief over-the-shoulder reminder that your lunch is still in the fridge, and he heads upstairs because he needs to work on packing more things.

You dwell in the kitchen that’s not yours. It’s not a natural sense of belonging that you feel imprinting on you, rather an induced sort of reassurance you’re gaining. From what lingers behind in the snippets of those who attempted to help you.

It’s hard applying this here and now. With unfriendly predators stalking your sense of security, grinding you down into a fine dust until you’re willing to cooperate. But it’s caged now, and in its place is an oddity of birdsong. Like you’re as free as you’re going to get, with the storms swirling in your blood, the static in your marrow.
Maybe if you’re in control, if you *stay* in control, you’ll find something worth all of this.

You look back out to where Chara is, looking wistful of the scenery, content; if only for a little bit.

And you think, maybe this can stay.

Maybe this can be enough for now.

Chapter End Notes

I went over this in the last story, but this crossover slowly became a huge part of my writing development, and even though I'll always poke fun at the silly idea, I've come to respect it. Love it, even, for what it is. There's nothing wrong with having fun with an idea, no matter how ridiculous it may seem.

Thank you so much for helping me branch out. Thank you for your kudos, your comments, and your time. It means more than you'll ever know.

And, to those who said this series made them happy: thank you for reading!! I hope that, in the craziest sense, I was able to inspire somebody with this.

You can always contact me at embragii on Tumblr.

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