Welcome To The Kane Co. Family
by SplickedyHat

Summary

There's a new CEO in Kane Co. tower, and the years-long war on Motorcity has ground to an uneasy halt. In her father's absence, Julie Kane works to hold her new position in the power vacuum he left behind. Far below, her boys have their own problems: a fast-growing new threat from an old enemy, and a mysterious epidemic creeping through the streets of Motorcity.

Notes

Aaaaand we're back! :D Thank you to everybody who encouraged and supported us through the first fic--we'll do our best to make the second (and final) one a real killer. UvU Enjoy!
Two Weeks Later!! Who's Sitting On The Throne??!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

DAY ONE

Julie Kane is looking at her face in the mirror.

She’s definitely not imagining it—the shadows under her eyes are getting darker. They’ve always been there, it’s a family trait, but at this rate she’s going to end up looking like a mutant raccoon. Julie’s not surprised, exactly. She’s really been through the wringer this past week—several wringers, actually. Non-stop wringing.

*Note to self,* she thinks absently as she opens the slick white makeup case under her bathroom cupboard, *ask Jacob what a “wringer” is next time you're down in Motorcity. He might actually be old enough to know.*

She goes through the steps with the unconscious ease of someone who’s had the same morning
routine every day since she was thirteen. Foundation, concealer for those shadows, then liberal
eyeliner and her signature crimson lipstick.

That had been Claire’s idea, during one of their countless teen sleepovers. Julie had balked at first,
refused to let her best friend get anywhere near her face with the stuff (“Ew, no, it’ll stand out way
too much!”). Until Claire, in a fit of exasperated spite, opened a tube of bright, pale lavender and
applied it generously, then glared at Julie and said “See?! If I can pull this off, you can totally do it
too! Okay?”

She was right, of course—it looked great. They both looked great. And these days, Julie wears the
red lipstick like armor, dark and bold, no-nonsense. *Listen to me when I’m talking.*

She presses her lips together, slides them back and forth for an even coating, and then puckers for a
moment—perfect. Claire would be proud.

Now...time for a board meeting.

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Abraham Kane, founder of Kane Co., always stressed the sacrosanct importance of the board
meeting; a time to remind his inner circle Who They Worked For. It’s one of those rare policies
Julie actually kind of agrees with, and she’s stayed faithful to it in his absence. With only one
major difference: the meetings are now weekly rather than monthly.

It’s a temporary thing, but it felt necessary. No matter now many sour looks she gets every
Monday, she wants to hear every detail. Julie slogs through budget changes, PR (a new concept
for most of the board members, several of whom actually scoffed out loud when she said the words
*Public Relations*), and her proposal for a global department review. By the time she’s crossed off
the last bullet point, her voice is hoarse and impatient.

“Any questions?”

The board of directors looks at her, expressions ranging from calculating to openly hostile. Julie
stares back at them, contriving to indicate her disappointment with a sharply raised eyebrow. No
questions? Disgraceful.

“Clement,” Julie says brusquely, and Gwen Clement raises a brow back at her. *You may be CEO
now,* says that look, *but I can still cancel your Girls’ Night with my daughter. Do not test me.* Julie
clears her throat a little and adds...just a touch more respect to her tone. “It’s been a week or two
since we announced that my father was missing. How’s Deluxe...taking it?”

*My father,* she thinks to herself distantly, as Gwen purses her lips in thought and pulls up a screen.
He’s her *dad.* Calling him “father” just feels incredibly pretentious. Unnatural, even; up until a
few weeks ago, she’d never called him anything but “Mister Kane” in company.

“The public cams haven’t picked up any open unrest,” Gwen says, flicking through a long, long,
scrolling list of feeds. “...From our families of concern...mm. Slight uptick. Nothing too far out of
the ordinary.”

Julie’s known for a long time that Claire’s mom has eyes all over the city, and since she’s taken
over as CEO, Julie’s come to understand why her dad considered them so important. She hates
depending on spy-camera footage just to find out how people feel, but she has to grudgingly admit
how useful the surveillance department can be.

(How do people like the new sunglasses, Clement? *Well Mr. Kane, sales are good but very few*
people wear them to go out, and the residents of pod 721 in tower QQ40 laughed at your commercial last night when it broadcast over their dinner break.)

“Good,” says Julie, just a split second late but completely even and calm. “Thank you. Larsson? Your department was supposed to be compiling a full list of current in-progress tech for me to review.”

Larsson doesn’t look pleased to be called on either, but to his credit he’s already pulling up his report by the time Julie finishes her sentence.

Julie...doesn’t like Larsson. There’s no more tactful way to say it, and she knows the feeling is mutual. He’s been running the research and development department for almost as long as Julie has been alive, and if you asked him he’d say the tech R&D turns out is invaluable to the city.

Oh yeah, Julie wants to say, sometimes, invaluable like zombie plagues and explosive reactor cores and city-flattening death cubes, Larsson? And even worse, more personal, the things R&D’s inventions have done to her friends. Deluxe produced the collars that almost killed Julie and the rest of the Burners, the implant that forced Mike to obey her dad’s orders, the supersuit he wore when he carried those orders out. The thought of tech like that being mass-produced makes Julie feel physically ill.

Swallowing hard, she tries gamely to concentrate as he describes the projects currently on hold—weaponry waiting for Mister Kane’s approval, mostly—and others, still ongoing. When he finishes, looking faintly smug, Julie takes a moment to rally her thoughts before responding.

“Alright, so...you didn’t mention what any of the weapons projects are for,” she says. “That’s my first concern.” And then, before Larsson has a chance to jump on that, “--My second is, it sounds to me like we’re trying to fix a broken system. Optimization projects are good, but if things get bad enough it’s more efficient to demolish and rebuild.” She flicks back through his presentation. “This. Upgrading this generator complex’s output would take so many man-hours we would barely make a profit! We could build two new power plants with these resources.” She shakes her head, minimizes the screen and folds her hands on the table in front of her. “So tell me. Why should we do this your way, Emmanuel?”

The deliberate use of his first name has the intended effect; Larsson puffs up, brows drawing together into an impressive scowl. “The reason, Miss Kane,” he says, clinging to joviality despite his obvious rage, “is that we don’t have an alternative. This city is insular by its design. Your father only went to the trouble of trying to...evacuate...the old city because those squatters refuse to let the company draw on the resources it needs.”

Down the table, Pinsky sits forward, “Seconded. Security is ready for your next plan of attack, sir.”

Julie wonders, not for the first time, whether it would be too bold of her to dismiss half of her board of directors. “The war is off, Pinsky,” she says brusquely. “No plan of attack. Right now we need to focus on Deluxe.”

Pinsky glares unnervingly from under his eyebrows. “Deluxe wants action, sir. The men who came back up after the invasion--”

“Are not ready to go back,” says Julie sharply--she has learned by now to ignore the “sir”. I was down there, she doesn’t say. I helped make sure of that.

“I’m sure my department’s innovations can pick up Security’s slack,” says Larsson, and ignores
the dirty look Pinsky throws him from down the table.

“...Yeah,” says Julie, “we’re gonna have to talk about your **innovations**--remind me sometime.”

Larsson balks. “With all due respect, Miss Kane, I’m not your personal secretary!”

Oh, so he thinks he can play the “I’m too important, I don’t have time” angle--well, that’s fair, he probably doesn’t. He’s probably too busy brainstorming ways to undermine her. “Okay, then maybe you should hire one for me? I want applications on my desk by tomorrow morning.”

“Kane Co. chooses the most qualified people and employs them for the good of Deluxe. It doesn’t do...applications.”

“It does now,” says Julie. “Maybe add something in the call about how we’re not going to, I don’t know, beat them up for every little mistake? Which, by the way, we’re not going to do that anymore!”

He folds his arms, silent but clearly unconvinced. God, the sooner Julie can get rid of him, the better.

“...I think that’s enough for today,” Julie says. “Meeting adjourned--except for you, Clement. I need to talk to you.”

The board members filter out, except for Claire’s mother, who stands and starts the long walk towards Julie from the other end of the table. Julie sighs, snaps shut the fan of crowded screens in front of her, and forces her jaw to un-tense. It’s only seven in the morning and her temples are already throbbing.

“You’ve got them all **sorts** of worked up,” says Gwen, and pulls out the chair nearest to Julie, settling gracefully into it. “So. What did you want me for.”

“I--yeah. Yes.” Julie clears her throat, trying to ignore the feeling that she should be asking for things **pretty please Ma’am**! “I have an...idea to run past you.”

Mrs. Clement gives her that look that’s becoming all too familiar--the you sound like your father look--but to her credit, she doesn’t say it out loud. “Okay…”

“I want to share my identity with the company,” says Julie. “Just the company, not the city! And I was wondering if...you thought...that was a good idea.”

The discussion of surveillance stats and public relations that follows is a good fifteen minutes long. The verdict they finally reach, backing down from an almost-argument, is that Julie needs to weigh opening herself up to fresh criticism against the risk of being deposed while she keeps her identity secret.

Julie can take criticism.

Another hour of speech-writing and editing later, she’s ready. The speech itself is obscenely short for the amount of time she and Mrs. Clement have spent doctoring it and rehearsing the tone--authoritative, but calm, straightforward but elegant. (“And you’re a CEO, for the love of god, sit up straight.”)

Julie asks Gwen to leave the room before she starts. This is going to be hard enough without an in-person audience.
She opens a line to the entirety of Kane Co. Tower, checking and double-checking that she hasn’t accidentally connected to the city-wide broadcast system before opening the KaneCue text window next to the recording screen. Her father always insisted he didn’t need it. Probably he didn’t, but Julie will be damned if she stutters even a little during her first official address.

You have to show people you’re someone they can trust, Julie-bear, says her dad in her head, and straightens his collar. He’d been burning with energy, eyes dark and hard and bright, as close to nervous as she can ever remember seeing him. She doesn’t remember much, but a few details still stand out; the new buildings still ground-bound outside the windows of the half-constructed tower. The itch of Julie’s new white dress. Her dad’s voice as he smoothed his hair back and squared his shoulders, stepping up into the recording window. This is the first announcement Deluxe’s citizens will see on the first day of their new lives. First impressions are everything.

The screen counts down. Three. Two. One.

The recording light blinks on.

“Good afternoon, Kane Co. employees,” Julie says, and she’s alone in the room, but she would swear she can feel a hundred of pairs of eyes focus on her, pinning her in place. She can hear her own voice echo. It’s a surreal feeling, hearing herself through the office floor, through the walls as every room in the tower lights up announcement screens. “This is a Code White confidential announcement. Repeat, this is a tower-only announcement. As you know, Abraham Kane has been missing for some time and new management has been instated during his absence. The Executive department thanks you for your support during this time of transition.” Her voice feels hoarse. Julie pushes through it, doesn’t let herself stammer or clear her throat.

“My name is Julie Kane,” she says, and smiles. “And I’m pleased to announce that I will be the new CEO of Kane Co.”

And it’s done. It’s said. For a single, inane moment, Julie imagines laughing, trying madly to play it off as a joke.

“I’m sure you all have questions,” she says, folds her hands and looks at the camera head-on, fearless. “Rest assured...”

It doesn’t take more than a few minutes to finish the speech, but it feels like hours. Julie explains the very barest outline of the city’s situation, sparing a lot of details--reiterates her announcement of peace with Motorcity, puts out the official call for somebody to take care of the executive secretarial work. She smiles, she reassures, she keeps her back straight and her head high.

“...Again, rest assured,” she finds herself saying, a few endless minutes later, “--this transition will be as smooth as Executive can make it. This city, this company, and these people are all my responsibility now. The mission of Detroit Deluxe will stay the same as it ever has; building you a better tomorrow, today.”

The window closes and Julie collapses back in her chair. Bits of the speech replay in her head, lines where she faltered or fell flat. Especially the Deluxe tagline, which Gwen insisted would provide some comfort to older employees. Julie’s heard it in her father’s confident, booming voice a hundred times, and her own rendition rings trite and unconvincing in her memory.

...Well, it’s done now. No use worrying.

“Nice speech, Kane.”
Julie makes herself not bolt upright, but it’s a hard-won thing. A familiar, electric mix of fear and anger fills her body as she raises herself slowly to look at her visitor.

“You know,” she says, “I was kind of really hoping I’d never see you again?”

Red tilts his head, drawing closer to her desk. “No sign of your old man yet...in case you were wondering.”

Some part of her wants to retreat, to lean away. Julie refuses to be swayed. “Why do you care? I thought your big issue was with Mike.”

“Chilton’s not going anywhere,” Red says, and Julie hates the hint of a satisfied chuckle in his voice. “I’ll get around to him later. But if Kane gets back to Deluxe--”

“How did you get back to Deluxe?” Julie shoots out, mostly to distract him from wherever that sentence was heading. She can’t believe she’s in a room having a conversation with a guy who wants to kill both her dad and one of her best friends.

“None of your business,” says Red bluntly. “I’m not here to answer questions, I just thought I’d check in on you while I was...in the neighborhood. How’s the transition of management going?”

“How’s the transition of management going?”

“None of your business.”

He laughs, a sound she always regrets having to hear. “You’re going to need me eventually, Miss Kane.”

“If you say so,” says Julie coldly. “Until then, maybe don’t come anywhere near me? How does that sound.”

A faint, garbled noise, unreadable--a growl or a laugh or a sigh, it’s impossible to tell. Whatever it is, he stops advancing.

“...You’re his daughter alright,” he says softly, and Julie can’t tell if the sudden tight surge in her chest is pride or fury. “Stubborn. Arrogant.”

“That’s rich, coming from you,” Julie says, and--and--okay, if he wants to bring her dad into this--she turns her back on Red, folds her hands behind her and paces to the window. “Like I said, if I ever need a creepy thug for some reason, I’ll let you know. You’re dismissed.”

“You--”

“I said...” Julie half-turns her head, just enough to catch a glimpse of black and scarlet out of the corner of her eye. “Dismissed.”

She gives it twenty seconds. When she turns around, he’s gone.

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Visiting Claire for Girl’s Night feels kind of weird these days. It hasn’t been for a long time--Gwen did seem wary at first all those years ago, having her boss’s daughter in the family pod cluster, but Julie wore her down with tireless politeness. Since then, she’s practically been part of the family.

Even before she arrived, though, the Clements were an unusual family. By the time Julie was thirteen, she’d picked up the specifics of the situation--that Claire’s biological parents hadn’t been
matched via the Deluxe marriage algorithms. But they’d had Claire anyway. It’s not illegal, technically, but it’s frowned upon, and as a member of the executive board, it could have been a fatal blow to Gwen’s career. But Gwen Clement had a daughter, a daughter Julie’s age, and apparently the topic of dismissal was never raised.

Instead--according to Claire, who heard her mom talking to her dad and later passed it on to Julie--Kane had pulled his head of surveillance aside and told her about his daughter (his secret daughter) and asked her to let the girls play together.

Thinking back later, Julie would be surprised he hadn’t used blackmail. But maybe he saw Mrs. Clement, with a demanding job and a daughter to raise, and recognized a kinship. One exhausted parent to another.

Julie’s best friend Claire is lying on the floor of the family pod when Julie docks her own pod next door and steps inside. She’s playing a tap game on a screen and looking bored, but she glances over at the sound of the door opening and springs up immediately. “Juliieeeeee!”

“Claaaaiiiiiire!” Julie yells back, and they fling themselves at each other to embrace dramatically. “I missed you so much!”

“It’s been weeks!” Claire agrees. “Mom! Tom, Julie’s here!”

“Be right in!” calls Claire’s dad from the next room over, and Gwen comes hurrying out, smiling a little uncertainly at Julie as she appears.

“Julie,” she says, and makes a well-practiced gesture, dimming the glass walls to opaque black. “...Good to see you.”

To Julie’s relief, she doesn’t sound entirely frosty, just a little hesitant. She’s not alone in that, but Julie gives her the biggest smile she can manage and gets a small one in return. Good enough.

“Is dinner ready?” she asks, letting her backpack of Girls Night supplies slide down one arm. Claire immediately picks it up and starts digging through it, examining Julie’s new contraband with interest.

“Coming!” Claire’s dad sings out, appearing at the table with two plates balanced elegantly on either arm. “We’ve got a real gourmet meal tonight…”

Julie, Claire, and Gwen all supply the obligatory round of slightly sarcastic applause. Even Claire, who has yet to find something she enjoys eating in Motorcity, has admitted in confidence that “Well, at least it tastes like something.”

Tom Odom, a consummate showman, bows as he hands a plate to each of them, his magnificent ink-black ponytail hanging over one shoulder.

“Thanks, Mister O, this looks delicious,” says Julie as he throws himself into his own chair, sliding a plate across the table to his daughter. “I mean, as delicious as throat cubes can look.”

“That’s what I do, hon,” says Tom comfortably, winking at her. “You know, I wanted to run a line of these with different colors last year, so at least they look like something you’d want in your mouth, but you know how that goes…”

Claire rolls her eyes half-affectionately. “Tom, you always talk about this when Julie’s here…”

“I deserve to be heard by upper-level officials!” Tom protests, the image of an slighted artist. “I
get that Kane Co. has a brand, but what about my brand, sweetheart? Fifteen years of designing outfits, home decor, food, and what do I get for it?"

“Ooh, I know!” says Julie, who’s heard this speech before. “Just two colors and--”

“--one letter,” Gwen finishes for her, sparing Tom a small, knowing smile. He blows a kiss back at her and Gwen, in an utterly unprecedented display of spontaneity, bats her eyelashes.

“Aaaaah!” Claire groans, covering her eyes. “What, now that we’re both eighteen it’s okay to flirt in front of us? Guys!”

“Maybe you just didn’t notice before,” Gwen sniffs, reaching for her pod’s video console. “You might as well get used to it. Now let’s see who’s on tonight…”

“Oo!” All thoughts of parental flirting apparently driven from her mind, Claire scoots her chair over toward the end of the table, watching avidly as her mother pulls up a holo-screen and flips through feeds. “Who are we watching?”

“Mm…” Gwen clicks her tongue. “We got...385R’s son went on a date without his parent’s permission...grandma in 899W is yelling about how much better things were back in the day…one of our flagged Motorcity sympathizers got matched-and-married to one of the executive interns a few weeks ago and they’re both trying to convert each other in 117A…”

“Definitely 385R,” Claire says. “Right? Gotta be. He is so grounded.”

“Well…” Gwen sighs. “..my vote was for 117A. But it’s Girls Night, and--”

“Girls make the rules on Girls Night!” Claire says, and pops a cube into her mouth. “You can tape it! If you ever stop having meetings all the time so you can actually watch. You’re missing all the good shows!”

On the screen, somebody says “young man, we need to talk.” and the Clement-Odom family gives a collective ooo.

Julie learned a long time ago that being the daughter of the CEO made her childhood...different. Gave her different values, different standards for what was normal. Growing up the daughter of the city spymaster was bound to do something similar. Claire and her parents have been watching Deluxe’s family drama for as long as Julie has been coming over, and no matter how many times Julie tries to explain why it makes her uncomfortable, it doesn’t seem to faze them. Honestly, some part of her envies them. Even creepy people-watching family time is better than CEO lessons.

“Julie?”

Claire just asked her something. Julie blinks and shakes off the melancholy thoughts. “Mm? Sorry, what?”

“Are you gonna eat?”

Julie glances down at her plate and sighs a little. She should, really--she’s already lost quite a bit of weight in the past couple of weeks, and she didn’t have much to spare in the first place. But the longer she goes without pizza and smoothies, the more she hates every single thing about throat cubes. “Uh...yeah,” she says, halfhearted, and picks up her fork. “Sure, sorry.”

There’s something really bizarre about eating dinner while watching surveillance feeds of other
people eating dinner. Gwen actually changes the channel to the Gordy family for one heart-stopping moment, but to Julie’s relief, Dar and his parents seem thoroughly occupied with the digital card game on their displays. Gwen gets bored within seconds. She also skips away from any hushed conversations about where Mister Kane is and who’s running the city now, eyes fixed determinedly on the screen while Julie plays self-consciously with a lock of her hair.

“Oh my god, did he just say that?!” squeals Claire. “Oh my god, his mother-in-law is the worst!”

“He made that story up,” says Gwen, unimpressed. “She doesn’t even have access codes for the incinerators.”

Tom waves urgently at both of them. “Sh-sh-sh! Somebody’s coming in!”

Julie loves everyone in this room, but god they can be weird sometimes.

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She only manages to eat about half a plate of throat cubes before their lukewarm, too-soft texture and the ever-present tightness in her stomach combine into something way too close to nausea. She gets up as 485Z accuses his roommate of plagiarizing his project for the R&D Practical Applications exam, and quietly collects dishes to dump into the matter reclaimer.

“Looks like somebody is ready for girl time,” Claire’s dad says, and leans over to wrap an arm around Claire’s shoulders, shaking her a little bit to get her attention. “You’re up, baby.”

“Oh! Yeah!” Claire pushes herself up and hurries around the table to take Julie’s hands. “We can go back to your pod--”

“Oh, you can stay here.” Claire’s dad spins elegantly up out of his seat in one smooth motion, and ends up on his feet with one hand extended to Gwen. “I think these two old folks might need to retire back to my pod for the night. I have a bottle of KaneCohol with our names on it, and some new outfit ideas in need of a gorgeous model…”
“I think I know a girl,” Gwen says, with impeccable dignity--she sounds detached and cool, but her lips twitch like she’s hiding a smile. “Have fun, ladies. Don’t do anything you wouldn’t want me to know about.”

Tom puts an arm comfortably around Gwen’s waist as they head across to the near wall and he keys in his code. He and Gwen walk together into the room beyond and as the door seals again, Julie hears the beginning of a startled laugh. She and Claire look at each other, torn between eeewww and are they really gonna--?

And then they both break down with uncontrollable giggling. Claire grabs Julie’s backpack from the corner, and they retire to the familiar comfort of Claire’s bedroom.

Nail polish is one of the few Deluxe luxuries that can be found in multiple colors, although some are harder to find than others. When Julie was 12, nothing beat the excitement of bringing in a new color like Real Fire Red or, memorably, Orchid Surprise. She still doesn’t know who named them or what half of the words mean.

“So,” says Claire, finally selecting a small, shimmering bottle of rare Forest Green, “what’s the big plan?”

Julie scoffs awkwardly, extending her right hand so that Claire can inspect her nails. “Plan? Uh...nail painting, I guess, and then, like, we could do each other’s hair--”

“Jules.”

Getting right into the heavy stuff. Okay.

“I...wanna announce a truce,” says Julie. “I don’t have all the details figured out yet, but I’m not gonna just--tiptoe around the whole war on Motorcity thing! That’s all I did when my dad was still here, and--”
“Girl, I get where you’re coming from,” says Claire, painstakingly applying glistening paint to one of Julie’s nails, “but you know if Mister...I mean, if your dad...ugh! You know if you try something like this, no one down there will trust you!”

Julie wilts a little. “Well--I guess some people might think it’s a trap…”

Claire scoffs gently, then blows on Julie’s right hand. “Mmkay. Those are good. Now we’re gonna do the other one…”

“Claire.”

“Of course they’ll think it’s a trap! It’s like, how couldn’t they? I’m your best friend and I kinda think it sounds like a trap!”

Julie almost yanks her hand out of Claire’s grip, stopping herself only because the flare of anger in her gut is familiar by now. It’s the one that makes her shout, and do things she regrets later. When she swallows it, she’s surprised to find a lump in her throat instead.

“I’m really trying, okay?” she mumbles. “I mean--” This is harder to say than she thought it would be--she told Claire when her dad named her his successor, but she omitted a few details. “--L--ugh, look, I don’t need people to tell me I’m not...great at this CEO thing yet. I wasn’t even Dad’s first choice, y’know?”

“Then who--” Claire pauses thoughtfully, and then sighs, looking back down at Julie’s nails. “Mike. Duh.”

“...Yeah.”

“Are you even listening to yourself, Jules? I like it up here--it’s clean, it’s safe, it doesn’t stink--”

“Is this going somewhere?”

“--but even I think your dad had problems! Okay? And it’s not like you have to fix everything at once, right?”

“...I guess,” says Julie, but there’s a tug at the corner of her mouth that takes the edge off of her reluctant tone. “Maybe I just need to figure out what to do first?”


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DAY TWO

The next morning, Julie calls the Burners.

She calls every morning, when she can. It’s a good reminder, seeing the hideout behind whoever picks up, hearing the sound of roaring engines or Jacob humming tunelessly in the kitchen. It helps keep her grounded, reminds her…

Well, just reminds her.
It’s Mike this time, looking irritatingly awake for eight in the morning, and perks up immediately when he sees Julie’s face. “Jules! Hey!”

“Hey, Mike,” says Julie, and lets her smile be just as tired as she is. Mike cocks his head on one side, looking at her—his bright expression softens a little.

“...Still rough up there, huh?”

Julie sighs and throws herself back into her bed. “So rough,” she says gratefully. “I thought—I don’t know. I didn’t know somebody was going to fight every single thing I did, y’know?”

“Oh, I know,” says Mike fervently, and then lowers his voice, glancing briefly around at the kitchen behind him. “I’d trade you for those old guys any day. You wanna come down here and handle the Amazons and the Mama’s Boys for me?”

Julie laughs. “We should throw them all in a room together,” she says, tone serious but lips twitching. “I think that’s the way forward, Mike. I think I could see real change happening like that.”

“Don’t do the CEO voice,” Mike groans, but he’s grinning. “Good old Pinsky’s still in charge of Security, right? I’d love to see him try to tell Foxy she doesn’t have the constitution of an elite.”

“Ooo, no.” Julie winces. “I’m not ready to hire a new chief of Security just yet. Give me a couple of days to get set up first.”

“Not yet?” Mike’s hair makes it hard to tell, but Julie thinks she sees his brows rise behind his bangs. “...what happens after ‘a couple of days’?” And then, grinning and a little bit wicked, “...You got something in the works, Jules?”

“Mmm...maybe.” Julie flips her hair over her shoulder, playing coy and cagey and trying not to laugh. “Sorry, cowboy, that’s classified.”

Mike gives a little fake-disappointed hum, and then pauses, frowning a little. Whatever he’s thinking, it makes him run a hand through his hair and sigh through his nose.

“What, did you just remember Jacob’s making lunch today?” says Julie, half-grinning.

“No--well, ha, yeah, he is actually, but it’s just—things are pretty anti-Deluxe down here right now, which I get…”

“I know,” says Julie uncomfortably, crossing her ankles and watching her toes curl in favor of looking at Mike’s face.

“...especially since, uh...Kane’s Golems really did a number on the buildings. So there isn’t a lot of room for the security guys who stayed down here after the invasion. It’s pretty hard to deal with. You wouldn’t like it.”

“I already don’t like it,” says Julie tensely, and Mike kind of chuckles.

“Yeah. We miss you, though. I wish things hadn’t gone down the way they did.”

“What way?” Julie asks without thinking, and then catches the way his face twists for a moment and wishes she hadn’t.

“Just...all that stuff with me and you and…”
“Yeah,” says Julie suddenly, cutting him off. She’s starting to feel that slow build of nausea again, and she doesn’t want it to get any further. “It sucks. It does. Uh...tell you what, I’m gonna be busy and you...look pretty tired--”

“I keep telling him that!” says Jacob, appearing suddenly from the right side of the screen. Mike jumps about a foot and Julie clutches her chest, her mind instantly racing back to check the conversation they just had for any private information.

“Geez!” says Mike, with the fervor anyone else would use for much stronger language. “Maybe warn me next time you’re gonna give me a heart attack, Jacob?”

“Sorry, kid,” says Jacob patting Mike on the shoulder. “Didn’t mean to scare ya. I just saw our favorite lady here--” he gestures to Julie, who manages a small smile. “--and thought I’d drop in to say hi! Julie, listen, we gotta talk sometime, about...some, uh, stuff.”

“I’m actually just about to start work,” says Julie quickly, distantly aware that something in her is quietly panicking and it’s only going to get worse if this conversation continues. “So...bye!”

Jacob and Mike are only halfway through echoing the word back at her when she closes the connection, and she feels a little bad about that. But mostly she’s just...relieved.

Julie is tired of this.

Tired of a lot of things, but right now, mostly just tired of the way Mike looks at her when she asks “how’s it going down there?” Like he’s got things he doesn’t want to say to her. Like he pities her, or...like he’s not sure what to think, maybe, it’s hard to tell. She knows Mike won’t be able to let her dad come back up to Deluxe if he finds him, and the almost cautious way he looks at her makes her temples throb and her teeth grind. I know he’s evil, okay?! She wants to yell, when he looks at her like that. I know what he did, did you find him or not?!

She doesn’t say it.

She starts work.

--

Kane Co. makes an announcement the day after that. It’s the first citywide address since its CEO went missing in Motorcity, and Deluxians aren’t the only ones listening. Deluxe doesn’t have too much ability to broadcast into Motorcity itself, but news spreads fast. One by one, the Burners’ contact lists light up, Mike and then Chuck and then Dutch and then Texas, as people spread the broadcast like wildfire. They’re already gathered together in the hideout, playing racing games and snacking--not much else to be doing, these days. Kane Co. hasn’t attacked in weeks, and the Burners have help now, other gangs patrolling the city while it rebuilds.

The announcement is a simple thing, less than a minute long; the Burners spend a couple of seconds all trying to stream it at the same time, then give up and crowd around the sofa to watch on Mike’s screen.

“Oh, hey!” Mike says, as the picture resolves out of a blur of static. “It’s Alex!”

“This is an official announcement from Kane Co. management,” says Alex Harley, on the screen.

“He looks a lot better,” Dutch remarks, raising his eyebrows. “Guess no one up there found out about all the...”
“Sharing company secrets and tricking Ultra Elites into shooting each other and trying to be on our side?” Chuck finishes for him, looking sour. “Yeah. Guess not.”

“Wait, we know this guy?” Texas says from the back, raising the brim of his cap to frown at the screen. “Who’s he?”

Dutch groans, but Chuck makes a very tetchy noise and snaps, “Oh, nobody! He just stuck experimental mind-control tech in Mike’s neck and turned him into a--a--” Chuck pauses, head twitching in Mike’s direction as his jaw works soundlessly. “...He’s just a jerk, okay?”

“Oh, right, okay, the lawyer guy!” says Texas comfortably. “Texas will allow it.”

“He’s not a lawyer, dude,” Dutch mutters, rolling his eyes. “He just helped with Mike’s trial.”

“So, good guy.”

“Not good guy!” Chuck squawks indignantly. “Are you not seeing the nice new Commander’s uniform and that stupid smug--”

“Hey,” Mike says mildly, “I can’t hear what he’s saying.” And then, still mild but just a bit pointed, “...and he’s a pretty good dude. People change, y’know?”

Chuck kind of crumples, folds his arms and doesn’t argue. Dutch pats him on the shoulder and then turns at the sound of footsteps. “Oh hey, Jacob! New stuff from Deluxe!”

“I saw!” Jacob rounds the corner, frowning. “You finish it yet?”

“Not yet.”

“Well, get on with it.” Jacob nods to the video, paused on Harley making a rather unflattering face. “I’ll wait.”

“The war on Motorcity has been draining our resources and manpower for long enough,” Alex goes on, jittering back into life. “Kane Co. is suspending all missions into old Detroit until further notice, and will be appointing an ambassador to liaise with community figures in Motorcity.”

“An ambassador?” Texas’s brows are furrowed. Mike sighs and pauses the video again. “What, they’re making a bridge?”

“Ambassador is a job description, dingus,” says Jacob absently. He’s frowning at the screen too. “Means somebody who goes back and forth in between and talks to people. Uh...diplomatic...liaison.”

“That’s a weird name for a bridge,” says Texas.

“Guys,” Mike says.

“Citizen policy changes will be announced in future broadcasts. Kane Co. thanks you for your patience.”

The broadcast ends. The Burners look around at each other, expressions ranging from cautiously delighted to suspicious to flatly startled.

“...Well, if nobody else is gonna say it,” Chuck says, “--this 100% sounds like a trap.” Mike makes a kind of “eeehhhhh?” noise. “Mikey...seriously?”
“It...I mean, J--whoever’s...in charge up there...might be different?”

“Yeah, and the Mama’s Boys might--not--do--” Texas frowns for a second, apparently stymied, and then gives up and just guffaws. “Yeah right, is all I’m sayin’!”

Dutch, who’s been watching Mike with a funny look on his face since the broadcast started, says slowly, “Mike, I’m not... Look, I get wantin’ to be positive, and I don’t wanna bring this stuff back up again, but are you really gonna tell me this feels okay to you? After...what happened?” Mike opens his mouth to say something, and then gradually closes it again. He doesn’t go pale or stiffen up, but something about him turns still and distant. Dutch visibly winces, sinking guiltily back into his seat.

“...Sorry, man.”

“Don’t worry about it,” says Mike distantly, and then smiles a moment later, like he forgot to when he was talking. Dutch doesn’t look comforted and stands sharply up a few seconds later, mumbling something about helping Jacob in the kitchen.

After lunch--Mutt Dogs with indeterminate and possibly vegetarian contents--and a good hour of debating the new Deluxian policies, it comes down to this: Mike is still in favor of trusting Deluxe (against all common sense), Dutch wants to be hopeful but isn’t feeling it, Chuck is already expecting the inevitable doomsday but doesn’t want to fight Mike on it, and Texas...

“It’s Deluxe! Deluxe don’t change, right? If it did, there wouldn’t be a war, we wouldn’t be runnin’ from bots twenty-five seven--”

“Twenty-four seven,” says Chuck automatically.

“Texas has bigger days than you, little man. Anyway listen, what I’m saying is, don’t trust Deluxe, ever, at all, no matter what they do! That’s all I got!”

“But--” Mike starts, and then jumps in his seat as the giant broadcast screen above the hideout lights up in eye-watering green. Chuck screams as Mike’s newly-refurbished sparkstaff ratchets open and buzzes into life a foot from his face. “Whoa! Get back--”

“Hello, motorcitizens!”

The mood goes almost instantly from shocked readiness to a kind of fatigued frustration.

“Oh,” says Dutch, “nnnnno...”

“It’s been too long, hasn’t it? Oh, you know it has! And that’s why it’s time for...another splentastic bombastic gigantinormic Duke of Detroit television special!”

Mike sighs, collapses his staff and drops back onto the couch. The screen is briefly swallowed by colored lights and sparkling explosions. “I don’t think those are words,” mutters Chuck sourly, and then yelps as the video cuts abruptly to an uncomfortably tight close-up on the Duke’s face.

“Now, what shocking stunts and death-defying dives can you expect this time around? Don’t change that channel!!” And then, without even a pause, “I can’t tell you! Because you can’t script action this good! OW!”

An electric guitar solo revs up as the camera pulls back to show the Duke on a background of shots from last year’s Burner reality show. Someone has greenscreened about ten copies of him into the shot, moonwalking and spinning in perfect sync. The overall effect is very disturbing.
“We were pretty awesome,” Texas concedes, grinning as Stronghorn crosses the screen behind the line of dancing Dukes.

“We almost died!” says Dutch.

“Yeah, and it looked awesome!”

“Well--I mean, yeah, it did, but--”

The scene changes again; the Duke, on a familiar background of crimson plush and gilt trim, grinning secretively.  “What I can tell you, my dear watchers, is that we will have a very Special. Ah-guest.”

The camera cuts closer to his face with every sharply enunciated word, accompanied by heavy, ominous drumbeats.  It stays there in silence for a good five seconds, giving the inescapable impression that he’s looking directly at the Burners, and then--“You won’t wanna miss it, Motorcity!! And cut!”

Another explosion effect wipes the screen, which goes abruptly dark and then fades back into a quiet fuzz of static.

“...Okay,” says Chuck after a moment, “he was totally talking about Mike, right? There’s no way he wasn’t talking about Mike!” Mike slumps back in his seat, drops his head back and lets out a long, long groan.  Chuck winces a little.  “Sorry Mikey, I’m just saying--”

“Oh please, Texas is obviously the special guest.  It’s Texas’s turn!”

“We should--” Chuck starts--stops.  “...we should...go after the Duke.  Right?  Mike?”

“Mm?”  Mike is still frowning at the ceiling.

“What do you think we should do?”

“...Whatever the Duke is planning, we’ll handle it when it shows up.”  Mike closes his eyes for a second, reaches up almost like he doesn’t realize he’s doing it and rubs the back of his neck.  Scratches at the scar there.  “I’m more worried about Kane.”

“Yeah!”  Texas barks.  “Yeah, right?  He’s down here, right now--Texas could totally find him and punch him in the face!  Tonight!  HWA-CHAW, right in the--oh!  Oh man, we gotta call the Duke, he could get Texas punching Kane in the gut on TV.  Texas the Legendary Kane-Puncher!!”

“I’m with Chuck on this one,” Dutch says.  “I got enough problems, I don’t need a bunch of cameras in my business.  And I’m sick of the Duke gettin’ the drop on us.”

“Oh--I mean, Mike’s probably right,” says Chuck.  He winces a little bit at the look Dutch gives him--gives a helpless little shrug.  “I’m just sayin’, he has a point.”

“Man,” Dutch starts, with the tone of somebody who fully intends to keep going--and then stops, distracted, as his comm beeps.  “Uh--oh.  I gotta--”

He’s gone in seconds.  Texas snorts as he watches Dutch slide down into the garage, shakes his head.  “Guess who that was.  Whatever, it’s cool.  He was just gonna be super boring anyway. With his girlfriend. Time for Kane-punching! Let’s get out there!”

“We can’t do that if we don’t know where he is,” says Mike, and there’s something in his voice
that makes even Texas pause and look over at him. “And I’m, uh...I’m pretty tired. So maybe we can just...stay here today and you guys can show me how to play Enchantment the--Conv--Conver-

“Convocation,” says Chuck, his face brightening a little under his bangs. “Aw, dude, I’ve been trying to get you into ETC for years!”

“Well, now’s your chance, bro!” Mike glances at Texas, grinning apologetically. “Kane hunt later, okay, Tex?”

Texas huffs, but doesn’t seem inclined to go into one of his infamous Texas Sulks; a moment later he sits down next to Chuck, who’s already pulling spare Enchantment: the Convocation decks out of his specially-made case. “Okay,” he says, “so how do you play this, or whatever.”

--

“Okay,” says Julie, “tell me everything.”

“There’s a lot,” says Claire. “Right, mom?”

“...Yes,” says Gwen after a moment, glancing at Julie. Julie’s been a little off-balance ever since she realized Claire was going to be a part of this discussion, but she’s trying gamely not to show it. She’s known for a while that Claire was going to work with her mom a few days a week, shadowing with increasing interest. She just wasn’t actually expecting Mrs. Clement to bring her daughter to a confidential CEO meeting.

But because going “Excuse me, why is Claire here?” would be totally uncool of her, she clears her throat and says, “Okay, well...just tell me how people are feeling after the announcement?”

Gwen talks and Claire talks, sometimes at the same time, both at length. Julie thinks it probably could have been easily boiled down--mainly, people are curious and a little afraid, although the prospect of an open relationship with Motorcity has gotten a much more positive reaction than expected. But on the other hand, it’s good to know the statistical details. Apparently several people have already covertly made the trip...downstairs. Some of them from much higher up the tower than Julie would have expected.

“They didn’t take anything with them?” asks Julie, mildly surprised. “They don’t have to start from scratch down there, if they just--”

“For now, the most you can offer is not to stop them,” says Gwen. “Now, do people want to know who you are? Yes. Should you make it public...?”

She kind of pauses, frowning as she looks Julie up and down. Not promising.

“The other directors don’t want me to,” Julie guesses, and Gwen snorts.

“Well, of course they don’t. They’re still trying to figure out how to handle you.”

Claire laughs out loud, high and chiming in the still, empty office. “Good luck with that!”

Julie manages a smile of her own, feeling faintly bolstered. Thanks, Claire. “So I should...you know, introduce myself to the city?” Both cities, in fact. God, there’s a consequence she didn’t think of--everyone in Motorcity will know too, if she tells Deluxe who she is.

“Maybe,” says Gwen, running one knuckle thoughtfully over her lower lip. “If you want to do
things differently from… If you want to do things differently, honesty is a good way to start. But it also doesn’t hurt to start small. The tower announcement was a testing ground.”

“Right! Right.” Julie knots her hands in her lap, relieved. She’s going to have to tell Deluxe eventually--and, yes, Motorcity. But not just yet. “And...that was my other question. How did our employees feel about that one?”

“Mixed results, again,” Gwen says, and throws up more screens. Her voice goes a little flatter, business-like. “Lots of whispering, lots of rumors. Security is...as aggressive as ever. Pinsky gives them the run of the tower--they have a lot to say and they don’t care who hears them. They’re the only sector that might cause a problem though. Economics seem mostly positive. Citizen life management are mostly concerned if your succession is going to affect their jobs. Research and Development is…” she rolls her eyes. Julie’s heard a lot about R&D at Clement family dinners; a group of the smartest and most paranoid people in the city, taking every possible measure to jealously protect their ideas from outsiders and each other. Gwen has a lot of complaints about R&D, and how hard they make it to spy on them.

Julie briefly imagines an entire hundred-man department full of copies of Chuck, huddled over their screens, surrounded by firewalls and dampers, and has to stifle a laugh.

“That’s fine,” she says. “I’m...I don’t think they’ll cause trouble? It’s probably gonna take them a really long time to trust me, and Larsson hates me enough for a whole department, but I don’t think even Larsson could bully those guys into doing something drastic.”

“But you also won’t have their support.” Gwen closes her windows, looking exasperated. “You’re still just a face on a screen to them.”

“What if I wasn’t?” says Julie tentatively, still feeling the idea out in her head. “Dad spent a lot of time with the Cadets, but I don’t remember him ever visiting the other departments in person. Mostly they just came up here to report to him and…”

“Get beaten up,” says Claire, and sniffs, a faint sneer tugging at her lips.

“...Yeah,” says Julie. “But if I put time and energy into getting to know them face-to-face…”

“That’s a fairly old-fashioned concept,” says Gwen, and then, as Julie starts to protest, “But not a bad one... We could give it a shot.”

Claire looks elated by the idea. “Yessss! They’re gonna love you, Jules, just be yourself--”

“But authoritative,” Gwen interjects firmly. “Remember, they work for you. This is just to show them who they’re working for, and hopefully gain some trust. Maybe even a little respect.”

Julie smiles crookedly, thinking about her other board members’ reactions to the takeover. “That sounds nice.”

Chuck left a message while she was in her meeting--just a brief, half-coded paragraph to mention that the Duke is up to something again.

As much as Julie wishes she could spend any time in Motorcity anymore--and as much as she worries about the boys--it’s kind of a relief to know she’s far away from the Duke of Detroit. Even if her employees flat-out hate her in person, that would at least be fairly predictable. No one’s likely to shoot a limousine at her, or sniff anybody, or sing or...well, any of the things that make the
Duke so tiring to be around. The list is so long.

Anyway, she thinks, looking around at her R&D team, this could be a whole lot worse.

It’s still...not great, though. Taking charge of the board of directors, she at least felt justified in pushing them around a little; they were belligerent, suspicious, and worst of all, patronizing. The techies range in attitude from impassive to downright scared. Unlike security, who glared at her in perfect ranks, they’re kind of...huddled in the middle of the room looking at her like she’s a bomb that could go off at any second. Julie’s pretty sure she heard one of the younger guys babbling about getting fired and sent to the fabrication factories before she walked through the door.

Okay, Julie. Try to be a people person.

“Oh, hi,” she almost says--but no, that’s way too casual. “Hi--hello,” she says, and then, a little too loudly, “Good morning?”

Okay, Julie, try harder. She shoves the hot, rising embarrassment to the back of her mind--she can’t afford to lose herself to that right now. She has to save this and she has to not think about the weird looks they’re all giving each other now.

“As you all know, my name is Julie Kane and I’m going to be in charge while...Mister Kane is absent. I wanted to talk to each department individually in case you had any questions. You can call me--uh, Miss Kane.”

She was expecting shocked outbursts, some kind of open suspicion--there’s just a tightly-controlled ripple of whispers. The technicians barely move to glance at each other, just watch her with wary intensity. Julie swallows hard and keeps going.

“I know you’ve been under Larsson for a long time. Maybe he’s even told you some things about me!” And then, as the people closest to her avert their eyes, she adds, “Probably not good things.” More discomfort, but she isn’t surprised at the tacit confirmation. Of course he’s been taking out his impotent anger at her on his employees.

“Well, that’s why I’m here. And this is what you need to know about me: I am...not my father. I think he wanted me to be when he left me this company, but you already know where I stand on Motorcity.”

Somewhere in the back of the crowd a small voice murmurs, “Approximately ten thousand five hundred feet above it,” and a ripple of nervous chuckles goes around the room, followed immediately by a sort of muted group panic as they realize what they just did. Julie has to fight to resist the urge to respond with the fond eye-roll she gives Chuck’s nerdiest jokes, settling instead for a smile. The atmosphere does not relax. If anything, they seem more unnerved by her lenience.

“I also know Larsson’s been...encouraging you...to keep working on weapons and anti-Motorcity measures,” she says, and sees multiple people in the crowd shift uneasily, eyes darting guiltily away. “I don’t blame you for following orders, which is why I’m issuing new ones. From now on, if you have new plans or inventions, run them past me before Larsson.” She smiles as sweetly as she knows how, and sees a couple of the techs blink and look at her differently, eyes widening. “I’m sure if he’s been short with you recently, it’s due to the increased workload. I would like to relieve some of that pressure.”

Somebody in the middle of the crowd snickers. Julie blinks innocently, and a couple more people cough, muffled noises that could almost be laughter.
“So,” Julie says, heart lifting bit by cautious bit, “Those are the changes you can expect in the upcoming weeks. Um. I’m setting up a new chain of command. The company is changing focus, now that there’s no war. And, well...” She hesitates, just a second, but--well. There’s so much to fix, and this problem is right there in front of her. Why not? “…from now on, if anyone from Security gets pushy, get their name and rank for me. Because I have the authority to fire them.”

That gets a real response. Even the most deadpan faces in the crowd weren’t expecting that one, and some of them are looking at Julie like she’s approaching them with a barely-disguised bear-trap, but she can see a few open grins too. Julie straightens her back, satisfied, smiling back.

“Any questions?”

There are a lot of questions. They’re slow to start--still wary of Julie and the unknown quantity she represents--but there’s a certain type of mind that gets recruited to Research and Development, and Julie knows there’s…a lot to question.

“More focus on city development, and less on weapons.”

“That’s…classified! Sorry.”

“Currently, yes. Easier, smaller-scale changes come first.”

“Because my father didn’t want you to. For security purposes.”

Some of the nervous clench in the pit of Julie’s stomach is just starting to settle, when one young man near the back raises a hand and asks “Is Mr. Kane going to take over again if he comes back?” and Julie’s chest closes like a fist.

“Of…course,” she says, but she knows they all hear the hesitation in her voice. “When he--”

“Do we get to vote on it?”

Julie recognizes the voice a second before she turns and sees a familiar, pale face, and piercing blue eyes. Alex Harley throws her a slightly crooked smile and a sharp little salute over the wall of his workstation. Julie gives him a very slow, calculating look, lips pursed--she hasn’t seen him since he did the announcement for her, and she can only assume he’s been up to…something. Hudson’s been keeping an eye on Harley during his frequent excursions into Motorcity, and he hasn’t done anything suspicious--heck, and he did help out during Mike’s trial and the battle after it. But that sarcastic, confident little smirk still makes Julie a little bit uneasy.

“The company--”

“--Could use some new management,” Harley says, quiet but fearless. There’s an uneasy murmur from the crowd--people shuffle a little bit; Alex glances around. “…I don’t think I’m the only one who thinks so.”

Holy shit, he’s going to get us in so much trouble, Julie starts to think, and then...stops. Because...in trouble with who? Who’s going to get her “in trouble” for wanting to take the company that’s rightfully hers?

“…Noted,” Julie says, crisp and formal. “Any further questions?”

Nobody volunteers. Everybody is still throwing startled little glances between Harley and Julie, eyes wide with shock or narrow with suspicion. Well, that’s...to be expected, probably. Julie smiles around at everybody, brushes her hair back over her shoulder with all the dignity she can
muster, and says “if you need to contact me, I’ll be available in the mornings.” And then, because she really does not like that smug little smirk, “...You can address any of your concerns to Ambassador Harley. He’ll make sure they get to me.”

Alex’s mouth drops open. Julie smirks at him, and he sputters for a second before finally remembering to stand to attention, snapping off a salute. “Miss Kane,” he says smartly.

“Dismissed,” says Julie.

She’s about to walk out, letting the department disperse behind her, when a skinny man with big shadows under his eyes and a nasty black eye comes sidling up to her uncertainly.

“Uh,” he says quietly. “Miss...Kane?”

Julie sits back in her chair, pushing the heels of her hands into her eyes. She stays like that for a moment and then relaxes with a tired half-smile, resting her elbows on her desk. “Y’know,” she says, “I gotta say, today was...pretty good! Not bad, anyway. Fiscal Management didn’t have a lot of CEO supervision to begin with, but Stevens actually knows what he’s doing. Citizen Life Management...might have to go through some changes, but I don’t think we’ll have to get rid of the department, which is what Bell seemed most worried about...”

“Um, cool,” says Dar Gordy. “And you’re tellin’ me all this stuff because...?”

“I need somebody who knows the Security sector,” Julie says. “Everything else is...slow going,
but they’re willing to talk to me. The Security guys won’t give me the time of day.” And in a couple days, they’re really not going to like me, she thinks, and shakes off the prickle of unease that thought inspires. She made her decision. Her dad wouldn’t have backed down, and neither will she.

“Uh…” Dar grimaces, and for a second he reminds her so intensely of Dutch it makes Julie's heart hurt. He looks so much like his big brother. “...yeah, y’know, you’re not really...what we’re used to down there.”

Julie does know. Between living in the tower all her life and having an ex-Kane Co. Commander for a best friend, she’s learned more about the Security Division than she’s completely comfortable with.

“I’m never going to be what you’re used to,” she says, and Dar kind of nod-shrugs--yeah, I got that. She’d given the Security guys the same I’m not my father speech as the rest of the departments, and it hadn’t gone over nearly as well with them.

“...Y’know the Deluxe Oath?” says Dar, and Julie sighs through her nose, nodding. “Uhh, how does it--blah blah blah, to protect Deluxe at any cost and forever wage war against its enemies--”

“Do you not...know how it goes?” Julie asks, half-laughing--Dar gives her an unimpressed look so abruptly reminiscent of his big brother, Julie has to stare for a second.

“Do you know how it goes?”

“I--well, most of it.” Julie folds her arms. “Mike still knows all of it. I thought cadets had to memorize it or something.”

“Only if you know you’re getting promoted,” Dar says, and shrugs the point off. “Look, what I’m saying is Security’s whole life is about ‘protect Deluxe’ and ‘wage war’. Against our enemies.”

“Why--” Julie starts, and then it hits her, an uneasy sinking in her stomach. “...Oh.”

“We’ve gotta have enemies,” Dar says, and spreads his hands. “We gotta, right? Or what have we got security for.”

“That should be a good thing,” Julie protests, but she can’t put any force behind the words.

“I don’t think anybody ever thought gettin’ outmoded was a good thing,” Dar says, and sits back a little bit, ruffling his own close-cropped hair. “I mean, we’re not all mad! I know a lot of guys who aren’t cool with the way your...y’know. How we were doin’ things. A couple of ‘em who’ve got buddies in the other departments, even! Just...the angry guys are a lot louder.”

“That’s...huh.” Julie huffs, chews her tongue for a minute as she thinks. “Well, that’s not great. But at least I have some idea what’s going on down there now.”

“Uh...yeah.” Dar fidgets a little. “So...speakin’ of ‘down there’...”

“Dutch is doing fine,” Julie assures him, and Dar grins and relaxes a little bit, relieved. “It sounds like right now their biggest problem is keeping Mike from wheedling his way into a car.”

“Oh, man.” Dar laughs with her, then gives her a hopeful kind of look, almost shy. “So--any chance I can...make it down there? Some time? Y’know, just any time this week, it doesn’t hafta be tomorrow...”
“Tomorrow is fine,” says Julie, even though she isn’t sure it is. But he’s sweet and he’s Dutch’s brother and if she had the chance to visit Motorcity tomorrow, she’d take it in a heartbeat.

Dar leaves the room grinning from ear to ear, and...on that note, it’s about time Julie did call her family. It’s been too long.

It’s late, late enough that even Texas doesn’t pick up. Mike, on the other hand, appears immediately when she taps his contact button, looking wide-awake and alert.

“Jules, hey! You’re still up?”

“So are you,” Julie says, a little defensively, and brings the screen closer to her face to squint at the background. “Are you...are you in the garage?”

“Just workin’ on Mutt,” says Mike, waving away her suspicion. “They told me not to drive, but they never said I couldn’t do tune-ups! And before you say it--”

“Are you--”

“I am taking my meds,” he finishes firmly, pulling a little white bottle out of his pocket and rattling it at her.

“Uh-huh,” says Julie.

“Most of the time.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Even though I can deal with the pain just fine without them,” Mike finishes doggedly, shoving the bottle back in his pocket and leaning against the car. “Geez...you guys worry too much.”

“I didn’t say anything...”

“You said uh-huh!”

“...But, you really should get some sleep.”

“So should you,” Mike points out.

“I’m running a company! Long nights are par for the course! You just don’t get it because you’re not a CEO, Mister Chilton.”

“I’ll sleep if you will,” Mike promises, and there’s something in his eyes when he smiles at her that makes Julie think maybe he actually does get it--how bone-deep this fatigue is, how even though it feels unbearable to stay awake, sleeping is unthinkable. “Promise, Jules.”

“I...” Julie blinks hard--it must be the brightness of the comm screen, her eyes ache. “Yeah. I will. Don’t worry about me.”

“I’m gonna,” Mike informs her, and half-laughs as Julie shakes her head. “Seriously! Nobody’s got your back up there, Miss Julie, I’d f--”

Julie is so tired that for a second she doesn’t realize why he’s stopped talking. Then the last few words replay in her mind and she actually shrinks away from the screen a little, unsure of what to say.
“...It’s okay,” says Mike after a moment, even though she can hear his breathing speeding up a fraction. “It’s fine. I mean, it’s not the worst thing that coulda come out of my mouth...sorry to freak you out.”

“I’m not freaking out,” says Julie quietly. “I just...”

But she doesn’t know exactly what she wants to say, and after a moment Mike wraps his arms around the screen in a makeshift long-distance hug and says, “‘Night, Jules.”

“‘Night, Cowboy,” Julie murmurs, and stands up at her desk. Time to go to bed.

It’s all very well, she thinks as she walks alone down the blank white hallways, to try and fake it until she makes it as a CEO--joking to Mike like she knows what she’s doing. But the truth is, for all her dad’s lessons on leading, he didn’t teach her how to do it this way.

And the changes she’s making--giving people freedoms back, rehauling the entire company infrastructure--it’s right, she doesn’t doubt that for a second. But some part of her still whispers, you’re undoing everything that took your dad decades to make.

Rationally, Julie knows that it only took decades because it’s not easy to crush an entire city’s sense of individuality into featureless building blocks. The reason it’s so easy to undo is that it wasn’t meant to be this way in the first place.

She still feels guilty.

Julie shakes that thought away, bows her head and, again, rubs the heels of her hands hard into her sore eyes. Her stomach growls, a heavy ache, but she doesn’t want throat cubes. She wants to be curled up in the booth at Antonio’s with Texas yelling and Dutch sketching on a napkin and Chuck complaining about whatever crazy stunts Mike’s pulling in Julie’s absence. She wants to be Julie the Burner again, not Julie Kane, CEO of Kane Co. Down in Motorcity, where--

...Where her dad is.

And there she is again, at the beginning of the circle. Julie groans, keys in her code and collapses gratefully onto her bed as her pod lifts out of the tower and into the Deluxian night. She doesn’t know what she’ll do when she sees her father again, but she can figure that out later. For now, she just needs to get him out of Motorcity.

--

**DAY THREE**

There has to be a way out of this.

Abraham Kane was never a sedentary man, never content just to sit in his office and delegate. He considers himself a hands-on kind of person (or fists-on, if it comes down to it), and even with one arm out of commission he’s going to make his way home. By any means necessary.

He’s been here for about two weeks, by his estimate. It’s hard to tell, though, between the absence of artificial sunlight and his lack of sleep. Hypervigilance has been in Kane’s nature for years, even in the safety of Deluxe, and now he’s...here.

The last thing he remembers is falling, yelling wordlessly, struggling with the masked vigilante Chilton called “Red”. No--specifically, the last thing he remembers is a sharp, horrible pop in his
left shoulder as it connected with the ground. He hasn’t found any head wounds since he woke up here, which means (to his great distaste) that he must have passed out from the pain of the impact. Frankly, he’s surprised he woke up again.

It wouldn’t have taken a genius to figure out where he was. Even if the gaudy color scheme of scarlet, white and gold wasn’t eye-blisteringly familiar, there’s an enormous portrait of the moron himself hanging over the austentatious double-bed.

Not that Kane left the Duke’s decor intact; in fact, it was one of the first things he smashed in his search for a makeshift weapon. But after the first escape attempt failed, gray-suited minions swept away every trace of broken wood and glass--and then, under the direction of the Duke’s leggy red-headed right-hand woman, removed everything else that Kane might use to his advantage. At this point the space is frankly spartan, for a room in the Duke’s mansion.

It’s still more furnished than his office in Kane Co. tower. Everything is in order there, and if...no. When Julie takes her place as CEO in his absence and goes through his files and documents, she should find everything in order for her to continue where he left off.

He’s the one who’s lost and trapped in a barbaric city full of violent gangs, but he can handle that. It’s when he thinks of his daughter that he’s so intensely, furiously afraid it’s hard to breathe.

It’s imperative for him to get back to his company and his family, and he’s not going to achieve that by sitting in this room looking for reasons to be frustrated. All he needs is an opportunity. The only window in the room looks out over the back of the mountain of trash the mansion is apparently built on; even if he had two working arms, climbing down the wall and the cavernous ravine beyond it would be a daunting prospect. With one arm crippled, it would be suicide. But no situation is inescapable--sooner or later there will be an opening. And when there is...

Kane is so deep in thought, he doesn’t hear the first rumble. He feels it as he shifts automatically to keep his feet under him, and his arm protests the movement with a vehement throb of pain. Kane controls the immediate urge to wince and looks around instead, searching for the source of the disturbance. Everything is still.

Then, another rumble. Distantly, somebody yells. Kane pushes himself up, walks quickly and quietly to the door and leans in, listening hard. Outside, somebody is talking into a comm--what? And But ma’am--

“I said get your butt up here now!” says the voice on the other end of the line. “We--My Duke, get down!”

Yelling from the comm, from overhead, from outside the window--people are running. One of his guards snaps “I’m heading up! Stay here!”

There won’t be a better chance than this.

Chapter End Notes

Notable section titles for this chapter:
- That’s A Weird Name For A Bridge
- The Duke Has Big Plans
- Julie Needs YOU We Can Do It Or Something
- Julie Talks to Her New Boys
- Escape From Duke Mansion
(Still) Day 3

Mike wakes up at 4:30 sharp. He can’t remember what he was dreaming about--if anything--but his pulse is a quiet, sick thrum in his throat. Something feels...wrong. But then again, a lot of stuff has felt wrong since…

Mike puts one hand up to the back of his neck, fingers moving unconsciously over the ridged scar there. That feels wrong too, a permanent reminder of what happened last month. Soon his hair will be long enough to cover it, but he’ll still know it’s there. He’ll still reach up to feel it sometimes.

...It doesn’t matter. He’s not that person anymore, he’ll never let anybody do that to him again. Mike shakes the memories firmly away and sits up in the dark, dragging a hand down his face with a muffled sigh through his nose. Time to do something until he feels sleepy again or everyone else wakes up.

He shadow-boxes in the darkness for a minute or two, waiting for his eyes to adjust, but it doesn’t seem to take the edge off his nerves. A pipe creaks in the wall. ROTH’s repulsors whirr faintly in the garage below. Somewhere, a Burner rolls over in bed. The little sounds from around the hideout should be familiar, but in the empty silence of early morning each one makes him twitch with a little jolt of adrenaline.

Mike tries channeling that into another flurry of punches--faster and harder this time--but he puts too much force into them and has to stop for a second, hissing softly in pain as his ribs throb. The disapproving glares of half a dozen Motorcity nurses and doctors flash through his mind and he settles down guiltily, holding a hand to his side.

Something else...gotta find something else to do. His room feels suddenly too small and dark, a closed box with none of the distractions he desperately needs.

In the garage, ROTH hums something that sounds suspiciously like one of Texas’s many theme songs. He’s probably doing basic maintenance on the cars, Mike thinks, and then springs suddenly upright as a thought occurs to him--an early-morning drive, that’ll do the trick! He’ll just hop in Mutt and roll her around the block, and…

No. No, wait, he’s not supposed to drive even a little. They told him specifically not to, and now all of the other Burners are in on making sure Mike follows orders. Especially Chuck. Chuck freaks out when Mike leaves the room without him these days. If he woke up to find Mike and Mutt both missing he would probably have a heart attack.
The hallway is pitch-black, but Mike can tell by the faint glow ahead that he’s coming up on the Mutt Dog kitchen, and if the lights aren’t on up there then Jacob’s probably still asleep too. Maybe there’s something edible lying around? Yeah, surprise breakfast for everyone! That sounds pretty rad, and it’ll probably keep him busy until…

The sense of wrongness, still hovering like mist in his hindbrain, chooses this moment to rear its head and scream *LOOK.*

Mike doesn’t know what he’s supposed to be looking for, thinks for a second that it’s just more paranoia about Kane—but then he spots it.

It’s too dark in here.

--

Overnight, the hideout has turned into a jungle. Not a concrete jungle, an *actual real green living* jungle. There isn’t earth for the plants to grow in—by all rights they *shouldn’t* be growing. But there they are, climbing every available structure like a trellis. A profusion of rustling leaves, bright, sticky flowers and bristling vines towers over them, blocking Mutt Dog from all outside light.

“Alright, guys,” says Mike, frowning out at the new wilderness, “three guesses who did this.”

“Kaia and the Terras!” shouts Texas immediately. “ONE TRY! WHOO!!”

“I gotta call Tennie,” says Dutch, who looks profoundly unnerved. “I don’t wanna know what this stuff is doing to the Settlement…”

“If you don’t wanna know then don’t *call* her, duh!” says Texas, now crouching down and occupied by yanking at the vines on the sides of the hideout. Chuck gives a one-shouldered *can’t fault his logic* kind of shrug, but Dutch shakes his head and pulls up his comms.

Tennie picks up after the second ring, sharing the screen fifty-fifty with a giant pair of shears. “*Hey, Dutch! Not a great time, sorry.*”

“Oh, yeah, guess not,” says Dutch, eyeing the shears. “So I guess this whole...thing is goin’ down over there too?”

“I dunno,” says Tennie, and with a grunt, severs an inch-thick vine climbing the wall next to her. “*Is ‘this whole thing’ a bunch of crazy plants growing all over your stuff? If so, then yes.*”

“Dang,” says Dutch softly.

“Dang is right!” Tennie says, and huffs as someone yells her name from off-screen. “--*Coming! Okay, Dutch, I really gotta go, sorry. There are these big red plants with...mouths in the upper levels and some people can’t get out of their homes. It’s--*”

“Mouths?” squeaks Chuck, gripping Mike’s shoulder convulsively. “Plants with *mouths*?”
“Plants with mouths might not even be the worst of it,” says Tennie grimly. “You guys stay safe, okay?”

“You know we won’t,” says Dutch, with a grimace-y smile. “Just...call me when you can?”

“Will do! Love you!”

“I--uh--” Dutch’s eyes flicker over to the rest of the Burners, then snap guiltily back. “Uh, yeah! Bye!”

“...Bye.”

Tennie’s window winks out, leaving Dutch frying gently in his friends’ stares. Texas seems speechless for once, gaping at Dutch like he just grew a third arm. Chuck has gone a little pink under his bangs. Mike just claps Dutch on the back, grinning, and then turns and strides purposefully towards the garage.

“Oh--hey bro?” Chuck says, trailing uncertainly after him. “Can we maybe stop and talk before we do anything?”

“Nothing to talk about!” Mike calls over his shoulder. “We gotta get out there and check on the city!”
“Aw, man,” mutters Dutch, jogging after him, “but we just saved it…”

--

“This is bizarre,” says Chuck, eyeing the leaves brushing over Blonde Thunder’s windows. He was painstakingly convinced to be Mike’s chauffeur today despite the possibility of plants with mouths, but he’s obviously not happy about it. “And--and it’s probably worse outside the hideout! There’s gotta be even more out there, right? And who knows what kind of freaky stuff they do--”

“Well, soon we will,” says Mike cheerfully as the gate rises. “And it’s not like we could just stay in there all day!”

“Yeah, it is!” Chuck snaps, his fingers tightening on the steering wheel. “It’s totally like that! I don’t wanna get hit with fear toxin or, or, tentacle vines--”

“Don’t sweat it,” Mike says. “We’ve got weedkiller this time, dude.”

It’s true--Jacob has loaded them up with his homemade herbicide, which he’s apparently been hoarding ever since the first time the Terras attacked. The tanks of toxic chemicals strapped to Chuck’s car do not seem to relax him. “Sure,” he says, reluctant--Mike settles back, satisfied, and Chuck hurries on, “--but last time that barely made a dent, and then they just threw more spores! We’ve only got so much weedkiller, dude, what if--”

The blast doors grind open, and a six-foot-tall plant with giant, jagged jaws sways down and starts to ponderously gnaw on Blonde Thunder’s front bumper. Chuck shrieks and reaches out automatically for weapon systems that aren’t there, then seems to remember he’s supposed to be driving. He seizes the wheel and stomps so hard on the gas the acceleration slams them both back against the seat. The plant’s mouth wrenches loose, arm-long fangs leaving gouges in Blonde Thunder’s hood. Chuck laughs victoriously and then lets out a high-pitched yelp as more plants sway down to snap at them. Blonde Thunder swerves wildly to one side as he lunges across Mike’s seat, groping for the weapons systems.

“Dude, whoa!” Mike protests, slapping at his hands-- “Go--hey! Go left--Go left!”

“Get the new--the blaster, we gotta--”

“Just drive, keep your hands on the--!”

“--need the weedkiller, hurry up--let me--!”

“I got this!” shouts Mike, and hits a handful of random keys. A red window snaps open, blaring the words CONTINUE ENGINE EJECTION PROCESS?

“NO!” Chuck yelps, veering wildly around the forest of mouthy plants. “Do not continue! Do NOT continue!”

“Uh hey, what are you guys doin’?” says Texas’s voice, as Stronghorn mows down a thick, twisting green stalk.

“We got it under control!” says Mike, closing the engine ejection window--and then growls in frustration as five new, smaller windows immediately appear. “Who designed this stuff??”

“Uh, I did,” says Dutch, sounding injured. “And Tex is right, what the hell’s goin’ on over there?”
“Under control!” Mike repeats, and Chuck glances over to see one of his fingers hovering over the screen to his right.

“Oh wait Mikey not that one Mikey wait--”

Five minutes later, the Burners reconvene for a moment, cars idling in the flattened patch outside the blast doors. A dozen enormous tooth plants had colonized the road outside the hideout; they’ve been flattened, shot, and generously sprayed with weedkiller. Blonde Thunder is the only car that took any real damage. Dutch tsks as he runs a hand over the jagged toothmarks in her hood. “Good thing I don’t get tired of redoin’ paint jobs.”

“We had a--it just--” Chuck is still breathing hard, wired on adrenaline and red in the face with embarrassment. “We had it under control! Okay?”

“Yeah,” says Texas, chortling. “Sure looked under control.”

“The plants are dead,” Mike says firmly. “It’s cool, we’re all fine, everything’s fine.”

Texas guffaws again and Dutch would probably have kept laughing too, but Mike is holding his cracked ribs and Chuck is wide-eyed, jittering all over. “Sure,” says Dutch, taking mercy instead, “Where to?”

“Just...around,” Mike says, and turns in a slow circle, frowning at the twitching plants on the ground and the forest beyond them. “...The best-case scenario is the Terras only hit us and the Cablers. Which still sucks.” He grimaces. “But if they hit the whole city, we’ve got a lot of cleaning up to do. People are gonna need our help.”

“Those both sound bad.” Dutch grimaces. “I don’t like Kaia knowin’ where we park our cars.”

“Yeah, or knowing where we sleep,” Chuck points out, and shudders. “...So, we gotta...we gotta keep an eye out for Terras, I guess.” He swallows hard. “Okay? Okay. Let’s--do this!”

“A round trip of the city that would usually take a matter of hours has become an obstacle course overnight, riddled with aggressive and wildly-varied mutant plants. It seems like the hideout is in the middle of a broad swathe of greenery, which tapers off as they fight their way east toward the river. Mike is still clumsy with the screens, but he gets better as they drive, blasting hostile plants with weedkiller and bursts of electricity from Blonde Thunder’s new weapons systems. Chuck yells and flails and yells some more, until finally the forest around them starts to thin.

The air is hazy. Another foreign jungle looms ahead of them, blocking the roads with thick, creeping vines. Curled plants dripping with sticky sap have broken through windows and blocked doors, and gnarled tree roots have chewed the road up to impassibility. Given the choice between that menacing treeline and one of the ubiquitous corkscrew ramps up to the dome, Mike barely has to work to convince Chuck to take the high road. At a sedate 95 miles per hour, the Burners spiral upwards.

“These aren’t random,” Dutch says over comms, sounding fascinated. “Look at that, holy crap.”

“There’s definitely a pattern.” Chuck glances over, edging his car just close enough to the side of the road to see over into the vast, empty space below them. From this high, the patches of mutant jungle are distant, gloomy shadows on Motorcity’s normal neon, pockmarking the familiar
landscape like inkblots. “Oh god--y-yeah, they’re in circles, thickest in the middle, there’s definitely an epicenter. Uh...spore bombs?”

“Who cares how they made ‘em?” Texas snorts. “We just need a way to kill ‘em, right?”

“Okay, well if they dropped bombs we can do the same thing, right? Like, weedkiller or salt or whatever works on these.” Mike frowns down at the plants. “…The Terras have gotta be out there, somewhere. We need to find ‘em. The sooner the better.”

“Even if we find Kaia, she’s not gonna talk to us,” Chuck points out timidly. “Let’s not--”

“We should try to find those mushrooms they live in again,” Mike says firmly, and Chuck groans quietly to himself and takes a hand off the wheel for a second to rub his face roughly. “We know they did this. It’s the best place to start. Mm.”

Chuck glances over, distracted from dread by the sight of Mike rubbing his side, grimacing absently. Chuck frowns too, and nudges Mike’s shoulder with a pointed glance.

For a second Mike just stares back at him, confused--then he follows Chuck’s gaze and pulls his hand guiltily away from his ribs. “Oh, come on,” he says--and then, as Chuck contrives to be meaningfully silent even with his eyes on the road, “…Buddy, seriously, I don’t need--”

“Pain makes you heal slower,” Chuck says over top of him, and Mike huffs and gives up, rummaging in his pocket for his pill bottle. “That’s what they said. You wanna heal fast, right?”

“I--well yeah, but--” Mike scowls down at the pills.

“The doctors told you to take them.”

“Yeah I know, but--”

“Is he not takin’ his meds again?” Dutch says, and Mike flushes.

“I can’t drive as long as I’m taking these stupid things!” he says stubbornly. “It’s not that bad! Seriously, they didn’t do anything to me up there I couldn’t handle.”

“Well, whatever about that,” Texas says. “But you can’t drive anyway! They told us not to let you, and you gotta listen when doctors tell you to not do stuff, or you die.”

“No you--I mean, it’s not like you just automatically--”

“You. Die.”

“Fine!” Mike groans and slumps back in his seat, fishing out a pain pill. “But if I get loopy again, I’m blaming all of you.”

“That happened once, Mikey.” Chuck has slowed to barely 50 miles per hour, glancing away from the road every couple of seconds to fix Mike with his firmest glare.

“Yes and it was hilarious.”

“Not helping, Texas,” Dutch says very seriously, but there’s a tremor in his voice and a second later he cracks, laughing. “…He’s right though, that was awesome.”

“--and they had you taking twice as much, way more often,” Chuck continues doggedly, as Mike throws back the pill and swallows roughly. “You’ve been hurting for hours, just suck it up and
“I just did, dude,” mutters Mike, sounding almost petulant, and Dutch chuckles again, hitting the gas.

“Well? We gonna go looking for trouble or what?”

They don’t have to go looking. Minutes after they get back to ground level, they find a crew of construction workers hanging from a tree, vines wrapped around their ankles. One of them shouts as the Burners pull up, “They’re like, heat-seekin’, man, cool your engines!” Mike cuts them down and together he and the crew chop through the trunk of the heat-seeking tree with a combination of his sparkstaff and their plasma tools. They barely get the tree down before the carpet of moss beneath them abruptly gives way, swallowing them up to their knees in unpleasant, soupy grit that used to be a solid sidewalk.

Chuck screams and flails and only succeeds in sinking himself almost to the waist, while Dutch shouts theories—Maybe they dissolved the concrete underneath? Liquefied it somehow? And Texas fires his gunchucks ineffectually into the ground. It takes the entire construction crew to yank them out of the sludge. Mike shakes everybody’s hands fervently and then pulls his staff out, puts his head down and marches determinedly off, evidently prepared to fight a whole jungle.

Within two blocks, though, the sidewalk gives way to a swaying meadow of huge, glistening flowers. Someone brushes against one of them and immediately all of the blooms shudder into life and spit clear, viscous goo at the offenders. Dutch has to peel his shirt off, swearing, as a gob hits him square in the chest and starts to soak through the cloth. Within a few seconds, everyone who got the stuff on their skin is scratching at angry red hives.

It’s a dirty, frustrating, stressful day. They run into what seems to be a really aggressive oak tree that drops acorns so hard and fast they crack asphalt, and Texas narrowly avoids getting concussed. Mike has to hack his way through a giant rose bush to save the tenants trapped in its vines, emerging intact but with bloody scrapes criss-crossing his arms.

And that’s just one circle of forest. By the time they’re back in their cars, none of the Burners seem all that enthused to keep exploring. Except Mike, of course. And of course Chuck agrees, but only, he stresses, as long as Mike stays in the car.

Mike immediately digs in his heels—“I’m not just gonna sit in the car and do nothing, dude!” The argument lasts for a solid ten minutes before Chuck points out that somebody has to keep track of the plants they find and how to kill them.

Dutch firmly agrees and so, surprisingly, does Texas. Mike caves eventually, but it takes him another ten minutes to figure out Blonde Thunder’s text memo function, and he’s obviously frustrated watching the others fight without him. Still, he spends the rest of the day dutifully recording the details of their forest adventures.

“I can’t read this,” says Jacob two hours later.

“What?” Mike looks genuinely injured. “Jacob, c’mon--”

“No yeah,” Texas volunteers, grabbing the screen to squint at it. Jacob throws up his hands and wanders back into the kitchen, where a giant pot is making a thick glooping noise. “Might as well be Babylonian, Tiny, who taught you words?”

“Who taught you words?” Chuck cracks, after a moment of mouthing Babylonian? to himself.
Then, before Texas can answer, he pulls the screen his way and starts to read aloud, stilted and inflectionless, like someone who doesn’t often make public presentations. “Uh...One. Giant tree, hanging branches. Drops explosive nuts? Shrapnel damaged car windshield. Awesome.”

He pauses to glare at Mike, who shrugs sheepishly. “What?”

“They were not ‘awesome’, Mikey, they almost killed us.”

Mike snorts. “C’mon, it was kinda awesome. You’re not really living unless you’re almost dying, right?”

“Mikey, that’s not--” Chuck pauses, biting his lip, and then turns back to the file in front of him and reads doggedly on. “Three. Those giant mouth plants that tried to eat us. Shoulda been number one but I forgot.”

“Plants tried to eat you?” says Jacob, looking up from his giant pot of unnameable hodge-podge. “Aw, man, what if they come for the vegetarians? Revenge of the Killer Tomatoes VII style.”

“This is serious business, Jacob,” says Dutch, who would probably have laughed if he weren’t still shirtless and covered in rashes. “C’mon, is there anything you can do to help?”

Jacob snorts and sloshes hodge-podge into four bowls on his counter. “Maybe, but it’ll take a while. You’re gonna need a little thing I like to call patience.”

“Cute,” Dutch mutters, but takes his bowl without complaint and reaches for a spoon. “Any other words of wisdom for us?”

“Yeah,” says Jacob as he hands out the rest of the food. “Call Julie. She’s gonna wanna know what’s goin’ on down here.”

--

The private call alert buzzes discreetly in Julie’s ear as she settles into her chair. She ignores it. She’d rather not take a call from the Burners during a board meeting.

That said, it would give the directors something to grumble about apart from the frequency of her board meetings. Julie knew when she sent out the memo she wasn’t going to see happy smiling faces around the table, but she’s still almost impressed by how universally disgruntled they all look.

“Good morning,” she says, as politely as she can. “This shouldn’t take long, but if you have any questions before we start--”

Larsson jumps in before she can even let the question trail off. “This is outrageous, Miss Kane! Weekly meetings were enough of an inconvenience, but how are we supposed to get work done when--”

“As CEO,” says Julie, forcing her voice steady and cool, “I have the right to make decisions on an ongoing basis for the good of the company.”

“I’ve been on this board three times longer than you’ve been alive,” Larsson growls. “Inheritance is one thing, but I will not be bullied by a teenage girl. Miss Kane. Right, Bell?”

Oh, he’s going to drag Bell into this. Julie barely resists the urge to roll her eyes. Bell seemed like the nicest of her directors when she started her new worst job of all time--punctual, understanding,
more like a timid uncle than a corporate crony. Since then she’s realized he just likes to half-agree with everyone when he has to contribute, and keep his mouth firmly shut when he doesn’t.

“We have been here a long time,” says Bell, and then sits back, looking slightly apologetic.

_Picking the least offensive thing to agree with and then shutting up! Classic Bell!_ Julie thinks.

“But you _would_ let my father tell you what to do,” she says instead, narrowing her eyes at Larsson.

“Of course!”

“Well, he _told_ you I’m in charge now! In charge of you, and all our employees--and a whole city! Actually! I’m not just taking over a company, I’m--the leader of a government!”

“Yes,” says Pinsky, very suddenly. Julie’s stomach sinks a little. She had a feeling this confrontation was coming, but she was hoping he would have the discretion to talk to her in private. She should have known better--Pinsky wouldn’t know discretion if it bit him in the butt.

“Question, _sir_: What kind of government fires its army?”

Right. Well. Okay. Sounds like news of her...work last night has reached the department heads. Julie thinks about the list of reports from R&D, the black eyes and split lips, and she squares her shoulders.

“Well, Kane Co. expects a high standard from its workers,” she says crisply. “Especially from its troops. Security is supposed to protect our people, not beat them up!”

Pinsky’s low brows lower even further. “My men--”

“Were abusing their authority,” Julie cuts over him. “I had eye-witnesses, Pinsky, a _lot_ of them.”

“From R&D?” Larsson’s voice is hard, and there’s a steely edge to his ever-present smile. “Miss Kane, you know my technicians work to the highest standard, but they are also high-strung at best and neurotic at worst! You don’t know those boys like I do. Any complaints you received were nothing but--”

“Agreed!” Pinsky slams a fist on the table. He shares at least one thing with Julie: a lack of patience for Larsson’s long-winded speeches. “My men were loyal! I was loyal, _sir_! This is an outrage!”

“...Not just from R&D.”

Julie actually jumps--she had almost forgotten Stevens was there. Her Fiscal Executive sits forward, folds his hands deliberately, and gives the table a long, slow look.

“We get frequent reports,” he says finally, every word measured and heavy as stone, “of _inappropriate_ behavior.”

“And--_excuse_ me--who says she’s just taking somebody’s word for this?” Gwen does not sound like someone who actually wants to be excused. “What do you think my cameras are for, exactly? _Emmanuel_.”

“But--” Bell is plucking nervously at his mustache. There’s a faint sheen of sweat on his forehead--being stuck in the middle of an argument between Stevens and Larsson is probably one of his worst nightmares. “I think we’re all, hm, being a little hasty--”

Larsson cuts in impatiently, glaring between Julie and Stevens. “Who did you talk to? Who’s
been making these reports?"

*We’re not going to get in trouble, are we? Just, some of these are from the new kids, if Security knows it was them--*

“None of your business!” says Julie. “And if you don’t support how I’m running this company--”

“We do not, sir!” Pinsky contributes, like there was any doubt. Julie raises her voice, talking over him.

“--if you don’t like your job here, I can give it to somebody else!”

For a moment, the air is crystallized, pure and hard with disbelieving silence. Julie meets Larsson’s eyes, and sees his anger—and his uncertainty. She glares back, not entirely sure whether she’s bluffing or not but unwilling to back down.

“Well,” Pinsky starts, chest swelling with fury—Larsson glances from Julie to Pinsky and clears his throat sharply.

“Gregor,” he says, quiet and warning. Then, to Julie. “...Of course, it is your company. Miss Kane.”

“Yes it is,” says Julie. Something hot and victorious is roiling in her stomach. She can’t tell if she likes the feeling or not. “In less than a week, I plan on announcing my inheritance to the city. I’m going to need my board behind me every step of the way.”

*Oh god why did I say that?!* Julie fights to stay looking confident and in control while sweat starts beading on the back of her neck. A faint murmur goes around the table. Gwen stays impassive; Stevens just inclines his head silently, absorbing the news. On the other side of the table, Larsson and Pinsky share a look and Bell runs a finger under his collar, tugging at it nervously.

“That’s all,” Julie says. She wrote up an agenda for the meeting and there are still fifteen items to get through, but—screw that. “I don’t need to consult you on half of these things anyway. I’ll see you next Thursday. Dismissed.”

She lets them go, standing at the head of the table with her hands folded behind her back in a conscious echo of her father’s favorite power-pose. She does hurry forward to catch Stevens at the door though, putting a hand on his elbow—she would have to stand on tiptoe to reach his shoulder.

“I...appreciate your support,” says Julie, and swallows as Stevens turns to look down at her, sleepy-eyed and impossible to read. He holds her gaze for a second, and then smiles faintly.

“Deserve it,” he says, and turns to follow Bell out.

“...I swear, a pod wall would be easier to read than that man,” says Gwen in an undertone, watching him go, and looks back at Julie. “Well. I suppose we know what side we all stand on now.”

“There don’t have to be sides,” Julie says, but she hears the hopeless edge to her voice even as she says it. “Just—keep an eye on them for me?”

“Always,” says Gwen, and moves towards the door with a nod. “Good luck with your announcement next week, Miss Kane.”

Ah, yes. The announcement, which she made up on a whim and hasn’t prepared for. Julie would
rather die than say it aloud to her directors, but all she really wants to do is hide and never be seen by another human being again.

--

The streets of Motorcity are winding and dirty, full of blind alleys and clusters of those godawful creeping plants. Kane steps over heaps of abandoned trash as he picks his way through a tiny back-road, nose wrinkling with disgust. At least the gas mask he stole from the Duke’s mansion dulls the worst of the smell, and more importantly, shields his face from any prying eyes that might recognize him.

...Good god, did the Duke bathe in cologne? Even if Kane wasn’t wearing the mask, the smell of the stolen cloak wrapped around him would probably drown out the stench of...whatever that was he just stepped in.

Kane is going to incinerate this street first.
on him, of all things. Like some kind of 21st century thug. Some types of low-life never change.

The second obstacle on the list seems like it might be considerably more difficult to crack.

“...So why do we gotta guard these, again?”

The access tunnel from the Deluxian commerce sector to downtown Motorcity is the biggest, most direct route from one city to the other. It’s also blessedly free of aggressive, semi-sentient plants...so of course Motorcity has put these hooligans in place to guard it. Of course they have, after the number Kane’s people did on their territory. There are at least five guards here that he can see, each with a hand resting casually inside his black suit jacket. Even if they don’t have reinforcements nearby, Kane has one arm in a sling and a severe sleep debt. The odds are unsettlingly long.

Well, no matter. There’s sure to be an exit only he knows about. Kane ducks back into the darkness.

The next exit is closely guarded as well. And the next--and the next, and finally the last--the smallest, most dangerous route to Deluxe he can think of. A narrow, antiquated maintenance tunnel near the edge of the dome, consisting mainly of rusty metal rungs set into the wall. There’s one car parked near its entrance, its driver snoring softly in their fully-reclined seat. Kane almost makes a run for it, even in no fit state to climb a ladder, but a sound to his left makes him freeze.

It’s a Hound, or...what’s left of one. The thing limps aimlessly along on three legs, red eye flickering, joints whining. Kane watches silently as it closes in on the exit hatch, perhaps seeking a way back to Deluxe itself--

And then it passes in front of the car, and an array of red dots ripple across it. Something under the popped hood gives a sharp, urgent beep, and a second later the bot is torn to sparkling pieces by a hail of plasma blasts. Whoever’s sleeping inside the vehicle did not set their phasers to stun. And what’s more, they’re awake now, hands reaching for dashboard screens--a weapons array, Kane’s willing to bet.

He keeps moving, skirting around patches of unnatural, squirming greenery and whatever dangers lurk within. He needs cover, but he’s not stupid enough to look for it there. He saw what they did to the Duke’s mansion.

Eventually, he finds himself among buildings again, hiding in a cramped, filthy alley with both ends shuttered by fairly harmless-looking leaves. His arm is a constant, sickly throb, and moving makes it worse but standing still isn’t an option either. Kane weathers through a harsh wave of pain, head down, then stops where he is and...considers his options.

So, the exits are locked down. These Motorcity rats are many things, but they’re surprisingly, inconveniently effective when it comes to closing off their nest. Think, Abraham. He knows this city, he’s been searching for cracks and weaknesses since day one, he should be able to find a way out, even with a recently-dislocated shoulder and none of his usual resources--

An engine roars nearby, tearing Kane from his thoughts with a horrible, reflexive jolt. Headlights cut briefly through the leaves at the mouth of the alley, and then they’re gone, leaving him in the darkness with bile rising in his throat. For a second, he has the wild urge to run after the vehicle, certain that it’s Chilton or one of his Burners--but reason catches up with him a moment later. Of course, the Burners aren’t the only car-driving scum down here.

Last month’s in-fighting thinned the ranks, but the gangs are clearly still prowling their territory.
An unpleasant thought, and then another one right on its heels--what if Motorcity’s home-grown criminal organizations have carved the city up so thoroughly there isn’t a place for him to lie low?

Another passing car, another involuntary surge of adrenaline, every muscle tensing. Kane grits his teeth and waits for the fresh throbbing in his shoulder to ebb. As it fades, so does the unwanted trace of panic, leaving the amorphous beginnings of an idea in its wake. A potential hiding place, away from the eye-stinging colored lights, searching eyes, and man-eating plants. It’s a long shot, but it’s the best Plan B he has right now. He might not be able to get home, but he can’t stay here. And most importantly, he needs to...acquire...some food.

Steeling himself for more pain, Kane starts moving again.

Chapter End Notes

Notable section titles for this chapter:
Motorcity Goes Green
Julie Has A Meeting While Motorcity Has Plants
Escape From The Disgusting and Pestilent Rat’s Nest Known As Motorcity
Let's Talk About This!! Plague in Motorcity!!

Chapter Summary

Something sinister is creeping through the streets of Motorcity...something other than Abraham Kane, that is. The consequences of the Terras' latest attack might be more dire than anyone anticipated. Julie receives a surprise and a warning from an old friend, about some old friends. Dutch struggles to express himself.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

DAY FOUR

“So,” says Texas. “Guess you’re wonderin’ why Texas told you all to come here today.”

“You didn’t,” says Chuck wearily. “Mike called a--”

“Answer’s simple!” Texas says. “Plants.”

Mike snorts. Texas glances over at him, grinning, and Dutch and Chuck share a what are you gonna do? kind of glance and then give up and laugh too. They’re collapsed in various states of exhausted stickiness around the main rec room, covered in sap and plant gunk. Nobody has the energy to shower. The laughter eventually dies down to tired snickering. Texas slumps back against the couch, satisfied with himself, and goes back to picking nasty, stinging burrs off his jumpsuit sleeves.

“Okay, but seriously,” Mike says. “We should call everybody. Check in on ‘em.”

“Everybody like…?” Chuck twists a hand, pulls up their comm directory--lately it’s gotten long enough he has it sorted into folders.

“I’m thinkin’…the Skylarks, the Amazons, the Mama’s Boys--”

“The Duke…?” Dutch is looking over Chuck’s shoulder--he reaches out, finger hovering over a red and gold icon. Chuck squeaks and swats at his hand, then glances apprehensively over at Mike.

Mike frowns at the icon. “Hmm.”

“He’s an ‘everybody’,“ Texas points out.

“He’s--the Duke, though!” Chuck says. “Come on, Mikey…”

Mike considers it for another second, and then his shoulders slump. “Nah,” he says. “No, not the Duke. He can handle himself.”

“You just wanna keep Texas from gettin’ his spotlight time,” Texas says grumpily. “If the Duke’s gonna make another show--”
“--then we should definitely not give him a chance to get anywhere near us!” Chuck interjects, sounding panicky just at the idea. “We can call everybody but the Duke, okay, that’s enough. That’s more than enough!”

Of course, Mike is the one who makes the calls. The Amazons are coolly polite, and deny having any trouble--apart from some “issues” which they intend to “handle” on their own. The Mama’s Boys have a heavily-automated system of robotic defenses, so their base is apparently mostly untouched, although Junior looks sticky and dirty and ticked off when he picks up the call. Of the outskirt gangs, only the Hatchet Men seem interested in picking up the call--but only for long enough to laugh uproariously at Mike’s concern and hang up again. Mike briefs everybody on the Terras, too, with mixed results.

“Our intelligence would debrief us of the initiative if a civilian in a leaf skirt was sighted on active duty in our battlefield!” AJ barks, after at least twenty minutes of repeated explanations. Mike sighs. “We will keep our sights open, hut-hut! But I do not believe you!”

“Got it.” Mike says, and AJ salutes aggressively and turns toward the towering wall of bamboo behind him, shouting at unseen soldiers to fire all weapons, hut-hut! There’s a whine of laser canons priming and just as the call cuts out, a cluster of explosions rakes across the forest.

Mike sits back with a tired sigh, drags a hand through his hair and stares at nothing for a second.

“Okay...okay. One more.”

He straightens up, finger-combs his hair into some kind of order, and then reaches out and hits the Skylarks’ icon. The comm rings...and rings...and keeps ringing. Mike taps his foot and frowns as the noise goes on, glancing from the screen to the rest of the Burners and back again.

“...Maybe they’re--” he starts, and then shuts his mouth as a sharp young man in iridescent glasses flickers into view.

“Skylark Motel. We’re closed.”

The guy reaches forward, apparently with every intention of hanging right back up again. “Hey!” Mike says, waving urgently, “--wait, dude, wait a sec! It’s me, Mike!”

The Skylark stops, huffs through his nose but doesn’t terminate the call. Mike drops his hands, grinning.

“Thanks,” he says, altogether too sincerely. “Is everything okay over there? I was getting kinda freaked out, dude, you guys usually pick up on the first--”

“What do you want?”

Mike blinks, startled. “Uh...”

“We’re busy,” snaps the Skylark.

“Look, I just wanna talk to Rayon!” And then, before the guy can snap at him again, “--And where’s the guy who usually answers the comms? Uh...20?”

“...Call when you want a reservation,” says the Skylark, after a small, cold pause. “We’ve got no time for small-talk.”

“Wh--?”
The call goes dead.

“Welp,” says Texas immediately, “looks like no one needs help, huh? So let’s go--”

“We’re going to the Motel,” says Mike.

“What? Why?”

“Something’s wrong.” Mike says. He’s already pushing himself up. “Rayon always answers when there’s trouble. C’mon, buddy, it’ll be an adventure! Although...well, the Duke’s place is on the way, and he might get his tracksuit in a twist if we don’t drop by to say hi.”

Dutch groans. Chuck makes a face that clearly says he would rather do exposure therapy for his kitten phobia than voluntarily go anywhere near the Duke. Texas, uncharacteristically, seems to take a moment of deep thought before responding with a wide smile and a “Sounds good, Tiny!”

“I’m not doin’ that,” says Dutch flatly.

“Aww, c’mon.” Mike shakes him bracingly. “We’ll see the Duke first, get it outta the way. It’ll be fast, probably!”

“Not sure which one’s worse,” Dutch says, “if he’s happy to see us or if he’s not.”

“We can take him,” says Mike, and Chuck sighs, pulling out his keys. “Let’s get this show on the road!”

--

The Duke is not happy to see them. His mansion is mostly cleared of plants, but the junkyards and mountains of scrap around it are still overgrown, and he’s uncharacteristically snappish and brief. He barely even does a backflip when Number Two introduces him.

“And a-hwhat did you want?” he says, when the last of the fireworks have died away. Mike opens his mouth to answer, hands open and weaponless, nonthreatening--Texas jumps in first.

“Well Texas wants to know when you were gonna abduct him for your weird show thing,” he says. “Yeah, uh, ‘cuz I can do next week but this week I’m gonna go and--”

“Thing?!” The Duke does such a theatrical double-take he almost falls over, ostentatiously flabbergasted. A muscle twitches in Mike’s temple. “Hwhat?! That--no things were in progress, I was thing-less, baby!”

“Gross,” says Texas. “Anyway, think about it. I got more one-liners ready than you got limos, BOOM, instant ratings! Get Texas on your show!”

“No,” says Mike, very firmly, “That’s what we don’t want him to do. We don’t want you to do that.”

“Great elevator pitch,” the Duke sniffs, “but we are currently uninterested in applications. If we ever need a musclebound loudmouth, my people will get in touch with your people.”

“Yeah, uh, we don’t like the way you get in touch with people,” says Dutch, arms folded uncomfortably.

“Too bad! Now roll out, Burners, I’ve got too much to deal with right now to listen to your ‘tay-ahmwork’ claptrap!”
Number Two leans discreetly in towards the Duke’s left ear and murmurs something behind a black-gloved hand.

“Ah.” The Duke chuckles, nudging his glasses up his nose. “Yes, teamwork. That one is on me.”

“Stop actin’ like you can’t say words,” says Dutch, just loud enough to be heard, and the Duke’s nostrils flare.

“Hey, not here to fight, remember? We’re just checkin’ up on people.” Mike insinuates himself between them, arms outstretched, before the situation can escalate. “Look, Duke. All these crazy plants everywhere, we gotta look out for each other.”

“I only look out for one person,” says the Duke, “and that’s--” he does a complicated series of gestures and sweeps both skinny arms around to point to himself. “--numero uno, baby!”

“Who?” says Texas, “That’s a lame name, I bet whoever that guy is he’s lame. Hey so is the show gonna be Texas Vs. Plants?”

“Get outta my mansion,” says the Duke.

“Uh, we’re in your yard? So, when you--”

“Come on, Tex,” says Mike under his breath, and Texas whoops angrily as Mike grabs his collar, tugging. “…doesn’t look like we’re welcome here.”

Texas waves them off at the border of the Duke’s territory, looking peeved. He won’t say where he’s going, but he seems to be taking off in the direction of the city center--Mike knows he has family there, somewhere. People who certainly mean more to Texas than the Skylarks do.

So, Mike gets it, but they sure could’ve used another car. Maybe if they’d had Stronghorn’s ramming power, they wouldn’t be where they are right now. Which is a couple miles out of their way, taking a detour around yet another circle of murderous plants. Apparently they didn’t go far enough, because some vine has managed to creep out all the way to the DE-65 and sprout…this.

It’s orange, and faintly ribbed, and about as immovable as the Deluxe Dome, and it takes up almost the entire mouth of the tunnel. It’s…well. It’s nothing like any plant Mike’s ever seen before, that’s for sure. It’s…big. It’s too big.

“It’s a pumpkin,” Jacob reports over the comm, a minute or two later. He looks impressed. “Hot tamales! Bring me back some seeds.”

“Pumpkin?” Dutch wrinkles his nose at the thing. “What, like…the kind you carved up for Mayhem Night?”

“Pumpkins,” Chuck interjects, thick with congestion and shaky with leftover adrenaline, “are not supposed to be bigger than your car!”

“Nah,” Jacob says. “But vines aren’t supposed to eat you either. Gimme those seeds, I’ll take a look.”

Getting giant pumpkin seeds is easier said than done. Mike hacks and saws at the thing for a while and then stops, grumbling, as the thick flesh clogs up his spark staff. Dutch fires a couple of blasts
at it from Whiptail, but all that does is leave long slices in both the pumpkin and the road, and he stops after a couple of attempts, disgruntled. And then it’s Chuck’s turn. He makes his way reluctantly over vines and fallen leaves, raises an arm and unfolds his slingshot. The first plasma bolt just leaves a smoking crater--Chuck frowns, wrinkles his nose and turns a couple of the dials on his screen all the way to the top.

The pumpkin blows open like a popped balloon and Chuck squawks as a chunk of it hits him in the face. He collapses his slingshot and scrambles back as giant seeds and stringy guts splatter the road around him.

“Aw man, gross,” says Mike with relish, and picks his way through the steaming remains of the pumpkin, kicking slime off his boots. “How many d’you think Jacob wants?”

Chuck is too busy being grossed out by the pumpkin guts to answer. Mike shrugs, grabs another four seeds, and retreats back to Blonde Thunder to jam them into the glove compartment. Chuck climbs into the driver’s seat a moment later, still fastidiously picking orange goo off his shirt and face.

“Nice one, dude,” Mike says, and then laughs as Chuck flicks pumpkin bits at him vengefully and hits the gas.

--

The Skylark Motel is never loud, but it’s silent as the grave when Mike, Chuck and Dutch make their way into the lobby. People occasionally hurry past, but they don’t look like customers. They’re wearing black Skylark suits, but with RN or MD where their numbers should be. There are a lot of masks and rebreathers. The Burners draw a little closer together as they walk.

One of the black-suited figures stops on the way past and pulls down his mask. Mike starts to smile at them, then shrinks a little bit. It’s one of the nurses who cleaned Mike up after the showdown with Kane’s army a few weeks ago.

“Did you drive here?” the nurse demands.

“No!” says Mike immediately, and then, when the nurse looks unconvinced, turns to Chuck for backup.

“He didn’t, he didn’t! I drove us here.”

The nurse looks unimpressed. “Hm. Is he taking his meds?”

“Uh…” Mike shifts his weight uneasily. “I...had some...earlier!”

The nurse huffs, apparently too busy to press the matter. “You better have some later too,” he says pointedly, and reaches into the bulging pocket of his suit, tugging out a pack of rebreathers. “Get covered. The last thing we need is you guys walking out of here and spreading this around.” He tugs his own mask back up, presses a button or two and gives them all a sardonic salute as it pressurizes with a faint hiss.

“Wait,” Mike starts, taking a step or two after him. “Dude, spread what around?!”

The nurse is already gone. Mike stares at the door he stepped through, obviously torn--but in the Skylark Motel it’s not a good idea to go into any room you don’t have a key to. He shakes his head and turns back to the other two instead; Dutch looks grim. Chuck looks unnerved.
“...Let’s...get upstairs,” Mike says, and he’s talking quietly but it still feels like the words come out too loud, breaking the silence abruptly.

“Uh...” Chuck pulls the mask up, sealing it with hands that shake just slightly. “Right. Yeah, let’s get outta here.”

The security on the top floor is as tight as it ever is, four men in immaculate suits around Rayon’s door. Today, though, there’s something extra in the air. Hands resting on guns. As the Burners draw level with the guards, one of them stifles a cough.

“Here to see Rayon,” Mike says, almost uncertainly. “He around?”

The guards share a glance, then the two closest to the door step back. “...He’ll meetcha here,” says one with “11” on his back. “We’ll tell him you’s waitin’.”

The room beyond is empty, dim and silent except for the soft hum of power cables within the hotel’s central tree. One of its branches extends from the wall and there’s a pair of numbers carved into its bark, inside a roughly-scratched heart. Mike wanders over to the branch and leans against the warm wood as they wait, looking idly out the window into the courtyard below. A second later his shoulders tense, his brows furrow.

“...Guys,” he says slowly. “C’mere.”

There are four Skylarks in the courtyard. It looks like they were working on one of the Buicks together--not anymore. One of the men is slumped forward over the car’s engine block. Two of the others are trying to pull him upright, shaking him and gesturing--the fourth one is backing away, apparently horrified.

“What the heck?” Mike murmurs. People in those RN and MD suits are hurrying across the courtyard, rebreather masks rendering them eerily faceless in the stark neon.

“There’s something really freaky going on, Mikey,” Chuck groans, agonized, “We should get outta here, like, now--”

“Chilton.”

Adrenaline jolts up Mike’s spine, grounds itself in the scar on his neck. He whips around, fists raised, heart pounding, and then catches himself at the sight of the two Skylarks standing in the doorway.

“Mr. Rayon’s gonna be here in a second,” says the one labeled 11, and the slow ebb of instinctive terror in Mike’s gut tints with something slower, something more like dread. “So...be cool, Chilton, or you’s gonna hear from us. Okay?”

“Be cool about what?” says Chuck, and immediately quails as the guys stare him down.

“Be cool,” one of them repeats, and then stands a little straighter as footsteps sound from beyond the dool. “--here he comes.”
Rayon looks...different. His suit is unbuttoned, for one thing. That’s strange enough all by itself, since Rayon never looks anything less than immaculate. But there’s something off about him, the way he sits and the tilt of his head. He keeps half-glancing around the room, like he thinks he hears something or catches something out of the corner of his eye. Mike’s used to seeing the same two men flanking him, but today there’s only one, and the empty space at Rayon’s right shoulder is strangely disconcerting.

“Rayon,” Mike says, a little more cautiously than usual. “Hey.”

“What can I do for you?” says Rayon, and pauses, leaning forward a little like he can’t see well. “...Mike.”

“One of your guys just collapsed down there,” Mike says, and frowns when Rayon just sighs slowly through his nose. “What’s going on, dude?”

“Skylark business,” says Rayon, but without much force.

“Uh...huh,” says Dutch slowly. Behind Rayon, the two men who came in to announce him give Dutch synchronized throat-cutting gestures. One of them mouths silently, BE COOL.

“Okay, uh, so just a cold then!” says Chuck, with false cheer. He’s sweating. The Skylark guards shift unhappily, frowning, but Rayon doesn’t seem offended. He hardly even seems to be listening.

“Not...just a cold.” Rayon glances sharply over Mike’s shoulder--Mike glances back too, startled, but there’s nothing there. “I don’t...know what this is.” Another glance at the empty corner, and this time he twitches abruptly, one hand darting toward a flash of matte black under his jacket. The Burners take a sharp step back in unison.

“Boss,” 2 says, very quiet and flat. Rayon twitches and forces his spine straight.
“What’s happening?” Mike looks unnerved, seeing Rayon so lacking in composure. “What do
you mean, not just a cold?”

“That’s how this started,” Rayon says, and finally he seems to shake off whatever was happening
to him. His eyes focus, the halting, strained edge leaves his voice. “It felt like a cold. Looked like
one, too. But then my men started...seeing things.” He blinks again, and his eyes flicker over
Mike’s shoulder. “...Remembering things,” he finishes, a second late and strangely distant.

“Things like what?” Mike persists.

“Anything.” Rayon’s hands twitch at his sides again. “Everything.” He pauses, shakes his head.
“...You should go. We’ll take care of our own mess.”

“What if you can’t ‘take care of’ this one?” Dutch winces at the look the other Skylarks give him,
but soldiers on. “You can’t just tell us to forget about it when there’s some kinda--what--plague
goin’ around? The guy we just saw outside, is that what happened to him? Is that…” He hesitates
just a second, then finishes, quieter, “...is that gonna happen to you?”

Rayon’s lips thin. “Like I was telling you,” he says, very crisp despite the distant flicker of his
eyes and the tension in his shoulders, “...that’s not your concern. We got some men down, that’s
all. No casualties.”

“Yet!” says Chuck, and then jumps and stares as Mike puts a hand on his shoulder. “This is crazy!
This is--”

“Dude,” says Mike, “Calm down, okay?”

“Mikey, for the last time, I--literally--can’t, okay?!” Chuck shakes his hand off, breathing deep
and fast like he can’t catch his breath. “Don’t--tell me to--god--shit!”

“How long does it take?” Dutch interjects, with a doggedness that suggests he knows he might be
pushing it. He actually takes a step back when Rayon sits forward, but Rayon just gives Dutch the
same long, almost confused look he gave Mike earlier. Like he’s looking at some old acquaintance
he knows he should know.

“...Dutch,” he says. And then, before Dutch can respond, “--Depends on the guy. Most of ‘em, a
week or two. For Sh--for3...two days.”

There isn’t much to say after that. Rayon certainly doesn’t seem to be in the mood to talk, and the
longer they stay there in the quiet, close hotel room, the tighter Mike’s chest feels. He’s never
gotten used to being around sick people, as long as he’s been in Motorcity--in Deluxe, as soon as
you’re reported for being sick you go straight to a quarantine pod. Drones deliver meds and throat
cubes, and you stay there isolated until you get better. There was never this feeling of-
-contamination. Like the air is dirty, like he could get sick just being here.

And he doesn’t think he’s alone in that--Chuck is breathing too fast, too hard, and Dutch looks pale
and more than a little bit nauseated. They say their goodbyes, and burn rubber out of there.

Chuck drives on autopilot on the way back to the hideout. His hands are vice-tight on the wheel,
and he’s still hyperventilating. Mike looks straight ahead, watches the road and doesn’t say a
word. When they get back to the hideout, Chuck finds a corner to curl up in, and after a little while
Dutch joins him, pulling up Laser Swords III as a wordless invitation. Mike sits awkwardly to one
side, watching them, waiting for Chuck to signal somehow that he’s ready to talk again.

A few minutes later, he gets his chance, when Dutch’s comm beeps and the game has to go on
“Uh...feelin’ better, bro?” Mike tries, lowering his voice as Dutch turns to read the text. Chuck pulls a face and looks down at the table. Not an encouraging response.

“I know I don’t...always get your whole, uh. Thing,” says Mike, aware he’s being less than coherent. “Sorry I told you to calm down. I wouldn’t wanna be told to calm down if I was freakin’ out about. Stuff.”

Chuck kind of laughs, but it’s dry and almost...angry? The worry squeezing Mike’s chest redoubles its grip. “Mikey, I’m not mad at you, okay? I’m...I’m mad at myself! For freaking out back there. I yelled at you for no reason--”

“You didn’t yell,” Mike points out. It’s all he can think of to say.

“It doesn’t matter what I did, Mikey! You were just trying to help and--”

“Dude, you know it’s okay to get mad at me, right?”

“I--”

“Uh, guys?”

Chuck and Mike, who had both forgotten anyone was listening, look nervously back at Dutch. He’s still looking down at the text message, one hand drumming nervously at the tabletop.

“...Yeah?” Mike ventures.

“Cableers are gettin’ sick too,” says Dutch. “I--I get their news and announcements and stuff, and it looks like the same thing’s happenin’ there as at the Motel.”

“Oh,” says Chuck. “Oh, no…”

“I’m goin’,” says Dutch abruptly, standing up and striding towards the garage.

“Give us a sec, we can--”

“I’m goin’ right now!” Dutch calls over his shoulder. “You don’t have to come, I’ll call you when I get there!”

“Probably doesn’t want me slowing him down,” mutters Chuck miserably, and then grunts softly as Mike throws a companionable arm over his shoulders. “Hgh. Mikey, come on, you can’t be cheerful right now, people are--are getting sick and we’re just sitting around doing nothing!” He waves away the Laser Swords III window in apparent disgust.

“Well, there’s one thing we can do,” says Mike in a voice of determined cheer, summoning a comm screen with one hand. “We can tell Julie what’s going on.”

--

There is one thing to be said for Motorcity: the place is full of junk. Reusable junk, much of it already repurposed from Kanebots and pieces of the dome. Kane has fashioned the awful, gaudy cloak into a makeshift sack, filling it steadily as he picks through fragments of tech. He has almost all the pieces he needs. He just has to put them together.
Finding a place to do that is going to be harder. The midlines between gang territories are essentially neutral ground, mainly untouched by both groups and conveniently marked by walls of trash or barbed wire. But that doesn’t mean they’re liveable...or lacking in surveillance cameras.

In the past few hours alone Kane has already had to hide from some kind of...evil hockey team, a fleet of old women on motorbikes, and an actual repurposed Hound. One of his own bots! With a giant, plush replication of a cartoon dog’s head covering its gaping jaws. It was both infuriating and intensely disturbing.

All of this, and on top of it the occasional stretch of rustling, alien plantlife. Kane skirts around those as best he can, even when it requires him to edge into real gang territory. He also refrains from touching any of the fruit hanging invitingly from the trees, no matter how loudly his stomach complains. The last food he had was stolen from the edge of a construction site; no doubt some worker will be missing his sandwich with its mystery meat and unidentifiable condiments.

It was disgusting. But right now, Kane would eat a hundred sandwiches like it--hell, he’d eat mutant rat meat if it weren’t almost certainly toxic. Later, he tells himself. There’s time. He’ll figure out food later.

He hikes the bundle of machine parts higher on one shoulder and soldiers on.

--

Julie had hoped against hope that the call from Motorcity meant just one tiny piece of good news, but so far the gist of it seems to be: plants everywhere, everyone is getting sick.

“...Yeah, that’s about it,” says Mike. “We’ve only heard about the Skylarks and the Cablers, but...diseases spread down here, y’know? Everybody’s pretty freaked out.”

He’s quiet for a second, and Julie lets it last, waits for him to gather his thoughts. “...Geez. That’s about it, actually. How are you doin’ up there? You good?”

“Uh, no, yeah,” says Julie, and offers a tired half-smile. “Not much to report. But, uh...I was hoping to talk to Jacob, actually! Is he around?”

“Lemme check.”

As Mike stands up to search for Jacob, Julie tries to quiet the surge of anxiety in her chest. She’s been debating with herself since the last board meeting--whether she should ask Jacob for help at all--but the words just kind of slipped out. He is, after all, the closest…

The closest thing to her dad right now. Okay, she didn’t mean to think of it like that, but she can’t deny it. And she’s sure Mike wouldn’t, either.

Then she looks down at her screen again and there he is, adjusting the spigot on one of his many greenhouse watering systems. Julie puts on a smile--time to ask some very careful questions.

“Jacob, hey!”

“Hey,” says Jacob, with a whiskery grin. “How’s it goin’ up there, kid?”

“Good, good!” says Julie distractedly, looking down at the messy sheet of notes on her tablet. “Uh, listen, I...I’m trying to figure out something kinda important and I thought you might be able to help! The new CEO…”

“You,” Jacob interjects.
“No, the new CEO--wants--”

“Julie, I know it’s you.”

“I don’t--” Julie laughs and knows it’s her fakest-sounding laugh of all time. *Lie, lie, lie, do not let him know, oh god he can’t know what if he tells--*

“I knew your dad when he was your age,” says Jacob, his voice softening. *“Heck, I...I knew Sarah.”*

For a moment, everything in Julie’s mind goes blank. For a moment, she forgets what lying is and how long she’s been doing it.

“You…” Her voice cracks. “You knew my mom…?”

“She didn’t come into work much, but sometimes when A--when Kane was workin’ for a couple nights straight she’d just up and drag him outta there.” Jacob shakes his head. “You got a lot of her in you.”

“How long have you known?” It’s terrifying, exhilarating, such a huge relief to be found out, even if Julie’s pretty sure her life just got a couple of decades shorter from pure shock.

“Started to see stuff the first couple weeks you were down here,” says Jacob, and Julie remembers the way he watched her, for the first day or two. She’d assumed it was just mistrust, that he was keeping an eye on the new Deluxian recruit. *“You got his temper. His hair. Her smile though.”*

Something aches fierce and hot in Julie’s chest. “Well,” she says, and finds she doesn’t know what to say. “So. Are you...gonna tell them?”

Jacob sighs roughly, pinches the bridge of his nose. “...No,” he says, almost reluctantly. “We got enough going on right now. We don’t need the boys gettin’ their overalls in a twist over a little thing like this. Guess Mike already knows, though.”

“Of course he does,” Julie mutters, averting her eyes. “He...he was my bodyguard. When he was Blue. Dad--Kane--god.”

“I get the idea,” says Jacob, not unkindly. *“He assigned Mike to you, huh? Always had a real twisted sense of humor,”* he adds darkly. They share an awkward moment of understanding, and then Jacob’s face goes oddly thoughtful for a moment. *“Might be why it took him so long to bust outta mind control,”* he says, and Julie’s stomach twists in confusion and fear.

“What do you mean? Do you think I--”

“I just mean I think protectin’ you comes natural to him,” says Jacob waving one square, knobblly hand placatingly. *‘Part of him probably didn’t wanna leave you up there with Kane. Wasn’t yer fault or Mike’s. If you wanna blame somebody--”*

“I know!” says Julie quickly. “I...know. My dad did a lot of bad things. I’m trying to fix some of them. I just don’t know where to start, I guess? Most of the board members are fine but there’s this guy, Larsson--”

“Oh, Larsson,” says Jacob, rolling his eyes irritably. “I know Larsson.”

“Y...you do?”
“Yeah, old Emmanuel Larsson, thought he was God’s gift to Detroit when we started. Real smart-ass, coulda been a great technician but didn’t wanna listen to anyone else’s ideas.”

“Sounds about right,” Julie mutters. “But he’s only half of the--”

“Lemme guess,” Jacob says. “If he’s still hangin’ around, he’s gotta have Pinsky backin’ him up.”

“I--yeah!” Julie stares at him, wide-eyed--Jacob chuckles.

“Ain’t rocket science,” he says, and pulls up a screen, sorting through documents. Flicks a wrist, and a file transferring bar pops up on Julie’s screen. “Those two mighta been at each other’s throats, but they also had each other’s backs. As long as I was up there, they were schemin’ and fightin’ and--” he stops, opens his mouth, closes it again. Finishes, a little awkwardly, “...hangin’ out...”

The picture initializes and loads onto Julie’s screen: two young men standing side by side. One of them has Pinsky’s bullish build and square, scowling face--the other one is grinning a broad, jovial grin that makes Julie’s teeth grind with familiar dislike. Pinsky has a black eye and a bulky arm thrown over Larsson’s shoulder. Larsson’s grin is very fixed and his eyes are narrow with annoyance.

“Uh...wow.” There’s another picture in the set--Julie scrolls forward, hypnotized, and sees a slightly blurry picture that was obviously taken seconds after the first. Pinsky appears to be halfway through trying to put Larsson in a headlock. Larsson was caught in the middle of shoving him away--or possibly grabbing him for a headbutt, considering how close their faces are. He’s still grinning, but his grin has a vicious, snarling edge to it.

Julie pulls up a database of citizen files and drags Larsson and Pinsky’s photos to the screen, staring at them. It seems impossible to reconcile the directors she knows with these young men, barely older than the other Burners. “So,” she says, and then shakes her head and starts again. “--wait, so you’re telling me they were...friends?
“Uh...” Jacob clears his throat, makes a face Julie can’t even start to parse, and then says “...yyyyeah. That’s what I’m--yeah, friends.” And then, before Julie can ask him why he said that so weirdly, “--look, if you got both of them there, there’s no way they ain’t planning something nasty. You gotta get them outta your hair, or they’ll spike your wheels for sure.”

“I can’t just fire them, though,” Julie says, bitter. “I know they’re awful old men--”

“They’re four years younger than me,” Jacob mutters, and then relents at the pained look Julie throws his way. “--But look, kid, you can just fire ‘em, and I figure you should! You don’t need those two around. They’ll do you no end of trouble. They’ve been lookin’ to be on top since before the dome even got planned, okay? They’re not gonna sit back and wait for you to take over. They’re gonna make a move, and they’re gonna make it soon.”

“They’ll--” Julie swallows the sudden rise of sour anxiety at the back of her throat. “No, I mean, they wouldn’t--even if they’ve got security all riled up, they can’t just--start a coup. That’s not how it works!”

“Ain’t it?” Jacob says darkly, and shakes his head. “Look, I said my bit. If you’re not gonna kick ’em outta the tower, at least promise me you’re gonna keep an eye on their goons. Those two are no Kane, but I still don’t wanna see what Deluxe’d be like with them on top.”

“You won’t have to,” says Julie, more confidently than she feels, “Because that’s not going to happen. I’ve got it, okay?” And then, because Jacob still looks worried, and skinny, and old and tired, and she doesn’t say it enough, “…thanks though. For looking out for me. For us.”
Jacob snorts, shrugs, shoves his hands in his pockets. “Yeah, well--somebody’s gotta.”

“I’ll get my people looking at Security,” Julie promises. “Go tell Mike to get some sleep. And, uh, can I ask you more questions about this stuff sometime?”

“Ha! Sure.”

“Take care,” says Julie, and ends the call on Jacob’s grin, feeling a little lighter inside. She sits back on her bed for a minute or two, staring up at the ceiling, digesting the new information. Then she leans forward again, and pulls up her directory. “…Call: Director Clement. Dar Gordy.” And then, as the screens flicker and change, showing two startled, confused faces, “…I have some new information. We need to talk.”

The Cablers’ Settlement is looking…rough. Its inhabitants have clearly done everything they can to clear away the plants growing on it, but there are still massive, sticky vines climbing its exterior. Even from down here, Dutch can see a few places where they’ve cut off the nodes of the shield network. Of course, that would be more of a problem if any Kanebots had appeared in the past couple weeks, but Motorcity has been at war for too long to let it stand. There are Cablers everywhere, chopping and pruning and hauling vines to massive incinerators.

Bracket opens the door when Dutch knocks, which manages to induce an automatic fear response even though Dutch knows by now that the guy is okay with Dutch and Tennie’s whole…thing.

“Tennie’s not here,” Bracket rumbles. Okay, maybe he’s somehow not as okay with it as Dutch thought.

“I…I sent her a message,” he manages, jamming his hands nervously into his pockets. “Told her I’d be here in five. It’s important! It’s not, like, a date or anything--”

As more clouds roll in over Bracket’s already stormy visage, Dutch starts to suspect he’s got the wrong end of the stick. He takes one step back, swallowing, and tries, “I mean… Did I...do something wrong…?”

“Ask my daughter, if you can find her,” says Bracket, and closes the door. A moment later he opens it again, handing Dutch a gas mask with the blue Cabler star emblazoned on it. “Higher levels aren’t breathable right now. Don’t die.”

“I saw y’all have people gettin’ sick t--” Dutch starts, and then the door shuts again.

Well, that’s just…awesome.

The lower levels are crowded, multiple families crammed into the compact little homes. Dutch is eerily reminded of the Skylark Motel, albeit with more sniffing and coughing. Obviously some people here are still in the early stages of…whatever this is. But he catches glimpses through windows of people lying on beds or couches, limp and unresponsive like the Skylark who went down in the courtyard.

Creepy. Dutch shudders and goes higher, making sure the mask is well-sealed on his face. What did Bracket mean, higher levels aren’t breathable? Is it some kind of gas? More nanobots? Did Kane--

Dutch pauses, then relaxes. Of course, Kane’s gone. There’s…somebody else in charge now. Jeez, that’s hard to wrap his head around.
No one he asks seems to know where Tennie is, or at least they don’t want to tell him, which is even worse for Dutch’s nerves than the rampant plant-virus. If he did something to make her mad, he can’t for the life of him think what it was. And he’s been waiting to talk to her face-to-face for days now. The other Burners are great--they are, they’re great! Obviously. Even Texas...kind of. But even Chuck doesn’t share Dutch’s interests the way Tennie does, even Mike doesn’t feel quite as comfortable. Being with Tennie feels like making art--a break, a breath of fresh air.

Dutch could spend every second of his day with Tennie.

He’s so wrapped up in thinking about it that when he actually sees her, he’s completely forgotten he was nervous. She’s hanging from the ceiling in a harness, pointing a laser cleaner at the pipes above her and whistling tunelessly.

“Hey!” calls Dutch, waving. The mask muffles his voice, but she cocks her head like she heard him.

“Maintenance work ongoing!” she calls back down, and Dutch recognizes her Working Voice. “Proceed with caution!”

“It’s, uh…” And now he’s starting to remember why he was nervous. “Tennie, it’s me! Heard people were gettin’ sick up here, so I thought I’d visit…”

Tennie doesn’t move for a long second, then she reaches down to her harness and drops abruptly to the floor with a whirr of unspooling cable. Dutch backs up a step, giving her space to land, and Tennie unbuckles herself efficiently, still not quite looking at him.

“...Tennie?

“I heard you,” says Tennie, and reaches up with one gloved hand to rub at the back of her neck. Sighs. “Sorry. Uh...it’s good to see you again.”

“Yeah…?” Dutch swallows, hesitates, and Tennie seems to hear the uncertainty in his silence. She shakes her head, then folds her arms and looks him square in the eyes.

“I need to talk to you about some stuff.”

Well, he knew there was something up. Dutch nods. Tennie nods too, and walks toward him, past him, back down the hallway.

“When I called you the other day,” she says, firm and direct, like always, “I thought we were on the same page, so. I don’t know why you couldn’t say ‘I love you’ back. That’s all.”

Oh. Oh, geez.

“That was just--!” How is he even supposed to say this. Dutch stammers for a second, then finishes awkwardly, “--the guys were all there, y’know…”

Tennie glances at him, and he can tell she’s frowning now, under her mask. “So what?”

“Just--they get all…” He gestures, helplessly trying to sum up Chuck’s exasperated embarrassment at the concept of Dutch dating--Mike’s wry grins, Texas’s rough laughter. It doesn’t work. “I can’t talk about goin’ on dates either, you know?” Oh no, that came out really bad, crap.

“So you’re...embarrassed?” Tennie sounds ticked, but more than that she sounds...hurt. It sucks.
This sucks. “Of--what, of me?”

“What? No!”

“That’s sure what it sounds like,” Tennie says, and then chokes on whatever she was going to say next, coughing roughly behind her mask, eyes watering. Dutch starts forward, worried, but she waves him off, fights it back under control. “Kkh--y-you--said it first, I thought--”

He did, and Kane’s army had been minutes from running them down and Dutch had been scared and running hot on adrenaline, but he doesn’t regret it. He meant it, and he still means it, and he should say all of that out loud but it’s so cheesy, he’d sound so stupid. Dutch opens his mouth. Shuts it again. He could say it now, in private, in the dark, wearing a mask. But somehow he doesn’t think that would fix things.

Might even make them worse, come to think of it.

“It’s just--the guys,” he says again, unable to conjure up better words--and immediately regrets it.

“Okay, so,” Tennie says, “if this is some kind of--macho man thing--”

“What--no! You know I don’t go in for that stuff!”

“Well then--what is it? I don’t get it, okay?”

“I’m just…”

He falls silent, kind of half-reaching for her like he expects her to want to hold hands right now. Tennie folds her arms, staring him down, and after a moment Dutch backs off. There’s a big cocktail of emotions stirring inside him--guilt and frustration and instinctive resentment. He wants her to understand. The thought of people...noticing him, hearing him talk about his feelings, it’s too much. This is what he has art for. He can put his frustration and joy and rebellion on a wall and let the city see it, and that’s enough. It’s not going to be enough here.

He’s just opening his mouth, struggling to find the right words to even start to explain, when Tennie shakes her head and turns away, picking up her laser cleaner again. “...I think you should go,” she says.

“Y--you shouldn’t stay up here much longer either,” Dutch says, maybe a little defiantly. “That cough doesn’t sound good--”

“I can take care of myself, Dutch,” Tennie snaps. “This is my home. And I think you should go.”

Dutch goes.

Chapter End Notes

Notable section titles for this chapter:
- The Duke Is A No-Show LITERALLY
- Getting Sick Is Only Sexy When Rayon Does It
- Kane Interlude: Running from Gangs I
- Julie Interlude: GOVERNMENT, The Only Reason To Talk To Old People
- Dutch Visits Tennie and Gets Information But It’s Real Awkward
I Killed a Plant from the Inside!! It Ate Me and I Murdered It!!

Chapter Summary

In which Chuck leads his troops, an announcement comes from on high, Julie gets a pleasant surprise, and Texas plays Enchantment: the Convocation. Also, the Duke is a petulant man-child, but what else is new?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

DAY SIX

Three days later, things haven’t improved much. Kaia remains maddeningly impossible to find, even when the Burners finally manage to lead a team of Weekend Warriors to the home base where they first met the Terras. Whether they’ve picked up and moved camp or simply retreated into the mushroom forest, they were very careful not to leave any trace of their presence behind. Their houses are empty, even more overgrown than usual, their freaky white deer-mounts are gone, and (to Chuck and Jacob’s disappointment) the lab in Kaia’s house where the Terras synthesized their new super-vines has been totally swept clean.

Texas wants to head deeper into their land--”Which we should totally call the Territory, get it? Terra-tory! Like territory --” --but Dutch is adamant that they’re likely to get speared or vined from a distance if they run in half-cocked, and everyone else seems to agree.

So they’re back to square one there. And meanwhile, what seems like thousands of new species of plant, each uniquely dangerous or annoying in their own way, are still overtaking the city. Only one person seems even the least bit happy about this.

“I ain’t been out and about so much since I was sixty,” says Jacob happily over Saturday lunch,shouldering off his pack of homemade weedkiller and leaning the connected nozzle against the table. “Y’know, I think I missed this!”

“Missed what?” says Dutch, peeved and sweaty.

“Gardening!”

“Plants are the worst,” says Chuck. He’s got his hair tied back, and there’s dirt and sticky sap smeared across the bridge of his nose from brushing his bangs back with dirty hands. He looks incredibly frazzled. “Why would you do this on purpose?”

“Somebody’s gotta do the growin’ for you boys to do the eatin’,” says Jacob serenely. “If we just had a little bit more sunlight down here--”

“Roots tried to pull me under the ground and eat me!” Texas says. “That was awesome!”

“You’re insane,” says Chuck, and then startles at the sudden chime of his comm system. “Oh! Hey, yeah, uh...it’s Chuck.”
“I know it’s ‘uhhhhh Chuck’!” exclaims the little cube that pops up in front of him. “Is Lord Vanquisher, King of the mighty realm of Raymanthia, anywhere to be found? ’Cause he was supposed to be at the head of the crusade for the Sacred Stone, like, forty minutes ago!”

“What?!” Chuck springs up so abruptly he hits his knees on the bar and crumples back down, hissing in pain. “You’re--you’re continuing the campaign?! Ruby! There’s giant mutant plants everywhere, are you nuts?!”

“I know!” Ruby’s avatar rolls its pixellated eyes. “It’s not that bad! Thurman’s being a baby about it--” (“I’m gonna get in so much trouble,” says Thurman’s voice faintly in the background) “--but he hasn’t even gotten eaten! I got eaten, Chuck! I killed a plant from the inside! It ate me and I murdered it! Like Sir Fearless and the Golden Manticore!”

“You can’t–that’s–agh!” Chuck stands up, more carefully this time, extricates himself from the bar and scrambles up the stairs, talking the whole way. He comes back down the stairs seconds later, cloak over one shoulder, juggling his lance, a to-go box of last night’s cold pizza and a key-ring with a golden lightning-bolt charm on it. “--near any kind of plant, okay, not even if it looks harmless! That is an order from your king, Darkslayer--”

“Whoa!” Mike starts to push himself up. “You need a ride, buddy?”

“Wh? Uh.” Chuck is already halfway through sliding down off the side of the hideout platform, skinny legs dangling into the garage. “Hang on–Ruby! Look, who else is there? How did you even get there, it’s insanely dangerous to go out right now--” He swings himself into Blonde Thunder’s driver’s seat, and the other Burners watch, fascinated, as he buckles in, apparently on
autopilot, and Thunder’s engine roars to life. He still talking, gesticulating wildly with the hand not on the wheel.

“...When do you think he’s gonna figure it out?” Dutch says. Mike shrugs and laughs and pulls up his comm. Chuck burns rubber out of the garage with golden arcs of power trailing in his wake.

“Uuuuhhh, dude?” Mike taps his comm, and it rings a couple of times before Chuck picks up, still talking. “--Chuckles--where are you goin’?”

“Head for the battlefield,” Chuck snaps. “Apparently the Darkslayer has decided to forswear her oath of loyalty, Ruby!”

“You’re not the king until you get here!” Ruby protests in the background. There’s a wicked grin in her voice. “Ooo, look, some big sticky plants. I bet they try to eat people too. For the glory of the realm!”

“Ruby, I said NO!” Chuck yells, and on Mike’s screens his locator beacon visibly accelerates.

“Agh! Mike, slow down!”

“I’m not doing anything!” Mike protests, but he can’t stop grinning. “You slow down!”

“Yeah, but--Ruby, who else is there? Thurman!”

Another comm link joins the call. “I can’t make her stop!” says Thurman. “Dude, a plant ate her! She killed it from the inside!”

“I--aaaaAAHHHH MIKENO--I know! I know, so keep her from touching anything until I gnnnh! Nonononono--” The Burners all lean in to watch as Chuck’s beacon takes a jump like a champ, going an appreciable fraction of Mutt’s top speed. Mike can’t stop laughing, and Chuck takes a second to yell a couple of garbled invectives at him before going back to demanding status updates from Thurman and Ruby. “I’m gonna be there in--five, no, four--if you’re not all on the Scorchéd Plains when I get there, you’re all in trouble!”

“...We should probably go after him?” Dutch says, but he’s laughing too. Texas’s nose wrinkles as he watches the little dot accelerate--Chuck makes another jump and then takes a spiral at high speed, screaming the whole time.

“Nah,” says Mike, and settles back. “He’ll figure it out.”

Chuck is basically halfway to a high-speed panic attack by the time he tumbles out of the driver’s side door, snatching his keys as he goes. Ruby and the other LARPers are standing in a patch of Deluxian sunshine when he staggers up to them, cloak flung crookedly over his shoulders, breathing hard. A ragged cheer arises from the Raymanthians in the group, and everybody bows as Chuck jogs up, stepping flinchily over the fallen, mouthy blooms that used to be overgrowing the Scorchéd Plains.

“Are you okay?!” Chuck is gasping, as soon as he’s in yelling distance. “Everybody’s--?”

“Allow your knights and masters of Arcana the credit they deserve,” Ruby says, grinning--and then, a little bit less pleased with herself, “...uh, my lord? Your visage is, mm--”

Chuck stares around at them, sick and shaky with leftover anxiety--he’s gotta be white as a sheet, but he does not have time for people asking questions right now, no. “You’re not--you got eaten--”
And then, louder and higher—he hates how his voice cracks when he gets angry, all squeaky and piercing, but he’s so scared and angry he can’t bring himself to stop. “You should have told me you were coming out! This was crazy-dangerous! You can’t just come out here without somebody to protect—”

“Uh, excuse me,” Ruby says, offended. “We fought in the invasion? Remember? We can take care of ourselves. Besides, we need training! Real training, against real enemies.”

“Wh--training--why?”

“There’s somebody new in charge up there,” Thurman says, and shrugs as Chuck turns his stunned glare in Thurman’s direction. “Everybody’s saying it. So, uh...since we’ve been fighting for a long time down here, we should know how to fight for real in case this new guy wants us gone too.”

“I don’t care what kinda crazy propaganda they’re sending down!” Chuck says, shrill with rage and terror. “Mike--” He blinks, half-turns and looks around. “...Mike?”

“Present,” says Mike through Chuck’s comm screen. He sounds like he’s trying not to laugh. Chuck looks around again, still half-expecting to see Mike leaning on the hood of his car and grinning, but there’s nobody there. Chuck opens his mouth to say, “But you drove us over that jump!” or “But we were going so fast!”...And shuts it again.

“Wow buddy,” says Mike, “you hit three hundred once or twice! That’s pretty dang impressive.”

“Wh--but you,” Chuck starts, derailed, “--I can’t, I didn’t! Did I?”

“You seriously can, and you totally did,” Mike says. He’s beaming, gleeful. “Hey Ruby, hey Thurman.”

“Sir Smiling Dragon,” Ruby acknowledges, dipping her head. “Will you not join us in battle this day?”

“Sir Smiling Dragon was recently wounded in valiant battle,” Chuck says pointedly, before Mike can answer. “His services will not be--his services are needed elsewhere.”

“Doing less stuff,” says Mike, and even though his tone is playful Chuck still winces. Thurman, apparently oblivious to the subtleties of their exchange, jogs over to Blonde Thunder and peers into the front seat.

“Hey, Chuck--”


“Hey Lord Chuck Vanquisher, did you bring all your stuff or just the cloak?”

“What?” asks Chuck distractedly as Mike’s comm window closes.

“You know, your kingly armaments!”

“Oh, uh--no. Wait, yes! But I wasn’t gonna actually--”

Thurman is already leaning in through Blonde Thunder’s passenger door. He comes out holding an armful of the aforementioned armaments and looking smug. “Sweet.”
“Seriously, guys,” Chuck groans as Thurman drops the lance into his arms and pins the pin ceremoniously onto his shirt. “I didn’t come here to LARP and you guys shouldn’t be either! It’s dangerous out here and--”

Ruby steps right up to him, her toes bumping against his as she glares up into his eyes from several feet below them. “It’s dangerous everywhere, Chuck.”

“Lord Vanquisher,” Thurman mutters.

“I’m talking about the real world,” Ruby shoots back, still glaring as Chuck retreats from her gaze. “It’s not just plants, it’s whatever’s going on in Deluxe, and in case you forgot, we helped last time they came for our city!”

“Yeah, but--” Chuck is floundering. “But—but Thurman stop it--but you shouldn’t have to!”

Thurman pauses in his efforts to straighten the green, kingly cloak around Chuck’s shoulders and gives him a surprisingly serious look. “Yeah, dude, but we want to. You’re not the only nerd who gets to be a rebel badass.”

“I’m not,” Chuck wails, and then, when Ruby scoffs, “I’m really not, guys, I’m just--I dunno, the Burners’ hacker, it’s not a big deal, I can’t even drive--I mean!! Pretend I didn’t say that!”

“Sure I will,” says Thurman, giving him a weird look, “but only because you literally just drove here in your car. Also, you are a badass. We all think so.”

“You--”

“If we didn’t, you wouldn’t be king,” says Ruby pointedly, folding her arms. “...So do you wanna teach us what you know or not?”

Chuck pauses, giving Thurman the opportunity to pull the hood of his cloak up with a satisfied hah! He doesn’t complain, just absent-mindedly adjusts the folds of cloth so that they hang right. The silence goes on for so long that even Ruby starts to look nervous, one hand going to the wooden hilt of her sword. When Chuck finally opens his mouth again, she actually jumps a little, fingers closing around it.

“Are you guys...just gonna go and do this no matter what I say?”

“Probably,” says Thurman. “Definitely,” says Ruby in the same moment. Chuck sighs, scrubbing his hands over his face, and then suddenly stands up straight.

“Fine!” he says, and straightens up to his full height. “Whither go we today, my warriors?”

“Yesss!” hisses Ruby, and then, immediately snapping back into character, “To the Whispering Forest, my liege, where lurk the darkest servants of the Sylvan Witch Queen! Our allies await us there!”

“That’s right, the Whispering Forest is now literally a forest,” Thurman adds happily, a little slower to enter the fiction.

Chuck shudders, but keeps his shoulders square as he takes the lead, heading towards the North Cable Cluster in the distance. “Very well. We shall defeat them by our forces combined! Today, my first and most important command for you--”

“Yes, my lord!”
“--do not let anything eat me!”

Chuck stays out all day, and when he comes back he looks sweaty and flushed and happier than he has in quite a while. Stressed, but happy. He’s also hoarse and kind of sniffly, but he grins at Mike as he unfolds out of Blonde Thunder’s driver-side door.

“Had a good time, huh?” says Mike, and Chuck pulls a face at him and packs his LARPing stuff back into his trunk meticulously. “Hey, would you let me go outside if it was for the good of the realm? Because I will totally put on a cape for some fresh air.”

“Come on, dude,” says Chuck, “You go out all the time.”

“But I don’t get any action,” Mike complains, and hops down off the garage with barely a wince. “I’ve only got like two more days of pills, I could totally--”

“Is he tryin’ to get you to let him drive again?” Dutch calls down, and Mike rolls his eyes and groans. “He doesn’t even have the keys, Mike! Lay off!”

“Two more days, Mikey,” says Chuck apologetically.

“Yeah, two more days! That’s like--forty-eight hours!” Mike groused, but he falls in next to his best friend and throws an arm around his shoulders as they walk. “I’m basically fine! Practically all the way better!”

“I…” Chuck glances up at the hideout, toward the sound of the other Burners talking. “...Look, if-if we just go do one lap on the track--”

“Mike!”

Chuck freezes in mid-sentence with a guilty flinch as Texas’s head pokes out over the side of the hideout.

“You gotta come see this.”

It’s another announcement from Deluxe. This time, though, there’s no peaceful white-and-blue backdrop and no Alex Harley. A blank NO IMAGE symbol hovers on the screen. The Burners gather around to listen; an even, genderless voice is speaking, tone mild, matter-of-fact.

“The city of Deluxe is enacting an open-borders policy,” says the faceless voice. “Motorcitizens who would like to apply to join us in Deluxe are welcome. Deluxe citizens who would like to leave Deluxe are welcome to declare their intention and be escorted safely past our borders.”

Chuck, who just started to take a drink of water, chokes on it and goes into a coughing fit. Dutch’s eyebrows shoot up to his hairline. Mike huffs out a breath, startled and amazed.

“They’re--letting people just--?” Chuck trails off, voice rough--shakes his head wordlessly.

“People are gonna go crazy,” Dutch says. “Open borders--what is she thinkin’?!?”

Mike’s heart jumps abruptly, skipping a beat. “What?”

“Huh?” Dutch glances at him, preoccupied. “You heard that, right? People can just walk down to
Motorcity now?"

"You said--"

Mike stops, and Dutch blinks, apparently thinking back over what he said.

"Oh," he says, waving one hand awkwardly. "Uh--oh, oops--no, yeah, I mean 'he'. 'Them'. That CEO dude, y’know."

"What are you talking about?" Chuck says, and then before Dutch or Mike can answer, "There’s a new CEO, and--and they want a truce? Seriously, we’re supposed to buy that? What if Kane’s got somebody in charge up there, if he’s still calling the shots somehow--"

"Or there’s somebody better in charge now," Mike suggests, and sees Dutch’s eyes flicker to him and away again. Mike’s heart double-beats again. *Protect her,* whispers some part of his mind, the only leftover whisper he doesn’t mind still having. *Protect Miss Julie.* "We could give it a chance."

"*Mike,*" says Chuck, agonized.

"I’m with the nerd," Texas says. Everybody stares at him, startled, and he shrugs. "Told you already, ain’t no truces down here, it’s a war. Us and them. I know you just got down here--"

"Two years ago," Dutch objects. "And every war has to end some time, man! Didn’t you ever think about it? What if the war ends? What if we end it?"

Texas stares at him like he’s speaking a foreign language. "It’s a war," he repeats. "Deluxe don’t stop. No--no, listen to Texas. It’s Deluxe. You’re talkin’ about the big white city? Up there?"

"Yeah, but--"

"Mike," says Texas, and his voice is very flat and serious and almost pitying. "...It’s not gonna stop. Whatever they’re doin’ up there, it’s gonna end with bots, or a buncha jerks with guns, or some kinda poison dinosaur mutant army, and then it’ll be a war again and probably people are gonna be dead. The end, no more story."

The words sit in the air, heavy as lead. Mike stares at Texas, mouth hanging open, for a long second. Chuck is sitting small and unhappy and still, eyes darting from Mike to Texas and back--Dutch is shaking his head slowly, lips thin.

"I...don’t believe that," Mike says finally, pained and quiet. "I can’t believe that, dude. Not if I’m gonna keep fighting him, you get that, right?"

"Oh, we’re gonna keep fighting!" Texas grins, slams a fist into the opposite palm. "Motorcity don’t ever back down! I’m just sayin’--"

"Well--maybe don’t," says Dutch quietly, and folds his arms when Texas glances at him, brow furrowing. "Maybe just...don’t. Next time."

Mike gives him an odd look, and Dutch frowns back at him, eyes narrowed. "...What, dude? My mom and dad and Dar all live up there, you know?"

"Whatever," says Texas, before Mike can answer. "I’m gonna go punch the punching bag, bye."

"Sure, bye," mutters Dutch, staring at the wall. Mike sighs, looking after Texas. Dutch knows
what that look means, and knows just as well that Texas won’t stop Mike if he turns up asking to spar.

“Hey,” he says, warningly. “No drivin’, right? Or fightin’.”

In the corner, Chuck twitches but doesn’t say anything. Mike shoves his hands into his pockets, frowning rebelliously, and for a moment Dutch thinks he’s going to argue. But a second later he relaxes, shoulders slumping dejectedly.

“I’m goin’ crazy, dude,” he says, almost plaintive in the silence. “I gotta do something but it’s like everything I wanna do is off-limits!”

Dutch pauses, struck by an idea--is it worth it, though? It’s Mike, so yes. He stands up, walking over to the corner where he left his painting gear.

“You know what I do when I’m feelin’ frustrated?”

Mike laughs uncertainly. “Uh--yeah, I do. But Dutch--”

“Give it a shot,” says Dutch, offering him the mask and satchel of paint cans. “Can’t hurt, right? There’s a big old board of plywood out back, got it from one of the construction sites. I guess it’s shaped wrong or somethin’ so they let me have it.”

“It’s yours,” Mike protests. “What if I--like--ruin it or something?”

But he’s already reached out automatically to take the stuff, and Dutch drops the bag and mask into his arms, grinning. “Well I mean, it’s spraypaint. Even if you mess up real bad, you can just paint over it later. Heck, I’ll help if you want me to.”

Mike pauses, looking at Dutch in a way that makes him feel weirdly self-conscious. And then he smiles crookedly and says, “You’re helping plenty, dude. Thanks. Seriously.”

“Uh, sure,” says Dutch awkwardly, and makes a vague gesture over his shoulder. “Anyway, I got a call to make--need to talk to--about some stuff.”

Mike gives him another look, then shrugs. Not my business. “Okay. See you later! Thanks for the...art stuff?”

“Any time,” says Dutch, and then, as Mike starts to walk away, “But you gotta wear the mask the whole time you’re painting, okay? That stuff’ll mess up your lungs!”

“Come on!” Mike calls over his shoulder, already starting to fit the mask on his face. “I’ve watched you, I’ll be fine!”

Yeah, Dutch is definitely gonna check on him later.

But for now, he does have a call to make. He wasn’t sure he even wanted to until that announcement came out--maybe, he reasoned, it would be better to just put it off. Wait until the whole thing came out on its own, which is what’s probably gonna happen eventually anyway.

He takes a deep breath and hits Julie’s caller ID.

“Hey Dutch,” says Julie. She’s been nervously re-listening to the announcement since it went out, and the call from Motorcity presents a welcome distraction. “What’s up?”
Dutch opens his mouth, closes it, opens it again. Some of the relief Julie was feeling fades a little bit—this is...kinda weird. Dutch’s expression, the way he’s sitting, remind her more of Chuck. He looks really nervous.

“Uh,” he says. “Hi.”

“Hi?” Julie sets her pod to glide high and slow—above Kane Co. tower, out of the air-traffic zone. “Everything okay?”

Dutch’s face does something that would be totally hilarious if Julie wasn’t so worried. “Yeah?” he says. “We just got another announcement. From Deluxe.”

Oh. Oh man, oh no. Of all the things Julie didn’t feel like talking about— “Oh yeah,” she says. “I know. Crazy stuff, right?”

“It’s good!” Dutch says hurriedly. “I mean, it’s crazy, but uh. Whoever made that call, I mean, it was a good one.”

He says that...really carefully, and Julie’s heart is beating fast. “Mm,” she says ambivalently, and is proud of the fact that her voice doesn’t even tremble. “Could cause trouble.”

“I mean—yeah, but.” Dutch waves a hand abstractedly in the air for a second, and then abruptly changes the subject. “—so, I heard Dar was gonna get a day off to come down.”

“Oh!” Julie manages to add a note of surprise to the exclamation at the last second, and Dutch’s eyes search her face. There’s a prickle of sweat between her shoulderblades. “I thought cadets didn’t get days off.”


“Pity he couldn’t make it,” Julie says carefully. She hasn’t felt this on the spot since she took over the company—hasn’t had that feeling like somebody is dissecting every word she says. He’s suspicious he knows he knows he knows— “It must’ve been hard to get a day off. Guess he really missed you.”

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“Yes, well, it was gonna be the first year I wasn’t up there—for—I mean—” Dutch shrugs awkwardly. “Stuff.”

“Stuff?” Spotting her opportunity, Julie goes desperately on the offensive. “What kind of stuff?”

“I mean, just.” Dutch waves a hand, apparently going for “airy”. Mostly he just looks like he’s being attacked by a mutant mosquito. “It was my, uh...birthday. A couple days ago.”

“It what?” Julie sits up, nerves briefly overridden by genuine happiness and surprise. “Seriously?! Happy birthday!”

“Ha, yeah,” says Dutch. His dark cheeks are going marginally darker; his grin is embarrassed but bright. “It’s not a big deal.”

“It is a big deal!” Julie says. “Are you eighteen now? That’s a pretty big deal, Dutch!” And then, as Dutch keeps on not looking at her, cheeks flushed, “…why didn’t you tell anybody?”

“Yes, well!” Dutch says, and shrugs jerkily. “I mean! Sometimes people keep secrets!” And he looks at her through the screen, and Julie’s stomach drops, because he’s not avoiding her eyes any more. “Sometimes people keep big secrets, because there’s—no time to bring it up! Y’know? Or
they don’t know how to say it, or they don’t know how people are gonna take it, but if they’d just say it--”

“Keeping secrets is my job,” Julie says, smaller and shakier than she means to, desperate to make him understand. “It’s what I do, Dutch.”

“Yeah, but--but you shouldn’t have to keep ‘em from us!” Dutch says fiercely. “You don’t have to keep ‘em from us. You can tell us, you can say it!”

“I--” Julie takes a deep breath, and is horrified to hear her voice crack, to feel a hot prickle in her eyes. She takes another breath, fighting the feeling back. A third. “...I don’t...” Softer now, too small. “...I don’t want to.”

Dutch’s fierce expression softens a little bit. “...I...yeah,” he says. “I get that.”

For a second, they just sit there quiet, and don’t say anything. For the first time in a long time, the heavy knot in Julie’s chest has unravelled into something warm and relieved. She’s felt like this talking to Mike once or twice--the relief of knowing she doesn’t have to watch every single word she says, that she’s accepted--but it still surprises her every time.

“...You’re a good friend, Dutch,” she says finally, and smiles at him a bit shakily. “You should’ve told us it was your birthday though.”

Dutch laughs, startled. “Yeah, well,” he says, and reaches up to push his hair down, covering his eyebrows in a puffy imitation of Julie’s bangs. “Keeping secrets is my job, Julie. It’s what I do.”

“Happy birthday, you nerd,” says Julie again, half-laughing. “I’ll get you something next time I...get down there.”

“You--oh,” says Dutch, flustered. “You don’t hafta--”

“I want to!” Julie insists, and then as he keeps on looking dubious, “--and the other boys are gonna want to too, when you tell--”

“Whoa, no.” Dutch raises his hands, already shaking his head. “It’s good! I’m good.”

“You made it to eighteen!”

“It’s not a big deal, man.”

“It is too!”

“Look,” says Dutch, pained. “Look, Julie. I’m not gonna tell anybody, okay? I know you’ve got enough on your plate with, uh, your internship. So...do me a favor...?”

Julie is about to laugh again, but then she catches sight of the look on his face and stops. Sighs. “...deal,” she says, and holds out a hand toward the screen. “But I still think you should tell the guys.”

“Yeah,” says Dutch wryly, and raises an eyebrow at her as he reaches out toward his own screen. “I bet you do.”

They shakes hands over the miles, and Dutch glances off-screen, sighs something about paint and masks, and waves Julie off with a wry I know you’re not gonna sleep, but at least try to eat somethin’, okay?
Julie ends the call feeling lighter inside, and for the first time in what feels like weeks when her stomach growls at her there isn’t an ensuing pang of nausea and pain.

*You don’t have to keep secrets from us...*

Julie smiles to herself, giddy and warm, and pushes herself up to go find something to eat.

--

The Duke of Detroit dislikes having his scene stolen. He blames this partially on Abraham Kane, who would have made him the greatest reality show of all time. People *love* a gruesome ending.

But mostly he blames it on the plants still crawling insidiously over his mansion and junkyards. He’s the lead in this show! It’s just *enraging* to find himself cast aside in favor of a bunch of glorified dandelions!

And then there’s Chilton, Goody Four-Wheels himself, drawing on everyone’s resources--including the Duke’s--to play the hero again.

The Duke still isn’t sure Chilton is...*real*. Everyone acts on their own interests, everyone has ulterior motives, no one does something for nothing. That’s just the cold facts of life. And after all that bullshit with Chilton flipping sides like a revolving door and starting a whole gang war, the Duke had been positive he’d finally found the crack in Chilton’s stupid facade.

Except apparently, surprise surprise, it was *mind control*. Ugh. Typical.

Outside, the sound of henchpeople doing battle with vexatious greenery fills the air. Inside, they’re replacing broken windows and checking air filtration systems. The Duke’s heard about Rayon’s...little problem. Well, that’s not gonna be the Duke. Soon this mansion will be gas-proof and infiltration-proof, and the bunker can stand up to any weapon the Duke’s seen this city turn out so far. Whatever is spreading through Motorcity, whoever manages to survive it, one person is going to come out on top. And it’s sure as *hell* not Mike “Prettyboy” Chilton.

The Duke kicks a pedestal in a fit of pique, barely stopping to notice when his lovely Number Two catches the wobbling marble bust perched on it and replaces it carefully.

“This is a *disgrace,*” he mutters, and spins one of his rings with a thumb, preoccupied. There are leaves on his floor, remnants of a vine that ripped one of his doors off its hinges. “Somebody is making a *show,* baby. Somebody wants us lookin’.”

“Wants Chilton lookin’, my Duke,” says Babs, impassive, and doesn’t even blink when the Duke growls and grinds one of the leaves into his carpet.

“Somebody with a green thumb,” he says, and kicks mangled greenery away from his gators with a sneer. “I’m not a fan. I want this upstart hunted down and--”

“My Duke!”

The Duke tsks angrily, waves a hand and pulls up a comm screen, scowling at it. “The one and only,” he says, supremely aggravated. The woman on the other end of the call salutes. “Hwell? Time is money.”

“*Surveillance has eyes on an intruder in Riverside E.*” says the woman, blond and bored, with a cigarette hanging between her fingers.
“Bring it up.”

A twenty-foot-wide screen panel winks into existence on the wall, playing footage from one of the Duke’s many, many junkyards. It takes him a moment to find the dark, ragged figure limping between vehicle carcasses and pieces of outdated tech. A suspicion forms instantly in the back of his mind, but...surely not...

“Come closer,” mutters the Duke, lowering his shades to glare at the intruder. “Come on, you rat…”

Almost as though it heard him, the figure turns and starts to approach the camera. Now Babs leans in, scarlet lips pursed in a way that suggests she shares the Duke’s concerns.

“That’s my mask!” the Duke yelps suddenly, jabbing at the screen. “There! He is wearing my mask! Are you seeing this? Are you looking at--”

“Yes, my Duke,” says Babs.

“That--that--purloiner!” the Duke howls, and then actually screams in shock and rage as the masked figure—as Abraham Kane--tears the Riverside E surveillance camera from its mooring and the feed goes abruptly dark.

“I’ll get our best guys on it, My Duke,” says Babs, and snaps her gum.

“Everyone!”

“Not just the Ten-K?”

“E-ve-ry-one,” the Duke grits out, not looking at her, one restless hand spinning the length of his golden cane. “This ends within the week, Number Two. I want my star, I want my show, I want the season finale to end all--backstabbing car-hating THIEVING--WHAT?!”

Babs, supremely unconcerned by the flushed, snarling face inches from hers, drawls, “You don’t wanna tell the other bosses, Duke? You owe Chilton one.”

“I--wh--he owes me one!”

Babs raises one immaculate eyebrow, but she’s been the Duke’s second in command for long enough to know there’s no point arguing. The Duke is a whirlwind of frantic, angry energy, and he wouldn’t get fresh with her but there’s no point throwing gasoline on a rig that’s already burning. He’s come a long way from the weedy, cunning kid she hooked up with all those years ago, taking on the city with nothing but a gun and a fast mouth, but there’s some parts of him that haven’t changed at all and his temper is one of them.

“We’ll hunt him down, My Duke,” says Number Two, and the Duke huffs, slightly mollified.

“Damn right you will,” he growls. “Crossing me, stealing from me--who does he think he’s messin’ with?! I’m gonna--!”

And then, as quickly as it came, his anger drains away again. The Duke sways dramatically, flips his cape back with a flare to drape himself across the nearest car hood. “I swear,” he says. “Life is hard, baby. Life is hard at the top. You’re gonna get him for me?!”

He doesn’t carry the gun anymore. He never liked the gun. He has people to do that kinda thing for him, now, people who take care of his problems. Number Two pops her gum again, licks her
lips and tastes waxy, blood-red lipstick and old sugar.

“Consider him got, My Duke.”

--

DAY SEVEN

Despite all of Texas’s mocking disbelief and Chuck’s open, repeated skepticism, the Kane Co. truce doesn’t actually seem to be a distraction to cover up another invasion. But to the Burners’ knowledge, nobody is rushing to take advantage of the new open borders—if they have, they’ve kept it quiet. It’s only been a day, after all.

Mike imagines coming up from Motorcity into Deluxe, the same way he came down into the neon dark—uncertain and lost. But Motorcity is—different, forgiving and open in a way Deluxe just plain isn’t. Mike can’t imagine going back up, now. Can’t reconcile Deluxe with good in his mind, with Julie in charge and things will be better now.

...Julie’s in charge.

Mike closes the announcement screen for about the hundredth time since it came out, shaking his head in a sort of vague, pleased disbelief. Julie is CEO. Miss Julie the Burner, CEO of Kane Co.

“Mike?”

It’s Chuck, edging into the room. He looks tired, even more than he did after he got back from LARPing yesterday—he sniffs grossly as Mike glances up at him, scrubs at his nose with one arm and coughs a little bit.

“Yeah, dude?” says Mike expectantly as Chuck leans on the door frame. “What’s up?”

“We’re all hanging out in the rec room. If you…wanna come hang out…with us…”

“Oh!” Mike hoists himself out of his chair, trying not to let the twinge in his ribs show on his face. “Yeah, of course, dude!”

Chuck backs up to let him through, falls in at his shoulder as they head down to the communal area of the hideout. Wow, he really does sound all stuffed up. Mike can hear his breathing doing a nasty little wheezy thing every so often as he tries not to cough.

“Tiny!” Texas jumps up when they come through into the rec room, scattering cards everywhere. “We’re playing Encampment Conversation or whatever, but Dutch doesn’t wanna play and Lindsey has to go soon, and it’s lame with just two people.”

“You’re just sore ‘cause you always lose when we play one-on-one,” Chuck mumbles, and Mike glances at him, grinning. “Also, it’s Enchantment: the Convocation. I’ll make you a deck, Mike, uh…if you wanna…? Is the one you had last time okay?”

“Sure,” says Mike, “Deal me in. Hey, Julie!”

“Hi, Mike,” says Julie distractedly. “Okay, I can’t read the one one the far left, ROTH…”

Roth, hovering next to her comm screen, obediently picks up the card in question and holds it a few inches from her face. While Julie squints at the instructions and scantily-clad angel illustration, Mike settles down on the floor with his back against Dutch’s knees.
“You need me to move?” asks Dutch from his spot on the couch.

“Nah,” says Mike comfortably. “Alright, Chuckles, let’s, uh--go over the rules one more time?” He glances over, grinning, and then leans back as Chuck opens his mouth to answer and goes into an eye-watering fit of coughing. “--Dude, whoa.”

“It’s just a cold,” Chuck says thickly, and scrubs at his nose, eyes watering. “...whole LARPing group’s got it.”

There’s a second of tense silence, startled and unhappy--Chuck isn’t meeting anybody’s eyes. Then Texas shakes his head and shortles.

“...What, so you can’t just do a magic no-cold spell or--”

“I’m gonna sneeze on all your muscle mulch,” Chuck mumbles, blearily vengeful, and sniffs again. “...ugh.”

“Aw, buddy.” Mike rubs his back sympathetically--Chuck groans and hunches into it, thunking his head against Mike’s shoulder. “Maybe we can steal some antivirals from Deluxe. Or--ha, I guess it’s not really stealing anymore? Jules, you wanna help a friend?”

“I can try to send something down next time I know somebody is taking the trip,” Julie says, a little dubiously. “But it’s a big city and we’re--you’re--not exactly easy to find. There’s a reason it’s called a ‘hideout’.”

“Yeah,” Mike says reluctantly. “But…” he glances down at Chuck, who sniffs again, and then coughs.

“...I can try,” Julie repeats, relenting a little bit--Mike grins at her, and Julie smiles back. “We’ll see what we can do up here. But we don’t have enough for the entire kingdom of Raymanthia.” There’s a laugh on the words--Chuck laughs too, wetly, and then coughs some more.

“I’ll take anything, right now,” he says, and pries himself up off of Mike’s shoulder to scrub at his face again. “...can’t work like this.”

“Maybe that’s a sign you shouldn’t be workin’,” Dutch points out, and shrugs when Chuck throws him a miserable, dubious look. “Hey, my mom always said if your body wants you to get some rest, it’ll make that happen. Sounds like yours is makin’ somethin’ happen.”

“Wanna know what my mom always said?” Chuck says. Mike snorts. Dutch looks from one to the other, brows furrowing.

“Um...sure?”

“Me too!” Chuck says, and busts out in croaky, ugly laughter. Mike cracks up too--Dutch and Julie and Texas all stare at the two of them blankly, half confused and half horrified.

“I haven’t heard that one in years,” Mike says, and ruffles up Chuck’s hair as Chuck’s laughter turns into coughing again.

“Is that because it’s...really awful?” Julie says, with a nervous half-smile--Mike snorts.

“No, come on, there were all kinds of jokes, uh...what do you call a dad who--”

“Man, what?” Dutch mouths silently for a second, then settles on, “--all kinds of--where? I never
heard anything like that.”

“Yeah, well.” Mike shrugs. “You’ve still got your mom and dad, right? We’re KORS kids.”

“KORS?” Texas frowns at Mike, then at Dutch and Julie as they make identical quiet noises of realization. “What’s a—”

“Kane Co. Orphan Rehousing Services,” recite Mike and Chuck in weary unison.

“…’s where kids without parents go if there’s nobody else to take care of them,” Dutch explains, because Texas is still staring, confused. “Mom and Dad always said we could go to her sister if something happened, so at least we wouldn’t end up in—uh.” He stops, suddenly awkward. “…I mean, not like there’s anything wrong with—”

“Hey, don’t worry about it.” Mike waves a hand dismissively. “It wasn’t a great place to be, wouldn’t blame you for not wanting to end up there. I wouldn’t have gone if I didn’t have to, but Dad was from out of town so he skipped out as soon as Mom…”

He goes quiet for a second, then shrugs.

“…Anyway,” he says, a little quieter, “…wouldn’t have met Chuck, otherwise. So…it’s cool.”

“Aw, bro!” says Chuck, sounding genuinely touched. “You’re--” And then he’s coughing again, long and loud, cards scattering out of his hands as his breathing gets more desperate. Mike shouts in alarm, crouching next to him, one hand on his back.

“Hey! Hey, Chuckles, you okay? C’mon, talk to me. You need some water or something?”

Chuck shakes his head quickly, coughs dying to wet grumbles and then labored breathing. He drops onto one shoulder and then rolls heavily onto his back, eyes watering.

“That...sucked…” he manages, one hand going to his chest. “Ugh...god. Mikey, I don’t feel...so good.” He sounds relatively calm, but there’s a little edge to his voice that says he remembers Rayon, the collapsed Skylarks, Dutch’s news from the Cablers’ Settlement.

“Then we’re staying here today,” says Mike firmly.

Texas groans. “Tiny, you kiddin’ me? Just let Jacob take care of ‘im, alright, we got Terras to catch!”

“It can wait one day, Tex,” says Mike, ignoring Chuck’s own faint protests from the floor. “And anyway--I’m not supposed to drive. And we’re a team. We need Chuck.”

“I don’t--” Texas starts, in a tone of voice that suggests he’s about to dig his heels in hard on this. But before he can get started, Jacob bustles in with a basket of produce under one arm and says loudly, “Hey, there you are, ROTH. Got a job for you.”

“A job?” asks Dutch, craning around to look curiously at Jacob. ROTH chirrups happily and lays Julie’s cards down with care, motoring up to Jacob’s level and saluting.

“Usually I deliver this stuff in Sasquatch,” says Jacob, hefting the basket higher on one hip. “But with all the plant stuff it’s gotten real hard to get anywhere on the outskirts, so I was hopin’ ROTH would help me out.”

“Oh.” Dutch shrugs. “What do you think, buddy?”
ROTH buzzes and spins in the air, the picture of enthusiasm.

“He ain’t gonna be in danger, is he?” asks Texas suspiciously, peering over the top of his cards.

“Don’t think so,” says Jacob, heading for the door. “I mean, he can fly. More’n I can say for Sasquatch...or any of you yahoos.”

“You don’t know that!” Texas calls after him, half-lifting himself off the ground. “Maybe I just haven’t flapped my arms hard enough!”

Julie narrows her eyes at him. “Wait, is that why I saw you jumping off of the hideout roof a few months ago?”

“Not surprised,” mumbles Chuck, and clears his throat coarsely, one hand pressed to his chest. Mike looks over at him, fresh concern printing itself across his face, but before he can say anything his line rings. Mike sighs and picks up, and Foxy’s face appears in the air before him, looking even more grim than usual.

“Uh. Hey, Foxy. What’s up?”

“Chilton.” Foxy nods curtly, dark eyes darting around to take in Dutch, Texas, Julie’s floating screen, and Chuck, wheezing as he gets to his feet. “Hope you’re ready to talk strategy.”

Mike narrows his eyes. “Oh yeah? Why’s that?”

“Why do you think? We found the Terras.”
Chapter End Notes

Notable section titles for this chapter:
I KILLED A PLANT FROM THE INSIDE!!!! IT ATE ME AND I MURDERED IT!!!!!!!!!
Julie Interlude: The Announcement
Kane Interlude: Dumpster Diving
Orphan Jokes Are Hilarious
**Encounter With The Enemy!! Chuck Is Already...?!**

Chapter Summary

A chapter of meetings, for better and for worse. Mike comes face to face with an old enemy; Kane comes face to gun with a new one.

Take time to be with the people you care about, Mike. After all, who knows how long you've got with them?

Chapter Notes

I hope you guys appreciate that the entire time I typed that chapter title my brain was going (in Naruto's voice) "--Chuck wa mou...?!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

(Still) Day 7

"So, basically," says Chuck, "since we found Kaia, we’re, uh...we’re gonna...go meet her."

His voice is hoarse, thick, and less than enthusiastic. On some level, Julie can sympathize, but when it comes down to it she’s mainly just really...jealous. "You shouldn’t go in there alone," she says, pushing her paperwork to one side. "Tell Mike to wait, I--I bet I can make it down there--"

Chuck opens his mouth and then shuts it, makes a kind of ambivalent mmmgh… noise. Julie stops, paralyzed with realization, feeling her heart sink.

"...He doesn’t want me there," she says. "...Does he?"

"He said you didn’t need the extra stress!" says Chuck, raising his hands in protest. "I mean, do you?"

"Do I what?"

"Need the extra stress?"

"Well, I’m getting it whether I want it or not!" Julie points out, and then makes a conscious effort to let herself settle. "Okay...I get it. I probably wouldn’t have been able to make it down there either way, but--I miss you guys. I want to help. Y’know?"

Chuck grimaces. "Uh, yeah. I know. Sorry. Honestly, if I could make Mike stay home...?"

"You totally would," Julie finishes for him, sighing. "Good luck with that."

"Well, but--I mean...he’s been through a lot? So I don’t wanna be too hard on him either..." Chuck sighs as he trails off, and it comes out sort of bubbly. His chin lifts a little, like he’s gotten
distracted by something in the distance, and there’s a long, empty pause as his lips move silently. Julie remembers what Mike told her about the Skylarks getting sick, but doesn’t say anything. Talk about not needing extra stress...

“You’re not being too hard on him,” she points out. Chuck jumps, looks down at her again like he forgot she was there, then sighs, massaging his temples. “If he just runs around doing whatever he wants, he’s gonna get hurt even worse. You know that, right?”

Chuck nods, but even with his hair in his face Julie can tell he’s not meeting her eyes. “He’s...pretty miserable, is all,” he says, and crosses his arms, shoulders hunched.

“Look, don’t worry about it,” says Julie, who regretted weighing in basically as soon as she opened her mouth. “Just, we’re all worried about him, and you’re his best friend, so you’re...extra-worried about him. You’re trying to keep him safe, that’s all. Even if he’s not happy about it, I’m pretty sure he gets it.”

“...Yeah, well,” says Chuck, slightly mollified. There’s a moment of silence, and then he goes on abruptly, with a definite note of defensiveness in his voice, “He’s supposed to go off his meds tomorrow, so, I mean, his ribs are better at least.”

Having seen what Mike went through first-hand, Julie’s pretty sure Mike’s broken ribs and pain meds are the least of his problems. But she hasn’t talked to Chuck in days, and she’s already put her foot in her mouth once in the five minutes they’ve been on-line, so she just goes “mm.”

“So,” says Chuck, with the tone of somebody who desperately wants the subject changed. “What’s got you so stressed out up there? Anything we can help with?”

Oh. Julie blinks, suddenly scrambling internally, then manages, “The tower is just really tense right now, y’know? Change in management, uh…” Oh, he might like this. Julie happens to know Chuck was in R&D for a few months before leaving Deluxe, and it’ll be nice to talk to somebody who really gets it. “The new management is cracking down on security. Fired six guys last week for ‘abuse of authority’.”

She was right, it’s great. Chuck stares at her in confusion for a second, and then manages, “The tower is just really tense right now, y’know? Change in management, uh…” Oh, he might like this. Julie happens to know Chuck was in R&D for a few months before leaving Deluxe, and it’ll be nice to talk to somebody who really gets it. “The new management is cracking down on security. Fired six guys last week for ‘abuse of authority’.”

She was right, it’s great. Chuck stares at her in confusion for a second, and then blinks in realization, and then grins a huge, disbelieving grin and goes, “--Seriously?!”

“Management had eyewitness accounts of them abusing other Kane Co. employees,” Julie says, and it aches not to be able to tell him it was me, I’m the one who dared to do this, I wanted to help--but it still feels good when Chuck lets out a croaky, victorious peal of laughter, shaking his head in disbelief.

“How did management get anybody to talk to them?” he says, and then, a little less amused, “-They better be keeping an eye on R&D--’if you rat us out something’s gonna get broken’ was Security’s big thing, y’know. If they find out somebody in R&D told management--”

“I’m--sure management is aware,” says Julie, and tries to inject as much certainty into the words as she can, impress on him just how sure she is. Chuck flicks his hair back to squint at her.

“...Yeah,” he says slowly. “Sure, I guess they gotta be.”

“Take care of the guys for me!” says Julie, a little too fast in the crosshairs of that calculating, curious look. “Stay safe, okay? Uh--bye!”

She closes the call and grimaces at the other screen behind it; a group memo she’s been editing for the past hour. No use putting it off any more--this is as done as it’s going to get and she knows it.
Better phrasing won’t stop Pinsky and Larsson from yelling at her later. To a certain, very small extent, Julie gets it. She’d be mad too if someone started hiring for her department without her permission.

--

Kane doesn’t know how long he’s been on the move, only that he can’t sleep—only that if he stops, he’ll be found. Beyond the city limits, in the midst of dark, winding ribbons of highway, the only inhabitants are gang members, housed in sprawling headquarters like fortresses. It’s practically medieval.

Kane had been so sure that he would be able to find one safe place somewhere out here. He had never considered that every square inch of polluted, horror-infested land might be inhabited by the enemy.

He’s far from the city center by the time he finally finds the perfect place, directly on the shared border of two small-time gangs in the Northwest. The no-man’s land between their bases is wide and empty, an expanse of broken asphalt and crooked streetlights. Kane thinks it might have been a parking lot once, but it doesn’t really matter. What matters is the house in the middle of it.

It’s actually barely a house at all, slumping dejectedly on a raised metal platform overlooking the cracked blacktop. Kane only becomes more appalled at this insult to architecture as he approaches it. The roof is sagging, the front door is crooked in its frame, and at least one of the plexiglass windows has a jagged black hole in it. The only upside, as far as he can see, is that it has four walls and looks comprehensively abandoned.

...At this point, of course, it might just as easily be a hallucination. The world is foggy and strangely distant, and even the throbbing in his shoulder seems to be happening somewhere far away from him as he staggers forward. Almost there. He hitches the bundle of pieces and parts up under his arm. Can’t drop it. Essential to the plan. Almost there. He just needs to rest, to lie down for a minute, and then he can go find food. He just needs to rest.

He steps through the door with a heavy sigh, tugging off his gas mask and blinking in the darkness. Even without the shaded lenses obscuring his vision, there’s no sign of movement. Just a cluttered living room, and beyond it what might be a kitchen.

“Come on, come on—close, you stupid—”

He must be more tired than he thought, because he doesn’t even hear footsteps.

“I can’t see what I’m aimin’,” says the voice behind him, and Kane slowly raises his good arm as the cold metal of a gun barrel nudges against his back. “So god knows where I might shoot you. Hands up.”

--

The Amazons are still holding the Terra they found, while a squad of Skylarks circle the area, looking uncomfortable on Amazon land. It’s not Kaia, but it is a familiar face—her big lieutenant, with fierce stripes of green across his face and bare chest. He stares impassively with white-on-black eyes as the Burners approach, apparently unfazed by the guns pointed at him.

“We know this guy’s name?” Dutch murmurs, never quite taking his eyes off the Terra. There’s
something about the guy, a kind of reptilian stillness, that makes it feel like he’s seconds from springing.

“S Rall,” Texas shoots back, rolling his eyes. “Duh.”

“Second in command, right?” Mike reaches up like he’s about to straighten his jacket, then makes a frustrated little noise as he realizes for about the hundredth time he’s not wearing it. He makes do with pulling his spark staff off his belt. “He’s gotta know where she is.”

“Somewhere in this circle,” says one of Foxy’s ladies, gesturing to the forest behind her. She’s loud enough Rall has to be able to hear her--his inhuman eyes flicker to her for a second. “We’ve seen them going in and out, and we’ve got it surrounded. We even got the Mama’s Boys to cough up some drones, so we’re covering the air.”

“Good.” Mike strides forward, slow at first and then faster, more confident, shoulders squaring. Rayon and Foxy peel off from their respective gangs to follow him, glancing uneasily at each other.

“Hey, you! Rall?”

The Terra inclines his head, just once. Mike’s mouth twitches in a humorless kind of grin.

“We want to talk to Kaia. Face to face. No tricks, no traps.”

“Mm.” Kaia’s second-in-command doesn’t say anything for a long, long time, just watching Mike’s face. When he finally speaks, the low rumble of his voice is utterly impassive. “Why should Kaia agree?”

“Hey,” Texas starts, incensed. “If you wanna--” But Rayon steps forward, holding up a hand.

“Because if she doesn’t come out now, we’ll have to make her come out,” he says evenly, and glances up at the plants overhead. “...Your plants are nasty, but we can be nastier. We’ve got salt and weedkiller and fire. And if we have to--”

“Whoa, hey!” Mike puts a hand on Rayon’s chest, circling between him and Rall. “No one’s doing anything--fiery, okay? We’re here to talk! We wanna know what’s going on here!”

For a moment, there’s dead, tense silence. Rayon doesn’t even look down at Mike’s hand, just stares distant and unreadable at Rall. The Terra stares back, considering, and then nods again, eyes narrowed.

“...Kaia will decide,” he says eventually, and turns away, ignoring the aborted movements of the guards around him.

“You have an hour,” Mike calls after him. Rall raises a hand in acknowledgment and then strides fearlessly through the ranks of gang members. He takes a running jump and swings up into the branches of a crooked tree, vanishing into the new jungle with an eerie, echoing whoop.

Mike waits for a few seconds after Rall is gone, and then breathes out and relaxes. “Geez,” he says, and turns back to the other Burners with a bright, sudden grin. “Wow! I can’t believe that worked!”

“That was hardcore,” Dutch says, with a wary look in Rayon’s direction.

“Texas felt threatened,” Texas agrees, and slaps Mike on the back. “You figure they’re gonna go
“They gotta,” Chuck says, and glances at Mike for agreement. “Right? I mean...there’s not a lot of Terras. If the whole city gangs up on them...”

“Dunno.” Mike frowns up at the trees, the buildings overgrown with vines. “…They’ve got the advantage in this mess. That’s a lot of green.”

“Yeah, but there’s only like twenty of them.” Texas snorts. “Like the guy said, we can bomb ‘em if they don’t come out, right?”

“This was residential,” Dutch says, and Mike nods toward him. “I mean, we could deal with these crazy plants by fumigin’ the whole district and setting this crap on fire, but uh...people gotta come back to these houses when everything’s said and done, y’know?”

“And we don’t actually have that much salt,” Chuck points out. “I mean--it sounded cool, really scary, but um...it’s not super easy to get a hold of.”

“Oh.” Texas frowns. “Okay, so maybe just a little fire--”

“No, dude,” says Mike quietly, and Texas folds with a grumpy growl. “She’s gonna say yes. She has to.” His eyes slide towards Chuck and then snap guiltily back again. He clears his throat. “…Let’s get a hold of the rest of the gangs. They might want to be here for this.”

Mike seems as surprised as he is pleased that the other gang leaders agree to show up. They arrive one or two cars at a time at the forest’s edge, staring up at the trees and around at each other with obvious distrust. The Duke doesn’t show, but Tennie does, carrying her laser wrench like she means business and accompanied by a squad of Cablers. She’s just gotten out of her car, and Dutch is just starting to edge uncertainly in her direction, when a shadowy figure drops out of the branches by the forest’s edge. It’s a Terra woman, tall and armored, with curved, claw-like nails. She beckons wordlessly to the amassed gangs, and strides back into the trees without waiting for an answer. The Burners follow, and slowly everyone else falls in behind them.

“...Let me do the talking,” says Mike quietly, as the humid darkness closes around them. He’s got his staff out, staring around warily, but the forest just rustles uneasily around them.

“Oh yeah?” Junior has some kind of baton in his hand, spinning it around his fingers as he eyes the nearby plants. By the faint fuschia pilot light glowing in one end, it’s a plasma weapon. “Why’s that?”

“I’ve dealt with these guys before.” Mike keeps his eyes on their guide’s back as he talks, his voice low. “Their boss is...somethin’ else. She’s pulled this crap before--crazy plants, stuff that messes with your brains. She’s...she can fly, too.”

“You sure you’re not making this lady up?!” AJ says suspiciously. “Sounds like a reverse intelligence play! She’s feedin’ you wrong information, hut-hut!”

“Man, we saw her fly,” Dutch says, pained. “Like he said, we’ve been handling her crap for a while now.”

“Anyway!” Mike says firmly. “She’s not somebody we’re gonna want to mess with, okay? We don’t want a war with these guys.”
“Speak for yourself, captain!” AJ snaps. “War is the only language these plant-lovin’ maggots understand, hut-hut! They already started a war, I say we take the heavy artillery and--”

“No,” says Mike, very firmly, turning to meet AJ’s eyes.

There’s a moment of silence. The Burners stare at Mike, then at AJ, then back to Mike as the moment stretches on. Then, finally, Rayon breaks the silence.

“Armistice,” he says, quiet and hoarse.

“Army what?” Junior snorts. “I ain’t sittin’ here to hear you makin’ made-up words. Respect those English lingueestees, man.”

“We’re already at war,” Rayon says, like he didn’t even hear Junior slaughtering the English language. There’s something in the way he moves, still and tense and barely moving his lips, that suggests a fixed stare into nothing behind his glasses. “We can dig in and hold them at Easy Street.”

The Burners trade glances, confused. “Uh,” says Mike. “We can...what?”

“We can--” Rayon stops for a second, then straightens his back and minutely shakes his head. “...Nothin’. Nothing. Let’s get this over with.”

From the looks on his Skylarks’ faces, Mike would guess they agree with that sentiment. “Okay,” he says, because he knows it’d be useless to tell Rayon to go back. “Here we go.”

--

Kane whips around, fists at the ready, and then has to bite back a yell as his left shoulder responds with a fresh stab of pain.

BANG

Kane goes still, head ringing. Out of his peripheral vision, he can see a wide spiderweb of cracks in the plaster wall a few inches from his left ear, a smoking hole punched clean through it.

“I said don’t move,” says his assailant.
It’s a woman. Small, short-haired, maybe fifty years old by the lines on her face, and wearing a dress with a long, pleated skirt. Also, she’s holding a gun. A shotgun, to be specific, and it looks like it might actually fire bullets. For one delirious moment, Kane can’t help staring at the antique with unabashed curiosity.

But it’s only a moment, because the gun’s muzzle swings down as he stares, just inches from his chest.

“That was a warning shot. Give me one reason the next one shouldn’t go in you,” the woman says.
Kane weighs his options. He could try knocking the gun aside, wrestling her for it—she can’t be that strong. But then again, he’s starving and exhausted and in pain. The odds aren’t as good as he’d like. *Give me one reason.*

“I’m...not here to hurt you,” he says, but even to his ears it doesn’t sound convincing. The gun doesn’t move.

“ Heard *that* before,” she says pointedly. “What are you doing on my land? You’re here for the house, is that it?”

Kane looks disbelievingly around at the crooked, patchy walls and rickety ceiling. “Have you *seen* it? I assumed it was abandoned!”

“Rude,” says the woman. “And no. Last chance—try again.”

Kane grits his teeth and tries to think. It’s getting harder, even with adrenaline pushing the outer limits of his energy. In Deluxe, he always knew just what to say, how to control people. Everyone except--

“I have...a daughter,” he says, and it costs him every ounce of willpower he has. He hasn’t told *anyone* about Julie, and now he’s using the information as a bargaining chip with this...squatter. “I have a daughter in Deluxe. I need to get back to her. I’m not safe here.”

She doesn’t lower the gun, but a furrow appears between her brows. “You’re lying.”

Kane growls in frustration. “Why would I *lie* about that?”

“You’re from Detroit Deluxe,” she says belligerently. “They grow up on lies. It got *built* on lies.”

“That’s just--”

“What’s your daughter’s name?”

“...Julie,” Kane grits out. Maybe he should try fighting her for the gun.

“And do you two get along okay?”

Kane pauses, taken aback by the strange question and the sudden painful squeeze in his chest. He wants more than anything to *say none of your business* and take his chances with the shotgun, but he also wants to survive. If she’s ready to keep questioning him, it could be a sign that she’s prepared to give him a chance.

“Sometimes,” he says shortly.

“How old?”

“Sev--eighteen.”

The woman pauses, cocking her head to one side. Her eyes are fixed on a point somewhere to Kane’s left, giving the infuriating impression that she isn’t taking this seriously at all. Maybe she wouldn’t even notice if he just reached up and…

She lowers the gun, just a little. “Just had a birthday, huh?”

Kane grunts in reluctant confirmation and then, to his horror, his knees give out and he drops to the floor in an incredibly ungainly way. The woman takes a sharp step back, the muzzle of the gun jolting up again, but after a moment of silence she relaxes.
“...Did you just pass out?”

“No,” Kane manages, even though he’s floating somewhere on the edge of delirium. “...Hungry.”

She pulls a face. “Didn’t wanna stop by a restaurant on the way here?”

“No,” says Kane, and is horrified to hear an audible rasp of exhaustion in his voice. Apparently the relief of no longer being at gunpoint was enough for his body to finally betray him.

“Have a nap,” says the woman, turning her back on him and making her way further indoors with one free hand trailing along the wall. “I’ve got soup. You can have some soup. And then you can get out of here.”

Kane lets himself fall slowly against the wall behind him, grimacing. He can’t stay here, there’s no way, and--it has to be a trap. She has to know--

"...Don’t you know," he grits out, trying to blink away the black haze at the edges of his vision. "Don’t you know--who I...?"

“I don’t care who you are,” the woman calls, without looking back at him. “I just want you out of my house.”

You and me both, thinks Kane, and falls unconscious.

--

The forests have a...smell. It’s earthy, bitter, interwoven with sharper scents from flowers and flytraps and seeping sap. All of it is alien, new--frightening, even, although no one’s saying it out loud.

Kaia is settled in a grotto of vines that twine around the ruins of a leveled building like an arbor. Far, far overhead, some chink in the Deluxe Dome lets a mote of diffuse, white-gold light spill through the canopy, casting her into patchy shadows. She’s wearing armor--dark, matte metal that had to have come from a Kanebot. Lights still course along its contours, but their familiar Kane Co. red has been replaced by a bright, sickly green. Thick, ivy-like creepers thread through the metal plates, culminating in a halo of yellow flowers twining around her collar and through her braided hair. Their stems pulse weirdly, vanishing under her armor. What they’re rooted in, what’s keeping them alive, Mike doesn’t want to speculate.

“Hey,” he says without preamble, stepping forward to draw her attention. The guards to either side of her twitch, feet shifting under long, cotton-white skirts. One of them is leaning on a long, heavy-looking scythe; the handle looks worn and battered, but the blade is so sharp the metal gleams like water.

“Mike Chilton,” says Kaia evenly, looking up at him. “You’ve had a pretty busy day for a guy who should still be on bedrest.”
“Like I’d just sit around and watch while you mess up my city—”

“‘Your’ city was already ‘messed up’, son.”

Mike’s face twists. “Don’t call me that.”

“Mike,” murmurs Dutch warningly, eyes drifting towards the burly guards at the mouth of the grotto. Mike takes a breath. Grimaces. Settles.

“...Okay. I don’t know what you’re planning this time, Kaia, but one of your crazy plants up there is making people sick, alright?”

Kaia meets his gaze steadily, her eyes betraying absolutely nothing, and then turns to her left, where a clay pot full of clear, greenish liquid is gently boiling. Mike watches with mounting irritation as she lifts the pot bare-handed and pours herself a cup.

“Do you want some tea, Mike?”
“No thanks,” says Mike stiffly. “Just answers.”

Kaia shrugs, unbolts her mask and slides it down—one of the Amazons hisses in disgust and somebody in the small knot of Skylarks swears quietly. Kaia twitches almost imperceptibly, but there’s no sign of unease in the way she sets her mask gently down and takes a sip of tea.

“Mike…” Kaia breathes out steam through the ruin of her lips and her too-sharp jagged teeth. “You and I both know you’re not going to believe me.”

“I don’t know that,” Mike says. “How about you try telling me the truth, and we find out?”

“The plants are our fault,” Kaia says, abrupt and business-like. “There was a...farming experiment, which went badly wrong. But we’re not making anyone sick.”

“Mm.” Mike narrows his eyes. “Y’know, you were right? I don’t believe you.”

Kaia raises her eyebrows and takes a very ostentatious sip of her tea. Her eyes roam across the crowd of Motorcitizens in front of her—Chuck’s hand finds the back of Mike’s shirt and closes very, very tightly on a fold of it, fingers trembling. A muscle twitches in Rayon’s jaw. Tennie’s grip shifts and settles on her wrench.

“...Your choice,” Kaia says. “I would blame that bastard Kane, personally. He’s done it before. I wouldn’t put it past him to do it again.”

“Right after your farming accident?”

“Coincidences happen,” Kaia says calmly. “You should be glad I wasn’t responsible, honestly. It sounds like you’ve got a very personal interest, and if I created a plague it would be...agonizing.”

She shapes the word with relish. For a second, the air seems very thick, hard to breathe.

“...So some of you are experiencing it firsthand, I’m guessing,” she says, and Rayon’s shoulders tighten as her eyes fix on him. “You don’t look well. Something on your mind, son?”

“I hear you just fine,” Rayon says, very quietly, voice hard. Mike glances at him and frowns—Rayon’s pulse is visibly pounding in his throat over the collar of his shirt. There’s a faint sheen of sweat on the bridge of his nose.

“I’m not sure I believe that,” says Kaia, and then looks back to Mike, frowning. “How many of them did you bring here, Mike? Hoping to get some of my men sick?”

“Wh--no--”

“You should have some consideration for your friends,” says Kaia, hard and sudden, and where Kane would have used the line to mock and manipulate, she seems genuinely disappointed. “Like Chuck here. Yeah, I remember your name, kid. How hard did Chilton try to stop you from coming? Not too hard, right?”

“Mike doesn’t own us!” That’s Tennie—and it’s just as well she spoke up, because Chuck is sweating and swaying and doesn’t seem in any position to make a counter-argument. But Kaia ignores her, head snapping back to Mike, who hardly feels like he’s hearing her at all. Everything feels distant, detached from him—even his own body. He doesn’t know what to do he—needs orders, Mister Kane--

“Thugs and sick children, Mike. This is your army?” Mike can’t answer, and Kaia doesn’t wait
for him. “Take care of your own people instead of dragging them out here to waste my time.” She stands up—silently, the other Terras around the grotto start to move as well.

“Where are you going?”

“Home,” says Kaia. “You should too. Spend some time with the people you care about, Mike.” She sweeps her braid back over her shoulder and smiles a smile that’s full of heavy, greenish-white fangs. “…After all, who knows how much longer you have with them?”

Rayon’s men pull their guns, but Kaia is even faster. Her wings spread out and up, vast and moth-like, and one hand has already torn away her headband, exposing her third staring, bloodshot eye. People are scrambling, swearing, and Kaia bares all her fangs and hisses, barely a human sound, her eyes poisonous green in the dark--

“Hey!” Mike yells, sharp and hoarse, and pulls out his staff, shoving his way between Kaia and the gangs. “Hey, hey, everybody quit it!”

Panting silence falls. Kaia stares at him for a second, and then slowly folds her wings again. Mike glances back at the gang leaders behind him—very slowly, guns are lowered. Junior flicks his wrist deftly, retracting a neon-pink plasma whip but not putting the handle away. Chuck reluctantly collapses his slingshot; Tennie lowers her welding gun.

“Very rude,” Kaia says, and reaches down, picking up her headband in one hand, her mask in the other. “Didn’t anyone ever teach you not to stare?”

“We’re done here,” says one of the Skylarks suddenly. Mike glances his way and sees Rayon hanging limp, one arm looped over 4’s shoulders. Breathing slow.

“Yes,” says Kaia. "I think you are."

Nobody talks much on their way back out of the forest. Texas looks angry, hands working at his sides. Dutch keeps throwing nervous looks at Tennie, who isn’t speaking to anyone, head held high. And Chuck…

Chuck holds onto Mike’s arm all the way back to the cars, and doesn’t even let go when Junior makes a snide comment. Mike’s had Chuck cling to him before, but that’s usually because something startled him, and it usually only lasts a second before he’s pulling away again. He doesn’t usually just...hold on like this.

“Dude, we’ll figure it out,” says Mike, concerned and baffled, and pats his back a little bit. “It’s cool. Don’t worry about it.”

“I know,” says Chuck, and doesn’t let go. “I know, I just…”

“So what’s goin’ on?”

Chuck’s hands loosen, then squeeze again, gripping two handfuls of Mike’s shirt so hard they shake.

“I’m...seeing stuff,” he says, very small. “Stuff that’s not there. I know--I know it’s not there, but I can’t--” another cough, jagged and exhausted. “I’m--we’re in Motorcity, I know we are but I’m in Deluxe, Mike, we’re hhmh--” he makes a sharp little strangled noise of shock and twitches all over, ducking his head. He takes a couple of tight breaths and then starts again, strangled through his teeth. “We’re in Motorcity, there’s nobody shooting at us, this isn’t real. R-right?”
For a second Mike can’t answer, chest tight. Chuck’s been distracted, yeah, anxious and jumpy, but he always is. Mike just figured he was nervous about the plant invasion. He had no idea Chuck already moved on to seeing things. He thought they would have more time than this. They-

...No. This is okay. It doesn’t make a difference, because they’re going to fix it.

“Yeah,” Mike says, a second late, and pats Chuck’s back again, firmer. “Don’t worry, bro, you’re fine, it’s—we’ve beat Kaia’s weird mind-games before. We’ll do it again, just trust me, just...try to stay with me. Okay? Guys?”

“Shoulda taken ‘em all out back there,” says Texas immediately, as though he’s been waiting all this time to issue his opinion. “Everybody just backed down like a buncha cowards! We shoulda-...”

“I dunno,” says Dutch, and something about his tone pings Mike as...off. Dutch is usually pretty reserved, but there’s a low edge to his voice almost bordering on sullenness. “Maybe she was right, Mike."

“Dude--!”

“I mean, maybe we should be takin’ care of our own people!” Dutch clarifies quickly, sounding a little less grim. “Sorry, sorry! But--didn’t you see Rayon? He was a mess! And even Tennie--”

He stops abruptly. The other Burners trade a look--Texas still fuming, Chuck hunched and miserable, Mike worn and exhausted--almost as one, they reach a consensus. They’re not up for Talking About It right now.

“They’re gonna be fine,” Mike says firmly. “We’re gonna be fine. Look, it’s dinnertime. Let’s talk about this back at the hideout, okay?”

--

Texas tows Blonde Thunder home. Chuck looks a little better after a cup of Jacob’s homemade ginger-and-honey tea, but when everybody settles in around the hideout’s rec room he still opts to slump miserably against Mike’s shoulder.

“So that got us nothin’,” Dutch says. “The other guys know Kaia’s real now, I guess. Lotta good that does us.”

“Whatever she’s doin’, people getting sick’s gotta be part of it.” Mike’s eyes flicker over to Chuck. “So it’s probably not--germs, or--people aren’t sick, they’re poisoned. Does that...work? What do we know about this thing?”

“Spores,” Chuck mumbles, and plucks absently at one of his sleeves. “Gas? No, uh...” He trails off, frowning at nothing, then shakes his head. Clears his throat thickly, sniffs, sits up. “Right. Yeah. So. It goes in stages.” He coughs--forces himself back under control, counting on his fingers. “A cold, and then the--” his eyes flicker past Mike, off to something over his shoulder and far away. “--seeing things,” he finishes, a second late, and shudders.

“But you only just started seeing things,” Mike points out with forced optimism. “So--”

Chuck kind of cringes and makes a wobbly, uncertain noise in the back of his throat, and Mike stops, frowning.
“It...did just start, right, bud?”

“’S been a few days now,” mutters Chuck reluctantly.

“What? Why didn’t you--”

“I didn’t wanna believe it was actually happening, Mikey! Would you?”

“I-” Mike starts to protest, but Chuck cuts doggedly back in, holding up his fingers again.

“So it’s the cold, and then--seeing things. Memories and stuff. And then...you’re gone.”

“We don’t know that.” Dutch has been trying unsuccessfully to call Tennie ever since the meeting-he finally closes the screen with a frustrated snap of his wrist. “Diseases have cures. Poisons have antidotes. We can fix this.”

“Not all of them!” Chuck says, high-pitched and borderline hysterical for a second, and then shakes his head, waves the point away. “Shut up, Texas, I’m trying to think!”

“Huh?” Texas blinks, startled. “I didn’t say nothin’!”

“I know, I know--” Chuck crumples back down on a seat, rubbing the heels of his hands hard into his eyes. “I know! Geez, my head hurts...Dutch is right.”

“Thought you just said I was wrong,” Dutch says, faintly amused, and then frowns as Chuck shakes his head, still hunched over on himself. “Man, you okay?”

“It’s about--patterns,” Chuck mumbles, like he doesn’t even hear Dutch talking. Mike and Dutch trade a worried look over his head. “...point zero and then--some kinda...spread, currents--”

“Oh, nice,” says Texas. “Chuck’s gone nuts.”

“I can’t--” Chuck shakes his head, still rubbing at his eyes. “Ow. I feel like--something she said, I almost...I can’t focus, dude!”

“You gotta get some rest.” Mike puts a hand cautiously on Chuck’s shoulder; Chuck jumps, stares at him for a second with wild eyes and then relaxes. “Just--go lie down for a second, okay? Get your head right.”

Chuck snorts at that, but he does scoot back in his seat, pull his knees up and rest his cheek against the back of the booth. “...I’m not tired,” he says, but the words come out bleary and his eyes are already closing. “...I gotta finish...this...”

Mike watches him for a second, then sighs and turns back to the others. There are tight, stressed lines at the corners of his mouth, but he manages a half-smile. “Okay,” he says. “Any other ideas?”

They talk for hours. Jacob brings in dinner at one point, but nobody has much appetite. Chuck sleeps the entire time, and the rest of the Burners let him be; even sleeping, he looks exhausted. His eyes dart back and forth restlessly under his eyelids--occasionally he’ll mumble sleepily and then settle again, but he doesn’t wake up.

Dutch pulls up news feeds and maps, looking for plague outbreaks and circling problem areas. Hundreds of panicked forum posts and fifty-plus circled outbreaks later, it’s ten PM and they’re no closer to a breakthrough. Eventually, the furious theorizing winds down into an exhausted lull, and
Mike takes the opportunity to stretch out, his lower back popping impressively as he twists in his seat. Something catches his eye and he glances over, frowning, at where Chuck is still curled up against the back of the booth.

“...Is somebody gonna wake him up?” Texas says after a second. “‘Cause Texas can totally--”

“No--Tex, no.” Mike waves him off, pushes himself over a seat and shakes Chuck’s shoulder a little. “Hey, buddy? You should head up to bed.”

Chuck shifts and murmurs, but doesn’t wake up. Mike’s lips thin, but he raises his voice and tries again anyway.

“Chuck. Dude, you can’t sleep down here.”

Chuck groans quietly, yawns and scrubs at his face with one hand. “...Mike,” he says blearily, and smiles a little bit. “...it’s so much bigger than our old pod, bro, it’s...mm...” He yawns again and drops his head back. His eyes visibly unfocus, staring at something far-off that nobody else can see. He mumbles indistinctly, and his eyes fall closed again.

“Chuck.”

Chuck groans and shoves sleepily at Mike, eyes still shut. Mike glances up at the other Burners, genuinely scared, and then shakes Chuck, hard. Chuck makes a complaining noise and opens his eyes for a second to frown up at them.


“Do you know where you are?” Mike says urgently. Chuck blinks at him, then snorts.

“Course I do,” he says. He can’t seem to focus on Mike’s face, and he blinks and sways like he’s still half asleep. “...Yeah...”

“Where are you?” Mike demands.

Chuck half-laughs, then trails off, frowning distractedly. “Uh...”

“Chuck, focus, bro--”

“I’m,” Chuck starts, and frowns. Jumps and yelps, half-turning like he just heard something nobody else could hear. “--Mike! Whoa, did you--did you see--” He sways again, harder. “We gotta lift the buildings, the system can’t...can’t...Mike, something’s...”

He trails off indistinctly, makes a sleepy little noise and then goes still again. Gone. When Mike shakes him again, eyes wide with something too close to panic, Chuck just murmurs aimlessly.

“...Chuck,” Mike says again, numb, and sits back, dragging a hand through his hair.

“This isn’t good,” Dutch says, and pushes himself up, pacing restlessly back and forth. “Geez, this is--oh man. Oh man.”

Mike stares down at Chuck’s blank face--Chuck’s eyes flicker again, watching whatever memory he’s buried in. His brows crease slightly, he mumbles in brief discontent, and then he’s still again. “...Oh, buddy, this is all my--”

“Uh-uh,” says Texas firmly. “Nope, nuh-uh. No ‘my fault’ junk! Geez you guys are dumb--don’t worry, Texas is here to pick up the thinkin’ slacks.”
Nobody corrects him.

“Julie,” says Dutch, and there’s a second or two where Mike and Texas sit up straight, looking around—Julie? Where?—before Dutch’s screen starts ringing faintly and it clicks that he’s making a call. It goes on for a while, tinny in the tense silence, before his comm flickers to life and Julie picks up, looking distracted.

“What?”

“So, the meeting with the Terras didn’t go great,” says Dutch, and Mike is already cutting in, “Chuck is sick, he’s really sick—” and Texas is in the background going “Aw, what, no, we don’t need her—”

“Guys—guys!” Julie waves her hands, raising her voice to a staticky yell. “Calm down! I can’t tell what you’re saying, just, uh, one at a time! Dutch, what happened with Kaia?”

“She says the plants were an accident and she doesn’t know anything about the people gettin’ sick,” Dutch says grimly. “Like we’re gonna fall for that one.”

“Yeah it’s dumb,” says Texas, “That’s it, bye Christie!”

“Chuck is sick,” Mike says.

Julie frowns at him. “...I...I know. He’s got a cold, he’s been complaining about it all week.”

“No, I mean...he’s really sick,” Mike says, grimacing. “It’s gotta be Kaia doin’ this somehow, some kinda poisonous plant or something, I just--we just can’t figure out how! It sounded like Chuck was gettin’ somewhere, and then he went to sleep and now...”

“It starts out like that,” says Dutch. “Then it makes you remember stuff, and then you start hallucinatin’ stuff, and then you...” He nods at Chuck.

Mike drags a hand down his face and sniffs roughly. “He’s not just gonna wake up, we gotta fix it. Before he...before something worse happens.”

“So it puts you to sleep. That could be all it does,” Julie says, but she doesn’t sound hopeful. “If the Terras wanted to incapacitate us—”

“Since when does Kaia want to stop at ‘incapacitate’?” Dutch mumbles. “I agree with Mike. This is seriously bad.”

Julie opens her mouth, then closes it again. Pinches the bridge of her nose and rubs her eyes like the screen is hurting her head. There’s a moment of tired silence. Dutch finally breaks it, leaning forward to square his elbows on the table and say, “...Okay. Here’s what I’m thinkin’: we gotta figure out where Chuck’s gone without us, right? What he’s doin’ that we’re not. If it hasn’t affected us, then it’s gotta be a plant he got close to without us. It can’t be just the one...tree, or whatever. People would be affected faster around it, and then less the further away you got. But it’s not just one spot, people are goin’ down all over the city.”

“So whatever plant is doing it, there’s a lot out there.” Mike crosses his arms. “We figure out what that plant is, we kill it.”

“Some of those places don’t even have a bunch of plants,” Texas says, and the other two both blink and stare at him, startled. Texas stares back at them, picking at his teeth with a fingernail. “...Jussayin’,” he says. “The nerd kingdom’s just got a couple of those big mouth plants, but
they’re all sick too.”

“The Skylarks got hit,” Mike interjects, eyebrows lowering in concentration. “But we were all wearing masks at the hotel, so he can’t have gotten it then.”

“I’m gonna send a message to the Skylarks,” says Dutch suddenly, pulling up a comm window. “If the masks kept us safe, this thing has to be airborne. Maybe they’ve found out if it’s gas or spores or whatever...”

Mike nods once, distracted but approving. “Good call. Tex, you wanna weigh in? What’s Chuck been up to that we weren’t there for?”

“Lurking, duh,” says Texas immediately.

Dutch rolls his eyes. “Dude--come on--”

“Wait!” Julie waves a hand, staring at Texas. “Hey! Wait, did you mean LARPing? Has Chuck gone LARPing since the plants turned up?”

“I mean, kinda,” Texas says, as Mike stands up and starts pacing furiously with trademark Chilton energy. “He went out in the Forest of Death or whatever to yell at his larking buddies, right? And later he was like ‘eeuuggghhh they all have colds’ and I was like ‘hey, why don’t you use your healing spells--’”

“Yeah, sounds like a sick burn,” says Julie quickly. “So, you said before all the other LARPers were sick too.”

“Uh. Yeah. But I also said they’ve just got a buncha mouth plants there, and like--”

“We’re pretty sure it’s not those,” Mike finishes, nodding. “I can’t remember seeing any around the Motel--heck, there were hardly any new plants there at all!”

“So maybe we’re looking for the wrong thing,” says Julie, waving her hands in frenetic circles as though there’s something she’s trying to think of and it just won’t come to her. “If it’s not the same plants, what’s the same about those places? There’s got to be some connection!”

“The hotel’s got a tree in it,” Texas points out. “Maybe Kaia figured out how to turn it into a mind control tree. I saw it in Brain-Snatchers II: Snatched!! Like, there’s roots growin’ into their brains--”

“Dude, gross,” says Dutch. “That tree’s half-metal anyway, it’s mostly cable cluster with a tree growin’ up through it. Where d’you think the Skylarks get the power from?”

“Giant hamster wheel,” says Texas promptly. “Duh.”

Julie giggles, sudden and startled. The others all jump--it’s been so long since they even saw Julie smile properly, the sound is almost foreign. Julie doesn’t notice. She’s still laughing helplessly, face in her hands and shoulders trembling.

“Whoa, I fixed Julie!” Texas crosses his arms, pleased with himself. “Check Texas out!”

“You okay, Julie?” says Mike tentatively. Julie is still giggling, breathless now. “Jules?”

“I’m good,” Julie says, and wipes her eyes, shakes her head. “I’m good, I’m fine. Haha--I guess...first you have to figure out who’s getting sick. Figure out the places those people have in
common, check out those places. It’s gonna be a lot of data-crunching, but Chuck--” She stops, starts again. “I know...you guys can do it.”

Mike sighs. “Thanks for the vote of confidence, Jules.”

“No problem.” Julie glances off-screen as something goes ding very faintly. “...Hm. One sec.”

“Sure,” says Mike, and turns back to Chuck. “…We oughta...get him to a bed or something, right? I mean, we can’t just leave him here.”

“Texas can do that,” Texas says, and cracks his knuckles. “Like pickin’ up baby. Or a girl. A baby girl.”

“No--dude, no, I’ll get it,” Mike says hastily, and glances over at Dutch. “Dude, can you--Dutch?”

Dutch isn’t listening. Mike frowns at him, then follows his gaze to Julie’s face on the comm screen and stops as well, concerned.

“I’ve--ugh.” Julie is scowling at the message she just got like it deeply and personally wronged her, lips crimped into an expression that’s almost a sneer. “Ugh. I’ve gotta go, guys. Call me back if there’s anything I can help you with, okay?”

“Whoa, don’t sound too excited,” says Mike, and Julie flashes him half of a very distracted smile. There’s a muscle working in her jaw.

“Call me,” she repeats, and flickers offline.

“...Okay,” Mike says, and glances at Chuck, at the empty comm screen, back at Chuck. “Okay. Come on, buddy. Let’s get you upstairs.”

--

Literally the last thing Julie wants to do right now is have a one-on-one meeting with Larsson. Sure, he could be here to try and patch things up, he could be ready to cooperate and rally against the rampant abuse in his department. But somehow Julie can’t summon the will to believe any of that.

Larsson’s expression of fixed joviality when she enters the board room does nothing to help her figure it out. He’s already sitting, no papers, no screens, no other directors.

Julie crosses her arms, considering him for just slightly too long from across the room, and then sighs audibly, shakes her head and walks over quick and silent to settle down at the head of the table. “You had something you wanted to discuss with me?” she says, aiming for her dad’s best tone of disinterested annoyance. “Something that couldn’t wait for next week’s meeting…?”

“It’s about something very important to me,” says Larsson, and when he pauses dramatically Julie really almost expects him to say “Myself”. Instead, when she doesn’t prompt him to continue, he clears his throat and finishes, “…the future of this company.”

“That’s...also important to me,” says Julie carefully, trying to look relaxed and not like she’s seconds from just flipping his desk out of spite.

This becomes much harder when Larsson combines an even wider smile than usual with a sad little shake of his head, managing somehow to achieve new levels of condescension. “I’m just not
seeing that from you, Julie--”

“Miss Kane,” Julie corrects him, gritting her teeth. Larsson bulldozes on with a cursory wave, not pausing to correct himself.

“--and my suggestion would be that you allow us--your trusted board members, who have worked with your father for so many years--to advise you in matters that affect the future of the company! The changes you’re trying to make--well, they just might not be tenable in the future, and in the interest in preserving your father’s memory--”

“My father,” says Julie, her voice starting to tremble with rage, “is still alive as far as we know!”

“All the more reason to keep Deluxe in the pristine condition he has worked so hard to maintain!” says Larsson jovially, without missing a beat. He steeples his fingers. “What would he think if he came back and found out...what you’ve been doing?”

“That’s between me and him!” says Julie, “I’m the one he left the company to, not you! And I’m going to take care of my city, my way.”

Larsson watches her for a long second. His mouth is still bent into that ever-present smile, but his eyes are cold and narrow. Julie is suddenly aware, for a brief moment, how much bigger he is than her.

But she’s faced gangs and monsters and robots and her own father, and she’s not going to back down here. She doesn’t know what her dad is going to think of her changes to the government, when he comes back. She does know how he would react if he found out she gave up ground to this awful, cunning old man.

“As long as I’m in charge,” she says, very slow, very even, making sure there’s force behind every word. “We do things my way. Is that everything you wanted to talk to me about?”

Larsson stands up slowly. Julie would almost feel better if he was drawing himself up, outraged. Instead, he just watches her.

“...I thought it was only fair to make you aware,” he says. “If you continue down the road you’re on, there will be consequences, Miss Kane.”

“Get out of my board room, Larsson,” says Julie, harsh and cold, and he turns hard on his heel, heading for the door. He pauses before exiting, his hand on the keypad, and Julie straightens, anticipating the usual contest for the final word.

“I won’t lie,” says Larsson, sounding almost resentful, “you do remind me of him.”

Julie doesn’t have a comeback for that.

Chapter End Notes

Notable section titles for this chapter:
Mike Chilton, Professional Negotiator
Teatime with the Terras
Oh FUCK Chuck’s Going To Die
Larsson is An Asshole (Surprise..........?)
Runner up title: The Rumor Come Out: Does Chuck is Dying?!
Chapter Summary

Welcome to the new Kane Co. family.

Chapter Notes

Some mood music for this episode: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4phRLfc6w38

See the end of the chapter for more notes

(Still) Day 7

Kane wakes up flat on the ground.

Despite the immediate jolt of indignation when he realizes his position, it takes him a long time to convince his body to move. Something is poking him insistently in the kidneys. Every part of him aches. His stomach feels like a hollowed-out pit. His mouth is so dry it’s painful.

Jab. Jab.

“Are you dead?” says a vaguely familiar voice. Kane takes a deep breath, trying to force himself to answer, but instead of words he just grunts, pained and annoyed, as the thing jabbing into his back jabs again. “Oh, you’re not. What a pleasant surprise.”

“Water,” Kane tries to say. All that comes out is a croaky wheeze.

Something is cooking. He can smell something, hear it bubbling. Some kind of soup.

If he doesn’t eat some of that soup in the next minute, he’s going to die. It’s a certainty—an irrational one, unrealistic, but irresistible. Kane rolls onto one side. Gets his good arm under him, and pushes himself up. The woman poking him backs up a step as he gets to his knees. She drops the broomstick and raises—oh.

Oh, of course.

“If you’re going to shoot me,” Kane rasps, “shoot me.”

“Don’t tempt me,” says the woman. She doesn’t pull the trigger. Kane shifts slightly—the gun barrel doesn’t follow him. The woman’s eyes are fixed somewhere distant, not looking at him at all.

“Food,” says Kane.

The woman lowers her gun, just slightly. “…I don’t think you’re in a position for demands, stranger,” she says, but Kane is already moving, staggering past her. She swings her gun to follow
him, and he grabs the barrel, yanks it out of her hands and stumbles into the kitchen.

It is soup, and it smells strange and not entirely appetizing but Kane is too hungry to care. With only one arm he has to make the choice between the gun in his hand and the food in front of him, and he only hesitates for a few seconds before his body makes the decision for him. He leans the gun against the counter and grabs the ladleful of the soup.

There's steam curling off the surface. Kane stops, fighting with himself not to give in and drink it anyway—it's...dangerous. Of course. He almost forgot. Hot food has to cool. He needs--a bowl. A spoon.

"You're gonna have to pay for that, y'know," says the woman from somewhere behind him. Kane ignores her, throwing open battered cabinets--jackpot! A stack of chipped clay bowls.

"You said I could have some," he grunts. He remembers that, barely. He'd been halfway to unconscious at the time, but it's hard to forget the promise of food when you've been starving for days.

"I also said you could get out after you'd had some," she retorts, as he fills a bowl almost to the point of overflowing. "Now give me my goddamn gun back."

"Get it yourself," mutters Kane, and--he can't wait for it to cool, he can smell it and his stomach is burning--he gulps down a spoonful of soup. It's scalding, uncomfortably balanced between bitter and savory. He swallows anyway and takes another. And another, and another, forgetting in his haste to keep an eye on his "host". He drains the bowl greedily and reaches for the ladle again just as she puts a hand on the barrel of her gun. She's not looking down at it, though, which strikes him as odd, and not at him either, which is even odder.

"I can't see where I'm aimin', so god knows where I might shoot you."

The first thing she said to him. It's not that dark in here, and she was only a few feet from him, and--she didn't recognize him. He should have thought, should have realized, taking off his mask was a huge risk in a new environment.

"You're blind," says Kane loudly, and takes another spoonful of the horrible soup.

"And you're a genius," says the woman, watching--no, listening to him gobble down another helping. "A messy eater to boot, apparently."

Kane barks a hoarse, humorless laugh. "Your entire city is a mess," he says roughly, and pours the dregs of the soup into his mouth. He wants more--awfully, uncontrollably, can't eat fast enough--but his stomach feels too full already, and the woman has her gun in her hands again.

"You're from Detroit Deluxe," says the woman impassively.

"And you're a genius," Kane snaps, to cover up the instinctive jolt of annoyance at being read--of course, your city, he might as well wave his white and blue clothing in her face. If...she could see. Of course. Not that most of it is anything like white any more. He glances down at his shirt, lip curling, and plucks at the filthy fabric. He doubts anyone would recognize it as Deluxe colors at this point.

"I want you out of my house," says the woman.

"I'm not going anywhere," says Kane firmly, "--until--"
And then, suddenly, tension crawls up his spine. It takes Kane a second to identify the source; off in the distance, faint but growing louder second by second. Engines.

Someone had to have called them here. Kane whips back to the woman, furious, expecting to find himself at gunpoint again. But she’s staring blindly in the direction of the noise, apparently as shocked as he is. She pushes past him, picking her way around piles of trash as deftly as Kane would have. Her hand finds the wall, then the window; she steps back and traces the muzzle of the gun along the window-frame to a shattered hole in the glass. “Damn kids,” she mutters. “Damn cars--”

The motors outside scream to a halt. The sound of doors slamming, and then somebody yells “Hey! Kleinschmidt!”

“You can get right the hell off my land!” the woman--Kleinschmidt?--yells back, right pointer finger settled comfortably on the trigger. “I told you already, I ain’t goin’ anywhere!”

“Oh, what’re you gonna do?” There’s a jeering, teenager-ish edge to the voice that sets Kane’s teeth on edge. “Fire your gun at the noises? Sure, that’s gonna work out fine for you, up until someone revs their engine!”

“And that attitude’s gonna work out fine for you, until I shoot you in the leg!” Kleinschmidt yells back.

“Just try it, old lady! We’re onto you now, we all know you’re blind as sh--”

“Easy.” It’s a new voice, an older man by the sound of it. Kane recognizes the sound of authority--the tone he’s adopted with many an overzealous cadet or overconfident officer. “Look, Vi! I know you’re attached to this place, but there’s no point holding out. There’s too many of us--”

“You can have this place the day you carry my cold, dead body out of it!” yells apparently-Vi Kleinschmidt. “Get outta here! I can’t see where I’m aimin’, so god only knows where I’d hit you!”

“You already used that line on me,” Kane mutters. Vi jerks her head at him, a clear shut up in every line of her body. “You can’t hit them.” And if they break in past you... “...Give me the gun.”

“Not gonna happen,” Vi growls, and her trigger finger squeezes slowly as she leans forward, head slightly turned like she’s listening. There’s a thunderous CRACK--outside, somebody says a word Kane hasn’t heard since he was thirty, and then the younger voice laughs, jeering. Vi’s teeth grit. “Dammit.”

“Kleinschmidt--”

Vi’s hands resettles restlessly on the stock of her gun. “I don’t know you from Adam,” she says, and jerks her gun as outside somebody moves, footsteps crunching on gravel and dirt. “Shit. Shit.”

“Vi,” says Kane, almost desperate now, and the woman twitches. Slowly, her head half-turns. “...I...repay my debts.” As much as it stings to admit he could owe anything to a Motorcity low-life. Kane stands up, takes a step--then another, stronger, as his legs stay steady this time. “I’ll make sure they never drive again, if you give me the gun.”

She stands very still for a second, motionless and tense as a wire. Kane glances over at the window; there are faint, colorful shadows visible outside the window, still small and far off, but getting closer.
“...Aim for me,” says Vi.

“What.”

“I’m not letting you have the gun,” says Vi. “But you can aim for me. Do it or don’t, I’m gonna start firing in a second either way.”

“Aim for you?” Kane hisses, furious and cornered--stares around the room for a good weapon. He can’t see anything that would stand up to two gangsters, and with one arm out of commission--“What do you want me to do, look over your shoulder?”

“Up to you,” says Vi tightly. “They’re gonna be here in a minute.”

She feels very, very small.

Kane is aware he’s not the tallest man in the world by far, but Kleinschmidt’s head almost tucks under his chin. He bends down and reaches around her with his good arm, trying to sight down the barrel of the shotgun. Both of them are tense, still, barely breathing, but Vi’s hands are rock-steady as Kane adjusts the angle of her gun. The figures are getting closer now, and Kane hears one of them say, quiet and muffled--*somebody else in there? Hey, Tuck--*

“...Fire,” says Abraham, very quietly.

Vi squeezes the trigger, no hint of a twitch, and somebody outside yells “--son of a BITCH!” One of the men is yelling in pain--the other one ducks out of sight, and then both of them are retreating.

“They’re on their way back,” says Kane, but he’s still sighting, trying to adjust for angle, distance, the men’s movement. “One of them is injured.” *But we should--*

“Aim again,” says Vi, flat, and Kane is surprised to find he can’t restrain a hint of a smile.

The second shot misses, but by the yell and the high chorus of cracking pings, they hit the side of a car. An engine starts, and there’s a sound of squealing tires that fades rapidly into the distance.

Kane lets go of the gun immediately, stepping back. His arm is aching fiercely from the shotgun’s kick, and now that the crisis is over the feeling of that small, tense back pressed against his chest is making the soup in his stomach roil uneasily. He--really doesn’t feel good, actually. At all.

“They’re gone,” he says roughly, and turns away, toward his abandoned bowl on the table. “They’ll be--”

He blinks, and the world spins. Kane frowns at the wavering floor in front of him for a second, and then grunts as it hits his knees hard. He folds over, struggling against the rising bile in the back of his throat.

“...lie down before you fall down,” says Vi Kleinschmidt, somewhere overhead and far away. “You can stay here tonight. In the morning, we’ll see what you--”

Kane sleeps.

--

**DAY EIGHT**
There’s a hard edge to Julie these days.

Knowing what Jacob knows, the things Jacob has seen, it worries him whenever they talk. Doesn’t stop him from calling her, keeping her updated (the way these kids never seem to do for him, goddamit) but...he worries.

Like he doesn’t have enough to worry about.

“Everything okay up there?”

Julie stares at him, a little bit wild-eyed, and then blinks and shakes her head distractedly. “Uh,” she says, “How are things down there?” and then, before Jacob can call her out on completely dodging the question, “...how’s Chuck?”

Jacob grimaces. Julie huffs out a breath, new lines of stress tightening her face.

“...okay,” she says quietly. “...so...how’s Mike?”

“Not good,” says Jacob briefly. Mike’s been bouncing off walls since Chuck passed out, and if Jacob was a younger man he’d probably be in the same boat. The kids keep lookin’ at him with this kinda...hope in their eyes. Like they think knowing how to build a robot or splint a broken arm is the same thing as knowing how to cure a mystery plague.

They’re not even twenty yet. Sometimes Jacob feels so old he can’t hardly stand it.

“I would feel better if we could just--tell what was wrong,” Julie says, and glances up at something on her end, flicking a hand at the screen. For a second, the call minimizes to audio only. “Who--oh. Yes, thank you. Transfer them to my inbox. You can go.”

“Yes, ma’am,” says a boy’s voice, unfamiliar. A few seconds of silence, and then the almost inaudible whshh of a door sliding shut.

Julie opens the call again. She’s rubbing the bridge of her nose roughly, eyes closed.

“...so,” says Jacob, squinting at her. “Everything’s not okay up there, huh?”

“You guys can’t work on a cure if you don’t know what you’re fighting.”

“Kid.”

“Maybe if you had a brain-scan of some kind--a toxicology lab could probably--”

“Julie.”

“I’m fine,” says Julie sharply, and then slumps as Jacob gives her a reproving frown. “...sorry. Look, I’ve got...wow, so much to do today, I have a board meeting later...can I tell you some other time? I don’t wanna talk about it right now.”

“...Fine,” says Jacob. “Problem is, we don’t have the stuff you were talkin’ about down here. And--” he raises a hand as Julie opens her mouth. “Even if you could get ‘em past the guards on the access tunnels, it’s not like we got anyone down here who knows how to use that kinda tech, or the right facilities, and--”

“So we sneak him in.”

“There are only a couple--what?” Jacob gapes at her. He knows what he heard, he just can’t
believe it.

“We sneak Chuck in,” says Julie, her voice growing stronger like the idea is starting to take root in her head. “I don’t have to get the tech down there if you get him up here. I can re-arrange the guard rosters, give the boys priority access, if they come in disguise so nobody recognizes—”

“That’s crazy!” bawls Jacob, flinging his hands into the air. “I swear, you kids—actin’ like you can do whatever you want—gonna get yerselves—”

He stops before he can finish the sentence, eyes straying to the couch across the room. Chuck is laid out across the worn cushions, breathing slow and deep, motionless except for the faint flicker of his eyes.

“Tell the guys I need to talk to them,” says Julie, and then, when Jacob doesn’t say anything, “Please. I promise, it’s gonna be okay.”

--

It’s a crazy plan.

Even Mike can see that, and he’s desperate right now—can’t-sit-still, head-spinning desperate, hungry for action. But the longer Julie talks, the more convincing it sounds. They can’t help Motorcity—can’t help Chuck—unless they figure out what this thing is and how it’s hurting them. They can’t do that down here, can’t afford the time to scavenge up a makeshift lab or test recycled equipment. They need Deluxe-tech.

Mike hasn’t been up to Deluxe since...last time. He nods as he listens, and tries to pretend there isn’t a tight, sickening knot in the pit of his stomach. He’s not scared. He’s not scared of Kane, and he’s not scared of Deluxe.

Even if he was, though, this would be worth it.

“Okay,” he says. “You’re right. How do we make this happen?”

“Yeah!” Texas says, and punches the air. “This is gonna rock!”

“Think about it,” Mike says, “We don’t have the stuff down here—”

“Mike,” Dutch says quietly. “...No one’s arguing, man.”

Mike blinks at him for a second, and then glances, almost unwilling, over to the couch in the corner. Mikey no just getting across Motorcity to the access roads is stupidly dangerous...

Chuck just lies there, silent. Mike grits his teeth.

“Okay,” he says. “Good. Fine. So...so let’s do this.”

--

“We’ve got our way in,” Mike says. “Getting up to the city’s gonna be the easy part. We just need a parking spot for three cars—”

“Two cars,” Julie corrects him, then sees the hard, self-conscious look in Mike’s eyes and immediately knows—“Mike, no. You’re not supposed to drive.”

“I’m off my meds,” says Mike, terse and defensive. “We don’t have the people, Miss Julie, we
can’t be down another driver.”

“You’re hurt.”

“I’m fine,” says Mike, and it’s very nearly a snap. He stops himself a second later, drags his hands down his face and gives Julie a terrible look, very nearly pleading. “...Jules, I can do this. I’m...tired of being useless.”

“You’re not!” Mike is always hard on himself, always pushing himself, but she’s never heard him actually say something like that out loud. It’s...more painful than she would’ve guessed. “You’re not useless, Mike.”

“No, I’m not,” says Mike, and smiles tightly. “...because I can still fight for this city, okay? I can do this. I can do this.” He pulls up a screen. “ETA...give us an hour and a half. Might be tough getting there, with all these plants around.”

She can’t stop him. And apparently neither of the other two are going to either. Julie swallows, pretends she doesn’t see the shadows under his eyes, the wild, exhausted energy in his every move. “I’ll see about getting some gates opened for you at the dome. Sending coordinates your way. It’s...gonna be good to see you again.”

“You too.” Mike relaxes a little bit, apparently relieved she’s stopped arguing. “See you there.”

“Uh, yeah,” says Julie slowly, eyes drawn to a new notification on her executive feed. (1) Live News Stream, it reads. “...Later, Mike.”

If he says anything else before cutting the connection, Julie is too distracted to hear it. A news stream. How is that possible? She’s supposed to be the only one with clearance. No one else should be broadcasting city-wide.

It could be a mistake, of course, she thinks, with a finger hovering over the message. Someone could have been doing system maintenance and started it accidentally. God, she hopes it was a mistake.

When she sees Larsson’s face, she knows it wasn’t.

The stream has only been running for thirty seconds. Given Larsson’s tendency to stretch his opening statement into a full speech of its own, Julie considers herself early to the party. And, indeed, she’s here just in time to hear him finish introducing himself.

“...And supervisor of our many capable young technicians in Kane Co.’s exemplary Research and Development Department,” he’s saying, oozing jovial smarm. Julie feels her blood pressure rise. “I’m here to make a very important announcement to Deluxe, one regarding this company’s new CEO.”

Oh. Oh no. Julie opens three comm windows in quick succession, trying to contact--Gwen, Claire, her communications people, anyone, but everything’s down. She should have noticed--would have noticed sooner, if she hadn’t been using a Motorcity frequency for the past few minutes. Damn it!!

“...And specifically, the identity of that CEO! I have been forbidden from revealing it to the public, but as the situation continues to deteriorate I find myself with no...”

Oh, she’s going to punch him when she gets out of here. In the face. With her boomerang. God, Jacob was right! Damn it! Julie’s so filled with rage and embarrassment for a moment that she barely hears Larsson actually say her name--Kapulsky, not Kane. Of course. No matter how hard
he tries to paint her as some incompetent little girl, the Kane name still carries weight. He wouldn’t want to give her that advantage. A picture of her appears on the feed behind Larsson; it’s unflattering, apparently taken during some meeting or other in a moment when she looked particularly stressed and confused.

“She is young, incapable, and refuses all supervision,” Larsson continues, infuriatingly smug. Torn between fury and panic, Julie paces to the door of her office and opens window after sub-window, looking for the codes she needs. They may be able to stop her from leaving the building in a pod unit, but she’ll be dammed if they get in here without a really good hacker.

Alex is getting kind of tired of being a technician. He gets all the research funding, all the materials, but the pay and hours suck and--

“I said unlock this door!”

Alex pushes himself up from examining the executive office’s lock-pad and takes a second to compose his face into his most patronizing, pitying smile.

“I can do that,” he says. “It’s not hard, guys. Any of you want a shot first?”

“Don’t get mouthy with me, kid,” starts the Ultra-Elite, and Alex takes a sharp step into his space, squares his shoulders and looms.

“That’s Commander Harley to you,” he says.

It doesn’t exactly send them running for the hills, but it does send a satisfying ripple of uncertainty around the circle. The appointment of Commanders--the oath, the Star and Sabres badge--it was all personally approved and carried out by Kane himself. Even now, after the recent changes, it carries weight.

They shake it off after a second, of course--this isn’t one of the Burners’ ancient movies about badass heroes and explosions. But Alex does feel kind of badass anyway.

“You’re no commander,” the guy snaps, and raises his gun again. “If you’re not with us you’re against us! We know you’re in with the girl, you’ve got her pass-code--”

Alex stifles a startled kind of snorting noise, because hell. Him, “in with” Julie. That’s a good one. But they’re getting really jumpy, and there are five of them in the hallway with him, so he swallows the snort and just grins at them instead. What would Mike do...

...Mike would give Julie time. Believe she can handle it, and buy her time to do it. Alex swallows really hard, dry-mouthed behind his smirk. “Are you telling me you actually don’t know how? Breaking through these doors isn’t all that hard. Come on, guys. We got basic tech training, didn’t we? In junior cadets. Did you guys just play with your guns the whole time, or what?”

The Ultra-Elite is not amused. He makes this known by pulling back the butt of his gun and trying to hit Alex in the face with it.

Well, that’s enough of that.

Alex’s arms are still sore from the surgeries, and it freaking hurts when he slams his fists together, but the important part is that it works. Heat flares under the skin of his forearms, and his secret project unfolds around his hands, metal settling against his skin with a rush of hot wind.
The Elite has just enough time to stumble, taken aback, before Alex makes a fist full of pulsing, neon blue light, and punches him so hard his feet leave the ground.

“Miss Kane!” he shouts, and rushes forward, fists raised as the other Ultra-Elites yell and pull their guns. “Open the door!”

If Julie hears him, she doesn’t answer. Alex curses under his breath, ducks a wild punch and turns the Elite’s momentum into a shoulder-throw. A plasma bolt sears through the air inches from his cheek as he twists. Alex slams his fists together again, and the pod rattles around him as Mike’s--as Blue’s--concussive shockwave slams his eardrums like a thunderclap. Two of the Elites go flying.

So does Alex. Shit, he has time to think, dizzy in midair, gotta brace on something. Mike made it look so easy. And then he’s on the ground, ears ringing. Helmet. Next time, a helmet. Eardrum enhancements? Ow.

“I’m gonna kill you!” somebody is yelling. Alex is dragged up by the front of his uniform--throws a punch, and feels the shuddering CRACK as the shockwave goes through the Elite’s body. That guy has a broken jaw now. Alex scrambles up as the man falls, yelling in pain. Raises his fists.

“Yeah!” he says, breathless with terror and exhilaration. “Who else wants some?!”

All three of the others want some, apparently. Alex manages to take out one, right in the gut, winding him. The second one gets too close, and Alex squeezes his eyes shut, claps his hands
together in the guy’s face; a flare of light like a flash grenade makes his eyelids blaze red for a second, and when he opens his eyes again the man is on the ground, yelling.

He has just enough time to feel pleased with himself before the third Ultra-Elite wraps an arm around his throat and hauls him back off his feet. Alex thrashes and wheezes, trying to elbow, to smash his head back into the Elite’s nose. But this guy is good, and he’s running out of air--

...and he’s got a call.

“Harley,” says Julie’s voice in his ear, “duck.”

Alex makes a kind of wheezing “Hwhh?” noise, and then something brilliant gold and glowing like a miniature sun comes whistling around the corner and slams into the guy choking him.

Alex has half a second, dizzy and half-strangled, to think _oh my god I should’ve ducked_ before the charge from Julie’s boomerang knocks him unconscious.

--

Having hauled a slightly singed Alex Harley off of a fallen Ultra Elite, Julie settles down to assess the situation. She’s savagely delighted to find that her personal terminal works just fine outside the executive office. The company memo system is in chaos, a panicked mess of people begging to know what’s going on, and frantic updates from all over the tower--“trapped in my office!”, “Security’s arresting ‘dissenters’, avoid lower levels”, and one that makes Julie’s chest tighten unexpectedly--“is Miss Julie okay? has anyone seen her?”

And throughout, the repeated executive command, from an authorization code that isn’t Julie’s:

“STAY CALM, OBEY SECURITY, AWAIT FURTHER ANNOUNCEMENTS.”

The _bastards_, she thinks, her blood boiling. Running amok in her tower, terrorizing her people, not even bothering to maintain some semblance of order. She needs to get to Larsson. But if Larsson has decided to make his grab for power, Pinsky has to be with him, and in the worst-case scenario, that means the whole security force is against her. Alex may have been willing to fight his fellow security officers, but Julie’s willing to bet he’s in the minority. She needs something to turn the tide. Some kind of weapon that can occupy hundreds of trained soldiers, something...

...someone...

Heart pounding, Julie reaches down and flicks through her contacts list. There, right at the bottom. _Unnamed Contact_. A blank icon.

“...Desperate times,” Julie mumbles to herself, and makes the call.

--

Dar Gordy has been a good Kane Co. employee, for the most part. Obedient, loyal, totally competent. _Angry_. Because Dutch left, and barely explained anything, and suddenly Dar didn’t want to make art anymore, didn’t want to talk to anyone. So instead he joined the cadet corps, and fought. And he’d _hated_ Motorcity.

He’d told himself it was because Motorcity was the enemy. Ugly and filthy and savage--like Mister Kane always said on the morning announcements. And Dar had believed it, which makes him feel like a complete idiot now. It was only ever about Dutch. _Motorcity took my brother, I’m going to help destroy it._
Things are different now. Dar’s different. But he’s kept his game face on for the past few months, and as far as his superior officers know, he’s still a model cadet.

Dar has to admit, looking blankly up into the face of Commander Markarian, that he’s a little bummed at having to break his streak. But it had to happen sometime, and this seems like the time...maybe after Markarian stops shouting? Not that he seems likely to anytime soon.

Commander Markarian has their entire barrack lined up in one of the practice rooms, standing at sharp attention and listening to him rant at the top of his lungs. It’s probably supposed to be firing them up, but Dar can’t even focus enough to fake being interested. He can see the other cadets shifting and glancing at each other too, although the Ultra-Elites lined up across from them are standing at attention like normal, like all the hate and bile actually makes sense. Dar stares at Commander Markarian’ red face, and wonders if maybe now’s the time to finally haul off and hit the guy.

That might be the only way he gets out here in the next century. Maybe Commander Markarian is hoping the coup will be over by the time their barrack gets out there.

“--This opportunity to support Mister Pinsky and Kane Co. herself, we must all hold firm and are you listening to me cadet Gordy?!”

“No,” says Dar, and plants his feet, stepping out of attention, settling his stance. Dutch isn’t terrible at fighting, but he never settles his weight, never uses his long arms to his advantage. Dar has had training. He can see that kinda thing, now. “I’m not, sir.”

“What are you doing?!” Markarian is distracted from his pacing, drawing himself up in fury. He’s shorter than Dar. Most people are, by now. Dar rolls his shoulders, winds himself up tight. “You think you’re too good for security briefings, now?! You think you’re--”

Dar’s right straight is his best punch. He sizes Commander Markarian up through the haze of gentle terror, and then clocks the man in the face. The sound of his butt hitting the floor is possibly the best sound Dar has ever heard.

“Not all the security briefings,” says Dar, into the sudden, absolute silence. “Just yours. Traitor.”

For another second, nobody breathes. Then Commander Markarian pushes himself up off the floor, dazed and furious, blood oozing from a nasty gash in his lip. “Wh’r you waiting for?!” he slurs at the other cadets, and spits blood on the white floor. “Arrest him!”

Dar backs up hastily, fists still raised, and thinks Mike would win this fight. Thinks, I don’t think I can, though. Realizes, I’m about to die.

…Why hasn’t anybody grabbed me yet?

Somebody steps in front of him. Dar blinks, twitches to throw a punch and then stops--the cadet has his back to Dar, standing between him and Markarian.

“This is insubordination,” snarls Markarian. There’s a really nasty look on his face, and Dar wonders distantly if that’s how Markarian looks when he’s dragging people out of their homes in Motorcity, beating them down and shoving them into capture pods.

“No,” says the boy in front of him--Jerome, Dar thinks his name is. He’s a big guy, but he’s never done really well in sparring. He pulls his punches too much. “What you’re doin’ is insubordination. What we’re doin’ is company loyalty. I figure, sir.”
There’s a murmur of agreement from the other cadets. Around Dar, more and more people are falling out of attention, fists rising, glaring mutinously at the Elites and Commander Markarian. Cadets, mostly, boys halfway to men. Some of them are scared, Dar knows. There’s Tremaine, a KORS kid who only joined because getting recruited was better than factory work; Barney, who has a stutter and gets beaten up as bad as any R&D guy; Sam, who was supposed to make Commander within the year and has to know he’ll get worse than a lost promotion if this goes badly.

But they step forward anyway.

“Miss Julie is Mister Kane’s daughter, right?” says Jerome, spreading his hands wide. “Pinsky’s just--”

“Gregory Pinsky is a great man,” Markarian snaps, blood dripping from his cut lip. The Ultra Elites behind him mutter agreement. Dar can see them tensing, feel the air charging with violence. Markarian looks seconds away from ordering them to fire.

Dar’s not gonna let that happen. He raises one hand like he’s asking a question in class. “People are getting hurt out there. Loyal employees. I’m gonna go help ‘em, and if I have to go through you then I will.” He lets his fingers fold gently into a loose fist. The cadets to either side of him shift almost imperceptibly.

“If they’re getting hurt, I highly doubt they are loyal employees!” Markarian shouts, red-faced with fury. “Not that you would know anything about that, any of you!”

Dar opens his hand and tilts it forward, and an instant later the wall of cadets crashes into Markarian’ Elites and the tension snaps into an all-out brawl. Dar takes an elbow to the temple within seconds but headbutts the guy right back, shouting, “Go for their guns! Don’t let ‘em shoot!”

He knees the Ultra-Elite between the legs, sees Jerome pin another guy against a wall and--wow, he did not pull that punch. A twist and a wrench and the Ultra-Elite’s gun slips from his fingers, and Dar slams the butt into the guy’s head one, two, three times-- Someone grabs Dar from behind, trying to get him in an armlock, but another Elite blindsides both of them, flying backwards under the weight of two other cadets. It takes Dar a moment to disentangle himself from the mess of flailing limbs, still clutching the laser rifle, which he swings like a baseball bat into an Elite’s shoulder. And then a fist catches him in the stomach and he folds around it, eyes burning, lungs screaming. A hammerfist to the back of his head drives him down all the way and Dar hears Markarian through the ringing in his ears--”Stay down if you know what’s good for you!”

Dar, who has never known what’s good for him, presses himself up on both hands and donkey-kicks blindly behind him. There’s a crunch that sounds like a knee, and someone screams. Good. Dar staggers to his feet, sees a masked face and throws another dogged punch, busting his knuckles against the guy’s red-lensed goggles. The glass breaks, and for a moment Dar’s looking back into one furious brown eye. And he falters, just for that moment.

And then someone tackles him to the ground. His skull hits the ground with a nasty CRACK, and he loses seconds, vision flashing. He comes to on the floor with a knee in the small of his back--from the smear of red on the white tiles near his face and the taste of hot copper in his mouth, Dar would guess he has a cut lip to match Markarian’s.

And speaking of Markarian…

“…A disgrace to Kane Co. and everything it stands for! After this is all over I’m going to have
every one of you permanently relocated to--Underwood, get Gordy on his feet! I want him to hear this!”

A big hand grabs the back of Dar’s shirt and pulls him bodily up, bending one of his arms behind his back in a painful joint-lock. Dar grits his teeth, doesn’t make a noise, but it’s hard not to react to the sight of his fellow cadets bloodied and in cuffs. Jerome is lying still on the floor, barely breathing. Shit.

“As I was saying,” Markarian goes on, scowling, “permanently relocated to factories and inspection lines. And for those of you that don’t cooperate, we have more than enough empty cells to--”

The lights go out. In the sudden silence that follows, the sounds of fighting are audible from beyond the barrack doors. Echoes of yells, laser blasts, footsteps. If Dar had to guess, he’d say his squad isn’t the only one that split over the coup.

“Gordy,” snarls Markarian after a moment.

Dar’s not sure what he’s supposed to have done, but he prays, heart thumping in his throat, that it has something to do with Julie. Better play for time.

“Present,” says Dar, and grunts as Underwood twists up his arm a little further.

“Would you care to explain what’s happening right now?” Markarian mostly just sounds more pissed than ever, but there is a little edge to his voice that might just be fear.

“No idea,” says Dar simply. “But if you don’t know either, I’m guessin’ it’s not gonna be good for you.”

He can hear Markarian breathing in the darkness, hard and fast, but when the guy speaks again he sounds surprisingly composed.

“...Cadet, are you aware the cameras down here aren’t infrared?”

“No,” says Dar, trying to keep his voice casual even as the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.

“What I’m getting at,” says Markarian, “is that after today, there’s gonna be no evidence to say that you didn’t attack us again in the dark...and you couldn’t blame my men for firing in self-defense.”

“Wh--what the hell, Markarian!” says another voice--Barney. Dar hears a percussive crack and strains impulsively against Underwood’s hold. No dice, and his elbow is keening with pain. Barney doesn’t say anything else.

“I’m just saying, I could do it,” Markarian says, and there’s a hard k-chunk of a laser gun being cocked. “You kids think you’re gonna have it so easy with this new CEO! Well, this is how things really are, get it? This is how things always were under Mister Kane--there are consequences for disobeying orders and--who’s there?”

Dar doesn’t know what he’s yelling at for a moment, and then he cranes his neck to look at the door, where a faceless black shadow contoured in softly-glowing red lines stands with fists at the ready.

“I work for Julie Kane,” says the shadow, addressing Markarian with its head on one side. “Do you?”
“Julie Kane,” snarls Markarian, “is a stupid little girl! And as far as I’m concerned, so is any insubordinate weakling who follows her!”

The shadow pauses, and a thrill of unease goes through Dar’s gut at the way its silhouette tenses, red lightning crawling over its forearms.

“Wrong answer,” it says.

--

It gets harder to breathe as they climb. Dutch doesn’t notice at first—he’s not exactly the fittest guy there, okay, and Mike is setting a pretty punishing pace. Dutch just assumes he’s out of shape after being able to drive everywhere for so long. It’s been awhile since they’ve had to abandon the cars and hike somewhere on foot.

But when Texas has to stop for a second, doubling over and coughing, Dutch knows for sure he’s not the only one feeling it. The higher they go, the more the air feels...thick. The glow around Dutch’s screens is clouded with a kind of weird, drifting haze.

“...Texas?” Dutch says cautiously.

“Muh!” Texas says, apparently startled, and pushes himself up, staring around. “Whuh? Oh. What?”

Dutch is suddenly, vividly reminded of how Dar used to daydream while they were drawing. It was like he thought the art would magically happen if he just stared hard enough at the blank paper--

“Dutch?”

Dutch shakes himself awake with a jolt. “I was just--uhf. I was just gonna ask, does it feel...weird to you? Out here?”

“Weird?” Texas’s brow furrows. “Uh…”

“Yeah, weird!” Dutch waves a hand around at the muggy air. “It’s just really hard to breathe--I used to get sick when I was a kid, and it feels just like that, just--” Like no matter how much air he gets in he can’t seem to quite fill his lungs, and his skin used to feel like it was hot and tight, burning. His mom would put a cool hand on his forehead and then message Kane Co. Medical for pills, and Dutch would be doing better by the next morning, but a couple of weeks later he would be sick again, and…and Texas is waiting for the rest of what he was saying. Dang it. “--just weird,” Dutch finishes, seconds late and distracted, and rubs his temples. “I saw you coughing, didn’t you feel it?”

“Uh...sure,” Texas says distantly. He’s staring past Dutch’s shoulder, frowning intensely at nothing.

“Texas.”

“Yeah!” Texas jumps again, like he wasn’t just talking to Dutch. “What?”

“Guys!” Mike is a solid thirty feet ahead of them on the sloped road, looking back down. “Don’t fall behind! They’re in trouble if we don’t make this in time!”

Dutch blinks. “If--wait. Who is?”
“Tennie,” Mike says, like this should be obvious. Dutch stares around, startled, somehow expecting to see Tennie standing there in the lights of the Cabler’s Settlement, laughing with blue-white light gleaming in her eyes--

“Tennie’s--not--here,” Dutch grits out, and forces the image away. It’s hard--too hard, to focus on what’s real. Things are getting foggier by the second, thinking straight feels wrong. “Mike, come back here. Something’s seriously wrong, we gotta--”

“We can’t stop!” Mike says fiercely. “You saw the Hounds, Dutch! Chuck is--Chuck--he’s hurt, he--his shoulder--” He stops, breathing hard, eyes wide. “What’s going on.”

Texas is yelling at something, there’s nothing there, there’s nothing for Dutch’s teacher to yell about, Dutch didn’t even paint anything today, he keeps yelling and Dutch feels so small. On the ground, right, he wiped out. Driving is harder than it looks.

“Ow,” Dutch mumbles, and coughs, curled up small in bed as his dad rubs a big hand over the back of his neck and Dar holds onto Dutch’s hand with both of his smaller ones, he’s--it feels nice, and he feels so bad. The air is thick as syrup. He’s gotta call--he needs to call somebody, Julie, he needs…

“Your mom’s coming right back with medicine,” his dad tells him, and Dutch closes his eyes and coughs, weaker this time. “Try to get some sleep.”

Dutch sleeps.

--

Kane wakes up.

It takes him a minute to realize why. He lies there, groggy and aching and--he’s distantly aware--hideously vulnerable. And then something jabs him in the side, hard, and he sits up and grabs the handle of the broom that’s poking him in the side. Again.

He still feels dizzy and drained, but some of the gnawing, crawling ache in his guts has died away. The blind woman--Kleinschmidt, he recalls vaguely--is standing over him, holding on resolutely to her end of the broom.

“What is the meaning of this,” he tries to say, and then just coughs instead, parched and wheezy. Tugs at the broom until Vi lets it go. Stands. Every movement might as well be Atlas lifting the world, his head is spinning, but he makes it to his feet and stares around the hovel.

“My food delivery is late,” says Vi, and turns her back on him, winding fearlessly through the clutter of her crowded living room. “Dinner’s going to cost you tonight.”

Kane clears his throat, feels a lip crack open as he opens his mouth. “…what.”

“Dinner,” says Vi again, slowly, like she’s talking to a small child. “I’m guessin’ you’ll want some more food.”

Kane keeps his mouth stubbornly shut, but his stomach gives a low, rumble and a nausea-inducing wave of hunger rolls through him. Vi cocks her head, and he has the terrible suspicion that she heard it.

“So here’s the deal,” she says, with a nod in the general direction of the broom Kane is leaning on. “My heater’s on the fritz, my floor feels all gritty, and the roof is leaking. If you want dinner, you
“Hn,” says Kane. *Sweep the floor?* He’s a *CEO*, the ruler of a city, he does not sweep floors. Kane very deliberately holds out the broom, dropping it on the ground. No, he will not be sweeping this blind madwoman’s floor. Let alone--

“The roof--” He pauses, clears his throat, impossibly parched. “Leaking? It doesn’t...rain…”

“No, but I’ve got a Detroit Deluxe water main somewhere right above my house,” she says. And then, grimacing, “...And a filtering pump out back if you need a drink.”

“Which way…”

He stops halfway through the question--it’s pointless, after all--but she answers anyway, gesturing somewhere behind her and to the right. “Opposite side of the front door.”

The water is hardly filtered by Kane’s standards, but at least the pump works. The thought *How do these animals live like this* flashes across his mind, but it’s *water* and he’s wanted it too badly for too long to think about much else. Hardly filtered it may be, but he drinks until he can’t drink any more.

Vi offers him the broom when he comes in. Kane looks her up and down and then--why not, she can’t see him--sneers at her, giving her a wide berth as he heads toward the kitchen.

The noise is very very faint, but very audible in the quiet house. Kane looks down and sees Vi’s other hand shift again on the grip of her shotgun.

Kane takes the broom.

“Don’t move anything,” Vi says. “It’s all right where it needs to be.”

Kane highly doubts that, but the less work he needs to do, the better. If he can just play along...maybe he can take whatever food is delivered to her. Surely it’s no more than she expects from him. Surely that’s just how it works down here. If it weren’t, she wouldn’t need the gun.

“Well?” Vi says expectantly, and hitches the gun up under her arm, turning to pick her way through the piles of junk. “I don’t hear sweeping, Samuel.”

“I’m not--” Kane starts, and then “--what? Who?”

“Well, I’m guessin’ you’re not gonna tell me your real name,” says Vi, “Not like I really care what it is. Gotta call you something.”

Kane opens his mouth to complain, then closes it again grudgingly as he realizes that’s...convenient. He *isn’t* going to tell her his name, and if she’s willing to accept that, it’s the best possible scenario for him.

...God, it rankles though. Kane stews over it the entire time as he brushes the broom awkwardly across the floor one-handed, buffeting trash back and forth pointlessly. He’s spent years, *decades* building up the power and authority behind his name; having it stripped away is infuriating. He’s going to have enough work to do when he returns to Deluxe, re-establishing his stock there with his citizens and...

Not for the first time, Kane’s mind strays abruptly into worry for his daughter. Is Julie making announcements, reassuring the people? She must have succeeded him, he’s trained her that well,
he knows (he hopes). She’s never been in a true crisis situation before, never left the safety of Deluxe. Training can only take her so far before it comes down to her mettle, her ability to hold her head high and do what has to be done.

Kane hasn’t heard any announcements while he’s been on the run. But then again he hasn’t been near people, has been avoiding any place they might broadcast. Maybe now that he’s here...

“...What time is it,” he says, more to himself than to Vi. She moves in his peripheral vision, pulling back her left sleeve to reveal a small black device like a blank-faced watch. She raises it to her mouth and says, very loudly and clearly, “Time.”

The thing beeps--long, short, long, long…

“Morse code?” murmurs Kane, and then goes sourly quiet as she shushes him. There’s another series of beeps, too fast for him to focus on, and then the watch goes silent.

“Seven fifty-six,” Vi pronounces. “And much good may it do you.”

“I didn’t ask you.”

“But you asked. Why?”

Saying it feels like a risk somehow, but...it’s harmless enough at face value. “...The morning announcements from Deluxe have usually broadcast by now,” says Kane, sweeping his small heap of dust and broken glass towards the door. “I know you get them, even down here.”

“Not over here down here,” says Vi, and dumps a basket of apparently-clean laundry on the floor, settling down in the midst of the pile to fold it. She’s shockingly deft and quick, and Kane is reluctantly impressed. It’s like watching someone make crude tools by hand--an outmoded, primitive kind of coordination he hasn’t had to concern himself with for years. Anything he ever knew about folding clothes, he forgot a long time ago. In Deluxe, clothing self-cleans until it meets its expiration date and then gets recycled. A perfect system.

“...I have a project to work on,” he says, watching as her hands transmute a baggy mess of a shirt into a perfect, neat square. “I can take care of...the rest of your list tomorrow.”

“If the floor’s clean, do what you want,” says Vi. “Just stay out of my way.”

No one has talked to him like that in a very long time. Kane pauses, torn between belligerence and a kind of grudging respect. In the end, he says nothing, just retrieves his bundle of scrounged tech and stamps loudly towards the kitchen table.

It’s time to make a weapon.

Since recovering, he’s considered just stealing Vi’s shotgun. But its shots are limited and even if he had the full use of both arms, Kane isn’t sure he could take out a crowd with it. He is, however, more than capable of making an explosive. Kane has already found at least four volatile components in the pile he stole from the Duke’s junkyard. The bare bones of a rudimentary chemical bomb.

It isn’t much, though. He’s going to have to fix the pieces together somehow, the metals are disparate and the edges are sloppy. Even if he had a welding rig he’s not sure he could make them into any kind of cohesive whole that way. Especially with only one arm.

He’s in the process of laying out the most promising parts, looking for some way to fit them
together, when something flashes at the window.

Kane looks up absently, scowling, and then goes still and tense, frozen in place with shock.

“Kleinschmidt.”

“What,” says Vi from the other room. “I’m busy.”

“What is that?”

He sees Vi’s head rise, the exaggerated jerk of her head as she rolls her eyes. “I don’t know, smart guy. What is it?”

“There’s some kind of drone outside,” says Kane. The thing is motoring back and forth, almost indecisively. “One of ours. Deluxe’s. Or it...used to be.”

“So it’s from Detroit Deluxe, so what,” says Vi, and starts dropping folded clothes into her basket. “Maybe it’ll fix my goddamn roof for soup. Is it shootin’?”

“It doesn’t seem to have gun turrets,” Kane says. The more of the strange picture he takes in, the more offended he is. That’s one of his bots, and some tasteless criminal has just altered it. Graffiti is splashed all over it, bright green like its lens, and someone has ripped its gun turrets off to replace them with biotech limbs. “It’s...carrying something. Some kind of package.” He glances at the shotgun, leaning innocuously against Vi’s laundry basket. “I could take it out.”

“What kinda package?” Vi says. “You’re not touching my gun.”

Kane growls. “I don’t know what kind of package. It could be a bomb for all we know! I wouldn’t put anything past the thugs down here.”

He half-expects Vi to argue that, but she just shrugs, as if to concede the point. “About so big?” she says, and holds up her hands, framing a vague set of dimensions. “Brown paper?”

Kane glances out again. The bot is very carefully attempting to balance the package on top of its chassis now, for some inane reason. Kane’s hands twitch to pull up his screens, to bring down a swarm of real enforcer drones on this...mutated abomination. But he doesn’t have that access, now. He doesn’t even have a shotgun. And...the package it’s holding matches Vi’s description.

“Yyyyy,” he says slowly. “You’re expecting a delivery?”

“I’m expectin’ my food supply,” says Vi, and pushes herself up, carrying her basket of now-folded clothes. “And it sounds like that’s it.” She walks past Kane and, with unerring aim, shoves the laundry basket hard into his stomach. “There’s two guns and an order for my next delivery in here. Give ‘em to the bot and it oughta give you the package. If you take the guns, I swear to god, Franklin, I’ll shoot you as soon as you come back in. They’re my meal ticket, so they’re your meal ticket. They aren’t charged up anyway. Owners keep the power cells when they send ‘em for repairs.”

She turns, apparently unconcerned with staying there to listen, and heads into the next room. After a second, the faint sound of a water pump breaks the silence.

Kane dumps the basket on the living room table, rustles around in it and pulls out two patched, worn firearms. One of them has a familiar gold and red symbol on the stock, and for a second Kane grits his teeth, incredibly tempted—if anyone can afford to lose a gun it’s that loud-mouthed disgrace to humanity. But if the Duke knows where this weapon was sent, and it fails to return, it
isn’t worth the risk that he might send somebody to retrieve it. Vi may be willing to accommodate Kane for some reason, but he has no doubt if he brings more trouble in her direction she’ll throw him willingly under the metaphorical bus.

...Or the literal bus, possibly.

The note is almost illegible, a scrawled mess. Kane frowns at it, and eventually manages to decipher the names of several vegetables and fruits he hasn’t heard of for decades. Also “goat”, apparently. Just “goat”. Kane’s lip curls.

He’s about to pick up his mask--still discarded by the door, dropped when he came in--when a thought occurs to him. Vi can’t see the note, and won’t be able to see the contents of the next package when it comes either. If Kane bides his time, does a few menial chores and bears the humiliation of being called by the wrong name, he should be able to get the parts he needs. And as galling as it is to wait, it will give his arm time to heal, give him time to regain his strength.

It’s going to delay his trip home. But he can only reasonably expect one chance to make his escape happen, and he can’t afford to make a mess of it. In this case, for the first time in a long time, the consequences of hurrying a project far outweigh the benefits.

Plus, there’s no chance of anyone discovering his identity via a handwritten note. A recording, maybe--his voice is as recognizable to Motorcitizens as it is to Deluxians. Kane digs through a chipped cup full of broken pencils, glances guiltily around for Vi, and adds a few items to the list. A few neat lines, in careful, blocky handwriting he hasn’t used in years. He used to write up enormous plans late into the night and annotate Jacob’s blueprints by hand for hours--it feels strange to be writing again, in blunt pencil on dirty paper.

It’s not elegant or fast, but it’s safe. After all, who’s going to recognize his handwriting, down here?

--

Julie is hard at work.

Most of the conventional channels are locked down, but she’s still making headway. They’re not going to take her unawares again and oh, yes, she has access codes they didn’t even know existed. A quick check as she runs shows that Larsson is still making his announcement--”...myself and Gregory Pinsky, master-in-chief of our immaculate security force, this city will find itself entering a new--”

“Can’t you shut down the broadcast?!” gasps Harley, pounding down the hallway beside her.

“That’s what my dad would have done!” Julie snaps back, and flings the screen his way. “Here! Ping Larsson’s location, he’s gotta be somewhere near the tower if he’s using the news broadcast!”

Harley groans but does as he’s told, fingers jabbing furiously at the keyboard. “Sometimes your dad was--”

“I swear to god if you say ‘right’ you’re fired!”

“I wasn’t--”

“But if it’s any comfort,” Julie adds snidely as they skid around a corner, “now that I’m in charge, fired doesn’t mean getting your nose broken and living in a factory for the rest of your natural life!”
“Touche,” mutters Harley, and then backpedals, shouting, “J--Juliejuliejulie!! Get behind me!”

But Julie stands her ground, eyes fixed firmly on the regiment of cadets at the end of the hallway. “No way!”

“I’ll--use my implants!” Harley shouts, and then wavers as she whips around, glaring, at the word implants. “The ones in my arms! I put new--ugh, I’ll tell you later, just--please--”

“No!” Julie repeats, and with a flick of her wrist extends the boomerang again. The cadets slow their pace, looking uneasy. “I own this company! I’m going to fight for it myself!! And if you have a problem with that, then come at me!!”

There’s a ringing silence, and then a voice from the back row of cadets says, “Wow, okay, that was pretty badass.”

Julie’s boomerang drops a fraction of an inch as a familiar figure pushes to the front of the group.

“Dar?”

“It’s okay!” Dar says. And sure enough, there are no guns aimed at her. The cadets--and they are all cadets, no masks, no red goggles--glance at each other and then, a little raggedly, salute. “We’re here to help! Uh...Miss Kane.” A little belatedly, he salutes. “Pinsky’s got the Elites on his side, but we’re not with him, ma’am!”

His face is swollen, black and blue, his nose and lips are tacky with blood. If it comes to that, most of the boys he’s with don’t look so good either. Lots of blacked eyes and bloody noses. Julie stares at them, and has to swallow hard.

“Uh--” She flounders, then hastily stows her not-very-Deluxian boomerang and straightens up to her full height. “Th-thank you! Is everybody...okay?”

“Eh…” Dar glances around at his guys and kind of wince-shrugs. “We’ll live, ma’am. Did you send, uh...y’know, the guy?”

Relief rises warm in Julie’s chest. “He turned up, then?” She wasn’t sure Red would agree to go, and it’s not like he really gave her an answer before unceremoniously signing off. “Is he...um. Doing...what he does?”

“He’s doing somethin’,” Dar says fervently. “Didn’t stay to watch.” He puts on a raspy growl. “Get out if you know what’s good for you. Just glad he was with you and not Larsson.”

“I’m glad you’re not with Larsson,” says Julie, grinning.

“R&D’s isn’t either,” volunteers one boy. He can’t be older than fifteen, skinny and awkward with big, earnest eyes, and Julie has never felt so old for her age. Did she look that young three years ago? “I’ve got some buddies in the intern program and, and uh, they said you’re cool! Ma’am.” He glances at Dar nervously. “And they’ve been on the radio all morning. They say Mr. Stevens’ financial officers and some of the Cit-Life people have locked themselves up in R&D with the techs and they won’t come out.”

“We were headed there next,” says Dar, and hefts a plasma rifle that looks like it weighs at least half his body-weight. He side-eyes Alex, then looks back to Julie and raises his eyebrows. Do you want me to...? Julie rolls her eyes and shakes her head. Alex looks from one to the other and wilts.
“I gotta say,” Julie says, looking around at them all, “I thought this was gonna be a lot harder. No one’s had my back since I started, so--”

“So you thought you were gonna take down everyone in the tower on your own?” says Dar, incredulous, and shakes his head. “Man! I mean, don’t get me wrong, I’m not sure who I’d bet on there, but you’d have your work cut out for you.”

“Then it’s a good thing I have you guys,” says Julie briskly, and deigns to give Harley a look along with the cadets. She’s not sure she’ll ever fully trust him, but there’s something so weirdly innocent about him—so eager for approval—that it’s hard to completely hate him either.

“So,” says Dar as they fall in step around her, “I guess we’re headin’ to where Larsson is?”

“Yes,” Julie grits out.

“Uh, okay. Cool. You don’t just wanna shut down the broadcast?”

“I--no, I just told Harley--”


“--I just told him, I don’t want to just go dark and then make an announcement that everything is okay or whatever! Did you know back in the old days people used to debate on live broadcast?”

“I...yeah, I’ve kinda heard that,” Dar says. He’s going to be just as tall as his brother, geez. He has to take half-steps to avoid outpacing her. “But Larsson’s not gonna listen to you, ma’am.”

“Oh, he’ll listen,” says Julie grimly, and pulls out her boomerang again with a crackle of yellow plasma. The cadets around her side-step in such perfect unison it might as well have been coordinated, nervously clearing a space around her. “I’ll make him listen. I’ll show him who’s incapable.”

“So you don’t want to shut him down though.” Dar sighs, glances back at the troops behind them. “Guys, she doesn’t wanna shut it down, can you, uh…”

“On it,” says one cadet, and pulls up a screen. On the other end, a boy with bright red hair, dark skin and stunningly green eyes glances up and straightens his glasses. “Will! Hey, so--”

“We’re almost in,” says the tech. “Where are you guys? Did you find her?”

“Yeah, but she doesn’t wanna stop the broadcast!” The cadet glances up at Julie. “Uh, I guess she’s gonna take him down on camera? I think maybe she’s gonna beat him up!”

“Oh, sick!” says Will.

“I’m not going to beat him up,” Julie says, and then thinks about Larsson’s stupid, smug face plastered across her screens and adds, “…maybe. He thinks he’s winning—and I bet the city does too, that’s not okay.”

“So what do we do?”

“Let them know he hasn’t won,” Julie says, and doesn’t even think to notice how right it feels to step into an elevator, hands folded behind her back, a troop of soldiers standing at her shoulders. “‘Cause he’s--y’know what?! He’s a bump in the road. He’s nothing, he’s nobody, he always has been. He started this war because he thinks he can win, ha! He’s got a lot to learn!”
There’s a moment of silence as the elevator doors slide shut--Julie purses her lips, composing herself, and smiles.

“So,” she says, much calmer. “Do whatever you can to let citizens know that the right people are still in charge. Okay?”

“...Damn,” says somebody on the other end of the line, very, very softly. “I think we picked the right side.”

--

Claire knew something was up the instant she saw Emmanuel Larsson’s nasty face on the announcement channel. Julie and her mom have both spent enough time ranting about the guy that there’s no way he’d be allowed to do an executive city-wide broadcast.

And of course, of course he’s trying to make the big reveal and embarrass Julie, it’s written all over his smug, gross face! Claire’s up and out of her chair before he even says Julie’s name, darting into the other room to call her bestie. The call straight-up won’t connect--okay, so they’ve blocked her off. Don’t panic, Jules has got this, obviously, and there’s one other number Claire can try.

It takes her mom a while to pick up, and with every second that passes Claire’s imagination throws progressively worse and worse scenarios at her. What if Gwen tried to stop Larsson and got thrown in jail? What if he knew about Julie’s connection to the Clement family and went after Gwen first? What if what if what--

“Claire, honey!”
At any other moment, Claire would be surprised by the honey--her mom hasn’t called her anything cute or affectionate in years--but there’s no time now. “Mom! Ohmigod, I’m so glad you’re okay! What’s going on over there?”

“I’m in the R&D department,” says Mrs. Clement, glancing over her shoulder at a milling, yelling mass of Kane Co. techies. “Stevens sent a memo asking me to come here for a ‘surveillance tech review’ but it turns out--don’t crowd me--it turns out we’re barricaded in here trying to figure out how to deal with the whole...coup thing.”

“Ugh!” Claire glances back at the broadcast, disgusted. “I, like, can’t even believe this. They would never have tried to take over from her dad.”

“She’s not as...intimidating as Mister Kane,” says Gwen. Claire, who’s seen Julie stare down gang leaders, drive half the Amazons’ electrified race course backwards, and generally kick ass at all hours of the day, just rolls her eyes.

“Yeah, I’m sure that’s what Wrinkles here thinks too. Okay, so--how’s the public feeling about it?”

“I’d tell you if I had access to my feeds,” says Gwen, jaw tightening with frustration, “but these guys don’t even have a work-around to hack into them.”

“Oh, I got this,” says Claire, and strides back into the living room to swipe Larsson’s video imperiously aside. “I’ll start with the founding families and, uh, duh, high-ranking officials...”

“The password is--”

“MrClement!” Claire finishes brightly, already done entering it.
Claire laughs, pulling up feed after feed until she’s looking at a grid of videos, all showing Deluxe families with their eyes fixed on Larsson’s broadcast. “I’ve seen you enter it like a million times, Mom! Like you always say…”

“Keep your eyes open,” Gwen recites, and Claire feels her chest swell at the words. She’s heard them so many times before, but never with so much pride in them.

Larsson showed the picture of Julie and said a ton of dumb stuff about her, but he introduced her as “Julie Kapulsky” and he never really explained how she got to be CEO in the first place. Claire still hasn’t picked up the skill of listening to two videos at once, so she skips through sections of conversation one camera at a time, waiting to pick up the tone of each one before moving on.

“Okay, but—who made her CEO? I don’t understand—”

“—a disgrace, putting a child under that much press—”

“—ster Kane would make that decision unless he had a reason!”

“Unless he didn’t make the decision, but this guy—”

“—seen her around on the upper floors—”

“—red hair, always hanging around the executive levels—think about it, it—”

“Mmkay,” says Claire, trying not to think about the way her heart is pounding as she shuts down that video, “basically what I’m getting is, Larsson is super bad at making speeches, and people are just, like, mega-confused. Mom, do you know if Julie’s gonna be there soon? She should really shut down the—”

“Shut down the broadcast, yes,” mutters Gwen, her expression souring a little. “That’s what I said too, but apparently she’s determined to, uh...have a televised debate.”

“That’s not even a thing!” Claire protests, exasperated.

“I also said that! But you know how she is.”

Claire does. “Okay,” she says, frowning, “but the longer Bald and Super Ugly talks, the harder it’s gonna be for her to gloss this over, right? Isn’t there anything we can do?”

“They’re, uh, working on something over here,” says Gwen, although she sounds a little dubious. “I think they just got it running.”

Claire, who knows what kind of stuff gets made in R&D, pulls a face. “Ugh, god, it’s not like...a freeze ray or something lame, is it?”

“Look at the broadcast,” says Gwen. Claire looks at the broadcast, opens her mouth to say that nothing has changed...and then shuts it again as a slim white banner appears at the bottom of the screen. Claire watches, hypnotized, as blue text starts to scroll across it:

**This broadcast is unsanctioned by the Director of Kane Co. Julie Kane.**

**Please be patient until she makes her appearance.**

And then, after a pause:
Emmanuel Larsson is a wrinkly old bastard who looks the other way while his employees get the shit kicked out of them.

Don’t believe a word Emmanuel “Butthole” Larsson says.

Hey, you know this broadcast is 100% illegal, right Deluxe?!

“Are they...gonna stop anytime soon...?” asks Claire weakly, glancing back at her mom. In the background of her video comm, Claire can see techies crowded around a cluster of screens that look a lot like Chuck’s, all yelling and grabbing for the keyboard. She chances a look back at the broadcast, where Larsson is still talking, unaware of the text commentary panning by underneath him.

Closed captions provided by the Kane Co. Research and Development Department, also you’re welcome for everything.

Miss Kane’s coming for you Larsson!

You’re SO FIRED, LARSSON!!!

THIS IS WHAT YOU GET!!!!

Again, this broadcast is unsanctioned by the Director of Kane Co. Julie Kane.

Please be patient until she

Comes to kick Emmanuel Larsson’s ASS

“Ohmigod!” Claire giggles, and then cuts herself off, glancing back at the nerds squabbling behind her mom. “I mean--it’s not that funny, I just--”

“Larsson!”

“Oh,” murmurs Claire, small and squeaky with excitement, “Oo, oo, mom!! Mom, she’s doing it!”

Julie has a scrape on her cheek, her lips are pressed together tight, and her face is white with rage. Claire hasn’t seen her look that mad in a really long time. She comes storming into the shot, hair whipping behind her all silky and red, plants her feet and crosses her arms.

“I knew you were a greedy old man,” she says, all cold and badass, “I knew you didn’t respect me, but I thought you would at least respect my father.”

Larsson doesn’t look happy. Claire’s eyes flicker back, irresistibly, to the text banner at the bottom of the screen as “OH MY GOD, IT’S HAPPENING” scrolls by.

“Young lady,” says Larsson. “It’s glaringly obvious you know nothing about running a company. You will run this city into the ground!”

“My name isn’t young lady,” Julie hisses.

“That’s beside the point--”

“That’s beside the point...?” Julie leave the words hanging, suggesting, so clearly expectant Claire finds her own mouth shaping the words. Miss Kane.
“Miss Kapulsky,” Larsson grits out, through that big, awful smile.

“Wrong,” says Julie. “Try again.”

Claire tears her eyes away, flicks to another feed. Confusion, still, but people are glancing at each other. “--did she say ‘father’--?” “Guys look at this, look at this, what--” “Who is that?” “The banner said Kane, Julie K--” “She said my father--”

Larsson rallies, drawing himself up. “You are a child!” He’s taller than her, but Julie isn’t budging. “You have no right--”

“I have every right!” Julie says, and it kinda booms, and it sounds really familiar. That tone, the way she’s standing, the way her eyes look under her bangs, all shadowed. “I have the only right!! Or are we going to change the name to Larsson Co.?”

Larsson hits her.

--

It takes Julie a second to register what happened. It’s not the hardest hit she’s ever taken, but it’s unexpected and he’s much, much bigger than her. She staggers, hits the floor hard. A familiar sting in her cheek and lip, a rush of hot, metallic blood on her tongue. Larsson is shaking out his fist, turning back to the screen.

How dare he.

How dare he?!

Julie is halfway through pushing herself up, snarling, when a heavy hand in warm leather shoves her shoulder, pushes her back down. Quick footsteps, and Julie sees red light flickering off the walls and knows a second early.

“Red!” She snaps at the top of her lungs, throwing all her authority into the words, “Stop!”

She doesn’t make it in time. The sounds of her yell, of the crack of Red’s fist, and Larsson’s pained grunt echo over top of each other, and Red goes still, head just barely turning to look back at where Julie is kneeling. Red’s helmet has a crack in the visor, and the framework of it is warped and singed. One of his gloves is dead; the arm it’s on is dangling limp at his side.

“You cringing old hypocrite,” he hisses, and Larsson takes a step back, another one, and Julie--hates this, hates it so much she can’t breathe. “If you lay a hand on her again, you’re not going to like what--what?!”

“This is none of your business,” Julie snarls, inches from his cracked visor, and punches him in the diaphragm, hard.

--

Back in the Clement home, Claire tries feverishly to keep up with the confused conversations bouncing around the households of Deluxe. No one knows who Red is or why there’s so much punching happening, and there’s a general overwhelming sense of fear and confusion. Pull it together, Claire wills, watching as her friend shoves Red to one side and steps up to Larsson. There is a clear, horrible anger boiling just below the surface on Julie’s face, but if she loses control now there’s no telling how public opinion will shift.
To Claire’s immense relief--and Gwen’s, by her grateful sigh--Julie takes a deep breath, turns to the camera, and says, “Hello, Deluxe.”

“Good,” says Gwen encouragingly, as though Julie can hear her. “Keep going!”

“I am the CEO of Kane Co,” says Julie. “I--”

“No, they won’t!” Julie snaps. “My security forces are already in control of your little power grab.” (I hope, she thinks.) “Some people in the tower are still loyal to the company name!”

Larsson opens his mouth, but Julie’s done with this. To hell with pretending. To hell with lying. To hell with everyone watching, and what they’ll think. She’s going to do this the way it should always have been done: for herself.

Julie takes a deep breath and stands up tall, every inch a CEO, every ounce a Kane, a Burner to the core. Larsson meets her eyes and she sees him flinch.

“My name is Julie Kane. I’m Abraham Kane’s only child and while he’s gone, the company belongs to me! It says so in his will, and I’ll make the document public if you want.”

Larsson’s ever-present grin tightens into something ugly, half-scared. “That won’t be necessary!”

“I’m doing it right now,” says Julie, not breaking eye contact as her fingers dance over her keyboard. “You want the public to know about me? I’ll tell them everything! I’m done sitting in the shadows, trying to make tiny changes! There are people dying slowly in drone factories right now, and innocent employees taking abuse from our own Security Department! And Larsson, no one likes throat cubes! No one!”

“You tell him, honey!” cheers Tom Odom, leaping up in his pod to punch the air.

“If Mister Kane left the company to you in his will,” Larsson hisses, “then the document is only valid in the event of his death! Is that what you’re saying, Miss Kane? That you believe Abraham Kane, founder of our great city, is dead?”

To her immense credit, Julie lets him finish the sentence. Claire honestly expected another throwdown, probably to the death, but instead there’s just a moment of crushingly absolute silence. Even the surveillance feeds are quiet, the pods’ occupants staring breathlessly at the broadcast. The company hasn’t addressed the topic of Mister Kane’s fate since he vanished.

Deluxe holds its breath and waits for an answer.

“I don’t...know,” says Julie eventually, and to Claire, for a split second, she looks like the eighteen-year-old, young and confused and frightened. And then she blinks and it’s gone. “I don’t know, but here’s one thing I do know: your name wasn’t anywhere in that document, Larsson. Wherever my father is, whether he’s dead or alive, I’m going to treat your ‘coup’ like what it is: a desperate old man’s back-stabbing insubordination.”
She turns back to the screen, looking out at Deluxe. Claire glances up, out the window of her pod, and bites her lip to control an enormous, stupid smile at the sight of her best friend’s face on every screen, through the window of every pod.

“I’m sorry you had to see that,” says Julie, and she sounds genuinely remorseful, if a little frazzled and still clipped with leftover anger. “The Kane Co. I was trained to inherit does things quickly, smoothly and with dignity.” She glances back over her shoulder pointedly at the place where several cadets are boisterously getting Larsson cuffed. The boys look up at her and immediately stand up straighter and stop talking, marching Larsson promptly away from the announcement screen.

Julie turns back, painted lips quirking in satisfaction. Her lip is split, there’s a trickle of blood smeared across her pale skin, but somehow that doesn’t matter. “I case it wasn’t clear, Mr. Larsson has been fired as our head of Research and Development. Rough patches like this are part of the transfer process! I’ll take questions tomorrow morning via an open line to the tower. Until then, I hope you’ll stay patient as we introduce new management to the company.”

Julie spreads her arms, magnanimous and proud, and more than anything else she’s done tonight, it’s scarily reminiscent of Mister Kane. “Welcome to the new Kane Co. family,” she says, and Claire shivers.
Notable section titles for this chapter:
- Kane Gets Soup
- Julie’s Daring Plan
- Larsson and Pinsky Go Too Far
- Cadet Gordy Has Had Enough of This Bullshit
- The Pollen of the Terras (Flashback Time)
- Kane You Goddamn Freeloader
- WELCOME TO THE KANE CO. FAMILY BITCH
Do You Remember...?? It's Time To Wake Up!!

Chapter Summary

I have one person worth 1000. Do you?

* I belong in Motorcity

* There's somebody up there looking out for us.

* Deluxe is the worst.

(STILL) Day 7

Julie watches Larsson led away by a squad of cadets and more than a couple of R&D techs, all of them chattering to each other over his head. She almost has to laugh—they’re all so young, and they won. She was so scared but she won. It feels like every fight against an army of bots, every one-sided battle turned miraculously around, all rolled into one. Even Red, standing like a sullen black and red ghost in one corner, can’t dampen her mood. Julie wants to whoop out loud, do donuts in Nine Lives, hug her boys and crowd into a booth at Antonio’s for pizza, she won!

She pulls up Mike’s comm, half-running to get clear of the crowd around the broadcasting platform, breathless with excitement. He should be almost up to Deluxe by now, if he’s not here already--she’s gotta tell him!

The call picks up. Julie is already talking, pacing in tiny, excited circles. Wow, her knuckles sting. “Mike! Cowboy you’re never gonna believe what happened up here--we got it all figured out, but there was this huge--uh. Mike?”

Mike seems to be slumped against something, a wall--no, or is he on his side? Is he...lying down on the ground?

“Mike?”

“I,” says Mike, bleary-eyed and vague. The air around him looks hazy, blurry, like her screen is glitching out. “...Miss Jules. J-Julie I’m...why’d you take me here, I can’t--”

“Mike!” Julie grabs her screen in both hands, stomach twisting. She’s seen that blank, confused look before, seen Mike lost in his own head and scared. “Mike, talk to me. What’s going on?”

“Mom’s dead,” Mike rasps, and swallows hard, voice thick. His eyes are watering--that has to be why they look so bright. “I made commander, Julie, Miss Julie, I, I mean..”

Julie takes a deep breath--another one, as deep and steady as she can. It doesn’t help. Panic is still crawling up her spine, icy and unstoppable. “Mike,” she says again, and stops, mouthing helplessly. “--T-tell me where you are.”

“I belong in Deluxe,” Mike mumbles.
“Where are you?!”

“Mmmotorcity,” slurs Mike, and his eyes are starting to fall shut, unfocusing as they close.
“...'M...home.”

Julie says his name again--shouts it--no answer.  Mike lies there still and silent, breathing deep.
Julie tries Dutch’s icon, Texas’s...stops before hitting Chuck’s.  None of the other Burners are picking up. Julie groans, agonized, drags at two handfuls of her hair and tries to focus, tries to think--

“Miss...Julie?”

Julie whips around, wild-eyed.  Alex jerks back away from her, alarmed, hands held up in surrender.  “What’s wrong?” he says, unnerved as Julie just stares at him.  “Is everything okay?”

“No,” Julie says, hoarse and small.  “No, it’s--no!  No it’s not!  It’s...”  She trails off, eyes drawn inexorably to the empty corner by the door.  “...Where’d Red go?”

“He--just left?  Alex sounds like he’s not sure if that’s the right answer or not.  “A few seconds ago.  I tried to ask where he was going, but he just...growled at me?  I mean, he literally growled?”

“Where was he--?” Julie starts, and then stops herself.  “Okay, not important.  Listen, there’s some kind of plague down there, some kind of--of toxin, I don’t know, but--Mike’s down--”

“Seriously?”  Alex’s pale face is going even paler.  He hurries forward, bending down to look over Julie’s shoulder.  “I mean, surely Chuck can figure out some kind of--”

“Chuck’s out too,” says Julie, and Alex’s eyes go completely round.  “All of them are, it puts you in a coma and they were going to bring him--”

“Chuck’s in a coma?!”  Alex’s voice cracks hilariously on the word.  “Are you--when--why didn’t somebody tell--okay!  Okay, okay, uh--  If they weren’t affected before and they are now, it must have happened fast, so there has to be a high concentration of whatever’s causing the--the coma, near where they are.  We can’t send a squad after them.”

“Jacob!” Julie says sharply, and her comm pulls up, dialing.  Jacob picks up on the first ring, looking harried and worried.  “Jacob, where’s ROTH?”

“He just got back from doin’ his deliveries,” Jacob says.  “Julie--”

“I need him,” Julie says.  “Right now, I need him to head up to where the boys are, they didn’t make it here.  Whatever Chuck has, they’re all getting it, fast.”

Jacob’s eyes widen, and he turns off-screen, calls “ROTH! Get over here, kiddo!”  Back to Julie, “- -What didja see?”

“I called Mike, and he was seeing things,” says Julie.  “He could barely even talk to me, and then he…”  She swallows hard.  “He’s not gonna be able to help us, and none of the others are even answering.”

“You got coordinates?”

“They’re--not in their cars anymore,” says Julie, trying to think while her brain revs into panic mode.  “They were going to use the access tunnel in sector 63--the one that spirals up over the river.  I think they were somewhere high up.”
“We can do better than that,” Alex says, and Julie is reminded abruptly that this is the guy who invented a mind control device and a shock collar strong enough to kill. Alex’s eyes are electric. “I can get you coordinates.”


“I put a tracker in Mike’s neck,” says Alex, blank and bright like that’s a perfectly normal thing to do, and spreads his hands, fanning screens out in front of him. “When they did surgery for his implant.”

“You WHAT?!”

Alex is typing, not listening to her. “I thought it might come in handy in the future,” he says, without a hint of guilt. “And I was right, it looks like.”

“Say again now?!” Jacob is scowling fiercely on the other side of the comm screen.

“It was a logical choice,” says Alex.

“You put a--no, wait, back up.” Julie takes a deep breath, trying to steady her voice--it doesn’t work at all. “You put a tracker in Mike? Like some kind of--?!”

“Julie, please,” says Alex fiercely. “Chuck’s brain could be taking permanent damage right now.” He says the words like somebody else might say “and then they burned the museum”. Julie subsides into breathless, outraged silence, fists working as Alex types.

“The signal’s faint, but I’ve got quadrant coordinates,” he says, after an endless minute. “It’ll keep triangulating from there.”

“It’ll run without your help?” Julie says.

“It should, the program is--”

“Oh, good!” says Julie, and slaps him across the face with all her strength.

--

Mike’s packing his stuff. The smell of his pod is familiar, sterile and Deluxian under the smell of two sweaty thirteen-year-olds who don’t shower as much as they probably should. The feeling of the polymer under his hands as he pushes himself up is exactly right, almost too real. Chuck is sitting on the top bunk, knees pulled up to his chest, frowning and wide-eyed. Mike shoves his belongings into a transfer pod, practically vibrating, pushing up the too-long sleeves of his new Cadet uniform.

“...You’ll come back to visit, right?” says Chuck, and--and no, he’s...lying down, he’s on the ground on the cold surface of the access road, eyes closed and--sick, he’s right in front of Mike and--

--straightening up gasping, staggering toward Mike. Jagged green lines creeping across his skin. Shambling hoards of virus-zombies reach out for him, they’re all sick, Chuck’s sick, they’re sick with something.

If he could just get a comm connection with Julie, she could come help him up instead of bumping into him in the hallway like this, she dropped her stuff everywhere.
Mike kneels down to pick her stuff up for her, and Julie says “Are you...Mike Chilton?” and Mike smiles and settles the blank white helmet under his arm and smiles.

“Sorry, Miss Julie?”

...No. No, that’s not real, that’s not happening, not now. That’s over, he’s not like that anymore!

Something is messing with his head.

The memories are smothering, vivid as a movie playing in front of his eyes. Mike jerks onto his front and shakes as Jacob puts the jacket on his shoulders. Pushes himself up onto all fours as Kane nods approvingly at him and corrects the form of a punch. Struggles to his knees as Red’s boots swim in front of his vision. Get up, Commander.

He makes it to his feet, half-blind and struggling to remember how to use his own arms and legs, before his mom reaches out to him and says “...You weren’t fighting again, were you?” and Mike’s knees go out.

“Julie,” he tries to say, to call her for--for something, for backup, he needs backup, the building is full of--he can’t. He can’t remember, he can’t stop remembering.

--

Julie yelled at Alex about human rights for a solid fifteen minutes, and the sting in his cheek has basically died away by the time she sends him out to the Burners’ rendezvous point with stern orders to wait. His cheek is still bright red. The medical squad Julie sent with him has tactfully avoided mentioning it, but Alex can tell.

He waits, occasionally pinging Mike’s homing implant morosely and forwarding the information to Julie. Okay, so maybe the tracker was...overkill, and sure, it’s not something Alex is proud of, but it came in useful, didn’t it? So it turned out okay, right?

Right?

Alex’s cheek throbs. He sends Julie another update.

He’s been sitting there for about forty minutes when the sound of whirring propulsor engines startles him out of his daze. A boxy little shape with a glowing green eye rises out of the darkness. It might have been an enforcer drone once, painted bright green, and the Burners’ logo is stencilled on its front in neon purple. It’s carrying...some kind of tarp, bundled around something bulky...

The bot hitches up its misshapen burden, and a limp human arm flops over the side of it. Alex squeaks embarrassingly and backpedals about fifteen feet as fast as his legs can carry him, raising his gun. The bot looks up at the noise, makes a high-pitched whining noise and motors back abruptly, eye flashing in apparent surprise.

“Sir?” says one of the medical officers, high-pitched and nervous. “What...what is that thing?”

“I--I don’t know.” Alex’s hands work on the grips of the gun. Burner logo. Painted drone. Hasn’t he seen this thing before?

“...Do you know Julie?” he says cautiously.

The bot makes a high-pitched whirring, chirping noise that can only be interpreted as gleeful, bobbing vigorously up and down like it’s nodding. Alex swallows hard.
“Is that them?” he says, with a nod toward the lumpy bundle held under the bot’s chassis. It bobs again.

“Sir?”

“It’s a friend,” says Alex, with all the authority he can muster, and beckons the bot forward. It comes, a little warily, and then lowers the bundle very carefully to the ground. The broad green thing that Alex assumed was some sort of salvaged tarp moves and condenses and turns into two strange, plant-like appendages, veined through with inorganic circuitry. Alex gets stuck staring at those for a couple of seconds, but then his eyes fall on what the bot was holding and all thoughts about biotech go right out of his head.

“Oh, shit,” says one of the medical technicians, very softly. “Are those the freakin’ Burners?”

Alex hurries forward, drops to his knees and presses two fingers to Chuck’s throat—for a long, awful second he doesn’t feel anything at all, but then Chuck’s chest shifts faintly, a slow pulse throbs against Alex’s fingers. The other three are breathing too, hearts beating. But they don’t wake up.

“...Godinsky Syndrome,” says one of the medical techs softly.

There’s an immediate outburst of complaint. “--Godinsky, we’re not calling it that!” “Godinsky, come on!” and “Nobody agreed to that name!” and “It’s called Ephemereia, I’m telling you, that’s so much better--”

“You--what?!?” Alex’s mouth drops open. “--You knew about this?”

“Knew about what?”

It’s Julie. One of the techs must have called her. Alex straightens up, cheek stinging, and clears his throat.

“I’ve got them, Miss Kane,” he says, as officially as he can. “The Burners, I mean. They’re unconscious, though, all of them.”

On the other end of the call, Julie takes a heavy breath. “...Right,” she says. “Okay.” And then, “...Wait, who knew about what?”

“The medical squad say they recognize this,” says Alex. Julie’s eyes widen and then narrow.

“...Let me talk to them.”

--

The medical department is the smallest department in Kane Co. The medical system is basically automated, and no new diseases have been discovered in Deluxe for several decades. The most excitement they’ve had in years was a few months ago, when Julie’s dad released a zombie plague into Motorcity. A Deluxian living too close to a gap in the dome somehow managed to contract it, and the entire medical department was thrown into a frenzy of excitement. Then R&D Sanitizers had showed up with some kind of magnet gun and instantaneously cured the lady, deflating the excitement like a punctured balloon.

Right now, they’re ecstatic.

“We have a list of possible names!” one of them tells Julie—a young man in a perfectly white coat.
There are five or six other people behind him, all sharing one comm screen. “It’s a real, organic disease, a cluster of repeating symptoms caused by biological--”

“So you do recognize it,” says Julie—he quails a bit under her stare.

“Well--yeah, I mean, I did say that earlier.”

“So what you’re telling me is…” Julie trails off, takes a deep breath, trying to let her anger settle. She can’t start shouting at her employees now, not after her fight with Larsson. She has to be the better boss.

They’re all waiting for her to say something. She settles for straightforward and simple. “Why didn’t you tell me there were Deluxe citizens getting sick?”

“Well!” says a woman in the background of the call, jumping eagerly forward, “We weren’t sure at first! I mean, the zombie plague--” A rustle of discontented mutters. Clearly this is still a sore spot. “--The zombie plague turned out to be...nothing!”

“Nothing,” huffs the one named Godinsky. “And we had a name for it and everything!”

“We did not,” says the woman immediately. “We were not going to call it--”

“I discovered it!”

“And it was nothing!”

“Guys, focus!” snaps Julie, her patience ebbing again. She can already tell the medical department is going to be their own special kind of difficult, and it’s giving her a throbbing tic behind one eye. The doctors calm down, looking disgruntled.

“...So, we didn’t know if it was real at first,” says the woman. Julie glances at her nametag--J. Deere. “And then we, uh…”

“Couldn’t decide on a name,” says Julie. Another collective wince tells her she’s right on the money.

“Well...yes.” Deere clears her throat and then rushes on as Julie opens her mouth. “--but! But, we also...we didn’t think you would be interested! Um, Miss Kane.”

“You...you didn’t think I’d be interested?” Julie repeats, flabberghasted. “In the fact that my citizens were catching some kind of mystery plague?!"

“Mister Kane--M-mister Kane wouldn’t have been!” one of the men jumps in, hands held up in pacification. “You didn’t bring half-finished projects to Mister Kane, Miss Kane. He would...not have been pleased. He wasn’t very interested in our work unless we discovered something that could be used as a bio-weapon, and--”

“Sanderson,” hisses Godinsky, and the man who was talking falters abruptly, eyes widening.

“Not--he was a very good CEO!” he hurries to say, and Julie has to resist the urge to laugh because...what, do they think she doesn’t know? She knows, that’s exactly how it would have worked. How can this be used against Motorcity scum? She knows. “But he was very busy, and he, um, didn’t have a lot of time to spare. For us. There are still pieces of the puzzle missing, Miss Kane. Even apart from the name.”
“Okay.” Julie takes a deep breath, digesting all of that. “Okay, that’s...fine. But what do you know?”

“We know it’s some form of neurotoxin,” Deere says quickly, obviously eager to redeem the honor of the medical department. “It causes people to relive their memories until they’re incapacitated, possibly by over-stimulating the--”

“I don’t need to know the anatomy,” Julie interrupts, and then feels kind of like a jerk as Deere bites her lip and wilts a little bit. “...Sorry. But it wouldn’t mean anything to me anyway, I need to know what we’re doing to fix it.”

“Oh!” And to Julie’s surprise, every face brightens. Godinsky summons a flock of hovering storage cubes and starts inputting something into a screen. “Yes, of course! Well, progress on that front has been very successful, Miss Kane! Behold!”

Godinsky holds up something small and glittery with a flourish. Julie squints at it, then at him. “...that’s an injector gun,” she says.

“I know!” Deere pushes forward as well, smiling again. “It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

“We--hhh.” Julie rubs her temples, breathing out slowly through her nose. “Yes, very nice--what about the medicine we need inside the injector, Doctor?”

“Oh, well, yes of course,” says Sanderson, half-scoffing. “What do you take us for, Miss Kane? It’s 100% effective.”

Julie stops dead.

“It’s...what?”

“It’s 100% effective!” Sanderson repeats. “Oh, cures are easy, especially with the new nanoneurotechnology Research and Development has been working on for us--”

“No, no no no wait,” Julie snaps, and holds up a hand sharply. To her satisfaction, the Medical Department’s chatter comes to an abrupt halt. “Are you telling me you have a cure?”

There’s a moment of silence, then, cautiously, Deere nods.

“Can--” Julie’s mouth has gone very dry, excitement hammering through every inch of her body. “Can you--give it to those, uh--”

“Burners?” says Sanderson dubiously. Another round of shushing.

“The Burners...” Oh, geez. “The Burners...were fighting my father. Not me. I’m not trying to destroy their city, I’m...I’m trying to make Deluxe...not the villain anymore.” Julie pauses, acutely aware that she used up her capacity for public speaking earlier in the day. “Um. Think of this as a peace offering. Does that make sense?”

The medical crew looks at each other, confused but (Julie thinks) not angry. Maybe they’ll have something to say after she closes the call, and that’s fine. As long as they help her boys.

“Sounds good,” says Deere. “Alright, guys, let’s do this! Who’s our highest priority?”

“Chuck!” shouts Harley, practically diving on-screen. “Chuck first!”
“Which one is…?” starts one of the doctors, and then yelps as Alex wrenches the injector out of his hand and dashes off. The doctors go hurrying after him, and for the first time Julie can see the Burners, lying on hover-stretchers, four motionless bodies. The screen follows Godinsky as he rushes over, and Julie winces at the sight of Chuck’s face. He looks even more sickly and ashen in the pure Deluxian sunlight than he did down in Motorcity.

Alex makes a hissing noise between his teeth. “Haven’t you been doing any kind of damage control?” he snaps accusingly. In his voice Julie can hear the remnants of that sort of bossy cruelty that some very smart people use with their subordinates. She’ll have to have another talk with him later. “Chuck’s the-- We’re talking about the leading authority-- Haven’t any of you read his thesis on android psychology?!”

“Oh wait,” says Godinsky, “actually, maybe? So--”

“Then you know how imperative it is that we prevent any more damage from coming to his brain!”

“Just did it,” says Deere in the background, bent over Chuck with an empty syringe in hand. “Easy-peasy. Now--”

Harley pushes past her, dropping to his knees at Chuck’s side, and Julie rolls her eyes. If she were there, of course she’d want to sit next to her boys and keep an eye on them. But she wouldn’t collapse by their stretchers like a grieving widow.

“Harley,” she says slowly, “I’m going to need you to focus on getting them to Kane Co. Tower. Okay?”

“Why isn’t he waking up?” Harley demands, like he didn’t hear her, and Julie grits her teeth, trying to breathe deeply. It’s not like it’ll last--he’s bound to calm down eventually.

“Oh my god,” says Harley. “He’s dead. Oh god, Chuck’s dead, oh no--”

Or not.

“He’s not dead,” says Deere, who sounds close to the end of her tether. “He has a pulse!”

“He’s dying, it’s too late--” Alex freezes, eerily still for a second, and then whips back around to Julie, eyes wide with manic hope. “We can save him,” he says.

“Alex,” says Julie, too exhausted to even be really frustrated. Harley isn’t listening anyway.

“The most important part of him is his brain,” he says, like a man having an epiphany, waiting for everybody else to catch up with him. “If we operate immediately, we have experimental mechanized bodies that should integrate with his neural implants, he can--”

“Commander Harley is officially under arrest,” says Julie quickly, and Alex turns to stare at her, startled and betrayed, as ROTH grabs his arms, chirping sternly at him. “Do not let him cut out that Burner’s brain.”

“It would be more effective to put his body in cryostasis and take it to the neuro lab in the tower, anyway,” Godinsky mumbles. “If he was dead, which he’s not.”

“So...the cure is working?” Julie glances past them to the stretchers. “He...he doesn’t look any different.”

“Well, it depends on length and severity of exposure, and efficiency of metabolism,” contributes one
of the junior medics, apparently eager to get his two cents in while the boss is on the line. “And--ma’am, since the name’s still up in the air, I’d like to suggest eidetosomatic degeneration--”

“The name is not important right now!” Julie says, very firmly. “We’ll decide on that later. For now, bring them to the tower. I’ll send you transportation. Harley, I swear to god, if Chuck’s brain is anywhere but inside his skull when they get here, yours is coming out next. Stay put.”

“And--ma’am?” Deere says cautiously. “To...to the tower?”

“Yes,” says Julie, ignoring the little twinge of nerves. She gave her reasoning, she doesn’t have to explain herself any further. She meets the doctor’s eyes for a long second, and Deere blinks first.

“...Yes, Miss Kane,” she says, “Of course.”

“Very good,” says Julie crisply. “Give all of them the injection, and...keep Commander Harley away from their brains. Dismissed.”

“Alright, pack up,” Julie hears somebody say, as she pushes her chair back and reaches out to end the call. “...Wow. I wonder what they’re dreaming about...”

When the pod arrives, Alex has mostly calmed down. Mostly. The pod slides open, revealing a girl no older than Julie, chin held high and hip cocked--like she just got here but she’s already disappointed. Alex starts to straighten to attention, and then stops himself, feeling stupid. She’s not even wearing a Kane Co. uniform.

“Uh...you are...?” he manages as she strides over to the unconscious Burners.

“Uh, Julie Kane’s best friend,” she says crisply, gesturing for the medical crew to start shifting stretchers. “Claire Clement.”

“Well, you--” Alex pauses. Thinks. Swallows. “Like...Gwen Clement?”

“Okay, good, so you know my mom,” says Claire and then, sharply, “Careful, alright? Geez!’

“Sorry, good, so you know my mom,” says Claire and then, sharply, “Careful, alright? Geez!’

“Sorry, sorry,” mutters the med guy named Godinsky, looking sullen--although Alex is pleased to note he holds Mike’s stretcher level as it hovers into the pod. The Burners’ bot escorts Alex inside and presses him down on the couch farthest from the Burners with surprising force. Apparently satisfied, it motors off to hover watchfully over their unconscious bodies.

“Okay, no, everybody get over to that corner, over there, and nobody touch anything!” Claire is saying, as the pod lifts off with a soft *whumm* of repulsor engines. “Like, I just got this place polished again and I don’t want fingerprints all over it?” And then, a little bit softer, “...Are they all, like...are they okay?”

“They will be shortly,” says Deere. “Um, Miss Clement.”

“Oh, I like the sound of that,” says Claire, bright and self-satisfied, and turns those big, dark, sharp eyes on Alex. He’s suddenly, uncomfortably reminded of the way Julie looks at him when he hesitates to follow an order. “...You’re Alex Harley, right?”

Oh god, she knows his name. “Yes,” says Alex, and then “--ma’am,” he adds, to be on the safe side.
“You made that thing they used on Mike.”

Alex shrinks in his seat, and tries really hard not to glance over at Mike’s dreaming profile. He’s much less peaceful than Chuck is, eyes twitching under his lids, lips moving faintly. But at least he doesn’t seem to be suffering this time, if that faint curve of a smile is any indication. Not like he was when the implant...

“I...feel really bad about that?” Alex offers, too quiet and a little late. Claire gives him a long, piercing look, and then, very slowly, raises an eyebrow.

“I bet you do,” she says. Alex tries to meet her stare for all of three seconds, and then his eyes slide away, and Claire laughs, not entirely kindly. “Uh-huh.”

“Why isn’t the cure working yet?” Alex asks, because it’s that or handle the way Claire Clement can see into his soul. “I thought you said people should be waking up by now.”

--

It’s Dutch’s first time painting a wall out in the open. He got sloppy, he rushed it...and he somehow managed to take way too long while doing both of those things. The sunrise is starting on the Deluxian horizon. But it was worth it. Holy jeez was it worth it.

He got the whole wall, a sprawling technicolor mess in contraband paint. If Dutch could do it over again, he’d fix like fifty things—fifty-one, that green is outta whack. But he feels alive, finally. This is what he wanted when he doodled on his note-taking tablet during education sessions. This is what was burning inside him when his teachers took those notes away, cut the sketches out of them, deleted his drawings. Real. Permanent. Paint on a wall.

Dutch wants to stay here and watch dawn fall over his creation, and damn the consequences. But he also remembers the mandatory hours of detention videos after one too many doodles. So instead he runs.

He picked a wall under a bridge, perfectly hidden from nearby security cameras, and like most Deluxian kids with a rebellious streak, he’s learned how to sneak around their range of vision. It’s the perfect crime. He’ll be home before his parents are even awake. He won’t even get in--

--so much trouble. He’s in so much trouble and the disciplinary hearing is in one minute and Dutch is sure he’s gonna end up in detentions for the rest of his natural life. Why did he have to put himself out there like that? He knew it was stupid, he knew he’d get in trouble, why’d he--!

“Well hello there, young man!”

Dutch looks up, despondent and slightly terrified, to see a dark-skinned man with a silky black ponytail approaching him. The guy doesn’t wait for him to answer, just blinds Dutch with a perfect smile and flourishes out a hand for him to shake.

“Tom Odom,” he says.

“Dutch Gordy,” says Dutch after a moment, grasping the proffered hand gingerly. Tom shakes it twice, with ceremony, and lets go. Dutch is grateful for that--handshakes longer than a couple seconds have always made him uncomfortable.

“You’re the young man responsible for this, I assume,” says Tom, snapping his fingers to summon a screen--a trick Dutch has never seen before. He winces at the sight of the photo: his painting, huge and gaudy across the wall under the bridge.
But it’s his art, *his* art, and he’s not gonna pretend it’s not. Dutch meets the guy’s eyes and nods.

For a tense second, he’s pretty sure he’s gonna get thrown off Deluxe. That’s what everybody says happens to kids who get too many disciplinary hearings; you get tossed through a hole in the dome and then mutant rats *eat* you.

But instead, Tom laughs loud and long and claps his hands. The screen minimizes with a soft, musical chime that’s *also* not standard. “Oh, I *like* it!” he says. “I love it! Son, you’ve got style coming out your ears!”

“Uh…” Is this a trap? It feels like a trap. Dutch swallows hard, then hazards, “Thanks?”

“You’re *welcome,*” says Tom generously. “Now, I suppose you don’t know who I am…” A meaningful pause. Dutch takes his cue and shakes his head. Tom sighs theatrically and shakes his head as well. “No,” he says. “I suppose you wouldn’t. I made...the *K.*”

Dutch waits patiently. Tom grins at him for a second or two, and then slumps a little, rubbing his temples.

“The Kane Co. ‘K’,” he says. “That’s my achievement. Two colors and one letter, that’s what they give me, up here. But *you*!” He bends down, half-bowing, and looks Dutch right in the eyes. “*Dutch Gordy*!”

“...Uh...yes?” Dutch manages. This...doesn’t feel like a disciplinary hearing. This feels like something new, and weird, and kind of cool. Dutch is *really* suspicious.

“How would you like to work for Aesthetic and Design?”

Dutch stares at him. “For...? Are you--are you offerin’ me a *job*?”

“I am,” says Tom, and his tone is a little softer now, less dramatic but no less genuine. “You have incredible talent, and--believe me, son--if you keep going the way you’re going, that talent is going to get you crushed. Just...” He snaps his fingers again. “…like a decommissioned bot. And I don’t want to see that happen.”

Dutch’s mouth is dry. “I’ve never...heard of Aesthetic and Design,” he says. His voice sounds small to his own ears.

“Ha!” Tom smiles, slightly pained. “Well, yes. It’s just me. Not much call for design, around here. I’m not lying to you, Dutch, it’s mostly figuring out how best to put a ‘K’ on things. But…” he holds up a hand as Dutch opens his mouth. “But. I also have access to all the art supplies in the city. Every color left in Deluxe.” For a second as they hold each other’s eyes, Dutch sees a familiar worn, drawn edge to Tom’s smile, and knows he--gets it. This guy gets it.

He could make art. He could make art every day, it could be his *job.* Dutch starts to jump up to his feet, starts to smile, and then...stops.

“...I couldn’t ever show anybody,” he says. “*Right?*

“You could show--your family,” says Tom, tilting his head to one side. “I...have someone I share my art with. You know--” He gestures, rolling his eyes. “--The stuff with the *colors.*”

There’s something about Tom’s face, the wistful eyes and crooked smile, that makes Dutch say it. “If...you didn’t have that person,” he says, “would you have stayed here?”
“No,” says Tom immediately. “I wanted freedom. I wanted to experiment! I wanted a stage. I was this close to...taking a trip downstairs.” He pauses, rapturous, one hand still held aloft with thumb and pointer finger a hair’s breadth apart. And then, slowly, the melodrama slips away and he’s just a guy, looking down at Dutch with that slightly sad smile he was wearing before. “But I had one person worth a thousand,” he says, and then, “...Do you?”

Dutch thinks of his mom, his dad. Of Dar. Of art jams in crayon on the pod floor, and how happy he was with that. How it was enough.

Before he painted that wall.

He doesn’t say anything, but Tom shrugs like he can see it all and says, “Alright, well...let me know if you need help getting down--”

--on the ground. The air stinks of spray paint and rust. There’s a boot on his chest, a crowd of grotesquely masked faces above him.

“No one caps King Krylon’s shit, toy!” says the owner of the boot, jabbing a gloved finger at the wall somewhere to Dutch’s right. Half the words don’t make sense to him, but the gist is easy enough to make out.

“I just got here, I didn’t know--there were rules--down here!” Dutch grits out, gripping the guy’s ankle with paint-stained fingers. “I won’t do it again, man, just get off me!”

The guy lifts his foot for just a second, and then stamps back down again, driving all the wind out of Dutch’s lungs. It hurts like hell, but nothing feels broken--for now.

“No way you’re fresh from Deluxe! You’ve been practicing somewhere and I know for sure you didn’t slam a wall or two up there--”

“Sure...I...did!” Dutch wheezes, and despite the weight still bearing down on him, scrabbles for his screens. The message is still there, the hearing summons with photographic evidence, and he tosses the file up to the guy before he can object.

There’s a moment of silence. Someone whistles.

“Okay,” says boot guy, and pulls off his mask. “That’s pretty ballsy.”

“Thanks?” Dutch mutters, and then gasps gratefully as the boot lifts off of him. “Thanks. Jeez. You do this to every new guy down here?”

“Most of ‘em,” says boot guy. “But hey--”

“--Hey,” says Mike, and silhouetted against the vibrant orange-and-gold mural behind him, he looks like some kind of shaggy-headed rebel angel. “You’re Dutch Gordy, right? I’ve, uh, kinda heard a lot about you.”

It’s been three months, but Dutch still hasn’t quite shaken the memories of the Krylon gang’s hazing. He reaches surreptitiously for the omnitool in his back pocket. “Oh yeah...?”

“Yeah!” says Mike, and then, “Whoa, hang on, I’m not here for a fight, alright? I just thought you seemed like the kinda guy I want on my team. Saw a custom part you made for the Skylarks--pretty tight. My people--”

“The Burners,” says Dutch. Mike’s amiable grin widens, and Dutch relaxes a little. Okay, maybe
this Chilton guy’s not so bad. The rumors going around about him are a pretty mixed bag—traitor, runaway, prodigy driver, rebel leader. Motorcity can’t figure out whether to vilify him or idolize him.

Meeting him in person, Dutch thinks it’s probably best to be pragmatic and do neither. This might be worth a shot.

“Wanna see my car?” asks Mike, and Dutch forgets all about the rumors.

“You know it!”

Dutch’s comm is ringing. Alex glances at Claire, then down at the comm, and then edges forward to gingerly accept the call.

To his surprise, he recognizes the face.

“Dutch,” says the head of the Cablers, and then stops, glowering, as he realizes who he’s talking to. “...You. What are you doin’ on Dutch’s comms?”

“He’s, uh...indisposed?” Alex tries, and then rushes on as Bracket’s suspicious expression tilts rapidly towards “thunderous”. “He’s sick, but we’re working on it!”
"Dutch?" Another face comes into view; the girl, Tennie. The judge.  "Dutch is sick?"

“We’re working on it,” says Alex again, a little late--he can’t stop staring. The scary, sharp-eyed girl who presided over Mike’s trial just a month or so ago is nothing like he remembers her. Her eyes are unfocused; there are deep shadows under them. She looks slumped and small, bizarrely fragile, and it’s legitimately freaking Alex out.

“The medical team up here--” Alex starts, with a gesture at the curiously-craning medical techs in the corner, but he’s cut off a second later by a faint groan.

“Tennie…”

Everybody goes still and then, slowly, all eyes turn to the Burners, lying limp on their stretchers. Dutch stirs, brows creasing, eyelids fluttering. “Mm,” he mumbles, and raises his head. “T-Tennie?”

Alex and Claire glance at each other and then, wordlessly, Alex moves the screen closer to Dutch and steps hastily away.

“…Dutch?” Tennie says, ragged. Her father helps her sit up straighter, cradling her shoulders in one huge hand. “Dutch, can you hear me?”

“You’re so...dint say…” Dutch’s eyes wander shut for a second; he forces them open again, shakes his head, tries weakly to push himself up. “Tennie. I didn’t say--I shoulda said, I shoulda said it. Sorry.”

Tennie stares at him for a second, struggling to focus--then, slowly, her face crumples. Her voice is thick and shaky when she says “…that doesn’t matter, don’t worry about that, it was dumb--”

“No!” Dutch says, firm and loud. “No, you shoulda been mad, I can’t. I can’t, say, can’t say what I wanna say. You’re my...one person like a thousand. I shoulda tried.” One long-fingered hand rises, reaches out to the screen--Dutch’s eyes go half-lidded, hazy and fixed on Tennie’s face. “Shoulda told you how--how you’re art, you’re like--could...talk. T’you forever. Love you.”

Tennie makes a very small, broken noise. Dutch’s expression of bleary wonder dims a little, tinged with distress.

“You okay?” he says, and then coughs, one hand flying up to his chest. His voice is clearer, his gaze gets sharper with every passing minute. “You were sick. We’re gonna...scan Chuck’s brain, up here, we’ll figure it out. Fix it. You’re gonna be okay.”

“Um, actually,” Alex starts, and Claire whaps at his arm rapidly, making frantic shhshhshhSHHHH noises. “Ow!”

“Suck it up!” Claire hisses. “This sounds super important!”

“Brain scans?” says Bracket, eyebrows lowering.

“Uh,” says Harley.

“Yeah, ‘cause we’re--sick. Prolly,” says Dutch blearily. “Gonna get us all better. Fix our brains.”

“We’re coming up,” says Bracket.

“Excuse me?” says Harley, raising his eyebrows.
“You’re going to figure out what’s going on with this...disease.” Bracket glowers at Harley as though daring him to argue.

“Well, yes--”

“Get to these coordinates,” says Bracket, hoisting Tennie into his arms again. “Give me fifteen minutes.”

“But--”

The screen vanishes. Alex stares helplessly at empty air for a moment, and then growls high in his throat, throwing a punch at the wall. His implants dent the polymer, and Claire squeaks angrily.

“Hey!! You can’t just--ugh, I can’t believe Julie went on a date with you!”

“You--knew about that?” says Alex weakly. “...That was a business meeting.”

Claire rolls her eyes. “Yeah, uh-huh... So, anyway. Let’s go meet up with that...guy, I guess.”

“Oh, yeah,” says Harley, who’s still trying not to imagine the Spymistress’s daughter watching his awkward fake date through a security cam. “Let’s go, I guess.”

It looks about like any of the other vents and gaps that open into the vast, empty void under the dome, but this one is filled with hundreds upon hundreds of wires and cables, ranging from as thin as a finger to the width of several cars combined. The cables radiate out from the hole, channeling off into building chargers and factories. There’s a fence, and hovering KEEP OUT signs, but the signs are glitchy and faded, and the fence is down in places, poorly maintained. It looks like nobody has been here in a long time.

“Okay, so we’re here?” Claire stares around as her pod soars to a graceful landing. “What’s the big deal? There’s nothing here.”

“Look,” Dutch says, “Bracket said to go here.”

“But there’s nothing--”

“I know, but--”

And then Claire shrieks and backpedals abruptly into her pod. Alex whips around, startled, just in time to see a heavy, leather-gloved hand shoot up through the cables. A huge arm follows, and then a pair of broad shoulders. Dutch is already running forward to help as Bracket pulls himself out of the cables, panting rough and heavy through a blue and silver re-breather. There’s a canvas sling over one of his shoulders, supporting most of Tennie’s weight as she slumps against his chest, arms limp around his shoulders.

“Ohmigodohmigod oh my god,” Claire is going in the background. “They can come up through the holes in the dome?! They can just come up here any time?! Oh my god! That’s, like, so creepy!”

Alex privately kind of agrees. But now doesn’t really seem like the time to say anything--Dutch is reaching out, fingertips just barely stroking Tennie’s cheek. Tennie stirs faintly, but doesn’t turn to look at him. Dutch and Bracket glance at each other, pained and worried and on the same page for once.
“You okay?”

“Mm.” Bracket reaches up, careful not to jostle his daughter, and pulls his rebreather off. Takes a few deep gasps of filtered Deluxe air and then nods. “Been worse.” He throws a sharp look toward Claire and Alex, then jerks his head at Dutch, a wordless question. Dutch follows his gaze, apparently uncomprehending--then blinks and half-laughs.

“Nah, no, they’re cool,” he says. “This is Claire, uh…”

“Uh-huh,” says Claire, who’s still staring at Bracket like he’s one of the Motorcity monsters from a Deluxian kids’ holo-book.

“And that’s Harley.”

“Alex,” says Alex, and approaches nervously, holding out a hand. “…Uh…Alex. Harley. We met at the...the trial…?”

“I remember.” Bracket glowers at him suspiciously. “The kid playin’ mad scientist with Mike Chilton’s brain.”

Alex slumps and lowers his hand again, self-conscious. “…yyyyes.”

“And you think you can help my daughter?”

“Oh--oh!” Dutch’s face lights up. “Oh man, no, listen, this is amazing…”

Bracket waits as Dutch explains about the unnamed disease and the treatment Deluxe Medical developed. When Dutch is done, Bracket nods pensively and then says, with a dark finality, “...How long have they had a cure?”

Dutch’s grin goes frozen, confused. “Huh?”

“And why didn’t you tell us about it when we called earlier?” Bracket growls, eyes moving to Alex’s face with the grave slowness of a sniper setting up his shot.

“I was trying!” Alex protests. “You didn’t let me finish! And we didn’t even know we had a cure until, oh, five minutes ago? The medical team--”

“Didn’t want the information getting spread to Motorcity?” Bracket interrupts.

“Couldn’t agree on a name!” Alex snaps, exasperation coloring his face. “Is everyone down there this paranoid? Wait, never mind, I was at the trial, I remember.”

“Whoa!” says Dutch, alarmed. Bracket draws himself up, looking about seven feet tall and a mile wide, and Harley lowers his stance automatically, armored fingers flexing. For a second, the air seems to crackle, drawn taught.

And then Bracket backs down, shifting Tennie’s makeshift sling over on his shoulders. “...We don’t have time for this,” he says, and it’s clear from Alex’s face that he wants nothing more than to say well, you started it.

Instead, he says, “...I’ll have them send up a bot with the injection. I’m...qualified to give one. Unless you--I mean, if you’re. Okay with it.”

Bracket gives him an almost imperceptible nod, mouth tight. And together they all troop back to the pod, one of Dutch’s hands reached up to wrap tightly around Tennie’s.
The medical squad looks at Bracket with open horror when he comes into the pod--Alex gives them a smile that’s meant to be reassuring. By the expressions he gets in return, he fails pretty miserably.

“And this shot is safe?” Bracket says--over Alex’s head, like the Deluxians in the pod aren’t even there. Dutch nods.

“Brought me back.”

“Fine,” Bracket rumbles. And then, “...so you don’t have to do a scan.”

“Uh...no, I mean, I guess.” Dutch glances back at the medical techs and jerks his head meaningfully. There’s a brief scuffle, a whispered argument, and then Deere snatches the injector and marches forward resolutely, shoulders squared in the face of Bracket’s menacing stare.

“Why?”

“We’re not goin’ to the tower.”

“I--excuse me?” Alex says. “There’s nowhere else for you to go! What are you going to do, climb back down into--contamination city?”

“We’re not goin’ to the tower,” Bracket repeats, lower and harder.

“Wait! Wait, hey, cool it.” Dutch insinuates himself between Alex and Bracket, hands raised.

“Look, you don’t hafta go if you don’t want to. You can stay with my parents! We’ll drop you off.”

Bracket’s eyebrows rise. “...I’m not gonna impose on your folks,” he says.

“They’d love to have you,” Dutch says firmly.

“Awww,” Claire Clement cooes, very softly. Alex opens his mouth to object to the detour and then sighs and gives up.


---

Everything sucks after Mom dies. Mike can’t live in his old home anymore, doesn’t have his own bedroom anymore. Instead there’s a big wall full of holes, like a huge bookshelf, and a bed in every hole. A bunch of kids and no parents.

He spends his first couple of hours curled up on his bed, ignoring everybody who tries to talk to him--but he’s so bored, and he’s so lonely, and the longer he lies there the more he has to think about how his mom’s gone, how dad didn’t even want him and now nobody--

He’s too jittery to hold still, too angry to be quiet, too sad to find words. He doesn’t talk for a week. Dad’s gone. Two weeks. Mom’s dead. Three weeks.

“His name is Chuck,” says Mr. A, and pushes forward a skinny little kid with scraped-up knees and freckles all over his face. The kid backs up a step when Mike turns to look at him, trying to hide behind Mr. A’s knees. Mr. A laughs a little, pushes him forward again. “No, go say hello. You’re going to be living together for a while.”

“...Hi,” says the skinny kid, so quiet Mike barely hears him. His eyes are big and pale and all red,
like he’s been crying. He swallows really hard, so hard Mike can hear it, and then inches closer like he thinks Mike is going to bite him. “...Wh-what’s your name?”

Mike almost growls at them--that works on a lot of the other kids, even the older ones, makes them back off and stop trying to talk to him--but Chuck already looks so scared.

“Mike,” says Mike. His voice sounds hoarse and weird after being quiet for so long. Chuck jumps like Mike scared him, then cocks his head on one side and gives Mike a tiny, wobbly smile. Mike returns it, and Chuck’s smile grows, until it makes his eyes crinkle up. “Mike,” Mike says again, getting used to it again. “My name’s Mike--”

“--Chilton, right?” mutters Jacob, leaning over to Mike. Mike keeps his eyes straight ahead, trying to pretend it’s not weird seeing a Kane Co. prisoner in person. You hear “Take this man into custody” and think, okay, I can do that, it’s just a job. And then you actually get the guy in custody and he’s...older than you thought, and has an impressive collection of laughter lines, and smells faintly earthy and organic. In short, he’s an actual person.

“I may be old as nuts, but I can read a nametag, kid, I know you know I’m talkin’ to you.”

Mike doesn’t like it.

“Hey, kid,” says Jacob again. “Chilton.”

Whatever he was about to say next, Mike isn’t listening. Something roars in the distance--deep, guttural, strange. Menacing, even, but it sends a weird thrill through Mike’s gut. The squad leader says a word Mike would never even think and pulls up his comms, yelling something about _send bots_ and _drivers incoming_. Then he signals them to start running. Mike whips around, reaching out to grab the prisoner’s shoulder, but he’s--

He’s already thirty feet away and accelerating, his cuffs lying in neat halves on the ground. A yell echoes back to the squad--”See ya, suckers!”--and suddenly Mike’s after him.

He didn’t mean to. He wasn’t ordered to. It’s just in his nature, this fire in his chest, the little whisper that says _chase_. His mom always said it’d get him in trouble.

Well, he thinks, pounding after Jacob’s retreating back, this probably isn’t what she was thinking of, but she was definitely right. Someone’s yelling behind him, but he’s _so close_ and if he can just catch this guy, it’ll be _such_ a big deal, and--

The roaring noise suddenly reaches a deafening crescendo as three gleaming, garish vehicles whip around a corner to his left. They skid, trailing stinking smoke, then find purchase and scream forward again, up the road behind Mike, away from him. He stares after them, breathless, his mind suddenly swallowed by that single moment. The colors, the glare of lights, that hungry, boundless _speed_, even the strange music thumping inside them--

--like a heartbeat. _Thump thump thump_, and then turn and spin away and it’s _easy_, everything is easy up here. Easy to fight. Easy to serve. Easy to forget the old man and the colorful cars and--Mike takes a hit to the jaw, stumbles. He can practically _feel_ Mister Kane’s frown from across the room, because of course he would notice. Mike’s...off.

Maybe it’s not so easy to forget.

Later, they talk about it--or, Mister Kane asks questions, and Mike tries to answer them the way he would have before.
“Are you alright, son?”

Mike’s heart leaps in his chest—he can’t tell Mister Kane what’s been bothering him, not now. Not when things are going so well.

“You seen what he’s doin’ down here?” says Jacob.

“Sure am, sir!” says Mike dutifully. “Just, uh...still gettin’ over this little concussion, is all!”

Mister Kane frowns. “I was watching your fight with Jenzen today. If you keep giving him points, he’ll get full of himself. Insubordinate. We don’t want that, do we?”

“No, sir,” says Mike, trying not to smile at the idea of Jenzen being any kind of real threat. Mister Kane must notice, because he narrows his eyes a little more.

“...Is that all?”

“You know how many people he’s hurt?” says Jacob.

“That’s all, sir,” says Mike, and--

--raises his hand, back straight, head held high, so proud, so proud. “...Loyalty to Deluxe,” his mouth says, words he’s murmured to himself over and over again for years, he’s going to do so well. “To defend--”

--Miss Julie, she’s so important, so small and strong and sharp and sweet. Mike loves her. He’d never hurt her, he’d never let her fall, no matter how much he hates Kane, no matter--

--how many things are slowly falling into place as Kane pleads for Julie’s life in the thin sunset air. He doesn’t know--

Everything is happening too fast. Mike blinks and then covers his eyes with one hand, squinting into the sunset, and then yells as Kane’s fist closes on the front of his shirt, hauling him right up off his feet like he’s weightless. Mike’s not weak, has never been the weak one, but pulling at Kane’s hand is like trying to bend steel with his bare hands.

Dad doesn’t want him, nobody wants him--

“We would have built a new world from Motorcity’s ashes!” Kane snarls, and--

--Texas snorts and rolls his eyes. “It’s Deluxe, Tiny,” he says, and shoves Mike’s shoulder. “The war don’t end.” And he never looked so tired, there’s such a grim, certain edge to his grin, makes Mike wanna punch something. Tex should be yelling and lit up and unstoppable, he shouldn’t look--

--hurt, furious hurt, in Kane’s eyes, after everything he put Mike through. Mike hates him, hates him so much he can’t breathe. Kane never stops pushing, acting like Mike somehow betrayed his trust, like everything he does is fair just because Mike wouldn’t kill for him. Like--

“--You’ve gotta stand for somethin’, right?” Dutch says, and smooths a hand over a whole wall of wild color, the Burner logo in a thousand fiery shades of red, gold, green, white. “You can do that, down here. You can put your mark up, you can make whatever you want! Nobody can--”

--find them now, the sound of bots chasing them has faded off into the distance and the air is thick with silence. Chuck is crumpled against the wall down the alley from him, gasping for air, pale as
paper under his blotchy flush of exertion. Mike puts an arm around his shoulder and Chuck turns at looks at him, eyes round, shaking all over.

“What are we gonna do?” he says, helpless and tiny and terrified, and Mike doesn’t know. All he can really do is pull Chuck over and hug him, pat his back as he wheezes, shakes and sobs and--lies there, too still. Dreaming. Gone. He’s sick. Mike needs to help him, Mike--

--can’t remember.

“Where do you belong, Commander?” says Mister Kane, and Mike salutes, eager to please, to do his best for Deluxe.

“I belong in Deluxe, sir!” he says, and Mister Kane smiles but not like he’s happy.

He never looks happy anymore. Mike thinks it must be his fault, it must--

--not be a problem anymore. Mike is fine. He doesn’t have to cry or anything. If he just--keeps distracted, stays focused on helping the gangs run missions, it’ll get better eventually. He’s fine. Kane is gone. He’s fine. There’s nothing they did to him up there he couldn’t bear, nothing Kane did to him he can’t take. If he feels like it’s never going to heal, it’s because there’s nothing to heal.

Mike’s fine. He has to be.
They're in the middle of the Security barracks when Mike wakes up. He makes this known by immediately rolling off his hover-stretcher and onto the ground. He scrambles up, falls over again, gets to his feet and takes a swing at the nearest upright person--Godinsky the medical tech. Just in time, Bracket catches Mike’s entire arm with one huge, gloved hand.

“Get off me!” Mike snaps, surprisingly coherent except for the way he’s twitching and staring around like he’s being attacked by a swarm of wasps. “Get off! Guys, run!”

“Mike!” People are crowding around him, reaching out--Mike stares from face to face, panting. Slowly, he stops struggling.

“They got me,” he says, and awfully, even worse than the furious panic, his voice shakes. His eyes are too bright. “I couldn’t--I got you guys caught, it’s all my--”

“Mike,” says Dutch, and gives Mike’s shoulders a sharp little shake. Mike chokes on whatever he was saying, fixing on Dutch’s face with desperate intensity. “We’re okay, man, we’re safe! Everybody’s safe. Take it easy.”

“We all--went down. I remember--how--?” Mike looks around the circle, apparently counting up. “Where--?”
Dutch considers trying to soften the blow, for just a second—but no, it would just make it worse to drag it out. He steps back out of the way and lets Mike see the other two stretchers. Texas is twitching and mumbling in his sleep, restless; Chuck lies still as the dead, eyes just barely flickering under bruised-looking eyelids. Mike’s expression falls.

“Geez,” he says, and drags his hands over his face. When he looks up, his mouth is a firm, determined line. “Okay! Uh...does somebody wanna tell me why we’re in the middle of the Kane Co. cadet barracks? Or am I seein’ things again?”

“We’re meetin’ Julie,” says Dutch, grinning.

Mike squints at him. “...You’re really there, right?”

“Yeah, I’m really here,” says Dutch patiently. “It sounds like things have been...pretty weird up here.”

They catch Mike up on recent events on the way through Security. Alex proudly shows Mike the burn on his shoulder where somebody apparently shot him, and then tolerates it gamely as Mike gives him a by-now-familiar dubious look. “--and yes, I’m real,” he finishes, and Mike relaxes. “Does this really feel like a hallucination?”

“None of it did,” Mike mutters, a little defensively, and shakes his head. “...I’m glad you’re okay, though, bud. You should get that looked at. Uh...okay, so. There was a coup? Is Miss Julie safe?”

“She’s fine,” says Alex, and then frowns. “Um...Mike?”

“That’s good,” says Mike absently. He’s rubbing his temples, shaking his head slowly. “I’m not--supposed to--Mister Kane’s orders--”

He stops, frozen in mid-step.

“...Did I...?” he says, and his hand flies up to the back of his neck, finding the ripples of scar tissue. His face goes through a couple of emotions in quick succession--pain and anger and grief and resignation one after the other. “...That was real.”

“Yeah,” says Dutch. “Sorry, Mike.”

“It’s...fine,” says Mike, and pulls his hand away from his neck again, smiling with an obvious effort. “It’s fine! I’m okay, don’t worry about it. Let’s just...let’s get outta here, okay? I don’t--whoa.”

The door in front of them slid open on what looks like the aftermath of a warzone. One of the huge sliding pods that makes up Kane Co. tower has been shattered and warped so badly it’s out of lock with the pods around it, walls streaked with bubbled burns and gouges. There’s a man lying on the ground at Mike’s feet, one leg at a strange angle. His Ultra-Elite mask is bloodstained, his goggles dark. Mike picks his way gingerly over the Ultra Elite’s body, staring around at the wreckage. There are training rooms visible through the broken walls on either side of the pod; security drones litter the ground in smoking piles. Between them, there are men in Elite uniforms, lying very still or twitching weakly.

“...what the…”

“I’ve seen these before,” says Dutch, and runs a hand over the strange forked, angular burns on the wall. “...Red.”
“Red?” Mike’s hand immediately goes to his pocket, finding the cool chrome of his spark staff. “I thought he was on Kane Co.’s side!”

“He’s on...Julie’s side,” says Alex, a little dubiously. He glances over at Dutch, still examining the burn marks on the wall. “Uh...does he know…”

“About Julie?” Mike shrugs, frowning. “No idea. I thought maybe--but look, is Red really working for her?”

“I mean, kinda,” Claire chips in. She’s been quiet most of the way up, apparently distracted by a fan of video feeds--she glances up now, frowning dubiously. “Sorta? The Elites decided they were gonna work with Larsson and Pinsky--ugh, so gross--so I guess Red...took care of it?” She looks back down at her screen, rewinds a feed. It’s mostly black, but every so often an arc of red lightning illuminates a flying body. The crackling sound of a familiar furious roar echoes faintly from the recording for a second before Claire closes the screen with an affected shudder. “...Ew. Like, he’s so creepy? Ew.”

“Jeez,” says Mike, and shakes his head, hurrying forward. “Where is he now?”

“I have no idea,” says Alex fervently. “Oh! Uh, he heard Julie talking to Mike and took off, I think. He’s probably looking for you!”

“Ha.” Mike shudders just a little bit. “...glad you guys found us first.”

ROTH bobs up and down in a nod and puts a protective arm around Mike’s shoulders.

“Just the--the Elites?” Dutch’s voice is soft, distant with sudden horror.

“How?” says Claire.

“The cadets,” Dutch says urgently. “What happened to the cadets?”

“Oh!” Claire grins. “Well, they like Julie. Red had to come bail them out, it sounds like they lost, like, mega-bad. But there’s no casualties in the report so far!” She steps delicately over another Elite, grimacing as he groans. “...ugh. Not even on Larsson’s side.”

Dutch lets out a long sigh and scrubs his hands over his face. “Okay,” he says. “So Dar’s--oh man. He’s gonna give me a heart attack.”

They catch an elevator--one of the big executive ones, with more than enough room for their party.

“Y’know, I was thinkin’,” says Dutch, nudging Mike’s arm as the floor counter slides smoothly up, “and we haven’t seen Julie in about a million years. Wish we’d brought some pizza or somethin’.”

Mike brightens up at the thought. “Yeah. Yeah! Oh man, it’s been forever. Uh...” He watches as the elevator comes softly to a stop with a chime on Floor 40, and cocks his head to the side.

“We’re meeting her in R&D?”

“That’s the idea,” Alex says, straightening his uniform for the third time in as many minutes.

“Cool!” Mike says cheerfully. “I came up here to visit Chuck a couple times.” And for...other stuff, more recently. Mike keeps grinning, and packs that thought way, way down. “Let’s get in there, come on.”

“Oh!” Alex says. “Chuck!”
Everybody jumps, then almost in unison they turn and stare at Chuck. He’s still lying on his stretcher, motionless except for his breathing.

“I--no,” Alex says, “No, sorry, I mean--let me take him in there.”

“You...what?” Mike half-laughs, and Alex goes faintly pink, shifting nervously from foot to foot. “Why?”

“Because this is a once in a lifetime opportunity,” Alex says, and glances down at Chuck--his face falls a little. “...even if he’s, um...not...conscious. If I bring him into R&D I’ll be a legend!”

“Aw, come on,” Mike says, laughing for real now--Harley just looks so earnest. He’s so excited about Chuck, it’s kind of great. “He was only up here for like six months. You think people are still gonna remember who he is?”

Alex’s face does something hilarious, shifts from disbelief to affront to incredulity to a kind of pitying smile. “Mike,” he says. “Do you know anything about Chuck? Really?”

Dutch makes a kind of snorting, sputtering noise and has to turn away hastily. Even Claire glances over long enough to snicker behind one hand--Mike laughs, bemused. “Uh...yeah? More than just about anybody, dude.”

“Mnhm,” says Alex, who’s still looking at Mike like he just admitted he never learned to read. It’s...pretty annoying. Mike raises his eyebrows at him, but Alex’s pitying expression doesn’t shift.

“If there’s something you wanna tell us, you can just go ahead and tell us,” Mike prompts. “You don’t hafta be a jerk about it, dude.”

Alex goes pink. “I--I’m not!” he says, high-pitched and defensive. “I’m not being a--no? I’m just saying, can you really claim to know somebody without knowing their body of scholarly works? That’s all I’m saying!”

“Uh...yeah?” Mike hazards. “Yeah, I totally can, dude, what does that have to do with it?”

“It--that--” Alex mouths silently for a second, then shuts his mouth and shakes his head. “Never mind. Uh...no, it’s fine, never mind.”

“Okay, cool.” Mike shrugs and turns back to the doors to R&D. “Let’s get in there already!”

Alex ends up leading the way anyway, just because he has a working key-card. The others fall in behind him with varying degrees of caution. Dutch and Alex look nervous but excited.

Mike...can’t stop thinking. About badging through these doors, pulling off his helmet--

“Mom!”

Mike jerks back to the present as Claire shoves past him and plows through a bunch of guys in Kane Co. uniforms to throw her arms around the neck of a curvy lady with a huge, round bun. The woman staggers a little, then hugs her back, laughing. Alex, who was in the middle of striding forward confidently, kind of crumples, edging back and over like he wants to hide behind Mike.

“Dude?” Mike says, and Alex grimaces at him. “What’s up?”

“That’s Gwen Clement,” says Alex. Then, when Mike’s only response to that is to wait, smiling patiently, “--Clement? Director Clement, head of Surveillance?!”
Oh. Oh. Mike turns back and stares as Claire lets go of her mom and starts babbling about something Mike doesn’t understand, footage and splices and feeds. (“It was so cool, mom!!”) “The...Kane’s--like, the spy? Wait, and she’s on our side?”

“I really really hope so,” says Alex fervently.

“Harley!”

The men in white coats who were gathered around the doors when they opened have edged carefully forward again, giving Claire and her mom a wide berth. Harley draws himself up nervously, and this time when he steps to one side it’s in front of Mike, half-hiding him from view. “Uh...hi, guys!” he says brightly.

“Where did you go?” The guy at the head of the group folds his arms and gives Alex a pretty impressive glare. “We coulda used you down here.”

“I--yes, well, somebody dragged me up to try to open up the Executive Pod,” Alex says, and then rushes on, “...And then Miss Kane had a mission for me!!”

“Mission, huh.” A wave of muffled laughter goes around the slowly-gathering crowd of techs. “Check you out, Cadet Kane Co.”

“Yes, a mission, Benjamin,” says Alex, with dignity. “She sent me to--to get Chuck.”

There’s a moment of silence. Then, “...Chuck,” says the guy at the head of the crowd slowly. “What, Burner Chuck? Our Chuck?” And then, as Alex starts to open his mouth, chest swelling with pride, “--call me ‘Benjamin’ again, Alexander, see how that works out for you.”

“I--it--yes,” says Alex. He seems to be losing confidence the longer he stands there. “Burner. Chuck. Um...you know we’re not at war with Motorcity any more, so, it’s not like they’re enemies--”

Okay that’s enough of that. Mike steps deftly past him, looks firmly around the circle and then holds out a hand.

“Mike Chilton,” he says, into the sudden dead quiet. “Nice to meet you.”

“I think they know who you are,” says a voice.

And there’s Julie. Smiling at them from the door, tired and familiar and perfect. Mike only has time for a brilliant, relieved smile before Claire lets out a noise that’s probably only audible to dogs and crashes into Julie at top speed.

“Aaaahhhh Julie Julie Julie you were so great oh my gaaaaawwwwdd!!”

“Whoa! Claire, hey, I’m--oof--I’m so glad you’re okay!”

“Hey,” says Dutch quietly as Mike starts forward. “No one here knows she’s in with the Burners, dude.”

Mike pauses, biting his lip. “Oh--yeah.”

They watch as Mrs. Clement pulls Claire gently away again, with a brief whispered sidebar to Julie. Julie nods, and the Clements retreat to a corner where a massive array of video feeds is waiting for them. There’s a moment of awkward silence--some of the techs seem to be literally
holding their breath, waiting to see how Julie responds to her visitors.

Not that there’s any reason for them to worry, of course. But Julie does a decent job of looking stoic and calculating when she turns back to the doorway and says, “Hello, Burners.”

Chuck’s five when his parents die.

A guy in a Kane Co. outfit comes to his pod and tells him “you can’t live here anymore, come with me.” Chuck cries, because he doesn’t understand, because the guy won’t explain, won’t tell him why. Just hauls him into a pod. Chuck asks what’s going on and the man ignores him, Chuck digs in his heels and the man picks him up, ignoring him when he struggles and cries. By the time they reach the pod-cluster at the base of Kane Co. tower, Chuck has cried himself sick, not fighting anymore. The man tries to put him down, growls when Chuck crumples straight to his knees and then hoists him back up again.

There are other kids here. Babies, kids Chuck’s age, teenagers. Chuck stares around as he’s carried into an elevator, up to the top of the tower, into an office. Put down.

“Is this a new addition?” says a voice. Chuck shrinks down as another man he doesn’t know comes up to him, kneels down to his level. “Hi there. You can call me Mr. A. What’s your name?”

Chuck knots his hands in the hem of his shirt and keeps his eyes on the floor. The man called Mr. A laughs.

“Quiet little guy, isn’t he?” He stands back up, talks over Chuck’s head. “What brings him here?”

“Lab fire,” grunts the guy who carried Chuck in. “Mother and father.”

“Oof.” Mr. A makes a kind of hissing noise between his teeth.

“Lab fire?” Chuck repeats, high and shaky. “Mom and dad? What’s going on?”

There’s a silent moment, and then Mr. A sighs. “…I keep tellin’ you, kids are smarter than you think,” he says to the guard, and drops back down again. This time, Chuck doesn’t look down at the floor. Mr. A’s face is pale and lined and tired, but not mean. “…Listen,” he says. “What’s your name?”

“Chuck,” says Chuck, because if knowing Chuck’s name will get him to just say what happened--

“Where’s my dad? What happened to my mom?!”

“Chuck,” repeats Mr. A, and nods. “…listen, Chuck. I’m sorry I’ve got to be the one to tell you this, but--”

Time skips, slides, and Chuck misses words but he knows what Mr. A said, he knows. He knows, but it’s wrong, it can’t be right.

“You’ll find plenty of people here who understand what you’re feeling right now,” says--liar, he’s a liar, that can’t be right, Chuck just saw them, they just told him goodbye-- “The company has redacted your family name from the register. Do you know what that means?”

He shakes his head, no you’re wrong that’s wrong, and Mr. A just nods and says “It means you don’t have a last name now. If you use your last name on things, the company won’t be happy. I
Chuck still doesn’t answer. Mr. A sighs, gets up. “We’ve got another recent arrival in the 13th block,” he says. “Let’s get you settled in. Welcome to the Kane Co. Family.”

--a boy with big, dark eyes and a mop of messy brown hair, sitting up on the bed and staring as Chuck comes in--

“--Your aptitude tests have been very promising,” says Mr. Aradiccio, and smiles in response to Chuck’s nervous grin. “Both of your results.”

Mike nudges Chuck in the ribs. He has to reach up, now. Mr. A shakes his head, leans back in his chair. “You’ll make a fine cadet,” he says to Mike. “I know that’s where you’ve been applying, I can’t imagine they wouldn’t let you in, test results like yours. And you’ll fit in at Research and Development, Chuck. I’m sure you’ll do...great things.”

For some reason, he doesn’t sound as happy when he says that. Mr. A was in Research and Development for a year or two, Chuck heard once. He was hoping to talk about it, but Mr. A always waves it off.

Chuck’s smile wavers uncertainly, and Mr. A seems to realize the change in his tone--he shakes off whatever he was thinking about.

“You’ll fit in fine,” he says again. “I’m sure your parents would be proud.” And Mike’s hand finds Chuck’s, squeezes hard, and Chuck knows Mike’s feeling the same hard weight in his chest. It never goes away, but--

--R&D isn’t exactly what Chuck expected. He doesn’t hate it, though. Every other department in Kane Co. seems to have a strong focus on hypercompetition, playing by the rules and kissing butt. The guys here just seem like a bunch of super-smart nerds throwing experimental spaghetti at the experimental wall.

They’re also kinda jerks. But...nice ones?

“Hey, peewee,” somebody says, and ruffles Chuck’s hair up hard enough he staggers a little bit. “When are they gonna get you a labcoat, huh?”

They don’t make them in Chuck’s size and Andrews knows it. Joining R&D early has bonuses--people high-up are keeping an eye on his work, he’s getting extra resources, extra time from supervisors--but it also means he’s still weedy and small, five years younger than the youngest technician in his section.

Chuck fixes his hair and gives the guy the rudest hand gesture he knows. Andrews goes “Awww,” and pinches his cheeks like a solicitous grandma, laughing when Chuck sputters and slaps his hands away.

“Leave the kid alone, Andrews,” says their department manager from his cubicle, deadpan and bored but definitely smirking. “Just because there’s finally somebody shorter than you in the department--”

“Look at his chubby little cheeks though!” Andrews coos, and then snorts and bursts out laughing when Chuck tries to glare at him. “Ben, look. Look at him, Ben, oh my god.”

“Get back to work, you ass,” says Ben. “He’s not your little brother, he’s your goddamn coworker. And his productivity is better than yours.”
“Ohhhoho, well I’m in trouble,” says--

--”Mike?!?” Chuck gasps, relieved and terrified, “Are you in trouble? Dude, what--”

“I’m in Motorcity.”

It’s like a punch in the gut. Chuck sits down, stands up to pace, has to sit down again as his knees wobble. “Whh,” he says, less a word than a gasp. “Wh--what?”

“I’m gonna get you down here,” says Mike, and Chuck kind of scream-laughes in response, hysterical with fear. This is all happening so, so fast, way too fast.

“Mike, I don’t--I don’t get it, okay? I--I got that internship, and you made Commander, we did it! And now they’re saying all this stuff about you on the news--I don’t-- What happened, Mikey?”

The look of pure pain and anger that crosses Mike’s face is so horribly vulnerable that Chuck actually catches his breath--and then abruptly starts hyperventilating again, because oh god what could have been that bad?

“He’s not the man I thought he was,” Mike says shortly. “It was my first mission and he--he wanted me to do something really bad.”

“What--”

“People would’ve died, Chuck! He doesn’t care about the people down here and I’m not sure he really cares about anyone up there either!”

“That’s not--” Chuck pauses. Swallows. He’s remembering the bruises he’s seen around the R&D department, the way a guy from Security elbowed him in the hallway yesterday, hard enough to throw him into a wall. “Okay, but--Mikey, he c--cares about Deluxe, right? He has to--”

“Sure,” says Mike, hard and hurt, “he cares about Deluxe. He cares about it way more than the people who live there, way more than--”

He chokes on the words, eyes crinkling up weirdly. Chuck remembers something else, now--the way Mike used to look when he talked about Kane, the smile he--

--was wearing doesn’t fade, but it does drop a little.

“My dad’s coming back,” says the kid stubbornly, squinting through scrubby brown bangs. “He’s not gonna just vanish forever, okay? He was the coolest, he--”

“--always stops me after practice to give me advice and stuff,” says Mike, pacing energetically around the pod like he’s too happy to sit still. “Dude, I think he’s really impressed with me! Oh man, did I tell you? Yesterday instead of Cadet Chilton he called me--”

--Mike, who’s driven Chuck’s new car, insists that she handles like a dream, whatever that means. All Chuck knows is that every time he pulls on the steering wheel, the thing whips uncontrollably around and sends him into a series of horrible hairpin zig-zags, and also he’s going to die on Sunday.

“How are things coming along?” asks a voice, and Chuck tries to laugh but makes a noise like an overheated teakettle instead.

“Uh!! Uuuuuuuhhhhh aaaaahhhhhhh haha! Fine!”
Julie sits down next to him on the sports coup’s sleek blue hood, looking thoughtfully out over the practice course. “Lotta scorch marks out there,” she says, smiling. Chuck stretches his mouth mutely, willing a good lie to spring to mind, but nothing doing, apparently. Julie’s smile falls a bit as she glances at him.

“...Sorry. You, uh...seemed pretty confident about the whole race thing.”

“Oh!” Another attempt at a casual laugh, another wild titter (get it together, Chuck). “Oh, no yeah I totally am, totally, totally, yes, I’m totally gonna win this...race...thing!”

“That’s...good?” says Julie, raising her eyebrows. This is going so badly that Chuck is starting to look forward to his inevitable death on the Duke’s race-track.

“Ha, yeah, I just...” Through his bangs, Chuck chances a look at the scorch marks she mentioned. Yep, he’s made a real mess out there. That’s great. “I just...don’t like all the attention, I guess. Not really, uh, built for the spotlight, y’know?”

“Oh, I get it,” says Julie, kind of laughing. “I’m a Burner working in Kane Co. tower, remember? There’s all kinds of stuff I’m always...hoping people don’t look at too closely.”

Chuck looks at her this time, uncertain. She’s frowning faintly, lips pressed together like she’s regretting the words. Chuck looks away again, tracing a hand over the golden lightning bolts on the car’s scuffed hood.

“...Well, somebody up there’s looking out for you,” he offers, a little hopelessly, and glances over at the sound of Mutt’s engine in the distance. “Think you can spare me some of that luck on Sunday?”

“Oh!” Julie laughs, kind of startled, kind of weirdly bitter. “I don’t think it’s luck looking out for me up there.”

“What?”

“Don’t stay out too late,” says Julie quickly, and hops up off Blonde Thunder’s hood, backing away as MIke gets closer. “Hi Mike! Bye, Chuck!”

“Who’s looking out for you?” Chuck calls after her, but Julie just waves and vanishes as Mike comes around the corner with a box of carry-out under his arm and a wide, ready grin on his face.

“Hey, buddy, ready to--”

--“Ready to fire!” Tennie snaps, and tugs the release lever, locks the stabilizers deep into the concrete as the Genesis pod descends. A perfectly smooth cube the size of twenty buildings put together, looming overhead like the sky coming down--

--Mike’s gone, he’s gone, he’s a cadet, he’s in Motorcity, he’s a commander, he’s in Deluxe, Mike’s gone, Chuck’s a technician now. He can’t hide behind Mike, not when the first punch lands, not when somebody sneers something derisive about productivity in his face and doubles him over around a fist--

R&D doesn’t smell like anywhere else he’s ever been, the air smells like solder and hot metal and reheated throat cubes. The smell is more real than anything else, and he holds onto it, thirteen and fourteen and fifteen and new on the job.

Somebody is talking, saying “--bring him here in the middle of a coup, what’s wrong with you,
Julie is trying to moderate an argument between Mike and one of the R&D guys when Chuck groans, yawns deeply, and opens his eyes. He blinks up at the ceiling a few times, yawns again, stretches on the hover-stretcher and then pushes himself up, apparently not noticing as the entire room turns slowly to stare at him.

“Jeez,” he says, and rubs his eyes. “How long was I out? I had a bunch of...really weird dreams--” And then, much higher-pitched, “--are we in Deluxe?” And then “Guys, why are you looking at me like that?”

One of the R&D guys says a word that makes Mike wince. Chuck swings his legs over the side of the stretcher and stares around.

“...Are we...?” he says, and reaches up, scrubbing at his eyes. “I’m hallucinating again,” he says, small and tight and upset, and reaches out with one hand, eyes still squeezed shut, groping for Mike’s arm. “...Mike?”

“You’re seriously not,” says Mike, hoarse with relief, and drops down to grab Chuck for a bone-
creaking hug, so sudden and tight Chuck yelps. “Jeez, dude, I thought…” he trails off, buries his face in Chuck’s neck and squeezes harder. “...Don’t freak me out like that,” he finishes quietly, and Chuck very carefully pats him on the back, staring around at the other Burners.

“Where are we?” he says again, and finally looks past them at the other R&D techs. His mouth drops open. “Wait—oh my god, wait, what’s Harley doing here? He’s in my department? We’re in my department! Oh my god—hey, guys!”

That breaks the ice. There’s a chorus of greetings and people start to filter forward, ruffling up Chuck’s hair, laughing at his bangs, ribbing him for the awful Kane Co. wanted posters. Every so often Chuck still twitches, eyes unfocusing, but he seems to be getting more lucid every minute.

Julie does her best to fade into the background, acutely aware that everybody in the room except the Burners knows who she is and what she’s done today. She’s gotta tell the boys, right now, but first she has to get her legs to move.

Except while she’s still trying to steel herself to step forward, Chuck glances up, like he can feel her eyes on him, and his mouth drops open. “Julie!” he says, lurching to his feet. He immediately staggers, legs shaking—waves off the people who try to help and half-jogs toward her. Just crossing the room seems to take a lot out of him, but his eyes are clear when he catches her arm. “I gotta,” he starts, and bends over, losing his grip on her, wheezing a little bit. “Hff. Gotta. Talk to you. ‘Bout the--no.” He blinks again, shakes his head hard.

“...Chuck?” says Julie nervously, glancing over his shoulder at the other techs. She wonders how many of them are putting two and two together—Chuck the Burner knows Miss Julie.

“I figured it out,” he says, low but urgent.

“Oh?” says Julie, her gut tightening. Chuck seems to notice her unease, because he shoots her a crooked, weird smile.

“I’m not gonna tell…” He glances back at the other Burners, and his mouth crinkles dubiously in a nervous frown. “...anybody. I, uh...I promise I’m not. But, yeah. I know. Must’ve been pretty hard.”

Julie doesn’t bother to ask “know what?” Just watches him for a second, letting the startled worry in her chest ease. “Thank you,” she says finally, really happy for the first time in a while.

Chuck cocks his head to one side, brushes his hair back for a second and gives her a look, and it takes Julie a second to realize why it feels strange, having him look at her like that. It’s the look he usually reserves for Mike, fond and trusting. Julie’s heart does something painful.

“I, uh...I don’t want you guys to have to keep my secrets for me,” she says, to distract herself from that thought. “You don’t need that, you’ve got enough going on--”

“It’s okay,” Chuck says hastily. “Yeah, no, don’t worry about it. Uh...are we cool?”

“Yeah!” So...okay. That makes everybody, doesn’t it? Mike has known since...his last stay in Deluxe. Dutch figured it out after her second announcement. And now Chuck, and--no, of course. She’d forgotten about Texas, lying still and silent on his stretcher.

Still not waking up.
It’s Randal’s eighth birthday, and he’s hiding under a table with his hands over his ears, because there’s bots outside. They’re firing at stuff—he’s a kid but he already knows the noise of bot guns. His dad is holding onto him, rocking him a little bit, telling him not to be scared—he’s not. He’s not scared. He’s angry. He’s eight! It’s his birthday, it’s not fair, Deluxe ruins everything--

“--everything’s gonna be okay, I’m okay--”

His mom has a burn on her face, right across her face. Randal’s dad is putting a bandage over it. His dad is shaking, keeps on kissing her, and it’s gross but it’s also scary. Mom is never scared, but she looks really pale, and something burned a big, ugly scorched hole through her bag and all her teaching books.

“You can’t keep going all the way to the university,” Randal’s dad is saying, and he touches her hair and then her burned face and then kisses her again, and then hugs her really tight. “If it hadn’t hit your bag, if it had been a little bit higher--”

“I’m fine,” says Randal’s mom, and pulls away, looks around. “Where’s--oh, baby, there you are. Get nanay a cup of coffee, okay?”

Randal’s ten, he’s big enough to make coffee. He wants to go, anyway. He doesn’t like seeing that look on his dad’s face, or how his mom’s hands are kinda shaking, and--and--

--Angelica’s leaving.

Randal’s mom is yelling, and Angelica’s yelling, everybody’s arguing, grandma and the cousins and everyone. It’s like when Dad’s half of the family went Up There, except it’s worse because Angie never yells, and neither does their mom.

“--support this family, I needed a job!” Angie shouts, and holds up a blue jumpsuit, shakes it in their mom’s face. “Well, I found a job!”

“Driving for that maniac?!?” Their mom throws up her hands. Randal was there with Angie when she found her car, started fixing it up, learned how to drive it. He wants to drive a car, someday. He doesn’t wanna say that right now, though, so he just pulls his knees up and starts to color in his drawing of a dinosaur-dragon breathing fire at a bunch of Kanebots.

If he was bigger, if he wasn’t still twelve and too skinny, he could drive his own car. A really cool car with missiles and flamethrowers in it. And then Angelica wouldn’t hafta go and run off with all her weird girlfriends in jumpsuits, she could--

--glare at Texas over the top of her Amazon car and pull her helmet back on without sayin’ a word.

“Yeah, you better go!” Junior yells, and hoots as the other Amazon gives him this look, like she just picked up a rock and saw Junior on the bottom of it. Texas is probably supposed to be yellin’ too, but he doesn’t really wanna. He hasn’t seen Angie since he was twelve, why’s she mad at him? It’s not fair.

“No girls allowed!” hollers Junior, as the racecars vanish into the distance, and grins at Texas. “Ain’t that right, Texie?”

“Uh, yeah, sure, whatever,” says Texas. ‘Cause whatever, it’s--

--the worst, Kane is the absolute total worst and Texas is gonna kick his butt! Kick, kick, punch, KA-CHAW!!
“And that’s what I’d do after I beat all his guys!” Texas shouts. “And that’s why you need Texas on your team, got it? I’ll just be like-Huh! Huh! Huh! Hwa-yah! Kane’s gone!”

“Cool moves,” says the guy, you know, the Chilton guy. Which, okay, they are cool moves, but more importantly--

“You mean awesome moves!” Texas corrects him, and reaches for the tarp over Stronghorn. This is really gonna blow ‘im away. “And guess what--I got my own car already!”

The look on the Chilton guy’s face when he sees Stronghorn makes Texas feel like--

--this is the worst idea ever.

“Uh, Mike, she’s from Deluxe,” Texas whispers, very super quietly. The girl makes a face, but it must be about somethin’ else ‘cause there’s no way she heard Texas. He was whispering.

“So was I, Tex,” Mike points out, which, okay, but more importantly--

“Yeah, but you’re not still livin’ there!” says Texas. “And neither’s Dutch or--what’s-his-name--”

“Chuck,” says what’s-his-name, looking up from his nerd screens.

“Sure, whatever. What I’m gettin’ at is, we don’t know nothin’ about her, right? If she’s not gonna be like ‘no thanks Deluxe’ and give Kane a big old middle--”

“I think that’d make it hard to do my spying job,” says the girl, talking over Texas. Wow. Rude.

“Go on,” says Mike, sitting forward, and just like that Julie’s--

--someone Texas trusts, whaddaya know? Turns out you don’t gotta flip the bird at Kane to be a real Burner, you just gotta explode a factory! Pretty dang cool, he’s gotta give her that. So from now on, Texas is just gonna be cool with her--

--spying on the Amazons, and he almost wanted to ask her, did she see Angie, but. No. Julie doesn’t even know Angie anyway, and anyway Texas doesn’t talk to her anymore, right? So it doesn’t matter. It doesn’t--

--matter that Angelica was right up there in the ring before Foxy and the Duke did their whole fight thing, and she saw Texas and didn’t even blink, because--

--Deluxe is the worst. They’ve done some messed-up stuff before but now Mike flinches when Texas tries to play-fight with him. Mike is weird and different and Texas hates it, and Julie is, like, not allowed to come down anymore? Which is bull, as far as Texas is concerned, Kane’s as good as dead so there’s nothin’ to spy on, right? So she should just live down here, she should just forget about Deluxe finally! Texas has been planning his Kane-Is-So-Dead Party for weeks now.

He’s pretty sure Julie would wanna be there for it.
Texas goes from asleep to awake in about half a second flat, and springs off of his stretcher with a flourishy spinning kick and a scream that sounds like “UotototouoohaCHAAAAAIII!!” Everyone in his immediate vicinity yells and dives away--except for Mike, who just looks mildly surprised, and Harley, who seems to have tried to jump protectively between Mike and Texas.

After a long moment, Texas’s breathing slows and his eyes stop darting suspiciously around the room. “…Where are we?” he says after a second, and reaches slowly for his gunchucks. “Texas didn’t get captured again, did he?”

“You’re in R&D, big guy,” says Mike. “Everything’s good, don’t worry about it.”

“R&D?” Texas’s eyes narrow. “Nuh-uh. We’re in Deluxe.”

“Kane Co. Research and Development,” Chuck contributes. “Uh…the place I used to work?”

“Oh, the nerd factory.” Texas snorts. “So…what, these guys are all our prisoners, or?”

“Your friends are real charmers, huh?” says one of the techs dryly. Chuck laughs--Texas scowls. “More charming than you, nerd!”
“Okay, okay!” Mike has been resting on one of the hover-stretchers; he pushes himself up, hands outstretched soothingly as Texas advances on the techs. “Whoa, Tex! These guys are friends, okay? Be cool.”

“Texas is cool,” Texas says, but he sounds more sulky than aggressive. “The coolest.”

“I know,” Mike says. “So I need you to act like it right now, okay dude?”

“Sorry about him,” Chuck says in the background, with an apologetic shrug at his former coworkers. “He’s, uh...he’s from the ground floor.”

“So are you, now!” a huge, red-haired tech points out, and ruffles up Chuck’s hair. “Look at you! Freakin’...baddass Burner mastermind.”

Chuck goes pink and shoves at him, but he’s grinning. “Shut up Rich, I’m not a mastermind for anything. Mike’s in charge.”

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“Sure,” says one of the techs, with a kind of benevolent grin at Mike. “Who’s the team genius who freakin’ hacked Mister Kane’s pod controls a couple months ago? That guy?” he jerks his head at Texas. There’s a ripple of laughter from the techs--Chuck snorts and then immediately flinches as Texas pushes past Mike and heads straight for him, flushed and scowling angrily.

The laughter dies immediately--the other techs have all gone still, tense.

“No, Texas,” says Julie, “it’s just a joke.”

“Yeah, but--” Texas starts, and then does a magnificent double-take and grins, totally distracted from his anger. “Julie!”

Oh. Oh, okay, wow, one of the Burners is about to hug her, Miss Julie Kane, CEO, in front of the entire R&D department. She backs up a step as Texas comes toward her at a jog, already reaching out--holds up her hands and says, very sternly, “Wait.”

Texas blinks and...stops, staring at her like she’s some kind of weird animal he’s never seen before.

“Uh...what?”

“Hey, Texas,” says Dutch, fast and loud, “Uh--hey, a distraction!”

“What?” Texas turns back, hands rising in wary knifehands. “Where?!”

“You are the mastermind, though,” Alex murmurs to Chuck as Dutch describes the monster he supposedly just saw sneaking under one of the workstation desks. “You’re by far the most intelligent member of the Burners.”

“Shut up, Harley,” says Chuck. “I’m the--team nerd, or something, that’s it.”

“Yeah, team nerd for the Burners, though!” says one of the youngest techs. “Is it true you have a plasma weapon in your arm?”

“Chuck X, dangerous rebel super-genius,” drawls the big guy who was arguing with Mike, and
Chuck is just opening his mouth to respond, red in the face, when Texas turns back, distracted from his distraction.

“Whoa, whoa whoa what?! Wait, Chuck’s name is “X”? But that’s--” he sputters for a second, then, aggravated, “--cool!”

A kind of unhappy shiver goes around the crowd--techs glancing at each other and faint, uneasy murmurs. Dutch elbows Texas, frowning meaningfully.

“What?” Texas rubs his side. “I’m just sayin’--”

“There’s a lot of…’X’ kids in here,” says Harley, with the quiet solemnity of somebody discussing a delicate family secret. “It’s...Kane Co. redacted their family’s name for, uh...security.”

“And they gave him a cool new one!” Texas says. This time the murmur of annoyance is louder, and Texas glances around and crosses his arms defensively. “Just sayin’--”

“It doesn’t matter,” says Chuck, with what’s probably supposed to be airiness. “It’s fine, it’s cool.”

“It’s not,” says the big guy.

“Come on, Ben, stuff’s--different down there.” Chuck sort of jerks, half-shrugging. “He’s just like that. Nobody cares in Motorcity, it’s not a big deal.”

“It is a big deal,” Alex says earnestly. “Your achievements are even more impressive considering you were a Redacted.”

Everybody starts yelling at Alex, all at the same time. Chuck extends one hand in a kind of weak “no guys don’t” gesture, but one corner of his mouth keeps twitching upwards as Alex quails against a work desk. Julie considers stepping in--Alex is also one of her employees, after all--but really. A Redacted. Good intentions aside, that one deserves a little bit of yelling.

A hand touches her shoulder. Julie jumps, instinctively reaching for her boomerang--but then the hand squeezes gently and a voice says “...Hey.” and Julie relaxes all over, a full-body sigh.

“Hey, Mike,” she says, and leans back as Mike’s arms settle carefully around her shoulders.

“We missed you, Jules,” he says, and it’s...really, really stupid, how Julie’s throat goes suddenly tight at that.

“No kiddin’,” Dutch says fervently, moving in close next to Mike. And geez, they’re both so tall, and really warm, and she hasn’t hugged them in what feels like years. Texas is elbowing his way in now too, socking Julie awkwardly on the shoulder before wrapping his arms snugly around all of them.

It’s been such a long day.

“Hang on,” mumbles Dutch, a few inches from Julie’s ear, “we need Chuck.”

“Chuck,” Mike stage-whispers, waving to him. “Get over here, dude!”


“Get in here!” Texas says, all irritation apparently forgotten, and Chuck yelps as Texas grabs one
of his wrists and yanks him in. It doesn’t last long—or maybe it just feels short to Julie. She kind of just wants them to never let go. But some of the R&D guys have left off haranguing Harley to throw covert glances in Julie’s direction, and she...can’t.

“Guys,” she says softly. “Gotta keep my cover, remember?”

Mike, Dutch, and Chuck pull away reluctantly, but Texas stays, putting one companionable arm around her shoulders. Julie catches a familiar whiff of sweat and Muscle Mulch, and kind of smiles—she hadn’t realized she missed it.

“Hey, Julie, so, while they’re, uh, havin’ their nerd-fight over there, listen.”

“What’s...what’s up?”

“I didn’t wanna say anything with all these guys listening--” He gestures to the room at large. “--But, okay, you’ve been spendin’ a lot of time up here, right? And I figure--”

“Wait,” says Julie, straightening up, her heart starting to race. This sounds very familiar. “Hang on, I think I know what this is about and—if everyone knows, there’s no point in dancing around it anymore! I’m--” She freezes for a moment, but only a moment. She looks around at Mike, who stuck with her even after those horrible weeks he spent as Kane’s supersoldier; at Dutch, who let her know so gently that he accepted her; at Chuck, who is afraid of so many things but thankfully, wonderfully, not Julie; at Texas, waiting impatiently for her continue. “I’m...Kane’s daughter,” she says. “And the new CEO of Kane Co.”

There’s a moment of silence, and then a lot of things happen at once. Dutch shouts, “Daughter?!” just as Chuck squawks, “CEO?!” and Texas, to Julie’s utter, dumbfounded surprise, busts out laughing.

“Oh my god,” says Dutch, “that’s why you’re CEO! You’re--oh, it all makes sense! Everything makes sense now!”

“You’re in charge of the whole company!!” Chuck shrieks, staring wildly around as though he can see the entirety of the city through the walls. “You--own--Deluxe!! JULIE YOU OWN DELUXE.”

Julie looks helplessly at Mike, who shrugs, looking as surprised as she feels. “I--uh--sorry?” she manages, as Texas wipes his eyes, still chortling. “I thought when you guys were hinting that you knew my secret you meant...you know...my whole secret.”

“The red hair!” Dutch exclaims, gesturing at her. “The internship! And you never joined in when we were raggin’ on Kane either, I figured it was just a Deluxe thing!”

Chuck is still staring at her as though she’s grown an extra head. “Do you even know how to run a company? Do you--is this what all that respect me I am the alpha dog stuff was about, when Mike was gone? OH MY GOD.”

“It wasn’t--alpha dog?” says Julie weakly, and then blushes as Mike raises his eyebrows at her. “That’s not what happened!!”

“Okay, okay, okay…” Texas has apparently finished laughing, and is now shaking his head with a knowing grin. “Okay, Julie, real funny. You got both the nerds and it was, like, alright? Texas woulda done it better, but--”

“Tex,” says Mike.
“--HAH, come on, it’s not like you’d ever be a Burner if you were Kane’s daughter! And, hey if I
got to be in charge up here I’d just smash the whole thing! Like, okay, you know the guy who’s in
charge? Let’s get him to blow it up! We done here?”

“Tex,” says Mike.

“Huhuh--what, Tiny? She didn’t get you too, did she?”

“She’s telling the truth,” says Mike, and Julie suddenly wishes she could’ve stopped him from
saying it. She wants to backpedal, try to pass it off as a joke, let Texas believe it was a joke for the
rest of his natural life. Let’s get him to blow it up.

“No, she’s not,” says Texas with an edge of impatience. “What, like Kane’s her dad? Yeah, right!
She’s our friend, if she was related to the guy she could just--take ‘im out, no problem!”

“Take him out,” says Julie, flat and soft. The corner of Mike’s mouth creases.

“Hey, Tex--”

“Yeah, just--hack into his pod and blow it up, or--”

“Tex.”

“--I’m just sayin’,” Texas bulldozes on, “he was wrong and we’re right! ‘S all there is to it! He’d
be the worst dad anyway, right? So no prob--”

“Shut up, Texas!”

All eyes in the room go immediately to Julie, panting and white-faced. She didn’t so much shout
the words as scream them, high and piercing and furious. Texas is looking at her like she just
sprouted a second head, mouth still stretched into the remnants of a grin.

“Uh, Julie, what--”

“Watch this,” says Julie, pulling up a screen and opening the broadcast archive with shaky hands.
“Just--I don’t care anymore-- This has been the worst day ever, alright? And now you--god--”

She throws a video feed up into the air, and loose circle of techies tightens with a murmur of
interest. “That’s my banner!” says one of them, nudging the guy next to him, who rolls his eyes.

“You borrowed half the code for it from me.”

“Yeah, but I--”

One of the older techs shushes them with a glare. “Hey, this is the good part.”

They all cheer when Larsson gets punched in the face, and then again when Julie punches Red.


Julie doesn’t answer. She’s looking steadfastly down at the floor, lips thin, brow furrowed.

“Nice punch,” Texas remarks casually. “Texas coulda done better--hey, you remember that one
time we thought we were breakin’ Tiny outta prison--”

“Texas,” Julie snaps, cold and pained. “Watch the video.”
“Ugh, okay, jeez. Texas is watching the video. This joke sucks.”

“Hello, Deluxe,” says the Julie on screen. The techs grin. Dutch and Chuck share a look, half unnerved, half awed. Mike is looking at Julie, standing stiff and lonely next to him.

“My name is Julie Kane. I’m Abraham Kane’s only child and while he’s gone, the company belongs to me!”

Texas’s face...changes, slowly. He doesn’t turn his head, but his eyes, dark under his cap, keep darting between Julie and the screen. The set of his jaw tightens and his throat works convulsively under his collar.

The video ends abruptly after Julie’s closing lines, leaving the Burners in their own private bubble of awkward horror. They’re waiting for Texas to say something, or even just move. He’s uncharacteristically still, almost stony, his face hard-creased. Julie’s never seen him think something over so intensely, or for so long.

It’s probably ten or fifteen seconds before he turns to her, but it feels like hours. He looks her up and down, considering her new uniform. Gauging the resemblance.

“Miss Deluxe,” he says, like he’s meeting her for the first time, utterly devoid of trust.

Julie doesn’t know what to say, whether she’s sad or angry or just tired. “Texas,” she says, “it wasn’t-- It’s not as simple as-- You didn’t know him, okay?”

Texas doesn’t say a word, determinedly looking anywhere but at her.

“Texas,” says Julie again, and he twitches but still he doesn’t answer. Julie watches him turn and walk away from her, head down, and slowly it dawns on her. This is his answer. This is all she gets.

Texas isn’t speaking to her.
A Sleepover?! Ask Me Anything!!

Chapter Summary

The Burners spend the night with their respective families, and even in Deluxe, everyone has somewhere to go. Dutch and Tennie leave room for Lady Decency; Chuck lives it up in R&D; Mike can do somersaults, and more; Julie finally eats some actual food for once; Alex Harley and Abraham Kane struggle with their past choices.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The Deluxe medical crew bursts through the door and into the Burners’ awkward silence like an invading army. They all introduce themselves, and it’s hard for Mike to focus on names right now but he does his best. He shakes hands, kind-of smiles, and tries to keep up.

“This is very important,” says Edward Godinsky. “None of you passed through a decontamination chamber today, so--”

“Dude, are you gonna accuse us of like--poisonin’ Deluxe?” asks Dutch wearily. “‘Cause I really don’t feel like dealin’ with that right now.”

“No no no! Well, kind of. But not really. What I’m getting at is--”

“We want to take samples,” says Deere, nudging Godinsky to one side. “Residue from your clothes, skin, hair…”

“You ain’t gettin’ nowhere near Texas!” Texas bellows from his corner, making Julie wince. Mike wants to say something but doesn’t know what he could say to improve the situation--or even avoid making it worse. So he does the next-best thing.

“Go on,” he says, trying to pretend the sight of Kane Co. medical uniforms doesn’t make his stomach churn. “Whatever you need.”

He’s steeled for something awful, but actually all that happens is a quick brush-down. The medical techs brush what looked like harmless dust off of Mike’s shoulders and out of his hair, do something to his arm that kind of pinches but doesn’t hurt, and then draw a couple drops of blood. Dutch grimaces, but lets them do the same thing to him; Chuck barely stops talking to the other techs long enough to glance down as somebody draws his blood. Nobody approaches Texas. By the way he glances back at all of them and scowls, he doesn’t miss this.

“Good,” says Julie, when the whole procedure is finally done. Dang, she looks so tired. “I can find you guys somewhere to sleep while they’re working on that--it’s getting late. And it’s not like we don’t have plenty of open pods.”

“Texas isn’t stayin’ up here,” Texas half-shouts from across the room. “If anybody cares!”

Julie doesn’t wince this time. “I don’t,” she says. “Texas can go wherever he wants. As long as he doesn’t get in any fights in my city, or hurt any of my people.”
“He doesn’t--he won’t.” Mike doesn’t sound very sure, even to his own ears. Texas opens his mouth belligerently, but Mike steps between him and Julie and gives Texas a really pointed look. “…’Cause we’re not up here for trouble. Right?”

“Mike, why are you still talkin’ to her?” Texas says, and it would be easier to handle if he just looked angry, but he actually looks upset, too, like Mike hurt his feelings. Which is a whole new kind of weird and terrible. “She’s Kane’s daughter and she totally let him try to kill us, like, a million times!”

“What was I supposed to do about it, exactly?!” Julie snaps. Texas ignores her.

“What was she supposed to do?” Mike repeats, and Texas huffs, crossing his arms. “Take. Him. Out.”

“Could you do that to your dad?” Mike says, brow furrowing. His chest hurts, a sharp ache, the back of his neck keeps stinging. He doesn’t like this at all, talking like this about--Julie, about Kane. It doesn’t feel safe, and it feels too much like defending Kane, and…but…

“My dad doesn’t suck!” Texas growls. “My dad’s not freakin’ evil!”

“Tex!”

“Good to know you’re so objective!” Julie says, furious and breathless, dark eyes blazing. “Don’t worry, Mike, you may be our friend and we definitely love you but if you ever get brainwashed again we’ve got Texas around to take you out before you can hurt people!”

Mike’s mouth drops open. Texas draws himself up, teeth bared. “Kane ain’t Mike, and Mike ain’t Blue! We could fix him, we can’t fix Kane!”

“Julie, that’s not fair,” Mike says, hard and loud. “--Texas--take a walk, dude. Just--”

“You can’t just shut off how you feel about people!” Julie cuts over him shrilly. “He’s my dad, Texas, he loves me!”

“He wants to kill. Us,” Texas repeats, like Julie didn’t hear the words--visibly remembers that he’s not talking to Julie anymore, and turns to Mike instead. “He wants to kill mom and dad and grandma and everybody, and Jacob and us! He’s been tryin’ for years! If he was gone, he couldn’t hurt anybody else!”

“I know!” Mike says, hands raised. His stomach twists uneasily at the look in Texas’s eyes, hurt and frustrated and almost pleading. “I know, I get it, but--”

“No, you don’t get it,” says Texas. “None of you get it, ‘cause if you did you’d want him gone so bad you wouldn’t freakin’ care, you’d be sick of dumb robots and stupid traps and poison and crap, ruining EVERYTHING!!”

It’s a good thing Mike is there to hold Julie back, catch the arm she’s pulled back to wing her boomerang at Texas. It’s not easy though; she’s small and skinny but she twists and braces like a cat that doesn’t want to be held, wordless but white-lipped with fury.

“Miss Julie!” People are convening on them--in the corner, Claire and her mom look up from their screens, identical expressions of angry concern on their faces. “Do you need us to call security? Is--”
“No!” Julie snaps, and goes abruptly still in Mike’s arms. Mike lets her go, with an uneasy glance around at all the white and blue figures closing in. Julie stands still, doesn’t go after Texas, even though she’s practically vibrating with anger. “No,” she says again, colder and more even, and it makes a weird little chill grip Mike’s chest. The tone is so familiar. “I have this under control. Texas will need an exit to Motorcity. The rest of...my guests...will need a place to rest for the night.”

“Oh, like Texas is gonna leave his friends up here with Kane Co.,” Texas yells, apparently to the room at large.


“We’ll figure it out,” says Mike, with a worried glance after Texas, who’s heading determinedly for the door. “…Hey, is he gonna be…?”

“It’s not like we can lose him up here,” Julie grits out, in a voice that says clearly she wouldn’t mind losing Texas for a good long while. “Do the rest of you…?”

“I, uh, I got family up here,” Dutch volunteers awkwardly. “Uh, Miss. Kane.”

“‘Julie’ is fine,” says Julie. Dutch winces.

“Yeah. Sure. So, anyway, Tennie and Bracket are already there, so I might head out now and, uh, make sure things are...okay there.”

Julie nods, managing something like a smile, and watches him leave the room.

“And then there were two,” she says, looking Mike up and down. “You and Chuck...used to live up here too, right?”

Mike opens his mouth to say something--I could stay with you, here, take care of you, comfort you, do something--but Julie’s eyes are already wandering to the corner where Claire and her mom are standing.

“Yeah,” says Mike. “Yeah, we’ll be fine. You go.”

He feels weirdly small, standing there, watching Julie walk away. There’s people talking all around him, but not to him. Dutch is gone to his family, Texas is gone...somewhere else. Julie’s got friends up here who can help her better than he can. And Chuck…

Mike is halfway through turning to figure out where his best friend went when a long, bony arm drops around his shoulders.

“Mikey!” Chuck says, out of breath and half-laughing. Somebody has given him a white lab coat--it looks weird, with his dark blue Motorcity clothes, but...not bad-weird. Just different. “Where’d Dutch go?”

“Uh…his family’s place, I think.” Mike tries to reach up and get an arm around Chuck’s back, gives up and drops it around his waist instead. Geez, he gets like six inches taller when he’s standing up straight. “Julie’s headed out too. We gotta find somewhere to spend the night.”

“Oh, yeah.” Chuck doesn’t look dismayed by the idea. “I was coming over here to say, dude--I’m staying up here tonight! I’ve got so much to catch up on! You can stay here too if you want. The guys would totally be cool with it.”
He looks super excited, and his buddies seem pretty nice, but… “I’ll find somewhere to spend the night, bro,” Mike says, and grins when Chuck pulls his bangs back with one hand, skeptical. “Seriously! Enjoy your party. I’ll be okay.”

“I could--”

“Nope!” says Mike. “Get back over there and catch up. I’m gonna go...see Mr. A.”

He doesn’t really mean to say the words, but since the weird, awful swarm of memories swallowed him he’s had a lot of old thoughts buzzing around in his head. Chuck looks as surprised as Mike feels.

“Oh man, I haven’t…” He stops, eyes darting away. “I...hadn’t...thought about him in a long time,” he corrects himself. Shakes the thought off. “Okay, well, cool. You gotta tell me how that turns out. Maybe I’ll come around tomorrow?”

“Sure.”

There’s a second of silence. Chuck looks quietly preoccupied. Mike is thinking too, thinking about a skinny, freckled kid who always had scuffed knees and bruised elbows.

He steps forward into the hug at the exact same second Chuck does. Mike squeezes, and Chuck huffs and then grips the back of Mike’s shirt with both hands.

“You gonna be okay, bro?”

“Yeah,” says Mike firmly. “Yeah, I’m good.”

“Okay, well...good.” Chuck pats his back a few times and then lets go. “Don’t do anything dumb.”

“No promises,” says Mike, and Chuck rolls his eyes, backing toward the gang of R&D techies again. Somebody calls, “Hey, Chuck, you coming or what?” and Mike shoos him off. “Go on.”

Chuck grins at him one last time, and then turns away. Mike heads toward the door, smiling as Chuck’s voice rises, half-laughing-- “Get outta my freakin’ chair, you douche--!” and then the door slides shut behind him.

It’s hard not to be on edge, alone in the middle of Kane Co. tower. Mike stares around at the plain, white walls and...tries to convince himself he can relax. It’s bizarrely difficult. His brain gets it, but his body won’t listen to him. Deluxe not being the enemy anymore, Kane Co. tower as...just another place...wow.

...Have they won?

No. No, there’s still--so much to do, Kaia, and heck, the Duke--there’s still plenty of stuff he needs to keep his city safe from. But the idea of having Julie, having Deluxe on their side when they need to handle something...it’s almost scary. Such a huge change he can’t even really wrap his brain around it.

Yeah, he can’t really handle that right now. Mike shakes off the moment of weird, paralyzing hope, rakes a hand through his hair and puts that thought in his back pocket. He can think about that in the morning. For now...time to go home.

--
It’s been a very, very long day. Dutch almost falls asleep in the transport pod on the way to his old place, and it’s really only nerves and sympathy for Julie that keep him awake.

Dar is already there when he arrives, apparently in the middle of a story. His face is bruised and bloody. Tennie and Bracket are perched uncomfortably on hover-chairs, listening, while Mr. and Mrs. Gordy hurry around, keying in orders for medical supplies.

“...She’s the CEO, mom, I couldn’t just let ‘em do that! She’s cool!”

“Honey,” says Mrs. Gordy, and then looks up sharply at the soft hum of the door sliding open.

“Who--Dutch!” She drops her screen and comes half-running across the pod, pulling him down to kiss his cheek and hug him. “Are you okay, baby?”

“I’m fine--mom, I’m fine!” Dutch squirms, face heating, as Tennie grins at him across the pod.

“C’mon, mom…”

“Dutch!” Dar says, and jumps up. He’s grinning, and holy crap his face is a mess. Dutch swallows hard as Dar limps across the room and holds out a fist. “Man, you’re not gonna believe--I punched my commander in the face! The other cadets and me, we fought back, just like the Burners do!”

Dutch’s chest kind of twists up into a knot as he looks down at Dar’s bandaged knuckles. “Dar,” he says quietly.

“When the lights went down he said he was gonna shoot us, I was so scared, man, but we--hey, you’re not gonna leave me hangin’, right?”

Dutch steps forward, past the proffered fist, and hugs him instead. Dar is still shorter than him, but not by a lot. Still small and skinny, but already more solid, stronger than Dutch. He grunts in pain when Dutch squeezes, and Dutch loosens his grip but can’t bring himself to let go.

“You boys are going to make me gray,” sighs his mom, and comes back in, this time to hug both of them. Dar whaps at Dutch’s ribs and makes complaining noises, but Dutch holds onto him for another couple of seconds before he lets go and grins at his little brother.

“Bro,” he says, “I’m proud of you for real, but this was probably the scariest day of my life. And a bunch of gang guys stomped on me my first day in Motorcity.”

“Gang guys did what--” Mrs. Gordy starts, and then looks away abruptly as Bracket stands up from his place in the corner. There’s a slightly uneasy pause as the Gordy family regards him.

“We should get going,” says Bracket.

“What?” Dutch looks up, frowning. “Are you--is Tennie--”

“She’s fine. We’re not staying the night...here.”

“Why not?” says Dar, looking genuinely disappointed. “I’ve been waitin’ to meet Dutch’s girlfriend for like, a million years--”

“Girlfriend?” exclaims Mrs. Gordy. Dutch shrinks a little, glaring at Dar.

“I was gonna tell them,” he grits out under his breath.

“Why didn’t you tell them already?” says Tennie, and then, light dawning on her face, “Oh, right.
‘Cause of your issues.”

“Hey! I don’t have--”

“Yeah, you do,” says Bracket.

“...Yeah, I do,” Dutch mumbles.

“He’s always been a shy boy,” Mrs. Gordy offers, apparently in an attempt to defend him by
embarrassing him to death. “He didn’t even call us on his birthday last week!”

“You had a birthday last week?” Tennie half-yells, hopping out of her chair. “Why didn’t you tell
me?”

“There-- I-- A lot was happening? Plants?” says Dutch weakly. “I’m workin’ on it, I swear!”

“Nothing a few more years in Motorcity won’t fix,” rumbles Bracket from his place by the door.
Mr. Gordy frowns at him, not angry but definitely...concerned.

“I don’t think our boy needs fixing,” he says.
Bracket’s features barely shift, but Dutch has spent a long time learning how to read his blank-as-a-
mountain face, and he thinks maybe Bracket’s regretting his choice of words.

“All I’m saying,” Bracket says finally, a little more carefully, “Is this isn’t a safe place to raise a
family.”

“I’m sorry,” says Dutch’s mom, “My son just said a gang stomped on him.”

“I’ve been fighting off your troops since before my daughter was born,” Bracket growls, voice
rising now. “And they do worse than kick people around a little.”

“Dad, that’s--not fair,” says Tennie, but it’s half-hearted at best.

“There’s a lot of stuff that needs to change,” Dar says quietly. Dutch glances over at him, and
winces all over again at his brother’s bloody face. “But those guys--they’re not Deluxe. That’s not
what Deluxe is gonna be like. Things are changin’ up here.”

“We believe in what Deluxe stands for,” says Mrs. Gordy gravely--words Dutch and Dar have
heard time after time. “It’s the same thing Dutch is fighting for.”

“What Deluxe stands for--” Bracket snorts, folding his formidable arms. “Well, I climbed up
through the dome this morning and you got broken struts and faulty wiring all over. It’s not gonna
be standing for long if someone doesn’t get their hands dirty fixing it.”

“That’s what we want too!” Mr. Gordy protests. “And with Julie Kane in charge--”

“What?” says Bracket, and Dutch feels the blood drain from his face. Bracket never got a chance
to find out--he left the tower before they’d even reached R&D.

“Julie Kane,” Mr. Gordy repeats, pulling up the same video feed Julie showed the Burners earlier,
and oh no, it’s gonna be Texas all over again, Dutch needs to--to--

Whatever Dutch needs to do, instead he stands still and watches in cold horror as the video unfolds.
Some part of him is already curling up, crumpling into a small, awful knot. He can see a shadow
of Texas’s grim thoughtfulness on Bracket’s face. After the video ends, there’s a ringing silence.
Tennie is staring into space, eyes wide, frowning thoughtfully.

“...Wow,” she says, after a long second. “I can...see it? Wow.”

“Kane had a daughter,” Bracket says, just even, quiet, like he’s just double-checking. “…Julie?”

Dutch fights to make his voice work. Say something, say something good about Julie. “Uh,” he manages. “Yeah.” Great job, Dutch!!

Bracket glances back at the place the video used to be, unreadable as ever, and then puts a massive arm around Dutch’s shoulders, leans down and says, in a voice like distant thunder, “Was she alright?”

“...Huh?”

“Your friend Julie. You ever see her with...bruises?”

“Nuh. Don’t think so,” Dutch manages, utterly blindsided by this line of questioning.

“She ever flinch at something and you didn’t know why?”

Dutch is having a hard time remembering anything right now, let alone specific moments.

“Maybe,” he says, “I dunno. She was always real stressed, uh. Guess that makes more sense now. She was our spy, kind of? She’d get information from Deluxe for us, sabotage Kane’s plans and stuff, and it usually paid off--it was pretty awesome! This one time--”

“She put herself in a lot of danger,” says Bracket, straightening up. “That’s a lot of responsibility for one kid.” Dutch nods, relieved to have his inane rambling cut off. He’s still a little dizzy from mood whiplash, but he doesn’t miss the way Bracket glances at Tennie before saying, “…Don’t let her push herself too far.”

“I’ll try,” says Dutch, who’s had about as many emotional scares as he can handle in one night and would like to go to bed now. “Can I--uh. I’m gonna just go to bed now. Uh...Tennie, if you guys are stayin’, my old bedroom’s through this way, you can spend the night in--”

Bracket draws himself up to his full, terrifying height, crossing his arms so he looms like an oncoming thunderhead. Dutch’s mouth snaps shut on pure instinct, so fast his teeth click.

“I don’t think so.”

“What?” Dar groans. “Come on, Mr. B, it’ll be like a sleepover! Dutch and me can take my bed--or--hey, mom, do we still have that extra hoverbed?”

Bracket’s crossed arms unlock, his eyebrows rise minutely. “Mm,” he says. “The three of you.”

Dutch’s tired brain finally puts two and two together. “Oh,” he says, and suddenly can’t look at Tennie, or Dar, and especially not at Bracket. “Oh! Oh, haha, no, I’m, I, uh, ha! No! I didn’t--I wasn’t gonna--oh my god.”

Tennie is giggling at him. Dutch kind of wants to implode.

“...Kids,” says Mrs. Gordy, with a fond, weary glance at Dar’s bruised face.

“Yeah,” says Bracket. “Okay, okay. We can stay. But I’m not eatin’ that mush Kane calls food.”

“Oh.” Mrs. Gordy glances at her husband, concerned. “Well...throat cubes are the only thing there
“That’s fine,” says Bracket, and reaches up, shrugging a massive pack off his shoulders. “I packed for a week.”

“Packed what?” Dutch says, and then steps back out of the way as Bracket starts unloading stacks of containers and foil-wrapped packages. “What is all this stuff?”

“Oo, tortillas!” says Tennie, who immediately dropped down and started poking through the pile with interest. “Did you bring the Antonio’s we had in the fridge?”

“Pizza doesn’t travel well,” Bracket rumbles, and pulls out what looks like an entire loaf of bread.

“Whoa!” says Dar, and opens another package—a solid block of goat cheese, by the smell. “Whoa! What is this stuff?”

“You’re about to find out!” says Tennie with relish. “Dutch! You haven’t had my dad’s enchiladas yet?”

“His...no?” says Dutch. “His...what?”

Enchiladas are delicious. Bracket says they’re supposed to be even better, that there’s a lot of ingredients nobody’s been able to grow since the dome went up. For a second it looks like things are going to get tense again, but a second later Dar takes his first ever bite of non-throat-cube food and the ridiculous chortling noise of shock and delight he makes distracts everybody.

It was still one of the weirdest dinners Dutch has ever had. He’s incredibly relieved to see Bracket head off into the guest bedroom, and to retreat into his own room. It doesn’t look like he remembers it, but...in a good way. Dutch and Dar’s drawings are papered all over the walls, replacing the old posters of Kane’s leering face. Most of the Kane paraphernalia is gone, except for the creepy polymarble bust—Dar has drawn a scribbly mustache and a goofy grin on it in pen.

It’s been a long time, but...it feels like home. The sunset skyline of Deluxe is throwing a soft light over Dar’s bed—neatly made—and Dutch’s bed, as messy as it was when he left.

Oh shoot, there’s a mess all over his bed.

Dutch shoves all the old, painted pieces of crud onto the floor and kicks them out of sight just as Tennie follows him inside, looking around with interest. “This is your room?”

“Yeah,” says Dutch, and settles down on his bed, toeing his shoes off, stretching his legs. Looks around and remembers...growing up here, these four walls. Art jams with Dar on the floor. Crayons hidden under his mattress. “Yeah, it...was.”

The KORS tower is one of the oldest towers in Deluxe; one of the only ones that doesn’t break apart into hovering pods or rise up out of the dome. It feels weird as heck just walking in there, but actually not terrible. He has a lot of bad memories in Deluxe, but not here. This place was...safe.

Safe or not, he should probably have taken a second to cover up his Motorcity clothes with a hologram cloak. But the thought doesn’t occur to him until he’s halfway up the tower, and—and he’s not an enemy of Deluxe, anymore! It’s not like there are elites here to arrest him, and even if
they did, he’s not doing anything wrong? He seriously, actually isn’t.

God, this is the weirdest feeling ever.

There’s a familiar sign outside the pod door at the top of the tower; J. Aradiccio and then underneath that, in scratchy pen on a strip of tape, Head of Kane Co. Orphan Rehousing Services. Mike stops there, takes a deep breath, and then hastily tries to finger-comb his hair into some kind of order. Moves to straighten his jacket, and then realizes there isn’t a jacket to straighten. Tucks his T-shirt in neatly. Steps inside.

The pod looks just about like he remembers it. At the other end, against the Deluxe skyline, there’s a desk with a man sitting at it--hair a lot grayer and thinner than Mike remembers it, shoulders a little more slumped.

“Uh…” Mike steps forward, and swallows hard on the nervous flutter in his stomach. This is dumb, he’s...he’s a Burner, he’s not a little kid anymore, he’s just...saying hi. One adult to another. “Mr. A?”

Mr. Aradiccio looks up. His face is much older, there are lines around his eyes and at the corners of his mouth, and he looks kind of pale and thin and worried. But it’s definitely him, and for just a second Mike is six years old again.

“H-hi,” he says, small and stupid, and kind of tries a half-smile. “Long time no see?”

The man gapes at him for just a second, squeezes his eyes shut and shakes his head like he thinks he’s hallucinating Mike. Stands up abruptly and snaps his fingers, darkening the pod windows.

“What are you doing here?!” he says, and yeah, it’s the exact same tone of voice Mike used to hear after he jumped out of a window or got caught trying to stand on top of a flying pod. Mike should feel chastised, but weirdly he can’t stop smiling. “It’s not safe--”

“Visiting,” Mike says. “It’s okay! Seriously, J--uh, Miss Kane...knows I’m here.”

Mr. A’s eyebrows rise. “Oh,” he says, a little weakly.

“I mean, and,” Mike clears his throat. “I’m not...gonna hurt you, either. I know Kane said a lot of stuff about me, but...” Mr. A is already waving him off, shaking his head. “...I’m not a bad guy,” Mike finishes, and slumps, relieved. “You know that, right?”

“I saw you grow up,” says Mr. A, “Of course I didn’t believe you were a terrorist! You couldn’t terrorize a two-year-old, Mike Chilton.”

That probably shouldn’t make Mike smile. He’s tough, okay? And intimidating!

“I can be scary!” he says. “I’ve got sharp teeth and stuff, haven’t you seen the posters?”

Mr. A snorts and shakes his head. “You boys aren’t even living with me and you’ve still been giving me gray hairs,” he says. “How’s your friend? Chuck?”

“Chuck’s good. Chuck’s--really good.” When did Mike get so much taller than him? When did the desk shrink, when did it all get so...small? “...How are the kids?”

Mr. A’s smile doesn’t fade, but it gets an edge. Just a hint of sadness. “Still orphaned,” he says, with half a laugh. “There seem to be more of them every month, and, uh...less funding from Bell, of course.”
“Geez.”

For a second they stand there quiet, both of them thinking their own thoughts. Then Mr. A looks up and sighs, smiling again. “...Forget about my budgeting problems,” he says. “What brings you all the way up here? Even in this...new Deluxe, it’s not a friendly trip.”

“I’m,” Mike starts, and then stops because he doesn’t really know. “I just, y’know. I need a place to stay tonight. And this is the only place up here I could kinda still call ‘home’, so.”

For just a second, he’s sure Mr. A is going to say “no”. Mike’s not welcome, in Deluxe, he came to terms with that a long time ago. And he can always head back to Kane Co. Tower, that wouldn’t be so bad--

“It’s been awhile since one of my boys came home to visit,” says Mr. A, and puts a hand on Mike’s shoulder, squeezing gently. “There’s somebody in LL13 now, but I’m pretty sure we can find a bed for you. But first!”

“First?” Mike echoes, and lets himself be gently steered toward the door.

“You need the grand tour,” says Mr. A. “You need to meet the kids.”

--

Walking through the KORS tower is like walking through a dream. Like being infected with the memory-toxin stuff again, except softer, memories nudging at the back of Mike’s mind with every nook and cranny he sees. He hid out there, the first week he came here. Chuck climbed onto that food delivery system to get away from a bully and got stuck and cried until Mike scaled up to get him down. Mike learned how to do headstands against that wall, used to look out this bank of windows on the way to breakfast every morning. He remembers the faint rattle of the elevator, louder now than it was when he left.

Like everything else, the recreation pod looks much smaller than it used to. When he was growing up it was enormous, a vast, echoey place full of kids and toys and education terminals. And it’s still full of those things, but Mike’s taller, about a thousand years older, scarred and tired and still...kinda grimy, honestly, from the trip up. Everybody’s wearing white and blue, and Mike stands in the middle of the entrance and he--

--he feels…

“Are you Mike Chilton?”

Mike blinks and tenses up automatically, but it’s just a little girl. She looks about ten, and she’s looking Mike up and down from just out of arm’s reach, brow furrowed in concentration.

“Uh…” Mike glances back for help--Mr. A makes a shooing gesture at him. “Yeah.”
A few more nearby kids look up, and then stop what they’re doing to stare. There’s a spreading wave of silence, and then, right in its wake, a wave of whispers. The kids right in front of him put their heads together, apparently digesting this information, and then one of the boys pops up out of the huddle and asks, “Can we see your teeth?”

“They’re not really pointy,” says Mike, and at least four or five kids go awww, apparently disappointed.

“So you can’t chew through the pod wall while we’re sleeping?” says a boy.

One of the others cuts in before Mike can answer that one. “So you can’t, uh, you can’t, you can’t bite somebody, like, so hard they die?”

“I--no?” says Mike. “Why’d I want to do that?”

A good question, apparently. There’s a few seconds of fierce discussion.

“...’Cuz?” says one of the girls eventually.
“No, I don’t do that,” says Mike. “I--drive my car around. And help people.”

“Car?” says one of the older girls sharply--one of the thirteen-year-olds around the edge of the pod who’ve been aggressively pretending Mike doesn’t exist. “You really have a car?”

“Yeah!” says Mike. “Here--” And he pulls up a video clip on the biggest screen he’s got; Mutt revving, rattling with the force of her engine’s barking. The kids all go “ooo!” and some of the teenagers around the walls stop ignoring the proceedings abruptly. Mike scrolls through recordings of their track tests, dashboard footage of bots and explosions--the kids giggle at the sound of Chuck screaming, and Mike is kind of glad Chuck isn’t there. For a heart-stopping second he sees his own face, the video that played at his trial, and he scrolls past that one fast. Then--oh, that shouldn’t be in there.

“Why are you fighting that guy?” says one of the girls. “Are you gonna bite him?”

“That’s my buddy Texas,” says Mike, and frowns at the screen--a recording of some sparring session, months ago. Wow, Mike’s spinning kicks have gotten really sloppy. “We’re just...playing. Uh...sometimes, you...fight people because it’s fun.”

In the video, Mike does a back handspring to avoid one of Texas’s brutal roundhouse kicks. Everybody watching goes “oooo” again.

“...Can you do somersaults?” says one of the girls.

“I--yeah, sure?” Mike says, baffled. “They’re pretty easy.”

“Nuh-uh,” says the girl. “Can I see?”

“Somersaults are boring, though,” says Mike, but he’s already standing up, stretching his arms from side to side and over his head. Jeez, he’s been on freakin’...medical rest for so long, he hasn’t done a flip in weeks. Eh, that’s okay. It’s like riding a bike--anybody can do it, and learning the tricks is easy. “Here, everybody back up.”

The recreation pod is pretty big. Mike fits in four flips, a roll and a cartwheel before he reaches the other wall and has to abruptly kick off it for a backflip to avoid slamming into it face-first. Everybody cheers. Mr. A has his face in his hands. Mike stretches again and barely winces as his ribs ache. It’s getting better. There’s nothing to get better from, but--if there was, Mike would be getting better. Wow, that feels good.

A sticky hand grabs his. “Do it again!” says a little girl with a fuzz of black hair.

Mike laughs, and does it again.

--

“You are not going to bed in your makeup,” says Claire as they walk through the front door of the Clements’ pod.

“Yes I am,” Julie mutters, staggering towards Claire’s bedroom.

“No, you’re not, you’re going to--”

“Claire, I’m not--I’m--I can’t, okay? Just stop it! Just--”

That’s no good.”

Julie groans thickly. “Not my fault.”

“Well, it’s not mine either,” Claire chirps. “Here, hold this.”

Julie takes the makeup kit without protest, opens it numbly and pulls out cleanser and swabs.

“Much better,” says Claire with satisfaction. “Now, you work on that, and then we’re gonna get you in a shower…”

She coaxes Julie through the entire ordeal, until eventually Julie is sitting clean-faced, wet-haired, and feeling almost human, on the floor by Claire’s bed.

“So,” says Claire, clicking her tongue. “What happened?”

“Nothing,” says Julie automatically. Claire raises her eyebrows, supremely unimpressed, and it’s so...Gwen that Julie has to smile a little. “...Okay,” she says. “Okay. It’s, uh...Texas.”

Claire manages to look even less impressed than before. “What, Mister Brawniest and Most Brainless?”

Julie feels a hot, mean spike of amusement go through her--Exactly, he’s so stupid. That’s all, he’s just a stupid jerk who thinks with his muscles. Not like I care. Not like I care if he ever says my name again, or play-fights with me, or spins me around after we blow something up, or--

And then, to her absolute horror, her eyes start prickling, and her lip starts twitching, and oh my god she’s not going to cry over Texas, she’s not.

“Okay, sorry!” says Claire, apparently alarmed. “I know he’s your friend and everything--”

“He’s not my friend!” Julie snaps, her voice cracking. “He--he found out I’m K-Kane’s daughter and h-he--”

Claire narrows her eyes. “He what?”

“He hates me,” says Julie, well-aware that she sounds like a whiny ten-year-old. She punches the bed limply.

“He does not,” says Claire.


“Ugh--Julie, no he doesn’t!” Claire sighs. “Look. You remember that thing with Foxy, where you got all jealous and pretended to be an Amazon and stuff? You remember my totally cool speech about why Foxy should help the Burners?”

Julie sniffs, dabs at her eyes, then remembers she’s not wearing makeup anymore and just scrubs at them. “...You said they were loyal,” she says.

“Because they are,” Claire says. “Those boys are super dumb, or super dweeby, or, like, both, but they’ve got one thing going for them: they would do just about anything for you! He’s mad, and he’s upset you lied or whatever--which, if he was smart, he’d get why you had to, but that’s not the point, you can’t wait for boys to be less dumb.”
Julie giggles a little, kind of wet and shaky. “Yeah.”

“So! He’ll come back around!” Claire says, and frowns. “...You should call him.”

“What?!” Julie sits up straight, electrified out of her unhappy fog. “What--no! Claire, I can’t.”

“Okay, so I’ll call him,” Claire says, and pulls up a screen. “I’ve been following him on the security cameras ever since he left the tower, I just have to look up the number of the pod cluster he went to.”

“Claire!” Julie says.

“That’s me!” says Claire brightly, and starts typing. “Mm...Tower T-L, pods 3 through 24...wow, that’s all one family? D...Dimaguiba? Does that sound right?”

“Uh,” Julie starts, but Claire is already calling. There’s a ring or two, and then a bright little blip and the call is live. Julie shifts out of the screen’s range--she’s not scared of Texas, that would be dumb, but she...maybe doesn’t want to see him look at her like that again.

“Who the heck are you?”

“Texas, right?” says Claire, “this is Claire.”

“Who?”

“Ugh--never mind. Who are you staying with?”

“Ain’t tellin’ some random Deluxe chick nothin’!”

Claire opens her mouth to reply, but before she can, a round, lined face slides into view behind Texas, inspecting the comm screen myopically.

“Randal, sino yan?”

“No one, geez!” says Texas, glaring at the old woman. “I don’t gotta tell you nothin’ either, Deluxe-livin’--”

“Randal,” calls another voice from off-screen, “dinner’s ready!”

“You’re all dead to me!” Texas yells back, and then, after a moment, “...What’re we havin’?”

“Aahhhh, ang tigas ng ulo mo,” mutters the old woman, tapping the side of Texas’s head with one crooked, arthritic hand.

“Whatever, you’re not my mom,” Texas retorts, scowling. Then his head snaps back to the screen and he fixes Claire with a hard look. “And neither are you--I remember you now! You’re Jul--I mean, you’re--that one girl!”

“Wow, nice,” says Claire acerbically.

“Well, you can back off and so can--UGH. Everyone can just--back off!”

“Randal!” calls the voice behind him again.

“I’m comin’!” Texas bawls over his shoulder. He gives Claire one last glare, and then closes the call.
“He hates me,” Julie says again, dully, into the still silence.

“...His loss,” says Claire, obviously trying to sound casual, but there’s something cold and hard behind her voice that says Texas has a lot to make up for. “Come on. I’m gonna braid your hair, and then you can get some sleep. We’ll figure this out in the morning.”

--

DAY NINE

It’s four o’clock in the morning. Julie hardly slept, thinks she might need to cry again, and just remembered she hasn’t eaten since before the coup kicked off yesterday. But it’s time for a board meeting, so all of that will have to wait.

With Larsson and Pinsky absent, the table looks pretty empty. Julie sits down and says, with barely a tremble in her voice, “Good morning. Before we begin, I know it was...a busy day, yesterday. Does anybody have any questions for me?”

“Are you okay?” says Stevens.

Julie has been so preoccupied rehearsing answers to questions like “What are your plans re: Motorcity?” and “Who’s taking over for Larsson and Pinsky?” that it takes a solid five seconds for this one to sink in. When it does, the best she can manage is a weak, “E...excuse me?”

“Are you okay?” Stevens repeats patiently. “Rough day yesterday.”

“I’m...your CEO,” Julie points out, trying to ignore the way her throat is tightening up.

“I know.”

That seems to be all. Julie swallows hard and says, with as much composure as she can muster, “I’m getting by. I had support from R&D and the cadet program. I appreciate that. It worked out. We still have a lot of work to do. Any further questions.”

There’s a general, patient silence that seems to indicate no, not really. Julie nods, tight-lipped, and carries on.

“...I’ve been...working hard to keep everything going,” she says. “Making a lot of changes. Um. I don’t know if--” She feels the crack in her voice coming. If she says my dad now she’s going to lose it.

She clears her throat instead, says, “--I don’t know if my father would approve of what I’m doing. But I think making peace with Motorcity is the right thing to do and...I can’t work for it alone anymore. I’m going to need your support. If you’ll open your meeting outlines, uh, you’ll see my five-point plan for establishing a mutually beneficial relationship...”

For the first time in a while--damn Stevens--she feels stupid and young and out of her depth as she makes her way through the presentation. “Five-point plan” sounded so official when she was coming up with it but now she just feels like an imposter, throwing around words she doesn’t really understand for the benefit of people who can see right through her.

Julie keeps bracing for one of Larsson’s wordy, smug interjections--they don’t come. She just talks and talks and when she looks at the time again, it’s almost exactly five o’clock. A whole hour of board meeting, and no fights. No one telling her how to do her job, or undermining her
authority at every turn. She’d expected it to last much longer, budgeted her time accordingly; now she has a free hour for breakfast.

Half an hour later, she’s done nothing but stare blindly down at her throat cubes. Her brain spins increasingly horrible hypotheticals for the Q&A at six. Maybe the city will turn on her. Maybe they’ll be too afraid to ask anything at all. Maybe they’ll all finally take her up on that offer to head down to Motorcity...maybe that’s better than staying in a city run by an eighteen-year-old.

Julie buries her head in her hands. Why is everything suddenly so much scarier now that she doesn’t have to hide? Why does she feel faker now than she did when Larsson was constantly challenging her right to run the company? Why--

“Julie?”

She’s half-expecting Mike, but when she looks up it’s to see Dar standing in the doorway, holding a blue-and-white food cooler.


He laughs, closing the door behind him. “Oh, yeah, that’s a good idea! Bet the commanders would love that.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” mutters Julie, sitting heavily back in her chair. “I’m a teenager and everything has gone perfectly since I took charge.”

“Don’t sell yourself short, man,” Dar says, and pulls a package out from under his arm. “...Look. I dunno how this is gonna go today, but...I brought you breakfast.”

“Oh.” Julie tries to smile. “Uh...thanks, Dar. I’ve already got some.” She picks half-heartedly at her plate of throat cubes. “So.”

“Oh--no, nah, not those,” Dar says, with a faint grimace at her plate. He walks forward and rests the cooler on the table. “Tennie and Dutch and mom and dad and everybody, uh...they wanted you to have these. For good luck, I guess. They’re called enchiladas. They’re really, really good.”

By five-fifty AM, the Burners and their various friends and allies have all gathered together in the main Kane Co. R&D testing room. Claire is with her mom again, screens up and ready. The techs have settled down as far on the opposite side of the room as possible--except Chuck, who’s yawning and ruffled and kind of dozing off against Mike’s shoulder. Dar is apparently on security duty, guarding the executive pod during the Q&A, but Dutch is there too, jittering nervously in place. Texas is nowhere to be seen.

“We’re live in five,” says Gwen tensely--on a few of her screens, men and women with grim, business-like faces nod and open up screens of their own. “You all have your assignments. If there’s a security threat, I want to know yesterday.”

“Is it seriously this dangerous?” Mike mumbles--Claire glances at him and shakes her head despairingly, turning back to her screens. “What are people even gonna do?”

“We don’t know, like, that’s the point,” Claire says. “Four minutes.”

“Here we go,” Chuck says, kind of breathless--nudges his shoulder against Mike’s. “Dude. Julie’s CEO. Oh man, oh geez.”
“I know, buddy,” Mike says. Some part of him isn’t sure if he’s ready for this, if Julie’s ready for this. Seeing her there, on the screen where Kane used to stand, it’s gonna be...weird.

“It’s like I fell asleep and woke up in different timeline or something,” Chuck says, and Mike blinks and frowns over at him.

“Timeline? What?”

“Uh, it’s like, this theory where--”

“Good morning, Deluxe!”

“Oh, sshhhh, it’s starting,” hisses Claire. “Nerd stuff later!”

“Cool nerd stuff,” Chuck shoots back, instead of wincing and clamming up. Claire blinks, startled, and then rolls her eyes. Chuck rolls his eyes back. Mike turns up the volume on the broadcast screen, grinning a little.

“I know there have been a lot of changes in the past few weeks, and I wanted to take the time to address some of the questions and concerns that you might have about...all of this,” Julie says, on screen. Mike can’t even see the big shadows he knows are under her eyes. Makeup is pretty freaky stuff. She smiles, and she looks so sure of herself, Mike can’t help relaxing a little bit. “All questions will be entirely anonymous, even to my surveillance team. Before we begin, though, I want to tell you what happened yesterday...”

Her account of the coup is brief and blunt. Larsson and Pinsky tried to take over and are now in prison, along with half the Security force. Everyone will be treated as humanely as possible. A serious overhaul of the Deluxian justice system is in the works.

“...and we are officially working with Motorcity and the Burners,” says Julie, in a clipped, steady voice. “Our management may have...misunderstood their actions over the years, but they only ever wanted peace and justice. I’m going to fight as hard as I can to make that happen.” She pauses, looks at someone off-screen, and nods. “Thank you. Lines are open.”

The Q&A lasts for three hours. Julie gives Deluxe an almost exhaustive personal history--excluding her identity as a Burner--from being Kane’s secret daughter, to training as his replacement, to her general education credentials. She answers technical questions about management and leadership with a kind of political ease that Mike finds frankly stunning. She is unerringly patient and steady, and for the most part the questions seem to strike a positive tone.

Some of them, though…

“How old are you?” Julie reads aloud, frowning down at her screen. It’s almost indiscernable, but Mike recognizes the little twitch at the corner of her jaw and feels his own hands tighten into fists.

“...Eighteen,” says Julie. “Next question...Why were Larsson and Pinsky trying to take over? They thought I was too young to lead and too weak to stop them.” She pauses, letting the vaguest sliver of a threat hang in the air for a moment. “...Next question.”

More management policy stuff that goes in one ear and out the other for Mike, while Claire and Gwen nod approvingly at Julie’s answers.

“I heard a rumor that the Burners are in Deluxe…” Julie starts, and Chuck groans. Mike glances over at him, frowning.

“What is it, buddy?”
Chuck ignores him, instead looking over his shoulder to glare at the amassed R&D workers. “I know this is one of you guys!”

Someone in the crowd snickers. Someone else shouts, “Love ya, Stringbean!”

“You're compromising our position, you dumb jerk!” Chuck yells back, and then settles grumpily back to listen to Julie.

“...So what I can tell you is that there’s some kind of sickness spreading through Motorcity and Deluxe. We don’t know what’s causing it, but Kane Co.’s medical team has already developed a cure, which we will be distributing to Motorcitizens as soon as possible.”

“Oh, that’s gonna get a reaction,” murmurs Gwen. “Claire?”

“On it,” says Claire, selecting feed after feed from the array in front of her and flicking them in her mother’s direction. They confer together for a moment, then send a quick message to Julie. On the screen, she pauses, making it look impressively natural, and then says, “...And, of course, all Deluxe citizens who were affected have already been treated.”

“Good,” sighs Gwen, and nods once to Claire, who looks pleased as punch. Behind them, the R&D crowd is still cracking in-jokes and laughing, but they all go abruptly silent as Julie sets into the next question—Who’s going to replace Larsson and Pinsky on the board of directors?

“We have...several potential candidates for the new head of Research and Development,” says Julie. There’s an outbreak of elbowing and muttering from the room at large. “Security as a whole is in need of a serious overhaul, so that process is going to be...a lot longer. In the meantime, squad leaders who have proven themselves loyal to Kane Co. will report directly to me.”

She looks down at her screen, scrolling to the next item in the queue, and something about her goes still and cold for a second. Gwen looks uneasy, but the pause doesn’t last long. Julie even manages to put a little tonal variation into her voice as she reads it aloud--”Where is Mister Kane right now?”

Another pause. Dutch and Chuck share a look and then they both turn to Mike. He feels the back of his neck burn, and doesn’t meet their eyes.

“As I said yesterday, my father is somewhere in Motorcity,” says Julie, stiffly composed. “That’s all we know right now. Next question, please.”

--

Julie manages to hold a perfect, professional smile until about 0.3 seconds after the broadcasting screen flickers off. The release of tension is so huge she has to fall back in her chair, heart hammering. She made it, she did it, and it wasn’t...great, but it was okay. She’s okay.

“Claire?” she says, and Claire’s face pops up, distracted and in mid-conversation. “How--?”

“Girl you did so good!” Claire gives her a distracted smile. “We’re down in nerd central, like, you can come down and talk if you want--I’m just a teeny bit busy right this second.”

“Oh.” Of course, Claire’s working with her mom right now. Julie swallows, and forces herself to nod understandingly. “Right, sorry. Thanks, Claire.”

It takes a lot of effort to push herself up and walk to the door. For some reason, Julie almost
expects hoards of Deluxians outside, with even more questions. But when she walks out, there’s only one person there. And it’s...not Dar Gordy.

“Commander Harley,” Julie says, just a touch warily. “Where did Dar go?”

“...I asked him if he could stand down by the elevators instead,” Alex says colorlessly. He’s sitting in one of the waiting chairs outside the office, hands folded in his lap like a kid waiting for a disciplinary hearing, a very quiet, grim look in his eyes. “I...I needed to talk to you.”

“O...kay.” Julie hesitates, then tries to lighten the mood a little. “Well, there was just a totally anonymous Q&A. You’re a little bit late for--”

“Julie, am I a bad person?”

Julie is taken aback. She’d expected this to be some further moping about Chuck or Mike or the whole “redacted” thing. “Um,” she says, which somehow seems to confirm Alex’s worst suspicions. He covers his face with his hands, fingernails digging into his forehead.

“I thought I was better,” he says slowly. “I thought--it was so easy for Mike, leaving Deluxe--”

“You don’t know that,” says Julie sharply. “It’s still messing with him, and it was like two years ago.”

Alex stares up at her, mortified. “No, I mean--I’m sorry. I mean, he can look at a thing and go, this is wrong, and that’s it, you know? But I don’t--it’s like I can’t...do that. And after the trial, I thought, Okay, I’m...better now!”

“And then you decided to put Chuck’s brain in a robot body,” says Julie, with a wry half-smile. Alex doesn’t smile back--if anything, he shrinks down smaller. Oh boy, thinks Julie. Okay.

“So...I’m not getting better,” says Harley, his voice thick and bleak. “I’m...I think I might be...getting worse?”

“You’re not,” says Julie, bluntly.

“Huh?”

“You’re not getting worse,” she repeats. “...Would you use your mind control tech on another person?”

“No!” he says immediately, shuddering. “No, I--”

“Not even someone you really hated?”

Alex frowns, thinking hard. “...No.”

“Why?”

“Well, because--it was wrong.”

“Why?” Julie presses. It feels harsh, cruel even, but...he asked.

“Because--because, I don’t know, it was hurting him!”

“But if it wasn’t hurting someone it would be okay?”
“Y--no! I don’t--no, it wouldn’t!”

“Why not?”

“Because no one deserves that!” Alex yells, springing to his feet--Julie is reminded suddenly of how tall he is, and takes a few quick steps back. “People shouldn’t--be controlled like that, it was horrible and wrong and I’m horrible because it’s my fault! It’s my fault it happened to Mike and I--I…” He freezes, chest still heaving, eyes sliding out of focus. Julie relaxes a little, one hand still on the handle of her boomerang.

“...I shouldn’t have left the tracker in,” says Alex numbly. “It’s like--another way to remove free will. Like there’s still a little mind control left over.” He looks at her again, eyes wide and over-bright. “Is...is that what you were trying to tell me?”

“Not really,” says Julie, letting go of her boomerang. She doesn’t think Alex would’ve really attacked her, but it’s been a rough few days. “Just...giving you a little taste of what it was like for me when I started to have doubts about my dad.”

“Oh.” Alex takes a deep breath and steps back, looking her up and down with a new kind of respect in his eyes. “I didn’t think of that. So...you get it.”

“Kind of,” Julie concedes. “Maybe not all of it. I wasn’t part of the stuff he did. But I know what it’s like to have your world turned around, and realize maybe you were wrong. Like, really really wrong. It’s, uh...kind of the worst.” She pauses, grimacing. “...But if you feel bad about it, that means you can tell the difference. So you feel worse. But you’re getting better. Just...think before you open your mouth, okay?”

Alex pauses, then nods mutely, apparently not ready to trust himself to say something nice. Julie tries not to laugh, but can’t help smiling--if Alex Harley is really developing a conscience, maybe there’s hope for the future. Who knows.

“Thank you, Commander.”

“Ha...yeah. Commander.” Alex scratches the back of his head sheepishly, a crooked smile crossing his face. “...Miss Julie.”

“Just Julie is fine.”

“Uh. Sure. Julie. So, when are we going down to Motorcity?”

Julie blinks at him for a moment. “I...was thinking of leaving as soon as the medical team has everything together. You really want to come along?”

Alex squares his shoulders. “Well, you made me the ambassador to Motorcity...even if it was just a goodwill gesture to say you were ready to talk to them. I should probably play the part, right?”

Julie actually kind of laughs at that, and, without thinking about it, claps him on the shoulder the way she’s seen her father do with promising cadets. “Sure,” she says. “It’s a start, right? Just...get your stuff together and I’ll call you when we’re ready to go.”

“Yeah,” says Alex, and takes a deep breath. “Yeah, okay. It’s a start.”

--

“Damn kids and their damn cars,” grumbles Vi.
Kane glances up, distracted from his table of irritatingly incompatible scavenged parts, and sees her sitting still, hands on her gun, head cocked like she’s listening. After a second, he hears it too—the faint sound of motors in the distance.

They sit silent and still until the sound fades away again. Kane turns back to his work, scowling. Across the room, he hears the by-now familiar noises of Vi systematically taking apart some gangster’s gun.

They both work in silence for time immeasurable, until something echoes softly in the back of Kane’s mind, a retroactive realization. He looks up at her, frowning suspiciously.

“You have a problem with cars?”

“Huh?”

“Damn kids and their damn cars?” Kane prompts impatiently. “You don’t like them.”

“Should think you wouldn’t either, coming from Detroit Deluxe.”

Kane rolls his eyes, then remembers for the thousandth time that she can’t see him doing it. “I don’t,” he says bitterly. “But you’re from...here.”

Vi snorts. “We’re all ‘from here’. Or don’t you remember life before the dome?”

Kane hasn’t been questioned this much in about a decade and a half, and it rankles. “Don’t you remember life before the dome? He built the damn thing! Designed the infrastructure for a perfectly stable society living on top of it! It’s almost enough to make him want to tell her his real name.

He doesn’t, just gives a humorless bark that hardly sounds like laughter and says, coldly, “This city isn’t Detroit anymore. That’s why I b--that’s why I...want to get back to Deluxe. Clean air, blue skies--”

“Like Detroit ever had either of those,” she snorts.

“It should have,” Kane growls. “What does Motorcity offer these people? Filth, disease! Chaos!”

“Can’t disagree with that.”

“They should be flocking to Deluxe!”

“But they’re not.”

“That’s--”

“Kinda the opposite, actually, from what I’ve heard,” says Vi, fingers moving systematically over the dismantled gun until she finds the next piece to clean.

This is pointless. Kane turns back to his work bench, teeth grinding.

He only manages to work for another minute or two before he can’t stand it anymore. “People die down here,” he snaps, and sees Vi jump just slightly, hands twitching at the suddenness of the noise. “From diseases we could cure with a day of treatment in Deluxe. They scramble around in the trash down here, killing each other over nothing--”

“My brother died building Deluxe,” says Vi shortly.
She says it so matter-of-factly, it takes a second for the words to register. Kane takes a breath to answer, then stops, uncertain of his next move. Vi doesn’t wait for his response.

“They couldn’t do the whole thing with drones; they’d only built so many by then anyway. They needed human eyes on it, people who weren’t scared of heights and knew the tech.”

Kane tries to sound equally dispassionate when he speaks again, but he’s sure the sick, unnameable emotion welling inside him shows in his voice. “And what happened to him.”

“Shoulda been more scared of heights. And I’d already gone blind, so—”

“You weren’t born--?”

“Car accident,” she interrupts bluntly, and picks up her shotgun, aiming it at the open window as the sound of distant engines waxes and wanes again. Lights flash by. “When I was seventeen. Stupid mistake.”

“At least you survived,” says Kane roughly. Anything to stop her talking about this, wallowing in self-pity or whatever emotion it is she’s hiding. And she does pause, actually turning her head towards him as though she can see him, even though her eyes wander to the right of him as usual.

“Your wife,” she says after a moment, hard and certain, and the words might as well be an explosion, the way they seem to echo in the silence that follows. The sick feeling goes sharp, guts him, makes his voice hoarse and alien when he can speak again.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You said ‘at least you survived’.”

“I didn’t say it like that!”

“Yes, you did. And you hate cars, and you mentioned a daughter but not a mother. Just a guess, but it looks like I was right on the money.”

“I’m not--you don’t know--” He wants to hit something, break something. Feels the familiar swell of rage, overriding that strange, nameless emotion, and practically welcomes it. “You don’t know what you’re talking about!”

Vi points the gun at him. And this time Kane really would have knocked it aside, thrown it away, told her to get out, if it weren’t for her hands.

Her hands are shaking. He remembers the look on Julie’s face the first few times he shouted at her, and the look on--her mother’s face. The promise not to raise his voice again. The sick feeling returns, heavy and seeping, and this time he recognizes it.

Guilt.

He sits back down, heavily, still eyeing the muzzle of the shotgun. “...Her name was Sarah,” he says. “I was driving.”

“...Paul,” says Vi after a moment. “It’s not like I told him to take the job. But I didn’t stop him either.”

It takes a while for the electric atmosphere of fear and suspicion to dissipate, for Kane’s breathing to slow and Vi’s gun to drop towards the floor. They sit in the darkness for a while, with the sound
of engines sanding the silence away.

Vi gets up eventually, and heads across into the kitchen to start on dinner. She keeps coughing or clearing her throat wetly—she’s been nursing a cold since yesterday. Kane has thought about putting his gas mask back on for the remainder of his stay here. But Vi gets contentious about the way it distorts his voice, and it’s uncomfortable and stifling and still smells like the Duke. And besides, what’s the point of wearing a mask all day and then eating food made by a sick person? Even if Kane does get sick, he can handle a little cold.

Somebody raps at the door. Kane starts upright, glancing automatically toward the gun leaned against the counter at Vi’s side. But then a boxy green shape comes hovering over to the window and knocks again, and Kane recognizes it this time. It’s the little green bot again, carrying a basket of organic greenery and empty firearms.

“Kleinschmidt!”

“Same as last time, Jeremiah,” Vi calls from the kitchen, her rasp becoming more pronounced as she raises her voice. “Basket’s on the end table!”

Kane performs the requisite swap—glaring all the while into the bot’s singular green eye, daring it to make a move. In the end, it motors happily away and he’s left feeling...foolish.

The feeling only lasts a minute before it’s replaced by frustration, as Kane digs through nameless, misshapen vegetables. Nothing. None of the parts he ordered. He’s back to the drawing board.

Kane picks up the basket and stomps through to the kitchen, dropping it loudly on the counter next to Vi. “Here,” he grunts, and pushes it her way. “Food.”

Vi jumps at the sound and smacks out blindly at his arm, hard enough to sting. “Christ, Brian! Warn me!”

Kane is halfway back to his project when he realizes he’s smiling. Not widely, not so anyone would notice. Just an absentminded pull at the corners of his mouth. But it’s more than enough to ignite a feeling of confused, dull panic in his gut. He’s not happy. He’s not happy. He’s certainly not happy that a small, blind, horrible woman hit him on the arm, it doesn’t—make any sense--

“Daniel!”

“What?” Kane snarls, and feels the panic crank up another notch on realizing he automatically answered to the random name.

“The damn fool asshat left a note in the basket,” yells Vi. “Need you to read it.”

Kane considers ignoring her, but...she’ll just keep on bothering him until he gets up and reads the stupid note. And besides, maybe the note explains why he didn’t get the parts he ordered. Kane can’t very well go marching up to Vi’s mysterious supplier to demand satisfaction, but oh he wants to. If he was in his own city, he would never tolerate that kind of bad service and disrespect.

“Here,” says Vi, when she hears his footsteps. She holds out a wrinkled piece of paper. “He knows I’m blind, don’t know what he was thinkin’.”

“Mm,” says Kane, and takes the paper, flicks it open and scans the first line with a dismissive eye.

_**Hi, Abe.**_
Softly, but with feeling, Kane says a word he would never say around his daughter.

“Oh, how bad can it be?” snaps Vi. “No artichokes this week?”

--

Alex is trying to decide which nano-wrench to pack for the trip to Motorcity when he hears footsteps outside his pod. Well, decision time...might as well take both, he thinks, and starts to zip his bag shut. The door behind him hisses open, and Alex sighs. “Just another minute, Deere--I’m almost--”

Then he hears the breathing--rough, garbled, heavy. Even as he turns, Alex’s mind is spinning logical explanations--a filtration mask, maybe. But when he sees the figure standing in his doorway, those thoughts vanish into blank, full-blown terror.

“Keep...your mouth...shut,” snarls Red, “and do what I say...Harley.”

Insanely, at this moment Alex’s knee twinges, like it remembers the black-booted foot smashing into it all those weeks ago. Alex remembers that too. He almost says, “What do you want me to do?” but then he remembers that he’d have to open his mouth to do that, thereby violating the first directive. Instead he stands up, eyes following Red nervously as he staggers towards the hover-bed in the corner and half-falls onto it.

“He--my hel--” His body convulses in a burst of dry coughs that only abate when he pries at the bottom of his mask. There’s a pause as he struggles with the thing, shoulders heaving. And then, loud in the silence, “Fix...my helmet.”

He must have pulled it up past his mouth. Alex has never heard the guy’s voice without the layer of distortion, had always kind of felt deep down that Red was like an android--not quite human, mechanical in his hatred. He feels like he just opened the maintenance hatch on a machine to find flesh and bone underneath.

In other words, super disturbed.

“And stay--” Red grunts with effort as he hauls his helmet all the way off, still facing away from Alex, still shrouded in the darkness of the corner. “Stay away from me,” he finishes, hard and sour as ever, and tosses the helmet over his shoulder without looking back. Self-preservation overrides Alex’s shock and he dives to catch it, inches from the floor. There’s a nasty, familiar burned streak across the visor; a Kane Co. laser rifle. Alex remembers the reports from the Security department, the burned wreckage and the massive influx of injured Elites--he shudders a little.

“I’m going to need a totally new visor,” he says, as softly and inoffensively as he can.

“Don’t care,” Red snaps. “Just get it done.”

“Right, yes. Right.”

There’s silence for a long time, after that. Alex takes scans and tweaks designs--runs the new shapes through his parts printer and then starts picking apart the inside of the helmet, wincing at the smell of melted wire and polymers. There’s no sound from Red, except for the occasional faint shift of fabric or a stifled grunt of pain. Alex’s mouth is very, very dry.
“H--hey,” he manages finally, too soft and choked. There’s no answer from Red’s corner. Alex swallows hard and tries again. “What’s your problem with Mike, anyway?”

No answer. Alex wonders, hands trembling faintly, whether he’s one more word away from a freshly broken nose. He swallows.

“He’s--I thought he was a bad guy for a--a whole year, but after I spent two weeks with him I realized--”

“He ruined my home.”

Okay, that’s part of an answer.

“...The building,” says Alex tentatively, encouraged. “The one he was supposed to help demolish.”

Red twitches violently, like he’s about to turn around, but keeps his back to Alex instead. “...How do you know about that.”

“I got access to that mission log for my...project last month,” says Alex, guilt rising in his throat like bile. It’s a familiar sensation by now. “The graffiti on the wall of the building matches the paint on your suit, I mean, it’s really fairly--”
“I grew up there,” says Red. There’s a rough edge to his voice, and something…distant about his words. Alex recognizes that sound, and wonders with a shiver what Red is remembering right now.

“But…Mike tried to save it,” he tries, knowing he’s pushing his luck but too fascinated to stop. “He helped people instead, he left Kane Co. after that. I mean, I know it still got demolished, but he’s not the one that ruined your--”

“My home--” Red pauses, coughs again. “…’s not that building. Motorcity. He ruined. Motorcity.”

“What--”

“Kane’s favorite son leaves the family. Comes down to Motorcity, starts a--a goddamn club, like it’s a game, like we--needed him. To save us. Like he wasn’t what really brought Kane. Down on our heads.”

“That’s not,” Alex starts, and then…stops. Sure, Mister Kane was always talking about getting the Motorcity problem “under control”, always had his side projects devoted to it, but the two years after Mike left…

“Zombie virus,” snarls Red. “Weather machine, bot invasions, the Genesis Pod. Because of Chilton. So I decided--if there’s one person who wants Chilton out of Motorcity more than I do? It’s Kane. Or it was.” He makes a soft, gravelly noise that might be a sigh. “…’s dead.”

“Kane is?” Alex yelps, a stab of adrenaline driving him to his feet.

“No, my little brother,” Red snaps, sounding horribly lucid for a second. “He’s right there, he--gh-shit--”

Alex watches as the black-suited figure tips over, limp and helpless, still mumbling deliriously.

Alex thinks, I could just leave him here.

Alex thinks, No one would ever know, and it would make things so much easier.

Alex thinks, He’s done so many horrible things. He’s made trouble for Julie. He’s hurt Mike.

Alex thinks, So have I.

With a long, painful sigh, Alex pulls up a comm screen. “Hey,” he says. “Godinsky, hi. I need you to get over here. Uh. Please.”

--

Kane doesn’t get any more work done on his project that day. He can’t focus, can’t concentrate. The note lies on his work table like…

Well, like an unassuming scrap of paper. But it seems to draw his eye.

He picks it up now, resists for a second and then gives in and unfolds it again.

Hi, Abe.

I don’t know what damn fool thing you’re trying to do here. I looked at the parts you wanted, and I figure it looks like a bomb if you wanted to be a stupid son of a bitch and half-ass it in the worst
goddamn way.

Kane takes a second, like he does every time, to huff. Those parts would have worked fine for a bomb. Jacob’s not as good at incendiaries as he thinks he is, he never has been.

Anyway I’m not sending you a bunch of unstable bomb parts and chemicals so you can blow up Vi Kleinschmidt’s house. She’s a good customer, and a good lady, and if I get wind she’s not alive and well over there, I’ll send the whole city your way. You get one last chance, Kane. Do the right thing, keep your head down, give up on this stupid war and let our cities heal.

It’s what Sarah would have wanted.

-- Jacob

The note ends there. Kane stares at that last sentence for another long second, then crumples the paper up with a vicious snarl and tosses it to the farthest corner of his desk. What Sarah would have wanted. Like that waffling old lunatic would know what Sarah wanted. Like he would know anything about Deluxe! Deluxe doesn’t need to heal from anything, and if Kane has anything to say about it, Motorcity will never get the chance. He doesn’t need Jacob. He doesn’t need anyone, and when he gets back up to Deluxe, he’s going to reduce this place to a burning wasteland.

Chapter End Notes

Notable section titles for this chapter (see: almost all of them):
Deception! Disgrace! Texas Would Punch Julie Right in Her Face
The Hospitality of the Gordy Family
A Matter of KORS
Sleepover...in Deluxe!
“I’m Fine” Says Girl, Not Fine
Alex Harley: Ethics??
Aggressive Oversharing
Out of the Corner of Your Eye You Spot Him
S.W.A.L.F.U. (Sealed With A Loving FUCK YOU)
Hot Damn!! Deluxe Is Here To Help!!

Chapter Summary


Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Julie didn’t feel scared hovering miles above Motorcity in a transport pod. A little anxious, maybe, thinking about what she was about to do, but prepared. In control. But the closer the pod came to the actual city--constellations of lights turning into buildings, dark masses into crowds of people--the less in-control she felt. Now, she thinks she might be sick. She wishes the other Burners were here, backing her up, but she also knows there’s a chance Motorcity will turn on them for standing with her. She can’t risk that. They’ll come down later, when (if) the coast is clear.

Behind her, Bracket and Tennie stand in awkward silence, next to a very nervous Alex Harley. Dar had wanted to come too, had practically fought Julie on it, but with Dutch looking over his shoulder, Julie couldn’t bring herself to put him in danger. So he’s at home, healing.

One less thing to worry about, thinks Julie as the pod touches down on the roof of an abandoned building. She forces herself to stand firm and look out at the crowd of Motorcitizens below her. No one’s thrown anything or tried to shoot the pod down, which is practically a miracle down here...but they don’t look happy, either.

“Alright,” says Julie, and takes a deep breath. “Open the doors.”

“Should I…” Alex raises one hand, the seams of his implant surgeries pulsing gently with blue light. Julie shakes her head once.

“We can’t look like a threat,” she says. The door slides open, and she moves to one side to let Bracket and Tennie step up beside her. A ripple goes through the masses outside, and Julie sees the scattered confetti of multi-colored screens. Everyone’s filming.

And she thought it was scary doing the Q&A in Deluxe--silly Julie.

“Hi!” she calls out, smiling stiffly. “It’s me, Julie...you know...the Burner…”

“Bracket, what happened?” calls someone from the crowd, ignoring Julie completely. “Why were you up there?”

“My daughter Tennie was sick,” Bracket rumbles, sounding a little stilted. Julie glances at him uneasily, remembering the trial, a million years ago, when Tennie told the Burners her dad didn’t like public speaking. “The Burners had already gone to Deluxe for treatment, so I...followed them.”

“Then why didn’t you tell everyone else?” shouts a guy near the front of the crowd, one hand resting on what looks like a laser pistol. Julie swallows hard.
“We’re...tellin’ you now,” says Bracket. Tennie takes his hand and he glances down at her, frowning.

“I’m guessing you all watched Julie’s morning show today!” Tennie shouts, and Julie feels a tinge of envy at the effortless authority in her voice. “She only just found out about this, and she wasn’t sure if you’d trust her enough to let her people give out the cure! But that’s what this is all about! If you’re ready to let her set up shop down here--”

“And inject us all with poison,” says a voice in the back, and Tennie bristles but this time it’s Julie who steps forward, eyes narrowing.

“I know that’s you, Doug Birbiglia!” she calls. “We saved your butt from bots last year when you ran away from home! You rode off on that homemade motorscooter thing and I had to--you know what, okay, it doesn’t matter. I get it--Deluxe has given you too much trouble to trust us. At all.”

A chorus of enthusiastic agreement, a wave of nods. Someone somewhere cheers. Alright, she’ll take any positive responses she can get.

“Oh, and I know that because I helped stop most of that trouble! But I--I punched Emmanuel Larsson in the face, on a live broadcast, I told all of Deluxe I support Motorcity… Some people up there are gonna hate me for that! But you know what’s more important? Saving lives down here. I believe that! I’ve always believed that, and if you’re not sure, you can ask Doug Birbiglia! I saved your life, Doug!”

The crowd laughs, and Julie tries not to let the monumental surge of relief show on her face. Holy shit, it’s actually working. In Deluxe, authority and assurance are everything, but in Motorcity, you’re in if you make them laugh. You’re part of the family. We know you.

“Julie’s a good kid,” says Bracket, with impeccable timing. “We chose to trust Mike at the trial--well, she’s done just as much for this city, and you all know it. You’ve seen her. I can vouch for her, as can Jacob. We all know Jacob.”

The crowd murmurs assent. They do all know Jacob.

--

Ten minutes later, Julie has sent the okay up to Deluxe--medical pods will come down, set up checkpoints around Motorcity, and administer the cure to anyone who wants it. There was only one real snag--the Deluxe techs wanted security with them, but Motorcity wasn’t ready to let Kane Co. officers into their streets again. This went back and forth for a good five minutes, until Alex stepped forward with a solution; he’d seen an ex-Ultra Elite in the crowd during Julie’s address, and if there were more down here...there might be enough to supply security. The best of both worlds.

It’s good to see him pulling his weight, for sure. But there are some jobs Julie won’t trust to just anyone, which is why she’s taking this moment to make a call.

The line rings for only a fraction of a second before a screen winks into life.

“Julie! Hey!” says Jacob, jumping out of his seat. "Boy am I glad you’re callin’. Listen--"

“Jacob, we need your help!” says Julie quickly. She hates to interrupt, but this is...important. “You saw the announcement, right?”

“‘Course, but--"
“But the announcements don’t reach all of Motorcity,” Julie barrels on. “So we thought you could help spread the news to the outskirts--”

“Kid, I ain’t exactly a social butterfly,” says Jacob weakly. “I get dinner with Hudson on Fridays, that’s about it. And anyway, I gotta tell ya--”

“I’ve seen your comm’s contact list, Jacob,” says Julie, spreading her hands. “Everyone knows you! Just--talk to your customers, your friends, anyone you know!”

“Harry Gutierrez don’t even take my calls anymore--”

“Make him! And tell him the disease is airborne, so gas masks are a good idea. I’m gonna send you a list of places where we’re setting down medical outposts--coordinates and stuff--so you can spread that too, okay?”

“Sure, sure,” says Jacob, accepting the file transfer with a disgruntled wave. “But look, Julie, I got somethin’ important to tell you, okay?”

“Uh, sure.” Julie takes a breath, pinches the bridge of her nose. “Just, uh...just as long as it’s not going to totally throw me off...I really don’t need anything else on my plate right now.”

Jacob pauses, squinting at her. He looks down, at a scrap of paper in one hand, then back at her. Then down at the paper. “Nah,” he says, “nothin’ too important. It’s my--my plants, actually! Started growin’ some new stuff from the forests in my greenhouse, and they’re turnin’ out okay. Think some of ‘em might even be edible.”

“Oh,” says Julie, smiling absently. “Well, that’s great! Looking forward to getting probably-not-poisoned after this is all over.”

“Yeah,” says Jacob, “after that. Okay, well...better get the news out, I guess.”

Julie sighs, relieved, and throws the screen a cursory salute. “Thanks, Jacob! Good luck.”

“You too, kid.”

--

Jacob sits back with a gravelly huff, dragging one hand down his face. “Well,” he says to the fat orange pumpkin on the desk next to him, “at least you’re doin’ alright.”

Okay. So, get the news out. He can do that--but he’s only got the comms for so many people. Fortunately, he’s got a real good set of helping hands.

“Hey, kid!” he calls. It echoes weirdly around the mostly-empty hideout, but a second later there’s a chirp and ROTH comes around the corner. He’s still stirring the fertilizer mixture Jacob gave him a couple hours ago, Jacob’s spare apron tied awkwardly around his angular chassis. “Oh, that stuff oughta be done now. Look, I gotta new job for ya, you got a second?”

ROTH almost drops the bowl, puts it down carefully on the table and then claps excitedly. Jacob laughs. “Good! Good. Uh...how are we gonna do this. I gotta get word out to a buncha folks, and you’re faster’n me with all these plants still growin’ all over creation. I’m gonna need to write some stuff up, and--”

ROTH holds up a finger and spins in midair, hovering away at speed. A second later he’s back, cradling something in his hands--a little chip connected to a boxy module. He holds it out very
carefully, and drops it in Jacob’s palm.

“What’s this?” Jacob turns it over, squinting at it, runs a thumb over the side and feels a familiar texture. “…Speakers?”

God only knows where ROTH learned to do installations on himself, but ten minutes later Jacob is hooking up the last wire to the the little recorder module. ROTH reaches in carefully to nudge it deeper, then picks up his own plating and pops it back into place with a soft click of magnetic adhesion bolts.

“Testing,” Jacob says, and there’s another click and a whirr.

“Testing,” his voice says back to him, kinda high-pitched and funny-sounding, but clear.

“Testing.” ROTH’s eye flickers and flashes, and the voice warps more, higher and lower, slowing down and speeding up. “Testing, testing, testing…”

“This is Jacob.”

A click. “Testing. This is Jacob.”

“Looks like we’re in business!” Jacob scrubs his hands off with a rag, drops his tools back in his box and settles down. “Okay. You ready?”

ROTH nods and settles down on the counter in front of him, his eye glowing steadily.

“Right.” Jacob takes a deep breath. “If you’re listening to this recording…this is Jacob. You know me, and if you don’t, I’m bettin’ you know somebody who does. You probably noticed, but there’s a sickness goin’ around the city right now. Mike Chilton and the Burners got a cure for it, but people have gotta get to them first. Wear gas masks, if you’ve got extras give ‘em out to people.” He pulls up a screen, glances over the list Julie gave him. “…There’s folks handin’ out the cure near these exits…”

It’s a long list. Jacob reads through steadily, while his brain wanders off to do other stuff--worrying, wondering. ROTH floats there, listening patiently.

“…head to those spots and get treated as soon as you can,” he finishes, and drops his paper. “Stay safe, everybody. We’re gonna be just fine.”

Click. ROTH’s eye flashes. Jacob reaches up and pats the bot’s chassis. “You got all that, kiddo?”

ROTH regards him for a second, then there’s another click and Jacob’s own voice plays back to him. “--Gonna be just fine.”

For a second Jacob blinks at him--then he laughs, startled and amazed. “Yeah! There you go!”

“Yeah!--gonna be just fine.” ROTH spins in midair, whirs and waves his arms excitedly. Jacob laughs again and waves him back down.

“Gotta get the word out,” he says. “You can do that, huh?”
“Yeah!--” ROTH repeats, a cut-off little sound-dip. “Yeah!--stay safe.”

Jacob nods and transfers a map to his system, and ROTH whirs and chimes for a second and then claps his hands together and takes off toward the door of the hideout.

--

When Julie arrives at Checkpoint 2, the medical pod is just landing. She starts to dash forward as it touches down, but brakes abruptly as a flash of flame-patterned jumpsuit catches her eye. Texas is the first one out of the pod, glaring around; he brightens a little bit at the sight of the Motorcity doctors and nurses in their gang colors. The medical team edges out after him, a patch of strange, pure white in the dim light of Motorcity. Immediately, there’s a cold, awkward silence. Julie watches Texas mutter something to the other Burners, glance at her with venomous distrust, and then jog off down a side street. Mike throws Julie a quick, apologetic glance and then follows Texas.
Well, that’s. Fine. Fine. Julie has other stuff to deal with.

Like the way the Deluxe and Motorcity medical professionals are eyeing each other up like animals about to fight.

“That man has an eyepatch,” hisses Godinsky, and is immediately deluged in gentle slaps and admonishments from his peers.

“Well, if I knew y’all could fix this shit with your skin-bonds, I’d’a run up there lickety-split,” says the man in question, rolling his good eye. “Motorcity makes do. Not that you’d know what that--”

“Come on, Nguyen,” mutters someone, but the damage is done. Now everyone looks offended.

“We brought...the serum, and all the supplies we had stocked,” says Deere cautiously after a moment. “Do you have...injectors down here?”

“Do we--of course we have injectors!” The Skylarks’ head nurse scowls, glancing at Julie. “This is ridiculous. I have forty-eight men down that I need to be taking care of, I don’t have time to futz around here and be talked down to.”

“Well I’m sorry, you just told me you don’t have skin-bonds down here!” Deere says, insulted. And then, before the Skylarks’ nurse can respond, “...You have forty-eight patients?”

“Yeah?”

“What’s...” Godinsky edges forward, eyes wide. “What’s wrong with them?”

“What?” The nurse blinks for a second, distracted from his anger by confusion. “They’re--thirty-two from deja flu--”

“Deja Flu,” repeats one of the medical techs.

“Uh...yeah?”

“Deja Flu!” Godinsky says, and throws his hands up. “You can’t name--it doesn’t describe--oh my god, it does though. It does. Oh my god.”

“Thank you, thank you,” says one of the Duke’s doctors lazily. “I’ll be here all night, folks.”

“My point is, I have to get back to my boys,” says the Skylarks’ nurse, and turns back to the Deluxe medical team. “Number One is under my personal care. I don’t take that lightly.”

“Yes, that sounds very...important?” says Sanderson. “So take us there, and we’ll...fix that for you?”

“Fix it by killing them.”

The Deluxe medical team takes a step back almost in unison. “No!” Deere says, high-pitched with horror. “Oh my god, is--is that what you meant by ‘personal care’?! When people get sick you put them down like--”

“What?!” The Motorcity doctors do their own horrified double-take. “No, of course not!! We just assumed--”

“We don’t kill people!”
“Oh, but you think we do?”

“Okay, whoa!” shouts Julie desperately. She’d hoped they’d find common ground on their own, but Doing No Harm seems to be the last thing on anyone’s mind right now. “Come on, we’re getting kinda off-topic here, aren’t we?”

A nurse in red and gold sniffs. “I ain’t workin’ with a buncha hoity-toity never-defibrillated-a--”

“Yeah?” snaps Godinsky. “Well, I bet none of you guys wash your hands!”

In the massive uproar that follows this apparently unforgivable comment, Julie sighs hard through her nose and reaches yet again for her boomerang. Apparently it’s just that kind of week.

“Hey!!” she shouts. “Shut up!!”

To her surprise, they do--the Deluxians first, apparently on automatic, and then the Motorcitizens when they see her drawn weapon.

“You’re all doctors, and nurses and...stuff,” Julie trails off a little bit awkwardly--sees a couple of people huff and give each other looks. “--Sorry. My lessons were big on...executive management, not so much on, well, basically anything else. That’s not my point though. My point is, every single one of you--you spent years learning how to do this so you could save people, and, and if we work together, we can save an entire city.”

There’s a prickly silence, and the Motorcity and Deluxe factions look each other up and down.

“...Of course, Miss Kane,” says Deere.

“If these guys can start treatin’ us like we all do the same job, insteada...some kinda stone-age bullcrap...” One of the Duke’s nurses shrugs. “I figure we can do business.”

A murmur of agreement from the other Motorcitizens. Julie glances at her people, encouraged, and then nods firmly. “We’re out of our depth down here,” she says plainly. “I think I see the problem.” A lesson from her dad. Find a problem, fix it. It doesn’t have to be a big one, but it’s something. “I don’t think it’s wrong to say we have, um...some pretty advanced tech, upstairs, things you don’t have down here. Fair?”

“We make do.”

“I know you do, but, still.”

A resentful kind of grumble rolls through the crowd, but there are heads nodding.

“And,” Julie goes on, feeling her way across thin ice, but hopeful, “...I think we can all agree diplomacy hasn’t been a Deluxian skill in a really long time.”

“We can be diplomatic!” Godinsky says, offended. The entire medical team shushes him again. The Motorcity medical team doesn’t exactly laugh, but Julie sees several people stifle snickers.

“We just don’t know what to expect,” Deere chips in, apparently encouraged. “We have, uh...different priorities? So, you don’t have some supplies that we think are basic, a-and of course vice-versa! Of course.”

“And you’ve never seen a guy bleed to death,” offers a Skylarks nurse. A few of the Deluxians go a little pale.
“...No,” says Godinsky, and swallows. “Not. Really. Um, so! Where...should we set up?”

Julie breathes a heavy sigh of relief, and then immediately forgets about being relieved in favor of all the other problems that need solving. Deere has deputies who can work in her absence, and she seems to have the coolest head out of the medical team members. Julie pulls her aside, over towards where Chuck and Dutch are standing, looking slightly lost. Alex is hovering nervously behind them--good, she needs all her best brains in the same place.

“Okay,” says Julie. “I have to...make stuff happen, I guess, but I need you guys to put your heads together and figure out where this sickness is coming from, okay? If there really is a freaky plant out there causing all this, we have to find it and burn it.”

--

Number 50 is sitting on the edge of the highway outside the Skylark Motel, fatalistically finishing off an ancient bottle of eye-stinging bathtub vodka, when a tiny green shape comes swooping down out of the sky. Number 50 reaches for his gun on instinct, misses, and then has to catch himself before he sways off the edge of the highway.

“Whazzat!!” he yells at the shape. “Who’re you?!”

The boxy green shape hesitates in midair, then cautiously motors forward out of the darkness. 50 squints at it.

“If you’re listening to this recording,” the bot says, in a familiar voice that’s just a little bit too high-pitched. “...This is Jacob. You know me...”

50 listens to the entire recording, mouth hanging open. “There’s a cure?” he says.

He isn’t really expecting an answer, but the bot beeps and whirrs and then says, “Yeah! There’s a cure?”

50 lowers his sunglasses and gives the bot a very suspicious look. It looks back at him, bobbing a little.

“Are you--hic--copying me?”

“Yeah!” says the bot--Jacob’s voice again, but high and weird-sounding. “This is--copying.”

“Oh,” says 50, and considers that for a second. “...Hot damn.”

“Hot damn!” repeats the bot. “Yeah! Hot damn!!”

“Shhh!” 50, in his drunken haze, feels the familiar pang of guilt of a man who just swore in front of the baby. “No, shhshsh, that’s--uh, that’s a bad word. You shouldn’t say that, okay? Not unless you’re a...grown-up.”

“Grown-up,” repeats the robot.


--

“Here’s the good news,” says Deere officiously, pulling up a few screens. “We took samples from all of you yesterday and it does indeed appear that some kind of organic matter is causing the...Deja Flu. Specifically, spores. They were all over your clothes and hair--”
“Ew,” mutters Chuck.

“Yes, ew,” Deere agrees. “But as for where it comes from…”

“It’s not like there are any Terra plants in Deluxe,” says Harley thoughtfully. “...Maybe it’s something really small? Like a, a…”

“Don’t try to pretend you know stuff about plants,” says Chuck. “And no, even if it’d just been moss on the ground, we would’ve noticed!”

“I know what moss is,” says Harley, folding his arms.

“Do you, though?”

“I--”

“So there were people in Deluxe gettin’ sick,” says Dutch determinedly, shooting Chuck a sharp look. “Did they have anything in common? We found hotspots all over Motorcity…”

“Hotspots?” Deere frowns, pulling up an intricate 3D map of Deluxe with red dots scattered over it. “Nope, pretty even spread across the dome. A few areas with higher concentration, but those were mostly maintenance workers who’d been down in the inner dome. Which makes sense, since apparently it’s all coming from down here.”

“But we’ve checked,” Chuck protests. “None of the central points down here had any Terra plants in common!”

“To your knowledge,” says Harley, and hardly even quails a little when Chuck glares at him. “...I’m just saying.”

“And I’m just saying, we checked, and it’s not coming from Motorcity!”

“Then what, it’s coming from Deluxe? That doesn’t make any sense--then how would it even get down to--”

There’s an abrupt, ringing silence.

“Oh my god,” says Chuck.

“Holy shit,” says Alex.

“What,” says Dutch, just as Deere’s eyes go wide and she shouts, “The cables!”

“We didn’t look at the cables,” says Chuck. “Oh! Stupid, yes!”

“It got worse the higher we went!” Dutch yells suddenly, shooting to his feet and staring up as though he can see through the roof.

“And most of the cases we had in Deluxe were from lower pod levels!” Deere adds, banging a hand on the table.

“So whatever this thing is--” Chuck starts, just as Harley says, “It’s growing on the underside of the dome itself!”

“And the cables--” Dutch pulls up his map of hotspots, feverishly snatches Deere’s map of the dome out of the air and mashes the two together. “Yes!! The Skylark Motel--”
“Has that giant power cable running right through it!” Chuck shouts. “And we were LARPing in the Whispering Forest—holy shit!”

“So, that means...the Terras...planted something on the dome?” says Deere. “Is that even possible? It’s miles high and...”

“Well,” says Dutch, “at least one of ‘em can fly...”

“They’ve achieved flight?” squawks Harley. “What kind of weird--okay, okay, wait. Okay. You mean they’ve cobbled together technology that allows them to--”

“Their leader literally has wings,” says Chuck.

“Oh my god,” says Harley.

--

Foxy regards the bot coolly, leaning back in her throne. “...This could be a trick,” she says finally, slowly. “The Duke has bots like these, so do the Mama’s Boys. So they’re tryin’ to get us off our territory.”

The bot beeps. “No!” it says, and then, in a strange, hitching voice, tone and pitch changing with every few words, “No!—Not a--Mama’s Boys--not a--Duke! Not a--trick!”

There’s a moment of silence, and then one of the Amazons swears very quietly. Foxy arches a brow at the girl, unimpressed, and the bot squeaks and turns around to flash its eye at her. “That’s a bad word!” it says reproachfully.

“Yeah, Carrie, that’s a bad word,” Lizzie snickers, and then yelps as Toni smacks her reprovingly on the shoulder. “Hey!”

“You’re the Burner bot,” Foxy says, considering.

“ROTH!” squeaks the bot, and the voice is familiar this time: the Cabler girl who ran the infamous Mike Chilton Trial. “—can talk! ROTH—the—Burner!”

“Mm.” Foxy raises her eyebrows again, then shakes her head, still magnificently deadpan. “...Well, it’s not the strangest thing I’ve seen down here.”

“It’s the cutest thing I’ve ever seen down here!” says Bee, and ROTH covers his blank face bashfully with both arms. “Here! Here, say...’my name is ROTH, and I’m a Burner!”

“My name is ROTH!” ROTH repeats brightly, “I’m a Burner! Yeah!! I’m a Burner! Yeah!!”

“Fine!” Foxy swings her legs down off her throne. “Fine. We’ll head out. Ladies, we’re going.”

“Hot damn!” says ROTH.

--

“Randy!”

Texas jumps about six inches and stares around. He thought he shook off Tiny a few streets ago, but maybe he didn’t do as good as he thought. Well, alright. Texas wants to whoop someone’s butt right now, and it might as well be Mike’s.
But it’s not Mike. A woman in a bright blue Amazon jumpsuit is hurrying towards him, sure-footed on the rough road even in heeled boots.

“Randy, wait,” she says again.

“Uh, who are you talkin’ to?” Texas says, very loudly. “Nobody named that here!”

“Wh--” The woman pauses, dark lips pursing, then sighs and rolls her eyes. “Oh. Texas.”

“Yeah that’s me,” says Texas. “What.”

“...’What’,” repeats the woman, disbelieving. “That’s really all you’ve got to say?”

“Uh...yeah,” says Texas. “I mean, no, I got a lot to say, but you don’t wanna hear it, I guess!”

“What are you talking about?”

“We’re not talking about nothin’,” says Texas rebelliously. “...’cause apparently you don’t wanna talk to Texas about stuff ever again, I guess. It’s--cool, it’s whatever.”

“You mean like how you ‘never wanna see my face again’, because girls are gross and you’re too cool for them?” says the woman dryly, and snaps her fingers--a screen of Junior's face pops up, leering down at both of them. “Glad you’ve got better friends than brace-face now, by the way. Hope you never brought that one home to mom, bunso.”

“Y--that--nuh-uh!” says Texas, and chops a hand through the screen so it glitches out, staring around in case somebody saw. Nobody there but them. “Look, you don’t get to tell me about nothin’, Angie! You left! You totally ditched me--us! Everybody!”

“Mom kicked me out!”

“You coulda still called though!”

“You hung up on me!”

“Yeah, ’cause you left to go hang out with your weird girlfriend gang or whatever!”

“At least I know they have my back,” says Angie fiercely, and for some reason it feels like getting slapped in the face. “Do you know how much danger you’ve been in, running around with those crazy Burners?! I heard Kane’s daughter got you, I thought--”

“Hey, the Burners have got my back!” says Texas hotly. “Julie’s cool, she blew up a bot factory one time, she’s--”

He stops, choking on the words, and swallows hard. Looks away, keeping his mouth shut real tight in case more stupid junk comes out. Angie steps forward, reaches out cautiously and puts a hand on his shoulder.

“...You weren’t answering your comms,” she says, quieter now. “Mom was calling everybody. Even me. She thought you were dead. You need to call her.”

“Don’t tell me what to do,” says Texas, rough and half-hearted, and shoves his hands in his pockets. “...’m gonna, okay? Already visited the family Up There, so...”

Angie raises immaculately-groomed eyebrows. “Great-grandma and the rest? I can’t remember the last time Mom and Dad even talked about them.”
“Yeah. Well.”

“Were they just as horrible as we always thought?” Angie asks, grinning a little, and Texas opens his mouth to say yes.

Instead, for some reason his dumb traitor mouth says, “Yeah. Probably. I dunno. I’m gonna go home and get some sleep or whatever.”

Abraham Kane is not easily manipulated. And it is for that reason that no one can ever know that a little blind woman goaded him into reading aloud for her by telling him “you don’t seem particularly literate”.

It’s Anti Rhetoric by Ray R. Rosenberg—an incendiary piece of work Kane would have tossed into a car-burning without a second thought, had he encountered it in Deluxe.

Jacob used to read books like this. That’s probably why he turned out the way he did, Kane considers, and turns another page. He’s barely listening to his own voice as he works his way down the dense paragraphs of seditious nonsense. Ideas from the wrong places, from the wrong people.

Jacob is somewhere out there. Kane wonders, for the first time in a very, very long time, what he’s doing. Reading, or making blueprints again. Cooking that awful “organic” food. He used to push plates of it under Kane’s nose, when he was too tired and busy to notice what he was putting in his mouth...

“What are you doin’ over there?” Vi says from the kitchen. She’s turning her head blindly, listening for him, and Kane becomes suddenly aware that he’s stopped reading, wandering in memories like some sentimental old man. He shakes his head, then remembers she can’t see.

“Nothing,” he says.

“Well then, get on with it,” says Vi, and goes back to stirring whatever it is she’s cooking. Her voice is still rough and thick; the cold hasn’t subsided. “Book’s not gonna read itself, Mike.”

The name is like an electric shock. Kane freezes in place, hears himself make a distant, rough noise like she punched him in the gut. Vi glances up, brow furrowing abruptly.

“What?”

“Don’t,” says Kane. His voice still sounds choked to his own ears, strange and tight. “Don’t ever call me that.”

“Why?” says Vi. Kane doesn’t answer—can’t answer. Vi’s eyes narrow. “...what. Did I step on another grave?”

You were like a father to me!

Kane is—he’s so—he can’t breathe, he’s furious. There’s a tight, pressurized ache in his chest, like something is squeezing there. Chilton. Chilton and his Burners, Kane hasn’t thought about them in days, almost forgot about Chilton’s insolent grin, the sight of his hands wrapped around Julie’s wrist and the way he met Kane’s eyes in the sunset and said I should drop her--

“What,” says Vi again. Whatever expression is on Kane’s face, she can’t see it, doesn’t seem to
notice the sudden, humming fury in his silence. “Not a husband, you’re not over Sarah.” Her voice stays level, impartial, but there’s the slightest twist of sympathy in it and Kane’s hands are so tight on the book his thumb is ripping one of the pages. Shaking. “...a son, huh?”

Kane stands up. For a second he almost grabs her, shakes her, screams in her face, says—something, anything, to make her shut up.

Sarah folds her hands in her lap, spine straight and head held high, hair spilling down over her shoulders like ink.

“If we’re going to make this work, I need you to promise me something,” she says, and Kane sucks in a breath and staggers, sitting down hard. In the memory, he can feel his own lips move, knows
he says--"anything". “You can’t raise your voice at me like that again. I need you to control yourself, Abe.”

“Hey. Hey.”

Vi is talking to him. She has been for a while, she came up to him and he didn’t even notice, and something is very, very wrong here. The back of Kane’s neck is prickling with cold sweat. “Something’s wrong,” he says. Almost adds, did you see that? Catches himself. His throat feels scratchy, his breathing is too thick.

“Damn right something’s wrong,” says Vi. “There’s work to do and you’re slacking off, Paul.”

Kane is so used to answering to the wrong name, he starts to open his mouth. And then, slowly, he stops.

“...Paul?” he says.

“That’s your name, isn’t it?” Vi says, and coughs, presses a hand to her chest. “I’m sick, dumbass, you’re gonna have to take care of dad for a while.”

“Kleinschmidt,” says Kane, very clearly and loudly. “Focus.”

“I’m focused,” says Vi. “I just…” her brow furrows, her blind eyes shift, looking at something only she can see. She sits very, very still for a long second, and then blinks slowly. “That wasn’t real,” she says. And then, in a voice that’s just on the edge of shaking, “I’m blind. Why--did I think--how could I--”

“Get some sleep,” mutters Kane.

“You get some sleep.”

“You--”

But whatever retort he could’ve given dies as a knock lands on the front door. Kane glances over at Vi, but she’s… She’s looking straight ahead, gaze fixed. Her hands are slack at her sides, her lips are moving faintly.

Kane reaches over and takes her rifle, and goes to answer the door. Behind him, Vi sits down slowly.

Jacob’s bot lets out a high squeak of alarm when it sees Kane with a gun, and motors abruptly back. Kane growls, rolls his eyes and drops the barrel of the gun.

“What does he want this time?” he says. “If Jacob has something to say to me, he can come and say it to my--”

“No!”

Kane stops, gun jerking as he stares around for the source of the voice--but no, there’s nobody there. The only other moving thing in the entire asphalt wasteland is--

“Jacob--a good guy!” The bot says, and crosses its “arms” belligerently. “You? Are--Kane.”

“You could talk this whole time?” Kane growls incredulously.

“I’m a Burner! I’m--ROTH! You--are--a bad word.”
“Why didn’t you--”

“Today--I’m--copying,” says the little bot, in a collage of disparate voices. “Jacob--gave me--words! Motorcity--gave me--words! Duke--gave me--words! Bonjaloha! Hot damn!”

“I hate this,” says Kane. “Alright you little abomination, why are you here?”

He listens to Jacob’s recorded message with increasing disbelief. *There’s a sickness goin’ around the city right now.*

“Sickness,” he repeats. “What is he talking about.”

The Burner bot clicks. “...*We can’t go in the motel,*” it says, in a man’s voice, bleary and slurred. “*They’re all passed o-out, y’know? Couldn’t listen t’you anyway. ‘F you hadn’t stuck around so long I’d figure I was seein’ things again, you sure you’real--?”*

“Seeing things,” Kane repeats, and blinks, hard. That reminds him of something, he—that reminds him of— “People who’re dead. Things that aren’t real.”

The bot bobs up and down a little, and it doesn’t have a face but it still somehow manages to look reluctant.

“And there’s a cure?”


“You just said--” Kane starts, furious, and then forces himself to lower his voice as the bot motors abruptly back away from him. “...*Jacob said the Burners were handing it out.*”

The bot bobs up and down in an unmistakable nod.

“So they stole it.”

A shake. “Deluxe--gave--”

“This doesn’t make any sense,” Kane interrupts, pacing. “Deluxe should be seizing this opportunity! Julie wouldn’t--” He stops, glances back inside at Vi. She doesn’t even twitch. Still...he’s been careful so far. If this green abomination can keep its voice chip muted, he has a chance of getting out alive.

A thought rises unbidden to the back of his mind--maybe this “treatment” is just a scam, a ruse to finally bring Motorcity down. Maybe his daughter has finally succeeded where he had failed.

And maybe, he thinks darkly, Larsson and Pinsky usurped her position as soon as Kane was out of the picture. He wouldn’t put it past them. But if anyone has hurt Julie…

Kane clenches his fists, imagines throwing Emmanuel Larsson from the top of Kane Co. Tower. Exhales.

He has to get to one of those treatment stations. He has to know what’s happening.

But he has to be careful, too. If he’s careful enough, maybe he’ll even be able to escape to Deluxe in the confusion.

“We--we got enough water to last us the drive...” murmurs Vi, eyelids fluttering. “It’ll be fine. Work opportunities, can’t waste...”
Kane watches her for a moment, thinks about his past. About memories he never wants to relive.

“If I stay here,” he says slowly, turning back to the bot, “will I end up like her?”

“Get treated as soon as you can,” the bot repeats, in Jacob’s voice. “Not--gonna--stay safe.”

Kane strides to his work table, looking down at his...project. It’s practically ready. He doesn’t have a cord for a long-distance trigger, but it won’t be hard to find something. This will have to be good enough.

A minute later, he’s packed the makeshift bomb into one of Vi’s old satchels and swung the Duke’s cloak over his shoulders. It still stinks.

The bot motors over, looking a little tilted on its axis--almost like a dog cocking its head. It watches as he pulls the Duke’s gas mask over his face, then turns to give Vi what can only be called a pointed look.

“Everyone--stay safe,” it says.

“We only have one mask, and she’s already sick,” Kane snaps, and reaches down to hoist her bodily over one shoulder. "Now...tell me where to go.”

Chapter End Notes

Notable section titles for this chapter:
- The Return of Julie Kane to Motorcity
- Jacob Unwittingly Unleashes Ultimate Cuteness
- The Motorcity-Deluxe Medical Superteam
- IT CAME FROM THE DOME ITSELF
- More Kane + Vi Probably
Beginning of the End...!

Chapter Summary

It's a day for realizing things are worse than you thought. The plants that make the pollen are doing...what?! Julie-bear is helping Motorcity...why?! Kane is...where?! And what's wrong with the Duke?! Get it together, guys, or we won't make it out of this in one piece. See a problem, fix the problem.

Chapter Notes

We're very proud of this chapter! It was fun to write and it's ramping up to some Really Intense Shit, so everyone hold onto your pants for the next few weeks while we finish the last chapter (and epilogue, there's gonna be an epilogue).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

DAY TEN

“All right,” says Julie, “so we know whatever’s making these spores is growing on the dome. We don’t know what Kaia’s play is--unless she’s just messing with us, but that’s not her style. So we’re gonna take samples, we’re gonna burn whatever’s growing on the dome, and once we’re at full strength again, we’re gonna hunt her down. Any questions?”

They’re back in the hideout, hanging around the garage. It’s six in the morning and no one got more than a few hours of sleep, but at least they’re all back together again, for now. For the most part. Jacob’s off on his own and...well, no one’s mentioned Texas.

“Dang, Jules,” says Mike mildly. “Pretty leaderly.”

“Alpha dog,” mutters Dutch, and then grins at Julie’s immediate blush.

“Wh--are we gonna do this or are you just gonna stand around teasing me?”

“We’re doing this,” says Chuck firmly, to the surprise of everyone--apparently including himself. “Or, uh...I am.”

“Say again?” says Dutch, frowning.

“I just think--you only really need one person up there, right? Better to have everyone else down on the ground, helping with the treatment stuff.”

“What?” Mike coughs, disbelieving. “You should be down here with us, buddy!”

“Oh yeah?” Chuck pulls himself up to his full, impressive height, huffing through his nose. “I know my way around Deluxe access panels, I’ve already got equipment for taking samples, I’m a little bit stronger than average, my eyesight is 20/20--”
“Okay!” says Julie, bemused. “Well, okay, sounds good to me.”

Mike looks between them, a muscle twitching in his jaw, clearly still biting back arguments. “Fine,” he says, suddenly. “Then I’m coming too.”

“No,” says Chuck.

“You need somebody to watch your back, bro, it’s way too dangerous for you to go by yourself—”

“No,” says Chuck again, a little louder this time. “You’re staying down here. You need to stay down here, Motorcity needs you.”

“But—” Mike mouths for a second, taken aback by the resistance. “—But—there could still be Terras up there! Aren’t you scared of—”

“Mikey, of course I’m scared! But I couldn’t forgive myself if I… I need to go.” Chuck drags his hands over his face, muffled and miserable. “You wanna save everybody from everything ever, but you can’t, okay? And that’s not your fault or anything, but you gotta figure out what you can actually do. Do that, not some crazy plan that takes you outta commission.”

Mike can’t seem to find anything to say to that. Chuck swallows audibly, drops his hands away from his face and clenches them at his sides instead, knuckles white. When he speaks again, his voice is shaking faintly.

“...This is what I can actually do,” he says. “And—and I’m gonna do it. On my own. You can’t help, even if I really...really feel better when you’re there, but they need you down here, dude!” He takes a long, deep breath, lets it out and gives Mike a look that barely trembles, lips thin and eyes determined through his hair. “So. No. You can’t go with me.”

There’s a long silence—not uncomfortable, exactly, but strange. The status quo seems to have tipped ever so slightly, and Mike’s lost his footing in the process.

“Well,” says Dutch, a little too loudly, “Since we got that figured out, I got...presents!” And then, before anyone can say anything else, he pulls one of his ubiquitous duffel bags from Whiptail’s back seat, sets it carefully on the ground, and unzips it.

There’s a pause.

“...I made everybody masks,” Dutch says. Fidgets a little bit under the incredulous stares. “...I stress-paint, okay? If we’re gonna do this, might as well look cool while we’re doin’ it.”

“Aw, neat!” Mike holds out a hand and Dutch shuffles around in his bag and pulls out a mask painted Mutt-green, streaked in gold and black and white, with a fearless, fangy smile on it. “These are so cool, dude!”

“One for Texas too,” Julie observes flatly. Dutch hesitates for a moment, then meets her eyes and nods.

“I think he’ll come around for it sometime,” he says, and holds up Julie’s--a yellow, many-eyed cat face with tiny projectors affixed to either ear. “Here. Didn’t have a lot of time last night but it has a few different holo-settings.”

“Yeah, well, you should be ashamed,” Julie deadpans. “Just a few? You’re losing your touch.”

“Ha, ha. Chuck, this is you. Blonde Thunder rides again.”
Chuck’s fingers trace the golden thunderbolt designs, strong and fierce on pure sky-blue. “Thanks, dude,” he says, and when he puts it on he looks a little braver for a moment. Then he pulls it off, leaving it hanging around his neck, and he just looks like Chuck again--nervous, and kind of sick.

“Everyone ready to go?” says Julie, clearly too preoccupied to think about feelings. “Chuck, I’m gonna need you up there ASAP, okay?”

“Yeah,” says Chuck, and takes a deep breath. “Yeah, okay. See you guys later, I guess! Haha!” Mike watches his best friend walk away, and he feels…

He doesn’t really know how he feels. Not really scared, not really excited. Proud, but kind of freaking out a little bit. But…it’s fine. Chuck can take care of himself. He’s gonna have to.

Chuck stops as soon as he’s out of Mike’s line of sight and presses his forehead against the nearest wall to hyperventilate.

“…Chuck?”

Embarrassment freezes Chuck in place--followed by a wave of needling annoyance as he realizes who the voice belongs to. Dammit.

“How long have you been awake?” Chuck says, and tries to push himself up in a natural way, like he absolutely wasn’t freaking out just now. By the way Harley is watching him--kind of nervous and kind of pitying--it doesn’t work very well. Chuck frowns at him as forbiddingly as he can manage.

“Long enough to hear you guys talking.”

“Right, well--”

“And I’m going up to the dome with you.”

Chuck tries to glare, he does, but he’s just...really, really tired. It doesn’t work very well.

“...Why?” he says. “Mike’s not gonna be there. ‘S not like there’s anybody to impress.”

“I...I know,” says Alex. “But it’s better to have more than one person up there. And...I’m people, I mean, I have skills. You can use.” He takes a really deep breath. “...But driving isn’t one of them. I...need a ride. I need your help. Please.”

“Ugh,” says Chuck, and then, “Hrrgh. Nrfff.”

“...Is that a yes?”

“Fugh,” says Chuck, stomping back towards the garage.

“I am going to get in the car,” says Harley, very clearly and carefully, trotting after him. “Lock the door if you do not want me to get in the car!”

Against Chuck’s better judgment, Harley ends up in the car. There are five Burners, and they all have cars, but Harley has only ever ridden in Chuck’s. It’s not fair.
The only, only fun thing about this is that every time Chuck speeds up going around a turn, Harley grips the seat and braces his legs like he has a brake to stomp on. Never before has Chuck accelerated so easily, or so willingly.

It’s only fun for a little while, though, because he remembers that feeling. And no matter how vindictive he feels towards Harley, he can’t quite eliminate that twinge of empathy. They reach the dome in good time anyway, by Chuck’s clock, and Harley doesn’t even vomit when he gets out of the car—though he looks a little green in the face. He pulls a collapsible Deluxian filtration mask out of one pocket and huffs a few breaths through it to get the system moving.

“Julie’s sending people your way from Deluxe,” says Dutch, over comms. “A couple R&D techs, some kinda chem expert. You see anything yet?”

“Not yet.” Chuck settles his mask firmly, takes a deep breath and strides forward into the dimness. The air is definitely thicker up here, hazy. “I’ll keep you posted.”


“I try,” Chuck mutters, but Dutch has already hung up. He takes another breath, reassuring himself with a rush of clear air through the filters, and then jogs a little, catching up to Harley. “...This road hits the dome up there. Should be close enough to see what we’re working with.”

“Right!” Harley sounds...pleased to be talked to, which is incredibly annoying but also makes Chuck feel like kind of a douche. He ignores both feelings, and starts walking.

Fortunately, Harley doesn’t try to make more conversation as they proceed through the gloom. It’s not that Chuck...well, it’s not like Harley hasn’t gotten. Kind of better. But he’s still super annoying and it’s hard--impossible--to forget what he did to Mike. That kind of thing doesn’t just go away, and if Mike’s not going to hold a grudge, Chuck will do it for him.

Something shakes him from his thoughts--the slightest hint of movement in the distance. Chuck slows down, unconsciously flexing his fingers for his slingshot. It’s bad enough that he keeps hearing creepy creaking noises from all around...please don’t be Terras, please don’t be Terras, please--

“Chuck!” Somebody is waving. Bright lights in the foggy air. “Uh--is that you?!”

“Hey!” Chuck calls back, a lot softer. He can’t shake that feeling, like there’s something hanging over his head. Somebody watching. “Yeah, over here. Do you have gloves?”

“Do we have gloves.” A squad of techs in biohazard suits come jogging out of the dark, grinning through the windows of their hoods, bulky packs slung over their shoulders. “Eat your heart out.”

“Aw, you shouldn’t have.”

“No, we should have, and that’s why you literally asked us if we did.”

Chuck snorts drily. “Smartass.”

“That’s what they pay me for,” grunts the first tech, setting down his pack. “Alright, let’s kill us a plant!”

They spread out in the dark, lights shining harshly up onto the dome. Voices murmur over comms, trading status updates and jabs.
Chuck hasn’t exactly taken the time to inspect the underside of the dome before; from Motorcity, it looks more like a starry night sky than anything, the small details swallowed by a vast distance. He’s...not sure it should look like this, though. There’s something...off.

“Can’t put my finger on it,” he mutters to himself, and one of the other guys laughs.

“Maybe you could put your finger on it if you were wearing gloves, Stringbean!”

“Very funny,” mutters Chuck, still lost in thought. What is it...what is it...something about the texture of the metal? Those striated grooves that look almost organic, almost too deep and dark even with the light shining on them...

“I’m not seeing any plants,” someone else chimes in. “There were supposed to be plants, right? Like...green ones? R...red ones? Are there other colors...?”

“It could be something incredibly small,” Harley is saying in the background. “We don’t know exactly what we’re looking for. Right, Chuck?”

“Uh-huh,” says Chuck distantly, and pulls on a pair of gloves, reaching up cautiously to the underside of the dome.

“So, we might need to try other roads, other spots. This seemed like the most likely, based on the pattern, and...and--Chuck?”

“Yeah,” says Chuck, and pulls up a screen, brightening it as far as he can, squinting at the metal. He taps it with his knuckles--pushes on it gently and then backs away abruptly, shaking his hand off. Throws up another screen and starts typing.

“Um…” Alex leans in, trying to look over his shoulder without obviously looking over his shoulder. “...What are you doing?”

“Calling Dutch.”

“...Why?”

“The dome’s gonna fall,” says Chuck.

Overhead, the dome gives a rumbling, whining groan and then settles again--the entire search party flinches in unison. There’s a long moment of silence, and then Chuck breathes out, shaky behind his mask.

“It’s gonna fall,” he says, barely a whisper, like the sound of his voice might bring everything down. He should definitely be panicking about this. He can’t seem to remember how, right this second. His heart is hammering, but he keeps having to remember to breathe. “It’s like it’s--rotting. It’s rotten. My hand went right through it.”

The rest of the team rushes up to the dome--flakes of metal ping gently against the road as they run their fingers over the pockmarked metal, pushing at it, swearing under their breath.

“Some kind of...fungus?” Alex cranes up to run a hand over the metal, rubs his gloved fingers together and watches a puff of pollen join the haze in the air. “Plants can eat metal?”

“Terra plants?” Chuck snorts bitterly. “Wouldn’t freakin’ surprise me.”

“...Chuck.”
Chuck looks down at his screen, where Dutch’s face is staring up at him, frozen and shocked. “Oh, hey dude. Did you hear--”

“Yeah I heard,” says Dutch weakly. “I just thought...what about the pollen?”

“Some kind of defense mechanism,” says Chuck.

“Okay. Okay, yeah, makes sense. Distract us with the forests on the ground, disable anyone who gets near the real problem.”

“Maybe it hasn’t gotten through the whole dome,” says Alex softly, eyes fixed on the cracks above them. “Maybe it doesn’t go that deep. Maybe--”

There’s a groan from the screen, heartfelt and panicky. “...It’s deep,” says Dutch after a moment. “Bracket mentioned somethin’ when he was at my parents’ place--broken struts and wires fallin’ apart, or somethin’. I figured it was just bad maintenance, y’know? Deluxe isn’t exactly known for responsible tech use. I never thought--”

“Oh shit,” says Chuck. “Oh, shit, Dutch, Bracket, the Cablers--”


“Okay,” says Chuck, before the screen has even closed, “solutions. Now now now, come on, guys! See a problem, fix the problem!”

“We can lift the buildings!” says one of the techs. “The towers, the pods--reduce the weight, evacuate. Even if it falls--”

“And crushes Motorcity?” Chuck says, and the tech subsides, stymied. “We can’t just let it fall apart! And--and some of the older buildings don’t even fly! Like the KORS tower and…”

He stops, trailing off. The others stare at him, waiting for him to finish, but Harley seems to have figured out what he’s thinking. Behind his mask, his pale face is going paler.

“...Kane Co. tower,” he finishes, soft with horror. “Kane Co. tower doesn’t lift off. If the dome comes down, it’s coming down too.”

“It’s ten times--a hundred times--heavier than any of the residential columns,” Chuck mutters--takes a couple of fast, desperate steps, pacing as much as he can on the narrow road. “We can’t--we can disassemble...most of it, some of it. I dunno, the elevator system and the tower core aren’t gonna come apart, though! The training rooms, the barracks, the whole medical block, the operating rooms...”

“The Genesis Pod,” says Harley suddenly. There’s a perfect beat of silence as everybody turns toward him. Harley doesn’t seem to notice.

“What about it?” says one of the techs.

“We can use it,” says Harley feverishly. “This is the perfect time!”

“What?” Chuck says, and there’s a faint tremor in his voice but he doesn’t sound scared. “-”

“Motorcity’s gonna get flattened, might as well start building New Deluxe now?”

“What?” Harley blinks, startled. “N-no, I’m saying--”
“No, y’know what?” Chuck advances on Harley, leaning down to growl in his face. “I’m done! I’m done with you! The *Genesis Pod*, are you kidding me? Why is it that every time you come up with a solution to a problem it’s freakin’ *evil*?!”

“I’m not! It’s not!”

“Oh, what, do you want me to go through the list again?” Chuck raises a pointer finger, shoving it in Harley’s face. “One! You made the mind-control stuff for Kane—”

“I know, but—”

“Two! Those collars that could’ve killed *all* of us! And then you tried to fix it by bringing *Red* down here? You played that freaky video at the Kane Co. guys during the invasion—”

“You said—”

“—and don’t think nobody told me about your *put Chuck’s brain in a robot body* idea! Even after *everything else*—”

“I’m *trying*, okay?!”

Chuck opens his mouth to yell back—but there’s something in Harley’s voice that makes him pause and look at the guy properly. Harley flushes and turns sharply, striding away across the road and opening a screen. A thick, awkward silence falls; the other techs glance at each other, then back away, muttering amongst themselves, like they weren’t just watching with interest.

“Oh,” says Chuck. “Uh. Are you…”

“No,” snaps Harley thickly, pulling up another screen.

“It sounded like—”

“Yeah, well! It—wasn’t.”

There’s a pause.

“...I’m not sorry,” says Chuck.

Harley shrugs crookedly. Sniffs. Says, shortly, “Pollen’s bad up here.”

Another pause. Chuck edges nearer, trying to look over Harley’s shoulder without getting close to the shoulder in question.

“It’s a good plan,” mutters Harley.

“Okay.”

“It’s not evil.”

“I--sure. Okay.”

“It’s *not*.”

“Okay, then tell me what it is.”

“Yeah,” says one of the techs, and doesn’t sound 100% mean, “tell us, dude. Can’t hurt to give it a
shot.”

Harley explains the idea.

“...That’s actually not bad,” says someone, after a moment.

“No actually evil,” Chuck admits grudgingly, and Harley actually beams at him. “As long as--”

The dome shifts again. Chuck backs up abruptly, staring up at the metal overhead as the heavy, awful, ear-splitting screech goes on and on--

And then there’s a crunch up above, and the road tilts under the team’s feet, listing--not more than a couple of inches, but enough to throw everyone off balance. Chuck flails out an arm behind him, tries to find something to catch himself on and finds nothing but empty space. The road is tipping beneath him and then it’s just gone and--

--Chuck is falling--

A hand grabs his wrist. There’s a dizzying lurch, and Chuck’s side slams into the edge of the road with bone-cracking force. For a second it hurts so bad and he can’t breathe, doesn’t know what’s going on--and then he sees blue eyes and Harley’s other hand closes around his arm with bruising desperation.
“Come on,” Harley gasps, “Come on, no--” He yanks with all his strength, and Chuck finally gets a breath in and moves, clawing at the smooth surface of the road. More people grab his other arm, and then he’s back on solid ground, on his knees. Head spinning, ribs aching, wheezing in pointless little breaths.

“You’re okay!” Harley says, cracked and desperate, grabs Chuck by both arms and hugs him, and Chuck’s hugging him back before he can think about it, trembling all over, uncontrollable. “You’re okay, you’re okay!”

“I’m okay,” Chuck repeats, and has to swallow hard. It doesn’t matter if the adrenaline rush is shaking him up like an ant in an earthquake, he’s not gonna cry in front of all these people and he’s not gonna pass out. He’s not--

Something huge, a shadow bigger than a human being, goes swooping by so close the breeze blows Chuck’s hair back. Pollen whips up in clouds, and Chuck catches just a flash of three bright,
toxic green pinpoints of light before night under the dome swallows the shape again.

“Lights off!” Harley snaps. The techs scramble to obey, and they’re plunged into thick, choking darkness. The only remaining light is a diagnostic screen, throwing out a dim glow that only manages to add shape to the gloom. Silence falls.

“...What was that thing?” somebody breathes over comms. Chuck holds up a hand sharply, and to his distant surprise, everybody behind him shuts up and goes still. He swallows hard, reaches down and wordlessly activates his slingshot, aiming it out into the dark. Behind him, he sees a faint flash of blue light and hears sliding metal--Harley edges up next to him, raising glowing fists between the civilians and the night.

There’s a long, frozen minute where all of them stare silently into nothingness, squinting through the hazy air. But the giant winged shape doesn’t come back. Chuck counts to sixty, a hundred and twenty, three-hundred...nothing. Just the sound of his own breathing, fast and scared inside his mask. Finally, very slowly, he lowers his weapons array again and breathes out

“...Guys,” he whispers, and swallows hard, trying to keep his voice from shaking. “Ears on. We’ve got a problem.”

--

“Is it a different problem from the one we already had?” asks Dutch through gritted teeth, slamming the gas to catch a jump over a gap in the highway. In his passenger seat, the box of injectors he picked up on the way jostles dangerously. Better to have them than not, he’d reasoned. Just in case.

“Uh, yeah,” says Chuck, his voice dripping with dread. “On top of the dome falling apart.”

“The dome is what?” shouts Mike.

“You gotta be kidding!”

“Wish I was. Whatever was making the pollen up here, it’s eating through the metal, too much damage to fix in time. Dutch, we might have a way to...prop up the dome in a few places, but we’re still working on the plan--you gotta let the Cablers know as soon as--”

“I’ve been tryin’ to call Tennie the whole drive!” Dutch snaps back, drifting around a curve. “She ain’t pickin’ up!”

“Is she mad at you again?” asks Mike, the slightest hint of a smile in his voice. Dutch is not in the mood.

“Don’t you even start with that, Mike! Why’re we the only ones talkin’ about this, anyway? Where is everybody?”

Mike groans. “Just a hunch, but I’m betting Tex saw Julie’s name on the group call and--”

“Pulled a Texas, yeah,” mutters Dutch. “Sounds about right. And Julie--”

“Julie’s...busy,” says Mike. “I promised I’d tell her if anything important came up so she could shut off her comms and focus.”

“Oh, so you get to have this fun conversation twice! Good times, huh, Mikey?” Chuck starts to laugh, nervous and high-pitched, and then abruptly stops, voice breaking into a squeak. “Oh shit- gotta go--”
He vanishes with a soft hiss of static. Dutch would’ve stuck around long enough to wish Mike good luck, but at that exact moment Tennie picks up and suddenly nothing else is important. Dutch waves away Mike’s window and slows down just a fraction to look at his girlfriend’s face.

“Tennie! Man am I glad to see you--things are gettin’ intense--”

“I know!”

“Y--you do?” Dutch blinks. “Then--you gotta get outta there!”

“Dutch--we can’t, that’s the whole point! He showed up right after we got home and I think he’s finally lost it!”

“What--” Dutch almost wants to pull over just to have a proper conversation, but he can’t stop, he needs to get there as fast as possible. “Okay wait--what are you talkin’ about? Who’s lost it?”

“The Duke,” says Tennie. “What did you think was going on?”

“Oh,” says Dutch. “Oh boy.”

--

There’s a queue of colorful, ragged Motorcitizens outside the Deluxian treatment station. It looks out of place in the middle of the open square, a complex of sleek white awnings extended from transport pods, curtained for privacy. Kane hoists Vi higher on his good shoulder, trying not to let his exhaustion show. She’s small, relatively light, but she’s still an unconscious human he’s had slung over one shoulder for hours. The Burner bot keeps trying to lift her off of him, squeaking something about “tired!” and “carry!” but Kane swats it away every time.

When they finally reach an open tent, Kane drops Vi’s limp body unceremoniously on the treatment table. “Give her the injection,” he barks, barely bothering to disguise his voice. And then, because he can’t stop thinking about how Julie could have allowed this to happen--”We’re from--the outskirts. Tell me what’s happening.”

The medical tech’s eyes flicker over the gas mask, the filthy clothes and the cape with its matted fur. “Well, uh, sir, wouldn’t you like--”

People in Kane Co. uniforms do not disobey Abraham Kane’s orders. “Tell me.”

“Uh. Yes. Okay.” The young man fumbles sweatily with the injection, looking as though he’d rather be anywhere else in the world. Kane smiles. “So, we--the Kane Co. Medical Team--discovered this new disease, Godinsky Syndrome, and it turned out it had been spreading through Motorcity too, so the new CEO--”

“The new CEO?” Kane’s heart slams at his ribs. “Who?”

The man gives him a curious, lopsided look. “...Haven’t you seen the announcements?”

“Are you stupid,” Kane snarls. “Obviously I haven’t! Now tell me--”

“Now, hang on, sir,” says the guy, backing away. “I get that it’s a lot to take in, and you’re probably entering the flashback stage right now, which hits people all different ways--”

“Where is m--where is Julie Kane?” Kane practically roars, and behind the fear in the tech’s eyes he thinks he sees the faintest spark of recognition.
“She’s--she’s down here somewhere, I think? She came down to organize the medical outreach! Uh--look, here, this is one of the announcements--you wanted to see those, right? Just--watch this! It’s fine! Everything’s fine!”

Kane watches. Keeps his eyes on the screen even as the tech gives Vi the injection, even as the needle stings Kane’s own arm. Kane barely feels it. He’s looking at his daughter, brave and articulate and just as he taught her to be--except--

*Working with Motorcity. Allied with the Burners.* No. No, unacceptable, impossible. There has to be an explanation, there *must* be some reason for this.

There--behind Julie on the broadcast, peering through the door. It’s only the briefest moment, but Kane would know those blue eyes anywhere.

*Harley.*

Of course. Of *course.* Kane remembers the notification--Alexander Harley, AWOL, likely defected to Motorcity. But Kane had been on the verge of his final invasion, and he’d thought--what’s one more renegade Commander? Easy enough to recapture him during the battle, punish him in the aftermath.

A mistake. Harley should have been demoted and reassigned the instant Kane had the technology he needed. He should have thrown the boy out of his office the *instant* he saw that cocky look on his face. He was the threat all along, not Larsson or Pinsky. This...*brat* and his mind control device, which Kane can all too clearly imagine buried in the back of his daughter’s neck.

He has to find her.

Through the heavy red fog filling his mind, Kane hears a voice. The young medical tech, murmuring covertly into a comm screen.

“...Here in the station with me. Yes. Yeah. Bring security. *Please.*”

Kane snarls, draws back a fist--and goes staggering backwards as something green and metallic slams into his head.

“You--go!” squeaks the little bot, flailing fibrous arms at Kane’s face.

“Get off me!” Kane roars, cutting his knuckles on a sharp polymer edge as he throws punch after ineffectual punch. “Get--off--you little--”

The bot wraps both limbs around his head, and Kane staggers as it pushes him backwards, throwing him off balance. In the moment before he falls, he feels the band of the gas mask slipping up the back of his head. But it’s too late to catch it, and the bot spins away from him with the mask in its arms.

“Oh my god,” says the medical tech, his voice cracking. “Mister--”

“*Don’t--*”

“*Mister Kane!*”

“What *did you just say*?” barks a muffled voice from the comm screen. “*Hey, kid, did you just say--*”
“Turn it off!” Kane roars, springing to his feet. “And tell me where——”

But there are already voices in the distance, and the sound of running feet. There are pods here; Kane could commandeer any of them, fly it up to Deluxe. He’d risk getting shot down, but if he headed directly for the dome he might have a chance.

And he’d be leaving Julie down here. In Motorcity, with the Burners. Under their control.

The bot is gone, and his mask with it. Kane pulls up the hood of the Duke’s cloak, tugs it low over his face, and runs.

--

“Chuck.”

Someone’s talking to him. Chuck opens his mouth, tries to speak, but his throat just clicks wordlessly.

“Chuck, it’s——”

“I know,” he finally manages, but it’s not enough to stop Harley, of course.

“--it’s back.”

“I said I know,” Chuck hisses. “I know, we can all hear——”

He cuts himself off sharply at a rustling thump somewhere to his left. The techs draw close behind him; they have to be terrified, but he’s just as willing to bet they’re ready to fight.

Chuck really, really hopes it won’t come to that. He doesn’t want to lose any friends today.

“What...is that?” says someone, and after a few moments of frantic searching, Chuck spots it too. A shadow, bulky and irregular, shifting through the gloomy haze.

“Somebody give me a flashlight,” says Alex.

“No!” snaps Chuck, and instantly regrets the outburst. The...thing whips around, and three sickly green pupils shine through the dark like a mutant rat’s eyes. And it starts towards them, one dreadful step at a time.

“Oh god,” Alex breathes as the shape advances out of the dark. Heavy, raspy breaths cut through the thick air. “Oh my god, what is that thing?”

“Kaia,” says Chuck, and it would be really nice if it would come out calm and authoritative, it would be nice if he was anything like Mike. It doesn’t, and he isn’t. It’s a breathless whimper. “L...look, we don’t want any trouble——”

And then, so abruptly it makes him flinch, an announcement screen flashes into life in front of him. Everybody stops, staring, as a man says—

--

“We have news that Abraham Kane is at large in this area,” says the man—a Motorcity nurse with a hard, unshaven face and shadows under his eyes. Julie whips around, staring up at the screens hovering in the sky overhead. The man glances back at Godinsky, while Godinsky frets and folds his arms behind him. “He’s wearing a fur-trimmed cloak—what color was it?”
“I--I dunno,” says Godinsky reluctantly, eyes darting up to the screen. “Look, I’m not really in support of--”

“Fur-trimmed cloak of indeterminate color,” the other guy barrels on, not even bothering to conceal his eyeroll. “On foot, probably running. Keep an eye out, Motorcity. We could end this today. For good.”

“Hey now--” Godinsky starts, and then the broadcast cuts out and Motorcity goes into an uproar. Julie can hear it from here—a clamor of voices that rises above the hustle and bustle of the treatment centers. Dread drags its claws through her gut, heavy and cold. There’s going to be a manhunt. And what they’ll do when—if they find him, she doesn’t want to think. She can’t--she can’t deal with this right now, she can’t--

“Jules.”

“I can’t--” Julie swallows, feels a headache start to throb behind one eye. “Mike, I can’t talk right--”

“The dome’s gonna come down, Jules.”

It’s...what? Julie turns to look at him, narrowing her eyes. “Mike, that doesn’t make sense, what--”

“Chuck called,” says Mike. He isn’t 100% clear on the details as he fills her in, but it’s hard to get the important parts wrong. The dome is falling apart. The dome is falling. His voice sounds weirdly numb, at odds with the wild grin painted on his gas mask.

“This can’t be happening,” says Julie, when he finishes. “This literally--there has to be a way to keep it from--”

“Jules, please, we gotta do what Chuck says or it could be really bad!”

“It’s already really bad,” says Julie weakly, and for the first time Mike’s eyes go to the screen with Kane’s face on it.

“Oh,” he says. “Yeah. Well, let’s...let’s keep it from getting worse.”

“Easier said than done,” says Chuck’s voice, and his little box icon zips out from behind Mike, face compressed in pixellated consternation. Julie rubs at her temples, tries to keep the rising panic at bay.

“...What does that mean?”

“It means Kaia’s on the move,” says Chuck.

--

“Well, where is she?!”

“She took off!” Chuck says, and sucks in a breath through his teeth as another creaking groan echoes distantly from overhead. “We were ready to fight her but then she heard Kane was down here and she took off! And the dome is coming down, like, now. We think this is what she was planning the whole time--the forests down there were just a decoy!”

Julie says a word Chuck has never heard her say before and slams a fist on something off-screen.
“I should’ve helped!” she growls. “I should’ve been there--”

“Except you literally couldn’t be,” Chuck reminds her, and gives her a stiff, unconvincing smile. “Look, don’t blame yourself, okay? I have a pl--”

“We,” says Harley.

“We have a plan,” Chuck corrects warily. “But we’re not sure how well it’s gonna work, and we can only keep so many places safe...you can tell people to evacuate to there. Sending you a map.”

“On top of everything else,” mutters Julie, and she sounds exhausted. She starts typing a message. “Okay. I’ll have someone make the announcement. Fill me in on...whatever the plan is.”

“Randal, get back here!”

Angie’s waiting by their cars. Dad’s ushering the last of the little kids out of the house. Texas is standing still, looking up at the place where the screen used to be. Kane. They know where Kane is. Down here, in Motorcity, on Texas’s home turf! The turf Kane’s always tryin’ to stomp on and build his dumb buildings on and--

“Hey,” says Texas. “I’m gonna go.”

“What? Go?” Angie glares at him over her racecar. “Where are you gonna go? We need to stick together, you can’t just leave!”

“I’m gonna find Kane, duh!”

“There’s no way mom is gonna let you--”

“So don’t tell her!” Texas kicks Stronghorn’s door open. “You saw the map thing, just go hide or whatever! I’m gonna go kick Kane’s butt in the butt!” He slams the door, and then opens it again to pop his head back out, glaring. “--No snitching!”

“You’re gonna die!” screams Angie as Texas slams his door again. “You’re gonna die, like a dumbass, and how are you gonna feel then, huh?”

“I’m gonna live forever!” Texas roars back, and punches the gas. “Kane, not so much!”

“Kane had another Genesis Pod?” Mike drags a hand through his hair. Even with a mask hiding most of his face, he looks stressed and harried.

“It’s not a true Genesis Pod!” Harley cranes over Chuck’s shoulder to see the screen—Chuck almost throws an elbow back into his gut, then sighs and relaxes again. “It’s a bunch of prototypes and extra matter that didn’t fit in the active unit!”

“Huh?” says Mike.

“I said--!” Harley starts, raising his voice. Chuck, who’s had a lot more experience translating for Mike, cuts him off.

“It’s a really crappy version of the Genesis Pod,” he says. “The stuff that didn’t make the cut for the first one. But it should have enough juice to make supports, and it’s full of some pretty tough
“stuff.”

“So they’ll hold?” Julie says.

“I think so,” says Harley. “I hope so.” A colossal, grinding rasp echoes through the comm--Chuck and Harley both flinch. “Ah! God!”

“Okay, buddy, you did good,” says Mike. “Now, get outta there! We need you down here--”

“Nope!” says Chuck, with terrified brightness. “Can’t come down! We gotta go up!”

“Up is about to come down!” Julie says, half a snap--her voice has that hard edge to it, authoritative, like she expects to be obeyed.

“And we need the Genesis Pod down there when it does, ma’am,” says Harley, and salutes, fast and neat like a nervous tic. “We need to secure it, ma’am!”

“Commander Harley,” starts Julie, and Harley crumples nervously at her tone.

“He’s right, Julie.”

Harley looks at Chuck with a totally ludicrous expression on his face, which Chuck firmly ignores. “We’ve got to get up to Kane Co. tower,” he says. “Find the Genesis Pod, get it moving again. It’s safer to go up than come down!”

Mike opens his mouth to object, but before he can find words another comm screen pops up behind him and a woman’s voice starts talking, muffled and distant. Mike half-turns to listen, and his expression goes from distraught to outright panicked.

“Oh geez, oh man,” he mutters, looking back at Chuck. “It’s Texas, he’s--”

“Go on, dude,” says Chuck, trying for a smile. “Take care of it. I’ll, uh...I’ll call you later? Haha.”

“Yeah,” says Mike, approximating a grin in return. “Yeah, later. You got this, buddy.”

The window closes. Chuck and Harley share a look.

--

There’s a blockade of limos around the base of the Cablers’ Settlement. Dutch slows down as he gets close, puts Whiptail in park before her wheels are even done skidding and tumbles through the car door, already running. The pack of injectors rattles gently under his arm as he moves, eyes fixed on the strange scene outside the Settlement.

There’s a skinny figure in red strutting around the main entrance, cane spinning in one hand. Even from a distance, there’s something strange about the way the Duke is moving, even more frenetic and jerky than usual. Dutch is almost to the limo blockade when a lean arm flies out of the nearest car and yanks him abruptly inside.

“Wh--hey!” Dutch yelps, and then makes a muffled noise as a hand slaps over his mouth.

“Keep ya mouth shut,” hisses the Duke’s Number Two. “You wanna die today?”
“Ffh--” Dutch reaches up and yanks her hand away. “--No? But your boss is out there goin’ crazy, and nobody else is gonna stop him!”

“Can’t,” says Number Two tersely.

“Wh--why?!"

“He’s got a gun,” says Number Two simply, and glances over--through heavily-tinted glass, Dutch sees the Duke gesticulating wildly as he yells something to the empty air. “Ain’t used it in a while, but it’s like ridin’ a bike. He’s got that...deja flu.”

“It’s--what?!"

“Dunno what he’s seein’, but he’s shootin’ on sight.”

“What?” Dutch shakes his head, holds up a hand. “No--wait, come on. You guys know he’s goin’ crazy, but you’re still followin’ his orders?”

“Some’a the guys would take the Doom Jump no questions asked if he told ‘em to,” Number Two drawls. “Me...I’m takin’ him down as soon as I got an openin’.”

She glances out the window again--reaches out and cracks the door open! The Duke’s voice filters through for a second, cracked with yelling--king of the Empire State, baby! King of New York, see how you like me now--Number Two pulls the door shut again. The Duke’s head snaps around at the noise, and he whips the gun around to aim directly at their window. Number Two grabs Dutch again, pulling him down to the white pleather seats.

“Woulda thought you guys were busy hunting down Kane,” mutters Dutch, as soon as Number Two’s grip loosens.

“We was,” she shoots back around her gum. “But then the boss started...actin’ funny. Y’know. Half the time seems like he don’t even remember Kane exists. Or that he’s in Detroit.” She pulls a face, cool attitude cracking for a second. “Or who...anyone is. Y’feel me?”

“Uh. Yeah. Sure.” Dutch glances up at the window again--the Duke’s screaming hasn’t paused for a second, may even have gotten louder. “…Got a lotta energy for a sick dude.”

Number Two gives him a long, unreadable look. “He’s...taken some things.”

“But we just brought the cure--”

“Look, what it comes down to, kid, is are ya gonna help me out here or not? These mooks ain’t gonna do it, that’s for damn sure. And say whatcha like, my Duke is a crack shot. Need someone to hold onto his shootin’ hand while I...take care of him.”

“Oh my god,” says Dutch weakly. “You--you don’t gotta kill him, we have a cure, I brought injectors for the Cablers--”

“Chill out, kiddo, I was just gonna clock ‘im good.” Number Two glances at the case under Dutch’s arm. “…But a cure works too. So. You down?”

Dutch opens his mouth to say no, absolutely not, he will not walk up the the Duke of Detroit while he’s hallucinating and waving a gun around and on...medication, and grab his gun hand. This is beyond being put on the spot or having to improvise, this is--
--this is Tennie’s life on the line. And everyone else in the Settlement. This is everything important to Dutch. This is do or die.

“Okay,” says Dutch. “...What do you need me to do?”

“You look kinda like one’a his old buddies,” Number Two says. “Figure it oughta turn his head if you show up. You just gotta play along.” She catches the door handle with the toe of one boot, a quick flick and tug, and then kicks it halfway open. “...Go get ‘em.”

“Hey, wait,” says Dutch, and then a hand grabs his arm and he’s falling face-first out the door.

Distantly, through the haze of adrenaline and fear, he hears the limo door slam shut behind him, and a sharp, resounding CRACK as something hits the metal right over his head. Dutch yelps and throws himself to one side, rolling—but there aren’t any more gunshots. No more screaming, either. Silence.

A hand grabs Dutch’s arm. Dutch just barely manages to hold in a noise like the ones Chuck makes when he sees a kitten, and the grip on his arm tightens, dragging him upright.

“Why, as I live and breathe,” the Duke hisses. His eyes are darting wildly over Dutch’s face, pupils blown freakishly wide. “Last time I saw you, you were taking the final plunge off the side of the Chrysler.”

“I,” says Dutch. “Uh. I lived. Made it out of that one! Phew.”

The Duke stares at him for another long second, tapping his gun gently against one thigh like he’s thinking. And then his face splits abruptly into a manic grin.

“Of course you did!” he hoots, and yanks Dutch up, throwing an arm around his neck. “Like a little flying lesson was gonna finish off the Bandit! Hwell, we gotta catch up on old times!” He turns, dragging Dutch with him, holds up a hand to the gleaming spire of the Cablers’ Settlement. Overhead, the dome grinds and rumbles; the Duke doesn’t even seem to hear. “...We can catch up at the top,” he says, almost reverent. “What’d I tell you? We’re gonna be kings.”

--

It took a while to get Stronghorn’s maps going right, but now Texas is pretty sure they’re taking him to the place those guys saw Kane. Time for sweet, sweet justice and even sweeter butt-kick—who’s calling him? Better not be Julie, and she better not be ready to apologize, or be nice to Texas, because, well, because--

Oh. It’s Mike.

“Texas, your sister called--”

“Snitch,” Texas grumbles, glaring at the road ahead.

“Yeah, well, it’s a good thing she did, or--”

“Or you wouldn’t be here to boss me around, huh, Tiny?”

Mike does that weird little cough-sigh that always manages to make Texas feel bad about himself. “No, dude, of course not, I just--you’re not safe out there.”

“Y’know who’s not safe?”
“Kane?”

“Ka--HEY.”

“Yeah, I know he’s not safe, ‘cause the freakin’ dome is coming down!” Mike shouts. “And it’s gonna fall on you too if you don’t--”

But whatever he doesn’t want Texas to do, Texas doesn’t hear it. He just caught sight of a lone figure, running towards the city center. Someone in a cloak.

--

The call ends.

“Oh my god,” says Julie desperately, and drags her hands through her hair. “Oh my god!”

“He was headed for the middle of the dome,” Mike says, mostly to himself. His eyes are very wide, his face pale in the dim light. “Those street signs behind him--Julie, stay here.”

“No,” says Julie. “No! I have to get to him, I have to be there!”

“But he’ll--but the evacuation--”

“Screw the evacuation! He’s my dad!” Julie says, shrill, half-screaming, and Mike’s head snaps up at her tone, his spine straightens. At attention. “You can’t stop me!”

“But--”

“Mike!” says Julie, “I’m going whether you take me or not.”

Mike stares at her, back at the screen, back at her. Takes a deep breath and then lets it out, hissing through his teeth. “…Okay,” he says finally, and then, reluctance in every word, “But…we gotta be safe, Jules, if you get hurt because of me…”

“If I get hurt, it’s going to be because of me,” Julie says, and starts toward Mutt, fists clenched at her sides. “It’s time to end this.”

--

“So,” says Dutch feverishly. “How about, I know I’m always down for anything, but--”

“Uh-huh?” The Duke doesn’t seem to be listening--he’s got his gun raised, head jerking and eyes flickering as he aims it at imaginary targets.

“How about you don’t break in there?”

“Bandit,” the Duke says, like he’s been personally wounded. “No, my man, no no no no no. Listen to yourself! This is the Empire State Building. Germanotta’s out of the way, my man! We’re home free!”

“Yeah, but, uh.” Dutch swallows, trying desperately to think of a convincing lie, and then gives in and just goes with the truth. “My--my girl’s in there!”

The Duke narrows his eyes. “Since when are you into girls?”

Oh, shoot. “I--yeah, my guy, I said guy!” Dutch gets out, and rushes on before the Duke can cut
“But! Listen, Duke--”

“You used the title!” The Duke laughs victoriously. “--you said it, can’t take it back.”

“Oh--darn,” says Dutch desperately. “And I--always called you by your name, usually! All the time! Ha, uh, weird. Listen, my g-guy’s in there, you can’t go in wavin’ that gun around.”

“Smokey, Smokey, this is our dream, baby!” croons the Duke, literally waving the gun around as he gestures at the Settlement. “And, uh, anyway, just last month you were five-timin’ Knuckles Douglas with his lieutenants!”

“What?” Dutch manages, red-faced, and then, as the Duke narrows his eyes, “uh, yes. I did that. Yes.”

“Then what makes this one so special, Smokey? Ol’ Bandit me pal?”

“Wh--well, sh--he, uh--” Dutch swallows, hard, trying to summon all the big, important, heartfelt thoughts he’s ever had about Tennie. They’re not really coming, so he starts with the basics. “I think I’m...in love, for one thing. Duke. My good...buddy…”

“Aaaahaaaand?” says the Duke through his teeth, staring right into Dutch’s eyes from a few inches away. Oh jeez, oh shit--


The Duke squints at him. “In his eyes?”

“On his face! Face. Yeah. Uh. And we like the same stuff but he’s so smart and I’m always learnin’ new stuff about, uh, mech...I mean, the stuff. That we both like. Me, Bandit...Smokey...and my guy that I love. So, uh, I’m really into, uuuhhhh...”

“Vintage wines, yes.”

“All day every day,” Dutch croaks.

The Duke spins around and leans dramatically back against the hood of his limo, stroking his beard thoughtfully. “I hate to say this, but I’m still not convinced, Bandit! You won’t mind telling me more about this fella of yours, hmmmm?”

“You know it!” Dutch says. He’s starting to feel kind of sick and light-headed--where is Number Two? Does he really have to straight-up grab the Duke’s gun before she shows up? Is a distraction really not enough?

If he gets shot here, Tennie might come marching out here and try to take the Duke on, gun or no gun. Dutch takes a deep breath, trying really hard to keep it from audibly shaking.

“...Hhhe’s pretty small, but, uh, but he’d probably fight somebody twice as big. F-for me.”

The Duke’s gun-hand twitches. Dutch twitches too, eyes flickering from the gun to the Duke’s face--the man is frowning at something invisible, eyes wandering. “...Fighty,” he says. “Always did like ‘em that way. And?”

The memory of Tennie yelling at the Duke during Mike’s trial comes back. Dutch scrubs his sweaty palms on his jeans as inconspicuously as he can, tries to slide closer to the Duke one step at
a time. “...He’s--okay, so you know how I used to say that, uh, that...wine’s like art?”

“Mm. Now, you know I never listened when you talked wine,” says Duke the absently.

“Well I did. Say that. And s--he’s real good at...he makes art out of scrap and junk and nothin’, and he makes me wanna make art. Makes me feel like I could take on the world, y’know?”

“Knew a broad like that one time,” says the Duke. He frowns for a second, like he’s trying to remember--stiffens suddenly, head whipping around to stare at the silent line of limousines.

“Right!” says Dutch hastily, and the Duke’s gaze snaps back to him. “I bet she made you feel like...like if you had her with you, you’ve got nothin’ to worry about, huh?”

“Smokey,” says the Duke. “Don’t be shy now. We’re talkin’ about your fella, remember? Not…” His eyes unfocus again, his frown deepens. “...What the hell was her name?” he growls, more to himself than to Dutch.

“Right!” Dutch stops advancing, hands held up placatingly. “My...fella. He’s...man, I dunno what you want me to say! He’s...smart, and kick-ass, and makes art like you wouldn’t believe--and, y’know, he makes me wanna be better! Because he’s better, like, way outta my league! But she sticks with me anyway, even when I mess it all up. And I got no clue why but I’m not gonna mess it up again, and if you go in there and start shootin’, I’m gonna--!”

“Real leggy,” says the Duke. He doesn’t seem to have noticed Dutch has edged up to a couple feet from him. “Chassis like a, a...had red hair. Kick-ass girl, who the hell...?”

And then he goes silent, staring into the distance, and Dutch turns to follow his line of sight. It could’ve been nothing, just another hallucination.

But it isn’t.
It’s Number Two, strutting between the assembled limos towards the Duke. She snaps her gum. Blows a bubble and pops it, with a cock of her head that might be a message for Dutch. *Keep moving.*

The gun. Right, right, right.

“She’s really...somethin’ special,” says Dutch slowly, hands shaking as he reaches for the Duke’s arm. Gotta make sure the gun’s pointing somewhere safe. Can’t let him--

Dutch almost has a heart attack as the Duke’s gun-arm jerks upward--but it’s a short movement, aborted. The Duke is breathing hard through his nose, teeth bared in an unreadable grimace.

“*Germa...notta...*” he rasps, like he’s fighting every syllable of the name as it comes out. “No--”

“No, I ain’t that bitch,” calls Number Two. Dutch hovers uncertainly at the Duke’s side, waiting for some kind of signal. Not sure if he’s needed. “‘S me, D. Babs.”


“Yoouuu--”

“Shoulda just let it take ya, D,” says Number Two, within feet of her boss now. “Taken a nap for once. It’d do ya good.”

“You--hff--I don’t--I am the Duke of--"
“Yeah, you are,” says Number Two. “Now--get ‘im, kid!”

Dutch wraps both hands around the Duke’s forearm and hauls down with all his might, scrabbling for the handle of the gun, just as Number Two dives forward. The Duke struggles like a wild animal, bracing and twisting, hard to keep a grip on. And Number Two manages to slam the injector into his thigh, just a second before the gun swings up in Dutch’s grip and--

*BANG*

--

Kane doesn’t look like he used to in his messages. His face is all dirty, his arm is bandaged and he’s breathing hard, eyes wide and crazy. He doesn’t seem to see Texas until Texas is right on top of him--which is great, because he also doesn’t see Texas’s boot coming right at his *face*.

The kick sends him staggering back, and it feels *just* as good as Texas always knew it would.
“You’re not gonna hurt people down here anymore!” Texas yells, and Kane stares at him like he’s insane. The kick gashed his cheekbone open; his blood leaves fresh, scarlet splatters over the anonymous stains on his shirt.

“Who--?” he starts, and then “--Get out of my way!” He rolls his shoulders, fists clenched. Ready to fight. “Move!”

“This city? This is my city!” Texas growls back, and darts forward, fakes another jab. Kane twists, brings an elbow around and catches Texas in the shoulder, and he may be off his game but when he hits it’s still like a hammer coming down. Texas yells in pain, stumbling, then grabs at Kane’s arm before the guy can make a break for it. “Get--back here!!”

“I’m not afraid to hurt you, boy,” Kane says, ragged and harsh. “No Motorcity thug is going to stop me from--”

“I know! Destroying Motorcity, building your perfect dumb buildings on top of us, WHATEVER!” Texas says, frustrated and furious, and lashes out, a roundhouse kick aimed straight at Kane’s ribs. Kane takes the impact with a grunt, catches Texas’s leg and wrenches Texas off his feet with a roar of effort. Texas hits the road with a nasty thud, turns it into a roll. When he tries to come up to his feet again, the leg Kane caught buckles under him. His hat came off; his hair is falling in his face.

“Damn the city!” Kane rasps, and raises his voice to a booming yell, echoing off the dark buildings. “--WHERE IS MY DAUGHTER??”

Texas freezes, suddenly uncertain, and in the moment of silence, a distant, colossal rumble overwhelms the echo of Kane’s voice. It’s endless, resounding, echoing from everywhere and nowhere. Texas makes a false start, about to charge at Kane, but Kane’s not looking at him. His eyes are fixed somewhere high and far away. Texas glances up--stops. Stares.

The sky is falling apart.

Chapter End Notes

Notable section titles for this chapter:
Chuck Ain’t Scare of No Thing
Journey to the Cablers’ Settlement
Julie Kane...You Know, The New CEO?
The Hunt for Abraham Kane
LOOK AT ME, I’M THE KING OF NEW YORK
GOD DAMMIT TEXAS
Dutch Loves Tennie, Assertively
Kane! Versus! Texas! FIGHT!!
Chapter Summary

While Chuck and Alex race to save their cities, Julie is finally reunited with her father. Family issues are hard enough without a giant plant mutant in the way, but Kaia isn't in a considerate mood. Once again, it's time to fight!!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

By the time Chuck and Alex reach Deluxe, the ground is shaking. It’s like the time Kane docked the buildings too long, but this isn’t the grinding complaint of overclocked machinery. This is deeper, a guttural rumble. Behind them, the rest of the R&D techs are struggling to keep their balance.

“...Fatal error,” says Chuck quietly. “...Ha. ‘Deluxe’ has failed, do you wanna retry--”

“Not helping!” says Alex, high and shaky--stagger as the ground jerks under his feet, jumps and quivers like a living thing. “Oh my god. Oh my god, oh my god. It’s really coming down.”

“Yeah.” Chuck’s not panicking--just staring at the cityscape in front of them. Flurries of pods swirling around the towers, inky cracks spreading across the ground. “...I had a nightmare like this, one time. There wasn’t a city down there, though. Just...teeth. Ha.”

Chuck might possibly be panicking. Just a little bit. That’s fine. That’s fine! Alex will just have to be the one not panicking, he can do that. Probably.

“What do we do?” says Alex, as firmly as he can. “Chuck!”

“Chuck, ears on!”

Chuck shakes his head, blinks a couple of times and reaches up to his comm. “Uh--uh! Yeah! Dutch? What’s going on at the--”

“The Duke got sick--and that red-haired lady--? And I had to pretend--and I got shot--long story!” Dutch gasps. He sounds out of breath; lights blur past behind him as he runs. There’s a very bloodstained bandage secured around his left bicep. “The cablers are cuttin’ us loose from the dome! You’re gonna lose power up there!” Behind him, something crashes, spitting sparks--Dutch yells, ducking as a blinding arc of electricity barely misses him. “How’s the Genesis Pod thing goin’? We’re gonna need it here!”

“It’s...w-we’re working on it,” says Chuck. Saying the words seems to firm his resolve--he squares his shoulders, eyes focusing again. “It’s a cable column, won’t it just come down?”

“They’ve been buildin’ in there and reinforcin’ stuff for years,” Dutch pants. “They think it’ll hold its own weight, but not if everything connected to it is fallin’ down.”

“Right. Yeah, right, okay.” Chuck takes a couple of fast breaths. “--But if it doesn’t--"
“I know, man.” Dutch pauses for a second and leans on a wall, chest heaving. “...Hey, y’know—just in case I don’t get a chance to say. Been nice knowin’ you.”

“Don’t—” Chuck starts, and then stops and swallows really hard. Nods. “...You too.”

“Genesis Pod,” Dutch says, and flashes him a fast, scared smile. “Don’t...don’t take too long, okay?”

His screen flickers out. Chuck stares at where it was for a second, and then takes a huge, deep breath, skinny chest swelling, spine pulling up straight. “Right!” he says. There’s an edge to his voice that wasn’t there a second ago, still kind of shrill, but very firm. “Christiansen, call upon our allies in the tower.”

“Uh...y’mean the other techs?” says one of the guys cautiously. Chuck waves a hand. “Any who will answer,” he says, hard and sure. “Have them ready the Genesis Pod.”

“Why are you talking like—”

“It’s a coping mechanism, Perry!” Chuck paces a few steps back and forth. “Do it already! Make the call!”

“Oh...” says someone in the crowd.

“We’ve gotta make sure everybody gets out of the towers and stays there,” Chuck says, and stares up at the endless skyline of Deluxe. “If the pods go down with the towers, we’re gonna have thousands of people trapped.”

“They’re not gonna be dumb enough to get in the towers right now,” says one of the techs, with an edge of tight hope. “They can hear what’s going on, they’re not stupid—”

“No, but they do what they’re told,” Chuck says, and he turns in a circle, feverish. “We used to run drills and, and stuff—when there’s an emergency—”

“ALL PODS, PLEASE RETURN TO YOUR DOCKING STATIONS,” says a woman’s voice, calm and computer-generated over the earthquake rumble of the dome. “PLEASE RETURN TO YOUR DOCKING STATIONS.”

“But--but that was for the riots,” Alex says, agonized, “It doesn’t just work for everything!”

“Kane Co. doesn’t update stuff,” Chuck says, and groans faintly as the pods start to filter back into their towers. “They’re gonna get themselves killed, this is so bad--”

“But they need to be flying,” says Alex, sort of numbly, staring out at the pods. “If they’d just stay in the air...”

“They don’t know that!” says one of the techs sharply, and throws a screen in Chuck’s direction. “Here, you gotta tell ‘em!”

“Do I?” squeaks Chuck, but the guy is already gone, jogging off towards an approaching group of maintenance workers. Chuck freezes, but only for a second. And then he conjures a keyboard and starts typing, fast and sure.

“What are you doing?” asks Alex, watching his fingers move.

“I’m taking over the announcement system,” says Chuck, and more screens spring to his fingertips.
They limn his face with unforgiving green light, dirty and scraped and fierce with terror. “We have to get these pods airborne, all of them.”

“They won’t listen to you!”

“They have to,” Chuck says feverishly.

“No--listen, listen to me!” Alex grabs his wrist, and refuses to quail under the ferocious look Chuck gives him. “Y’know how I said I was trying to--respect free will, and not be evil anymore?”

“Harley, the dome is--”

“I know!” Alex shouts over top of him. “I know! And--we don’t have time for any of that stuff! Nobody up here had free will when Kane was in charge! This isn’t the time for them to start! We gotta override pod controls!”

Chuck stares at him, mouth hanging open, eyes almost round behind his bangs. Alex lets go of his wrist, suddenly self-conscious.

“...You wanna...take over Deluxe?” says Chuck.

“I’m sorry!” Alex says feverishly. “I know, it’s--bad, it’s a bad thing to do, but-- If you did it-- I’m--I’m not good enough, Chuck. But you are! You have to save them. Please!”

“I know I’m smart!” Chuck yells. “That doesn’t matter when I...I don’t have access codes or--”

“I have them.” Alex throws his own screens out, pulling permissions, opening his account wide. “And I didn’t mean good like good at hacking!”

“The morality of an action doesn’t change based on who’s doing it!” Chuck squawks. “Why are we even having this--look, anyway, I’d need the collision-sensor program from the--”

“I can get you that!” Alex staggers, catches himself as the ground shudders and growls. “I just--you used to do stuff like this all the time when you were a Burner--”

“I’m still a Burner, you--”

“Semantics!! Chuck! Please, just-- I’ll help, but I can’t--please just--”

“Fine!” Chuck screams, and starts furiously rearranging screens in the air. “Get that program! You’ve got ten seconds!”

“Okay. Okay!”

“Hey!” It’s the R&D tech named Perry, waving from the door of a transport pod. “You guys need to get to the tower, right? For the Genesis Pod plan?”

“Chuck’s busy--” starts Harley, but Chuck is already on the move, half-jogging.

“I can walk and code!” he calls without looking back at Harley. “Can’t you?”

“I hate you! You’re so smart!” Harley shouts back, following him at a run.

Alex doesn’t know who’s piloting the pod, but whoever it is obviously has overrides for the pod safety features because Alex knows for a fact they’re not supposed to fly this fast. Chuck is still
typing, occasionally collapsing screens together, breaking them into pieces that start their own sub-processes. He snaps out commands, and Alex tears his eyes away from the ground blurring by and follows orders as fast as he can. Overhead, the pods go still one block at a time, hovering motionless in midair.

"--underground facilities, rooted towers, get us an announcement comm to them--"

"On it!"

"--back door through the engineering and maintenance access codes, they don’t even keep them locked up--Christiansen, the Genesis Pod?"

"Got it! It’s in the Prototype Storage Facility!"

"Okay, okay, okay. Ha! Okay! Haha--!" Chuck cuts himself off, gasps in a couple of deep, fast breaths and then rushes on. "--AA, AB, AC--shit-- Scan the pod sectors, which ones do I still need to get?"

"I’ll look,” says a tech, and duplicates one of the screens from the flickering flock hovering around Chuck’s head. “Okay--BC is still nesting pods, so is GR…”

"I’ve got the comm access,” Alex says, and Chuck glances from him to the tech and scrubs his hands together, like he’s trying to collect his thoughts.

"--Talk to them,” he orders. “Tell them. You, new kid! Find empty pods, get them to all of these locations. They gotta get outta there, yesterday!"

"Not empty pods,” Alex says. Chuck and the tech he’d pointed to both stop and look at him. Alex clears his throat. “We can use empty pods,” he says. “They’ve got repulsor tech.”

"Everything up here has repulsor tech, Harley!’” Chuck snaps.

"The pieces of the dome that are falling down don’t!" Alex snaps right back. “We can use it to slow them down! The Genesis pod moves really slowly, that’s why Kane had to take over before he could bring it down to Motorcity--it’s a terraformer, it’s not a weapon! If we wait until it gets down there, we’re going to lose people!”

The transport pod slides into the middle floors of Kane Co. tower, docking with an unexpected jolt that makes the whole crowd of techs shout and lose their footing.


"It’s fine,” Chuck replies under his breath. “It’s fine, it’s cool, it’s fine, it’s cool.”

"It’s both fine and cool, we get it, Chucky.”

"I hold all your lives in my hands!” Chuck yells, not looking up from his screens. “Okay! Okayokayokayokay and done!! Yes oh my god! Airborne, airborne, airborne--who’s the man?!"

“Chuck ‘Indecent Expletive’ Redacted!” crows one of the techs, and there’s a roar of victorious laughter that even Alex joins in on. He actually gets that joke--anyone who’s triggered Kane Co text censoring would--and besides, the sudden burst of relief is like an extra dose of energy stimulant.

"Uh, not to be a buzzkill--"
“Shut up, Christiansen!”

“--No, seriously! This tower can’t lift off! And might I remind you, neither does the KORS building.”

“That’s where the Genesis Pod comes in,” says Chuck firmly, and glances at Alex with what might be the faintest crooked grin on his face. “Right?”

“R--right!” says Alex, drawing himself up. “Okay! To the Prototype Storage Facility!”

“To the Prototype Storage Facility!” says Chuck.

In the end it’s just the two of them, dashing full-out to the dark, password-locked hall full of Kane’s rejected experiments. The rest of the techs have their jobs, and all of them need to be done right now. For once, though, Chuck can’t seem to bring himself to care that he’s alone with Alex. They’re just running. And when they reach the door, Alex tosses Chuck the access codes without waiting to be asked, and Chuck practically slams his way through the extra security. Alarms start to blare around them, but there’s no one here to care and they slide through the doors the instant there’s room.

“Okay, okay, okay.” Chuck’s muttering again, turning up the light controls as far as they’ll go, squinting as the room turns dazzling white. “Gotta be here somewhere…”

“There!” Alex jogs over to the furthest corner, ducking between shelves stacked high with failed tech. There’s a heap of dark, matte cubes stacked to almost twice his height, looking somehow both forlorn and ominous.

“Are they all connected?” mutters Chuck, pulling up his screens again.

“Should be,” says Harley feverishly. “Connect to one--”

“Connect to them all, yeah, okay, cool. Cool! And getting ‘em down to Motorcity--”

“Already programmed in,” Harley interrupts. “Most of Kane’s machines have that from the get-go.”

Chuck laughs, dry and distracted. “Yeah, I remember. Lucky us, okay okay okay--go, go, go--”

There’s a moment when nothing happens--and then the pile of cubes starts to hum and shift, and then, as a single flock they lift off the floor and stream towards the door with a rush of ozone. And Chuck’s shouting “Yes!” even as the black mass of cubes smashes through the window at the end of the hallway outside. And he claps Alex on the back, like they’re teammates, like they’re friends. “We did it! We’re doing this!!”

“Yeah,” says Alex breathlessly, and then, louder, awkwardly tapping Chuck’s shoulder in return, “Yeah! We did it! Whoo!”

--
Cracks are spreading with colossal, incomprehensible slowness, miles overhead. The dark dome flashes as electrical wiring tears and sparks; lightning arcs through the sky, the distant cracking of the dome booms through the air like thunder. Water conduits tear open, and icy water falls like rain from miles above. Kane’s shoulders heave as he watches his creation fall, beams of brilliant white light splitting the misty air. Texas falls back, mouth dropping open, staring.

He’s still staring when Kane charges toward him, head down, and slams shoulder-first into Texas’s chest. Texas grunts in pain and shock and stumbles back under a sheet of ice-cold water from above. Kane follows him, ignoring the rain, and hits him again; the diaphragm, the jaw, the gut.

“Where is she?!” Kane snarls. “Where is she?! Answer!! Me!!”

“Julie?” Texas spins back, out of the way of another punch, staggering a little. “It--she--none of your business! How the heck do I know?”

“You--used her,” Kane says. “You Burners. She’s with Chilton. Chilton has her. Doesn’t he?!”

“We didn’t use Julie for nothin’!” Texas says. “Are we talkin’ or fightin’?”

“She wouldn’t make peace with you--Motorcity scum,” Kane spits. “She’s my daughter, she’s--”

“She’s not like you, dumbass!” Texas roars, blinking away rainwater and loose strands of hair. “She likes--cats, and fighting, and pizza and stuff, and she’s like, super-smart! She helped Dutch build her car and--”

“No,” snarls Kane, advancing on him.
Texas barks a laugh--he’s found a weak point--and moves forward to meet Kane. “Yeah, dude, she’s the yellow car Burner! How d’ya like them snapples?! The factory that got blown up? Mostly me but also kinda her! And that thing with the fancy dumb Deluxe suits--”

“NO!” Kane dives for him, misses--Texas clips his jaw, sends him spinning, and then--

And then, with a distant, ragged groan of tearing metal, a piece of the dome hundreds of feet across splits off. A brilliant ray of light spills through the hole it used to fill, and Kane and Texas both stop at the same time, squinting into the blinding light from Deluxe. Trying to make sense of what they’re seeing.

There are tiny shapes darting around the falling piece of metal, coming together into a faint sheen of white against the dome’s dark underside. From this distance, at such a colossal size, the fall already looked titantically slow, almost ponderous. But...as more and more of those little shapes come together, its fall seems to slow even more.

Texas’s eyes widen. “Are those...?”

“Pods,” Kane growls. “They stole--how did they get control of--?”

There’s another ear-splitting groan, a series of crackling booms, and this time it’s right above them. Metal panels tear and buckle. A fresh gash of bright Deluxian light opens along some unseen fault line, and then another, and then... It’s coming closer. Falling, this time with nothing to stop it.

And they’re running. It takes out highways as it comes, crumpling them like spun sugar, and they’re running; Texas and Kane, racing to the edge of the inescapably huge shadow closing in on them.

It’s almost quiet, frantic breaths and pounding feet and the occasional raw-throated roar as one of them pulls ahead. And all the while the deep rush of air above, getting closer and closer and the edge of that shadow is only feet away--

It lands with a terrific noise, too big, too loud, and it shatters, spraying broken metal and sparks and a cloud of pale particles. The mist washes over Kane, and he’s still panting, starved for breath, disoriented. He’s already sucked in a lungful of thick, dusty air before he thinks, spores, and starts coughing, hacking, almost on the edge of vomiting. Get it out get it OUT GET IT OUT--

He looks wildly around through watering eyes, clumsily pulling his collar over his mouth and nose. Where am I. Where’s Sarah. No, STOP. It hurts.

Something bumps against his hip as he swings around, and in a moment of lucidity he remembers--the satchel, the explosive, the one he was going to use for his escape. Lucky it didn’t go off when...

When...

Where is he. His ears are ringing. Jacob’s making coffee in the other room. Emmanuel and Greg are arguing in a corner. Blueprints on the wall. Drafting desk warm under his arm. Where am I.

Got to get out. Get out.

“We survived,” says his father. “You’re not going to give up, not now, not ever, do you understand? Do you understand, Abraham?”

“Yes sir,” says Abraham. He’s twelve. He’s sick, he’s very--ate something bad. Scavenging for
food. Got to reach the city.

“Kane,” says a voice, and Kane feels a shock of rage go through him, so intense that it almost burns away the effect of the pollen. For a moment.

“Chilton,” he manages, and then gags on whatever he was going to say. It doesn’t matter--Chilton isn’t looking at Kane, but at something behind him.

“...Oh no,” says Chilton, quietly, round eyed, pulling down his green gas mask. “Tex. Texas! Oh no, no--”

Kane turns blearily. There’s--the boy, Texas, pinned under a strut, bleeding. Unconscious. The enemy, unconscious, at Kane’s mercy--who is he. The Burner. Texas. The Burner. Who is he.

“Tex no--”

Kane looks back at that face--so familiar, so hated, and he’s talking to--a young man after basic combat training--“What’s your name, son?”

“Mike,” says the boy, with a sunny, confident grin. “Mike Chilton, Sir.”

“You looked like you were having a good time out there,” says Kane, keeping his tone deliberately neutral. Mike stiffens a little, looking nervous.

“Uh--sorry, Sir, should I not--”

Kane laughs, a sound few starting cadets get to hear. It booms around the empty space of the training room, and after a moment Mike’s smile returns. It’s tentative, but there’s something eager in his eyes, something hungry without being greedy. Kane smiles back. It hurts.

Mike Chilton comes closer, looking past Kane, trying to get to something behind him--whatever it is, he can’t have it.

“You can’t have it,” he says, or maybe just thinks. Either way, Chilton seems to get the message. “Where is my daughter?!?”

“Keep Miss Julie safe!” Chilton says, and salutes, eyes blank and bright, eager to please. “I belong in Deluxe, sir!”

“You belong in Deluxe,” Kane echoes back at him, and Chilton--flinches back from the words.

“That’s not me,” he says. “That was never me, you made me--”

“Dad!”

Chilton whips around. Julie is running toward them, carrying her favorite stuffed cat--no. Wearing her new elementary-school uniform--no. Wearing dark green and yellow, a black vest, carrying a plasma weapon in one hand. A Burner. NO.

“Julie,” says Chilton, as though he cares about her as anything more than a hostage, eyes wide like he’s worried about her. “Your mask--I thought you’d keep it--”

“Dad, stop!” Julie screams, and Kane can’t--see her, she’s wrong, small and young, just a child. She’s only eight, she’s only eleven, she’s only eighteen.

“Stay back,” Chilton says, spares a second to glance back at her and, and he looks more hurt now
than he did when he--

--Threw his entire future away, his badge dropping to the ground like trash. He glares back at the screen like Kane is the one who’s betraying his oath, like he doesn’t know how important this is.

“You little--dog,” Kane growls, words half from memory. Cold water sheets down from overhead, another water main snapping, and the BOOM shakes him awake. Chilton is watching him--older and more tired, but still with that stupid, idealistic spark in his eyes.

“You’re sick,” he says. “We can fix it, Kane, it’ll kill you if we don’t.”

“That cure is Deluxe’s. I know that much.” Kane circles slowly, eyes flickering from Chilton to his daughter, looking for his opening. We can fix it, Chilton had said, like this cesspool would have had a chance if they hadn’t somehow made--if Julie hadn’t been forced to-- “I don’t need it to finish you off, once and for all!”

“Dad,” says Julie again. “Please, listen!”

“If the spores don’t kill you, Motorcity will,” Chilton grits out. “The Duke--you double-crossed him last time and he won’t--”

“The Duke--is an idiot charlatan,” Kane gasps, struggling to keep his hold on reality. “I don’t need your help--”

“I’m not trying to help you,” says Chilton. “I’m--I just--it can’t end that way, that’s not the world I wanna live in! We can get you in a pod, take you somewhere safe--Jacob will help! I know he--”

“And then what?”

Chilton opens his mouth, but he doesn’t seem to have an answer. He’s not looking at Kane.

“Oh no,” he says quietly, and reaches back, grabs Julie’s arm. “Get outta here, go, run!”

Overhead, something lets out an unearthly, echoing whoop. It’s barely an instinct, a prickle on the back of his neck--Kane throws himself backward as something heavy and misshapen lands on the road between him and Chilton. A mess of green vines, black metal, and what looks like a heavy fur cloak--flashes of human skin painted with swirling green designs.

The fur cloak shifts by itself, rises and flutters, and it’s wings, a pair of huge, moth-like wings. The thing turns to Kane, and it’s shaped like a human but it’s...not. It’s something else. Something wrong.

The monster rasps out a plume of thick smog through its mask, blinks at Kane with three wide, bloodshot eyes.

“...Kane.”

--

“Alright,” says Chuck, his voice shaking. “It’s coming down but we--we still have time. Almost there, almost there…”

He’s been organizing the Genesis cubes throughout Motorcity for what feels like an eternity, waiting for them to spread to the key points. And all the while, far below the constellations of a million hovering pods, the dome is caving. Falling through, every piece more than enough to kill a
crowd. But Chuck tries not to worry about his friends, and waits.

There are maintenance workers, architects, and techies all gathered around his screen array; Dutch and Tennie are watching over Chuck’s shoulder from a comm.

“What if the Genesis towers don’t reach?” murmurs one of the architects. “Even if we’ve placed them right--”

“Of course we did,” snaps another. “We know this structure inside and out!”

“I know that, Yvonne, but think about it! If the towers aren’t tall enough it could just make the situation worse!”

“Literally can’t get worse right now,” mumbles Chuck, although he’s painfully aware it may not be true. “But no, they’re tall enough. Harley and I checked the code. And, uh. Adjusted it. In some places.”

“So they weren’t tall enough!”

“But they are now,” says a tech. “So let it go, alright? That’s Chuck Redacted you’re talking to.”

“Stop acting like I’m a big deal,” mutters Chuck, and then, before anyone can say something nice about him, “Okay. Three...two...one. Activate.”

He presses a key with something like reverence, eyes falling shut for a moment.

Silence.

“They’re not responding,” says Alex numbly. “Why…”

“Or the towers aren’t tall enough!”

“Shut up, Delancey!”

“It’s not the height of the towers, the cubes--just--aren’t--responding!” Chuck hammers at the button for a moment and then breaks away from the screen, his face white with panic. “Oh no--oh no--oh god everyone’s gonna die.”

“It’s my fault,” says Alex. “Not yours. It was my plan.”

“Don’t be stupid,” says Chuck, breathless and distant. “Shit...shit...there’s no time...we don’t have-”

A hand lands on his shoulder. Shakes him a little bit. Chuck gasps for a second, struggles and then manages to get his lungs to work, sucking in air. When he finally looks up, he sees a familiar, heavy-set figure, hair tied up and jaw stubbornly set. It’s been a long time since Chuck was an intern, but the sight of his supervisor’s face still makes him feel--small, young, he can’t do this.

“I messed up,” he says, quiet and honest. “I messed it up, people are gonna die--”

“No,” says Ben, hard and sure like he always was when Chuck spun out on a project. He leans in like he’s looking closer at the screens, lowers his voice. “…You’re in charge now, kid, you don’t get to give up like that.”

“I don’t--I don’t know, I don’t know--”
“So figure it out,” Ben says, and stands up again, crosses his arms and glares around at the rest of the crowd, eyes sharp and dark. “Figure it out! There’s a problem, so solve it. Why wouldn’t they work?”

“Defunct tech,” Chuck whispers. His skin is running hot and cold, icy sweat on his back. “Deactivated. Unresponsive. Can’t do a manual reprogram or--”

“Maybe it’s not that. You could still move ‘em, right? So they’re not unresponsive, we’re just...missing something.”

“It should be simple, though!” Chuck slams a hand through his keyboard, frustrated and terrified—it bursts in a cloud of hissing static and then snaps back together. “Last time Kane controlled the whole thing by himself, he didn’t even have to come down, he had all the controls he needed in--”

He stops dead. The realization is like ice spreading through his bones, every muscle locking up.

“...Chuck?” Harley reaches out cautiously, touching his shoulder—Chuck doesn’t even move to shake him off, not breathing in case it scares the realization away somehow. Harley flinches at the lack of response, and then shakes him—again, harder, when Chuck fails to snap at him. “Oh my god,” he says, “He’s having a stroke.” He leans in closer, eyes intent on Chuck’s face. “...of...genius.”

“Kid,” says Ben, “What the f--”

“No, look!” Alex says. “Look at his face! He’s figuring something out!”

“--are you talking about?” Ben finishes, and then reaches out to swat Alex sharply on the back of the head. “Don’t interrupt me, Cadet Kane Co. I know what he’s doing, but he’s gotta do it faster.”

“His war-pod,” Chuck finishes, because it’s that or listen to people bicker over his head for another second, and god, no. “Kane controlled them from his war-pod. If we can get our hands on one of those--”

“There only ever was one of those,” one of the engineers says. “We don’t have a spare just, just lying around, y’know!”

“Oh.” Alex slumps. “Right. So--back to square one? We don’t have a war-pod, but can we clone the signal and--”

“We do, though!” says Dutch. “We’ve got a war-pod! Or, well. The Duke does. And he owes me one.”

“...Why?” says Chuck.

“Told you, long story! C’mon, what do we gotta do?”

--

Julie thought, when she saw Mike and her dad circling each other under the crumbling Deluxe dome, that this was probably the worst-case scenario.

She was wrong.

“Kane,” Kaia says again. Her gas mask doesn’t...quite fit her face anymore. There are faint wisps
of sickly green smoke drifting out from under it. “And Mike Chilton...my lucky day.”

“You look pretty rough, Kaia,” says Mike, and there’s something kind of like pity in his voice. “What happened?”

“I’ve been taking advantage of this beautiful place we made,” says Kaia, and her voice sounds even and composed, but there’s an awful, bubbly distortion to it. “Evolving. Growing.”

“You weren’t like this at the meeting.” Mike is circling slowly, eyes fixed on Kaia’s face. “Did one of the plants get you?”

“Get me?” Kaia laughs. “You’re still Deluxian at heart, Mike. There are...powers in nature that you’ll never understand.”

“I don’t like the way she said that,” mutters Julie. “Mike--”

And suddenly, there are warning screens everywhere, blaring text over the wasteland of rubble.

**THE DOME IS FALLING. THE FOLLOWING COORDINATES ARE SAFE. GO TO THE FOLLOWING COORDINATES.**

In the distance, shining columns of white spring out of nowhere, stretching up and up and up until they reach the dome. And where they form, the shifting of the broken dome slows...and stops.

“Chuck,” whispers Julie, and breathes a fervent sigh of relief. “Oh my god, yes.”

And then a huge hand closes around her arm and pulls her away and her dad’s voice is muttering, “Go, go, just go, I’ll take care of it--”

“Dad, I’m not--going--anywhere!”

A distracted growl of frustration. “Julie-bear, whatever they did to you--”

“They didn’t do anything! Dad, let--”

“Dad,” says a harsh, bubbling voice, and Kaia steps through one of the warning screens, dispersing it into static and pixels. Kane tenses, tries to pull Julie behind him. But his grip is strangely loose and she steps away easily, readying her boomerang again.

“You’re his daughter,” Kaia hisses, and there’s no trace of sanity left in her eyes anymore. They look lit up, glowing from the inside, and there’s something awful about the way she moves, twitchy, fast and too slow. Greenish muscle is visible through new tears in her skin, shifting grotesquely as she moves. Julie takes a step back as those wide, green eyes fix on her face, and Kaia licks her lips with a tongue that’s too long, the wrong color.

“Leave her alone, Kaia,” says Mike, and Kaia glances at him. When she smiles, it’s even wider than it was before--all of her gums, all of her serrated teeth. “You got business with me, right?”

“I’ll come for you next, Mike,” Kaia promises. There are vines wrapping around her wrists, growing down her arms, but they’re not forming into the neat crossbow she used to shoot spores with. They just shift and lash, reaching, growing. “He deserves to lose everything he loves. *He deserves this!*”

“He deserves to lose his home,” says Mike, and holds up his hands, voice steady. His eyes dart to Kane--his face tightens. “He deserves to pay for what he’s done, and he has! Kaia, this is *enough*!”
“NO!” Kaia screams, cracked and ragged, so sudden Mike flinches back. The vines around her arms lash. “We’ve choked on his poison long enough! He’s going to suffer before he dies, like my people suffered!”

Mike pulls out his staff. “Julie,” he says, and takes a wary step back as Kaia advances on them. “Get back.”

“No,” says Julie stubbornly, and her boomerang hums in her palm as she turns it up to full power. “I’m not letting you go in alone, Mike.”

“Julie!” Kane snaps, and Kaia’s head whips around in his direction. “Run!”

“You run!” yells Julie, glaring at him. “Go--go hide somewhere and lie down, or something!”

“Aww,” Kaia rasps, and makes a horrible, hissing sound that might be a laugh. “Daddy’s little girl.”

Mike and Kane and Julie all move at the same moment. Kaia’s wings slam into Kane as he rushes her, bowling him backwards--Mike takes a wild swing at her, but his staff just skates over her breastplate in a shower of sparks. Julie starts to run after him, and Mike barely catches Kaia as she lunges, reaching for Julie with hands full of lashing vines.

“Jules!” Mike bellows, “Get out of here!” And then a yell of pain as Kaia wraps vines around his chest, lifting him off the ground, trying to wrench his staff out of his hands. Kaia laughs and squeezes and Mike makes an awful noise, a breathless groan, clawing at the vines around his cracked ribs--

Kane cannons into Kaia, knocking her forward with his full weight on her back. Kaia screams in fury, jerking and squirming, clawing at him over one shoulder, and Kane bares his teeth and slams her face into the ground with a nasty crack. “Chilton,” he rasps, “If you--hurt her--”

“I’m trying to keep her safe!” Mike yells back, and staggers upright, wheezing, holding his side. He’s a nasty grayish color, and he winces on every deep breath.

“I can take care of myself!” Julie snaps--at Mike, at her dad, at both of them. She tries to dart past Mike, boomerang raised, but Mike throws out an arm as Kaia’s struggling intensifies. “Mike! Get out of the way!”

--

“You brainwashed her,” Kane starts, hoarse with fury, and then Kaia bucks up under him, throws him off and scrambles toward Julie again, eyes fixed, teeth bared and slick with gray-green blood.

“He didn’t--Dad, I’ve been a Burner for two years! I’m sorry but--I’m not sorry, okay?!” And she throws the boomerang with a skill and accuracy he knows she didn’t learn in Deluxe. It sings through the air, looping around Kaia and slicing open her left shoulder without losing momentum. And as it slaps back into Julie’s palm, she trades places seamlessly with Chilton, ducking behind him as he spins that godawful chainsaw staff.

He bats away vines as they come crawling towards him, and then there’s a flash of yellow light and a dozen copies of Julie come bursting out of his shadow. They dance and dart around Kaia, drawing away her plants. For a heart-stopping second Kane sees one of them jerk in pain and go down, dragged by both arms into the mess of vines; then she’s gone, pixellating into nothingness. Solid-light cloaking technology. It’s illegal in Deluxe, and she uses it like a master.
Something is starting to dawn inside him, cold and strange. *This whole time. He’s been so blind.*

“Kane!” Chilton tries to run forward, and Kaia throws down a bomb that explodes into thick, dark grey smoke. Chilton dives back from it just in time; something sparks, and the cloud goes up in oily red fire, sending shockwaves through the road under their feet. Chilton coughs, choking on the smoke, pulling on his helmet as Harley fixes the armor over his spine--

“Kane, help her!”

There are only two of Julie left, backing away. Kane blinks, trying to focus--remembers. Holograms. Not hallucinations. Kaia throws another handful of something down on the road, and vines shoot out and wrap around Chilton’s arms and legs, trying to pull him to the ground. He struggles, breaks out of the pin, takes down the commander he’s sparring, chops vines away from his hands and looks up at Kane--

“Protect Julie,” he rasps, and it’s not a memory this time, not a hallucination, he’s under nobody’s control but his own. Julie yells, a terrible furious noise, pained and angry; there are thorns tearing at her, catching in her clothes, her hair, her skin. Kane yells “*No!*”, Mike’s voice echoing his as they both move at once.

Kane hates how well they fight together. Chilton makes a second of eye-contact with him and then splits away, drawing Kaia’s attention. Kane takes advantage of her distraction, bringing a hammerfist down on the back of her neck; by the time she hits her knees Chilton is already rushing forward. Like he knew Kane would do that, like he was ready for it. Chilton is within arm’s reach and--Kane presses the button, watches him crumple to the floor and writhe in agony, collar sparking red around his throat, eyes rolling back in his head--

“Mike!” screams Julie, and a streak of yellow light swings out of nowhere. There’s a sizzle of plasma, and Kaia roars in agony as one of those huge, moth-like wings hits the ground. Sticky, bitter-smelling blood splatters the front of Kane’s shirt as he throws himself back, struggling to focus. Julie is there. Is here. Is asking to play with him, he’s too busy, he can’t. He can’t right now. Not yet. She’s in danger. She’s a Burner. She’s in danger. It hurts.

“Kane, move!” Chilton bellows, and brings his staff around in a whistling arc, aiming straight for Kaia’s face. One of her hands snaps up faster than sight and catches it out of the air. Vines snake around it immediately, snaring Chilton’s arms.

“Dad!” Julie shouts. “Help him!” She’s still pulling at the thorny vines wrapped around her, and her hands are bleeding. She’s reaching for him. Reaching for Chilton.

“I’ve been waiting for this, *Mike,*” says Kaia, rattling, bubbling, and her vines twine around Mike’s throat. Mike, the best and brightest of Deluxe, Mike Chilton, everything Deluxe needed, he’ll do the company proud. Kane tries to tackle the monster again, feels a jolt of sickening pain in his shoulder. It hurts. But the vines loosen, and Mike fights the rest of them off, lashes out with a foot and gets Kaia in the gut. Kane grabs the mutilated stump of her wing and hauls back. Kaia *screams* and staggers away, fluttering like a dying insect.

“Can you stand, son?” says Kane, and the cadet laughs and pushes himself up--

“Focus, Kane,” says Chilton. Like the words hurt him to hear. *Son.* Kane just called him…

“You’ve gotta get Julie out of here!”

“No!” Julie snaps, and yanks at the vines again with bloody hands. Her eyes are blazing. Kane runs to her, still staggering, snatches up her plasma weapon from the ground and hacks at the vines.
As soon as her arms are loose she snatches the weapon from him, breathing hard. “I can do this!”

“Yes I do!”

“I do,” says Sarah, and her hands look so small as she slides the ring onto Abraham’s finger--white titanium, Jacob had laughed at him--

“Dad!” Julie’s got a hand on his arm. Her hands look so small. “You’re sick! If anybody needs to go it’s you, please, listen--”

She’s so small, so pale, a shock of dark hair. Newborn. She’s eight, twelve, sixteen. Stronger, harder. Pushing him out of the way, taking her shot.

Julie stares up at him as he reaches out to her, feels her hair run through his fingers like silk.

“You’re the best thing I ever--” he tries to tell her, and Chilton is yelling, and something roars.

He has just enough time to turn, to see the monster charging toward him. To put his head down and brace himself, and then she barrels into him like an avalanche. Her left arm and shoulder are slick with blood from her missing wing, her nails tear stinging lines in his side, cloth ripping.

And then there’s a sudden, burning pain in his shoulder--all the fangs in Kaia’s too-wide maw sinking deep into his flesh. He screams and claws at her, groping for her neck, for a windpipe to crush. But she pulls away too fast, and already Kane knows something is wrong. The wounds she left feel hot, prickly. His face and the roof of his mouth are tingling, his fingers feel numb.

“What--did you--” The ground tilts under him--he staggers and she laughs, a wild jolt of sound from deep in her throat.

“At last,” says Kaia. “The great Abraham Kane and his precious city, brought down on the same day! How does it feel to have your home ruined, Kane? To have everything taken from you?!”

He shouldn’t have looked at Julie. Shouldn’t even have thought about her. Should have--stalled, played along. But his treacherous eyes turn to his daughter instead, the last thing he has left, the only thing that matters anymore, and Kaia follows his gaze.

“You’re right,” she says, conversationally. “...I forgot.”

There are too many voices, now. Too many thoughts, too many memories, and he can’t think straight. But he’s seen--his wife’s body, limp and crooked in the passenger’s seat, flames licking around her still face--he’s not going to see his daughter--he won’t let her. Not Julie. Not Julie.

Kane lunges and hooks his working arm around Kaia’s neck, hanging on with the last ounces of his strength as she twists and hisses. He’d meant to detonate the explosive from a distance, but there’s--no--time--

“Chilton!” he barks, as Mike swings into view. “Keep--uff--keep her safe, damn you!!”

“Kane--”

“Julie!” His finger hooks under the pin--he can’t hold on much longer-- “Julie-bear I--” Kaia tosses her head, smashes her skull into his nose, and Kane feels the pin come out, hears the hiss of combining chemicals. It’s a single moment, a split second. His watering eyes find his daughter’s
face again and he opens his mouth to--to tell her--something. He has to say something to her before

Chapter End Notes

Notable section titles from this chapter:
- Chuck and Harley’s Epic Deluxe Adventure
- Showdown 1
- Chuck Has A Stroke
- Showdown 2: The Son Of Showdown
A Death in the Family--What Comes Next?

Chapter Summary

Everything is going to be different now.

Chapter Notes

Recommended listening: In Our Bedroom After the War by Stars
(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c5qx_ZMY7tU)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In the singing, roaring silence after the blast, pollen fills the air.

Julie is ten and she’s painting Claire’s toenails and her dad is dead.

Julie is sixteen and she’s trying pizza for the first time and her dad is dead.

Julie is five years old and her dad is saying “How am I going to do this without you, Sarah,” and her dad is dead. And he’s wrapping her in his arms while Kanebots swarm outside the window and she’s pushing him out of the way to hit a ball back at the wall and he’s patiently teaching her to code and he’s dead. And Julie is losing her hold on reality, on what her age is, on everything except that one fact, and it’s like her heart is breaking a thousand different times on a thousand different days. It cuts brutally through every hallucination, every memory, happy or otherwise. The sight of this evil, kind, fierce, loving, awful man, lying filthy and destroyed and motionless on the ground. Julie wishes--she wishes--god! I wish none of this had happened, I wish I hadn’t been born, I wish he weren’t my dad, I wish--he hadn’t died miserable and angry, I WISH HE HADN’T DIED.

“How am I going to do this,” she says, soft and blank, before her voice cracks and she feels the tears coming. She doesn’t want to cry--wants more than anything to be hidden away from everyone else, to feel nothing, to be able to stop. But it’s breaking out of her in a wave, wringing great, shaking sobs out of her, and all the while the memories keep coming. She’s seven, sixteen, twelve, nine. It’s the night after the Genesis Pod came down and Mike is saying “Just...don’t get too close, okay?” and she’s crying.

Her dad is dead.
Mike has never seen Julie cry like this. He’s seen her tear up, occasionally. During his time as Blue, he saw her with a red nose and puffy eyes more times than he cares to think about. But he’s never seen her break down. It’s terrifying. And it’s—You were like a son to me, Kane had said, and Mike knew he meant it, and Mike had felt—Mike had been—

...But he’s not the one collapsed next to Kane’s motionless body, wailing like a baby. And he doesn’t know what to do.

Texas, whispers a little voice at the back of his mind, and a fresh wave of horror washes over him. He runs, past Julie, feeling like a coward for leaving her but—please let Texas be alright, let him be—he’s pulling up a comm screen to call for help as he goes, but there are already people coming. Footsteps, people yelling Over here! and Is that him? Is that Kane?!

The medical squads are in the lead, running the fastest. The Motorcity doctors and nurses edge in slowly, almost distrustfully, while Deluxe’s techs immediately gather close. They’re digging frantically in their packs, pulling up screens. Julie doesn’t look up at them as they jostle her shoulders. She’s laid over Kane’s chest, and she looks so frail and small, blood on her palms and Kane’s white shirt. And if she notices the techs are there, she doesn’t answer. Just keeps on making those awful noises, wrenching sobs and broken little whimpers.

It hurts to see and it hurts to hear, and Mike can’t handle it anymore. Can’t let Texas keep lying there. “Hey,” he says, “I need—” Nobody is listening to him.

“Someone check for a pulse!” shouts Godinsky. “We might be able to—”

“Does he look like a man with a pulse to you?” says the Duke’s lead nurse, coldly exasperated.

“You don’t know—”

“Look at those injuries for two seconds, why don’t you?” The man strides forward, keeping a wary
distance, walking a slow circle around Kane’s body. “...Blast injuries. Some kinda crude explosive.”

“But--”

“He’s dead,” Mike says, and a couple of people look up. Their expressions cover everything from exhilaration to grim satisfaction to distressed confusion. “But Tex--my friend got caught when the dome came down, he needs help!”

“R...right!”

Mike drops to his knees next to Texas, gets his hands under the metal and tries to push; it barely shifts. “Tex,” he grunts, “Help me out here, come on buddy, come on please--” No response, not even a groan. Mike backs off again as one of the Deluxian doctors comes running over, spares him a slightly frightened glance, then kneels down and cups a hand over Texas’s mouth. Mike rests a hand on Texas’s back, and then jerks it away again as he feels something wet and sticky-warm on his fingertips--blood, soaking through Texas’s jumpsuit.

“Texas,” he says again. “Hey. We won, come on--Texas.”

“Sir,” says the Deluxe doctor, and Mike’s blood seems to run cold at the cautious sympathy in his tone. “I think--”

“We’ve gotta get him out of there,” Mike says feverishly.

“Sir, I’m sorry, but...” The tech reaches out cautiously, lifts Texas’s head with a careful hand. There’s blood splattered across Texas’s forehead, all over his face, nasty bruises and a gash cutting over one eyebrow. His hair is messed up, his face is quiet and motionless. Mike’s heart is imploding, compacting into something tiny and brittle and cold.

“No,” he says, so quiet he barely hears himself.

The medical tech presses his fingers to Texas’s throat--a screen pops up; blinking zeroes. No signal found, a flat line--

Then there’s a faint blip. Another one. A heartbeat, too fast and faint but there.

“No!” echoes the doctor, and half-turns, looking back. “Hey! Help me out over here! This guy’s still alive!”

“Mike?” People are running, legs crowding around him. Mike doesn’t have time to wait, he just puts his shoulder under the metal strut pinning Texas. Pushes with all his strength, even though it makes his ribs throb. “Mike, is he--?”

“Alive!” says the doctor. He’s supporting Texas’s head with one hand, the other one feeling around under the rubble. He winces as the white sleeve of his coat comes back stained red. “But we need to get him to a hospital as soon as possible.”

More people are pushing. Metal shifting. Mike’s ears are ringing, but he doesn’t stop--closes his eyes and lifts. Today’s taken enough, too much, it can’t have Texas too.

There’s a great, creaking groan, a rumble of shifting metal. The doctor yelps as the rubble he’s kneeling on slides to one side, and more pairs of hands reach past Mike, grab Texas’s limp arms and pull him free.
“We did it,” says Chuck for the millionth time. He’s lying flat on his back, the floor cool underneath him. He’s already screamed himself hoarse, and so has everyone else in the pod. Maybe later there’ll be a casualty count, and maybe it’ll be bad. But god knows it’ll be less because of what they did here.

“We sure did.” Harley settles down next to him. “Oof...I mean...we do still have to figure out what to do with what’s left of the dome, and find places for all the displaced pods...reconstruct--”

“Screw you,” mumbles Chuck, scrubbing at his eyes with both hands. “I’m not gonna do any of that. Grown-ups can do that stuff.”

“You’re eighteen,” Harley points out. “Technically--”

“I’m not even going to ask how you know that. Look, just relax and...enjoy this, okay? I never enjoy stuff. I deserve to enjoy this moment.”

“True...” says Harley.

“...But?”

“But?”

“There was a ‘but’ on the end of that sentence.”

“Good place for it,” mutters Harley, and Chuck sits up, squinting at him through his bangs.

“Excuse me? You’re choosing now to get a sense of humor? Just tell me what you were gonna say, dude!”

“Fine, fine! Okay, I was just thinking...we should go down there.”

Chuck groans. “Uuuuhhh yeah I guess--”

“Or at the very least call Mike,” Harley adds uneasily, and a shock of anxiety goes through Chuck’s gut at the tone. He tries to dismiss it, along with the sudden slew of horrible images that just leapt to mind.

“He’s fine,” he says, pulling up a screen. “Dutch is fine, and I’m sure Julie stayed somewhere safe, and Texas--” He pauses, then goes on, doggedly, “Texas would stay with his family, right? So it’s fine.”

“Yeah, but--I mean--” Harley struggles, gesturing wordlessly for a moment, and then manages, “It’s...Mike?”

And he’s right, damn it. Swallowing hard, Chuck makes the call and watches it dial.

Mike appears, blessedly prompt, wonderfully alive, and...

And then the rest of the details filter in—the look on Mike’s face, the smear of red on his cheekbone. The sound of shouting in the background. And over it all, a high, keening wail, an almost unearthly sound of grief.

“We’re coming down,” says Chuck, before Mike even opens his mouth.
Dutch and Tennie watch as the dome keeps falling. It’s slower now, just small pieces in between the high, white Genesis columns. They saw Kane Co. Tower come down just a little while ago, a network of pods smoothing its fall, keeping it steady. Now it leans awkwardly in the distance, an alien behemoth on the Motorcity skyline.

The Settlement is bustling around them; there’s a lot to be done, and there will continue to be for a good long time, Dutch would guess. And normally he’d help out with that, even with the bloody bandage around his shoulder. And Tennie would too, but right now, in this moment, they’re just taking a break.

Eventually, Tennie breaks the silence.

“Did you really mean everything you said out there?” She sounds almost detached, watching people swarm over the Settlement. Somebody has gotten a crew together, and they’re stringing stabilizing cables from the Settlement to the sturdy columns surrounding it, and back again.

It’s been a crazy day. Dutch doesn’t even bother to ask how she saw--footage from cameras, maybe. Maybe she was hiding out of sight, ready to take the Duke out herself, when he showed up.

“Sure did,” he says. “Smokey ‘The Bandit’ at your service.”

“Not that.” Tennie half-laughs, leaning over to elbow him.

“I know, I know.” Dutch glances over at her, catches her watching him. When he smiles at her, she smiles back and looks away again, almost shy. The light from the Settlement is gleaming on her goggles, turning the darkness of her eyes starry.

“...I love you,” says Dutch.

It’s not a perfect moment, he kind of blurts it out and he’s still not sure they’re 100% okay and--

“I love you too,” says Tennie, and reaches out to wind her fingers through his. “...See? That’s how you do it.”

Dutch can’t stop himself from laughing at that. “Got it,” he says. “I got schooled.”

“Yeah you did,” says Tennie, and scoots closer, pushing herself up on her knees. Her voice drops a little, soft and private. “...Y’know, dad’s busy cleaning up.”

“Dutch?”

Chuck’s pixellated face pops up in thin air, directly between them. There’s a ton of ambient noise in the background of his call; people yelling, something grinding. Dutch opens his mouth to go “what, man?!” or possibly just blow Chuck off and close the call--but there’s a tone to Chuck’s voice he doesn’t like at all, tight and frantic.

“What’s up?” he says instead. “You okay?”
“Yes--no.” Chuck groans. “I don’t know. Dutch you gotta get to where Mikey is, something bad happened. Something real bad.”

“What kind of ‘real bad’?” Tennie says. The soft look in her eyes has vanished, replaced by focus.

“I don’t know.”

“I’m on my way,” says Dutch, already scrambling to his feet. He hesitates just a second, still holding Tennie’s hand--she nods to him once, firm, and lets go. Dutch smiles at her helplessly, and then turns away, jogging toward his car. “What do you know?”

--

Julie is still crying. Mike paces back and forth, restless energy boiling through every inch of him like a silent, full-body scream. He feels--he’s so--he doesn’t know how he feels, but it’s intolerable. Julie is still crying. Kane is still dead. Texas is surrounded by doctors and nurses, being carefully transferred onto a hover-stretcher, and his blood is sticky, smeared on Mike’s hands and face.

Chuck gets there first. Alex is with him, and Mike is--less okay with him right now than he usually is. Chuck starts asking questions as soon as he gets there, and usually it’s kinda funny how he needs to know what’s going on, every little detail. Right now, it makes Mike want to jump out of his skin.

“Kane’s dead,” he says shortly, cutting off whatever Chuck was asking. Harley’s pale face goes even paler, and he breaks away immediately, hurrying over toward the place where Julie is crying, still crying. “Texas is hurt. Bad. Dunno how bad.”

“How--okay.” Chuck glances at Texas, takes a deep breath, throws a scared look toward where Kane is lying. “But you’re okay?”

Mike waves a hand jerkily, wants to say yeah but can’t make the word come out. Chuck seems unconvinced, but doesn’t say anything else, just takes a deep, shaky breath. With an apparent effort, he turns to look at Texas again--not that there’s much to see, through the crowd around his stretcher. Chuck drags his hands down his face, murmuring something through them--Mike catches the words stupid and please.

And then Texas is gone, and Mike doesn’t know whether to follow him or stay with Julie. He wants to comfort her, wants to stay as far from Kane’s corpse as possible. He wishes the Deluxe guys had taken it with them, but none of them seemed brave enough to approach Julie.

Mike’s almost glad of the distraction when someone behind him says, “Mike Chilton.”

“Uh, yeah,” he says, turning slowly. “Yeah, what’s--”

The words freeze in his throat. It’s Rall, Kaia’s giant second-in-command. Behind him, in the distant trees of the nearest patch of forest, Mike can see a throng of Terras, watching with silent intensity.

“We come in peace,” says Rall. His eyes stray to Kaia’s body, lying gruesome and mangled in the shadow of the wreckage. “…I’ll take her.”

Mike doesn’t move, just glares up at him, sparkstaff whirring in one hand. He doesn’t remember taking it out, but he wants to use it.
“She hurt a lot of people today,” he grits out. “How do I know you’re not just gonna hurt more? Maybe I should just—take you out! So this can just be over already!”

“It is over,” says Rall, and to Mike’s frank surprise, his voice breaks. “I thought if I followed her long enough, she would...come back.” He pauses, glances at Kane’s body. Julie, still crying. “...My mistake.”

“So, what--now she’s gone you guys are just gonna play nice? I don’t buy that!” Mike feels his eyes burning, his body aching. He’s done with this. He’s so tired. They hurt Texas. They hurt Julie.

“You have my word,” Rall rumbles. “Just give us her body, and we won’t—”

“I don’t buy that!” Mike repeats, hard and hoarse. The sparkstaff buzzes in his hands, shaking, like it’s as ready to fight as he is. He tightens his grip, drops into a fighting stance--

And then Chuck is there, throwing himself between Mike and Rall so carelessly that Mike almost gives him a laser chainsaw haircut. He collapses the sparkstaff on instinct, feeling it fold back into the little chrome skull. Hot in his hand.

“He didn’t mean that!” Chuck calls back over his shoulder, voice wobbling. “He’s just--upset! Really upsetting day!”

Rall is watching. Waiting. Something in Mike’s gut rears up horribly, and he clenches his fist around the skull. He doesn’t need a weapon to punch this guy’s daylights out--

“Mike, no,” says Chuck, and catches his arms. Mike grits his teeth and tries to shake off his grip, but Chuck is holding on hard. “Mikey, listen--”

“No,” says Mike. “These guys aren’t just walking away from this! They deserve--they deserve the same thing she got!”

“Dude!!” Chuck’s voice cracks a little. “Mike, c’mon, this isn’t you!”

The words ring true and it makes Mike angrier, somehow--he’s spent so long being nice, doing the right thing, and people just keep getting hurt, and now it’s over and somehow it’s worse. “Outta my way,” he says.

“I know you’re upset,” says Chuck, his voice wobbling horribly. “But you don’t get to make everything worse just ‘cause you’re mad!” He takes a step forward, eyes too bright. “I get it, okay? It sucks even though we won and I’m really, really sorry! But just--Mikey just let them take her body, maybe it’ll be--”

Mike punches him in the face.

He doesn’t even really mean to, knows in that instant he’s going to regret it for the rest of his life, but before he can even open his mouth to apologize, Alex Harley tackles him to the ground.

“Get off me!” Mike yells, screams in his face. “Get off!”

“Don’t hit him!” Harley yells back, “He’s trying to help, he didn’t do anything, he doesn’t deserve--!”

But Mike doesn’t care, he isn’t listening. He pulls his arms free and hits Harley as hard as he can, pushes up with all his strength and twists to slam Harley hard into the ground. Something awful
and sick is lacerating his insides, tearing him up. The back of his neck is aching. He can feel the memory of Harley’s blue eyes burning into him—standing next to Kane with that smug, blank smile on his face, watching them put Mike under--

Mike hits him. Again, again, like Red hit him when he was too brainwashed to protect himself, hard enough he feels his knuckles tear. Every breath makes his lungs burn, he can feel his voice tearing at his throat, but he can’t hear what he’s yelling. His heartbeat is deafening in his ears, he can’t--

“Mike! Mike, Mike, Mike hey, bro hey, come on--!”

Somebody catches his arm. Mike wrenches away with all his strength, trying to lash out again. Harley is lying still under him, blood on his lips and his nose. His eyes are unfocused, but they’re still watching Mike, Deluxe-blue. The hands holding Mike’s arm don’t let go.

“Mike,” says the voice again. “Mikey, stop!”

It’s Chuck. Holding onto his arm, hauling back on it with all his strength. Mike doesn’t want to stop.
“He’s had enough,” Chuck says, and his voice is trembling really bad now, cracking and wobbling like he’s barely keeping it together. “Dude, you’re freaking me out, come on!”

“Nnuh,” Harley wheezes, “I--deserved that--” He flinches, hands rising hopelessly to protect his face as Mike jerks and tries to hit him again. “Sorry! Sorry--”

Mike exhales hard and hears the catch of a sob. Feels the anger breaking into--something else. Something worse.

“...Sorry,” he breathes, blinking hard. “Sorry. I don’t know what I was… Sorry.”

“‘S okay,” says Harley, a little thickly. He sits up, gingerly feeling his nose. “...You didn’t break it this time, so that’s--good.”

“It’s not okay,” says Mike. He can feel himself starting to shake as Chuck helps him sit down. He can’t look at Rall, afraid that if he does it’ll set off that...thing inside him again. But he puts a hand
on Chuck’s shoulder and murmurs, “Tell him...tell him to take her. It’s okay.”

It’s quick. Painless. Rall walks by, lifts Kaia’s corpse. Takes her away. It’s so easy that Mike doesn’t even know what he was so upset about. Chuck was right, this was better.

“It’s okay,” he says again when they’re gone. “It’s okay. I’m okay. It’s--out of my system now.”

“Dude,” says Chuck shakily, sitting down next to him. “I’m so sorry, Mikey, but I don’t--I don’t think that’s how it works.”

“It is,” says Mike blankly, staring down at his hands. The torn knuckles. Texas’s blood, drying on his fingers. His ribs are throbbing again, making his eyes water. “You just...don’t think about something for long enough, it goes away.”

“But--” Harley pauses, as though waiting for another blow, but Mike doesn’t feel that spark of fury at his voice, doesn’t look up. “...But, if you’re not thinking about it, how...how do you tell...if you’re getting better?”

“Doesn’t make sense,” mutters Mike.

“No, but--it does. It’s...you can’t fix something until you know how bad it is. Even if knowing...how bad it is…” Harley pauses. Swallows. “Even if knowing...feels...really horrible.”

“Who told you that?” snipes Chuck, but without any real malice.

Another pause. “...Julie,” says Harley. And finally, Mike looks up.

“Julie,” he says.

“Um. Yes.”

Mike stands up. Wipes his face. Staggers towards Kane’s body, where Julie is still kneeling.

“...Jules,” he says, and drops awkwardly down next to her. Now that the doctors and nurses are gone, Mike can see Kane clearly for the first time--his face is still, blood drying in his beard, shadows under his eyes. The rest of him is...not right, anymore. Not the right shape and not...enough. The smell twists something ancient and visceral in Mike’s gut, makes his stomach churn.

Mike stares for a second, then swallows hard, looks away. “...Julie.” He puts a hand on her back. She doesn’t shake him off, but she doesn’t look up either. Like he doesn’t even exist.

“What’s goin’ on here?”

Mike looks up at the sound of a familiar voice--he opens his mouth to answer, but there isn’t really anything to say. Jacob is already there, already looking. He can see for himself.

“...Goddamn,” he says, very quietly, and shakes his head. He settles down on the other side of Kane’s body--reaches out and closes Kane’s eyes. There’s a moment of silence, and then Jacob looks up at Mike and says, rough and businesslike, “Anyone else sees his body, lord knows what’ll happen. We need to move ‘im.”

“But--” Mike pauses, glancing at Julie’s crumpled form. Jacob’s mouth tightens.

“We’ll move her with ‘im,” he says. “C’mon. Got a tarp in the back’a Sasquatch.”
“Shouldn’t he...go back to Deluxe?” says Harley timorously. He looks a little unsteady, but he’s back on his feet. His nose is still bleeding sluggishly over his upper lip. “I mean…”

“We’ll worry about that later,” grunts Jacob, and looks Harley up and down for a moment. “...Alright. You’n Chuck, help out here. Mike, I saw you holdin’ yer side, you ain’t carryin’ nothin’.”

“But I’m--”

Jacob sighs. “...Stay with Julie.”

Mike’s throat seizes up convulsively, and his eyes start to burn again. “Okay,” he says.

The instant he tries to pull Julie away from her dad’s body, life returns to her in desperate, furious bursts. It’s like the only word she can remember is No, and she just...repeats it, clawing and fighting just to hold onto the corpse. Mike can’t bring himself to physically drag her away, no matter how often Jacob motions him to. Chuck flinches every time Julie sobs, and Harley just looks frozen, utterly appalled by the scene.

Eventually, Mike manages to lift her gently up and gets her to look him in the eye. She’s a mess, her face wet and streaked, eyes flickering distantly.

“Hey, Jules,” he manages, and then suddenly she’s holding him instead, crying into his chest. Mike wraps his arms around her, glad on some level that her grip is so weak. If it was one of Julie’s normal, viselike hugs, he’d probably black out from the pain in his ribs.

Behind her, Jacob is loading Kane’s body onto the tarp with businesslike movements while Harley apparently tries not to throw up. He follows Chuck’s lead and takes one of the tarp’s corners when Jacob is finished, but Mike can still hear him gagging as they make their way back to Sasquatch.

Mike tries to get Julie on her feet. She follows after a moment, still sobbing weakly, and staggers with him across broken metal and severed cables.

Sasquatch may be the only vehicle in Motorcity--apart from the Duke’s limo tank--that could roll over rubble like this like it was gravel. There’s something about seeing her gigantic tires that’s oddly reassuring, makes Mike want to settle down and hide underneath her.


Julie barely seems to hear him. She does as she’s told, in a kind of distant daze. Together, they all load into Sasquatch--Harley riding shotgun, Mike and Chuck on either side of Julie in the back. Trying not to think about their cargo in the trunk.

“Alright,” says Jacob, “hang in there, kids. We’re just gonna go wherever the people are.”

--

People start to gather, eventually. Nobody makes a decision, they just all come together, near the bank of the river, in the middle of Old Detroit. People bring their injured. Their dead. Mercifully, miraculously, less of the latter.

Dutch kind of wanders through the crowd; there are groups of Deluxians, groups of Motorcitizens, but mostly people just kind of...mix. Wander, like Dutch is, looking for familiar faces.
He finds some unexpectedly, hanging out near an old church by some R&D guys. Claire, and a lady...her mom, he thinks, though he only saw her for a moment up in Deluxe, and--

“Tom?” he says, incredulous.

“Oh!” The head of Aesthetic and Design snaps his fingers, squinting thoughtfully at Dutch’s face. “...Mmmm...Dutch!”

“Uh...yeah!” Dutch smiles weakly, then sways as Tom strides forward and shakes his hand very firmly. “H-how...how are you doin’?”

“Dad, you know him?” Claire says. She looks really frazzled. For the first time since Dutch met her, her immaculately Deluxian square bun is...less than immaculate. “Like, oh my god, is there anybody you don’t know?”

“Networking, baby,” says Tom. “Dutch turned down an offer from yours truly so he could come down here and pursue his passion.” He does a really smooth maneuver that somehow ends up with his arm around Dutch’s shoulder, swinging him around. “Dutch, I would like you to meet the one and only, the radiant Gwen Clement.”

“We’ve...met,” says Dutch, trying a smile. “Uh--kinda, anyway.”

“We’ve seen each other,” Gwen corrects him gravely, and then her lips quirk up as Tom laughs, loud and ebullient. Claire huffs and rolls her eyes, but she’s smiling a bit too.

“Well, son,” says Tom, gesturing to their surroundings with a sweep of his arm, “how has the day been treating you? I see you’ve, ah, lost a little blood…”

“Just a li’l,” Dutch confirms, and then, because they seem to expect more from him, “I...got shot?”

“Oh my god,” says Claire, looking thoroughly nauseated.

“Uh, yeah. I kinda had to convince this guy I was his old friend? He was hallucinatin’, though, or it wouldn’t’ve worked, and... I sorta had to tell him how much I...loved my girlfriend? To keep him from invading her home?” Dutch shrugs lopsidedly. It’d probably be a good story, coming from someone else, but he’s an artist, not a writer.

“Well,” says Tom after a polite moment of waiting, “sounds like it’s been intense for all of us! But we survived, and I have to say, I think that makes this a special occasion! A holiday, even, in the future...Fall Day. The day the dome fell!”

Gwen, who’s been watching Tom with a weird look ever since Dutch mentioned Tennie, finally opens her mouth to speak. “You know,” she says slowly, “I think maybe this special occasion calls for...something that’s been a while in coming.”

Tom turns to her, and Dutch feels almost blinded by the look on his face. Tom has been blazing with passion since Dutch first met him, but his face when he talks about art is nothing compared to when he looks at Gwen Clement. “I agree,” he says, gravely fierce.

“Then let me say something,” says Gwen. She clears her throat and stands tall, radiating dignity.

“No no,” says Tom. “Please, I can’t wait any longer.”

“This will only take a moment--”
“It is too important--

“Tom Odom--”

“Gwen Clement--”

“Will you marry,” they start together, and then, after a moment of staring each other, they embrace and kiss each other deeply. Gwen spins and dips Tom, who sinks gracefully into it with one arm extended for peak melodrama.

“Oh my god!!” squeals Claire, hands pressed to her heart. “Ugh, that’s like, so cute but so gross! Aaahhh I’m so happy for you guys!”

“Does...does this just happen down here?” murmurs one of the tech guys to Dutch, his wide eyes fixed on Gwen and Tom’s prolonged kiss.

“Sometimes, sure,” says Dutch absently.

“And--what? They’re...they’re gonna get married now? Can they do that? Just--without the algorithms or anything?”

“I mean, I don’t think Julie’s gonna...keep doing the Wedding,” Dutch says, nose wrinkling. “So you oughta be able to marry whoever you want, right?”

There’s a moment of awed silence.

“Miss Julie,” says someone. And then everyone’s shouting, so it’s hard to tell what they’re saying, but the general idea seems to be “You can’t just call dibs on Miss Julie, we all deserve a chance!”

So that’s gonna be fun for Julie. If...if she’s…

Dutch shakes his head, pulls up a comm as worry rises up inside him in a deep, awful wave. Julie. Nobody’s in their rides, and Chuck hasn’t called him back since they talked at the Settlement--Dutch is trying really, really hard to be cool about this, but it’s seriously starting to freak him out. Chuck said that Mike said that somebody...somebody was hurt.

“Mike,” says Dutch, hoping. His comm chimes once, but the call doesn’t go through. Dutch groans and paces, leaving the chattering crowd of techs behind, gritting his teeth. “Dar?”

“Cadet Gordy is not available,” says a calm, familiar voice. “The Kane Co. Communication Center has temporarily lost service.”

Dutch curses under his breath. “Texas!” he says. No response. “Julie, pick up, come on. Chuck?”

“Dutch!”

For a second Dutch stares around, looking for the comm screen, the avatar, any sign his call went through. Then he sees a familiar, motley group pushing through the crowd. Chuck is waving--Mike is limping a little bit, holding his side again and looking kind of distant. Jacob has got a hand on his shoulder, murmuring something in his ear. Whatever he’s saying, Mike doesn’t seem to be listening. Dutch can see the towering shape of Sasquatch in the distance; the endless, ebbing, flowing noise of the crowd must have drowned out the sound of her engine.

“Mike!” Dutch sprints over, grabs Mike and pulls him in for a hug. Mike seems weirdly
distracted, slow to react. “Oh my god you guys--” He hugs Chuck, who squeezes him back with considerably more enthusiasm. His breathing is shuddering a little bit, but the smile he gives Dutch is pretty steady.

“What happened?” Dutch says, while he hugs Jacob. Jacob squeezes him hard, thumps his back.

“What happened to you?” he says, holding Dutch at arm’s length to examine his bandages.

“Got a little bit shot,” says Dutch, waving the question away. His eyes slide nervously to Mike’s face. The rusty smear on his cheek. The exhilaration and relief he was feeling transmute slow and awful into something colder. Something sick and uncertain. “Where’s...where’s Julie?”

“She’s in the truck,” says Jacob quietly. He sounds hoarse, very tired. Old. “She doesn’t wanna talk. Dutch, don’t go spreadin’ this around, but--”

“Kane’s dead,” says Mike. His voice is hard and his face is strangely blank.

“Man.” Dutch shakes his head, blowing out a harsh breath. “How--?”


“Oh.” Dutch’s eyes flicker past them to Sasquatch again. “Oh, wow. Is she…okay?”

The other three share a look. “...No,” says Jacob finally. “Don’t reckon she is.”

“Right.” Dumb question, right. Dutch shakes his head again, trying to fit the thought into his brain. Kane, dead. The war’s over. He kinda feels like they should be celebrating, but from the looks on everyone’s faces, now’s not the time. He would’ve thought Texas, at least…

...Wait.

“Guys,” he says slowly. “Where’s…?”

“Chilton!”

Mike’s head jerks up--for a second, the dead look in his eyes is replaced by something fierce and sharp, almost wild. Then he relaxes, slow and reluctant, breathing out.

There’s a wedge of people cutting a swathe through the crowd. An Amazon in a blue jumpsuit is in the lead. There’s an older woman on her heels; she’s at least a foot shorter, with cropped black hair and a familiar expression of determined belligerence.

“Where is he?” demands the Amazon. The lady next to her is looking at Mike like she’s trying to decide whether to hit him or not. “Where’s my brother?”

“Easy there,” Jacob starts, but she cuts him off with a furious wave of her hand, still glaring at Mike.

“Randal! Texas! You were supposed to be the leader, right? I called you because I thought you would take care of him, now what happened to him?!”

Mike swallows. Dutch glances down and notices for the first time that his hands are stained rusty red. Old blood. “He’s alive,” says Mike, and the older woman clutches at her chest, eyes widening.

“What happened,” the Amazon repeats, and this time there’s fear in her voice.
“He’s hurt,” says Mike. “It--it looked bad, but he’s--”

The Amazon swears loudly in Tagalog and draws back a fist. “I swear, if he--”

“Hey!” shouts Chuck, ducking in front of Mike. “That’s enough, okay?! He’s our friend, we’re worried about him too! Listen--I know which hospital he’s probably at, okay? If that...if that helps…”

Slowly, she lowers her hand. Behind her, the woman--Texas’s mom, has to be--starts to relay Chuck’s words to the rest of the rowdy, dark-haired crowd.

“...Are you guys...all Texas’s family?” asks Dutch weakly, peering out at all of them.

“And is there something wrong with that?” snaps the mother, whipping around to glare at him.

“Uh--no! Nope, nothin’ at all! Ma’am! Thanks!”

“Good,” she says, narrowing her eyes, then turns back to Chuck. “Coordinates. Now.”

As Chuck begins the arduous process of appeasing Texas’s family, Dutch feels a hand tap his shoulder. He turns to see Jacob, jabbing a thumb at someone in the milling throng around them.

“Just spotted an old friend,” he says. “You kids got this handled?”

“Think so… Handled as it can be, anyway.”

“Heh. Yeah. Real day for that,” says Jacob, and disappears into the crowd.

--

Jacob almost didn’t believe it when he saw her--he wouldn’t’ve thought there was any way she could get here from all the way on the outskirts. But here she is, in the flesh, settled stiffly on a street bench as people flow around her. Every time Jacob’s seen her before today, she’s been holding some kind of gun, and it’s actually weird to see her without one.

“Vi Kleinschmidt!” He half-jogs the last few feet, grinning. Her head lifts up, one ear turning in his direction.

“...Jacob?”

“Got it in one,” says Jacob, edging around the bench to sit down next to her. “I can’t believe it--yer alright!”

“Course I’m alright,” mutters Vi. “Why wouldn’t I be. Just got a little flu, is all.”

“Yes, sure,” says Jacob, chuckling. “Just glad you made it out here. Especially with, uh...yer houseguest.”

“What, William?” She scoffs, rolls her eyes. “We had a few close calls, no worse’n anyone else in Murdercity. Why, d’you know ‘im? He kill someone or something?”

“...Or somethin’,” says Jacob. She didn’t know. Of course, he’d guessed, but he still thought on some level it was some kind of hostage situation.

“Well, ‘or somethin’ what?”
Well--she deserves to know. “...The guy yer callin’ William? That was Abraham Kane,” says Jacob, after a moment. No way to sugarcoat it, really. Might as well go the whole hog. “He’s dead.”

Vi pauses, frowning.

“Guess it’s a lot to take in,” Jacob says awkwardly, looking away from her. “Just thought you should know.”

Vi sniffs. “Well. When’s the funeral.”

“--’Scuse me?”

“The funeral. I wanna be there.”

“What?”

“Are you as deaf as I am blind, Jacob? I said I wanna be there, so when is it?”

“I--dunno,” says Jacob, slightly poleaxed. “I thought--I wasn’t gonna--we gotta ask his daughter.”

“Ah,” says Vi, a little bit of that harsh edge fading from her voice. “Yeah. The daughter.”

Jacob stares at her. “He told you about her?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Jumpin’ Jehosefat...” Jacob scrubs at his eyes, trying to understand it all. “…Alright. Alright. Maybe you should be at the funeral.”

“That’s what I’ve been sayin’!”

--

“That piece of the dome did some pretty bad damage to your lower back,” says the doctor, and folds her hands, leaning forward. “…We can get the bones to heal, but...we don’t know if you’re going to be able to walk again. If you do, it’s...not going to be the same. I’m sorry.”

Texas opens his mouth--makes a kind of rough noise, like he was trying to laugh, couldn’t remember how. The doctor watches him steadily.

“What questions have you got?”

Texas doesn’t answer. Just turns his face back up to the sagging canopy of the treatment tent and stares. The doctor breathes out through her nose, shakes her head and stands up.

“I’ll have a nurse come around and get you something for pain,” she says.

“Don’t need it,” Texas says, distant but immediate, a reflex.

“...Fine.” The doctor shrugs. “If you do, let us know. We’ve got enough to go around.”

She walks off, picking her way over the detritus of the tent to step in by the next bed over. Somebody is crying over there, on and on, low and keening. Texas turns his face away from them and looks toward the canvas wall instead, eyes unfocused and brow furrowed.
He’s been lying there for almost ten minutes, very still and silent, when another doctor in a perfectly white coat comes striding over and stands in front of him.

“Hello,” says the Deluxe doctor. “I’m Dr. Fatchikova. What’s your diagnosis?”

“...What,” says Texas, flat and heavy.

“Oh, uh, sorry,” says the doctor, and raises her voice, talking slower. “Uh...what’s...wrong with you? How can I help you?!”

“Y’can’t,” says Texas. Tries to roll on his side and freezes, breathing harshly through his teeth. For a second he just lies still, eyes squeezed shut and hands white-knuckled on the sides of his cot. Then, bit by bit, he relaxes. The Deluxe doctor is still watching him, head on one side.

“You’re the Burner, right?” she says. “The one that got hurt...fighting Mr. Kane.”

Texas makes a formless noise. The doctor swallows, looking more than a little bit uncertain now, but she doesn’t back down.

“Did you hurt your legs?”

“...No,” Texas growls. And then, because he can’t contain it anymore, “--doesn’t matter, not gonna get to use ‘em anyway! Stupid--freakin’--” he moves again, goes still again, and this time he can’t hold in a strangled groan.

“You should take something for pain.”


“Mm.” The doctor grimaces a little, holds up her hands, and a screen pops up in front of her. “Hold still for a second.”

“Hey!” Texas shifts again, trying to watch as the doctor walks in a fast circle around his bed with the screen held out in front of her.

“Compiling…aaaaaand, complete!” Dr. Fatchikova spreads her hands, increasing the size of the screen. On it, a rough three-dimensional model of a human body spins under her fingertips. “It’s just a field scan, but...ah! Oh, I see.” She clicks her tongue, flicks her wrist; the skin and muscles vanish from the body, leaving a modelled skeleton. The spinal column is flashing slowly red. “...Complex T9-10 fracture.” She shakes her head. “Very painful, very. And you’re likely to have some numbness or tingling in the extremities below the injury, but we can definitely piece it back together.”

Texas stares at her. The doctor stares back, smile falling as Texas’s blank expression doesn’t shift.

“Unless...of course, if you’d prefer to be seen by, by doctors from down here.” She straightens her white coat, clears her throat. “I thought I would offer a, um, a second opinion?”

“Unless...” Texas starts--stops and swallows the words. Turns his face away. When he keeps going, his voice comes out strange, strangled. “...I’m not lettin’ Deluxe cut me open.”

“I’m not gonna change my mind,” Texas mumbles.
“If you do change your mind,” the doctor persists. “We can fit you in any time in the next three weeks.”

She goes.

Texas lies there, stares up at the ceiling of the tent. Thinking.

There’s nothin’ to think about. There’s no way Deluxe is gonna fix this for him, just, fix it, make it all better--Deluxe doesn’t make stuff better. Especially not stuff like this. Nobody makes stuff like this better.

Except the dome falling. They helped out with that. Chuck and Mike and Dutch are from Deluxe. Julie’s-- There’s stuff that’s good that came outta Deluxe, Texas has seen that, like, a couple times now. One or two. The family Up There, they’re pretty cool.

They cured everybody who was sick, too. Deluxe did, they made everybody who had the plague just stop bein’ sick in like three seconds flat. And there was no way Motorcity was doin’ that by themselves.

Texas can’t lie around like this the rest of his life. He’s not gonna end up in a wheelchair like great-grandpa, he’s not--he can’t. That would be--dumb. That’s not gonna happen, he’s gonna make his legs work again. He’s gotta.

--

Julie watches Jacob pour the gasoline with dead black eyes. There’s a matchbox in her left hand.

Mike had offered to be here, but Julie knows it was for her. Not her dad. She understands that, probably better than anyone could, but still. She doesn’t want him here.

And she doesn’t want the rest of Deluxe here, either. Doesn’t want her dad preserved or his ashes crushed into a diamond or...put somewhere, to spend the rest of his death on a shelf. Someone can direct a public ceremony in Deluxe later, if they want to. It won’t be her.

Beside her, the old blind woman sniffs and says, “...Stinks.”

Yeah, well, it’s gas, Julie wants to say, but the words just die in her throat. It didn’t occur to her until just now that her dad would probably hate the idea of being covered in...car fuel, of all things, and burned on a pyre. But he hated a lot of things, and none of them matter anymore.

“Alright,” says Jacob, stepping back from the body. “Done.”

He’s looking at Julie, but the words still won’t come--if there even are any, for this moment. There’s a silence that smells of gasoline and feels like forever.

“I’ll say somethin’,” says the blind woman finally. Jacob explained why Vi Kleinschmidt is here, but it still sounds unbelievable to Julie. It feels wrong, watching her shuffle towards Kane’s corpse as though she has a place there.

“I didn’t know who he was when he stayed with me,” says Vi, in the awkward, stilted tones of someone who isn’t used to public speaking. “Tried to shoot him a few times. Didn’t fear for my life more’n once or twice, which is pretty good for new acquaintances down here. He swept my floors, fixed my roof, ‘n read aloud to me once. Saved my life, there at the end, and he didn’t have to.” She waves a hand vaguely in Julie’s direction. “Cared a lot about you. And your mom. That’s somethin’.”
It should probably feel… Julie should probably be relieved to hear that. Instead, the pain inside her intensifies, raw and brutal. Here’s this woman she doesn’t even know, telling Julie about her own father? She can hardly picture him sweeping floors and fixing roofs--they might as well not be thinking of the same person. *That time should have been mine,* she thinks, suddenly, the thought unbidden, irrational but irresistible. *The last weeks of his life, and we couldn’t even have a real conversation before--*

“Julie?”

It’s Jacob. Hand on her shoulder. Julie wants to push him away, wants to lean into him and beg for comfort. She freezes and doesn’t do either.

“You wanna say a few words?”

Julie doesn’t answer. After a moment, Jacob clears his throat and says, “Welp. My turn then, I’m guessin’.” He pauses, runs a hand over his bare head, and sighs heavy and tired. “Kane-- Abe. Was my best friend. We grew up together. It was...it was rough, watchin’ him turn into what he did. All I ever wanted was for him to go back to the way he was.

“Who he was, was--smart. And fun, *man,* but we had some times!” Jacob shakes his head, coughs out the semblance of a laugh. “He was always wantin’ to try somethin’ new, didn’t give a shit if it was dangerous. Loyal as hell, though. Loyal as hell. I dunno, maybe he found a little of that again down here.” Now he glances at Julie too. “Maybe you got to see it sometimes.”

Julie feels the tears start to well again, unexpectedly, burning her eyes. She manages the slightest of nods.

Jacob nods back, jaw set. “Yeah. He wasn’t a good man. Spent a lotta my life hatin’ him for one reason or another--and good reasons, too. But…”

“He was my dad,” says Julie, through her tears. Choking.

“Yeah,” says Jacob. Vi nods once, stiffly.

And maybe that’s all she needed to say. Or maybe that’s all she’ll ever be able to say. Either way, it’s time.

Julie scrapes a match, watches it flare and settle. She drops it, and the gasoline catches fast, and she closes her eyes on the tears.

After the funeral, before she leaves, her eyes catch on Jacob’s tool bench; a flash of silver. *Pocket them,* says her mind, snagging irresistibly on the thought. She does it. She’ll use them later.

--

Claire takes Julie back to the Clement pod cluster that night. Julie’s pods were in Kane Co. tower, and Kane Co. tower is just kind of *not there anymore,* an empty hole in the skyline. Besides, Julie shouldn’t be alone right now. She doesn’t seem to see where they’re going--or care. She barely even seems to notice when she’s being spoken to.

Claire helps her into the pod, past the nutrition dispenser where her mom is trying to figure out how they’re getting dinner now, and settles Julie gently down in the bedroom. When Claire returns, Gwen is on hold with somebody, looking grumpy and tired. She softens a little when she catches sight of Claire, raising her eyebrows.
“...How’s she doing?”

Claire glances back at her pod door and then up at her mom. Gwen seems to read the answer from her expression. She nods, lips thin.

“She can stay as long as she needs to.”

“Yeah.” Claire tries a smile, wan. “Thanks, mom. I think—”

She’s not sure what catches her attention—a sound, some faint noise from the pod behind her—something makes her glance back, frowning. A sudden twinge of suspicion.

“--I think she needs me right now,” she finishes, distracted. “Uh--like, let me know when dinner’s here, okay? Bye!”

Claire slips cautiously down the short hall towards her bedroom, heartbeat speeding up as she closes in on the sounds. Quiet, muffled swearing and something softly metallic. The door is open but she hesitates anyway, afraid of what she’ll see around the corner.

It’s dark inside, and it takes her a second to find Julie’s form, dark and slumped by the bed.

“...Julie?”

Julie looks up, wet-faced and slack-jawed. Half her head is practically bare, a mess of jagged, choppy red hair. She’s holding a pair of sharp silver scissors in one hand, must have brought them up from Motorcity. Claire’s never even seen any in Deluxe before.

“Claire,” she says helplessly. “I was...trying to…”

“Oh, Jules…”

“I was trying to…” Julie gestures at her hair with the scissors.
“We have an automatic hair trimming station in the bathroom, you know that, right?” murmurs Claire, sitting down next to her. Julie’s eyes are dark and glossy, already red from crying.

“I-I was t-trying...I wanted to…”

Claire swallows. Puts an arm around her best friend’s thin shoulders. “I know, Jules. We’ll fix it.”

“You--can’t--” Julie sobs, heavy and dull. “It’s--gone--!”

“...Yeah,” says Claire, looking around at the severed swathes of hair on the floor. “I know. But you know what, I--I think you’ll look really cute with short hair! We just gotta clean it up. The trimmer has settings…or, oh! I could bring someone up from Motorcity? They have to have actual people to cut hair down there, right?”

“No!” Julie says, bolting upright. “No! Nobody c-can see, Claire, they can’t--”

“Okay!” Claire squeezes her shoulders again, rubs her back. “No, I gotcha. But, like, you can’t just sit and cry about it. We gotta get you cleaned up, girl!”

“M sorry.”

Claire clicks her tongue softly, shaking her head. “You can’t say that right now, Jules…”

“No, but--I put everything on you, this...this whole time…’s not fair.”

From the main room, there’s the sound of a pod door opening. “Well,” says Claire, looking up. “Good thing I invited reinforcements, I guess!”

Gwen says something distantly and another voice answers, lower and soft. Claire doesn’t
recognize it right off the bat, but Julie’s eyes go wide. “Mike!” she says, and struggles up, weak and uncoordinated. “Oh--no, I’m not--Claire--my hair--”

“Bathroom,” says Claire firmly, pointing across the hall. “Trimmer. I’ll stall the boys.”

“The boys?”

“Yeah, all your greasy dorky Burner friends,” says Claire, almost fondly. “Except for...well… Anyway, I think they brought...pizza, or whatever? Since that’s allowed now? So they’re allowed at Girls’ Night. Just this once.”

“Okay,” says Julie, and she sounds...not quite as empty as she did five minutes ago. She dashes into the bathroom with a nervous glance down the hall, and Claire watches her go with a small, worried smile on her face. And then, because she has to go talk to the greasy, dorky boys at some point, she heads for the front door.

The pizza is very greasy and the games they brought are extra dorky, but it’s not...bad. Claire spends a minute coaching them fiercely on how to react to Julie’s new haircut--Be nice, not just surprised--and they don’t do too badly. Dutch Gordy lets Claire play with his hair, which is shockingly perfect, and all the boys ooh and aah over fingernail polish.

“What’s this?” Chuck bends over a small bottle. “D...Disco...Glitter?”

“That’s one of the sparkly ones,” Claire remarks, tapping the cap. “Might be a little too flashy for you.”

“...I’m gonna do it,” says Chuck, with determination, and Mike raises his eyebrows.

“Oh, alright, Chuckles is goin’ for it! I’m gonna do, uuuhhhhh..Jules, what’s your favorite?”

“Huh? Uh...” Julie stares blankly down at the rainbow array of bottles. “They’re...all good? I dunno.” Her eyes flash up to Mike’s face and she sighs softly. “I mean...how about Electric Pear? Bright green is your thing, right?”

“Sounds good! Dutch?”
“Claire said you can do layers,” murmurs Dutch, peering down from his spot on the bed (he’s the only one of the boys Claire has allowed on it). “I’m tryin’ to figure out what the best combo is…”

“Tango Fuschia and Sea Bubbles,” says Claire firmly. “It’ll look *sooooooo* good.”

--

Texas’s mom is *not* happy.

This is totally why Texas didn’t tell anybody until, like, ten minutes before they’re gonna do their weird laser thing. His dad grabbed Texas’s hand when he heard what was goin’ on, and he’s not lettin’ go. His *mom* is going back and forth across the room, not really *yelling* but gettin’ pretty close. Angie has her head in one of her hands, like Texas is bein’ dumb.

“--Taking everything from us, and now they want to take my *son*?”

“They’re not *takin’* me anywhere,” says Texas. His back doesn’t hurt as much right now, probably because of whatever that stuff was some guy put through the needle in his arm. His hand hurts more, because playin’ the harp makes your fingers really strong or somethin’ and Texas’s dad is holding on really hard. “Come *on*, mom. Be cool.”

“Be *cool*!?” Angie repeats. “Randy, you just told us you’re gonna let these--these--” she glares around at the room like the walls piss her off. “--knock you out and cut you open? We have doctors in Motorcity--”

“Yeah, well, the doctors in Motorcity said I wasn’t gonna walk again,” says Texas. “These guys said my feet were gonna feel maybe kinda weird while I was doin’ sick muay thai kicks, but they can just--fix my back!”

“What makes you think they were telling the truth?!” His mom throws up her hands. “Ahh, you’re going to stress your mother to death! No, absolutely not!”

“Uh, absolutely *yeah*!”

“Don’t shout at him,” says Texas’s dad. He’s kinda patting Texas’s hand, and he looks real upset, which makes Texas feel like a huge jerk. Not enough to change his mind, though. “Honey, he broke his *back*. When your grandpa hurt his back--”

“You’re better off in a wheelchair than--than carved up into weird food-cubes!” Angie snaps. “I can’t believe you agreed to this!”

“Uh…” One of the surgical guys pokes his head in. “…The operating room is ready, if--”

“Get out!” Texas’s mom yells at him, and starts toward the door like she’s gonna kick his butt. “Vulture!”

“*Mom,*” says Texas. “Be *cool*!” He glances at the guy. “I’m gonna, just gimme a second.”

“Uh...of course!” The guy glances at Texas’s mom again, and then backs out and closes the door. Angie is still staring at Texas. “Seriously?” she says. “You really, actually, want to do this.”

“Yeah,” says Texas, even though he kept on changing his mind for like a week before he called the Deluxe doctor back. “I’m eighteen, I totally can if I wanna!”

“Well!” says his mom, and throws up her hands again. “He’s a grown man, now! Bahala ka sa
“Do you want to talk to your friends, first?” says his dad, and more than anything Angie and his mom have been yelling about, that makes Texas kinda stop.

“Nah,” he says. “I’ll tell ‘em sometime. Like, later. It’s cool.”

“...Are you scared?”

For just a second, Texas can’t figure out what to say. “Uh… No. Duh. What? No. Like, I got stitches that one time and they didn’t even knock me out and it was totally fine, so--”

“It’s gonna be for a few hours,” says Angie. “That’s what they said. ‘A few hours’, and they can just do whatever they want--”

“It’s fine!” snaps Texas, and surprisingly, now that he has to tell her that, he kinda feels it, too. “These are the guys who did the whole cure thing, right? So if they wanted to kill me--” His mom goes extra pale and extra angry, but he keeps talking anyway, louder. “--If they wanted to kill me, they’d also be out to get everyone down there too, right? One fell swoop! Ha-cha!!”

It’s been days since he did a kiai, and it feels good. Texas throws in a few hand chops for good measure, before his back twinges and he has to sit grumpily back. In the corner of his eye, he can see Deluxian doctors hovering in the doorway.

“...They’re here,” he says brusquely, waving his family away. “Don’t be dumb.”

“But Randal--”

“Texas! Don’t be dumb! Hey, y’know what you can do for me?”

“...What?”

Angie looks kinda like she might cry, and it throws him off for a second. What was he gonna say? Think, Texas.

“...Just. Be here. When I get out,” he mutters, and then, because that was too many feelings for one day, chops her in the waist as the Deluxe guys haul him away.

“Ow!!” Angie clutches her side, swearing. “Ugh--yeah, I’ll be here, bunso--to beat you up!”

“Yaaaahhhhh!” Texas roars back at her as the doors close.

The mask closes on his face and someone’s talking to him about--counting, and how long it’s gonna take, and what they’re gonna do, but he’s not really listening. Now that he’s here, he is...just a tiny little bit...maybe scared. But not a lot!! Not so much that he’s gonna pass this up. Yeah. He’s gonna do this, and he’s gonna see his family after, and he’s gonna walk again. Yeah.

Bravely, Texas sleeps.

--

Julie goes to exactly one board meeting, a few days after Fall Day. It’s a brief affair. She doesn’t have much to say. Seven words, in fact.

“What do you mean, resign?” Gwen says hotly. “After all this?! After everything you went through to get--”
“I resign as CEO of Kane Co.,” Julie repeats. And then, because that doesn’t feel like quite enough, now that she says it, “…Effective immediately.”

“Now--now, Ms. Kane.” Bell is fiddling with his mustache nervously. “Do you think, uh--that’s wise…?”

“Yes,” says Julie flatly. “Find somebody who knows how to do this job. I don’t. I never did.”

“Your father--”

Julie’s head twitches, her eyes dart toward Stevens. Stevens pauses, meeting that glare with an even look, and then starts again.

“You did fine,” he says. “You shouldn’t resign. Kane Co. needs a Kane.”

“No it doesn’t,” Julie snaps. Stevens doesn’t answer, just regards her for a second like he’s trying to figure out how to handle her. It makes Julie feel pathetic and small, and blazingly angry.

“I’ll take care of things,” he says finally. “You’ll have the power. To keep us in line, if you feel you have to. We’ll do the work. Take all the time you need.”

Julie doesn’t know whether to be grateful or to hit him.

“Fine,” she says, and it comes out acidic. “Then--then I’m going back to bed!”

It sounds silly, childish, said out loud like that. Larsson would have ripped her to shreds for it, but Stevens just inclines his head slowly.

“Fine,” Julie says again, and stands up, shoving her chair back. “Don’t bother calling me.”

--

Mike tries to call Julie a couple of times on the way up. He doesn’t get a hold of her. He keeps on not getting a hold of her as he weaves across the dome. It’s a maze now, a mess of great, cavernous holes and landed pods. It’s been a long time since Mike learned the tricks of getting around Deluxe, how to navigate by the distant spire of the Kane Co. main tower; he didn’t realize how heavily he depended on it until it was gone. He keeps getting turned around, taking detours to avoid the gaping tears in the dome.

It takes him a solid half-hour longer than he expected to reach the temporary Kane Co. headquarters. There’s a couple of guys standing outside--newly-promoted cadets, judging by how young they look and the uncomfortable way they wear their dress blues. Mike jogs up and salutes; they salute back on jerky muscle memory and then gape at him.

“I’ve gotta see, uh, Miss Julie,” says Mike. “Is she in there?”

“You’re Mike Chilton,” says one of the kids.

“Uh...yeah.” Mike grins, and the kid just about drops his rifle. “Hey, man.” Oh, geez, there’s a badge on his shoulder. “Sorry. Commander?”

“Yessir,” says the kid. “Commander Hegde, sir! It’s an honor to meet you, sir!”

“Y-yeah, uh...at ease,” says Mike awkwardly, and to his relief Commander Hegde relaxes a little. “Cool. I seriously just need to talk to Julie. Do you know where she went?”
“I heard she left,” says the other boy. “Her pod unhooked and took off...half an hour ago?”

“Oh, yeah?” That’s...weird. Mike headed up here early on purpose, and he was hoping he’d catch Julie before she got busy. She shouldn’t be headed out already. Mike frowns. “You know where she went?”

“No, sir.” The commander--the kid--takes half a step forward as Mike starts to turn away. “But! I know who might!”

Mike loiters around, taking in the sights as Commander Hegde makes the call. They’re near another hole in the dome, here; there’s a cool breeze blowing up, carrying the by-now-familiar smell of dust and metal and Terra plants. Mike closes his eyes for a second, turns his face up into the sunshine and breathes in the smell of home.

“Mike!”

Oh, that’s a familiar voice.

Mike opens his eyes and smiles, and Alex Harley grins back at him--albeit kind of cautiously. His face is still bruised, blooming in spectacular colors. And Mike’s knuckles are still bandaged. Mike represses a twinge of guilt and holds out a hand to shake.

“Hey, Alex.”

“I heard you were looking for Miss Julie?”

“Yeah.” Mike can still feel himself getting twitchy at the sight of the guy’s face, feel a bunch of bad thoughts and memories trying to push at the back of his head--he pushes them back down again, hard. This isn’t a good time to think about that stuff.

“She went back to her pod, I think,” Alex says apologetically. “Uh...I was going to send her some notes about the board meeting after she left, if you want me to add something to the message?”

“Sure.” Home, huh? He...doesn’t really blame her. Mike didn’t really want to go out and see people today either, but he really didn’t want to be locked up in the hideout with nothing to do. Sitting alone in his room would’ve driven him nuts. “I just wanted to talk to her about some stuff.”

“What kind of stuff?”

Mike guesses the look he gives Harley must say it all for him, because the guy sort of steps back and says, “Right. Uh, okay. Well, I’m supposed to be going over the prison records and figuring out who to set free.”

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“Set free?” Mike raises his eyebrows, taking the screen Harley offers him and scrolling idly through it. “Man. That’s a lot of prisons. I had no idea.”

“Most people don’t,” says Harley tightly, watching as Mike opens the “Maximum Security” folder. “It’s...it’s pretty horrible. There are plenty of innocent people in Deluxian prisons. Not all of them, so we’ll have to judge on a case-by-case basis, but...”

“Look at this,” murmurs Mike, tapping the top of the list. “Might be time to pay a visit.”

“...I’ll come,” says Harley nervously. Mike gives him a bemused look and he shrugs, lips thinning. “It’s--kinda my fault he’s in there in the first place. And if we’re gonna let him out or something,
you might, uh...need a little backup.”

Mike grimaces and shrugs. “Can’t argue with that. Alright, let’s head out!”

--

The guards on the cell look real uneasy when Mike tells them he wants to go inside, but then one of them looks him up and down and mutters something to the other one, and they step back out of the way. One of them even salutes.

Alex glances over at Mike as they start to key the code into the door--shifts his weight, uneasy.

“...You okay?” he says awkwardly, like he’s not used to the words.

“Huh? Yeah.”

“You just look kind of...” Alex’s mouth twists. “...stressed,” he finishes diplomatically.

“Yeah, well.” Mike shrugs, stepping forward as the doors slide open. “I’ve been in Kane Co. cells before. Didn’t have a lot of fun.”

“...Mm.” Alex crosses his arms uncomfortably. “...Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” says Mike doggedly. “Don’t worry about it.”

Alex kind of looks like he wants to say more, but whatever he sees in Mike’s face makes him close his mouth again. “Sure, okay,” he says instead. “Let’s...get this over with.”

Red looks smaller with all the red lights on his suit extinguished--a crumpled, blackened shape, like a dead coal. Somebody has cuffed his hands, bare and ungloved--not on long cords like the ones MIke was tied up with, but actually cuffed straight to the wall, pinning him there. Mike...doesn’t like the guy, like, at all, but it still makes his stomach twist. If he’d been tied down like this, there’s no way Mike would’ve gotten away. He couldn’t have fought back. It’s...not a fun thought.

“Red.”

Red doesn’t answer, but his head rises minutely.

“I told them to leave you your helmet,” Alex contributes timidly from somewhere behind Mike. “I hope it...helped?”

Red makes an unreadable noise, too soft to tell if it’s a laugh or a snarl. Alex swallows audibly and shuts up.

“...Here to gloat, Chilton?” Red says finally, hoarse and soft and poisonous.

“No.”

“So?”

“Kane’s dead,” says Mike.

Red goes very still. “...I don’t believe you.”

“Doesn’t matter if you believe me,” says Mike. “It’s true. We’re rebuilding Motorcity, Red. You
“I could what?” Red hisses. His hands work, scars pulling and twisting, knuckles standing out pale under his skin. “I could help? I could hold hands and play nice?”

“...Yeah,” says Mike. “You could. You could help us fix it, if you--”

“Burn in hell, Chilton.”

Mike stops, lips thinning. Takes a measured breath and lets it out. “Okay,” he says. “Okay, so...it really is just...me.”

“It was always you,” Red says, and he sounds almost as tired as Mike feels, all of a sudden. “Pushing in where you’re not wanted. Screwing everything up.” A warped half-laugh. “It’s the only thing you know how to do.”

Mike refuses to flinch. Just meets Red’s eyes through his visor, and doesn’t blink. Red holds his stare for a minute, then looks away with a grating sigh.

“If we let you out,” Mike says, and hears Alex shift uneasily behind him, breath catching like he wants to say something. Mike doesn’t look away from Red. “--Are you gonna hurt people?”

Red hisses softly. “...No.”

“Are you gonna try to kill me again?” He can’t bring himself to sound upset at the idea--he’s just really tired. Too tired to care about this right now. “I don’t want to fight you.”

“I know.” The sneer is audible in his voice.

“We can find you somewhere in Motorcity, if you want--”

“No.” Red’s hands clench into fists again. “That place isn’t my home anymore.”

“Ah, well, um.” Alex takes a step forward. “Deluxe has a lot of--”

“No,” Red repeats. “You want to pretend everything’s okay, go ahead. I’m leaving.”

“You’re--what?!” Mike glances back at Alex for the first time--he looks just as confused and startled as Mike feels. “There’s nowhere out there to--dude, where are you gonna go?”

“I don’t know,” Red says. “Anywhere that’s not here.”

The next day, the Burners go and see Texas. They hadn’t been planning on it, but Mike gets a call from Angelica. She still doesn’t seem too happy with him, but as she says, “You’re still Ran--Texas’s friends, so. You should come visit him. Up here.” She throws a disdainful look over her shoulder at pristine Deluxe-white walls and shudders. “He said you should come up.”

“O--okay,” says Mike. “Just send coordinates.” He pauses, about to close the screen. “...Is he alright?”

Her face goes sharp and sad for a moment, and then softens. “Getting better,” she says. “I don’t know how they got him to come here for treatment, or if it was your fault--”

“He let the Deluxe guys look at him?” says Dutch in astonishment. “You’re kiddin’.”
“He let them do surgery.” Angelica looks as though the word left a bad taste in her mouth. “But. He’s starting physical therapy soon. In Motorcity they said...they said...he’d never...” She clears her throat, looking embarrassed at showing emotion in a way that’s very reminiscent of her brother.

“We’ll be there ASAP,” says Mike.

And they are, rolling up to a little medical facility on the edge of Deluxe, well away from any of the damage. Texas is one of the only patients, and all the doctors and nurses have that same attitude of awed curiosity that the Kane Co. med techs did. They seem determined to give Texas the utmost level of care. Apparently, he’s their biggest case since some factory worker more than half a decade ago, and they're falling over themselves to help.

Texas is looking good. Like himself, although Mike half-suspects he waited until he felt normal to call them here. He wishes, suddenly, with a fierce ache, that Texas wouldn’t do that kind of thing. That Mike could’ve been there for him when things got really bad.

Mike wonders whether his friends feel that way about him, sometimes.

There is one thing noticeably off about Texas, though, which is that he is completely loopy on pain meds.

“You can’t get up,” Angelica is telling him when they get there, with the frustrated patience of somebody who’s said this about a thousand times already. “You hurt your back.”

“Nuh-uh!” Texas says stubbornly.

“Lie down or I’m gonna tell mom.”

Texas stops trying to sit up, scowling. “Where’s Kane?” he says. “I’m gonna kick his--I’m gonna, right in the face.”

“Kane’s dead,” Angelica says. Texas’s eyes go round. “He got blown up. No, you didn’t do it.”

“Ugh.” Texas subsides for a minute into contemplative silence, frowning distantly up at the ceiling. For a second it looks like he’s falling asleep--then his eyes snap open and he jerks, starting to push himself up. “Julie! Hey, where’d--”

“Lie down!”

“Fine! God!” Texas lies back down, wincing, and then catches sight of the other Burners standing in the door. His face lights up. “Mike! Hey!”

“Hey, Tex,” says Mike.

“Wanna fight?”

“You have to stay in bed,” Angelica says. “You hurt your back. Randy, focus.”

“Wasn’t askin’ you,” Texas growls. “Shut up, we’re gonna fight.”

“Some other time, dude,” Mike says. “You hurt your back.”

“Why d’you all keep sayin’ that!” Texas starts to push himself up again. “I’m fine, you, you wanna go? Ow!”

He falls back down with a huff. For another minute or two, there’s silence.
“...Wanna get up,” growls Texas, and Angelica throws up her hands, striding past the Burners.

“That’s it! That’s enough! You guys can deal with him!”

“Who--hey! Burners!”

Dutch grins, sitting down next to the bed. “That’s us. How you doin’, big guy?”

“Texas is great. Texas could…fight anyone, I’m gonna--where’s Kane? I’ll kick his butt!!”

“Kane’s dead.”

Texas’s jaw drops. “--Did Texas--”

“No, you didn’t do it,” says Chuck, in the voice of someone realizing he’ll have to repeat this ad nauseum.

“Oh.” Texas settles back, looking a little grumpy, and then sighs. “Ugh. Yeah, okay. That’s okay.”

“Is it?” Mike frowns and glances at Dutch and Chuck.

“Yeah, ’cause--” Texas stretches and groans, looking more like a sleepy toddler than anything else. “--Cause like. He was Julie’s dad, or whatever.”

“...Yeah,” says Mike. “That’s right.”

Texas squints around at all of them, lips moving silently as he counts. “...Hey, where is Julie, anyway? I wanna see Julie. Gotta say some stuff.”

“Have you tried calling her?” Chuck shoots back, but his grin falters a little when Texas folds his arms sullenly.

“She doesn’t wanna talk to Texas.”

“She doesn’t wanna talk to anyone,” says Chuck quickly.

“Oh. Yeah?”

Dutch sighs heavily. “Yeah.”

“Oh.” Texas seems to settle into deep contemplation, and the rest of the Burners just watch him for a while, sharing glances every so often. Is this really Texas? What’s happening?

Then he looks up and says, very clearly, “I’m gonna get up now.” And they all have to pitch into keep him lying down and distracted. It’s kinda fun, though, talking to him again. And as Chuck says, he’s really not much more incoherent than usual.

And then about fifty people crowd into the room at once, mostly short and dark-haired and wanting to get a look at Texas. And the Burners find themselves kind of…shuffled out of the room.

“Nice while it lasted,” says Dutch, glancing back through the door.

Chuck shrugs. “Eh, he’s their problem now,” he says, but he’s smiling a little as he turns to Mike. “Well...where d’you wanna go?”
Mike puffs up his cheeks and blows the air out slow. “Uuuuuuhhhhh. I dunno. You wanna go just park in one of the tunnels and...?”

“Yeah, sure,” says Dutch. “But the big one on South side fell with part of the dome, so we’re gonna have to find a new one.”

“Figures,” says Chuck.

They end up just driving up one of the remaining highways, rolling to a halt halfway between Motorcity and the dome. Chuck and Mike are in Blonde Thunder today, now that Mike’s re-broken his ribs. There aren’t any guard rails, and the city opens up beneath them, a vast chasm of lights and wreckage.

Mike climbs out and sits down on the edge of the road, letting his legs hang over. After a moment, Chuck drops to the ground a little behind him, resting his elbows on top of his bony knees. Dutch leans against Whiptail’s chassis. Soft techno purrs out of her speakers, echoing off of the loops of highway high above, and a damp breeze washes over the three of them. The three of them, looking out across the miles of rubble and the patchwork canopy of the dome.

“...Kinda looks like it’s barely holdin’ together,” Dutch observes. “That’s...that’s a lotta work.”

“Tell me about it,” mutters Chuck.

Mike just nods, eyes still distant and sad. His lips thin for a moment. His throat tightens. He says, “...But Motorcity’s been through bad stuff before, right? She’ll...pull through this time too.”

“Yeah,” says Chuck. He and Dutch glance at each other.


“Time and work,” Mike repeats. And for a while it’s just them, sitting between two ruined cities. Holding together.
You thought it was over...?! There's still an epilogue to come--don't worry, though, it's not gonna be a twenty-year timeskip with kids. And then after that a little Extras chapter like the one we did for Live Free!

Notable section titles from this chapter:
- The Major Character Death Tag Is Suddenly Relevant
- Weddings and Reunions
- What About Texas’s Dick Tho
- Viking Funeral
- Trauma Haircut
- We Can Rebuild Him (We Have The Technology)
- Back to Business
The End, and What Comes After That; A Better Tomorrow!

Chapter Summary

An epilogue: A year isn't long enough for everything to get better, but it's enough for a start.

Chapter Notes

This is a real monster of an epilogue, but we felt like each character had their own issues to deal with even though the story was technically "over". There were loose ends to tie up and feelings to address and oh shit, where was Tooley this whole time? So we wrote 20k more words to dig into all of that.

This is it, though! Our ultimate conclusion to this monster of a Motorcity sequel. Three years! Two fics! A massive wordcount I don't want to take the time to tally up right now! We both want to thank all of you so so much for reading and reviewing over the years. Over the course of writing Live Free and Welcome to the Kane Co. Family, we've moved, changed jobs, and had several birthdays! Pretty crazy! But when it comes down to it, there's nothing quite like hanging out in a Starbucks and laughing helplessly as we brainstorm Alex Harley's latest fuckup.

Next chapter: The Plot, fun typos, and other behind-the-scenes stuff. uOu

A Month Later
Tom Odom officially becomes Tom Clement one night a few weeks after Fall Day. He wanted to get married in Motorcity; Gwen wanted to get married in Deluxe. Like a lot of things these days, it ends up in a compromise. Kane Co. Tower still hasn’t been dismantled, and there’s more than enough room on its top floor for a marriage and reception.

Julie remembers the sparkling, multicolored lights strung around the walls of her old office--her father’s old office. She remembers people dancing, confused Deluxians shuffling across the dance floor under Jacob’s painstaking instructions. She remembers laughing and hugging Claire and spinning. She remembers crouching in a bathroom, scream-crying, after it suddenly got to be too much. The sounds and lights, the place and the people. The wild up-and-down of emotions.

Mike remembers Jacob doing his tie for him, and the snug collar of his new shirt. He remembers the food--a mix of Cabler cuisine and Deluxian protein supplements. Some of the people Upstairs still aren’t used to real food, and he gets that. He remembers people sidling up to him, awed or scared or just kind of confused, wanting answers he couldn’t give. He’d escaped out onto the dance floor eventually, away from weird, prying questions--I heard you were there and is it true you’re going to run Kane Co’s new army? Dancing is kind of like fighting--easy, and fast, and breathless.
Thoughtless.

Chuck remembers loitering awkwardly in a corner, alone at first and then in the middle of a mess of awkward wallflowers with nothing better to do than talk to each other. He remembers drinking enough Cabler cider to go marching out of the corner and into the crowd. Telling Claire that he’s happy for her and her parents, and almost sounding like a normal person the whole time. He remembers fighting the urge to go grab Mike and stick to his shoulder, orbiting him like some kind of socially-awkward moon around a more sociable sun. He remembers being too hot in his jacket, too cold in his shirt-sleeves. Too overwhelmed in the noise of the crowd and then jumpy and unnerved in the silent hallway outside. But he had fun. He went to a party, and he stood by himself, and he had fun.

Dutch remembers Tom naming him best man with a great amount of pomp and circumstance, and then being totally, joyfully incapable of telling him what a best man should do. He remembers his mom fretting about the new concept of clothes for special occasions, instead of just different designs of jumpsuit. He remembers Tom crying all the way through the vows. He remembers Tennie pulling him out on the dance floor for one of the first dances--craning up to rest her head against his shoulder and seeing Tom flash him a thumbs-up from across the floor. He remembers feeling like he and Tennie were all alone on the dance floor. He remembers privately, happily wanting all of this for them.

Texas remembers getting the invite while he was lyin’ in bed waiting to get better. Remembers thinking, Julie’s probably gonna wanna go. Remembers then thinking, But if I’m goin’, she probably won’t want to. And then, hell, it’s not like he’s on his feet just yet anyway. Texas can be cool about not goin’ to a party. It’s fine, it’s totally cool. He remembers...maybe bein’. A little lonely, but only just a little. And he remembers everyone comin’ to visit, the day after, to tell him about it.

Everyone but Julie.

--

After four weeks of rolling around Motorcity in Jacob’s passenger seat, Mike kinda thought he’d have seen it all. Between gang members rebuilding houses, Deluxian med techs moving equipment into Motorcity hospitals, and everyone trying to figure out how to live with the remnants of the Terra forests…it’s been a heck of a month. He’s seen plenty of old faces, too--people he knows from Deluxe, just wandering around in Motorcity.

He just wasn’t expecting to see this old face.

“T...Tooley?” Mike squints. “Is that you?”

“That’s me! Hey, aren’t you Mike Chilton? Oh man, Mister Kane is gonna be mad I forgot you were down here!”
Tooley looks...different. He has a beard, for one thing. His hair is longer. He’s wearing khaki shorts and a pair of big, dirty steel-toed boots.

Jacob looks him up and down, frowning. “Hey, Mike, didn’t this guy work for…”

“I think it’s cool,” says Mike. “Uh, Mister Kane...isn’t around anymore, Tooley. Julie’s in charge now.” He pauses, trying to think of a better way to say that, but...none springs to mind, so he just goes on. “…Are you, uh...a farmer now? Bud?”

Tooley shrugs. “I guess? I was down here for Mister Kane’s last big thing. Guess I just kinda...forgot to go back up, haha! I wasn’t really doin’ much but then all these plants started growin’ everywhere, and we hadta do somethin’ with ‘em…”

Mike glances at the neat rows of greenery behind Tooley. “Who’s...we?”

“The Bolos,” says Jacob. “Nice couple. Been livin’ here for years.” Something in his expression
changes subtly as he glances towards the immaculately painted white-slat house in the distance. “As I recall, they lost a kid a while back, though. Son.”

Mike’s stomach turns. “Oh. That’s…”

“Seems like they’re doin’ alright,” says Jacob, kindly firm. “C’mon. Let’s all go in and see what we can do for ‘em.”

--

Texas has been lyin’ down recovering for like weeks after his weird Deluxe laser-surgery when Mike calls him and asks him if he can go talk to the Terras. He asks how Texas is, too, if he’s okay after his surgery--Texas laughs and tells him cha, obviously he’s fine! No big deal. Then he hangs up before Mike can ask any more questions.

For some reason it doesn’t feel as weird to roll up to the Terras in his new wheelchair as it does when he thinks about seeing the other Burners. It’s about as cool as a wheelchair can be, even if the dumb Deluxe doctors were like uh no we can’t put six wheels on it, we’re lame, whatever.

Whatever.

The Deluxe doctors aren’t happy about him going down there at all, period, but when they hear it was Mike who told him to, they get all quiet. Turns out okay, if Mike says so, he can go. But he’s totally not allowed to drive, like, at all. Texas’s nurse tells him like four times, and then says she’s definitely gonna tell Texas’s mom if he tries to drive anyway. So Texas ends up flying down to the Territory in a Deluxe pod, stoppin’ outside their mushroom forest and rollin’ in by himself.

There’s totally Terras in the trees watching him as he rolls up. That’s cool. Doesn’t matter if they know he’s coming. Just means when he gets to the middle of the old Terra village, everybody he needs to talk to is already there.

“...Texas,” says the big guy who took over for Kaia. He barely even looks down at the wheelchair. He found a pair of jeans somewhere, which is cool for him. Those pants he had on looked kinda drafty.

“What’s up?” says Texas. Jeez, what’s up with the weird, itchy tingle he keeps getting in his toes? He can’t even take his shoes off and scratch it right now. “So I gotta talk to you guys about some stuff.”

“We have nothing to talk about,” says the big guy. Rail? Rall. Something like that, anyway. “We don’t want trouble. We stay inside our borders.”

“Sure,” says Texas. “Except that’s what I wanna talk to you guys about. Mike’s been talkin’ to people, and they all figure you should move outta here.”

Nobody looks happy about that. The big blonde guy--Ezra, Texas is pretty sure--steps up and glares at him. “This place is our home, Burner.”

“Yeah, but it’s got all this chemical junk in it,” says Texas. “Look. Texas gets it, the big mushrooms? Pretty rad. Treehouses, totally cool. But there’s some ugly crap in the ground around here. We wanna get you guys somewhere you’re not gonna drop dead if you eat the wrong plant.”

Rall glances back at the house with Kaia’s name over the door. It’s dark, looks empty, and there’s a tree in front of it, flowers growing all around its roots.
When Rall looks back, he looks kinda ticked off, but mostly he kinda just looks tired.

“We’ll...consider it,” he says.

--

“Y’know,” says Dutch, “this is actually..alright?! I could eat this like once a week?”

“That’s what I’m sayin’!” says Jacob. “Goat cheese vegetable quiche!”

Chuck, who’s been staring suspiciously at his wedge of quiche for a few minutes now, swallows hard. “...What kind of vegetable?”

“Well, that’s the fun part,” Jacob starts, and then continues louder over the sound of groans, “the fun part is, they’re all-new plants! So I get to name ‘em! This is my bepper, spinnocoli, and carroot quiche--with tomatoes. And goat cheese.”
“We’re gonna need to workshop some of those, Jacob,” says Mike, grinning a little as he takes his first bite. “–Oh, man! Dutch is right, this is pretty good!”

“Told you,” Dutch mumbles around his mouthful. “Chuck, c’mon, you’ll like it.”

“Will I though?” Dubiously, Chuck hoists a forkful of artificial egg and mystery vegetable.

“Just take a bite!” says Jacob, exasperated.

Chuck huffs, glares, and puts the bite in his mouth. The other boys watch him closely, waiting for a reaction, but he stays impressively poker-faced as he chews.

Then he swallows and says, “Yeah, okay, it’s good.”

“Yeah!” Mike claps him on the back, laughing, while Dutch digs into the rest of his quiche.

“Alright ladies, what’re you gettin’ up to without Papa Texas?” calls a voice from around the corner, and Chuck groans.

“Aw, man--!”

“Hey, come on, dude,” says Mike, frowning. “It’s Texas!”

“I know,” says Chuck. “But, like, if we’d just waited a few minutes, we could’ve made him try this quiche stuff first!”

“Hey!”

“Sorry, Jacob.”

“’S not like that woulda told us if it was good or not,” Dutch remarks, shoveling out another slice for himself. “I mean, Tex’ll eat anything. Right, dude?”

“Hell yeah!” says Texas, and rolls around the corner. Rolls. In a wheelchair. The old jumpsuit is gone, as is his hat, but his new shorts are still black with red flames. He looks around at all of them as though daring them to say something, and then pushes himself forward with surprising ease, biceps bulging.
“Good to have you back, Tex,” says Mike. Chuck and Dutch nod, easing into cautious smiles, and Texas snorts, pulling to a halt with a flourish.

“What’re we talkin’ about?”

“Here,” says Jacob before any of the other boys can answer, “try this and tell me what y’think.”

--

ROTH has been running a lot of errands lately. There’s a lot to be done, and he holds a charge longer than any of the human Burners. Chuck and Dutch have agreed that he deserves a little something for his work.

“We thought we’d get you a real voice,” Dutch says. “Like, you’ll still have to pick the words back up, but it’d be your voice, y’know?”

ROTH bobs for a second, thinking, then nods.
“We have a lot of options,” Chuck says, and pulls up a screen. “Here, uh...stop me if you hear one you like.”

ROTH ends up picking a young man’s voice, in the end; it sounds kind of like Dutch, and just a little like Chuck, but mostly it just sounds like...him. Chuck and Dutch stay up until early in the morning, teaching him word after word, phrase after phrase.

The first thing ROTH does the next morning is motor up to Mike, sitting quiet in the corner. He pats Mike on the head and says, very clearly, “You’re very, very good, Mike.”

Mike can claim later he didn’t get all emotional about it, but Dutch filmed the whole thing, especially the hug. Mike could use all of those he can get, these days.

“If we’re really doin’ this, we gotta talk to the gangs,” says Jacob, running a hand through his hair.
“Not just the Terras, but everyone. They might be workin’ together, might be on our side--I guess--but they’re still technically a buncha criminals. Ain’t gonna look so good to Julie’s guys up top, even the nice ones.”

“I can see some of ‘em agreein’ to talk, though,” says Dutch hopefully. “They started workin’ together, and Texas was pretty sure that’d only happen when hell froze over.”

“Feel like it kinda has.” Mike glances up at the broken dome, the light streaming down. “...Right?”

“Yeah, tell me about it,” mutters Chuck darkly, and then suddenly brightens again. “Oh, hey! Isn’t Claire friends with Foxy?”

“Is she?” says Mike, astonished.

Dutch raises an eyebrow. “C’mon, dude, you were there for the whole selenium sulfate thing.”

“Yeah, I just didn’t think--they stayed in touch?”

“According to Julie,” says Chuck without thinking. A moment later he blanches, hunching over his pizza. “...Anyway, I’m just saying...we could ask Claire to talk to her. Maybe Texas can bring the Weekend Warriors around. Mike, you could take the Skylarks?” He pauses, peering awkwardly at his best friend. “...Mike?”

Mike doesn’t answer. He’s scratching at the back of his neck with one hand, looking distant and dull in a way that’s becoming all too familiar. Chuck sucks in his lips, clearly wanting to shake him out of it but afraid to say anything.
Jacob walks around the table to put a hand on Mike’s shoulder. “Kid.”

Mike’s expression barely changes, but a jolt seems to go through his whole body, and he sits up a little straighter. “Yeah. Uh. Present.”

Trying to ignore that—*present*, too formal, oddly military—Chuck repeats, “D’you...d’you think you could be the one who talks to the Skylarks? Maybe?”

“Uh. Yeah. Sure.” Mike shakes his head a little bit, thinking hard but not all the way focused. “...Yeah, I could do that. And the doctors and nurses, those guys kinda made peace during the whole...thing, right? They could help.”

“Could help more’n just the city,” murmurs Jacob, low and gravelly, and Mike twitches.

“I’m fine,” he says, but he doesn’t sound like he believes it.
Jacob sighs. “Whatever you--wait, no, actually, we need to talk about this, kid--”

“Nah.” Mike stands up abruptly, hands thrust deep into his pants pockets. “We’ve already got Tex doin’ PT up there, we can’t be another Burner short. I’m gonna--I’m gonna go talk to the Skylarks. Chuck?”

But he hardly waits for Chuck’s answer before heading to the garage. They watch him go, worried and silent, until Mutt’s engine woofs in the distance and breaks the spell.

“...I better go after him,” says Chuck apologetically, rising. “Make sure he, uh...doesn’t do anything...crazy.”

“Welp,” says Jacob gruffly as Chuck bounds away, “looks like it’s just you an’ me, Dutch. You wanna go visit the Duke, talk him into goin’ legit? Heard y’all are thick as thieves now.”

“It was one time,” Dutch groans, dropping his head to the table. “He was super high.”

“Yup,” says Jacob. “Let’s go.”

--

Kane Co. is busy. There are investigations and actual trials ongoing, a painstaking coverage of past crimes in the city-state of Detroit Deluxe. Mike should probably have known that was in the works, since he’s friends with the CEO, but he didn’t find out until Harley called him about it. Specifically, to ask if he had any testimonies to deliver against Gregor Pinsky.

Mike did, but his vague recollections of Pinsky as “kind of weird and paranoid” pale in comparison to Dar Gordy’s testimony. Given the way Dutch responds to public speaking, Mike kinda expected Dar to be...at least a little nervous. Instead, he speaks with more command and charisma than the average sixteen-year-old should rightfully have. And from the way his squadmates watch him from the seats, they’ve all noticed it too.

He’d make a good commander, Mike thinks, and then--feels something he doesn’t want to feel, and spends the rest of the day fighting it.

It gets him thinking, though. About Julie, and why she wasn’t the one to call him. And whether she even knew the trials were happening at all.

She doesn’t talk over comms, these days. Mike remembers her talking, that night with the pizza and nail-painting, and then later at Tom and Gwen’s wedding. But he hasn’t heard her voice since. She’ll send text messages in response, though, her head bent on the comm screen. When her hair was long, it would have hidden her face from view, but the new cut shows every scar, the shadows under her eyes and her unpainted lips.
Venting to her is hard, feels...selfish. But Chuck always starts to look kinda anxious and sick when Mike talks about...this stuff, and he knows Julie gets it. Might be the only one who ever really gets it.

“I actually felt...kinda okay while it was all goin’ down,” says Mike, watching her face. “I mean, not good, ’cause everyone was in danger and we didn’t know what was going on, but… I wasn’t thinking about...the other stuff. Y’know? Being...Blue.”

He sighs and drops his head to cradle it in one hand, eyes closed. “And now it’s back. It’s all back. I thought it was...better. You know, I even thought since the war was over it would just kinda...go away! But it’s almost like it’s gotten worse. Sucks.”

How’s everyone else doing

Mike shrugs. “...Alright, I guess? Um. Everything’s so different, it’s like we’re all kinda sleepwalking around. Our world literally fell apart! And without Kane around--”

He stops abruptly, guilt heating his face. “...Sorry.”
It’s fine, comes Julie’s response. That’s all.

Mike clenches his fists in his pockets. He can feel himself breathing faster. “It’s not fine,” he says shortly. “No one’s fine, Jules. Motorcity and Deluxe aren’t fine, you’re not fine, I’m--not--fine! Alex said you told him it was a good thing to know that!”

I’m fine, Mike. Really. Sorry you’re not feeling good.

Mike opens his mouth to say something, but then she’s typing again. Still not looking at him.

Maybe you should think about getting help.

“I don’t need--” Mike starts automatically, and then bites the rest of the sentence off. Because what did he think he was gonna do? Just live like this for the rest of his life? Whatever he’s doing now sure isn’t working.

“...Maybe,” he concedes after a moment. Maybe he should. Maybe she’s right.

Two Months Later

“A business,” says Rayon. He looks skeptical.

“You already kinda run one,” Mike points out. “Hotels are businesses. Selling info to people is...a business, kinda.”

“I’m hearing a lot of kindas in there.”

Mike shrugs. “Yeah, well, there’s a lot going around. I mean, selling info is also not super above-board. But you could probably keep doin’ it, off the books.”

“We got a good thing going here, Mike.” Rayon spreads his hands to the room at large, where the Skylarks are lounging in a state of relative relaxation. Some of them are even in shirtsleeves. Mike’s never seen the fake fireplace lit, or anyone behind the bar. But now there’s a simulation of blazing logs shining over the main lobby, and a small, dapper man in black making martinis in the corner. It’s nice.
“Yeah,” says Mike absently. “A good thing.” He turns back to Rayon, frowning. “Y’know, I was cool with giving you guys time to rebuild before we talked.”

“I know.”

“And it’s been two months…”

“Sure,” says Rayon, a little coldly.

“Well, I guess I thought you’d...be ready to talk.”

“We’re talking,” says Rayon, raising his eyebrows. “I just haven’t heard anything I like yet. You’re asking me to change everything.”

Mike shakes his head, trying not to let his frustration show on his face. “Everything’s already changed. We just don’t know if it’s good or bad yet! And if we don’t all work together, it...might just get bad again. That’s what’s scarin’ me, dude.”
Rayon opens his mouth, and Mike sits back a little, fully anticipating an icy “Don’t call me dude”. But Rayon just goes quiet, sits back too. Around them, the Skylarks’ soft conversation and muffled laughter are a rustling blanket.

“Mike.”

Rayon’s taken his shades off. Mike has seen him sort of peer over them, occasionally, but he never just...tucks them in his jacket pocket and looks at Mike eye-to-eye.

It’s really weird.

“You’ve taken some punches for this city,” says Rayon, in a voice that says pretty clearly I don’t owe you or anything but I’m willing to give you this. “And it wasn’t always Deluxe throwin’ the punches.” He cocks his head to one side, giving Mike a hard look. Right?

Reluctantly, Mike nods. ...Right.

Rayon sighs, long and exasperated, and rubs the bridge of his nose. “Ah, hell. I’m tired of you kids always doin’ the mature thing. For the greater good. Sit back and let us take care of shit for once.”

“If you would, I would,” says Mike, grinning crookedly.

“Alright, alright…” Rayon retrieves his glasses, slides them back up his nose and hides his eyes again. “Don’t push your luck.”

--

“I’m not renting out my racetrack,” says Foxy, but she’s kind of smiling, which is all the indication Claire needs to press her advantage.

“Foxy, think about it, right? We’re gonna regulate traffic on a lot of the old highways--”

Foxy’s smile drops a little. “And kill everything that made Motorcity what it was.”

Foxy’s smile drops a little. “And kill everything that made Motorcity what it was.”

A few months ago, Claire would have backed down under that look, but she’s been in a coup now. She crosses her arms instead, frowning right back. “Girl, I’m pretty sure there are gonna be like hundreds of cars driving around in a couple of years here! They can’t all be doing--loops, and jumps, and driving off buildings and whatever! You guys don’t have to be Deluxe all over again, but you do need rules. Aaaand…” She holds up a finger as Foxy opens her mouth, brows furrowed. “…If nobody can drive like crazy people on the normal roads, they’re all gonna want to come to your racetrack to do it instead.”

Foxy’s frown doesn’t turn back into an indulgent smile, but it kind of goes blank. That’s her thinking face. She’s thinking about it.

“...Women only,” she says.

Mike is up in Deluxe again today—though calling it Deluxe is starting to feel weird. It's getting harder and harder to tell the two cities apart.

Some things are the same, though. The doctors are the same, mostly. Everything about the checkups he goes through reminds Mike of old appointments. And...more recent ones.

He doesn’t remember everything about his time as Blue yet. It comes back in pieces and parts, and he’s not sure all of it actually happened. It’s half reality, half nightmare. But he remembers a woman—a woman who gave him an injection, that first time he woke up after being captured. And Mike...doesn’t want to see her again.

It takes everything he has and more to ask the med techs about her. Mike Chilton, who willingly took the Doom Jump, who once drove vertically up Kane Co. tower, who wasn’t afraid of anything. He faced Kane again and barely faltered. Seeing Harley doesn’t bother him more than a
little. But he could barely open his mouth to ask about that woman with the syringe. He thought he was going to pass out when he finally made the words come out.

Turns out, she’s gone. They’re not sure where—a prison, a factory...who knows, it’s Deluxe. People just vanish. She could be dead, for all anyone knows. Apparently no one liked her much, though, which is comforting somehow.

Anyway, today he was in Medical again, where a Motorcity psych guy and a Deluxian doctor have been trying to piece together a treatment. So far it’s involved talking and thinking about...a lot of really unpleasant stuff while the Deluxe guy moves a red dot around a screen. Mike’s supposed to follow the dot with his eyes. Eventually, they say, it would be good for him to go back to some of the places in Deluxe where he...went through this stuff.

Mike doesn’t see why. He did alright coming through Kane Co. Tower back after the coup, and anyway—anyway, it’s all gonna be different soon. Soon, those places won’t exist.

On some level, he’s ashamed of how relieved he is about that. The doctor told him not to be ashamed, and a lot of stuff like that, about how change is good and he shouldn’t expect to be the same person he was before, but… Mike’s not really sure what to do with that. So he’s just kind of brooding on it.

He’d been planning to head right back down, but then Dutch calls and they start talking evening plans, and anyway, that’s how Mike ends up in the office of Tom Clement.

Marriage is treating Tom well. Or maybe he’s always like this—a whirl of energy and words, throwing out ideas a mile a minute. What’s even more impressive is the way Dutch seems to mirror him; Mike’s never seen him so thoroughly in his element. It’s...kind of awesome.

They’re talking new looks for the new city. Some of the words Mike can follow—shape, silhouette, color scheme. Some of it…

“I just want a unified texture flavor!” Tom exclaims, snapping his fingers wildly to summon folders of reference photos. “Look, look, this, this, this!”

“I get it, I get it!” Dutch actually sweeps the files away with a big hand movement, and Tom gasps audibly. “But communal, collaborative art, that’s like—a symbolic revolution of balance! Forget overall composition—”

“Never.”

“Forget it!!”

“Fine!”

“What,” says Mike, but Dutch is already off again, outlining his plans for the New Detroit aesthetic, and Mike just patiently waits for them to finish talking. He doesn’t have to understand it to enjoy seeing Dutch going at 110%.
As they talk, though, an idea starts to form in his head. New Detroit. New look.

New Mike.

It takes them a while to simmer down, and with all the gesturing, Tom and Dutch both look pretty tuckered out. They collapse at their respective desks, breathing heavily, and Mike seizes his moment.

“Hey,” he says. “Uh, Dutch. Well, both of you, I guess.”

Dutch looks up sharply, like he kinda forgot Mike was there. “Huh?”

“I was thinking, I could use your help with something….”

Dutch grimaces a little. “Well, sure, Mike, but we’ve kinda...got our hands full up here…” He glances at Tom, who pretends not to notice.

Mike swallows, tries not to be nervous. “No, nothing big, I just need--I need a new jacket.”
Tom tilts his head on one side and looks Mike over. There’s kind of a weird look in his eyes—not quite pitying, but close. It doesn’t sting, now, like it used to.

“...Gotcha,” he says. “Well, there are plenty of pictures to work off of. The materials might be hard to find, but...we should be able to get close enough to the real thing it won’t matter.”

“No,” says Mike. Tom quirks an eyebrow at him--Mike has to swallow before he can keep going. The words stick in his throat. “No, I mean...a new jacket. I don’t want it to look like the old one. New Detroit, new me.”

“Ah, a fresh look,” says Tom, eyes sparking suddenly. “Very good! Dutch, you know him best, I delegate this task to you!”

Dutch looks like he might protest, but then glances at Mike and softens. “…Yeah,” he says. “It’d be an honor, dude. But Tom, you ain’t my boss, you can’t delegate to me.”

“I think I just diiiid!” sings Tom, and Dutch rolls his eyes again. He retrieves a graphics tablet and starts sketching, glancing occasionally up at Mike with a distant look in his eyes. Feeling self-conscious, Mike turns to Tom instead, only to find the guy already looking at him with laser-like intensity.

“I think you could use a job,” says Tom abruptly, standing up. “Dutch has one and he is loving it.”

Mike half-laughs, taken aback. “A--a job? What, do you think I’ve just been sitting on my butt for the past four months?”

“No, no, you’ve been so busy, I know! But sitting on your butt...isn’t that exactly what you’re doing right now?”

Mike draws himself up, frowning. “I--I had therapy--”

“Oh, I’m sorry!” Tom strolls over and sits down next to him, folding one leg over the opposite knee with balletic grace. “I’m not trying to guilt you, Mike. Never. But therapy can be intense, and just hanging around here won’t do much to help you through it. No matter how dashing and charismatic the Aesthetic and Design department is!”

“What are you even sayin’ half the time,” mutters Dutch, shaking his head as he draws.

“...You are pretty dashing,” Mike tells Dutch. Tom claps him on the back, a little too hard, and stands up again, pacing.

“Well, excellent! Now, tell me, Mike, what is it you love to do?”

“Oh.” Mike stares blankly at his hands. What does he love to do? What did he do with the Burners, during that crazy two-year war on Kane? “I love driving. I….” Fighting. He fought, a lot, and sometimes it was fun, but he wouldn’t say he loved it. It just had perks, like...adrenaline, and the satisfaction of sticking it to Kane, and taking down a guy in Deluxe colors.

This is starting to feel a little too much like therapy again. And maybe Tom notices that, because he kind of shakes Mike’s shoulder comfortingly and says, “Okay, don’t strain yourself there, it’s fine if you--”

“Helping people,” Dutch cuts in, watching Mike’s face intently.

Tom looks up, eyebrows raised. “What?”
“Even when we weren’t savin’ the city from bots and zombie plagues, Mike was...runnin’ errands...paintin’ fences and mowin’ lawns...”

“What,” says Tom, “is a lawn.”

Dutch rolls his eyes. “Not important. Look, I guess what I’m sayin’ is, Mike was a commander up here--sorry, Mike--and he was our leader down there. Mike, you gotta--”

“I’m not getting back into Kane Co. security,” says Mike blankly, and Dutch winces.

“No--sorry. Sorry, that’s not what I was gonna say. But I was thinkin’ about the time we stayed the night up here, remember? Before Fall Day? Well...” Dutch shifts from side to side, in that trademark Got-An-Idea-But-Having-Second-Thoughts way he has.

“Go for it, dude,” says Mike, trying a smile. Dutch smiles back a little, and clears his throat, and tells Mike his idea.

It’s a good one.

--

Texas is trying to call her again.

Julie stares at the comm screen blankly until the call goes away. There was a long break this time, and she thought for a while--

But no, he’s still calling. Calling...why? To gloat? She doesn’t need to hear him cheer about how dead her dad is, thanks.

For a second, there’s a flare of anger in that thought. Then it’s gone again, doused. Julie minimizes the window, turns off the incessant chime of her comm.

She’s barely started to settle back into her dazed delirium when there’s another noise, this one closer and louder and impossible to mute. Knocking.

“Julie?”

It’s a familiar voice, but not one she’s ever heard in the middle of Deluxe. The novelty by itself is enough to push Julie haphazardly upright and send her wandering toward the door.

Jacob is standing patiently outside, leaning on the doorframe with a strange shape under his arm. Julie glances down at it, then up at him, and waits.

“Hey, kid,” says Jacob. He doesn’t sound cautious and wary--not like the others have, every time they’ve talked to her since fall day. He just sounds tired. “Haven’t seen ya. Figured it’s a pretty rough time up here.” He pulls the thing out from under his arm, holding it out. “...Might help, havin’ something to keep your mind off...stuff.”

Julie stares down at the thing for a long minute. It looks like a little weird-shaped box on the end of a delicate length of wood, with weird metal wires strung across it. She’s seen stuff like this before, down in Motorcity. Not this small though. An instrument.

Slowly, Julie reaches out and takes it. Jacob nods once, pulls up a screen and flicks it in her direction. Julie doesn’t bother to stop the file transfer, but she doesn’t open it to see inside either.

“It’s a ukelele,” says Jacob. “I used t’mess around on it when I was workin’ with your dad.” He
says the words so casually, it takes a second for them to register--by the time the nasty jolt has hit, he’s moving on already. “...Never really got good, but it helped me figure sh--stuff out, when times got tough. Clear my head out.”

Something flashes in Julie’s chest. For a second she thinks it’s more of that awful, helpless pain--but then it hardens, strengthens, and she realizes she was wrong.

It’s anger.

“...I don’t want this,” she says, so quietly she can barely hear herself. She hasn’t said a word in...days maybe, weeks maybe. Her voice is a tiny croak.

“Oh, yeah?” Jacob scratches his mustache for a second. “...Huh. Well, do me a favor--just hold onto it for--”

“I don’t want it!” Julie snaps, louder this time. “What you--you think this thing is gonna fix me?!”

“Now, kid--”

“Get out!”
To his credit, Jacob doesn’t argue. He steps away and lets her close the door, just watching her until they can’t see each other anymore. For a second Julie raises her arm, with the delicate little instrument tight in one white-knuckled fist.

She can’t throw it. She drops her arm again, staring blankly at the door where Jacob used to be standing. Some part of her sobs quietly, wanting—somebody there, somebody to talk to, something else to think about. The rest of her is sparking, spinning, coming back to some kind of life. A fierce, restless kind of energy. Who does he think he is? Acting like he still gave a crap about her dad. Acting like some piece of ancient history is going to somehow magically make it okay?! This city isn’t Jacob’s, this company isn’t his, he has no idea what it takes to run it—

...But Julie’s dad did. And he taught Julie. And he wanted Julie to take care of it. *Kane Co. needs a Kane.*

Julie drops the ukelele in the corner of the pod with a faint, discordant *twang*, straightens her back
and takes a deep breath for the first time in a long time. Her dad shouldn’t be gone, it’s not fair he’s
gone, but somebody has to step up where he can’t anymore. That’s enough sitting in the dark.

Time to go back to work.

--

“Hi,” says Mike, looking out at the sea of small, curious faces. “...Uh. I’m Mike Chilton. I visited
you guys a while back?”

A couple of the kids brighten up, but most of them just stare at him.

“...I did flips,” Mike clarifies. “I showed you pictures of my car.”

“Car-man!”

“Uh--yeah. Hi?”

“Did you bring your car?” says one of the little girls, entirely serious. Mike snorts, catches himself
and shakes his head seriously.

“It doesn’t fit in elevators.”

Everybody looks disappointed, including some of the older kids who were too cool to come over
and do flips last time. Mike grins up at them, then folds himself down into a crouch, putting
himself at the younger kids’ level. There’s some part of him that’s still aching, that whispers they
need to get out of here, save them before Kane Co. turns them into--but he’s on top of that, he’s
fine. Deluxe isn’t the same city he grew up in, anymore. It’s a place where kids are okay, safe and
free. That’s...going to be hard to get used to.

“Have you guys ever seen Motorcity?” he says.

Everybody shakes their heads. Mike looks up at the older kids and catches the eye of a teenage
boy. The back and sides of his head are shaved, and he’s got the beginnings of muscle on his arms

The guy jumps, just a little, and then frowns at him. Mike looks back at him steadily.

“...I started basic after the invasion,” says the cadet eventually, and crosses his arms. “People don’t
just go back and forth, it’s not that easy.”

“It’s gonna be!” Mike settles down, cross-legged. The younger kids obediently follow suit, and the
older ones a moment after, not wanting to stand out. “Just as soon as we’ve got the roads up and
running. People are gonna be able to go wherever they want.”

“So...what are you here for?” says one of the older kids--a girl with dreadlocks and a soft, timid
voice.

Geez. Okay, here it goes. Mike wasn’t expecting to be nervous, but he’s...never really taught
anyone anything before. Well, there were Chuck’s driving lessons, but that wasn’t exactly a normal
teaching experience. He thinks.

“If you’re gonna go down into Motorcity, you need to know some moves.”

“What kind of moves?” says the cadet, almost suspiciously.
“Y’know, *moves,*” says Mike, and pushes himself back up. Sinks his weight a little bit, shifting onto the balls of his feet. “Everybody down there isn’t as friendly as I am. Never hurts to have a couple tricks up your sleeves.”

“Self-defense,” says Mr. A, who has stayed patiently quiet this whole time, letting Mike talk. “That’s what you’d call it.”

“Self-defense,” says Mike. He’s heard the words before, but never in the context of being taught. In Motorcity, it was just...fighting. In Deluxe, people weren’t expected to defend themselves. For all that Mike’s glad they won the war, in the end it was just…a lot of hurting people.

These kids are gonna grow up different.

Mike opens his mouth to tell them to line up, but the phrase that comes to mind after that stops him cold. *At attention.*

“...Spread out,” he says, smiling as brightly as he can. “This isn’t gonna be about hurting people. Unless they’re really out to mess you up, but--what I’m getting at is, don’t bully anyone with this stuff, okay?”

“Already throwin’ rules at us,” says the cadet kid, unimpressed. “Sounds an awful lot like Kane Co…”

“Rules…” Mike pauses. *Live fast, live free.* But even in Motorcity, there are rules. Some of them are unspoken, but there’s one common thread-- “Rules are supposed to keep people safe,” he says, even though the words feel strange coming out of his mouth. “It’s just when there are too many that it gets bad. Sometimes people...try and control things that shouldn’t be controlled. I guess.” He gives the kid another hard look. “I think No Bullying isn’t a bad one, though, huh?”

“Hn,” says the cadet kid. Mike makes a mental note to get his name from Mr. A later. But for now…

“Okay,” he says. “I’m gonna teach you guys how to punch.”

One of the little ones raises a hand, standing on their tiptoes to reach as high as possible. Mike tries not to laugh.

“Yeah? What’s up?”

“Do we--are we gonna--do flips?”

Mike hesitates. Glances at Mr. A, who’s shaking his head in tiny, warning jerks.

“...We…” Mr. A glares. “...are gonna do...somersaults. Later.”

Mr. A nods, with a visible sigh of relief. Mike grins again, and in that moment he feels full and happy for the first time in--forever. He straightens up and holds out a hand for the kids to see.

“Now, what you’re gonna want to do is make a fist, but keep your thumb outside your fingers, okay?”

Four Months Later

“Look,” says Mike. “Everybody’s goin’ legit, okay? Junior even talked to Mama, they’re gonna make rules for where they can get their bots. The Skylarks have got their motel, Foxy was gonna
keep racing and selling their Selenium fuel--You can go legit, dude, you just need a business. Sell off some trash, make TV shows, I don’t care, but you can’t keep doing things like before.”

“A-says who?” says the Duke belligerently.


“Oh yes?” The Duke’s smile is very unfriendly. “So it is on behalf of the whole city you want the right to dig through my things?”

“Well--yeah!” Mike folds his arms. “We’re building something big right now. Real big. We’ll pay you--we need raw material, and your junkyards are full of it.”

“You’re full of it!” the Duke snaps. “And I want no part of your little feel-good project, Mr. Chilton. Find some other sucker to scam!”

“But--”

“The answer,” the Duke says, and slams his cane down on the ground with a CRACK like a gunshot, “--is no. Now, get offa my land.”

--

“These are the plans,” says Dutch, throwing out a fan of screens. “Me ‘n’ Tom have been workin’ on ’em for a few months now and we think we have a look both cities are gonna be...mostly okay with. And if they’re not, they can make changes themselves. And if we could legalize public graffiti…” He trails off, bright enthusiasm dampening a little. “…Julie?”

Julie’s eyes flick towards him, then back to the screens. She’s frowning, and not in a thoughtful way.

“If you got input, we can add you to the design team,” says Dutch tentatively. “It’d…it’d be nice to work with you again, it’s been a while and these are some big changes--”

“I just don’t see why we have to make changes.” She says it sharp and quick, all at once. “Why not just put it back the way it was?”

Dutch kind of half-laughs, dry and uncertain. “Uh…’cause the way it was...wasn’t great?”

“It was my dad’s,” says Julie. She’s still not looking at him. Dutch feels an unpleasant spike in his gut.

“…Julie, he--”

“He built this city from the ground up,” says Julie, hard and almost sullen. She jabs one of the screens, a proposal headed “Resource Reclamation”. “I’m not letting you tear it down.”
“I don’t wanna tear it down,” says Dutch, hurt. “I’m just sayin’, there’s a lot of material we can break down, recycle—”

“No.”

“Julie, come on.”

“No.”

“Miss Kane,” says Stevens quietly. “Be reasonable.”

“I am being reasonable,” Julie snaps. “This city is his legacy, it’s the only thing left of him, and I’m going to preserve it!” She slams a hand down on the table. “Our answer is no. No negotiations, no deals, you can’t have Deluxe.”

Dutch stares after her as she stands up and walks out, spine held painfully straight. Stevens’ face
doesn’t show anything of what he’s feeling, but he takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Gordy,” says Gwen. “You have your answer.”

“This is good for both of us!” Dutch says, frustrated. “I dunno why she’s bein’ like this!”

“Ms. Kane--well, Ms. Kane has her reasons, I’m sure,” says Bell. He sits back as Dutch shoots him a sharp look. “Can’t be helped, I’m afraid.”

“...Okay.” Dutch kneads his forehead for a second, then shakes his head. “Okay. What about intercity transport? What have we got for that?”

“Not much without materials,” says the new co-head of Research and Development dryly. “A couple of our guys are looking at an elevator system, but we need a grant, and Ms. Kane is...not giving grants, currently.”

“Yes, thank you, Director Martinez,” Bell says, and smiles an apologetic, blustery kind of smile at Dutch. “So, as you can see, there’s just nothing we can do.”

“The hell there isn’t,” mutters Dutch, but he lets it go, for now.

--

“Well,” says Chuck later, “at least you have time to talk transport with me now!”

Dutch sinks lower in his seat, staring sullenly at his dinner--a cheeseburger with some of Jacob’s New Vegetables sliced onto it. “Uh...yeah, sure, man. Remind me how you ended up in charge of that, again?”

“I’m not in charge,” says Chuck, coloring. “I just have more complete scans of the entire Deluxe-Motorcity transport infrastructure than, uh, basically anyone. No one else drove around between upstairs and downstairs as much as we did, and I had my mapping protocol running the whole time, so…”

“Oh,” says Dutch. “Cool.” And then, when Chuck slumps gloomily, “No, I mean it, that’s really cool, dude, I’m just...Julie’s bein’ a real--well, she won’t let us rework Deluxe the way we wanted to. Somethin’ about it bein’ her dad’s, I guess.”

“Her dad was evil,” Chuck points out.

“Yeah, but like...he was her dad, I guess.”

“Mm.” Chuck pauses, grimacing. “Yeah, I...I guess. D’you think she’d let us dig through the old records up there?”

Dutch blinks and pauses, about to take a bite of his burger. “...What old records?”

“Old digital-analogue stuff, recovered from Old Detroit,” says Chuck, gesturing vaguely. “The architect guys from Deluxe think maybe there are old traffic laws in there? So we could make a start on setting up an actual system?”

Dutch nods thoughtfully, mouth full. “Mm.”

There’s a moment of companionable silence. Then Chuck shakes off whatever he was thinking and takes a decisive bite of his own burger. “...’Kay,” he says thickly, muffled, and swallows with an effort. “So. We’re not gonna be short on materials--if Julie and the Duke come around--but I know
you wanna make it look nice, too. So what were you thinking for these elevator platforms?”

Dutch comes out of his mood little by little, and by the end of lunch he’s got napkins spread out in front of him, sketching on them roughly; huge, branching columns of elevator-shafts, made of harder-than-steel clear polymer so they look like threads of diamond in the light from overhead.

“--And roads, actual roads up and down the big dome-ramps,” he says, and puts the finishing touches on the landscape he’s been drawing, sketching little scribbled silhouettes onto one of the massive pieces of fallen dome. “If we’re gonna start setting up laws, we gotta have real roads again, right?”

“With speed limits,” says Chuck reverently. Dutch laughs and shakes his head. “Seriously, it’s gonna be so much safer out there.”

“Mike’s not gonna like that.”

“He can still go drive like a crazy person!” Chuck protests. “Just, not where he could slam into somebody. There’ll still be plenty of--jumps, and upside-down roads and stuff!”

A sharp, soft alarm goes off. Chuck jumps, pulls up a screen and stares down at it. “Oh,” he says, and pushes himself up. “Oh, dude, we’ve been here for like three hours! I gotta go!”

“Yeah yeah.” Dutch sorts through the napkins, crumples up a couple of them and folds the rest into his pocket. “I’m gonna head back inside. Jacob wants to get his new plants out in the garden.”

“Sure.” Chuck grabs his keys and shoves his hair back out of his face again. Jeez, it’s getting long. It’s gonna hit his shoulders eventually if he’s not careful. “Don’t wait up. We’re almost at the end of a campaign, so…”

It’s still weird, driving places without Mike. Chuck takes the safe route, since there’s nobody there to laugh at him, and goes a sedate sixty miles per hour.

He’s almost there, already rehearsing his battle plan in his head, when his comm beeps and a little cube pops up on his dash.

It’s not one Chuck’s seen before, but even pixelated, there’s no mistaking those big, electric blue eyes. Chuck groans.

“Chuck?” says Harley. “Is this thing working?”

“How did you get this number?” Chuck grumbles, and takes a curve, slow and steady and precise. “I’m busy.”

“You...you gave it to me,” says Harley, and he sounds hurt. Chuck rolls his eyes. “When we were up in Deluxe. On Fall Day?”

“Sure, fine, whatever.” Another curve, in the opposite direction--it’s almost fun, accelerating through them, feeling physics push at him and pushing them right back. With nobody there to tell him he should be doing it at least three times faster. Chuck keeps his eyes on the road, steady.

“What do you want?”

“Well, you know that project you gave me to work on, for the new power and water mainlines?”

“I didn’t give it to you, it was on the list--”
“I have to show you these old paper plans I found!”

“Show me tomorrow,” says Chuck, and takes his foot off the gas to roll down a steep hill. The jump at the end speeds up toward him, and he breathes through the fear that tries to make his hands shake. He’s got this, this jump is safe at any speed less than fifty and he’s accelerating toward eighty, this is perfectly safe. He’s safe, it’s fine. “I’m done working for the day.”

Harley’s little icon somehow manages to look both confused and vaguely affronted at the concept of “done working for the day”. God, Chuck doesn’t miss being on the Deluxe work schedule.

“That’s...fine! I was on my way down anyway, I’m coming to you!”

“What?!” Chuck jerks the wheel by accident and lets out a cracked yelp as his car hits the road with a sharp swerve. “No! I’ll look tomorrow!”

“But if you look tonight, I can start on it tonight!” Harley protests. “I see your locator, I’m setting my course to intercept.”

“Do not set a course to intercept,” snaps Chuck.

“See you in five,” says Harley, and the call ends.

Harley gets to the battlefield about a minute and a half after Chuck does. He’s obviously been practicing, because this time when he clicks down his kickstand and swings off his gleaming new motorcycle, he doesn’t even trip over his own feet. That used to be the only tolerable thing about watching him show the stupid thing off. “Chuck!” he says, and starts hurrying over. “Where--what are you doing here?”

Chuck does his best to bundle the cape under his arm, but there isn’t really a good way to hide his lance.

“Put the papers in my car,” he says, as authoritatively as he can manage, trying to broadcast ask me what I’m doing here again and I’ll impale you.

It doesn’t work, of course. Of course.

“Is that a weapon?” Alex’s eyes flicker to Chuck’s chest. Chuck glances down and barely resists the urge to groan. He’d forgotten he already put on the royal pin, and it gleams proudly in the new rays of light from high above. “...What is that?”

“I’m--we’re just--”

“My king!”

The Lord Asiago is hurrying over, cohorts in tow, war-hammer over his shoulder. Harley stares up at him, then back to Chuck. Chuck sends a glare back and redoubles his efforts to communicate psychically. ASK WHO THESE PEOPLE ARE AND I WILL IMPALE YOU.

“My king-- And who is this?”

“Alex Harley,” says Harley immediately, and holds out a hand to give an excessively firm, neat handshake. “I work with Chuck.”

“We’re--” Chuck starts, “--no?”

“Are you joining us for the game today, oh visitor from foreign lands?” Lord Asiago is grinning.
Chuck is dying.

“Game?” Harley glances from the giant hammer to Chuck’s lance and back again--his eyebrows rise. “...Is this...some kind of military exercise?”

“Some kinda!” Lord Asiago repeats. “Hey, guys!”

“Oh--no, come on,” Chuck starts, agonized, but the others are already jogging over and he has to subside as people crowd past him, looking curiously at Harley.

“Welcome to Raymanthia!” says Ruby from somewhere in the middle of the group. “Be you fair or foul folk? Will you be part of the court of Raymanthia?”

“Uh...” says Harley.

“No!” snaps Chuck.

“An outsider, then!” The Oracle looks thrilled. Chuck curses internally. “And of what nature is your magic, outsider?”

“What...nature...?”

“A manual!” proclaims Ruby. “You’ve never played before, right? We’ll help you build your character!”

“Oh!” Harley brightens a little bit, curious and interested, as a hand-written manual is produced and handed to him. “Uh...right! That sounds good?”

“Hey!” Chuck jogs after them as somebody pulls Alex into the group; people are already chattering about warriors and spellcasters. “I thought you had something I needed to look at--?”

“Oh, sorry,” says Harley, and when he glances back over his shoulder, there’s a twist of a cocky little smirk at the corner of his mouth and goddammit Chuck hates him so much sometimes. “...I’m done working for the day.”
Claire calls Julie every week. Usually once or twice, never on the same day, which means it’s not something she plans ahead of time. Julie’s glad of that; right now, it’d just piss her off to think that “try to communicate with Julie” was some kind of...scheduled burden.

Sometimes, Julie picks up.

Like today. Julie isn’t feeling too horrible today, just the usual mixture of boiling anger and uncomfortable energy. So when she hears the comm ring and her brain goes Claire, she reaches up without thinking to open a screen.

“Hey Julie!”

“Julie, how’s it goin’?”
Shit, it’s Chuck and Dutch. Julie feels a mild surge of panic under her ribcage and tries to conceal it with a stiff, awkward grin.

“Uh...hi guys! It’s...okay. How...are you guys?”

“Alright,” says Chuck. The background of the video is a clean, Deluxian white; they must be up in the city somewhere.

“We’ve been lookin’ through the old records,” Dutch adds. “Uh...if that’s okay.”

Julie freezes. She hasn’t spoken to Dutch since the argument, and she’s sure they’ve been talking about it behind her back. The thought grates on her, but--no. Gotta be friendly.

“Yeah,” she says. “Totally fine. What...what’re you looking at?”

“Well, traffic laws mostly,” Chuck starts, but Dutch cuts in hastily--

“We found some things we thought you might wanna see!” He gestures off-screen, in a way that suggests he’s pulling up new folders.

“Uh--”

“Oh, yeah, there are all these old songs,” says Chuck, transferring the files before Julie can object. “Here, we listened to a bunch and we thought you might like these.”

Julie grimaces a smile. “I’m not...really...into music.”

“Yeah, but how much have you even really listened to?” Dutch chimes in, waving enthusiastically at the library Chuck is scrolling through. “I mean, look at this! Radwave! Neo-funk! There’s millions in here!”

“I’m not really--”

“This is my favorite,” says Chuck firmly, and with a flick of his hand one of the files appears on Julie’s end of the call and starts playing.

“Uh,” says Julie weakly, “this is just static--”

“Wait for it!”

A moment later, a bassline kicks in, plunky and muffled. And then a voice.

_When the night...has come... And the land is dark..._

“You would like this one,” remarks Dutch, rolling his eyes. “Talk about golden oldies. Julie, I’mma send you my favorite Solarcore albums.”

“That’s okay,” says Julie, kind of nonplussed. The song is still playing and she can’t figure out how to pause it.

_I won’t cry, no I won’t cry, no I won’t shed a tear..._

“Oh! Oh, jeez, I just remembered--” Chuck pulls up another folder, eyes wide. “Check this out...”

“I don’t need more music, seriously,” says Julie. “This is--this is enough--Dutch, five is enough, okay--”
“It’s not music,” says Chuck, “it’s--photos. It’s like a photo album. It’s uh--I think it was...your dad’s...?”

Julie’s stomach flip-flops, emotions from four months ago resurging strong and painful in her chest. She opens her mouth to say something, but nothing comes to mind.

*Stand...by me. Oh, stand...by me…*

“How do I pause this?” she says hoarsely. A new folder appears next to her. *Kane Family,* reads the title.

“Huh? Oh, there should be a media player somewhere in there,” says Chuck absentmindedly. “It’s kinda ancient, so it might only work with the old single-screen system? You’d have to close the comm--”

“Thanks,” says Julie, and closes the comm window. There it is--a fluctuating line of bars, and underneath it, control buttons. She hits pause and sighs, staring at the folder Chuck sent her. Her heart is pounding like it hasn’t in weeks.

The first photo is of her dad, standing in front of a building with the familiar Kane Co. “K” on the side. He can’t be much older than thirty; thinner, gangly and half-finished. In some strangely horrible way, it reminds her of Mike. Julie pauses for a second, meeting his eyes from across the decades, breathing through the awful ache in her chest. She blinks, eyes burning, shakes her head and flips to the next picture.

Sarah Kane had the same long, straight, dark hair that Julie...used to have. But her hair is black as ink, not a glint of red, and her...her eyebrows aren’t like Julie’s. Her eyes are different. Julie always kind of assumed she inherited all her looks from her mom, but she’s only now realizing that some features she can only have gotten from her dad.

She’s not going to cry over that. She’s not.

Jacob’s there in their wedding photos. Wearing a suit, hair tied up. In three pictures, Julie watches him laugh, duck his head, wipe at his eyes. Watches her parents exchange rings, kiss each other.
Something about the photos makes it click in her head.

He’s really gone. Just like Mom. If there’s any kind of cosmic justice, maybe they’re together.

Just...far from her.

The anger flares again, but its heat is dull now, a bruising pulse in her chest. And she wants it back, because that fury hurt but at least it was something. It was a feeling that wasn’t sadness or just...a void.

Now she feels the void again, yawning beneath her. And as the evening goes on, she sinks inexorably back into it.

She doesn’t have a choice.

--

It’s taken almost half a year to get the Duke to budge, and even then he’s only agreed to sell them
materials. He’s still holding fast on staying independent. Against his better judgment, Dutch has ended up as primary negotiator—the Duke really does seem to like him more than the other Burners, even if he does insist on calling him “Dutch ‘Bandit Jr.’ Gordy” now.

People come to the junkyards and dig out huge pieces of scrap that have been lying around since Deluxe was built. People are swarming over the fallen dome, harvesting materials, building more supports around the glittering Genesis towers.

The Burners’ hideout sits right in a bright patch of Deluxe light, now. The paintings look kind of old and shabby in the sunlight, the metal is dented and rusty. It doesn’t matter. It’s still home.

Julie’s gone and Texas is always out, but that’s...okay. It’s still home.

Mike and Chuck and Dutch are sitting around today, not really talking, just all being tired in the same place. At some point, the distant roar of Sasquatch’s engine announces that Jacob’s back, and a second later he’s elbowing his way through the door, kicking it shut behind him. He’s kind of out of breath, and there’s a weird-shaped little bundle in his arms.

“I got somethin’ for you guys,” says Jacob, and the boys perk up a little bit, interested. Jacob settles whatever he’s carrying more firmly in his arms—it’s wrapped in one of his dish-cloths, and when he shifts it around it makes a soft little noise and moves.

“Hey--easy,” Jacob says, frowning. “She ain’t gonna hurt you.”

Mike slowly puts his staff back in his pocket, but he keeps a grip on it as Jacob puts his bundle down on the table and steps back.

“She…?” says Dutch, and Chuck licks his lips, glances up at the other two and then leans forward resolutely to grab the corner of the towel. “What--oh.”

Jacob’s present yawns, showing a mouthful of sharp little white teeth. Chuck makes a very high-pitched noise and backpedals so abruptly he almost slams into Mike. “Is that a--?!”

“It’s a dog,” says Jacob. “Or, well. A puppy.”

The puppy makes a little yelping, squeaking noise that might be a tiny bark. Chuck stares from Jacob to the dog and back again. “...Looked like a cat,” he says, in response to the amused glance Dutch throws his way. “Shut up.”

Mike leans down, looking the little animal over, examining it closely. “Wow. Where’d you get it, Jacob? I thought pet animals were crazy expensive.”

“They are, but…” Jacob pauses, sighs. Then says, “Ah, what the hell--got a discount price for this little lady ‘cause--see?” He lifts the puppy gently.

“...They’re supposed to have four legs,” Dutch observes.

“Yeah, well, she’s special,” says Jacob, with a pointed look that suggests the puppy can understand everything they say.

“...Was it a fifty-percent discount?” Chuck says, like he can’t help himself. Jacob glares at him. Chuck looks chastened, but Dutch gives him a quiet high-five when Jacob looks away. “She’s tiny.”

“She’ll get bigger.” Jacob settles the puppy back down on the towel and wraps her up protectively.
She chews on his fingers a little, then yawns and settles back down.

“I like it!” Dutch grins, glancing at the corner where Texas’s old wheelchair is stowed. “I got some ideas already...everyone deserves a set of wheels, right?”

“Dutch,” says Chuck flatly, “don’t put wheels on that dog.”

“I’m gonna do it,” says Dutch.

“I wanna hold her,” says Mike, who’s been staring at the puppy with a kind of obsessive tenderness since he sat down. “Jacob, can I hold her?”

Jacob snorts. “Yeah, kid, of course. Go for it.”

Mike lifts the puppy reverently into his arms, tousling the fur on top of her head with square, calloused fingers. She yawns and there’s a collective “aaaaawwww!” from the Burners.
“What are we gonna name her?” says Dutch, looking thoroughly enchanted. “What about...Sparkplug?”

“Mutt?” tries Mike, grinning. Chuck gives him a Look.

“What, Dutch wants to put wheels on her and now you’re trying to name her after your car, Mikey?”

“Well, what’s your brilliant idea, Chuckles?” Mike shoots back, laughing. The puppy wriggles in his arms, pulling herself up to sniff at his mouth, and his attention dissolves into formless, affectionate murmuring.

“Welp, Mike’s gone,” says Dutch. “Chuck? Brilliant idea?”

“Gem,” Chuck declares. “It’s another name for a precious stone and--what?”

“Nothin’, nothin’!” says Dutch, still laughing as he pulls up a comm. “Wonder if Alex has any good ideas…”

“He won’t!” snaps Chuck, his voice cracking in indignation. “And since when do you have his number?!”

“Since he’s helpin’ with the redesign project?”

“Look, Gem is a perfectly good name, you just gotta let it...grow on you!”

“Whatever you say, man."

**Six Months Later**

Chuck is on the comm. He’s...feeling chatty. Looks pretty cheerful. Things must be going okay for him, down there. Julie should probably feel happy for him.

Mostly she just says “Hm.” and “Uh-huh?” and “Yeah…” while he talks and talks. God, did Chuck ever talk this much before? When is he going to be done? Julie wants to lie back down and stop hearing about the reconstruction effort and how well it’s going.

“Thanks again for helping out,” Chuck is saying. “Things have really come together since we got the materials together and--”

“It’s fine,” says Julie. “No problem.”

“...Uh, Julie...? Are you okay?”

Mostly things just feel kind of...blank. Pointless and heavy. Sometimes the sadness wells up again, or the anger burns through her, but it’s like there’s a wall inside her that won’t crack unless she pushes on it with all her might. This usually involves flipping through the old photoscans Dutch and Chuck recovered until she cries.

“Sorry if I’m bothering you or anything.”

It makes her feel better, kind of. Crying. Clean and empty, instead of full of fog. But it doesn’t last. It’s a cycle. She should probably want to go down to Motorcity but now everything in her rejects it, barely tolerates leaving her pod.

“...I’ll just go,” says Chuck. The call closes.
Julie is alone, and her dad is dead. She sits in that thought while the light outside changes. Lies down on her bed and lets the false sky grow darker. She’s alone...and her dad is dead. And everyone else is moving on. She should too. He was evil. Maybe if she could just believe that 100%, it wouldn’t hurt so much.

Julie tries to think of all the horrible things he did. Makes a list. *Come on, you can’t be in mourning for the guy who tried to kill your friends. Mind-controlled Mike and hurt him over and over again. Come on, Julie.*

It just makes her feel worse. Julie sleeps, on and off. The light outside changes.

Sometime in the morning, Stevens calls. Julie shouldn’t take it, doesn’t want to take it, but...it’s Stevens.

He updates her on the Deluxe situation. Julie barely listens, but makes sure to force a nod or a smile every once in a while. When there’s a long, long pause, she stretches the smile a little further and gets ready to wave goodbye. There. Almost done.

“...*I have a daughter your age,*” says Stevens.

*No. Go away. I thought we were done here.* Julie nods mutely, almost imperceptibly.

“*Living in Deluxe has...not been easy for her. She likes colors. Moving around. Doesn’t do well with classrooms.*”

Julie says nothing.

“*Motorcity would’ve been too much for her,*” Stevens continues. “*And I wouldn’t know where to send her. So we made do.*”

Julie says nothing.

“*New Detroit will be good for her,*” says Stevens. “*I support it.*”

Julie shrugs.

“*She wants to meet you,*” says Stevens.

Julie doesn’t want to meet anyone. She closes the call.

--

Texas’s great-grandma and the rest of the family Up There don’t live Up There anymore.

Their tower went through the dome when it went down, it turns out, and Texas’s cousin Dani did some kinda hacking thing and made it fly. They got it over to one of the big, long strips of dome that fell through, and landed it on there. It’s dented into the metal pretty good. Just kinda hanging out between Motorcity and Deluxe. Then his great-uncle went and talked to Dutch and the guys building the weird skinny elevators up and down, and now there’s an elevator stop at their building and, like, a platform and stuff.

They’re making little stores and stuff around the bottom of the building too. The half of the family Up There who were in Deluxe prison are out now, and when they got back to the tower everybody else moved out pretty quick. Now the whole building is Dimaguiba territory.

One of Texas’s third cousin’s brothers or something is selling comm cube-faces to Deluxe people.
for cheap from his pod, and somebody else made a gym in the bottom floor. There’s a real big screen hanging in front of the building, with the logo on it from the family business. It looks pretty good, for a Deluxe tower.

“It’s still very...Deluxe,” sniffs Aunt Jay. Gramma shushes her, and she shuts up.

“They took care of Randall while he was Up There.” Texas’s mom has a basket of food under her arm, and she’s lookin’ at the tower like Texas looks at a Kane Co. bot. “We need to thank them for the favor.”

“Texas can do that by himself,” says Texas grumpily. Gramma shushes him too. Angie reaches down and pats his shoulder.

“You sure you don’t want your braces, Randy?”

“I can walk,” growls Texas, even though his back aches pretty dang bad. He’s not gonna visit the family from Up There walking with a cane like a dumb old guy. Especially not two canes. Who needs two canes? A double old guy? Not Texas, that’s for dang sure!

People see them coming up the road; there’s faces looking out of a bunch of the pods. Texas’s mom’s sister is standing out front with her arms folded when they get there, and she doesn’t look happy. She looked happier when Texas showed up outta nowhere Up There.

“Daniela,” says Texas’s mom.

“Lea,” says Aunt Dani.

There’s a really long, quiet second. Angie nudges Texas in the ribs. Texas sighs. He’s gotta do everything himself around here, seriously.

“Yeah, and this is my dad and my sisters and my aunts and gramma,” he says. “Hi, Aunt Dani.”

“Hello, Randy,” says Aunt Dani, all friendly like she wasn’t just giving his mom a throw-down look.

“Yeah, hey,” says Texas, and steps a little to one side. “This is my dad.”

Aunt Dani’s frown comes back. “...Hello,” she says.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” says Texas’s dad, really soft and polite like he says everything. “Thank you for taking such good care of our son.”

Aunt Dani starts to give him the hairy eyeball, and then stops when she sees he doesn’t look like he’s being fake. Yeah, dang right. Because Texas’s family is the best.
“I owe you guys,” says Texas. “And...stuff, y’know. You didn’t hafta give me somewhere to stay, and, uh.” He glances over and sees his mom and dad staring at him like he just started shooting lasers out of his eyeballs. Hey, Texas can be polite! Texas is the best at bein’ polite. And...and like...not the best at apologizing. But he’s gonna be. He’s gonna get so good people will get him to be a jerk to them just so they can hear him apologize for stuff! Except he won’t, ‘cause that’s dumb.

“I need to say thanks to great-grandma for lettin’ me stay,” he says. “I was real rude when I didn’t, just ‘cause you’re from Up There. I messed up. Family’s family.”

Everybody stares at Texas after that, for like five whole seconds. And then Aunt Dani looks up at Texas’s mom, and uncrosses her arms, and stops frowning.

“...Maybe you should come inside,” she says, and when she smiles, Texas’s mom smiles back. “Grandma will be happy to see you.”
Chuck still doesn’t know how he ended up in charge of people. It’s all just kind of...snowballed. He’s blaming Alex Harley right now, on principle--and if not him, then probably Mike. He doesn’t-like it, really, doesn’t feel like he’s good at it, he kind of spends every day waiting for somebody to go “hey, why are we listening to this guy, again?” but they keep...not doing it.

And somebody has to make sure everybody’s watching the gang territory lines while they clean up, and calling Deluxe for repulsor tech to lift the pieces of the dome. Somebody has to go out and fight plants and rats, and...for some reason, that’s Chuck. If there’s one bright side, it’s that he gets to spend a lot more time hanging out with his LARPing group.

“Aha!” Ruby crows, and sinks her laser-sword into the base of one of the lashing, thorny rose-bushes. The vines all jerk and flail, then shudder and go still. “Sire! This beast will attack no more!”

“Finely done,” Chuck says, and taps his comm. “Uh--Foreman? This is Chuck--”

“Plants cleaned out?” rumbles the man on the other end. “We were just finishin’ up lunch break. Good timin’, yer majesty.”

“I’m not--” Chuck starts, and then sighs. “...Yeah, well, whenever you’ve got time. This whole block’s good to go.”

“The guys downtown say they’re not gonna be able to get that scrap lifted.”

Another call to make. “Got it,” says Chuck, and adds it to the list. The prospect is almost completely bearable, now. Calling strangers is getting easier every day. Chuck’s not sure if it’s because he’s getting used to it, or because he’s being Lord Vanquisher right now. He’s not sure if it matters. “Uh...did you...get that crazy tree uprooted on eighth?”

“That’s next on the a-genda,” says the man easily, and his little hard-hatted avatar winks. “After lunch break.”
“Sire?” calls Sir Carver, “Newcomers!”

“I’ll call you back when we’ve got the repulsor crew for downtown,” says Chuck, and hangs up hastily, “What? Oh!”

It’s a squad of Deluxian men and women, wearing blue and white jumpsuits and carrying some kind of two-pronged sticks. The man in the lead smiles nervously, glances at Sir Carver and then salutes Chuck uncertainly.

“Oh!” says Chuck. The part of him that’s paralyzed with embarrassment and the part of him that’s used to answering to his royal title are briefly and aggressively at war. When he opens his mouth all that ends up coming out is a slightly strangled “Y...yes?”

“They sent us down to help, uh, clean up?” The man brandishes his two-pronged stick, and it gives
a meaty-sounding *zap*, electricity sparking between its prongs. “Director Martinez and Mr. Jacob made us these, uh…” He hefts the thing, and Chuck can almost hear Jacob’s voice in it when he says, “...’weed-killin’ sticks’.”

“We do not simply fight the evil forests!” Ruby says, with relish. “Our enemies are many! Mutant rats and foul fiends, and *litter*!” She swings her laser-sword, and the Deluxians step back in unison. “The king--”

“My name’s Chuck,” says Chuck, with a wide-eyed glare in Ruby’s direction. He pushes his hair back out of his eyes--geez, it’s getting long--and gives the guy what he hopes is a professional-looking smile. “And--and, yeah. I mean… thanks for coming.”

--

The Burners haven’t stopped calling Julie. Not everyday, but...often enough. She can never quite forget about them. Even Texas, who’s sometimes part of their group calls, which makes her think…makes her think maybe…

Nothing. He can’t have changed his mind, because Texas *never* changes his mind. He’s probably just gotten it into his head that she’s sorry and she’s going to apologize and--

And it’s been months. It’s been six months since she saw any of them face-to-face. The thought of visiting them used to fill her with empty, dull dread. Talking to anyone was a slog through tar, an awful chore. Anyone but Claire, who would drop in for a minute at a time to tell Julie about her clothing design lessons and ask Julie how she was feeling. Claire, who didn’t look awkward and pained when Julie answered honestly.

But Claire’s gotten busier, and now Julie is starting to think about the Burners again. Not just as a weight around her neck, either. Memories are starting to come back, like stars lighting up in a solid black sky. Mike’s smile. Chuck and Dutch playing video games. Texas--

Thinking about Texas still isn’t an option. But Julie would talk to the rest of them. She *would*, she just...doesn’t know what she would say, anymore. And when she thinks about it, something hot and sickly wells up in her chest, something that feels a lot like Shame.

She doesn’t know exactly what she’s ashamed of, hasn’t examined the feelings closely enough to tell. Of going missing for almost half a year, maybe, or the way she never wants to talk when they call. Or maybe just of being Kane’s daughter.

Julie groans and stands up from her bed abruptly, sending it sliding back on its repulsors, and looks sharply around the room for something, anything to do. She’s already beaten all the games on her tablet--there’s nothing to clean--

Something catches her eye, just barely visible from under the bed. A curved edge of dusty wood. Julie stares, mouth slightly agape. She’d forgotten about Jacob’s ukelele.

It takes a little fumbling on the floor, but after a moment Julie retrieves the little instrument. She’s seen people play things like this in Motorcity, but apparently they’re pretty hard to come by. The noise it makes when she drags her nails over the strings is...sweet. Earthy and alien in the cold sterility of her pod.

There’s a little storage chip secured to one side of the ukulele, and when Julie lets her personal system connect to it, it throws up a screen and a holo-guide that flickers awkwardly over the strings. *Tuning Guide,* reads the heading.
Okay. Julie can do this. She’d rather do this than talk to anyone. It’ll just be her and this dumb ukulele, alone in this room, for the rest of her life. And she won’t have to think about anything else.

--

Dutch is having dinner with the Clements.

Technically, it was supposed to just be dinner with Tom, but then Gwen and Claire were also there and there was no polite way for Dutch to explain how being around them made him *maybe a little bit nervous*. So here they are, all talking about the city redesign together.

Well, kind of. When Claire and her dad are talking, it’s kinda hard to get a word in edgewise. Dutch tries to share a look with Gwen across the table, and she indulges him with a small smile. That makes him feel a little better.

“They make their own paint! Imagine if we could use their process and pigments in the production up here! Different colors of polymer!”
Claire wrinkles her nose. “Ooh, just as long as it doesn’t look like a kids’ coloring page.”

“Only the most tasteful color schemes, of course,” says Tom, looking offended that she’d imply otherwise. “I’m sure my charming intern here will be very prudent with his designs!”

“Huh?” says Dutch, and then, realizing he’s supposed to contribute, “--Oh. I mean, yeah. If I ever get to do any design again.”

“Oh, do tell?” Tom’s dramatic brows furrow. “What would prevent you, my dear boy?”

“We’re just...havin’ trouble gettin’ one of the gang leaders to work with us,” Dutch sighs, massaging a temple. “Have been for like six months, actually, and I’m kinda...in charge of talking to him, for some reason? The Duke? You heard of him?”

“I have not,” Tom concedes. “Please, elaborate.”

“I’ll do you one better,” says Dutch, who still has video clips saved from “The Duke of Detroit Presents: Catastrophe Canyon” two years ago. He throws up a screen against the Clements’ pod wall and together they watch in varying degrees of horror and bemusement as the Duke pinwheels across the screen, crowing into his mic.

After a minute or so of this, Dutch senses that the initial shock has started wearing off and closes the video, clearing his throat. “Uh...so yeah, that’s him. Crazy, right? He’s a real--”

“Interesting,” says Tom. Dutch turns to look at him and feels an almost physical shock at the look on Tom’s face. His eyes are shining.

“Uh...Tom...?”

“Can you set up a meeting?”

“I, uh—that’s really not a good--no, I mean, man, no.” Dutch glances at the Clements for backup, but gets nothing but baffled looks in response. “Seriously, he’s bad news. There’s no way I’m takin’ you anywhere near that mansion.”

--

“Now, Mister Duke--I can call you Mister Duke, can’t I?”


“Ahh, I see,” says Tom, with bulldozer-like courtesy. “I’ll remember that in future. Now! In the New Detroit, whose aesthetic I have been charged to spearhead--with my protegee, of course--”

“Not your protegee,” Dutch mumbles.

“--with my creative partner Dutch Gordy, who you of course know as Smokey Jr.--”

“How do you know about that?”

“Smokey, please,” snaps the Duke, “I am trying to listen to this...strange little man.”

Tom looks indecently pleased. “As well you should! Now, as I was saying, the New Detroit will merge the best of both our cities!”
The Duke sighs belligerently, draped over his throne in a sprawl of boredom. “I’ve heard this whole spiel, little man!”

“Tom.”

“What?”

“My name is Tom Clement. *Designer of the K*. I see that you, too, favor single-letter decorations.” Tom gestures to the room at large, where Dutch can indeed count at least five giant block-letter Ds painted on various cars and trophies.

“I will not be *compared* to the recently deceased *Mister Kane,*” the Duke sniffs. “Especially in terms of, uh, *style.* I am my own *man!*”

“Oh, I completely agree!”

“A-say what?”

“Yeah, *a-say what*?” hisses Dutch, but Tom continues as though he hadn’t heard either of them.

“You clearly have far more flair! More--” Tom clicks his fingers. “--*snap.* Vim! Get-it-done-itiveness! *Showbiz.*”

Oh god, thinks Dutch. There’s two of them. How did he not spot this earlier.
“Now, what I think,” Tom continues smoothly, “is that maybe you’re resisting this change because you feel it might cut in on that style!”

“Wrong wrong wrong wrong!” And there’s a spark of the old Duke of Detroit temper Dutch has been waiting for. But hey, at least he’s not waving a gun this time. “I am against it, Thomas--”

“Oh, please. It’s Tom, Mister The Duke Of Detroit.” Tom gives a very charming, white-toothed smile. “We’re all friends and business associates here. Business friends, if you will.”

“Whatever! I want to own my own things! A good slice of this city belongs to me and your little Deluxian rules? Don’t apply!”

“Ah, yes,” says Tom, raising his eyebrows. “Those pesky rules, like don’t steal, which would keep other people from stealing your things, and don’t kill people, which…” He pauses. “Hm. How do you feel about that one?”

The Duke wiggles an ambivalent hand.
“Fair enough.”

“Is it?” mutters Dutch, and is ignored again. That’s probably just as well, though—he’s not sure how much he could really contribute to a conversation between...these guys.

“What I’m telling you is, you don’t have to sacrifice your brand to make it in our bright future, Mister The Duke!” Tom waves a hand ebulliently. “Walk with me.”

“No,” says the Duke petulantly.

“Excellent!” says Tom, without missing a beat, and turns the step he was about to take into a smooth spin on one foot, landing neatly in the direction he was originally facing. “This is a perfect place to talk, anyway. As I was saying, there are all sorts of new positions and specialties that will need your specific talents! The more palatable ones, anyway.”

“Oh-ho, you think so?” The Duke cocks a brow skeptically over the rim of his shades--but there’s an edge to his voice, like he’s actually listening now. He sounds interested. “Like what.”

“Cornerstone cultural presence,” says Tom immediately. “Musician! Writer--how would you feel about an autobiography deal? Don’t answer that, you’ve got time to think it over--artist. Actually...” He pauses, strokes his chin dramatically, giving the Duke a contemplative look. “...Hmm.”

“'Hmm' hwhat?” The Duke sits forward for the first time, scowling.

“Oh, I just wondered...” Tom sighs, shakes his head. “...But most people can’t handle the responsibility. The...media pressure, the stress of being in the public eye...”

There’s no way. There is literally absolutely no way the Duke is falling for that one. Dutch stares from one man to the other, paralyzed, waiting for the Duke to call out the blatant reverse psychology--

“Now, you listen good,” the Duke says, puffing up like an offended stork. “There’s no pressure to a-pressing for the Duke of Detroit, baby! Now, spit it out!”

“Tell me, Mr. The Duke,” says Tom, and lowers his voice conspiratorially. “Have you ever heard the words...’Rock Opera’...?”

--

Mike is kinda worried Gem’s going to get scared when he takes her up to see the kids, but she actually seems to be doing better around crowds than he is, some days. She sits obediently in Mutt’s passenger seat on the way up, and only gets up to see out the window when they reach the bright lights of Deluxe. She’s already grown enough that Dutch had to rebuild her wheels, and her tail whaps against Mike’s elbow as he shifts into park outside the KORS tower.

He climbs out, looking around at the place. The gardening kids have set the flowerbeds up outside today, splashes of vivid color against the white polymer walls.

He didn’t really want to come today. It’s one of those days where his thoughts feels pale and foggy and his brain keeps spinning out long scenarios where somebody is waiting to trap him up here, drug him again, strap him into another chair and--

Gem comes rolling up and wheels in rapid circles around his legs, barking excitedly. Mike shakes himself, glances down at her and smiles.
“You ready, girl?”

She barks again, bouncing on her forelegs, and leads the way inside.

They’re only a few steps past the door when Mike hears the familiar sound of voices calling his name. Someone’s waving a finger-painting at him--Carl, he thinks, who just turned twelve. Lawanda wants to show him her backflips, which she’s been practicing even though Mr. A keeps telling everyone not to. And the Meyer (formerly Redacted) twins aren’t talking to each other again, so that’s another ten minutes of sorting things out. And meanwhile a hundred other voices want to know how long he’ll stay, what he brought, and what is that?!

Mike lets Gem distract some of them while he coaxes the twins into forgiving each other for whatever happened this time. He’s never seen the little dog so excited before, and even with the fog of apathy and pain hanging over him, it’s worth it.

It takes him almost an hour to get to everyone, look at what feels like a thousand drawings, and squeeze in a chat with Mr. A. And it’s all good and necessary, but he came up here today for a very specific reason.

Jian is tucked into the highest level of sleeping boxes when Mike finds him. He hasn’t changed much in six months--hair still shaved cadet-short on the sides, face set and belligerent. Still refuses to wear anything but Kane Co. colors.

He looks a little different today, though, and Mike frowns as he mounts the wall-adjacent ladder.

“Hey,” he says, stopping just short of the box where Jian is sitting. “...Man, these beds looked a lot bigger when I was a kid.”
No answer. Mike sighs.

“So, you, uh. You’ve been fightin’ again, I guess.”

Baleful hazel eyes slide in his direction. “Gee. Real genius here.”

“Come on, J.”

“I don’t wanna talk about it.”

“You said you’d at least talk to me once a week.”

Jian grimaces, raising one hand to his swollen eye and bandaged nose. He sniffs. “Yeah, well. That was before—”

“You also said if I won the bet, you’d come to dance class with me,” Mike cuts in. Honestly, this
isn’t so bad--for a long time, the kid wouldn’t even give him the time of day.

Jian narrows his eyes. “Are you trying to tell me…”

“I won!” Mike gestures to the floor. “See? Told you I had a dog.”

Jian leans forward a little to peer down at Gem. “That’s not a dog.”

“Oh yeah?” Mike taps the side of the sleeping box gently, raising his eyebrows. “How can you tell from all the way up here, smart guy? Bet you’ve never even seen a dog before.”

“I saw a picture!”

“Once, right?”

“Well--yeah, but it didn’t have wheels!”

“J,” says Mike, “there are so many more kinda dogs than you think. You got no idea. Now come down and meet her, and we’ll go to dance class.”

“I’m not going to dance class,” says Jian, but the protest rings a little weak, and after a moment he groans and shifts towards the ladder. “Alright. Move.”

“That’s what I like to hear,” says Mike, beaming, and shimmies back down the ladder. Jian follows a moment later, and approaches Gem with some trepidation.

“...He’s not gonna gonna bite me, is he?”

“She,” Mike corrects him. “And no, but she is gonna--yeah, see, she likes you! Kisses!”

“These--are not--kisses,” snaps Jian, trying to ward off an onslaught of sloppy dog licks.

“Whatsoever you say, J.” Mike pauses, wondering--maybe it’s too soon--but then again, maybe not. “...So, do you wanna take care of her for a couple days?”

Jian freezes, giving Gem an opening to jump up and sniff his face enthusiastically. “Uh.”

“I brought all the stuff,” says Mike, “and Mr. A says none of you guys are gonna have, uh, allergy problems or whatever, so…”

“But.” Jian stares at him, looking a little pale under his bruises. “But...I got into a fight. And I don’t know how to--and anyway I don’t even like you or your dumb--”

Mike waves hastily, trying to slow the rush of retorts. “Hey, hey, hey! You don’t have to if you don’t want to! But--I believe you can, okay? It might not be, like, your calling in life, but I know you’re responsible and you’re good with the little kids, and she really does like you. So, think about it, and we’ll talk after dance class.”

Jian grumbles for a moment, folding his arms tightly--and then sighs. “Shit. Okay. Whatever. I’m not gonna dance, though.”

“Sorry,” says Mike, snapping his fingers for Gem to follow, “can’t hear you over all the sick moves I’m gonna do.”

--
The court of Lord Vanquisher is in session at a council of war when the door to the throne room blows open with a **BOOM** like the crack of thunder.

A figure in a deep hood and a spiky crown of twisted metal stalks through the door. A hoard of limping, lurching forms flanks it, in the bright light from beyond the gate. The king stands, drawing his sword swiftly as his guard marshals around him.

“Who dares--?”

“Need you even ask?” The man in the iron crown straightens, eyes gleaming the color of an icy sky. “I am your doom, **Lord Vanquisher**.”

Lord Vanquisher’s face does something kind of hilarious. For a second he stands very still, dedication to the fantasy warring with some deep personal agony.

“...I know you, necromancer,” he says finally, cold and tight with anger. “You can’t possibly hope to take my crown with a mere handful of these…” He gestures to the necromancer’s undead minions, lip curling. “...Puppets. Your spells of vile control are of no avail in Raymanthia.”

“Oh, I do not come to do battle,” says the necromancer, and snaps his fingers. His undead minions gather around him, waiting on his word. “I come only to bring you news.”

“Any ‘news’ you bring me is as poison as your foul magic,” Lord Vanquisher snaps.

“Disbelieve me if you will.” The necromancer shrugs elaborately and tosses his head--the lights catch his blue eyes again, the angles of his face skeletal beneath his hood. “I just wanted to set your mind at ease. Had you not taken note? Your trusted lieutenant no longer stands at your side!”

A figure in a torn red cloak staggers from behind him, eyes dull and distant, jaw lolling and slack. Lord Vanquisher falters in shock. “Sir Ruby!” he cries, and starts forward. The necromancer laughs, low and villainous, and lays a hand on the knight’s shoulder. “What have you done?!”

“Do you yet require more demonstration of my power?” The necromancer scoffs. “Sir Ruby. Whom do you serve?”

“Lord Adonis,” intones Sir Ruby, in the deadened tones of the...dead. “Blue-Eyed Lord of Death and Life, my sword is pledged to you. Rrrgh.”

“...Yes,” says Alex. “Uh--rrright. Yes! And--soon you too, my king, will meet this fate.”

“Never,” Chuck snarls.

“Beware,” intones Lord Adonis, and retreats toward the door, casting his cloak about himself, undead minions closing in behind him as the court of Raymanthia starts forward. “**Beware.**"
He reaches into his pocket and pulls out something small and round. “...I cast a bewitchment upon your senses,” he announces, “You cannot witness my escape, and you are stunned for thirty seconds.” He meets the king’s eyes, and smirks in the face of his furious glower.

“You will pay,” promises Chuck.

“We shall see,” says Alex, and throws down the thing in his hand in a burst of choking black smoke. From the middle of the expanding cloud, his voice rises. “—Eldritch Abscondment!”

The sound of footsteps fades quickly. Chuck sits back on his throne with a thud, rakes a hand through his hair and lets out a long, frustrated groan.

“God,” he says. “I freaking hate that guy.”

--
One Year Later

Julie opens her eyes. She feels okay for a few moments, in the cool light of the Deluxian morning. The pain sets in like ink spreading through water, but it’s...less than it was. Julie breathes, and sits up, and looks across the room at the outfit on her desk.

Today is the day.

The clothes are Claire’s design, and Julie set them out neat and perfect last night, ready for today. Anything to make this easier, even though she’s been telling herself all week that she’s ready.

She’s been trying to pay Claire back for everything—taking her to the new Deluxian theaters to watch old movies and shows, buying her new nail polish colors from Motorcity vendors (they deliver upstairs now), asking Claire about herself as often as possible.

She owes Claire everything, for all time.

She certainly owes her for this outfit. It’s not 100% Deluxe; the vest and pants Claire found her are a deep slate gray, like her old Burner vest. But the shirt underneath is unmistakable Deluxe white, and there’s a familiar blue stripe down the arm. The collar has been neatly flattened to a crease that could probably cut sheet iron, and the boots are dignified but deceptively solid and heavy. Julie looks in the mirror, and under the shadowed eyes and thin cheeks, she can see a well-put-together young woman.

Even better, she feels like she could do some serious damage if she needed to kick somebody with these boots. That helps way more than she would have expected.
She puts on her bright red lipstick again, and after a minute or two of staring at herself in the mirror, she applies eyeliner and mascara for the first time in a couple days. It puts a shadow around her already-shadowed eyes, and it makes--it makes her look a lot more like…

Julie refuses to scrub it back off. Even if her face still looks strange to her in the mirror--even if she can see her dad’s face in hers with every twitch of her eyebrows, the angle of her head, the hollowness of her cheekbones.

She’s still watching herself in the mirror, trying to decide if she should wash it all off and start again, when somebody knocks on the door.

“Coming, Claire!” Julie runs her hands through her hair one more time--rumpled it. Smooths it back down. Ugh, she doesn’t have time for this. She grabs her backpack from the bed, jogs over to the door, and keys it open with a quick swipe.

“Okay, I’m ready, let’s--” She freezes halfway through the sentence, shock crushing the air out of her lungs.
“...Hey, kiddo,” says Jacob. He’s smiling under his mustache, but he still looks...a little wary. Julie can’t exactly blame him, after the last time they saw each other. And she hasn’t really been able to bring herself to talk to him since then.

“Huh--h-hi,” she manages, burning with nerves. She had a speech planned, a whole thing, but she thought she’d have time to prepare herself mentally--

“I know you weren’t doin’ so hot for a while there,” he says, and then pauses, kind of snorting. “--Okay, understatement. But I just wanted you t’know, I get it. I really do. And I’m real proud of you for doin’ this.”

He opens his arms, and without even thinking about it Julie steps into the hug she’s been missing for a whole year. Warm and bony, smelling of oil and fertilizer.

“I’m sorry,” says Julie, and feels his arms tighten around her.

“I told you, I get it,” says Jacob gruffly, and rumples up the hair Julie just finger-combed down. “...I like yer hair.”

Julie smiles, startled, and she’s even more startled to find that she means it. “Thanks!” she says, and smooths the shaggy hair behind her ears nervously. God, what was she going to say? There was a plan, she had this all planned out.

Oh. Right, of course.

“I, uh...I wanted to…” Julie backs up abruptly, half-turns and scrambles behind her desk. She sees something flash across Jacob’s face when she pulls out the ukelele; something complex and half-pained twists his expression, too brief to identify. “Well… Here.”

She clears her throat, positions her hands, and takes a deep breath.

She’s played this song over and over again for the past half a year. There were other songs, but this was the simplest, and it reminded her of things. Her friends. Her family. Everything she stood to lose if she let go.

“When the night...has come...and the land is dark...”

Her voice trembles, and she can’t look at Jacob, but she sings anyway. It feels woefully inadequate, but she sings anyway. She has to stop after barely a minute, but as the sound of her slightly clumsy strumming fades with her voice, there’s a soft, rusty-sounding hum underneath it.

Jacob is smiling at her when Julie dares to glance up at his face.

“That sounds real nice, kid,” he tells her.

Julie opens her mouth to say--a lot of things. Sorry again, and I shouldn’t have yelled and it could be a lot better. Instead, those all seem to cancel each other out somewhere inside her, and all that comes out is “...Thanks.”

She puts the ukelele back before they go out. It seems too raw, still, too private to play in front of anybody else. Maybe Jacob gets it, because he doesn’t bring up music as they make their way slowly down the tower. He just talks about whatever else wanders through his mind, anything else; his bad knee, Sasquatch’s most recent engine problem. His plants.

“What, like...the terra plants?” Julie wrinkles up her nose. “...Why?”
“Nah, I mean our plants!” says Jacob proudly. “It’s the first harvest of the year! Been sellin’ seeds for a good few months now, and whaddaya know--people’ve been plantin’ em! If there’s anything we learned from that whole Terra SNAFU, it sure was that we can grow plants down there.” He shoots Julie a crooked, tentative smile. “...Little sunshine doesn’t hurt, either.”

Julie manages to smile back. It’s okay. She can do this. There are holes in her city and there are holes in her, but it’s okay. The sunshine can come in.

“Come on,” says Jacob. “Let’s go pick up Mike.”

Julie starts, her heart skipping a beat. “Pick up--but--I’m not ready to… Why do we have to pick him up?”

“He’s up here with his kids,” says Jacob, and then, when Julie doesn’t look any less confused, “...Jiminy, he didn’t tell ya? I thought you guys had kinda started talkin’ again.”

“Yeah, kinda,” mutters Julie, blushing. “There was...a lot of ground to cover with the guys. We didn’t really...catch up. What do you mean, his kids?”

--

Mike has kids now. Kids of all shapes and sizes, running back and forth, jumping on him and clinging to his shoulders, showing him their pictures and projects and how good they are at cartwheels. Mike’s got a new jacket on, and his hair is so much longer he has it pulled back in half a scruffy ponytail, and he looks--

Happy. He looks happy.
“Guys--guys.” The head of the KORS program raises his voice, and Mike glances up, still smiling, and catches sight of Julie and Jacob standing in the doorway. Julie flinches immediately, resisting the urge to just turn around and run straight back to her room, but Mike is already pushing himself up.

“Jules!” He ruffles up the hair of one of the kids who was hanging onto his shoulders and then comes half-running over. He comes skidding to a halt right in front of Julie, smiling like she’s the best thing he’s seen all day. He’s...really tall, up close. Some part of Julie wants to step back, hiding from just the way he smiles at her. “Julie!” he says again. “Wow, hey! Uh--hi! Man, it’s great to see you again!”

“Hi, Mike,” says Julie quietly. Mike’s smile falls a little, less bright but a lot gentler.

“...Is it,” he starts, and reaches up to rub the back of his neck, carding his fingers through the ends of his hair. His smile is just as charmingly rueful as she remembers it being, but it looks older, now. “Can I get a hug?”

Julie can’t answer. She just nods, and Mike steps forward immediately, wrapping her up, squeezing
solid and steady. His cheek is warm through her short hair, and his chest is solid against her cheek, and for just a second Julie wants to cry again.

Then Mike lets go and steps away, and the urge is gone. “Come on in,” he says. “We got some time before we need to get down there, right?”

“Yeah,” says Jacob. His voice sounds weird, rough but warm. “Yeah, we got time.”

“Cool.” Mike looks down at Julie and steps back, inviting. “...You wanna come meet my kids?”

--

They only hang out in the KORS tower for about ten minutes, but it takes at least that long again for Mike to say goodbye. There are grabbing hands to peel off his jacket sleeves, and ten or fifteen simultaneous conversations he has to disengage from. But then they’re headed back down, Jacob on one side of her and Mike on the other. Mike has a bunch of questions for Jacob about people and places and projects that sound vaguely familiar from Julie’s occasional conversations with Stevens. She mostly listens on the way down the tower. Some part of her is still waiting for the inevitable swell of anger--*stop talking over my head about my city*--but it doesn’t seem to come, somehow.

“--And we’re supposed to pick up the others guys on the way down there,” Mike says eventually, and throws a look down at Julie. For such a tall guy, he looks weirdly nervous and small, like he’s waiting to get chewed out. “Everybody’s....real excited to see you, Jules.”

Julie...can’t answer that. Not quite, not yet. Not until she knows how they’re going to *really* feel, because Mike *wants* them all to be excited, but there’s no guarantee--

“Where are we going?” she says instead.

“First sub-level,” says Jacob. “Chuck’s workin’ late.” He rolls his eyes, an unspoken *what do you expect?* “He’s meetin’ us there.”

“Oh, right!” Mike perks up, throws an arm around Julie’s shoulder. He still twitches, hesitating, but Julie doesn’t flinch and he finishes the motion, giving her a little squeeze. “You haven’t been down on the elevators yet, right? Oh man, you gotta see the *view!* It’s somethin’ else!”

A sudden, inexplicable pang of fear shoots up through Julie’s gut. It takes her a minute to figure out the source--an unformed mess of anxiety, leftover anger and pain. Deluxe has already changed so much, but as long as she doesn’t see Motorcity, it can still be the way she remembers it. The way she first saw it, more than two years ago, or even milling with Kane Co. security, or choked in plants. It’s the last thing she has left, and she’s never going to be able to unsee whatever she’s about to see, to get that back again--

“Jules?” Mike’s arm on her shoulders falters, and then his grip strengthens again, resolute. “...Hey. It’s, uh...” He coughs, awkward and half-mumbling. “...It’s okay if you’re scared.”

It’s so unexpected--from Mike of all people--it jolts Julie out of the increasingly frantic spiral of her thoughts. “Ha,” she says, less a laugh then a startled breath. “What?”

“It’s been a while, right?” Mike smiles at her again, kind of self-consciously. “Uh...if you avoid a thing you’re scared of long enough, it gets harder to go back, so...it’s okay, y’know?”

Julie snorts, half-smiling. “...When’d you go and get so smart, Cowboy?”
“Hey, I’ve always been smart!” says Mike, mock-injured, his arm dropping from her shoulders. “They just never taught us about feelings and stuff in school!”

“Oh, tell me about it,” says Julie. She’s trying not to think too hard about the fact that they’re coming up on the elevator now.

“Well, I mean, we’re tryin’ now,” says Mike. “Me and Mr. A, and Stevens kinda strong-armed Bell into helping out too…”

“Oh, man!” Julie laughs. “What would we do without Stevens?”

“He’s kinda the best,” Mike agrees.

“He was always alright,” says Jacob. “Never liked bein’ in charge, though.”

“He talks about you every time I see him.” Mike nudges Julie’s shoulder with his. “The first time we talked he asked me if I was the leader of the Burners? And when I said yeah he was like--”

Mike puts on a deep, deadpan voice-- “Why not Julie? He was so impressed with how you handled bein’ CEO and everything. Oh--we’re here!”

The elevator station is a small, modest booth, barely half the size of a Kane Co. housing pod. On the side, somebody has neatly stencilled “Elevator 52B”. Underneath that, in a meticulously straight-edged box, a list of stops from “Sublevel 1” to “Old Detroit (R. Parks Boulevard)”. Somebody has started the bare bones of a painting that stretches around the entire booth, spilling out in broad stretches of still-formless color.

“They’re not all painted yet,” Mike says. “Dutch wanted color on these guys, y’know, like… Uh, what’d he say. Like, Deluxe sent the elevator shafts down, and the roads and stuff, and Motorcity sent color back up? I dunno, you hafta ask him.”

“Or his boss,” Jacob says. “I swear, can’t hardly understand nuthin’ those two say when they’re talkin’ to each other.”

“Yeah.” Mike smiles distractedly, but his eyes are on Julie. “You ready?”

Julie sizes up the box. Thinks about Mike’s face when he looks at her, patient and still a tiny bit uncertain. The tension that creeps into his body when he talks about things you’re scared of.

“…Yeah,” she says. “Yes. I’m ready.”

“Okay,” says Mike. “Cool! Uh…” He glances back at the box, then up at Julie, and smiles a familiar smile. I have a plan you won’t like, says that smile, rueful and hopeful. Just go with it. Just trust me. “Can you just, uh… close your eyes?”

The words ring a bell in the back of Julie’s mind--a memory from two years ago that might as well be decades old. Just close your eyes for a bit, I wanna show you something. And he’d driven her up to look at--something, she doesn’t even really remember, now. Some classic Motorcity vista, lit up with a hundred colors. Julie trusted him then. She can trust him today.

“Okay,” she says, and shuts her eyes. Lets him lead her into the elevator. Takes comfort in the way his hand doesn’t leave hers, even after it starts moving.

After a moment or two, her eyelids flare red and she scrunches up her face. “Are we really going down?”
“Sure are,” says Jacob.

“It just seems pretty bright here for Motorcity.”

Mike’s hand tightens on hers. “Well, you’ve seen the dome skylights from above, right?”

“I--yeah, I guess...I just never thought about what it’d look like from down here.”

“Well, you’re about to find out,” says Mike, and she can hear the excited smile in his voice.

*I love this city, just wait until you see how it looks from up here, it’s beautiful…*

Okay. She can do this.

“Alright, kids, this is our stop,” says Jacob. “Bit of a bump when you’re gettin’ out, watch your step…”

“Oh, yeah, Chuck’s still trying to get that fixed,” Mike laughs, helping Julie out onto Sublevel 1. “Okay, easy does it...now we’re just gonna walk right over here…”

Julie feels the light hit her eyes again and thinks, *window*. Alright. Motorcity. New Detroit. She can do this. She can do this.

“Okay,” says Mike, “you can open your eyes now.”

She kind of wanted to wait for a moment, maybe take it slow and squint at first. But her eyes just kind of blink open of their own accord, stinging a little in the light. The view is…

It’s something else.
Julie gazes out at pillars of white polymer and plexiglass, stretching up and up, the elevators flowing like blood vessels inside them. Neon lights trace their length, colors flowing in time with the elevators. The highways woven around them, curling elegantly all the way up to the windows in the dome. In the distance, more white pillars support a strip of the fallen dome, a massive ramp leading up into the light with greenery flourishing along its length.

There are trees, actual trees, reaching tall, leaves glowing in shafts of clean light from Deluxe. There are cars racing along the ground roads, pods flying free in the immense space under the dome. And Old Motorcity is rising higher post-reconstruction, buildings growing taller. Everywhere there are new paintings on the walls, new road signs. New foods. In the far distance, she can see the Cablers’ Settlement, a column of starlike lights, sparkling busily. It’s hard to tell from here but it looks bigger--better fortified, with more paths branching off of it.

“Pretty impressive, huh?” says a voice.

Chuck is wearing coveralls and he looks kind of dirty and tired, but his smile is steadier than Julie remembers it. Proud, and hopeful, and it takes Julie longer than it probably should to realize why she can tell that at a glance.

“You cut your hair,” she says.

“Oh,” says Chuck, “I, uh, I was talkin’ about the elevator system, but--yeah?” His grin takes on a familiar edge of self-consciousness, and his hand twitches up and flicks at his bangs--still hanging over his eyes, but cut a lot shorter and neater, now. “It was getting outta control. So.”
“I like it,” says Julie hurriedly, and Chuck relaxes again. “...All of it.”

“Julie!”

The voice is unfamiliar, but the high-pitched hum of repulsor engines that accompanies it is anything but. A blur of green comes whirring out of the elevator, almost bowling Chuck over as it comes, and Julie is already bracing herself before ROTH comes speeding over to her and throws himself into her embrace, wrapping her up in both arms. “Julie!” the voice says again, and it sounds so life-like it takes Julie a minute to realize it’s coming from right next to her. “Julie Julie Julie!”

“Wh--ROTH?” Julie sputters, face smushed up against the warm, buzzing polymer of ROTH’s side. “What--?!”

“Oh!” says Chuck. “Oh, yeah! Uh--ROTH talks?”

“He what?!”
“I talk!” ROTH chirps. There’s a hint of uneven modulation to his voice, a subtle disjointing between words, but it’s so close to an actual voice it’s kind of startling. He waves his arms in the air and backs away, spinning in circles in the air. “Julie’s back! Julie’s back! Julie’s back!”

“We know, bud!” Chuck comes jogging after him and pats ROTH’s chassis a couple of times. “Hey, you remember what day it is?”

“The Big Day!” ROTH says and reaches out again to pat Julie’s head. “Wow! It’s the Big Day! Your head is cute.”

“You mean her hair?” Jacob says, amused.

“Her hair is cute hair too! Julie is all cute!” ROTH says enthusiastically. “You’re a good Julie, Julie!”

Julie can’t help it—she snorts, breaking down in almost-silent huffs of laughter. ROTH cocks his chassis on one side like a curious dog, watching, and then echoes back a mixed-up mess of laughter at her—bits and pieces she recognizes, a cracked giggle from Chuck or a whole-hearted peal of laughter from Mike, the muffled snort Dutch does when somebody makes a joke he really doesn’t want to find funny.

“We’ve got a lot of stuff to show you,” says Chuck. “We missed you down here. Uh. A lot.”

“Dang straight!” Mike says, and strides over to grab Chuck for a rough hug. “Hey, dude. Where’s Dutch?”

“Hey,” says Chuck, and cranes up over the top of Mike’s head to address the group at large. “He was down fixing the express ramp signs, so, uh...so sublevel four.”

“None of you kids know howta take good time off,” Jacob grumbles, but he’s smiling again. “...Special occasion, y’know? You could take a day.”

“It’s fine,” Julie says, hurriedly. “I mean, I didn’t know if I was...coming down, until a couple of days ago, so...”

“Well, if you hadn’t come down, we would’ve gone up,” says Chuck, raising his eyebrows. “You know that, right?” He pauses. “I mean--unless you didn’t want us to, I guess we’d definitely respect that, but, we’ve all been pretty excited about this for a few weeks now, so--!”

“Hey, breathe, dude!” says Mike, elbowing Chuck gently in the ribs. “She’s here, it’s cool!”

“Uh--right. Okay, well, if I’m gonna take a day off we should probably, hah, get this party started, huh?”

“His sense of humor hasn’t changed much,” Julie stage-whispers to Mike.

“Hey!”

“Don’t quit your day job, Chuckles.”

“I wish I could,” says Chuck with dignity, starting to shoo them all back towards the elevator. “Come on, I’ve got a ton of other stuff to show you!”

Julie can’t help feeling a little like she’s being left behind, listening to him talk. They’ve all been working so hard, and she’s been...
You’ve been dealing with the fact that your dad died, says a voice in her head that sounds an awful lot like Claire. That’s a full-time job.

Julie feels the pain, and takes a deep breath, and leans against Chuck while he talks transport and traffic and, oh my god, actual months of cleanup, it took so long… Chuck is one of those guys who sounds kinda happy to have something to complain about. Some things really never change.

The view is different from down here; more looming buildings and towering signs, elevators vanishing up between ramps and roads like glimmering threads. Dutch is leaned against the side of the 52A elevator shaft, a tall, lean figure in bright colors. At some point in the last couple of months, he’s gotten a haircut--a flawless fade with delicate spirals shaved into it. There are tiny blue stars twinkling on his ears, and he looks...vivid. Tired, but animated and colorful and standing at his full height. He’s in the middle of a lively conversation with--

...Texas.
Julie knows, she’s...heard, there’s something going on with Texas. He’s “working on some stuff”, as Mike cryptically put it at one point. She knew he got hurt, on Fall Day, and he didn’t tell anybody about it but it was pretty bad. She thought she was ready to meet him, maybe, at some point today.

She wasn’t expecting to walk out of the elevator and immediately make direct eye-contact with him, or the kind-of panic that flashes across his face when he catches sight of her.

She also wasn’t expecting the canes.

“What?” says Dutch, when Texas stops abruptly in the middle of a sentence to gape over Dutch’s shoulder. “What’s--”

“HEY!” Texas says, at the top of his lungs, and points one of the canes directly at Julie, almost whacking Dutch in the side. “Hey, stay where you’re at!!”

“Uh?!?” says Julie, whose resolve to stay where she’s at is rapidly fading as Texas starts carefully jogging toward her, eyes laser-focused on her face. “Texas, I--”
“No!” Texas comes to a stop in front of her, points a cane at her again. “This is Texas’s Talkin’ Time.”

Julie glances mutely back at Mike, Chuck and Jacob for help—they all look back at her, expressions ranging from suppressed amusement to concern. “I,” she tries to start again. “Look, Texas--”

“Texas would like to apologize.”

*That* shuts Julie up considerably faster than “Texas’s Talkin’ Time”. “You...*what*?” she says finally, helplessly, after a few solid seconds.

“Texas is apologizing.” Texas says again, in a loud, rehearsed tone. “He knows now that sometimes things aren’t black and white, they’re like, purple or whatever--”

“If someone wrote this for him--” Julie starts, glancing at Dutch as he sidles over and gives her a huge, welcoming grin.

“Nope, it’s all him,” Dutch whispers back. “He’s been workin’ on it for like three months--”

“Hey, listen up, this is an official Texas apology!”

Julie smiles in spite of herself. “Yeah, uh, sorry. Go on.”

“A Texas apology,” Texas repeats, glaring at her. “*No* Julie apologies. Sometimes, things are purple. And *one* of those things is family. Even I got family upstairs, which ain’t called Deluxe anymore I guess, and they’re not totally lame, and even though--uh--”

“Even though my dad was kinda totally lame,” Julie prompts. Time has started to temper the discomfort. She gets it. Maybe Texas does too, now.

Mostly he just looks kind of uncomfortable. “...Yeah. Well. Texas has seen the aura of his ways.”

“Y’mean error?” Dutch pipes up.

“The *air* of his ways?” Texas gives him a suspicious look.

“No, error! Like--a problem.”

Texas snorts. “Problem of his ways? Doesn’t sound right.”

“What, like *aura* does? What would *aura of your ways* even mean?”

“Like, the feelin’ your ways make people feel!”

“How do you even know the word aura?” asks Chuck, who’s just kind of staring at Texas.

Texas pauses. Folds his arms belligerently. “...’S on a card,” he mutters.

“What *card*?”

“*nchantment...nvocation*…”

“Say that again?”

“Ugh! It was in your DUMB NERD GAME, okay? Happy now?!”

“*Very*?” says Chuck, looking like Christmas has come early.
“Great! Julie, Texas is SORRY, he was dumb and he messed up super bad and he wants to be your super cool and muscular martial arts friend again! Okay?!?”

Julie is bent over double laughing, but she raises a shaking thumbs-up and Texas grins.

“Cool,” he says.

Jacob claps his hands together brightly, grinning around at all of them. “Alright! Glad y’all got that worked out. I’m gonna head out--still got a little cookin’ to do for the big shindig--but you guys should get Julie to her car, huh?”

--

Nine Lives looks different in the sunshine, blindingly yellow. Julie blinks, eyes watering, and shuffles around her old car, trailing one hand along the hood.

“We kept her in shape for you,” says Dutch, glancing at Chuck. “Not, like, joyrides or anything, but…”

“We didn’t want her to just sit around collecting dust,” Chuck finishes. “And look, I even installed omnidirectional stabilizing repulsors! Those’re gonna be great for when you, like, go over a jump and maybe you spin out, or you pull a Mike and--”

Mike waves his hands in protest. “Wait wait wait, hold up--’Pull a Mike’? Is that a thing we say now?”

“We been sayin’ that,” says Dutch, shaking his head. “C’mon, Mike. So, Julie, you wanna take her for a spin?”

“Uh.” Julie looks at all of them. Texas is already inside Stronghorn, drumming his hands impatiently on the wheel. “...Um…”

“It’s okay if you don’t,” says Mike again. “I mean--there are road laws and stuff now, anyway? And it took me a long time to get used to those…”

“Yeah, I uh...I don’t know if I’m quite…”

“Hey,” says Chuck, putting a gangly arm around her shoulders, “you know I get it. I’ll tow you!”

“No fair, I wanna tow her!” shouts Texas, sticking his head out of the window.

Mike laughs, making a dash for Mutt. “Last one there’s a mutant rat, Tex!”

“Oh, WHAT, it’s ON!!”

Chuck, Dutch, and Julie watch them burn rubber into the distance.

“...Road laws,” says Chuck weakly after a moment, and sighs. Then he straightens up and gestures to Nine Lives, a crooked smile crinkling his now-visible eyes. “Your carriage, my lady?”

Julie performs a flourishy mock-curtsy in the direction of Chuck’s car. “Your carriage, Lord Vanquisher.”

“Dorks,” says Dutch.

Julie and Chuck share a look and then, as one, shuffle obsequiously to Whiptail and bow.
elaborately by the door.

“Lord Dutch of Gordington--”

“Your carriage, sir--”

“Dorks.”

“Yes, my lord, we are but humble dorks.”

“Your carriage, Lord Gordington.”

“Your carriage!!”

“See if I wait for you!” says Dutch, hopping into the driver’s seat while Julie and Chuck lean on each other, cackling. “I’ll meet y’all back at the hideout!”

Julie pulls up a comm the instant she’s in Nine Lives, snuggled deep in familiar pink plush.

“Ready?” says Chuck. “The views on the way there are pretty great too! Keep an eye out the window and I can like, tell you when we’re going past something I designed…”

“Or something Alex designed?” says Julie, teasing.

“Ugh!” They jolt forward, a little harder than Julie would have liked, but Chuck’s acceleration eases up after a second. “That jerk couldn’t design his way out of a paper bag!”

“Weren’t you kind of friends, though?”

“Wh--no--yes--kind of, I dunno. I guess we’re just the kind of friends who sort of hate each other. And don’t even get me started on Lord Adonis!”

“Who’s Lord Adonis?”

“WELL,” Chuck starts.

--

The hideout is almost unrecognizable. The metal blast doors have been pulled apart and turned into a kind of huge, open awning, and underneath the pools of shade there’s a broad flat stretch of patio with dozens of tables set up on it. There are vehicles of all shapes and sizes parked in a makeshift lot; the Burners swing through the rows of cars and bikes with ease, and pull into five spots right at the front, underneath a brightly-painted sign.

“Goat’s Good Eats, Grocery, Garden and Garage,” Julie reads.

“Yup.” Mike sticks his hands in his pockets and rocks on his heels, smiling up at the sign. “He didn’t wanna get rid of ‘Mutt Dog’ but the name was too good.”

“And he don’t sell dogs here,” Texas contributes.

“Oh yeah!” says Dutch. “Hey, I almost forgot--we’ve got somebody you need to meet!”

“Right!” Mike brightens, raises a hand to his mouth and gives a long, piercing whistle. “She oughta--yeah, here she comes. Watch your feet, Jules.”
“What?” says Julie, and then yelps in pain and backpedals as something comes rattling out of the restaurant and runs over her foot.

“Hey, girl!” Mike says, and squats down, clicking his fingers. “C’mere--hey, hey, come here--hey! Hey, you wanna meet Julie?”

“What is that?!” Julie says.

“...’S a dog,” says Texas. “What, you never saw a dog?”

Okay, Julie has seen dogs before. That’s not a dog. “Dogs don’t have wheels!”

“Gem does,” says Dutch. “She’s good like that!”

“Who?” says Julie, who is feel distinctly off-balance at this point. The dog finishes licking Mike’s hands and turns back to Julie, looking up at her with big, quizzical brown eyes.

“Gem,” says Chuck. “This is Gem.”

“Gem’s a good dog!” ROTH says, and hovers down next to Mike to pat the dog too. “Good good good dog.”

“She’s a girl but we weren’t, like, tryin’ to replace you or anything,” says Texas hurriedly.

Dutch drags a hand down his face, wide-eyed with exasperation. “Oh my god, dude.”

“What? We care about Julie, right?!”

“Yeah, buddy,” says Mike, his voice trembling with restrained laughter. “We sure do care a lot about Julie.”

Julie kneels next to Gem, half-smiling as the squabble continues above her. The little dog wheels closer immediately, bouncing on her forelegs and sniffing Julie’s hands enthusiastically. She hears an honest-to-god giggle come out of her mouth for the first time in weeks, and suddenly all the boys are staring at her.

“You didn’t tell me you guys had a dog!” she says, scratching Gem behind the ears.

“I think you mean we have a dog,” says Chuck, grinning. “I mean, she’s the Burner dog, so she’s your dog too.”

It’s like a soft light blooming in Julie’s chest--a feeling so raw and tender and genuine that it overwhelms her. She wasn’t--expecting it, this unbearable surge of affection and gratitude that’s making her face flush and her eyes prickle.

“So--Julie? Oh--no, Julie, what did I say--uh--guys she’s crying--”

“Hey,” says Mike, dropping down next to her. “Are you okay? Do you need a second?”

“I’m--I’m still--”

“Julie?” says Dutch. The other boys are sitting now too, leaning awkwardly toward her.

“I’m--”

“Hey, uh, take your time,” says Chuck, and kind of taps her on the head a few times.
“I’m--still a Burner?” Julie chokes out.

There’s a frozen half-beat of silence, and then all four of the guys kind of collide with her at once.

“Aw, Julie, of course--”

“You can’t get rid of us that easy!”

“If anyone’s not a Burner anymore it’s Texas ‘cause he was such a dumbass but TEXAS IS STILL A BURNER so--”

“What, did you think we were just gonna kick you out?” That’s Chuck, somewhere up and to her left in the press of bodies. He sounds kind of pained. “You shoulda talked to us, dude!”

“I--no, I d--don’t know!” says Julie thickly, half-laughing and half-sobbing. “I didn’t even th--think about it until you said that, I just--I missed you guys so much--”

“We missed you too,” says Texas solidly, and thumps her on the back--gently. “Hey, uh, if you need somebody to like...talk to or somethin’--”

“Seriously, Tex?” Mike laughs.

“Not me,” Texas protests. “My mom’s cousin’s granddaughter’s got a couch. And a notebook. And a talkin’-to-people job.”

“Therapist,” says Mike. “You mean she’s a therapist?”

“Yeah, probably,” says Texas, and waves the point away. “All I’m sayin’ is, let’s go to the party.”

“How is that what you were sayin’?” Dutch says, but Texas is already standing, getting his canes back under him.

“Let’s go! Party can’t start withoutcha, Lisa.”

“Okay.” Julie sniffs. Wipes her eyes and looks up at the door--and there, like an immaculately-dressed angel, is Claire. She looks worried, and it actually takes a moment for Julie to realize why.

“Uh, your mascara’s running,” says Chuck, belatedly, as Claire jogs towards them.

“Juliiiiieee, you came! I’m so proud of you, are you okay though?!”

“I’m okay!” says Julie, laughing, leaning into Claire’s arms. “Thank you so much for the outfit, it’s perfect.”

“Ohmigod, I know right? And that’s not even your present!”

“Uh--it isn’t?”

Claire giggles and ruffles Julie’s hair. “Kidding, of course it is. Like I could top this!” she adds, pulling away to gesture to Julie’s ensemble.

The boys sidle around to get a look at the new clothes--Mike squinting as though he’s not sure what he’s supposed to be looking at. “You do look pretty great.”

“Seconded,” says Dutch. “But you oughtta see my present next--”
Texas snorts. “Your present is weird!”

“Hey, don’t say that, man…”

“Texas’s present is the best! Texas got you--”

“Oh-kay,” says Chuck, reaching out to push Texas back a little. “Give her space, dude.”

Claire nods in fervent agreement, side-eyeing Texas’s sweat-stained tanktop.

“Guys?”

Chuck does his special eyeroll that involves his whole body, swaying back with arms hanging loose. “In a minute, Harley!”

“Hey, Alex,” says Julie, smiling. Alex smiles back, almost shyly.

“…Hey, Miss--” Julie winces, and he hastily self-corrects. “--Julie! Just Julie. Uh. Good to see you again. Thanks for inviting me.”

“Yeah, he has really enjoyed trying to edge in on the party-planning where he’s not needed,” says Chuck.

“Oh, save it for the battlefield, Lord Vanquisher.”

“I’ve got more than enough to go around, Necromancer!”

“You guys can talk about your neck romance later,” says Claire brusquely, summarily shutting them both up. She turns to Julie and holds out a hand. Julie takes it and lets herself be led towards the door.

“Everyone’s here,” says Claire. “Mom and Dad, and Texas’s whole family, and Dutch’s girlfriend’s whole family…”

“Guys--wait.”

They all turn to look at Mike, standing there with Gem at his heels. For a second he doesn’t seem to know what he wants to say--then he takes a deep breath, squares his shoulders and looks Julie in the eyes. “A year ago we were all in a pretty bad place,” he says. “And--I don’t know if I ever would’ve figured it was gonna get better. I couldn’t even...imagine what I could do to get better.”

The words ring painfully true, making Julie’s eyes prickle again. Everyone else nods a little. Claire puts an arm around her shoulders.

“But...we made it,” says Mike. “You made it, Jules.”

“Yes you did,” says Claire softly, and squeezes her. “Happy birthday, girl.”

Julie blinks, and dabs at her eyes, trying not to smear her mascara.

“Happy birthday,” Dutch and Chuck add in unison.

“Yeah, uh, happy birthday, who’s cryin’, not Texas--”

“Happy nineteenth birthday,” says Alex.
“Happy birthday, Julie,” says Mike, finally. “Let’s all have a ton more, okay?”

“Yeah,” says Julie, laughing wetly. “Okay, let’s all keep having birthdays.”

“If Dutch tells us when he’s having one,” mutters Chuck.

“Hey, that was one time!”

“Alright, alright!” Mike snaps his fingers for Gem and starts ushering all of them forward. “Let’s get in there. You ready for a party, Jules?”

“...Yeah,” says Julie, and she isn’t sure she means it but...she’s getting there. “Yeah. I’m ready.”

Together, they walk through the door.

THE END.
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