A Light for Each Shadow

by lostinnostalgia13

Summary

I do not love you as if you were salt-rose, or topaz,
or the arrow of carnations the fire shoots off.
I love you as certain dark things are to be loved,
in secret, between the shadow and the soul.
---Pablo Neruda

Operating in the darkness has been their lives. It's been what kept the Turtles safe all these years.

A single night, a night when April makes a call to save a life, endagers that. And brings in the light that will ultimately save them all.
Prologue

Chapter Notes

Dedicated to Cayla, for putting up with my insane babble for the past two years.

It's happening, dudette, IT'S HAPPENING!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They lived in shadow.

That was life. Or else it had been until four years ago.

Though he had not been there, Splinter recalled the aftermath of the battle with Kraang with crystal clear memories. It was the first time his sons had not only directly interacted with people topside but worked with them in order to save the city. This was not something one would easily forget.

Four years was a long time. Much happened. And just as much seemed the same.

His sons remained protectors of the city. The miraculous task force that formed in those desperate hours against the alien invader remained. There were more Humans that walked the street that knew of them. Knew they existed and fought against evils of the land. More than ever before.

Yet they were still ninja. They still lived in the shadow. Every individual on the task force these days was sworn to secrecy. The people they saved each night only caught glimpses if anything. They were silent, unknown defenders.

They lived in shadow.

They lived in darkness.

It kept them all alive. And it was slowly killing them.

Tonight was a night like any other. Nothing special would happen. And yet, Splinter found himself lingering at the edge of the tunnel that served as his rooms in the Lair. He watched as his sons went about their usual routines of gearing up for a patrol.

Leonardo, ever the leader, calling everyone into line. Raphael, a challenge on his tongue that came just as easy as he followed the ingrained instructions. Donatello, lights and holograms a blur about his form, gave an update on the area they were setting off to. And Michelangelo, already laughing and teasing his brothers into groans of complaint.

Just like another other night. Save for the strange feeling that came over Splinter as he watched his sons rush through the entrance to the garage. He heard the roar of the modified truck they took to using at times. It faded as they drove down the tunnels and away from the Lair. At last, he was alone with this strange feeling.

His sons were no longer children. And still he worried over them just the same.
As the years had passed, new worries came. While he never quelled the fear that rose whenever they went on a mission or got a call from April or Casey, he found the worry remained even when all were safe within the walls of the Lair.

He worried if this would be all his sons could look towards in the years to come. If this was all their lives could ever be.

They were part of the city. But they were not part of the people.

They lived in darkness. Always a touch away from the light.

Splinter sat on the low stool amid the bonsai. It was a soothing place, one he chose to meditate as often as the dojo itself. As he sought the old practice now, hoping for a calm that alluded him, he found his mind turning over those thoughts.

Shadows. Light. How light was simply light. Yet shadows were only known when there was light to cast them. Different lights. Different shadows.

The thoughts spiraled in a gentle hum just under the edge of awareness as he meditated. And then it broke hours later by a returning roar of an engine, the hum would settle down into his mind.

That night was not the start of the change. Merely the first night where Splinter found himself anticipating it.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!
Amaya

Chapter Summary

Running from her past, a chance call changes her future.

First light.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Amaya Fortier's life changed the day she met April O'Neil.

Life changes weren't new. The latest and roughest was still fresh at the front of her mind that day in the library. It should have been an easy day: morning classes were done, her shift ended at 5, then an hour of studying before that interview for the new pizza place. But she couldn't concentrate. Already her coworkers had to fix the mis-shelved books she put up. Twice.

She debated asking if she could just man the counter when a surprised yelp caught her attention. Ducking around the corner, she saw a girl struggling to pick up the books scattered across the floor. Without a word, Amaya knelt down to help.

"Thanks," the girl whispered, flushing to the roots of her dark brown hair.

Amaya simply shrugged. It was all research books, each one a common staple for those taking the Intro to American Literature class. She spied the stack of notes on the table, every page covered in messy handwriting. A familiar heading made her smile. "Beachman's comparative mid-term?"

The girl blinked at her. "Uh, yes. Are you---"

"Haven't taken it yet," Amaya cut in. "But more than enough people come in raging about it." She slid three books to the slide, gathering up the others to re-shelf. "These will get you there."

The girl broke into a grin. She glanced at Amaya's name tag before saying, "Thanks, Amaya. I'm April."

Amaya shook her hand and left her to it. When she left at 5, she saw April still hunched over the table, working furiously. Amaya hurried out, praying her interview went well.

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Who knew a pizza place could be so snobbish?

The next day, Amaya poured through the want ads, nursing her second coffee and wishing it wasn't nearly empty. She studied each job listing, fingers tugging at her long black hair as she thought. She needed to find another job. The library just wasn't enough.

Used to the rowdy noise of the cafeteria, she missed someone call her name. When April plopped
down in the seat across from her, Amaya jumped. Swearing internally, Amaya looked over the other girl in question.

April beamed, holding out a fresh coffee. The scent was tantalizing. "I asked the barista how you like it. A little thank you for the other day."

"No, thank you," Amaya all but groaned, draining the last of hers before taking the fresh one. She reveled in it, savoring the heat as well as the rush.

Their conversation that day was typical meet-and-greet that Amaya went through all the time. She didn't expect anything to come of it. A casual sort of relationship grew, though. April would always stop by and make small talk when she was at the library (which was often) and Amaya endured her pestering for any local gossip she'd heard.

Journalism wasn't Amaya's thing. April would be great at it, she was sure. But every time April started on a tangent about some story the school paper put her on, Amaya tended to tune it out. Until the day she mentioned Brian Wilson.

By then, Amaya was up to three jobs. Her latest, a diner that had replaced the same pizza place who failed to hire her, added a new routine to her life. April often came in for the last part of her night, working on whatever it was she needed for graduation, putting out resumes, and generally talking with Amaya. The rest of the staff got used to her, often leaving the seat at the end of the bar free when Amaya worked.

April moaned, head on the bar and hands clenched into fists. She'd spent a good ten minutes agonizing about her final story for the school paper, wanting to leave it with a bang.

Amaya listened, as was her duty, and set a chocolate milkshake in front of her (extra whipped cream). "It's not the end of the world, O'Neil."

"I know," April moped. She played with the straw, lost in thought. "I just want to leave my mark, you know?" she said suddenly. "Something to get me over this stupid senior rut."

"Still not a thing," Amaya said in a sing-song voice, clearing off a table.

"Shush, leave me to my miseries," April grumbled. "Everything I tried out just flopped. Nothing made a decent story."

"What about the rumors of the theatre department?" Amaya asked.

"Made up to promote the summer festival."

"The body going missing from the biology lab?"

"Frat prank, which seems to be a tradition. Nothing new."

"The school clinic break in?"

April hesitate, thinking. "That was the closest. But there were no witnesses. All I got was an interview with that guy, Brian, about finding the broken---"

"Brian Wilson?" Amaya broke in, laughing. "He's another regular."

At that, April brightened. "Really? What's he do? Study?"

The diner was popular with the college crowd. At any given time, Amaya could throw a ketchup
bottle and the splatter would hit three of them. But April's question made her pause. "Actually...no. He never studies." Another customer called for her and Amaya hurried to answer. It was another ten minutes or so before she had a chance to go back to April.

April was sitting up, eager now, and typing furiously on her lap top. Her eyes were bright as Amaya approached. "What does he do when he's here?" she asked, voice low, like she didn't want to be overheard.

Amaya rolled her eyes. She pointed to a corner booth. "He sits there, usually gets the burger, and talks with whoever meets him."

"Whoever? Is it someone different each time?"

On and on with the questions. Amaya didn't get it but she answered each as best she could. And when April spent the rest of the week wanting reports on Brian Wilson's meet-ups at the diner, she went along with it. It was kind of fun.

Until the school paper ran the story about the clinic break in. How Brian Wilson was selling the drugs he had stolen, right out of the diner that so many students used. And the picture that went with it showcased Amaya front and center behind the diner's bar.

Amazingly, she didn't get fired. And Brian confessed when the police got involved. He got a pretty light sentencing since the drugs he took were mostly antibiotics. His lawyer made sure to tell the press that he was doing it for the people who couldn't afford to pay for a doctor's visit. Clever angle.

But the press ran the same image. The phone calls started again. Amaya got rid of her cell. Then came the letters, thankfully to the P.O. box and not her apartment. She took to burning them without opening any. The first instance of that feeling---like cold clinging to her skin as she returned from work one night---had her packing and moving without a word to her roommate.

April was ignorant of it all. Amaya had never told her, never asked April to keep her out of it. April sensed that something fractured between them, though.

Graduation came, April got a job at Channel 6, and Amaya wished her well. She had her own life to worry about.

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Three years, her own graduation, and six jobs later, Amaya walked back into O'Neil's life.

Quite literally. She was running late for her shift at the coffee house and didn't see the news van parked at the corner. She hurried in and walked into April doing a piece on the place; something about winning an award for their bread.

The reunion was brief, urged on by Amaya's manager giving her the stink eye and April's camera man motioning that they need to wrap up. April promised to swing by when she was free. Amaya didn't expect her to and found herself smiling when April turned up just after the rush hour crowd.

The next few months saw a renewal of their old habits of meeting, talking, and generally passing the time both in person and over the phone. Hearing how many jobs Amaya went through, April mentioned possibly making a story out of it. Amaya refused; she was polite but made it very clear she didn't want to be in any more news articles.

April accepted that. Her questions, however, kept coming. April insisted she never met someone
with a work history like hers; she would be a fool not to see how valuable Amaya's insights were.

Amaya couldn't find it in her to deny her that. So when April was following a lead or trying to research something, Amaya was typically her first call. She was also the one April lamented to the most as her job with Channel 6 wasn't all that she wished for.

Such a lament had Amaya grinning as she sanitized the exam tables at the 24-hour vet's clinic (job #13). During the night shift, things were quiet so she could get away with having her ear buds in place. She typically used them to listen to audio books. And for when April called.

"---can't take many more of these!" April said, phone cutting in and out.

"The fluff pieces? Come on, O'Neil, that's the best part of my morning!"

"Ugh, you're as bad as Vern. But because of stingy higher management, I gotta follow up on this shipyard thing in the morning."

"That weird robbery?" Amaya pressed the ear bud closer, lowering to a whisper. "I thought you weren't supposed to handle that?"

"I'm just asking questions! And I won't go alone. Ok?"

"All right, fine. Good night, O'Neil."

Amaya didn't hear anything for the next few days. The catastrophe of Sacks tower had the whole city in a panic. Part of Amaya couldn't shake the feeling April would dive nose first into whatever that mess had been. About a week after the tower fell, she turned on the news and saw April there. Seeing her on the screen calmed a fear Amaya didn't know she held.

The next night, back at the vet clinic, a coworker called that she had a visitor. Amaya finished cleaning out the biohazard bags and checking on the cats they were boarding for the night before making her way to the front.

April gave her a tired smile, a little frazzled. "Can I ask a favor?" she asked.

Alarms went off in Amaya's head. O'Neil never asked for favors. She usually opened with the request. Popping out her ear buds, Amaya leaned on the counter between them and gave April a hard stare. She waited, not giving a single opening.


"What kind of supplies?" Amaya asked.

Again, April hesitated. This was a whole new side of her Amaya never expected to see. Keeping secrets? Not even hinting about what she was involved in? If she had any time to spare for it, Amaya would be intrigued.

"Bandages," April blurted. "Tape. Hydrogen peroxide. Or beta dine, if you have it? As much gauze as you can spare?"

Fear spiked Amaya's brain, heart speeding up in response. She looked April over again but saw no sign or hint at an injury. No blood covered her. The question hovered on the tip of her tongue.

"Two by two squares big enough? Or would four by four be better?"
A small smile brightened April's face. "The fours. Those are inches, right?"

Amaya nodded. She went into the first exam room, checking that all the requested items were there. Hand on the bottle of beta dine, she found herself hesitating.

She could be fired. There was every chance of it. Was it worth it?

For someone who needed it? Yes.

She took all she knew the clinic could spare, throwing in a few different tapes on top of the pile. Then she took some suture kits from the surgery room, trying to keep from making eye contact with anyone. Last thing, she grabbed a thermal blanket from the donation bin and wrapped everything in it.

April's eyes bulged when she brought the bundle to her. A wad of money was clutched in her hand. She refused to let Amaya decline it. Gathering the bundle, she started for the door, and then stopped. Looking back, she asked through a grimace, "What do you know about taking care of turtles?"

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There were no cameras in the first exam room; intentional, she later found out, as the manager, as well, gave supplies out to people who needed them. The manager also accepted the money April had given with a mere nod. But he cautioned Amaya to keep it from becoming a habit.

Life went on. The predictability was shaken by April on occasion. Sometimes it was just for a story. Sometimes it was another supply run. Eventually, that meshed into the predictability too.

Then came the call.

Amaya liked the flexibility being a ride-share gave her (job number 18), even if there weren't many riders. She'd managed to get hired while driving her SUV, something she hadn't expected. When the pickup was for four or more, though, they often wanted something with more room. The money was better on the weekends, when the party crowd was out in full force.

On a Tuesday? She'd managed to clear nine levels of some stupid mobile game before realizing her butt was asleep.

Just as she thought about calling it a night and actually getting some sleep, she got a call. "Fortier," she answered, so bored she hadn't even thought about screening the call.

"Amaya? A-are you there?"

April's voice made her straighten at once, hearing the panic it held. She quickly logged out of her Uber app and started the engine. "Yeah, I'm here. What's wrong? You ok?"

"I'm---I think---Can you pick me up?"

Amaya swung the SUV into traffic without further thought. Ignoring the blaring car horns, she cranked up the volume on her phone. April sounded terrified. "Where are you?"

The directions led her to an older part of downtown. The industrial district, some part of her brain supplied. Unused buildings with broken windows and chained fences loomed all around. Amaya didn't see any of that. A familiar yellow jacket caught her eye and she hurried over. She popped the locks and motioned for April to get in.
April didn't move. She stood in front of an alley, eyes too wide and face pale.

Heart pounding, Amaya scrambled to undo her seatbelt and hurried around the car to her. "What happened? Are you---" The rest caught in a muffled yell.

April's entire right side was covered in blood. Yet when Amaya reached for her, she shook her head. Sense returned to her wide eyes and she held out her hands. Between them, she clutched an old, moth-eaten sheet. "We need to hang this up."

"April---what?" Amaya spluttered.

"We need to hang this up," April repeated, nodding to the SUV. "Now."

Amaya stared at her. Soft sounds made her turn to the alley. It so dark. The night only made the shadows darker. She saw nothing. But someone was there, she knew. Turning back to April, she stared at the sheet in her hand.

"Who's hurt? Why are they hiding?"

The questions startled April. Her mouth opened and closed but she didn't answer. The sounds from the alley paused, whoever was there listening.

Watching April struggle, seeing how torn up she was, sealed the decision.

Sometime you didn't get all the answers.

Amaya grunted, pulling back her long black hair and securing it at the nape of her neck. She took the sheet from April and threw open the SUV's back doors. She kept a tool box in the back and it held a dwindling roll of duct tape. It lasted enough to secure the sheet across the back, even anchoring it to the sides as well. With this in place, she wouldn't be able to see the back at all.

Which was the point, wasn't it? Sheet secured, she made short work of lowering the back seats. She hoped it was big enough for whoever was hurt. Once she was satisfied, she started for the driver's seat, motioning for April to take shot gun. She paused before getting in.

Amaya glanced at the alley, searching the shadows. Taking a chance, she called out, "I won't look. I swear. Just tap three times when you're in. Ok?" Without waiting, she covered her eyes and turned her back to the vehicle.

Almost immediately, she heard three distinct taps. That fast? She kept the question to herself. Once inside, she was struck by two things.

The SUV sat lower by a good few inches. Just how many people were back there?

The smell of blood was thick.

Swallowing, Amaya forced herself to focus. She started driving. April gave directions, looking a little calmer. The same soft sounds came from behind the sheet. Was someone talking? Sounded delirious, what little she caught. None of it made sense. Amaya went a little harder on the gas, praying the place they were headed wasn't too far away. Her heart wouldn't slow down, beating heavily somewhere between her ears.

Twenty minutes in, her mysterious passengers almost got them killed.

"Stop the car!" a sharp voice from behind the sheet barked.
Amaya gasped but instinctually obeyed. She slammed on the brakes, wincing at the sound. A lone car swung around them, horn blaring and middle finger raised out the window. Panting, Amaya quickly put the vehicle in park. She didn't care that they were in the middle of the street. Without a word, she covered her eyes again.

And again, it felt too soon when April touched her arm to pull her hands away. The smell of blood was less strong. The vehicle sat at its usual level. Hands shaking, she gripped the wheel tight and let out a slow breath.

"Thank you," April said, voice hushed. Her eyes were wet, concern heavy in them.

"Go," Amaya told her. She scrubbed at her face, fighting the after-effects of adrenaline. "Go on," she said again when April hesitated. "Go see to your friend, whoever he is. Call me if you need anything, ok?"

April nodded. She slid out of the car, thanked her again, and hurried down the street. She vanished around a corner.

It took the whole drive back to her place before Amaya felt calmer. Even then, she sat in the garage for several minutes, willing the shaking in her legs to stop.

Journalism wasn't her thing. Anything involving blood splattered clothes, covert pickups in the middle of the night, and shadowed figures bleeding in her backseat were not her thing. In the years since the Sacks incident, Amaya watched April go from doing fluff pieces on the morning news to covering some of the most interesting and dangerous current events.

The medical supplies. The random questions April always asked with an intent grimace in place. The bizarre stories on the news that felt more like half-truths than anything.

April was neck deep in it. Amaya wondered how many times before had April started to call her, only to change her mind at the last second?

Needing something to occupy her thoughts, she got out to assess the damage in the back seat. When she opened the trunk, she stared at the pristine upholstery. No evidence remained of her shadowed passengers.

The smell of blood hung around, though. She opened all the doors, shuffling through her tool box for some spare air fresheners. The duct tape came off easily enough. By morning, everything should be normal. As she folded the sheet, red caught her eye. Frowning, she threw the sheet out so it laid flat on the garage floor.

A wide smear of thick, dark red ran across the sheet.

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"An Uber driver?"

Leonardo's voice rang through the Lair. The echo faded quick, aiding by the constant white noise from Donatello's surveillance hub. A snicker made him glare over at Michelangelo, who just grinned back.

He turned around to see April shrugging off her blood stained jacket. She threw it on the nearest couch and faced him. Hands on her hips, she looked ready to go a few rounds.

In the years since their reunion, Leo learned many of her tells. When she lied. When she hid
something. When she practically brimmed with new information for them.

And when she prepped for a fight.

Leo hoped it would just be a verbal one tonight. A short one.

The warehouse recon had gone belly up in a hurry. Mostly because the original information hadn't been complete. Instead of being empty, it was full of the latest recruits for the Foot clan. They'd barely gotten out in one piece. Only to find the escape wasn't so clean.

They all bore signs of a gruesome encounter. Grime covered everyone along with a fine layer of dust kicked up by a grenade. Both Leo and Mikey bore splatters of blood, none of it theirs.

Most of it was Donatello's. It also covered April.

The door to the needle room remained shut. Mikey hovered by it, too nervous to go in and too anxious to be his usually chatty self. He watched the unfolding confrontation but was only half-interested. Leaning against the railing, the youngest Turtle made sure he stayed in reach of the door.

Leo's mind, also, kept going back to behind that door. He threw it back to the problem at hand. "Uber?" he pressed.

"She's good people," April snapped.

"Good people? How much do you know about her? How can you be so sure she won't say anything?"

"She's not like that!"

"And how can you prove it? It doesn't take much to get the Foot back on our trail. Or even the Purple Dragons. The wrong word to the right ear, and she's sent both of them your way. Or straight to---"

"Leo, just listen!" April cut in, words almost a snarl.

Mikey let out a whistle, clearly enjoying this. Leo ignored him.

April tossed back her hair, fighting the urge to run her hands through it. That would only make the matted blood in it an even bigger mess. She was as tired and frayed as the rest of them. But she was unbending before Leo's anger. That alone made him wait.

"I've known Amaya for years," April began, striving to keep her voice even. "I doubt she's ever got as much as a parking ticket. She's as uncomplicated as you could want. If she has some legitimate tie back to any of the people who want to hurt you guys, it will be a complete shock to me. So when Donnie went down---" The bravado cracked at the words and she rubbed a hand against her shoulder, fighting the memory of trying to support her wounded friend. "---I knew we needed a quick exit and she could provide it."

"We would have gotten him back on our own," Leo said, for what felt like the hundredth time.

April looked at him, eyes shining but fierce. The words went unsaid:

*Back alive?*

Leo took a slow, steadying breath. Finding calm after a fight was always a crapshoot. It weighed
heavily on how well the fight or mission went. Still, he pulled back on his emotions, finding the space within himself where they belonged.

He would review what happened later. Master Splinter would want to discuss it with him. And they would improve from the mistakes that night. Hashing it out with April---who wasn't at fault though she honestly shouldn't have even been there---

Calm. Center.

Arguing with April would do nothing to change it. It was done. All he could do at the moment was handle the new complication.

Uber driver?

Leo held down the urge to laugh like Mikey had. It was kinda funny. But still a complication. Better to deal with it now before it became dangerous.

"You trust her?" he asked.

April eased a little at the change in his tone. "Like I said, she's good people. She's the one keeping us loaded with medical supplies. And the electronic parts you guys always seem to burn through."

Leo frowned. "I thought you got the medical stuff from a vet clinic?"

She nodded.

"And the parts from a disposal company?"

Another nod.

"Same person?"

April fought a smile. "She...gets around."

Calm would not be his tonight. Leo paced, thoughts flipping one from another. He trusted April. She trusted this Amaya girl. They'd been back for over an hour and there was no sign of anyone following them. The supplies she provided---needed far more often than Leo liked---were a welcomed relief. Since April started going to her, it was one less thing to worry about.

It was one thing to have an ally. It was another when that ally was an unknown entity.

This person was a complete unknown, save for what April told him.

Leo rubbed a hand over his face, feeling where the grit and dried blood irritated his scales. He glanced up at the needle room, chest tightening before he could catch the worry that went though him.

"This is a one time thing," he said at last. "It was an emergency and it couldn't be helped. All right?"

April nodded while Mikey groaned overhead.

"And," Leo went on, "if she says anything about tonight, you tell me. Understand?"

"She won't---"
"April."

She stopped, swallowing her protests. She had learned his own set of tells. Particularly the ones he let her learn. And she knew when to stop. "Okay, Leo."

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It was a long night. The door of the needle room didn't open until almost 3AM. Mikey was a blur of questions and hovering limbs. It wasn't until Raphael bodily moved him aside that Leo saw Donnie. The lanky Turtle leaned heavily against Raph but he threw a tired smile over their way. Casey emerged just behind them, wiping his hands with a stained rag.

"Through and through job," Donnie reported. "Bullet failed to hit any major arteries." Though upbeat, his voice was heavy with fatigue and his feet shuffled more than anyone watching was comfortable to see.

"I bet it hit plenty of minor ones," Leo said, eyeing the bandages on each side of Donnie and the blood still covering him.

If luck spared his life, it was the most sadistic kind Leo ever saw. Ricochet or something similar sent a bullet from his left side, just under his arm, and out his right shoulder. Blood loss alone should have killed him. Not to mention shattered bones or a punctured organ.

The memory of Donnie listing all of this while trying not to pass out in the back of that SUV hit Leo. He shook it off, trying to stay in the present.

Donnie refused to be put to bed. Only when he was at the massive set of monitors in his lab did he relax. The screens filled with diagrams, x-rays, and page after page of hand-written notes. Enough to show the massive amount of time Donatello spent researching the ins and outs of their mutated anatomy. The purple-banded Turtle added to this before he even sat down, aided by the equipment still in place on his shell.

Casey handed Donnie a stained stack of papers before heading over to where Leo waited. More out of necessity than skill, the human became their stand-by medic. The times when Donnie was out of commission were few but it usually meant an emergency situation. "He should be good," Casey told Leo. "Mostly muscle damage. And he knows what to do to heal."

"Yeah, it's just getting him to do it," Leo groused.

Casey cracked his neck, accepting some coffee April brought him with the kind of expression one saved for seeing a saint. He drank half of it before turning back to Leo. "So. What happened?"

"A cluster fuck," Raph said at once.

"Poor intel," Leo said, giving his brother a warning look. "The task force just said the area had seen an increase in activity. They were convinced it was drugs because a number of known dealers have been seen going in and out. We were going to survey it and go from there. No clue about the firearm smuggling. Or that the new Foot training center was there."

"Don't they tell you, Casey?" Mikey piped up, poking through the papers before Donnie could remove them from him. "Though you were on the team?"

"The point," Leo went on, "is we need to change what we do when they give us information. We're not going through his again."
It was a discussion they went through more often as of late. After this, Leo was going to talk directly to Vincent. If this task force was to succeed, there had to be a better way of handling things.

A few hours later, a phone rang. April, who had been dozing on the couch next to Mikey, jerked awake at once. Her hands groped at her jeans before going for her jacket. Seeing the caller, she paled. She was on her feet and walking towards the kitchen before taking the call.

Raph frowned after her. "What's that about?"

Leo didn't answer. But he thought he knew. Ignoring Raph's irritated grunt, he watched April.

She was quiet for a moment, paling even more at what she heard. "You---are you sure?" she asked. "No, I don't---Yeah, I understand." She closed her eyes, digging a knuckle into her temple. "Sure, sure thing. Nah, it was just something lying around, nothing of value. Thanks again. Really, I mean that."

The conversation was easy to overhear. Even Donnie paused in his typing to carefully lean back to watch. "Who's she talking to?"

"Bet it's that Uber-chick," Mikey said, eager at the possibility. He and Raph had tailed the car, only seeing from afar. Even when Leo made a warning motion, the youngest bounced in his place on the couch. "Maybe she's coming to give April a lift home!"

"Mikey, I doubt---" Donnie began.

April ended the call, shoulders falling. Silence fell as she looked over at Leo.

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There were many things that annoyed Amaya. Far to many to count. Needing to haggle with former employers certainly held a Top Ten spot.

She had high doubt an ancient sheet like that cost ten bucks to launder. She got him down to seven and still felt cheated. But it was the only thing she could think of to get rid of that nasty stain she didn’t let herself consider was blood.

Just…just no, can’t deal with that thought, not now.

Overpriced or not, the sheet was pristine by the time she swung by close to closing. Some of the larger holes were even darned, she noted with mild reluctance. Amaya slipped an extra dollar in the tip jar before hurrying on with her day.

The vet clinic was becoming a fixture in her life. Part of that was due to the turnover the that hit it every summer. People graduated and moved on. And that meant gaps in the schedule that needed to be filled.

Working the night shift was a nice bump to her paycheck, though. So she never whined or cringed when she saw her name stenciled there on the calendar pinned up in the break room.

Aside from the drama of last night and the gruesome errand of getting the sheet cleaned, there was nothing of note to make her more on edge. And, truly, it was a quiet night. There were very few pets being boarded, none being monitored after surgery, and the weather was mild enough that she didn’t count on any good Samaritans to come rushing in with a poor critter off the streets.
She volunteered to man the front desk, a boring and mind-numbing delegation. Normally, she would be listening to the latest from the never-ending list that came with her role as teaching assistant. Professor Prejean was set in her ways but never allowed a recommended reading list to become repetitive. This happened to be the year she wanted to revise it and it fell to Amaya to scour through the possible options.

A few minutes in, she found herself tugging at the head phone cord and loosening one. The nothing-sounds of the clinic and the street outside a 2AM were the same as they always were. She shifted on the stool, suddenly wishing she had something to keep her hands occupied.

Shifting through a few brochures on flea medication, she froze. Though her heart pounded, she could hear clearly. And there was nothing new for her to hear.

Nothing to give weight to the slimy, cold sensation that she trusted every time she felt it. That she loathed to feel.

Standing, ignoring the stool crashing to the floor, she rounded the long counter that served as check-in and work station. She hit the door with such force the little bell almost fell off as it rang shrilly in the silent night. Left and right, both sides of the street were clear. No unique shadow lurked at corners or across the street.

The on-duty vet, Dr Maxey, stuck his head out from the back. He took in the lack of customers and Amaya’s tensed frame. “Everything all right?”

“Yes, fine,” she lied, forcing a smile. “Though I heard something outside.”

He frowned but didn’t press it. And she didn’t fight it when he offered to trade so she could take her own break. She doesn’t get to relax. The feeling won’t go away. Like mud, she can feel it clinging to her, sapping away any hope of an easy night. All too soon, the break was up and Dr Maxey cheerfully came to swap places again.

Amaya shuddered the thought of returning to the front. Open windows with clear sight lines. No way to hide that wouldn’t be obvious to her co-workers. Nothing to keep between herself and---and---

And whoever watched her.

Thinking the words brought a sensation not unlike a fish hook jerking her stomach up. She forced down the gagging sound but not before Dr Maxey heard. She quickly fled for the bathroom, making a motion to her barely-eaten container of food and hoping he would accept that excuse.

In the bathroom, the sensation faded just as she steadied herself half-bent over the toilet. The rolling nausea slowed until just the lingering taste of it remained. Slow, deep breaths got her the rest of the way there.

Amaya slowly straightened and gritted her teeth to maintain the even breathing. Locked in the bathroom, the feeling of cold slime was gone. She hated that almost as much as the feeling itself. Hated it because that meant this might not be a panic attack or a hold over from the night before.

The hall outside was dim but far from sinister. It was a hall she walked countless times. Never before had it seemed so long. She had a choice to make: either make an excuse and cut out for the night or muscle through and try to see if she could get Avery to switch with her so she could hide in the back until the shift was over.

“Amaya?”
She jumped a clear foot, nearly falling backward into the bathroom. Plastering what she hoped to be a smile on her face, she looked up at Dr Maxey. He was leaning around the corner, a phone held to his ear. Given the pinched look to his otherwise clear face, it was more than likely business related. “Can you get my files for me? I think I left them at the front.”

Inwardly cringing, she nodded and forced herself to make those steps. With each one, she held herself ready, waiting for the slimy-cold to return.

She got all the way to the front desk, saw the neat stack of files---inventory notes, she read absently---and found herself still waiting. Not wanting to risk it, she grabbed the files and hurried back to the break room.

The night passed without another swift trip to the bathroom. But the slimy-cold did. For brief moments, mere seconds at a time, it would start to creep over her. She’d turned or jerk around, glaring now because this was getting more annoying than concerning, only to see nothing.

Whoever this was, it wasn’t a continuous thing. Guess she could stop squinting at the shops across the street. But it would do her nerves no good to let this go unresolved.

The relief shift came in around 6AM. Amaya lingered as she always did, making sure the early patients were checked in and ready as people got coffee and as Dr Maxey gave his reports to the day-vet, who’s name she never learned. By the time she clocked out and gathered her things, she was ready to drop face first into her bed.

Shutting her locker, she swung by to check that she hadn’t forgotten her favorite thermos in the break room. Doing so brought her around to the supply closet and the giant plastic tote that held the donation blankets. As she approached, her steps faltered then slowed.

Amaya stared down at the heap of colors and fabrics. A good blanket was useful but there was a limit to how many one could just have laying around. All sorts got donated. Old ones that were unwanted, parents cleaning out a child’s closet, even ones that came after someone passed on.

Or one that had been used to block her view from very mysterious passengers and had been laundered to a blood-free state only hours before.

She’d put it there just as her shift started. She knew she had. She remembered the black and orange flannel horror she had laid it on and there that one sat right on top.

But the old sheet was missing.

The crazy night before, early morning, and long night shift combined with too little coffee meant Amaya’s head took a little while to get working. When it came to her, they heard her clipped curse all the way in the front of the clinic.

---

April blinked in surprise when she opened her door and saw Amaya standing on the doorstep. The younger woman looked ready to pass out yet there was nothing but fire burning in her eyes.

Before she could ask anything, Amaya breezed inside and said, "Whatever you need to do? Do it to get that crazy Shadow-Man here."

"Shadow---who?" April stammered.

"Get him here," Amaya repeated. She marched across to the living room, tossing her bag aside and
nearly tangling herself in the cord of her earbuds. "He and I need to discuss his boundary issues." She caught sight of the bewildered expression on April's face. "Sorry," she amended, forcing back the fire still raging against her senses. "I'm sorry. It's just you're the one who knows him and I need to get this to stop."

"Get what to stop?"

"This stupid espionage crap," she huffed, turning to wave a hand out the windows. "He cannot be that interested in my less-than-average existence."

April fought off a smile as she watched her. Amaya continued to grumble, mostly to herself, and frown out the window.

In truth, she didn't agree with this. Leo insisted, concerned at how Amaya handled the whole bloody sheet thing. April understood his reasoning—in that, yes, it was a concern for anyone in the Turtles' position.

Ever since they became more involved with the Human world, the more people who knew or even just suspected their existence, the Turtles knew the risk to themselves. There would always be Foot soldiers or gang-bangers to fight. The ones that truly worried them were the ones like Sacks. People ready with the needles and swabs, whether they be mad scientist types or ones who believed it was all for science, were the most concerning.

Leaving behind a trail, even something as minimal as a stained sheet, meant the possibility that someone could trace it. And that meant more chances of vulnerability if Amaya’s relationship with April was discovered. All points of weakness ready to exploit by whoever connected the dots.

April would fight him on it.

…if it hadn’t already been proven before.

Amaya kept up a running tirade about ‘lack of sleep’ and ‘privacy matters’ as she paced. Occasionally she would mutter something fluid sounding that never quite articulated into actual words.

April let her continue to ramble, retrieving a canned coffee from the fridge without needing to be asked. Amaya would need the caffeine for the upcoming conversation.

When April held it out to her, Amaya stopped mid-rant and took the can. She held it for a moment, silent, then ducked her head. "I'm freaking out, aren't I?"

"It would have freaked anyone out. Seriously, you okay?"

Amaya sat on the couch, fingers drumming on the can. "I think so," she said after a while. "I mean, I know I've told you over and over again that I don't want to know the dangerous stuff you get into. And you get into a lot," she added with a hard frown to April's chuckle. "You've respected that. You've never dragged me into any of it. That night?"

She watched April tense, eyes darting away like she tried to avoid what her mind recalled at the words. Amaya drank the coffee to give her time. Having ranted, she felt the fire die down to embers, clearing her head.

After April sat in a chair across from her, Amaya continued. "O'Neil, I don't need to know what happened. I don't. Whether it’s another gang story, if you’ve managed to get tangled with some mafia group, or if you’re tacking down a serial killer that dismembers people: I don’t need to
know. I trust that you're watching out for yourself with...whatever this is. And you only called me because there was no other option. That and I was the only one with a big enough car."

A smile flittered across April's face, easing the tension.

"So. Again. I don't need to know details. But I'm a nobody. I'm the very last person anyone would consider a threat. This is all unnecessary."

"It's not about being a threat," April started.

"No, really," Amaya cut in. "I'm an eternal student because I've got no other alternative. I run between 6 jobs at any given time, usually more. The shadiest connection I've got is a brother with a drinking problem, who I haven't talked to in years. In what possible universe am I threatening?"

The words were innocent enough. Yet the mention of her brother caused a sudden glint to come to April's eyes, questions lining up behind it. Her 'reporter face' slipped into place without her notice.

Berating herself internally, Amaya stood and walked to the windows. It took a moment before she felt calm again. "I'm not a threat," she said again. "And if they feel like me being there or whatever it was with that sheet somehow endangered them, I doubt following me around is going to fix that."

"It's not...it’s not solely about you," April said slowly.

She cocked a brow in doubt.

"What happened---these guys live a precarious life. The kind where espionage wasn’t too far off the mark, to be honest. You taking the sheet to a dry cleaner may not seem like much---"

"Wait, how did you---" Amaya started, startled at this easy statement.

"---but it could have bigger consequences than we realize. Taking it to such a public place where other people and their things could be effected by it."

For a moment, Amaya stood there and processed that. "There’s not---it wasn’t diseased was it?" she stammered.

April shook her head. "Not like you’re thinking. It just complicated things. And these guys are trying to contain it so no one gets hurt."

"I didn’t mean to spread any kind---"

"And the people who inflicted the wound that shed that blood? What about them?"

The words were almost quiet, spoken in a too steady tone that made Amaya’s mouth click shut to listen.

"There was a lot happening that night," April continued, not quite looking at Amaya; or anything really, as she thought back on the night in discussion. "And we were all so focused on getting out and getting help. So, who can to say there wasn’t a single person who managed to give us the slip? One might have been following you since that night. Tailing your car, watching what you did, and at any point would have interceded to get that sheet, blood or no. And they wouldn’t have been hesitant to take out someone in their way."

Amaya wanted to turn, to go back to looking out the window. And found she couldn’t, not with how tired April sounded. When she finally raised her eyes to meet Amaya’s, she saw the dark
smudges that told her own night had not been peaceful either.

Even so, that didn’t quiet the squirming sensation Amaya felt at the thought of someone following her. Watching her. Needing to say something, she blurted, “That’s a bit of an overkill, deciding on all those options.”

"It’s what keeps them safe," April said; Amaya flinched at the protective tone. "Beyond having enemies, even everyday people are a danger to them for that very reason.” She blew out a short breath, shrugging helplessly. “I made a call, that night. I brought you in on a bad situation and it’s left them vulnerable. I can't ask you to just forget it. But I can't ask them to leave you alone, either.”

That made sense. It didn't excuse anything, but it made sense.

Amaya sighed, crushing the empty can and heading into the kitchen. She tossed it in the trash and found herself stuck there, tracing odd shapes in the swirled countertop by the sink. "I'm not asking them to," she said at last. "A little trust would be enough. Just don’t have anyone watching me. That’s it. That’s not much, right?"

Another shrug and April truly looked like she regretted not having a better answer.

Crossing over to the couch, Amaya picked up her bag. She hesitated, letting the weight of it ground her. A glare as sunlight shifted on the windows across the street caught her eye. She spent another moment watching it play over the glass.

“There’s no other way?” She hated how tiny her voice sounded. Hated how even considering this made the nausea return, churning the coffee in her otherwise empty gut. She swallowed thickly. “April, I can’t do that. Not again.”

April was on her feet, frowning concern, and hurried over. “What do you---”

“Any other way,” Amaya barreled on, hand white-knuckled on her bag. “Any other way. I swear, I’ll try anything. Anything at all. I’d do whatever---"

"Might want to wait before you make promises."

The words hit Amaya like ice water. Or maybe it was the voice. The voice from behind the sheet.

Some part of her began to associate that voice with fear.

Beside her, April tensed and gripped her arm as though to hold her in place. She was turned slightly to the side, looking behind Amaya. Yet she didn’t say anything.

It took all Amaya had to keep from facing him. She stared out the window, holding herself tight to hide the shaking in her hands. She’d been just as scared in her car and just as determined to keep it from showing.

Get through this, she told herself.

"You got a better option, Shadow-Man?" she threw out. Her voice held steady. "Because the one you're running kind of sucks. I've got enough to worry about without having your lame spy games distracting me."

"No games, here," the voice said; calm, even, and still with that edge that made it feel like a knife pressed against her throat. "You alluded that we might be criminals. And what do criminals usually do when people learn their secrets? That's not something you want to play around with."
Was that annoyance or anger she heard? And what secrets?

Despite those questions, despite the frustration his no-nonsense attitude stoked, Amaya found her thoughts latching onto something different. The fear pulled back a little. She swallowed, taking the time to organize the question as best she could.

"How is he?"

Silence.

"Your friend," she said, hoping he couldn't hear how fast her heart raced. "The one that was hurt? Is he ok?"

Nothing.

On the edge of her vision, she saw a smug sort of smirk light April’s face as she commented, "Like I said: good people."

The man grunted though it didn't sound angry.

Amaya took that as a good sign. She shifted, rubbing her hands against a chill that wasn't there. Before she could say anything, April let go and leaned out of her line of sight. She came back and held out a hand to Amaya. A cell phone case and a little device the size of a quarter rested there.

"You want an alternative?" the man asked, voice suddenly a lot closer. "Here: we'll use these to monitor you. As long as we find nothing that endangers us, we can call it quits."

"For how long?" Amaya asked.

"Wouldn't make much sense to tell you, would it?" he said, a smile evident.

"And you're cool with that? Seems like a major step down for you."

"It won't just be tracking you," April said; she shot a look at the Shadow-Man over Amaya's shoulder, a nonverbal warning of some kind. "It'll be monitoring everything around you. If you're being followed, tracked by something else, or even if there's a listening device."

Amaya took the items, puzzling over that.

The confusion made April lay a hand on her arm, drawing her attention back. "These guys can't take chances. If there's even a slim chance that your daily routine crosses paths with their enemies--"

There was a hiss of breath, a warning.

"---then it's best to know," she concluded with another glare. "You want to keep out of the dangerous stuff? This will make sure of that. Okay?"

Amaya met April's gaze, trying to fathom what on earth could make her speak with such conviction. This was more than 'dangerous stuff' and criminal activity. This was...

Personal. Whatever else, this was personal for April.

That alone stopped the shaking in Amaya's hands. It took only a moment to fit her phone to the grey and green case, pausing to squint at a cartoon turtle on the back. It was a thicker case than what she used, probably due to the purpose of monitoring her. A little heavy but nothing too bad.
She would get used to it.

There was no sound. No movement. Nothing to give it away. But Amaya knew Mr. Shadow-Man was gone. Cautious, she turned and found she and April were alone in the apartment.

---

The phone case gave her no problems. It was more likely for her to leave the house naked than forget her phone. The quarter-sized device?

Amaya honestly thought it was gonna kill her.

Three days after that meeting in April's apartment---three blessed days with no creepy-eyes feeling distracting her---she forgot the device. Already on her way to the university (job #4, still holding strong years later), it hit her when she saw that silly phone case.

"Crap," she groaned, flipping the phone around. She paused, struck by the thought that she didn't know how to get in touch with Mr. Shadow-Man except through April. And April was running leads on her latest story. Something about firearm smuggling.

As she stood there, staring at her phone, it began to beep. She jerked, startled by the odd sound, then saw it wasn't the phone itself making the noise. A small light on the side of the case blinked in sync with the sound. Anxious but curious, she pressed it.

A hologram popped up, laying over her phone like a second screen and easily visible in the mid-morning light. It was simplistic in design, merely showing a call in progress from...

The caller was just that same cartoon turtle, lit up in purple.

Amaya stared at it, marveling at the tech. It wasn't until a passerby threw an odd look back at her that she realized the phone case was talking.

"Hello, hello! This going through? Looking for an Amaya Fortier!"

Not quite believing what was happening, Amaya lifted it to her ear. "Uh...hello? Amaya speaking," she answered.

"Oh, hi! Glad to finally speak with you."

The chipper voice, completely opposite of what she expected, made her smile.

"But, uh, that's not the purpose of this call," the voice went on, sounding abruptly chastised. "It's been 15 minutes since you've taken the shell-case away from the tracker you were also given. Just checking on that! Did you understand that they should be kept together? Easiest place for it would be in your shoe; wouldn't recommend anywhere else."

Ignoring the term 'shell-case,' Amaya made an irritated noise. "Yes, I know. Redundancy aside, that may be more problematic than anything."

"How so?"

"I change shoes like three times a day," she said, continuing her way through the landscaped grounds of the campus. "Most times, I'm changing clothes as well. The case was probably the best option."

The voice hummed for a moment. "It's not about redundancy, miss," he said, apologetic. "They
each work on different levels. If the case were to do both jobs, it would risk wiping your phone's memory. Haven't been able to work out that bug. Don't get many cell phones to test with."

"Well, I'm barely making it to work as it is. I can't turn around and get it. Is---I mean, there's no...penalty for that, right?"

It was immensely difficult to find a diplomatic way of asking 'is this gonna get me killed?'

"No, no, nothing like that. I think I got a solution, though. I'll should get back to you sometime later today."

This guy was reassuring. Again, so different from what she experienced with Shadow-Man. "Guess this means I owe you one, huh?" she asked.

The line went quiet. She checked but the call was still going. The guy cleared his throat yet the words still sounded rough. "You don't owe me anything. I owe you."

Amaya blinked, her chest tight when she realized who she was talking to. "So, you made it out ok," she said, keeping her tone light.

"In one piece, more or less." Another pause. "Thank you."

"Anytime," she returned. A part of her meant it.

---

Just as she pulled into her driveway, the phone case made a series of beeps; almost musical for being so abrupt. A holographic message flashed over the screen: solution waiting in your mailbox. The sender was the same purple turtle. She tried not to think on how they knew where she lived.

It was a watch. The simple black band held four studs, two above and two below the watch face. The watch face looked like any other digital watch. The numerous tiny buttons that rimmed it hinted at far more. Smiling, she looped it on her wrist and hurried in to get ready for her night at the performing arts center (job #20). She paused only long enough to shoot a message back, marveling at how easily the case's hologram integrated with her phone.

'Got the watch. You guys in the habit of giving out gifts?'

She wasn't expecting a response. On her way back out, she just threw a glance at the screen. She stopped half-way into her car, stunned to see a wall of messages. Each one was listed by the same cartoon turtle, only different colors.

The purple one recommended not getting the watch wet but it would be fine for her day-to-day routines.

An orange one started asking about her jobs, most notably if she delivered pizza, or any kind of food. The brief messages piled on top of one another without waiting for an answer.

A red one appeared, starting an argument with the orange one. The purple one tried to edge in, telling them they might overload her phone. The purple one felt like the one who had called her; held a bit of his nervous energy. Orange and red? Who could they be?

The very last message held only one word: Stop.

No messages since. Amaya frowned down at the little blue turtle that preceded the order.
After almost two weeks of surveillance, Amaya Fortier showed no sign of posing a threat in any way.

The surveillance continued.

By now, just about everyone accepted it. Mikey enjoyed it far more than he should, messaging her about random stuff or even to debate which place to order food (mainly pizza). Given her work history, she replied with plenty of insider info. And there had been an increase in the quality of food since then. Raph joined in if the mood struck him. Mostly to hassle Mikey. Even Donnie checked in with her under the guise of tweaking the performance of the shell-case and modified communicator. Leo kept his distance. Partly because he felt like he had to.

Partly because he didn't like how he felt about it.

At April's apartment, he had watched her rant. Every time she spoke, the fire in her dark eyes grew stronger. She admitted not wanting to be involved yet was ready to challenge him without hesitation. She controlled the fear fighting that inner fire, neither giving in, and refused to back down from his less than veiled threats.

It wasn't as though she thought them harmless. Donnie chastised him about that, citing that she thought they would hurt her for forgetting the tracker. Even so, she kept up with Mikey's inane chatter, matched Raph with a dry, cynical humor, and even humored Donnie with his tech-talk. All while juggling the insane list of jobs she held down. With such a taxing schedule, one would expect her to be challenging this continued tracking. She didn't.

That might have been what bugged him so much. Her life and her actions never synched. And it wouldn't leave him alone.

Unsatisfied, he kept up with the surveillance.

Leo was supposed to be meditating. But he had been there for only ten minutes and was nowhere close to doing so. His thoughts were too frazzled, too loose.

He left the dojo, mood soured. He wandered over to the raised platform on the far side of the Lair that held the massive bank of computer equipment that served as more bedroom than surveillance HUB as it was called.

The lab was where Donnie researched, tinkered with the more delicate equipment and gear, or just did the things that made Mikey say he was ‘pulling a mad scientist.’ The HUB was where those projects started. Each monitor could function on a separate task or one. Most times, camera feeds from the sewers ran on a handful just to keep vigilant. Side by side, the lab looked like a small offshoot of the HUB with more explosive tendencies.

Donnie sat in his usual spot, moving much better. The edge of the bandages showed the irregular patches in his scales where the scar tissue was still forming. As of late, he went between here and the garage more frequently as cabin fever set in.

The lower half of the monitors were coved in typed reports. It off set the ones above that ran the various camera feeds. Leo caught the title of one of the reports. He grimaced; another info-dump from the task force. The meeting with Vincent had not gone well. The only thing that convinced the human that the process needed to be changed was Casey bluntly telling her how badly Donnie was injured. "Anything new?" he asked out of habit.
"More on the industrial district," Donnie answered, unsurprised at his brother's sudden appearance. "There's a dispute about the deed, might even have an altered blueprint in the city's records. That could mean the buildings have their own network of tunnels and hidden caches around the place. Maybe even further into the city. Of course, it all needs to be verified. Or were you asking about something else?"

Leo's eyes jumped to a small monitor set in the direct middle of the hub. A sticky note attached to it read LEO'S PET PROJECT in Mikey's handwriting. He snatched the note, tossing it aside and avoiding Donnie's knowing look. That only gave him the option of staring at the monitor in question.

Half of it was data: location, time elapsed since arrival, people encountered, and places visited that day. The other half held the wall of messages that went between all their shell-cells. He always ignored his when it alerted him to another addition to the feed. Here, it showed an active conversation between Raph and Amaya on weight training techniques. As he watched, Mikey popped in with a plea for Amaya not to goad Raph or his biceps would explode.

Leo's mouth twitched, almost smiling. He pulled back on that, frustration renewed.

Donnie watched, idly stretching his shoulder. He chuckled as Raph's response became filled with cursing. "It's never a dull conversation with her."

Leo snorted, arms crossed. He fought the urge to pace. "She going to be making up workout schedules next?"

Donnie shrugged. "At this point, I wouldn't be surprised if she had that in her resume, too." He adjusted his glasses, thinking. Then he spun his chair so that he faced Leo. Even sitting, he was tall. And the calculated look he gave Leo added a layer of intimidation rarely seen on him. "Are you going to tell me why you're keeping up this pretense?"

"About what?"

"About why you're insisting on keeping tabs with Amaya."

"Since when are you on first name terms with her?" Leo demanded.

"Since she helped save my life." Question flickered through his eyes. "Is that what's bothering you? That we needed help?"

Dangerous questioning. Even more dangerous line of thinking. And while he would have pushed it on any other day, Leo found he couldn't. Not with Donnie. Not when he was only trying to understand.

In the years since Sacks, since Krang, there were too many close calls. Too often due to someone getting careless. They had to be careful. While the task force helped bridge some of their involvement with the human world, they couldn't rely on it completely.

They were ninja. They belonged to the shadows. The more people that got involved with their lives, the greater the risk.

All of which, Donnie knew. But he wasn't asking about that. He was asking about Amaya.

The one that wouldn't leave Leo alone.

"She makes no sense, Donnie," Leo said at last. "Nothing in how she's acted since that night makes
since. She hasn't even asked about the surveillance, has she?"

Donnie shook his head, glancing back at the message feed.

"So why is she going along with this?" he went on. "She's fine if it's electronic, but having actual
eyes on her is the limit? And she responds to the texts like it was anyone else. No hesitation. She
just readily accepts four strangers texting her?"

"Nothing's shown that she has ulterior motives," Donnie said, fingers twitching like he wanted to
review the data. "And everything I've seen seems to be legitimate. She hasn't broken either device
and there are no linguistic changes to suggest she's speaking to anyone in code." He paused; behind
his glasses, his eyes grew softer. "In fact, aside from April and us, she only uses her phone for
business. And listening to audio books."

"What?"

"Just that," Donnie said, shrugging. He leaned over and typed a few commands into his mass of
keyboards. The screen right next to Leo shifted, illustrating what Donnie said. "Out of the eighty-
seven contacts in her phone, the vast majority are work numbers. Then various people from the
university, people she tutors or other employment-related relationships. The professor she works
for is the only person she regularly contacts that isn't strictly work related. And some of that is due
to the professor being involved with the house she's renting. April is the only one she regularly
contacts for any other reason. And the strangest part of all this?"

When Leo looked over at him, he was surprised to see sadness touch his brother's face.

"No family. She mentioned a brother, didn't she? But no information on her phone that leads to
him. No contact information, or information in general, about her family. I asked April. She said
other than that one slip, Amaya's never said a thing about any part of her family."

"Are they dead?"

"Alive, according to records," Donnie answered without hesitation. He sat back in his chair, gold-
green eyes intense. "You're so certain that her actions don't make sense. Maybe it's because what
information you have is so superficial?"

"You just said she's on the up and up. No hiding anything."

"All of which relates to her movements and her work. But even after all this," Donnie motioned to
the screens as a whole, "the only insight we have to this girl are what books she reads or listens to.
Nothing about her."

The two fell quiet. The usual buzz of noise from the Lair continued on, a permanent part of life in
the sewers. His brother's insight only complicated Leo's thoughts. In a way, he felt validated. If
Donnie agreed with Leo's assessment, he wasn't so out of his element. It changed nothing but it was
reassuring all the same.

A chuckle caught his ear. Donnie watched the message feed again. The conversation devolved into
a mass of swearing from Raph and emoji from both Mikey and Amaya. After a moment, Donnie
pointed at the monitor and said, "You know, she seems to enjoy this. She doesn't let much show.
Doesn't get personal. But she never ignores a message. Even Mikey asking for the thirtieth time if
she'll deliver a pizza in person. She always responds."

"She might be trying to stay on our good side," Leo suggested. The words held no weight, though.
Donnie gave no reaction to that. Instead, he tapped the monitor of the girl in question. "You keep saying she doesn't make sense. How can you know if you never talk with her, Leo?" he posed. "I'm not saying invite her down here or anything. But you've never talked to her outside of being 'Mr. Shadow-Man.'"

Leo shut his eyes, blocking out his brother's cheeky grin. That stupid moniker stuck the instant she put it in the feed. Mikey even graffitied Leo's bedroom door with it.

"So," Donnie went on, "how can you even speculate what she would do? Can't gauge a plan of attack on such superficial intel." He tapped his scarred shoulder to emphasize the point.

Mentally sighing, Leo knew he was right. He just hated to admit it.

---

Fridays were the best and worst days.

The best because Amaya had more freedom with her schedule during the weekends. The worst because around mid-terms, there was precious little she could do aside from grading and planning for Professor Prejean's classes.

She already declined several notifications of call-in jobs. One for a high-end courier service that she knew would pay out big. It would have taken her out of the city for at least a day, killing her initial temptation.

It was well past dark before she left the university for the day. Thoughts heavy with more grading she needed to do, she trekked out with little more on her mind than indulging at a cafe before turning in.

The idea tumbled around her head as she walked, absorbed in the latest book Professor Prejean had recommended. A beep jostled her thoughts, interrupting the narrator. She found herself smiling as she dug out her phone. What would Orange be asking now? Or had Red picked another argument he wanted backup for? When she flipped her phone around, she froze mid-step.

A blue turtle shone on the screen.

Shadow-Man. She blinked several times, not quite believing it. After so long, she thought he either didn't care to message her or he forgot her entirely. Then his message became clear.

**A little late to be going home.**

She rolled her eyes, typing back at once. *'Decent time for this part of the year.'*

The response was almost instant. **What part?**

Amaya started walking again, keeping an eye on the streets around her. *'Mid-terms. Hella busy. Worse for the intro classes.'*

**That means you leave at midnight?**

*'It's only ten. Calm down, Shadow-Man.'*

She grinned, seeing the bubbles that showed he was typing. She wished she could see what expression he made at the name. Red told her he hated it and promised her that the three of them used it as often as they could to irritate him.
In the effort to be civil, I'm going to ignore that.

She snorted. 'That'd be a first. What brought on this civility?'

Who uses 'civility' in a text message?

'Same one who txts in complete sentences. Guess we got that in common.'

You're not driving? Even though it's late?

So, he wanted to steer the conversation. Amaya smiled to herself; a part of her wanted to just call and be done with the texting. But she never did. Not even when the conversations with the other three were going a mile a second, messages flying by so fast she wasn't sure what part she was responding to. She stuck to text, keeping that bit of distance between herself and the strangers tracking her.

Speaking of the other three...they were nowhere to be seen. Only the little blue turtle remained active. Had he told them to back off for this? Seemed like something he'd do.

'Driving would be a waste of gas. Not that far away. Walking's fine.'

You're not doing the Uber thing?

Amaya started a reply, pausing when the crosswalk light changed. She hurried over, eyes on the traffic in case anyone got stupid. She paused outside a small shop to finish the text.

Running footsteps made her turn. A man ran into her. She hit the shop's window, bouncing off so hard she hit the ground. She scrambled to get upright, trying to see what was going on.

The man was on the ground as well. They looked at one another at the same time. Amaya saw his bruised face, the blood trailing from his mouth as well as from under his hair, and the wide, panicked edge to his eyes. Then the man was on his feet, running as if his life depended on it.

Amaya straightened just as three younger men hurried past her. She couldn't get much of a look at them, running so quick and intent on their target. But intent was clear enough.

That odd musical beep drew her attention down. Her phone lie on the sidewalk, screen cracked from the fall. The little light on the case was lit up again, blaring with increasing volume. She grabbed it on instinct, activating the button.

She didn't hear the voice, an odd ringing in her head from her sudden collision. There was only the sense that someone was talking to her.

"Trouble," she groaned into the broken phone. Then she let it fall back to the ground and stumbled to her feet.

The older man's eyes stayed with her. Too much fear. Too much pain. She couldn't un-see it.

Amaya ran after the men who hunted him, her bag bouncing against her hip. One hand groped inside, searching. She kept running, praying she didn't lose them. Her black hair fell in tangled heaps around her, half-pulled from the already hasty knot. She pushed it back, trying to keep her vision clear.

It was easy to get lost in the streets. Even if you grew up there. But the quiet streets were broken by a sharp yell and laughter. She followed, hand closing on a cool cylinder in her bag.
The alley looked like a makeshift garage. A truck was parked in the very back, a few bikes chained beside it. The three men cornered their prey here, still within sight of the street. The older man was hunched on the ground, begging them to stop, pleading for them to just take his wallet and leave.

The laughter, the blows that continued to fall, and the vicious nature of the three younger men more than told Amaya all she needed to know. They were dangerous. And they were going to continue the assault if no one intervened. There might be a reason, even a twisted one that made sense to them.

Amaya's heart hammered in her chest. Her hold on the cylinder slipped, palm clammy with sweat. This was so stupid. This was insane.

But who else was there? No concerned faces peeked through the windows overhead. No sirens blared. If nothing happened, the man was going to die.

Swallowing back nausea, Amaya rushed up to the huddled mass of bodies. "Hey!" she shouted.

The one closest to her jerked around. He saw her rushing them, a grin splitting his face. She got an impression of horrid teeth, grimy clothes, and the funk of someone who didn't regularly shower. Then she lifted the can of mace straight into his face and triggered it.

The grin turned into a twisted mask of pain. He howled, backing away so suddenly he tripped both his companions and the man they were beating. He clawed at his own face, swelling eyes and reddened skin growing worse by the second. Bouncing off the walls of the alley, he rolled on the ground, trying to get away from what hurt him.

The other two spun around to see the cause of the interruption. Neither looked at their peer, writhing on the ground and screaming in pain. The biggest one stepped closer, knuckles cracking as he clenched them into fists.

Amaya kept moving, pulling from her jacket her other item of self-defense: a lighter. The big man looked at it in confusion. Then he recoiled violently at the fireball she sent his way, born on a burst from the mace.

Both thugs backed away but they didn't go far. Amaya circled them, crouching down next to the beaten man. She kept the lighter and can aimed at them. "Can you stand?" she asked, feeling her voice shake.

The man just moaned.

Taking a risk, she glanced down. His eyes were open but unfocused. He didn't seem to realize she was there.

Too late, she looked back. The last thug, thinner than the other two and looking meaner than both combined, kicked high before she realized. His boot struck the hand holding the mace so hard there was a crack. The can spun away, lost in the darkened alley.

Pain shot through her arm. She bit her tongue, tasting blood, and pulled back. She kept herself between the beaten man and his attackers. Her head swam with fear and pain. The lighter clattered to the ground, useless.

The thin man cocked his head, a wicked leer stretching his skull-like face.

Amaya tensed, trying to prepare herself for whatever was going to happen. She held her throbbing hand out to shield the man behind her. All her focus on the leering thug, she hoped he missed what
her good hand was doing.

A soft gasp broke the air. A thud made the thin thug spin around. The larger thug was on the ground, still. He stared down at the body of his companion, disbelief breaking through his frenzied excitement. He jerked around, trying to pinpoint the cause of this. Then his whole body seized, muscles jumping and twitching. Just as suddenly, it stopped and he collapsed to the ground.

Amaya's breath came out as a growl. She gripped the taser tighter, the case creaking in protest. Giving in to the vindictive urge, she jammed the prongs into the back of the thug's thigh. He flopped and shuddered as the electricity wrecked his frame.

When she pulled back, the rush of her actions hit her and she toppled onto her butt. Panting, she looked between the tazed thug before her, the one still writhing and screaming along the edge of the alley, and the one passed out cold. She turned to the beaten man. Her hand trembled as she reached out to check for a pulse.

The skin along her neck prickled. Déjà vu struck her, throwing her back to April's apartment weeks ago. There was no noise. No tell. Other than what her senses screamed at her as the cold-slime feeling dripped down her body.

Someone else was in the alley.

As though summoned by her thoughts, a shadow detached itself from the gloom of the back of the alley. It grew as it drew closer. Just on the edge of the light that the full moon cast on the alleyway, it paused, hesitating on that last step.

Amaya swallowed, feeling her heart pound somewhere in her throat. "Sh-shadow-man?" she whispered, voice raw.

The figure twitched. Then it moved into the light.

Amaya felt her mind seize. It couldn't process what her eyes were seeing. Stuttering, she forced herself to take it in.

Green skin jumped out at her at once, pebbled with darker tones along his limbs. He stood well over six feet, broad chest straining as he took deep breaths. Part of his size was taken up by the...shell. That was a shell on his back. Part of his back. Was his back.

Gleaming metal shorted that looping thought. Twin blades rested at his sides, twitching with each movement of the densely muscled arms. She stared at the hands that held the blades. Three-fingered hands.

Then her gaze drew upward at a flash of color. She thought it was the mask, bright blue, standing out against the green skin. The flesh along his mouth and throat were lighter in color, a sharper contrast when he gritted his teeth, gleaming against the unusual colors.

No. Not the mask. Brilliant blue eyes watched her from under the mask. Watched each and every reaction she made to his appearance. Eyes that were guarded and too used to being so.

Amaya rocked back, struck by all this within moments. Her mouth hung open but nothing came. No scream. No words. All she could do was stare.

His guarded expression flickered.

A shout made Amaya jump, spinning around to its source. A couple, looking like they had been
out on a date, stood at the mouth of the alley. The man was pulling out his phone while the woman was shouting something, motioning to Amaya. Still reeling, she couldn't make out the woman's words.

When she turned back, the alley was empty.

---

It was two days before Leo got the call. April asked if he could come to her apartment. Amaya wanted to speak to someone about that night.

He was more than a little surprised it took that long. And also surprised that his brothers followed the order not to have contact with her until she made the first move. Mikey pouted but raised no fuss. If anything, he seemed the more melancholy about it all.

Donnie kept monitoring the data that the watch sent. No change in her routine, from what he could tell. Without the phone, they were limited to only tracking her movements. No way to tell what she was saying. Only that she hadn't gone anywhere out of the ordinary.

Before leaving for the meet-up, Leo found himself loitering in the dojo. Another failed meditation session. He started sharpening his swords for want of something constructive to do.

His foul mood was the exact opposite of helpful. But he couldn't shake it. No matter how hard he threw himself into training, no matter how he forced himself past the point of fatigue, he never reached a point where he could go past that night.

Her pale face, scared, trembling, and staring at him in that alley.

A soft hiss sounded as Master Splinter opened the sliding door. At once, Leo rolled onto his knees, the resting position to await instruction. Splinter waved a clawed hand in dismissal. His demeanor alone told his purpose.

He wasn't there as a master teaching his student. He was a father speaking to his son.

Splinter came to where Leo sat, almost level with his eldest. Black eyes shone kindly in the soft lighting. "What troubles you?"

Leo looked away, fiddling with the hilt of his blade. Stupid nervous habit. But he couldn't shake it, no matter how hard he tried. It brought comfort. "I don't know what to expect," he said, knowing to be truthful. "I don't know what to expect," he said, knowing to be truthful. "From the beginning, this girl has tripped me up, sensei. I can't predict her. Even now? The fact that she hasn't changed her routine after that? I can't imagine a reason for her going about her life after...after seeing that."

After seeing me.

It was vain, he knew. He briefly wondered if it would be the same if she had seen one of his brothers. Or even Splinter. Sometimes he wondered just how much he truly accepted their mutated nature. And how much of it was just trying to convince himself of it.

No matter how old he got or how many times it happened, seeing those reactions to their appearance stung. Even April, their closest friend and confidant, had fainted upon seeing them. Casey had been ready to attack them.

"Donnie and I talked about it, day before that happened," he went on, trying to keep his thoughts from that dark road. "He suggested I try talking to her. To get a better understanding of who she
was. I did. Right before she was attacked."

Splinter hummed. "Unfortunate timing. Though you possibly gained more insight from her actions alone."

Leo drew in a breath, staring down the length of his blade. So easy to incapacitate that thug. And he had been on the verge of taking out the last when she'd tazered his ass. Literally. Injured and scared, she kept her wits and continued to protect a man she didn't even know. Insight, indeed.

"But it seems," Splinter went on, "that it has left you in the same position. This girl is unknown. Hard to make plans around."

"No kidding," Leo huffed.

Splinter nodded. Turning to leave, he said, "Then I suggest you pick up where you were interrupted."

Leo just stared after his father.

Splinter smiled over his shoulder. "Talk to her."

---

Leo watched from the roof as Amaya made her way into April's apartment building. She kept a casual pace, no indication of fear or dread. Leo kept expecting her to turn back or have a meltdown in the middle of the streets.

What was she thinking? What was she expecting?

He was surprised when she asked to meet at sunset. Was it some kind of compromise? An acknowledgement that he preferred the darkness?

April answered the door and the two had a brief conversation that Leo intentionally did not listen to. Amaya stepped into the living room and April left, throwing a knowing look over to the corner where Leo waited.

Amaya seemed to prepare herself, rubbing at her arms and muttering softly. She paced a little, nervous energy tangible.

Leo watched her for a while, trying to decipher anything from her actions. But still, nothing. Knowing he shouldn't delay longer, he moved closer, keeping at her back. With the darkening sky outside, he had a clear view of her reflection in the windows. She paused mid-pace, tensing the same way she had in the alley. Her brows furrowed, a look of intense concentration upon her.

"You haven't said anything to the press." Leo kept his tone light, trying not to scare her.

She still jerked at the abruptness of it. The line of her back tightened, tensing as she held herself in check. She cleared her throat but never made a move to turn around. "What would I tell them?"

"I dunno. Giant turtle wreaks havoc in New York City? Catchy ring to it."

She drew in a shaky breath. "Turtle? Well, the shell doesn't seem so out of place, now."

He waited, anticipating something. A question. Demand. Something. Instead, she just stood there. After a while, he realized she was waiting on him. "What did you want to discuss?"
Amaya fumbled with her pockets for a moment before holding her arm out to the side, angled back towards him. In her hand, she held the broken parts of the shell-case. "Kind of hard to keep tabs on me with half the tech busted," she said, shrugging.

Leo looked past the broken shell-case. Her hand was splinted, the skin around the bandage a nasty purple and black. He recalled her putting herself between the injured man and his attackers, shaking and outnumbered, but refusing to move. Even for her own safety.

"You're expecting it to continue?" he asked to cover his hesitation.

She shrugged again. "I figured you guys wanted more information. Only reason to keep going."

Leo moved, coming around to stand within sight. He wanted to see her reaction, needed to see it. He wanted something to make sense.

Catching the motion, she half-jumped out of the way. Her wide eyes took him in, every detail from the gleaming hilts over his shoulders to his half-clenched hands down to the patched sandals he wore.

She drew back, breath catching. And oddly, it clicked. At last, a response he anticipated, though much less than expected. She raised her eyes back to his and he saw the disbelief, the half-formed thoughts that logic could not process.

And he saw her eyes were a deep brown, only the barest hint of color to the dark facets.

Amaya Fortier saw him. And she did not run or scream or faint or attack.

"Okay," she said after a while. She nodded, almost to herself. "Okay. Giant turtle. Giant turtle with samurai swords. Okay."

He motioned to the couch. "Do you need to sit?"

"Not sure," she said, still tracking his every movement. The disbelief ebbed away, little by little. She titled her head to the side. "The secrecy makes a hell of a lot more sense, you know."

Leo nodded, not wanting to go into details on that.

Amaya appeared to reach some kind of conclusion. She held out the broken shell-case.

Leo lifted hand to accept it. Again, there was a moment where he saw her processing the sight of his broad, three-fingered hand. Then she carefully tipped the broken device into his palm. That was when he noticed the failed tracker amongst the pieces. The watch wasn't there.

Catching his questing gaze, she pulled up her sleeve to reveal the watch. "I figured you guys could repair the case. Or find another substitute. And in the meantime, you can reach me with this. Right?"

"Reach you?" Leo repeated, trying to catch up with her words. Was she implying---

She lifted a finger, pointing to the shell-case then right to Leo's face. "If there's one thing I've realized, Mr. Shadow-Man, it's that you run a complicated life. And there are two things you need to realize. Right now."

"Reach you?" Leo repeated, trying to catch up with her words. Was she implying---

She lifted a finger, pointing to the shell-case then right to Leo's face. "If there's one thing I've realized, Mr. Shadow-Man, it's that you run a complicated life. And there are two things you need to realize. Right now."

Amaya leaned back, looking at him head on. "If half the things April told me are true, then I'm betting you guys might need another getaway driver before too long."
"Getaway driver?"

"Every good protector of the innocent needs a getaway driver," she said airily

Leo shook his head, fighting a smile. Given everything that happened, given the things he and his brothers had discussed at length, it wasn't as though the idea was new. And Donnie was right: she had done nothing to prove she couldn't be trusted.

"What's the second thing?"

A flush lit under her skin. She glanced aside, clearing her throat. "I kept the job at the vet clinic. At April's insistence, of course. Always knew it had something to do with turtles. I never thought the ones she wanted to keep alive would be so---" Those dark eyes flicked up and down his form once more, glinting. "---talkative."

The laugh that came from him was loud and genuine. Amaya smiled; like watching the first star appear in the night sky, slow but bright. Catching himself, Leo found the old suspicions falling away, bit by bit. There was still so much to learn, so much before he could truly say he trusted her.

But the road leading there did not seem so bad.

Chapter End Notes

Thank for reading! Updates should be weekly. Comment/review and it will make my day!
Not Every Secret

Chapter Summary

Letting people in is hard. Making yourself vulnerable is even harder.

Leo finds himself doing both.

"It's not forever, stop pouting like that."

"I am not pouting."

"Team vote: pouting or not?"

A chorus of calls echoed through the lair. Leo glowered down at April, biting back both a retort and a smile. It would be so easy to smile. Hell, he needed it. But he couldn't shake the unease that had gripped him at April's announcement.

An assignment covering a summit in Washington, D.C. Assembled patrons of sciences, theorists and inventors alike, all to discuss many of the strange events the world had witnessed over the last few years. Given that she had been at ground-zero for some of that, April had been offered the job.

And it would last close to a month.

Since reuniting with them over four years ago, April had never been out of town for that long. It wasn't as though they couldn't function without her. They'd survived near decades on their own. But it did raise a few concerns.

Donnie was still recuperating from his wounds. Hardly a month out and it was an effort for him to get through routine training. Leo forbid him from going topside until he improved. With that, there was a need to keep their medical supplies stocked at all times.

That, along with their usual needs for day to day existence, was usually taken care of by the human standing before him, a faint smile tugging her lips as the echo of his traitor brothers trailed around them.

Unable to stop himself, Leo allowed a small grin. "Not pouting," he insisted again.

"Fine. Sternly objecting with the sense of a four year old. That better?"

"Immensely."

Her smile faded a little. She laid a hand on his arm. "I'm sorry I couldn't give you a better heads up."
They just told me today and I had to give my answer. And I couldn't just say no---"

"And you shouldn't have to," Leo cut in. "It's your job, April. It's important."

"You guys are important, too."

"Hey, we'll manage."

April frowned. "That's just it, Leo. You don't have to just 'manage.' Do I really need to spell it out for you?"

"Geez, April---"

"No. You said it yourself: it's not a bad idea. What better time than now? Use this as a trial run and see. I will be fully ready to debunk all your worries when I come back."

Leo held in a sigh, rubbing his head to give him a few more seconds of thought. In truth? She was right. In reality?

He was uneasy. There were so many things that could go wrong. So many things that could happen. And this was still far too new for him to be comfortable. He was willing, yes. But this wasn't a planned thing where contingencies were taken into account.

This was falling down a hill and hoping you landed on your ass, not your head.

April's frown deepened, no doubt reading the thoughts behind his neutral expression. "Come on. You've even said---"

"I know what I said, April. I'll talk it out with sensei and Donnie. See what they think. I'm not risking anything for---"

"I know," she said, giving his arm a squeeze. Her words were just as gentle as his had been. Softer, though, carrying the unsaid things.

Leo drew in a breath before turning to seek out Master Splinter. April watched him go, fighting so many urges she wasn't even sure what was what. Priority, though? She pulled out her phone to give Amaya a heads up.

---

An uncanny sense of timing seemed to be part of being a ninja. At least, Amaya felt like it was so for Leo. She had literally clocked out at the performing arts center when her phone lit up. Fresh from the phone company, shiny new shell-case on and flashing so brightly it was embarrassing, she pulled it out and saw the little blue turtle icon blinking on the screen.

She answered the call and hit the street. She parked about a block away, wanting to grab a late dinner at a stall near the lot. "Go for Amaya."

There was a pause. "You've spent too much time around Mikey."

"Says you. You're brother doesn't hold the market on lame catchphrases."
"Ha ha," he deadpanned.

Amaya fought the laugh bubbling up. It was so easy to tease, easy to push Leo's buttons. And, frankly, his brothers only made it easier to do so.

"April told you about her assignment?"

"Yep. Also that I might need to be more available during that time."

"Not if you're busy---"

"I've been busy since the age of five. I think I can balance my duties while finding time to help you guys out. What do you need?"

"That's just it. Donnie has a suggestion but I want to run it by you first. You heading home?"

"ETA 12 minutes," she said, rounding the corner and joining the line for the stall. The smells of greasy fried deliciousness wafted on the air and her stomach growled. "Make that 15; getting some food."

"We'll be there."

Fourteen minutes later, Amaya hurried up the stairs to change out of her usher uniform. She threw on a sweater and the comfiest pair of lounge pants she owned. She smirked down at the multi-colored alligators that patterned the legs. Shame it wasn't turtles.

When she came down the stairs, a tingle lit along her hair line. She leaned around the railing in time to see Donnie and Leo coming into the living room. She frowned at the silent entry. Hitting the bottom step, she leaned on the banister. "So, what's the plan?"

Donnie grinned at her, jabbing the monitor on his forearm to pull up a shaky hologram. He tweaked it, working to smooth out the image. As he did, the bandages over the still healing wounds on his side and shoulder stuck out, making her wince.

It was on the tip of her tongue to chastise him for coming all the way here. She was beginning to agree with Leo's insistence he take it easy. And from the way Leo was frowning at his brother, she believed he had berated the point the whole way here with little headway.

Stubborn siblings were the worst.

She mentally shook off the thought and focused on the schematics that filled the air. Her eyes narrowed. "What on earth---"

"Your neighborhood," Donnie said, already pulling up a few more things and laying them over one another as he spoke. "Checking the records, the nearby sewer system in this area is connected to many places we have easy access to. With that knowledge, I've been able to extrapolate several key points in the area and in a few of your more frequent job locations to make a list of drop off and pick up points. That way, it won't take much out of your way if we need something."

Amaya blinked, watching as said sewer lines were highlighted. She moved closer, squinting against the brightness of the holograms. "So, we just do a drop off? Don't need me to bring anything directly---"
"This won't cut into your schedule," Leo said. He shrugged at the frown she threw him. "You've said it often enough, your day to day is hectic. A few designated drop points would be better for all of us."

She considered that. Looking over the hologram, something caught her eye. The image showed a blown up portion of the neighborhood, her routes to and from the city proper highlighted and noted with frequency of use. The sewer lines were also highlighted. And where they intersected---

Yet neither of the Turtles mentioned it. It was on the tip of her tongue to point it out, wanting to know their reactions.

Then she recalled those days of surveillance. The way they both fought it. And decided to pick her battles. "Okay. Which one first?" she asked, picking up a notepad and pen.

---

Did he expect things to fall apart the moment April left? In all honesty, no. Leo might have to plan for the worse, but even he was aware of the likelihood of it actually happening.

He kept them on a light routine, just to be safe. He didn't bother using Donnie's injury as an excuse. Raph would call him on it, Donnie would persist he was fine, and Mikey would do something rash like raiding a pharmacy in an attempt to help. So he used this as an opportunity to give himself and his brothers some downtime.

While his brothers did their own thing, Leo walked the sewers. Given New York's ever changing landscape, he tried to do this every few months. No telling if some construction crew dug too deep or flash flooding tore apart a once clear tunnel. Walking them helped reaffirm the layout in his head.

It was the only time beside meditation that he was able to center himself. It was therapeutic as well as helpful. And if the parallel of hiding from his problems glared at him in the face while doing so?

He staunchly ignored it.

Lately his talks with sensei circled to the same topic. Leo stopped trying to avoid it. His father was too used to his ways and if the rat didn't guide the conversation back sneakily, then he just flat out changed it.

Their lives shifted. Minutely, now. But in ways that Splinter believed would have drastic effects. Beneficial, he said. Ones they had been fighting for too long.

Leo just couldn't agree. He wanted to. He truly did. The part of him that remembered those days of gazing at the topside world through sewer grates all but yelled at him to agree with his father.

The years between kept him from doing so.

Leo came to a junction he knew all too well. His lip curled as he glanced down the long track of tunnel. How long until spring? Too soon and far enough, all at once? Until then, this place waited; another reminder of their bizarre lives.

He pushed on, doing no more than assuring himself that the place was unchanged. More checks,
more places where memories just insisted he stick with his gut. More reasons to fight what his father wished.

They could never have normal lives. Something as simple as human friends was a wonder. A miracle, he believed, even though April and Casey easily fit that category.

This new thing with Amaya? It was useful. Beneficial. A well placed back up he reluctantly admitted was long overdue.

But she couldn't get closer. Too much could---would go wrong.

Less familiar, now, the sewers around him bore the tell-tale signs of residential buildings. He still knew his way. The man hole cover with its newly re-enforced ladder looked the same as it had in the four days since he and Donnie visited Amaya.

A good minute or two passed with Leo standing there, glaring up at the cover and cursing at himself. Scowling, he admitted it wouldn't hurt to just check on her---to check on things. Just check and see that everything was fine.

It was edging close to midnight. The street was quiet when he lifted the cover and surveyed the immediate area. He climbed out, swearing to himself he was just going to do a perimeter check. That was all. Then get back to the lair. Make sure Donnie was resting. Make sure---

He stopped, a brightness in the dark side-street catching his eye. The street formed an alley of sorts between Amaya's house and her neighbors. Once upon a time, it might have been a drive to one of the houses. Now it made a short cut to the next street over. Pock marked from age but otherwise in good condition, it didn't seem to get much use.

And hanging from the fence that surrounded Amaya's house, flapping in the breeze and more than obviously meant for someone climbing out of that manhole to see, was a piece of paper.

Leo eased the cover down and silently crossed to the fence. He tugged the paper free, easily reading the message written in thick marker: KNOCK ON THE BACK DOOR. Underneath was what he assumed to be a drawing of a turtle. It looked like a splattered paw print.

He stared down at it. So many things ran through his mind. Not the least of which was that it was some sort of trap. Raph had returned from a pick up near the Chinese restaurant just before sunset, so things had been fine back then. Had something happened?

Always when he didn't need it to, sensei's words cut through his thoughts.

Talk to her.

A different situation. A different meaning entirely. Hell, a different life, if he was being honest. A life when he didn't have this complication. When he wasn't worried all the damn---

April's words came next to taunt him. You said it yourself: it's not a bad idea.

Chaotic thoughts settled. Leo let out a long breath. He crushed the paper in his fist and hoped he wasn't making the wrong choice.

The lights inside the house were dim. Almost as soon as he knocked, he saw her form crossing the
kitchen to the back door.

Amaya looked up at him, hair done up with a pencil keeping it in place, and wasn't at all surprised. "Come on in," she said, leaving the door open and wandering over the counter. The scent of coffee filled the air as she fiddled with the machine.

Leo frowned at her but obeyed. Shutting the door behind him he asked, "How long have you been waiting for me?"

"Four days," she said, fighting a yawn. Shaking her head and blinking furiously, she went on, "Though to be honest, it wasn't you specifically. I just figured one of you would pop in. I really thought it might be Mikey until I considered that you kept the sewer blueprints from him."

His frowned deepened. "The blueprints."

Only when the coffee was done and she filled what was probably the biggest mug Leo had ever seen did she face him. Brown eyes watched him; not calculating, not shrewd, just open with how she looked him up and down. She blew on her drink and said, voice muffled by the giant mug, "I spent three months transcribing grant requests for city workers. Can't read the whole thing, but I know enough about blueprints to recognize my own street. And the fact that you guys have a clear line to the manhole in the back. A much simpler and honestly easier drop off point that any of the ones Donnie gave me."

Silence filled the kitchen. It wasn't a small room, not even with his bulky frame taking up a big chunk of it. Yet Leo felt the weight of that silence fall on him the longer it stretched.

No pity crossed her. Indeed, her expression never changed. She drank the coffee, refilled the mug, and leaned against the counter. All while keeping her gaze on him.

Leo wondered why that didn't bother him like it should.

"I said that I got it," Amaya said, breaking the silence. "You have a million reasons to keep a million different secrets. Boundaries come with that. Rules, too." There she dropped her graze, something old darkening her features. "God, do I understand that."

She set the mug aside and lightly hopped up onto the counter. Legs lazily hanging in the air, the move made her look far younger--no. No, it just made her look her age. It was easy to forget how young she was.

Amaya gathered her thoughts, visibly steeling herself. When her gaze hit him again, they were firm. "But there has to be some sort of compromise for this to work."

“And why is that?"

“If change doesn’t occur when the status quo is grossly altered, chaos will out,” she said, words sounding half-quote. A shrug. “I’ve grossly altered whatever sort of life you guys had. And if nothing changes, if both of us try to keep to the same way of life, it’ll falter. It might be small or it might be catastrophic. But it will happen.”

She motioned out the kitchen window to the side street. “This is an easy access point between us, as you’ve shown tonight. It can benefit us. It can also be a point of vulnerability. I’m guessing that’s why it never got mentioned when you and Donnie went over pick-up points. I’m also
guessing it’s because there’s still some mistrust between you and me.”

Leo eyed her, trying to divine where she was going with this. While not entirely untrue, it also didn’t feel full of the anger or condescension he expected.

Amaya studied her coffee mug for a moment before looking up again. There was a tightness in the way she held herself, jaw clenching as she considered her next words carefully. “I’m not asking for any life stories here, Leo. But I’m also aware that superficial ones won’t cut it. And if we’re all to move forward with as little chaos as possible, not every secret can stay secret.”

She straightened, grabbing the mug and holding it in her lap almost like a shield. “So I propose a compromise, like I said. A give and take. You answer a question of mine. I answer any question of yours. One-for-one, without arguments.”

Honestly? Not the worst sort of thing to happen. And she was right, there still remained an element of uncertainty between them. As much as he held questions about her, she was certain to have far, far more for him and his brothers. Perhaps it would have the added benefit of calming his nerves in regards to her prescience in their life.

To have her no longer be an unknown element in the larger picture.

Dozens of questions immediately came to mind. Leo pushed them all aside. Reacting was sometimes better than acting first. A better way to gauge the opponent.

Leo nodded in agreement. "Ask," he said, inclining his head to her.

It was immediate. "What happened?"

"With wh---"

"You keep strangers at a distance," she cut in, once again looking him up and down. "You stick to being unknown. Ninja. Or whatever else you want to dub it. Doesn't alter how close April is with you all. Or this Casey guy I keep hearing about. So, that's a grand total of two people---two humans that are close to you. But that's not the full story."

Amaya leaned forward, elbows on knees to keep her balance. "Donnie's tech doesn't make sense. Why be ready with trackers and glorified walkie-talkies that integrate with cell phones on such a level when you don’t make a habit of doing so. Mikey contradicts himself every other sentence when he calls. Always seems to want me to drop by then suddenly offers to meet me in town instead. Raph always, and I mean always, tells me to keep an eye out and call if I'm in trouble. Even April. She tries to be slick. Tries to hide the fact that she's checking up on me, making sure nothing strange has been going on."

Never once did that resolve shake. Not a single flicker gave way to anything other than unmovable stubbornness. Not until Leo saw how tightly she gripped the mug in her hands. How that resolve might just be to keep herself in check. How she neglected to bring about his own quirks to the list.

"So," she said after a moment of silence to draw home the point, "what happened to cause all that?"

Leo shifted, the only outward sign of his discomfort. His face remained a mask, kept the memories from showing as he wrestled to keep them in line.
"It wasn't a single event," he said; his voice sounded loud to his own ears, though he spoke evenly. "Many little things over the years just...happened." In short order, he recounted their reunion with April. How that joy was shattered by the Foot Soldiers that tracked her to their home. Their first home. "Even now," he went on, "I think she can't let go of that. The guilt that she was responsible for what happened that day."

Leo's breath felt tight he drew it in. "We started working with the police. Still do but it's gotten tense. The details are foggy---Donnie thinks the majority of it was just rumors---but Casey got wind of someone on the task force wanting to get a sample from one of us. All with good intentions of course," he added, rolling his eyes. "Something about wanting to be ready if there was an emergency of some sort."

Amaya's eyes narrowed. "The bloody sheet," she said, careful to keep it from being a question.

"We can't leave anything to chance. Bad enough Sacks got a hold of us. He got plenty of blood to not only make his plan work but enough left over to do any kind of experiments that came to him. Even someone claiming to have our best interest isn't worth being careless," he said on a shrug.

"There were others things. Other people. Not many. Enough that casual, day-to-day meetings happened. What we didn't know---what I failed to realize, was that the Foot were everywhere. And they weren't alone."

She twitched at the name. "I thought they were driven out."

He shook his head. "That's the story. And that's all it ever was. But even now, I'm not sure if they were responsible or if it was the Purple Dragons, or--I just don't know. But the wrong person let slip that they knew us."

Another twitch but no interruption.

"There was a delivery guy. Kevin. He didn't care a bit about who we were or what we did. He was always willing to go to the weird locations we sent. Never fussed, never asked questions. Got to where we just started requesting him. Figured, why not? Not as though he was likely to sneak a pic of us and sell it to the tabloids. Great guy."

The lights never changed though the room felt a little dimmer as he paused, schooling himself into finishing the answer. "The wrong people found out about that. And tried to exploit it. Kevin came out with his life. But his family?"

The hanging question made her pale. She didn't call for him to stop, though. So he went on, "The worst part was that he wasn't even the one that let it slip. He kept our secret. Just the wrong people heard the right thing at the right time from someone else entirely."

Leo straightened, looking all around the kitchen, the various doors and entrances, the backyard and the single chain link fence that surrounded it. So many weaknesses to exploit. So many ways to break in.

All because he was there.

"Mikey doesn't know." The words came before he could stop them. "Neither does Raph but I'm
sure he's pieced it together. I just told them we needed to tighten security. That we couldn't be
careless. Donnie and I got the call, that night. April...April caught the story when they found his
family."

"So all the secrecy?" she asked, words a little strangled but still clear.

"It's to protect us," he said with a nod. "But it's also to protect you. And your friends and family;
anyone you care about or who cares about you."

Another twitch, a lightening of the graveness about her, and she looked away. She frowned, lost in
thought.

Leo let her stew, let her go over the implications of it all. He mentally ran through the layout of the
house, noting ways to make an entrance and how to intercept. A morbid past time, as Mikey often
moaned, but a good mental exercise.

By the time Amaya seemed of a clearer head, she was already working on the second mug of
coffee. Leo eyed the mug, wondering why she was hitting it so hard this late, when she said,
"Okay. Your turn. Ask me anything." At the quiet, she glanced up then blanched at the low smirk
he wore.

"Technically," he said at length, "I think I answered two questions."

She frowned so hard, it looked like a pout. She reran the conversation, furrow on her brow
deepening. Then her eyes cut to him and---yep, that was a pout. "Fine, sneaky-shadow-man. Two
questions." She smirked in return as the nickname made him scowl.

Plenty of options came to him. Yet he already knew what he would ask. "Turnabout's fair play," he
said. "What happened?"

She rolled her eyes. "Gotta be more specific---"

"You hated being followed. Physically followed, that is. No problems with being low-jacked or
your phone being monitored. You jumped at that. What happened?"

The side-eye returned. She held it for a moment. Again, Leo was more annoyed that he wasn't
annoyed by it. Then she blew a breath through her teeth and answered, "I've been stalked enough
for one lifetime. If someone's going to keep tabs on me, it's going to be on my terms."

The declaration hung in the air. Leo stared. He heard her. He knew what she said. The
implications...

Amaya gripped the mug between her hands, looking down at it as though watching her words play
out before her. "Call it being a Millennial or whatever bullshit title they come up with, but
electronic monitoring never bothered me. It's all around. It's part of life. You can't escape it.
And...and that just doesn't get to me. It's consumerism. It's marketing. Statistics and census and a
ton of other things. Being a note of data in the whole just doesn't even register to me."

The mug in her hands trembled; a small shake he caught traveling up her arms. Yet otherwise she
was unmoved. "But when you're the only one being monitored? When all the data consists of you?
When a single entity's entire focus is on you and you alone? When their eyes are on you and only
you?" The question made her nauseous to even voice. She glanced at the trashcan sitting several
feet away. She swallowed and visibly gathered herself.

"It’s the worst feeling in the world. Like they're touching me in all the wrong ways when it's only their eyes. Your whole life being reduced to numbers is one thing. Okay, companies are using you to farm for data for their next stage of products, big deal. But when someone’s watching what clothes you picked out and deduces the meaning and choice behind it? When they review your conversations, listening to every nuance and tic you give those words? Inflection? Emotion? Every single interaction down to how your cheek twitched or what your damn hormone levels were for that day? All to further their own sick fascination? Because all they're focused on is you and you alone and the rest of the world can burn and they’d be fine with it as long as they could keep watching you?"

Amaya slowly raised her head and Leo was hit by the haunted edge she bore now. "Intention is everything," she said softly. "You wanted to monitor me to make sure I wasn't a threat. Fine. It wasn't like you wanted to dissect me. Wasn't like you wanted to figure out how to force me to make the choices you desired. Not like you have archived data on me that you pour over while attempting to predict what I'm going to do next."

"My intentions---" Leo started.

"---were good," she said, voice still too soft. "Your intentions were never anything but good. You sought to keep yourself and your family safe." She drew in a deep breath, held it, then let it out just as slow. Clearing her throat, she said, "Next question."

With her sitting there, clutching that mug like it was her tie on sanity, and that spine-chilling proclamation still hanging in the air, Leo found only a single question. "Who was it?"

Amaya flinched. "You said it was all to protect the people I care about. To keep my family from being involved in all this or becoming targets themselves. Well, that’s a nice gesture but it’s also unneeded."

A grim smile stole across her face. "Why would I want to protect the people who not only enabled but encouraged the man who stalked me? The ones who fought to keep it going? The ones who disowned me when I took measures to protect myself against him? The ones who started it all in the first place?" She lifted her mug in a mock salute, snapping, “All in the advancement and name of science.”

A dull ache clenched his chest. At the words and the way she said them so casually. Words that she had long ago come to realize as truth. "Your own family?"

"Twisted, huh?"

The quiet returned. Amaya slowly finished the coffee. She glanced at the machine but shook her head after an internal debate. Sliding off the counter, she rinsed out the mug and set it aside to dry. When she turned, she was startled to see Leo had moved closer.

She looked up at him, cursing the silent approach even while chastising herself for not expecting it. "Use the manhole outside or not," she said, hoping to cover her awkwardness. "It's up to you. I want to help you guys out in any way I can. I meant that. But just know that there's no reason to be so strict around me." She shrugged, trying to smile and knowing it failed. "I don't have much to lose, after all."
When he just continued to watch her, Amaya fidgeted. She eased around him, knowing the papers waiting for her in the living room weren't going to grade themselves. She was halfway across the kitchen when he spoke.

"I'll have Donnie rig up a camera on the cover. We'll keep an eye on it. And I'm going to ask him about other security measures for this place."

Amaya froze in place. Had she heard right? She turned, mouth opening but nothing coming out.

Even watching him, his approach was silent. He kept a polite distance, made sure her space remained hers. But there was no way he could keep those eyes of his could be anything but intrusive. Bright blue flashed, catching her gawking, and one side of his mouth tipped in a smile. "If you want to help us out, no reason we can't return the favor."

"I didn't---it's not a favor---" Amaya spluttered.

"Then think of it as giving you peace of mind," he said easily. "April and Casey's places are both decked out. No reason not to spread the love around."

She flushed, feeling angry for reasons she didn't know why. "I've been fine on my own," she said, managing to keep the snap out of the words.

"Yes, you have," Leo agreed, scanning the living room from his place. Then that stupid smile returned. "Thing is? You're not on your own anymore."

Amaya felt something shift. Standing there in her kitchen, their eyes locked and both seemed to sense it. But neither voiced it. She just nodded, still a little stunned. She looked away for only a moment but by then he was gone.

You're not on your own anymore.

She didn't sleep the rest of the night. Kept awake by such a simple phrase. Kept awake praying she wouldn't come to regret it.
Welcome to the Shell-Raiser

Chapter Summary

Being benched never sat well with Donnie.

Neither did impulse control.

Seven weeks. 49 days. Not even two full months.

Donnie felt each moment like it was an eternity.

Seven weeks since the night he was speared through by a bullet. 49 days since the night he truly believed he cheated death. Almost two months since he had been topside on his own.

There was wisdom in taking it easy. He needed to heal. Needed to get back to optimal performance. Overtaxing his body would cause setbacks if not re-injure himself.

Donnie was aware of all of that. It didn't do a thing to change the fact that he was so freaking bored.

The security upgrades to Amaya's house had been a high point of late. Yet even that ended too soon. He was finally at the point where he could move without that sharp tugging sensation catching his breath. The Shell-Raiser was in need of a tune-up and a few upgrades of its own. He already spent the better part of a day working on the vehicle when the cabin fever started in again.

A brief phone call broke the monotony. Nothing serious, something with the computer repair shop he had been working for during his convalescence. Even that did little to stop the nagging itch.

While reworking the wiring for the cover-launcher, Donnie ran through the possible scenarios (38 and counting as the weather changed). He evaluated the benefits while changing the filters (all of them). He even made a list of techniques and exercises that would be good to try while adjusting the setting for the punching bags in the back (needed reinforcement after the Shell-Raiser had flipped). Eventually, he found himself sitting in the driver's seat, wrench twirling in one hand, while looking at his shell-cell sitting on the dashboard.

Leo was out. Handling something with the task force. Probably insisting another change in how they gathered their Intel. Raph was still in the Lair. Mikey was probably running through the tunnels on his board.

Donnie wasn't the rash one. Impulse usually ended in disaster. Yes, at times, he got carried away when he was tinkering or when he got too excited about trying out a new modification. But when he had time to think it through, he made sure he knew what he was doing.

A little thrill of rebellion ran through Donnie as he gave in to impulse and dialed Amaya's number.
The alley under the bridge was as nondescript as any other. Aside from the fact that Amaya firmly believed she’d seen it in a horror movie or two. She paced the little street in front of it, hands jammed in her pockets and one clenched tight on her taser. Her car was parked a street over per the hurried instructions gabbled over the phone.

Donnie's call had been vague though excited. Given the off the grid meeting, she was willing to bet it was also completely unauthorized by the brother-in-blue. Only a small note of hesitation came with that thought.

Mostly she wanted to see what this was about. 'Teaching opportunity' left a lot of room for interpretation.

A grinding noise brought her around. At the back of the alley, the wall opened. It slid side to side, trash cans moving along with it, camouflage broken. A massive dump truck came barreling out of the dim tunnel it hid, brakes screeching as it swung around towards her.

Amaya kept her place, amused, as the passenger side door came to a stop within arm's reach. She cast a critical eye over the green and yellow paint job before the door swung open.

Donnie beamed at her across the seats. "Welcome to the Shell-Raiser!"

She bit her lip, still reeling from the words blazoned across the side, and climbed inside. A sea of neon and metal met her. The dashboard alone was enough to make her dizzy. Then she peeked in the back and felt her jaw drop. "Whoa," was all she could get out.

"Always upgrading, so let me know if you have any suggestions," Donnie said, tapping a few of the multitude of buttons before him.

A thump had Amaya jumping. She peeked in the side view mirror and saw the tunnel entrance restored to the disguise. She jumped again when her door shut automatically. She held tight to the bar welded to the dash in front of her (probably the intended purpose) as the massive vehicle shot forward.

The rumble of the engine almost covered Donnie's voice as he rattled off instructions and explanations. But the rush Amaya felt as the city streets flew past them drowned out the details. Gradually, her death grip loosened and she settled into the seat. Despite its size, the Shell-Raiser was fast. Other cars whipped by with hardly a glimpse. Lights flicked overhead with the steady beat of the music rumbling underneath it all.

"---ink you got that?"

"What?" she blurted, blinking around at Donnie.

"Think you got that?" he repeated gesturing to the console.

Amaya looked down at the myriad lights and buttons. Crap, what had he been talking about?

Before she could ask, a siren pierced the air. Despite their speed and whatever gadgets Donnie had crammed in to work in their favor, it didn't stop a patrol car from whipping around and following
them, lights flashing in the mirrors.

Donnie wasn't bothered. He flicked a few switches and gunned the accelerator. Amaya fell back in her seat as they tore through the streets. The patrol car hurried after them, vigilant. But after a few blocks it was obvious that this was a losing fight.

"They'll call for back up!" Amaya pointed out, daring to peek out the window as the car narrowly avoided a collision.

"They won't find us!" Donnie said, cheerful as ever. He worked the wheel with a mechanic's grace and confidence.

The Shell-Raiser turned a corner Amaya never would have guessed it could take. The move threw her out of her seat. She tripped and fell into what looked like a pilot's seat sitting in the middle of the area right behind the front pair. The console of controls and monitors dug into her legs before she was able to right herself. She gripped the seat under her as the vehicle made another dizzying turn. Hastily, she clipped the seatbelt over her lap. Twin joysticks of some kind stuck out of the walls on both sides; she did not want to go flying into those.

While it only lasted a minute or so, she left like hours passed by before the truck came to a screeching halt. Donnie frowned downwards at that, mumbling something about the brakes. Only then did he seem to notice the passenger seat was empty.

Amaya managed a shaky smile at the alarmed look he gave her. "Whoa."

---

Donnie felt a whirl of thoughts hit him when he saw the awkward position she was in. The chair for Mikey's console almost dwarfed her. But to get there, she must have fallen over if not been thrown into any of the parts that littered the way. Dammit, she was Human; she was more fragile than they were. He should have made sure she was secured before trying to show off. He should have---

Amaya smiled and said again, "Whoa." She eased herself off the chair, taking care not to trip over anything. She looked out the windows, taking in the large but deserted looking alley he had chosen as shelter. Then her eyes cut back to him. "So, I didn't get a single word you were saying. Mind repeating that?"

Oddly, that broke the tense thoughts that jammed up his head. He couldn't stop the snorting laugh that came. "I might have been going too in depth," he said, rubbing the back of his head and glancing back at the console. "Let's back up."

Amaya perched on the passenger seat, legs drawn up to her chest but watching avidly as Donnie once again started going over the various controls lay out before them. She voiced her questions when she had them and he was dutiful in answering. If he went on a tangent occasionally, she just smiled and let him babble.

He avoided the controls linked to weapons. No need to go that far, just yet. Try as he might, he couldn't help but continue on into the back. He pointed out the various things that catered to each of them in turn. She grinned at the punching bags in the back. He kept on, a vague notion that he was rambling creeping in but he pushed through.
So absorbed, he didn't hear the beeping from the console. He was going over the readout monitor in the back, tweaking a glitch in the vital signs receiver and going over an idea he had in getting Amaya's phone patched into the system. All the while, the beeping grew. Amaya looked around at the noise, frowning as she tried to find its source.

Donnie fixed the glitch and moved on to a few loose wires he had missed before leaving the lair. The old speech he often gave his brothers---and they often ignored---of proper cable management didn't reach her.

Amaya quietly slipped into the driver's seat, brow furrowed. The beeping grew stronger. A wave of tension licked up her spine. She was still for a moment before she wrenched the key in the ignition. "Hey Donnie!" she shouted over her shoulder.

Donnie stopped, puzzled, and just looked at her. Only then did he realize the scrambler was giving out the warning signal.

He bit back a curse, maneuvering himself into the passenger seat. "How close?" he asked.

"Don't know---Can't read this thing!" Amaya huffed, thumping the blaring box.

Donnie spun it to face him. He tweaked the settings and also cut the music so they could hear it. "Three blocks, we got time."

"Is it just the police?"

"Yes, this only picks up their frequencies, it shouldn't---" The words broke off when he caught a snippet of a dispatch call from the other receiver. He quickly turned the volume up. The dispatch reported updated it to a pursuit involving armed robbers that were ‘abnormally dangerous.’

Amaya chanced a glance over his way. She saw the hesitation in his magnified eyes. "What should we do?" she asked.

There was a beat. Then Donnie grinned.

---

Amaya's heart pounded. She'd never felt this way while driving. Taken, she had never been in a high-speed pursuit. Nor even broken the speed limit while driving a glorified dump truck. Driven a dump truck? Winter of her senior year.

A wrong turn would be deadly. A car blindly running in front of them just as fatal. Donnie assured her over and over that wouldn't happen. He was listening to the dispatch, keeping an eye on the scrambler, and running something on the equipment he wore. She only caught glimpses of the holograms floating in the air around him. She tried to keep her focus on the road.

No idea what had been robbed. Only that the police chase was going poorly. Apparently whatever they were armed with was deadly enough to keep the police at a distance.

...but not deadly enough for them, Donnie said.

That was what caused the rush, she supposed. The speed, sure. But to get involved in this? Part of her wanted to beg to go back, to get the other Turtles. She didn't get involved for a reason.
But the words stayed put.

"Left at the next light. Take the ramp up!" Donnie instructed.

Amaya grunted, not trusting herself to speak. She pulled the words back. Biting her lip, she told herself this was a one time thing. Here after, she was just a getaway driver. That was as far as she'd--

The highway was mostly empty, given the late hour. At first, she thought they were in the wrong place. Then a muffled sound broke through the roar of the engine: a dull thud like a trash can being dropped. It must have been loud to reach her ears through the noise in the cabin.

Cresting the slight rise in the road, a line of flashing lights broke the stillness of the night. One cop car was shuddering to a halt, smoke billowing from beneath a hood riddled with holes. Amaya easily kept distance and sped up.

Just ahead of the police cars, two others were weaving drunkenly across all lanes of traffic. A figure leaned out the back window of one, massive firearm visible even at this distance. Visible and aimed in their direction.

Amaya jerked the wheel aside. A moment later, a flash and another dull thud came from behind them.

Donnie whistled. "Augmented ammo." The camera near his head gear blinked as it recorded.

"What do we do?" she asked, not letting herself look back at the smoking stretch of road. "What do you need me to do?"

Donnie consulted his equipment for a moment---during which another patrol car was almost taken out---then pointed to the right side. "Get us up along that way, try to avoid the police."


The engine screamed as she pushed it further. Either the cops didn't notice their approach or just couldn't be bothered. They were neck and neck with the one on the far end. Amaya glanced over to see the cop in the passenger window gaping at her.

Donnie climbed into the back, nimble for one his size. She was tempted to see what he was doing. But another police car was engulfed in smoke and she shut down that thought.

"Coming up on them!" she called back.

"Try to get level with it!"

As if he heard, the one hanging out the window shifted his wild-eyed attention to her. He leered and shifted the weapon to point directly at her.

If she let go of the steering wheel, she'd never stop her hands from shaking. She felt it just as surely as her chest throbbed with how fast her heart beat. Teeth tug into her bottom lip so hard she drew blood.
With a smothered shout, Amaya floored the gas. The Shell-Raiser jerked and surged forward. She angled the wheel so they came right up to the side of the fleeing car. There was a moment she saw the shooter, the driver frowning around him to see what was happening, and even the lumpy bags crammed into the back seat. She even had a glimpse of the other car, of someone starting to crawl onto the roof and lugging another massive firearm with him.

Metal screeched. The car's occupants did a double take as a massive arm swung into view from the side of the Shell-Raiser. A huge, cylindrical object hung from the end, swinging forth like a grotesquely large---

Amaya blinked. A nun chuck?

The Shell-Raiser lurched as the arm swung the nun chuck high overhead. It slammed into the road just before the cars hit it.

The damaged asphalt alone would have stopped them. But hitting the oversized weapon was overkill. The car closest to them spun outwards and struck its partner. Both cars ping-ponged off the cement dividers of the highway and each other. It took a while before they ground to a halt.

Amaya never let up on the gas. They blured out of the way before the first collision. The Shell-Raiser only heaved side to side as the arm was brought back in place. She chanced a glance to the rear-view mirror. Donnie beamed at her. She couldn't help but grin back.

Elated, nervous laughter broke the silence. The vehicle shook when Donnie did a little victory dance. Still laughing, Amaya started searching for an exit. Even if they stopped the robbers, there was no guarantee that the police wouldn't follow them next.

She took the first exit she saw, easing her foot off the gas for the first time. She hit the brakes.

Nothing happened.

"D-Donnie?" she called, pressing harder.

At once, he was beside her. He caught the frantic moves she made. They both looked up at the same time as they came to the exit. "Take it! Keep pressing the brake!" he ordered. Then he jammed himself into the foot well of the passenger side. With just his hand, he ripped into the floor to expose the craze of wires there.

Amaya fought a scream. Mercifully, no other cars were on the road. She winced, taking the exit so much faster than she ever would have wished. It wasn't a sharp curve but it was close. The side of the Shell-Raiser grazed against the guardrail, sending talons of agony through her ears.

The road was smaller, leading into a more residential part of town. She was about to ask what she should do when the Shell-Raiser lurched and the tires beneath her whined as they were forced to stop. Burning rubber hit her just before a sharp crash brought them to a sudden halt.

The seatbelt dug across her chest and knocked the wind out of her. She gagged, trying to catch her breath. Fumbling with the release, she coughed, tasting blood from where she bit her lip again. Steam billowed across the windshield.

Beside her, Donnie peered up from the awkward angle he was stuck in. His bo extended into the floor past the foot well, jammed at such an angle she guessed he had used it in place of the brakes.
He looked pained. "You okay?" he groaned out.

"Yeah. You?" she said, wiping at her mouth.

He sagged back, his shell catching on the dash. "Gonna feel that tomorrow."

"What happened?" she asked, peering through the thick steam.

"Brakes gave out," he groused, glaring down the mutilated console at the internal parts of the engine. "And I believe---" he craned his neck to check another readout. "---yep, gas is low, too. Probably why we were able to stop."

"Uh, think that was something else," Amaya said slowly, pointing through the windshield.

It took Donnie a moment before he was able to get himself upright. Through the steam, a red fire hydrant was visible laying across their path. That was when he noticed the steady gurgle coming from below them.

"Oh...poop," Donnie said softly.

---

A manic eight minutes later, they had succeeded in getting the Shell-Raiser off the ruined fire hydrant and Donnie managed to halt the spewing water. They left the mangled mass of red metal with a note a apology.

Unfortunately, that took up the last of their gas. They found a deserted stretch of road to wait until Casey could bring them a dearly needed can.

Donnie set to work repairing the hasty damage he inflicted. Amaya watched for a moment, letting herself come down from that adrenaline high.

When it settled, she found her words had little care for what she wanted. And almost wrecking a dozen times in 10 minutes loosed a number of questions she had held tightly two over the last two months. "You can find out anything you want. Can't you, Donnie?"

He paused, looking up at her.

She nodded to the dash and the still beeping equipment. "If you want, you can find out anything. Police location. Active crimes." She chewed at her lip, wincing at the cut there, before adding, "Or someone's background."

"Pretty handy," Donnie said with a shrug. "Keeping the most up to date information is the best way to handle any volatile---"

"Why haven't you said anything?"

Another pause. Slowly, she watched as that cool intelligence fell over Donnie again. He was smart. Scarily so, she knew. The brains. The mechanic. Able to come up with technology any tech CEO would kill for.

He gathered their intel. He was the one who screened potential threats. Any and all information
came through him.

So there was no reason to think that he hadn't found every little thing about her in the last 2 months. Part of her shuddered to think that. Part of her wanted to rage about it. But she thought back on her conversation with Leo.

Intent was everything. Donnie was in the same vein as Leo. He protected his family. If he sensed danger, he wouldn't hesitate.

But Leo was in charge. And he had been shocked at Amaya's admission the other night. Why wouldn't Donnie have told him?

Donnie looked down, fiddling with the screwdriver he held for a moment. Green-gold eyes flicked up to her. Not hesitant. Gauging, assessing. Yet in a way that didn't feel wrong.

"Your business is your own," he said at last. "It's not my place to say anything."

"But they---my parents---surely you can see---" She struggled to get the words out, to make him understand.

"You haven't had solid contact with them in over six years," he cut in smoothly. He shrugged. "That's enough to show you aren't close to them. Enough to know that you want nothing to do with them."

Amaya stared. No one, not even Professor Prejean, got that.

"Their chosen fields are interesting," he went on; a flicker of guilt crossed his face. "I, uh...may have read some of your father's papers. And one of your mother's."

She snorted a laugh, more touched by his reaction than the admission.

"But, again: you've taken steps to distance yourself. Is that why you're studying English?"

Another snorting laugh. She leaned back in the driver's seat, running a hand over the steering wheel. "I wanted to get as far away from any science related field that I could. I honestly considered art school," she said after a while. "But I can't draw to save my life. So, English it was. Wasn't a hard decision. I've always been a big reader. Just...just never the stuff they wanted me to read."

"They disapproved?"

"They would rather I read Newton and Hawking rather than Shakespeare and Harper Lee," she said though a grimace. She shook her head in disgust. "If it couldn't be quantified or properly labeled, it wasn't worth the effort."

Donnie looked ready to say something return, probably some argument for both camps. Then he caught himself and returned to working on the exposed wiring.

Amaya glanced up when headlights ran across the windshield. A car parked on the opposite side of the street, driver waving over at them. Donnie poked his head back up at her urging and waved back, confirming that was Casey Jones.
As she watched Casey retrieve the gas can from the back of his car, Amaya blurted, "Thank you."

Donnie blinked down at her.

"For...just thanks," she mumbled. It was nice to know someone had her back. Even if she hadn't asked him to.

Donnie smiled, ruffling her hair and earning him a cheeky glare. Then he moved out of the Shell-Raiser to introduce the two of them.
There were times Amaya knew she was missing something.

The whole affair with the Turtles---meeting them, proving she was trustworthy, slowly gaining a bigger place in their lives and vice versa---seemed unreal. Part of it was that she never expected to have such a thing. Even her deepening relationship with April was a surprise to her. To find herself assisting the mutant brothers in the odd ways they needed? She could never have imagined it.

Each time her phone trilled with a message or request, she would smile while part of her marveled at it all. Tried to make sense of it. Then she'd shake her head and push it aside. Ignore the nagging thought that something about it all was blank to her senses.

It wasn't until her phone rang with a strange, blaring sound that she realized just how naive she had been.

Amaya never questioned the details of how Donatello programmed the shell-case. She grew used to the varied jingles of a call or a text. Had fun assigning different ones to each brother, even. Donnie had shown her how to do it, even to silence it if she needed.

But, he cautioned, an emergency call would always go through. And she'd know it when she heard it.

He was right. That blaring sound, too much like a siren, cut through the murmur and clanging that made up the kitchen of the Chinese place she worked at on Tuesdays, *A Wok to Remember*. She quickly set aside the order she was boxing for delivery and pulled out her phone.

Red flashed across the holographic screen. Not the bright, cheery red assigned to Raph that he
grumbled at when he caught sight of it. It was a harsh, angry red. It took a moment for her to read the words blinking up at her.

MIKEY: NEED EVAC.

Amaya ran down the narrow aisle between the stoves and the prep counter, fingers jamming at the screen. A coworker saw her coming, saw the look on her face and called for the night manager. A stocky, older woman poked her head out of the tiny office. She drew back, looking stunned as Amaya skidded to a halt before her.

"I gotta---I have to---there was an accident!" Amaya blurted. No quick lie, no easy way to explain the panic creeping through her. Distantly, she was aware of a muffled voice coming from her phone.

The manager---Mrs. Myers, her frantic brain supplied, owner's widowed aunt, the one who had interviewed her all those years ago---gave her a quick once over then snapped her wrist in a dismissal. "Go, go," she chided. "Be safe."

Her relief was distant, thankful she hadn't ruined her standing there. She swerved to the locker room, nearly tearing her bag off the hook, and at last held the phone to her ear. "Mikey?" she said, hating the tight edge to her voice. The parking lot behind the shop was gloomy but thankfully empty as she raced across it.

"Amaya, where are you?"

"I'm in my car, now. Where---" She broke off, key in the ignition. The quick popping sounds coming from her phone froze her in place. Gunfire. "M-Mikey?" she stuttered.

There was a grunt, shouting, and then another voice picked up. "I'm gonna give you an address, get here quick."

Casey. Casey Jones. The cop. Their friend.

Like flashes, the words flitted across her vision. The engine roared to life before she realized she was moving again. She repeated the address, thankful that it wasn't too far away. Then, biting back a shout, she said, "Is Mikey---"

"Still here, sweetness!" Mikey called. "Few stragglers tried to get us, but no worries, I got them all. Me and Case' are waiting on ya."

Relief was thin. She heard the panting he tried to hide. The soft groans from Casey, close by but smothered as he tried to cover it up. Other sounds that said they were on the move.

That they weren't safe.

Amaya almost broke her phone trying to get it on the dashboard mount so she just put it on speaker and dumped it in the passenger seat. She swung out into traffic, hands tight on the steering wheel. "I'm coming, Mikey. Stay on the line, you hear me?"

A strained chuckle. "Yes ma'am, whatever you wish."

Adrenaline made everything sharper. It also made time fly by. She was pulling down a nearly
deserted street almost 8 minutes since getting the call. But she felt like it had been one breath.

Déjà vu hit her, the street too much like that night she was thrown into their lives. Darkened buildings, closed up for the night, loomed over her. A flash from one of the side streets, deliberate and eye-catching, had her tearing down towards it. Thanking her luck she'd had the back seats down for a delivery earlier, she just popped the back and shouted out the half-open window, "Get in!"

There was a blur of motion, too quick for her to really see, and then the whole SUV rocked with the sudden load in the back. The trunk door had been closed with an equal speed, sending the whole cabin into shadowed gloom. Amaya twisted around, hand slapping at the roof for the overhead light. When the small bulb clicked on, she choked down a shout.

Mikey huddled against the side of the SUV, a weak grin on his face doing nothing to hide the splatters of blood that glared against the bright green of his skin. It didn't look like his. No open, seeping wounds from what she could see. But he held himself tight, one arm braced around his middle like he was shielding a wound. His other held tight to his nun chuck, not letting go despite the shelter of the vehicle.

Casey lay splayed out as much as he could crammed in the back with a mutant turtle. A length of bloodied cloth wrapped around his thigh. His face was pinched tight, teeth showing in a grimace that threatened to pull a muscle. He, too, held an arm across his gut yet underneath the tattered shirt was dark; in the few moments she was stuck staring at them, the stain spread higher.

Mikey started to speak, started to say something. It was bitten off in a yelp when Amaya threw herself back around and hit the gas. They tore out of there like the vigilantes they were, Amaya praying no patrol cars were around. She wanted ample space between them and that street before letting off the gas.

When she merged back into traffic, still sparse due to the hour, she swallowed a few times before she got out, "Where should I go, Mikey?"

"The Lair," a voice thundered beside her.

Amaya jumped, heart thudding in her throat, and struggled to keep the car from veering. She slapped a hand down on the passenger seat and pulled up her phone. "What?" she barked.

Raph's voice was uneven, strained. "We need to get to the Lair. Leo and Casey need Donnie to fix 'em up before---"

There was a bleep of static then Donnie's voice cut in, "Raph! Take him to Amaya's place." Behind her, Mikey shifted closer. In the rearview mirror, she saw him wince and grit his teeth.

Raph swore. "Don't got time for this, Donnie. They need ---"

"I'm already en route to her house," Donnie cut in. "I am not risking his vision on this. Do not take him through the sewers!" His voice was sharp, hard. So unlike himself that even the air in the car grew tense.

Another swear and Raph roared, "Fine! Be there in ten."

"Amaya? You still there?"
"Y-yeah, Donnie, I'm here," she said, startled at being addressed. When had this become a conference call? Had the emergency call patched in everyone?

"I'm going to need to set things up in case we have to---"

"Do whatever you need to," she broke in; she didn't want to hear the details, didn't need more to add to the images already swimming in her head. "I'll get there as soon as I can."

Quiet fell. No one ended the call. Sounds of running, heavy breathing filled the car as Amaya drew closer and closer to home. No one spoke.

The call stayed open.

---

Mikey had to fight to keep from groaning. His lungs burned. The urge to cough was strong, eyes still stinging from that idiot whose wild gunfire had knocked out a wall. Coughing would be the worst thing to do at this point, though.

So he focused on keeping his breath short and calm. Beside him, Casey hissed when a bump in the road jostled him. Case' just bit down on it to keep in his own pain.

Amaya still flinched at the noise. She was pale. Twitchy, too. But she held on to it. She didn't bombard them with questions. Just focused on driving, tearing through the streets with an ease Mikey was envious of.

Getaway driver, indeed. Man, did they ever luck out with her.

The buildings became houses, flitting by so quick Mikey almost didn't notice. Then they pulled into her driveway, hidden in the garage in the span of time it took Mikey to register it. Amaya hit the button for the garage door before the car came to a complete stop.

She moved so quick it made Mikey blink. The back of the SUV slid up and there she stood, pale but determined. Her dark eyes flicked between him and Casey. "I can manage only one of you," she said slowly.

Mikey eased himself out, trying to hide any sign of pain and feeling like she caught every one. "I'm good, girl," he said, chest still burning. "Let's worry about Case'."

"M okay," Casey ground out, unconvincingly.

"Yeah, yeah," Amaya chided, already climbing up to grab him.

Between the two of them, they managed to get Casey upright and moving. Amaya resolutely refused to let Mikey carry him in and the look on Casey's face more than warned the Turtle against it as well. So she dug herself under his good arm and supported Casey as he half-shuffled his way into the house.

A sharp smell hit them when Mikey opened the door: antiseptic. It was both annoying and calming to find. It meant that Donnie had beaten them there. No doubt he setting up his 'travel trauma ward' somewhere close by.
Amaya and Casey made their awkward way across the kitchen. Drawn by the noise, Donnie appeared from the entry way. He looked Casey up and down while easily taking hold of the guy's other side.

As his brother and Casey started talking in low, quick words, Mikey hung back. He leaned against the counter and focused on breathing. It was getting better. Not much. A little?

Amaya was at his side before he knew it. She reached out, hands hovering over the arm still held across himself. "Is it---Are you---" she stuttered.

"I'm good, girl," he said. When she frowned, he lifted his arm. No dramatic, open wounds to see. Yet there was a noticeable darkness at his side, a smudge just dark enough it couldn't be mistaken for dirt. "Only bruised," he insisted when her frown deepened. "Nothing broken, not bleeding from what I can tell. Just sore."

"Okay," she said at last, still worried. "Tell me if that changes."

"Sure thing," he promised, grinning. She loosened up at that. Good thing their plastrons didn't bruise. She'd be horrified to see what getting hit by a steel girder wielded by a mutant warthog did to someone.

Casey was lucky his blow had been glancing, diluted from Mikey taking the brunt of it.

"Let me get you ice, at least," Amaya said, starting for the fridge.

Mikey caught her, ignoring the lick of pain the motion caused. "Raph's almost here and Donnie's gonna need you. I'll be fine."

She didn't argue though her color paled more. He watched the thoughts flying by as she slowly came to the conclusion none of them mentioned. She looked around the kitchen, at the corner where Donnie and Casey were huddled and talking. The snippets of words told that Donnie was making sure Casey would be okay for a while longer. So Donnie could focus on something else. Something worse.

"Vision," she said numbly. "He...Donnie said he wasn't risking his vision."

The words were barely out of her mouth when the backdoor flew open.

Raph almost didn't fit through the doorway. Leo was slung over his shoulders in a fireman's carry. He didn't look around, bright gold eyes focused only on Donnie, who instantly motioned to the dining room off the hall. Raph grunted, shifting his grip on his brother, and followed the taller turtle.

Amaya gave a muffled gasp. Blood drenched Raph's whole side, steadily leaking from Leo's unconscious form. They were gone before she could really process the scene.

Mikey swallowed back his own surprise. It hadn't been that bad when they'd separated. He hadn't seen how bad the wound was. Was it more than one? Shit, maybe this was too much too soon for her.

Before he could say anything, before he could try to distract her or suggest this was out of her
league, Amaya tensed. She held herself, jaw twitching as it clenched tight, and a hard edge settled
over her pale face. Then she marched after his brothers without a word.

Mikey watched her go, a warmth bobbing in his chest. Casey caught his eye and nodded in silent
approval.

Hell, they were so damn lucky to find her.

---

Amaya only used the dining room when she had company. More often of late, that just meant when
April stopped by. Otherwise, it was only used during midterms and finals, needing a place to hold
the mountains of papers she needed to keep organized while cursing Professor Prejean's disdain for
electronic submissions.

Seeing Leo laid out and bleeding atop it, she wondered if she would ever use it again.

A number of new items were crammed in where they could fit. Stack of gauze, sealed packets of
sutures, sterilized instruments, and metal pans all waited along the foot of the table. A number of
duffel bags lay in the corner, empty of their contents now. Another sat at an odd angle in a chair
crammed up near the foot of the table. The smell of antiseptic mingled with the heavy scent of
grime, sweat, and the things that happen when heavy fighting is involved. All that under the heavy,
noxious tang of free-flowing blood.

Raph and Donnie were talking, quick and anxious, as Donnie quickly assessed the eldest turtle.
Amaya felt something rise in her throat when he removed the shreds of Leo's mask. The blue fabric
came away nearly black with blood. His face was covered in it. She couldn't even tell where it was
coming from. A small trickle hit the floor, spreading from the table cloth in a creeping puddle.

She swallowed it all back and forced herself to focus.

"---wasted time," Raph said. He sported a number of small, less lethal cuts across his form. A
number of gashes and tears on his clothes attested to whatever chaos had lead them here.
Otherwise, he was fine.

"It's done," Donnie said, almost absently as he worked. "We gotta get this closed. He's already lost
too much blood."

"Right," Raph said, shoulders rolling. He dug through a huge duffel bag on of the chair. He tossed
Donnie a pack of sterile cloth. "Face or arm first, doc? 'Cuz I know damn well Casey was lying,
whatever he told you."

Donnie made an uncertain noise, ripping into the pack and laying them under Leo's head to raise it
slightly. "He needs both stitched up. But this---" He frowned, flipping something on his goggles
and staring intently at the head wound.

Amaya craned her neck, trying to see around Raph's shell. Whatever it was, it was on Leo's left
side, facing away from her.

Donnie seemed to pause without his hands ever stopping. "How bad is Casey?"

"He's gonna need more than a Band-Aid," Raph half-spat; he actually reached up to his mouth, as
if to toss aside a toothpick but there wasn't one. He turned it into a hasty scrub across his bandana. “Bepop wasn’t kidding when he went for him. Mikey got in the way. Saved him but they're both the worse for it.”

Donnie frowned tightly. “If we can get both of these taken care of, I would worry less about Leo bleeding out or having permanent injury.”

"Hell of a squeeze, both of us doing this," Raph said dryly. Sure enough, there was hardly any space for Donnie to get at the wound at a comfortable angle. There was no way he and Raph could do both at the same time. Just standing there, they were cramped. The dining room just wasn't meant to hold three mutant terrapins, much less act as an emergency surgery suite for them.

The trickle of blood grew, the sound stabbing into Amaya's ear.

"Do we have another option?" Donnie posed, grabbing some gauze and soaking it in a sterile solution. He worked at clearing he gore from Leo's head. "Cuz last time I checked, you were the only other one capable of doing this. Casey may need a hospital. Mikey can't stitch a bean bag, much less---"

"I can do it."

The two stopped, staring around at Amaya. She pulled back her hair, knotting it at the base of her neck. "I've been doing more at the vet clinic," she went on. "He's been showing me how to suture wounds, not just surgical incisions. And I've been practicing. I...I can do this," she said again, hands clenched and meeting their stunned gazes.

Raph glanced at Donnie, eye ridge raised. Donnie was quiet for a moment more before he nodded. "Okay, let's go," he said, turning back to the task at hand.

Amaya started forward, stopping when Raph clapped a hand to her shoulder. "You got this," he rumbled, teeth flashing in a smirk, before leaving the dining room. She touched her shoulder, drawing on his confidence, and then faced Leo. She almost balked at seeing the wounds clearly. The one of his arm slashed from the inside of his forearm and up past his shoulder, glistening in the light. It was shallower at the top, ending into hardly more than a scratch across his collarbone. The red-red-red color stuck out against the dark green of his scales, even where she could see they had tried to staunch the bleeding. She made herself look at it, made herself see what she was dealing with. It was big. It was scary. But she could do this. Donnie tossed her a half-empty bottle of antiseptic and she quickly scrubbed her hands and fingers until they tingled. Then she grabbed the waiting sutures and a pair of hemostats and got settled.

Donnie gave her as much room as he could. But even pushing the table as far to the other side of the room as they could, Donnie's shell scraped at the wall if he tried to stand there to work. The wound on Leo head was at such an awkward angle, there was little they could do to even get to it. She hadn't let herself look at it, didn't want to get stuck on yet another gruesome sight. One thing at a time.

One horror at a time.

Amaya hunched under Donnie's arms, the two working to find a way to fit around one another. Donnie ended up leaning over her to get at the head wound while she crouched over Leo's arm. If one moved too quickly, they bumped back to front. Eventually, they found a rhythm that worked.
She fell into the repeating motion of stitching the wound. It was jarring, watching the needle go through the dark green skin. Her mind wouldn't let her disconnect. Wouldn't let her try to say 'it's another animal at the clinic.' There were so many reasons that wouldn't work.

It was Leo. She was stitching Leo's arm and praying there wasn't a nicked artery or some nerve damage from such a wound. Leo's skin she was stitching to cover the exposed tissue and muscle. Leo's blood that she wiped away to get at the wound edges. Leo's blood that slicked her hands. Leo's blood staining her clothes, spreading across her table cloth, under her feet---

She didn't hear her shaking breath until Donnie's hand lightly touched her back. It broke through the whirling thoughts, bringing her to a halt.

"He's okay, Amaya," Donnie said, calm and even. No more hardness, no orders, no sharp edge. "You're doing great."

Amaya nodded stiffly then went back to stitching. She was barely halfway done. Donnie leaned over her again, still intent on his own task.

When she got to his bicep, she needed to get at a new angle. Either Donnie saw it or he needed to adjust as well. He pivoted a crucial half-step that freed the space she needed and settled at the head of the table, crammed in against it and the wall. It groaned and she tensed, certain it was going to give under the pressure and then she’s have to explain the hole in the wall to the owners. But it held.

Amaya straightened, hearing her back crack. She shook out the distant ache, wanting to stay focused. Yet her eyes were drawn upward.

Her gut dropped at the head wound. It started at his neck, the void between it and the one she worked on looking as though it was a single strike that found its mark all too well. The stitched line climbed his throat and clipped close to the side of his head, where she noticed a small depression, she guessed marked his ear, and swung across his eyes.

Both eyes.

Donnie reached out to a blood cover eyelid---

Amaya tore her gaze away, not wanting to see. Over and over she heard Donnie's urgent 'I am not risking his vision,' and not wanting to see the worry to be so real.

Not Leo.

She had been missing this all along. Missing such a crucial part of who these guys were that she felt like an idiot.

They were ninja. Warriors. Trained to fight. Trained to kill. And that meant there were people out there that they fought. That tried to kill them, in turn.

She knew. How long had she been giving April medical supplies and advice? There was a reason: it was needed. Yet somehow, it hadn't connected to the four brothers she'd come to know. Even knowing Donnie's life had been at risk that first night, somehow it didn't click.
And it took Leo bleeding on her dining room table for it to click.

The leader. Shadow-Man. Leo.

...not Leo.

Amaya continued, aware of a buzzing in the back of her skull. The stitches never faltered. When she knotted the last one, her breath left her in a rush.

Donnie had finished his own. He worked on clearing away the rest of the blood, muttering something about 'infection tendencies' and 'blood-borne pathogens.' He stopped when Amaya cleared her throat.

"I'm...I'm gonna check on the others. Okay?" she asked, glancing at Leo to see if there were any other glaring injuries.

Donnie nodded, oddly silent.

She handed him the hemostats and walked out of the dining room. The small hall never felt longer than it did now. She paused just inside the kitchen.

Raph tossed a bag of ice to Mikey, who caught it easily. The largest Turtle was frowning down at Casey, still propped up in the corner though talking without strain. Hearing her approach, they turned.

Someone spoke. She wasn't sure who. Dark red captured her attention. The leg of Casey’s jeans was cut away, showing several small pin pricks like buckshot on the outside of his thigh. But that hardly registered at all.

She stared at his torso, bared at last. A harsh, jagged cut crossed his stomach, already stitched up but still in the process of getting cleaned. It looked worse due to the huge bruising surrounding it. Most of the bleeding had stopped by now.

Maybe it was just one wound too many to take in. Or the fact that it was seeing it on another human, on flesh she shared instead of green, green, green. Whatever the reason, it was Amaya's breaking point.

Mikey moved quicker than her own thought process. He crossed the kitchen before she even realized what was happening. She got a glimpse of something in his hand---a trashcan?---before the shock claimed her at last.

The orange-clad Turtle caught her arm, keeping her upright, and patiently held the trashcan for her as she lost the fight and vomited into it.

---

Pain was second-nature to ignore.

But the biting ache that took over his left side? The ache centered on his face?

Leo couldn't ignore that if he wanted to.
He didn't come to awareness so much as he was jerked into it. Darkness met him, panic almost taking over.

A firm hand to his shoulder and a voice stopped him. "It's okay, Leo. It's okay." Donnie.

Leo grabbed Donnie's hand, focusing on that. Breathe. Breathe. When he calmed, he cleared his throat. "Where are we?" This place didn't sound or even smell like the lair. Familiar, though.

"Amaya's. You've been out for most of the night."

"Everyone---"

"They're good. Raph and Mikey weren't too bad. Casey got it worse but Raph and Amaya patched him up."

Leo wanted to nod. The biting ache made him rethink that. The darkness nagged at him. He reached up, feeling the bandages that covered his face.

"I'm going to turn on the lights," Donnie warned.

When he did, Leo almost sighed in relief. His left eye was covered in the bandages but he had a vague sense of light from that side. He focused on using his right one, slowly adjusting his movement against the sting. His sight was cloudy but there. Dimly, he remembered twisting away from the blade that tore through his arm at the last moment. Probably what kept it was being fatal. Or debilitating, as it were.

He catalogued every twinge, every off sensation. It helped center himself after a fight. Helped him hold tight to the fact that he survived. Donnie gave him space. Close enough to reach out if he looked unsteady but otherwise remained where he was. Once Leo was sitting upright, he looked around. They were in the dining room. Faintly, he heard voices from elsewhere in the house.

Upright, feeling a little more like himself, he looked over at his brother. "Why not the Lair?"

They had never discussed using Amaya's house for an evac. It was plausible and Leo couldn't find fault in it, given the situation. But it still surprised him. It was always protocol to get back to the Lair, where their defenses were ironclad.

Donnie watched him, the halo of his equipment blinking an odd counter-balance to his still posture. "I didn't want Raph to drag you through the sewers with those wounds," he said at last. "I didn't even know how bad it was until he got you here. I know you've trained blindfolded but---Leo, I just couldn't take the risk that an infection would set in or something in the waters would aggravate it---"

"Wait, where's this coming from?" Leo cut in. It wasn't the first time they'd gone through the sewers injured. It was so commonplace that Leo never gave it a second thought.

The way Donnie watched him, though, had him rethinking it.

When Donnie looked away, he absently rubbed at his shoulder; his freshly-scarred shoulder. It took him a while, gathering his thoughts.

Leo waited, easing himself off the table. He frowned down at the gauze that wrapped his left arm.
He needed to work on his blind spots. Needed to improve his response time. If he hadn't hesitated, that damned Foot soldier wouldn't have gotten so close to---

"Something's changing."

Donnie fiddled with the equipment on his wrists, his equivalent of wringing his hands. "When I got shot," he started, voice soft like he didn't want anyone to listen in, "I monitored myself. Wanted to make sure there wasn't an internal bleed or something we missed. And I noticed I was off my baseline."

"What was off?"

"Everything." Donnie glanced at the open archway, looking for all the world like he wanted to throw up a sound barrier. "Everything was off. Red blood cells, hormone levels, metabolic rate, even bone density: it all started changing. Higher then lower. Nothing I can diagnose. Nothing that gave a clear picture. Except...except---"

"The mutagen," Leo finished.

Donnie nodded. "The mutagen concentration alone kept shifting. Like it was changing. I don't know what's causing it. It might have just been the blood loss, that day. But it's been almost three months and it's still happening. With all that, I can't guarantee the immune system isn't affected. And after all this---" he motioned to Leo's form. "---I couldn't gamble on the chance that it wouldn't happen to you as well."

That was a lot to take in. The mutagen that gave them life was still a mystery all these years later. Donnie had done countless experiments. Collaborated with the handful of people they trusted with it. And still they barely knew anything different.

Hearing Donnie speak like it was a living thing? Reacting to them? Changing them?

Leo fought down a shiver.

Donnie shifted, eyes tracking the bandages on Leo's form. "I'll need to run tests when we get back. See if it's started---"

"Sure thing, Don," Leo said. "Let's take it easy for now, 'k? I just woke up, you know."

Donnie caught himself. He nodded though he seemed to want to continue.

The voices down the hall broke into laughter. Hearing it, Leo felt his tension ease. A bad night, a close call, but they were all right.

He eased his way down the hall, Donnie at his back. The voices drew him and he found he was eager to get there. Leo rounded the corner and the sounds quieted for a moment. The living room was covered in blankets, pillows, and what looked like the contents of a theatre's concession stand on the coffee table.

Mikey bounded forward and gave Leo a brief but welcomed hug. Then he pulled back, squinting up at his bandaged face. "Dude, you gonna rock an eye patch now or what?"

Leo chuckled, rustling Mikey's head and not bothering to answer. Casey waved from his place on
long end of the L-shaped couch, looking grumpy but whole. Raph moved over to make room for them on the floor.

Amaya perched on the other end of the couch. She looked as tired as any of them, dark circles under her otherwise alert eyes. She watched him intently as he took the place left for him after Mikey and Donnie both crashed on the makeshift pallet on the floor. The question was plain to see on her face.

As his brothers fought over what to play on Netflix, Leo leaned over to her. "Thanks for having our back," he said.

A smile broke her tense expression. She waved a hand in dismissal, skin blotchy like it had been scrubbed raw. "Any time, Shadow-Man."

He groaned at the name, fighting a smile as he settled back against the couch.

Duty nagged at him. Weariness from his wounds wanted to drag him down. He needed to speak to Splinter, though he knew one of them had already contacted him. He should review what had gone wrong with his brothers. Should go over whatever Donnie would find when he tested his blood.

All that could wait. They needed this more. Needed to spend time with each other. Reassure one another they were alive.

Leo knew his brothers had not gotten any rest, waiting for him to awaken. Not even an hour passed before each of them crashed in their place. Snores filled the room, unique to all of them and creating a dizzying cacophony of noise.

He had just considered getting up, to check the gear they’d taken off him and check in with sensei, when a blanket fell over him.

Amaya paused when he looked over at her. "Thought you were asleep," she said sheepishly.

"Slept enough."

Her eyes narrowed. "You need rest," she stated simply.

He considered pushing her, just to see what she would do. But that weariness still pulled at him. "Fine," he drawled. He grabbed a spare pillow and tossed it up to her. "You should, too."

She snorted but didn't argue. She jammed the pillow behind her and settled in. After a moment, she asked, "Are you okay?"

Timid. Unsure if she wanted the answer. Yet asking all the same.

"Not the first time I've been hurt," he said, shrugging with his good shoulder. "Won't be the last."

She grimaced like the words tasted bad to hear. "I want Donnie to coach me on this," she blurted suddenly. "In case---When it happens again, I want to be ready."

"Sure," he said, mildly impressed at the wish. "Rest first."

Amaya nodded. A moment later, she was out.
Leo looked around the room. The stillness centered him. It wasn't home but it was a good second choice. His brothers were safe. He was safe.

He pulled the blanket around himself and let sleep claim him. He fell to the darkness, wrapped in the scent of coffee and spices.
Diya

Chapter Summary

Normal life, normal job, normal everything. Except for the day she got a message from a street artist no one had ever laid eyes on.

Second light.

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much! For the kudos, the comments, the views, EVERYTHING!!! It means so much for me!

I can't say it enough: THANK YOU ALL!!!

Michelangelo never expected much to come of his art.

It started as a distraction technique Master Splinter used. Each Turtle found a niche and it stuck into their later years. Raph had wood carving and knitting (though he rarely let anyone witness that, outside of the hashi). Donnie had his tech and experiments (Master Splinter was eternally grateful that explosions were much fewer these days). Leo sought the discipline of meditation and bonsai tending (things he used to clear his head).

Mikey had art.

He held vague memories of the first time he splattered paint on the dirty cement of their home. Not so much the paint itself. But the sense of wonder that took over him; the idea that he could make his mark and others could see it even when he wasn't there.

Master Splinter always made sure his salvage trips brought back something for the youngest Turtle's sudden drive. As he grew, Mikey kept it up, leaving mark after mark all over their lair. Eventually, it reached a point when his brothers started complimenting it. Though Raphael never did so out loud. He simply stopped complaining about it (and he never realized what Mikey had painted onto his shell).

When they started going to the surface more often, Mikey found a world of possibilities open for him. There was always a stretch of concrete somewhere in the vast city. Some times when they went on patrol, he'd stash a few spray cans in his gear. It was always a thrill to finish a piece before Leonardo called for them to return.

The first time April commented on the colorful walls of their home, Mikey tripped over himself
to gush about it. He didn't care about the surprise that lit her face, only that someone new liked it.

He never expected anyone would want him to create more.

Which lead to the strangest conversation of his life. And the coincidence that forever changed it.

"They want what?" Mikey blurted, almost falling off his hover board.

Below, April smiled as she repeated, "They want your paintings."

That time he did fall. He caught himself though the landing was less than graceful. "Angelcakes, I don't have any," he said, still trying to make sense of what she was saying.

"They want you to make some. For them to buy," she said.

He wanted to say something, needed to say something. But Mikey just couldn't quite grasp what was going on.

April watched him flounder, finding it endearing. The Turtle was so out of his element, he couldn't even joke about this. Taking pity, she said, "I didn't give the guy a direct answer. He just thinks I'm asking around to find out who you are. I can easily tell him I couldn't find you."

"But you do know me. I'm right here," Mikey said, blankly.

"She lied to the guy, Mikey," Raph called from across the room where he and Donnie sparred.

"It's something to consider," April went on. "And it's not just him. Several people have called the station. People want to know."

Mikey fidgeted with his board, not looking at her. He'd been embarrassed when April told him they were doing a story on local graffiti art and one of his was to be the backdrop while she was on air. It was one thing to want to leave his mark; it was a different beast when it was on the news. And this?

"What if they suck?" he asked, voice quiet.

April's smile faltered. She stepped closer and laid a hand on his arm. She always looked so small next to him. He wasn't used to that, being the shortest out of his brothers. And Master Splinter never counted, at least in his own head.

"This is up to you, Mikey," she said gently, pulling him out of his thoughts. "I know how much your work means to you. Like I said, I can find a way. And it doesn't have to be right now. I can get you some stuff to practice on. To see if you even enjoy it."

Mikey found himself nodding, at a loss of what else to do. Someone would pay for him to make something?

April squeezed his arm, comforting him without words. Then she hurried off to speak with Leo, list in hand of the supplies they needed.

With hardly a sound, Raph walked up to him. Despite his size and the fact that they were ninja, it never failed to surprise when he showed up without warning. He watched April walk away
before turning to Mikey. "Sure about this?" he asked.

Mikey spun a wheel on his board, stalling. Raph was the only one who knew about the whole 'leaving his mark' thing. The only one who knew it was Mikey's way of telling the city that he was there.

Living in shadows kept them alive. Kept them safe. Even so, Mikey felt the pull of the surface world grow stronger each time he went up. He craved it, without a decent reason other than just wanting to be seen.

Wanting to prove he existed.

Mikey shrugged, grinning at his elder brother. "What's the worst that could happen?" he said, voice not as carefree as he wished.

Raph frowned but didn't say anything. He clapped a hand to Mikey's shell then strode off. Still worked up from the sparring, he'd be in the weight room for a while.

Across the way, April and Leo went back and forth over the list of supplies. A list that never seemed to find an end.

Mikey thought of the supplies April kept getting for them. The tools and equipment they needed to keep Donnie's lab up and running. The camera system to keep them safe. Their weapons. Their armor.

And he thought again of the insane number the guy was willing to give for a single painting.

What was the harm in trying?

---

The transition wasn't without its bumps. It took a while before Mikey was comfortable with the supplies April brought him. Then a while longer before he drummed up the courage to let her take one for the potential buyer to view. First one sold. Second one didn't. He kept at it, finding that he wanted to take on the challenge.

After a few months, there was a steady stream of purchases. April told him she was getting bombarded with people wanting more. It didn't seem real. Part of him considered that maybe April was just buying them.

It wasn’t until Amaya came into the picture that he found himself voicing that lingering doubt. The girl was a new addition to their group. It had been almost three months since she dropped into their lives. Yet Mikey found it just as easy to talk to her about this whole 'art' thing as anyone else. Maybe more.

The girl seemed to acquire a new job every other week while still juggling a handful of favorites. Most recently, she took on the label of photographer's assistant. Being involved in the art scene, even a small one, Mikey thought she'd have some insight.

They were on the rooftop of a building that housed several studios, sharing a pizza during her lunch break. Daytime outings weren't a typical thing. But what Leo didn't know couldn't hurt; plus, he was still recuperating from that last tussle with the Foot Clan and less likely to call for an
impromptu training session. And Mikey couldn't wait until nightfall to ask her advice nor did he want to do this through text.

After hearing his thoughts on April's involvement---namely that she was buying them all---Amaya frowned and threw her pizza crust at him. He caught it in his mouth easily, never one to waste. "That's ridiculous," she said in that no-nonsense way of hers.

Mikey gave a little shrug. "Well, what else could it be? There's no way that many people could want my stuff."

Amaya thought for a moment, fingers twirling in the cords of her earbuds. "Why wouldn't they?"

"They---come on, girl. There's plenty of other paintings out there."

She lifted a brow. "Mikey, have you seen some of the stuff people are calling art? The stuff that's being sold right under us? My boss is, at this very moment, arranging empty bottles of household cleaners while we wait for the models to arrive. It's some commentary about role expectation and big chemical companies," she added at his confused grimace; she looked like she shared his thoughts. "My point is that people will buy what they want."

Mikey thought that over, heels drumming against the rooftop. The streets below were far enough away he didn't worry about anyone seeing him. If they did, it could easily be explained by one of the various art studios. Hence, why Amaya suggested the rooftop.

Amaya grabbed the last slice, grinning at his pout before tearing it in half. Then she grew serious. "I think you're stuff's great. I do," she pressed. "And I also think it's because you put a lot of yourself into it. Selling it can be scary. Ultimately, it's up to you whether or not you want to continue."

Mikey nodded. He knew that. He also agreed that it was scary.

"Lastly, you should think about going through an art dealer," she added. She motioned to the building below them. "It'd be an easier way to make it available to many people. And it would take some of the stress off April. You'd have the pieces sent to the dealer and make arrangements for how it was to sell."

"Got any suggestions?"

At that, she shrugged, lifting her hands. "Expertise ends there, my man," she said through a smile. "I can ask around but even April might have a better chance at finding someone."

---

Finding someone went faster than expected. Donnie checked the guy out, everything cleared, and it just became part of life. After spending so much time agonizing over it, Mikey thought it anti-climactic at how easy the whole thing was.

The process was simple: when a piece was done, either Amaya or April would deliver it, then a check would be sent to April once it sold. Given the spotty schedule before, there were plenty of finished pieces to go through before having to worry about keeping up with demand. So there was little to consider beyond sending it out and getting a check back.
Mikey never asked about the checks. It was almost an afterthought. As long as it went towards the things they needed, he didn't need to know about it.

Had he realized how the checks were getting to April, things might have turned out different.

It was such a part of life now, Mikey never thought about it outside the lair. Too many things needed their attention. Foot activity alone kept them busy though the Purple Dragons were coming on strong. Even benched, Donnie was grumbling about an increase in certain activities that could be heading to larger conflicts. Things were slightly complicated by the task force. The latest process the group was trying involved sending their Intel through Casey. On paper.

Donnie had almost blown a gasket at that. Leo was a close second.

That day saw Mikey and Leo stopping at April's place, about three weeks after starting the whole art dealer thing. Casey was there to discuss the Task Force’s ‘improved process,’ with various colorful words from both parties. April tapped away at her laptop, working on her current story.

Hardly any time passed, however, before there was a knock at the door.

April looked up, brow furrowed in confusion. "Yes?" she called. Even Casey looked puzzled at this sudden caller.

"It's Diya!" came the chipper answer.

All three turned to April, who silently swore. "I forgot," she hissed. "Quick, hide! Hide!" She hardly got the words out before Leo and Mikey disappeared. Four years and she still wasn't used to that.

"Miss O'Neil?"

"Coming!" April called, making sure Casey had most of the task force paperwork obscured. Once the room cleared, she opened the door.

Diya gave her a bright smile, catching April's slightly frazzled appearance. "Forgot about me again, huh?"

"Just---Days mixed up," April invented.

"Just---Days mixed up," April invented.

Diya glanced around her and saw Casey at the island bar, waving in greeting. Her smile turned sly, green eyes twinkling. "Oh! Well, I'm not going to interrupt any more of your date night," she said smoothly. She reached into the large purse on her arm and pulled out an envelope. Tapping it against her cheek, she asked, "Anything new for me to bring in? I loved this last one. I was a little sad it sold so fast."

"Not tonight, sorry," April said, taking the envelope.

She clucked her tongue. "Shame. Wish we could get more of his stuff. Or that he'd do commissions."

"Maybe next time I'll have something."
With a sigh, Diya plucked a small card out of her purse and handed it over. "If this mystery man changes his mind, there's the info." She turned to leave but paused. She gave Casey a shrewd stare. "That's not..." The question trailed off.

April laughed. "No, no. Not the guy." It wasn't until her retreating footsteps faded that April shut the door, letting out a breath.

"Who was that?" Mikey asked at once.

April jumped, as the large terrapin had materialized at her elbow. She thumped his shoulder for startling her. "Diya," she said, glaring. "She works for the art dealer. He's got some hang up about electronic banking so she delivers the checks in person."

"Does she usually come over unannounced?" Leo asked; his reappearance behind Casey made the human jump as well.

"No," April said, stern. "She lets me know when a check's ready and I tell her when to come over. I forgot. Really," she added at his frown.

They continued on that tangent, Leo unhappy about the intrusion. Mikey left it to his brother. He doubted any regular human would have gotten the jump on them. Curiosity, though, hit him.

Edging around the other three, Mikey went over to the large windows in April's living room. After a moment, a woman walked out onto the street wearing the same overcoat he got a glimpse of when she handed April the card. He hadn't been able to see her face, not from where he hid. The coat was easy enough to recognize: patterned with green and grey roses. As high up as he was, though, he couldn't make out her face. Just wavy, red-brown hair that flowed behind her as she walked.

It would have been easy enough to forget. Should have been easy to forget. But Mikey kept thinking about it. It was her voice that lingered. Actual interest in a new piece. Genuine disappointment there wasn't one.

It lingered enough that Mikey would look down at the business card he swiped from April and debate calling the number typed across the surface.

Only two days passed, but it felt like an eternity to Mikey. It had taken a final reminder of how well texting had gone with Amaya to bolster himself to hit send on his shell-cell.

---

Diya Davis was at war.

In a manner of speaking.

She was up to her hips wading through the various portfolios for her boss' latest pet project. Plus, her own deadlines loomed closer. And she had a family gathering she should be preparing for.

In their own ways, each held a priority. And Diya struggled finding which priority was paramount.
Her phone beeped and she ignored it. She stared between the three pieces laid out before her, each a different representation of "movement" from the artists. Her boss often held an 'open gallery,' of sorts, for local talent. All one had to do was turn in a piece with the gallery's theme. Only twenty pieces would actually be displayed, though.

Diya had been staring at the submitted pieces for so long, she thought she might be going cross-eyed.

Groaning, she pushed her chair away, sending her rolling across the room to her work station. The layout of her apartment deemed this the living room. Diya had reinvented it as her workroom/office. One side held the trappings of her job as assistant to art dealer Charles Lee, including the intimidating stack of pieces she still had to review. The other side held a workstation longer than most picnic tables. Half was taken up by her 'mundane' computer and various books for school.

The other half held what she loving called 'Leviathan': A monster of a computer capable of keeping up with her life as both student and freelance artist (with a side hobby of internet-comic-creator, something to keep her sane), outfitted with enough peripheral equipment to make any digital artist either envious or sport a raging art-boner in a second.

Sometimes it paid having a geek for a best friend. Without her, Diya would never have been able to get Leviathan up and running---

Her phone beeped again.

Diya glared at the little device across the room. Then she thought it might be her grandmother, another reminder of the get together that Saturday. Never wise to keep Mama Rita waiting for a return text.

She got to her feet and trudged over, idly considering placing a delivery order; she wasn't going to be leaving any time soon.

It was an unknown number. And a fake one at that, judging by the series of '5's running across her screen. Diya prepared to delete it, not up for dealing with any more spam.

At the last moment, she caught part of the message from the notification and stopped. Curious, she opened it.

April said you wanted more pieces?

Diya stared down at the message. April? April O'Neil? Before she could respond, another message came.

It's cool that they're selling, but what kind of stuff where you looking for?

Diya continued to stare, not quite believing what she read. Could this really be Michelangelo? Anonymous artist who no one---NO ONE---had even seen?

She had given April her business card, the one that listed her cell number, not the line to the office at the gallery. While it wasn't a secret that Mr. Lee wanted more of this guy's work, he'd never pushed for more. When O'Neil had met with him, she made it clear that all communications would go through her and that the artist was not to be pestered. Mr. Lee was more than
understanding though he sulked about it at times.

Diya never thought he’d respond to such a simple request. Even less so that he would respond himself. But she wasn’t going to let this chance slip away.

---

Mikey paced a nervous circuit around the sewers. Well, 'paced' in that he boarded through the pipes he knew like the back of his hand. It was easy enough to do; been doing it since before Donnie first strapped an engine to his board. He sent the texts, both fired off before he could second guess himself, then careened through the sewers to blow off nerves.

He wasn't used to being nervous. Maybe it was like Amaya said: this was personal. He wasn't sure how else to word the odd emotions rolling round his gut at the thought of discussing his art with someone else. Someone related to the selling of said art.

Mikey hit a length of pipe that flowed level for a good few yards. He flipped his shell-cell up, half expecting a blank screen. Several messages popped up, one from Leo instructing him to get back before nightfall for patrol, a reminder of a co-op game he had planned for way later that night (was that right? 2AM? At what point did it become 'next morning'?).

And a response.

Hi! So excited to finally speak with you! I hope it didn't sound as though I was demanding anything. I just wanted Ms. April to pass on the message.

He just stood there, coasting to a stop, staring at the text. Then he grinned.

No worries! Not mad or anything. Just not used to this kinda thing.

What thing?

This art thing. Still feels weird that people want it.

What do you mean? I'm sorry, I don't think I understand you properly.

Mikey absently kicked off his board, propelling him further. He slid on to a section of the pipe that was busted open; here he had first tried out one of Donnie’s new fuel types, only for them to find out it was too combustive to be safe. The curling shreds of metal had been filed down so it wasn't as dangerous. From there, it was an easy jump to another pipe that would take him back to the lair.

It gave him enough time to think of his reply.

If April hadn't said anything, I never would have thought to make stuff to sell. It's just something I do. Feels weird getting paid for it.

Mikey shoved his shell-cell into a pocket and set to the ride back home. He let himself focus on the physical activity. As much as he could focus. He always had parts of his brain hopping to other subjects, been so since he was little. When he could, he kept it on easier things.
Not the weird churning in his gut.

He didn't regret any of it. The paintings or the selling of them. Yet there was something about it that just wasn't clicking. Something that kept him from being at ease.

Maybe that was why this person stuck out to him. The first person he heard compliment it that wasn't family (April was family, his long-held crush notwithstanding; there was just no going around the fact that she was as much a part of them as Splinter was).

The pipes leading to the lair came up, sharpening his focus. He flipped the board into his hand, tucking it in place on his back, and reveled in the rush of sliding through the pipes with nothing but water propelling him. He never grew tired of it, never kept a grin off his face even when they scrambled to respond to a new Foot sighting.

The sharp dip that lead home loomed ahead. He flipped at just the right time, the rush sending him into the air with a splash.

A disgusted shout was his only warning that Raph had been standing too close when he entered. But his brother didn't retaliate, already hurrying off towards the garage while cussing and shaking off the water. Leo came up behind him, motioning for Mikey to follow.

Mikey fell in line, apparently arriving just in time for patrol. He hopped into the back of the garbage truck, which he insisted on calling Shell-Raiser, despite Donnie's continued grumbles, and did a last minute check of his gear.

He almost didn't check his shell-cell. Actually considered ignoring it until they returned. But his hand flipped it up almost as though it acted on its own.

The truck lurched forward, nearly matching the odd swooping feeling in his gut as he read her responses.

*Payment aside. I think your work is phenomenal. I'm not saying that because I work for Mr. Lee.*

*Every piece you've sent in always amazes me.*

*Serious, Mr. Michaelangelo, I almost can't put it into words.*

Mikey stared down at the messages. He started typing, ignoring Leo's pointed glare.

*Call me Mikey. What words would you use? Go with your gut! I usually do :)*

By the time they hit the streets, a single sentence returned, echoing throughout his time on the streets.

*When I look at them, they make me glow.*

---

Diya fretted.
In the rush of actually communicating with Michaelangelo, she'd thrown all caution and sense to the wind. So when he'd ask for her opinion on his works, she'd listened without thought.

And now she had spent half the night awake, freaking the eff out.

What was she thinking, saying that?! He must have thought she was so dumb!

Other laments came and went, but this stayed around the most. It got so bad, she even Skype-called her friend Lyn to complain.

Lyn almost pissed herself laughing at Diya's dilemma.

Diya glared at her computer screen until her friend composed herself. "Your support is greatly appreciated," she grumbled.

Lyn snickered, adjusting the headset she wore. She took off her glasses to wipe away the few tears of mirth that still lingered. "Oh, lord, Dee," she chuffed, "that made my year."

"Serious, girl," Diya said, trying to reign in the conversation. "I might have screwed this all up."

"How so?"

"It's been over six hours since I sent the god-forsaken text," she said, glancing at her phone and again fretting when there were no messages from that bizarre number. "Still nothing. He has to be pissed or something. That's why he hasn't responded."

"Or, you know, he's sleeping," Lyn said, idly swiveling her chair. It was a massive thing, more upright bed in Diya's opinion. The amount of hours Lyn spent in front of her computer warranted the luxury of such a chair. "That's something normal people do at 1:30 in the morning."

"You're awake."

"Normal people, my dear," Lyn said smoothly, wagging her eyebrows playfully. "I've been on Europe's clock for the last week because of the audits. Had a conference call that ended just a few minutes before you rang in distress."

Diya continued to glare.

Lyn straightened in her chair, wincing for a moment. When she settled, the humor ebbed away. "So why's this one got you so worked up?" she asked. "You've worked with the reclusive artist types before. Heck, you're one yourself."

"Internet comics don't count," Diya said automatically. "It's only online I'm secretive."

"Point stands," Lyn said, shrugging. "You're familiar with the type. Why is this one special?"

A question Diya often asked herself.

She wasn't new to being impressed by other artists. She had plenty of exposure to it working with Mr. Lee. And she'd interacted with said artists through more than text messages.

But Michaela---Mikey, he'd said to call him. This was different. And she found she couldn't
voice the reason why. Namely because words cheapened it.

Diya told him the truth. Looking at his works, she felt warmth from the inside out. Colors sharpened. Even gloomy days felt brighter. She was moved by art, there was no secret there. It had been so since before she could remember. His wasn't the only one to invoke a deep, long-lasting reaction.

But none made her glow like his.

All of which, she couldn't tell Lyn. Not because she feared more laughter; she knew Lyn better than that. And because it wasn't the reason behind her fretting.

"You remember that my dad was a huge sci-fi nerd?" Diya started, not quite looking at Lyn as she spoke.

Lyn perked. "Yeah. Said he was commissioned for a few novel covers, right?"

She nodded. "There was this series he would read to us. I can't recall the name of it. But there was this character, a general or admiral---no, that's not the important part. Whenever this guy would want to invade a new planet or species, he would collect artwork from it first. Study it. For days and weeks at a time."

Lyn frowned. "Sounds drawn out and lame. And this guy was an admiral?"

"The point," Diya went on, fighting a smile, "was that through a culture's art, he came to understand it. He knew how they thought, how to best attack, how they would defend. I doubt that was the lesson of the books, but it's the one I took away from it."

Lyn nodded, considering for a moment. "And this pertains to this Mickey guy how?"

Diya rolled her eyes, not bothering to correct her. "Insight gained through art."

A musical alarm sounded. Lyn reached off screen and silenced it. "Well, I can't tell you what this guy's silence means," she said, looking truly regretful. "But you take care of your clients, Dee. I know you do. So I know that you didn't mean anything negative by it. If this guy can't see that? He's not worth you losing sleep. Hear me?"

Diya nodded. She couldn't help the smile at the gentle admonition. "Yes, ma'am."

Lyn grinned. "All right, get to bed. I got a raid planned."

"Real or fictitious?"

"Watch the news if you want the answer," Lyn said, sticking out her tongue. Then she took on an exaggerated grimace. "Crap, the FBI guy assigned to me might be listening," she said in an overt whisper. "Fictitious, totally fictitious. Just me and a bunch of other geeks giving ourselves carpal tunnel, I swear."

"Happy hunting. Don't make any twelve year olds cry," Diya said, giggling.

Lyn grinned, saluted with two fingers to her headset, and signed off.
The quiet pressed in on Diya. She knew she should get to bed, regardless of if she slept or not. She needed to not think. Lyn was right; there had been no negative intent in her words. She had to keep reminding herself of that. Crawling into bed, covers pulled over her head, she let herself contemplate the other reason she felt so worried.

The lesson from the books was something she truly believed in. The insight one gained from studying art was like gaining access to the mind of the artist. And the art Mikey created indeed made her glow, alive with color and possibility and a general feeling of life.

But it all held a note of longing. Some more than others. Even Mr. Lee commented on that. Her boss believed it was why everything sold well. A gentle juxtaposition: capturing the essence of life while yearning for some unnamed desire.

Even with that glowing feeling, Diya couldn't help the pang of sadness that came with it.

Her phone dinged.

Diya blinked in surprise at the device. She fumbled a hand free, not daring to hope.

The bizarre number again.

Diya scrambled upright, heart pounding. Her finger hovered over the screen, hesitating to unlock it. A second message came, like he sensed it. Then she swallowed her nerves and read the messages.

*Whoa, didn't know pictures could do that! That's good, right?*

*Crap, hope you aren't asleep, sorry it's so late.*

Diya smiled, quick with a response.

*No worries! I was up, talking with a friend.*

*I wouldn't say all paintings can do that. But yes I meant it in a good way.*

The conversation continued for a while, somehow turning from a discussion on his work to the merits of going to bed on time. It happened so quickly Diya missed it. Eventually, he claimed he had to go, citing a last duty before heading to bed himself. Placing her phone back on the table didn't feel like the end of the conversation, though. Just hitting the pause button.

Diya went to sleep with the smile still in place.

---

Mikey wasn't used to having a secret.

Sure, he hid things from his brothers; sometimes literally. They all did. Part of having family. Part of life, in fact.

But a secret? Something that would get him in some serious trouble if any of them found out? Well, mainly Leo. And he wasn't sure how Raph or Donnie would react.
Whenever he got a new message from Diya, he'd grin like an idiot without even reading it. Though it all started on a question about art, the subject was rarely brought up. Sometimes there was only a cursory mention or a random question from Diya. Then the subject changed and it faded into the background.

She was cute. Mikey couldn't think of a better word to describe her. She kept up with his ever shifting attention span. Returned his jokes (even though sometimes it was simply several laughing emojis, he enjoyed it all the same). And if he sent something remotely flirty, she'd return it.

It felt different. Conversations with April never left him feeling like this. Talking with Amaya (which was happening more and more as Leo begrudgingly lifted the restrictions on contact) never made him stare at his shell-cell, hoping to get another message.

Such was his state, one day, when he found he wasn't as secretive as he thought.

He just finished a massive gaming session, chilling on the couch, and playing with his shell-cell, not quite letting himself admit he was wanting to text Diya. Then Raph vaulted over the back of the couch, taking up half the cushions when he landed.

"What's 'er name?" Raph asked.

Mikey blinked, brain scrambling to find a reason that the question did not pertain to his secret texting affair.

Raph smirked, a little too pleased at surprising his youngest brother. "You do know Donnie gets the info from all our stuff, right?"

Up until that very moment, Mikey never entertained the possibility. "Ah, crap," he groaned.

Raph snickered. "So? Name?"

Mikey fiddled with the shell-cell. "Diya."

"Diya? Same chick Leo was bitching about a few weeks back?"

"Yeah," Mickey said, sinking down in the couch as though trying to hide from a not-present Leo. "She was at April's when we were there."

Raph grunted, no more explanation needed. Anonymity was crucial for them. Too many holes in that just made them more vulnerable. Both of them had fought when Leo all but threw a tantrum when Amaya became mixed up with their lives. The want to annoy him had fueled the marathon texts.

Though it chafed, and annoyed like the worse itch ever just under the lip of his shell were he couldn't get a good angle at and had to deal with for days on end, Mikey knew there were good reasons for it.

That made Mikey think back to the whole Amaya situation. It hadn't turned out like Leo feared. Was he hoping for a repeat?

"We just talk," Mikey half-mumbled. "You know. Stupid stuff."
"Stupid, eh? That why you always look like an excited puppy when you check yer phone?"

"Do not!" Mikey countered, resisting the urge to shout it.

The shell-cell in his hand dinged. Like a reflex, he looked at it with the same grin spreading across his face. Then he remembered Raph was right beside him.

His older brother's smirk grew bigger, if that was possible. "Excited. Puppy," Raph deadpanned.

Mikey refused to let Raph's gloating ruin his good mood. Diya's message was a follow up on something dumb one of her siblings had done over the weekend. His response was quick, siding with the dumb stunt as that's what you're supposed to do when you're young. Once it was sent, Mikey found himself blurting out, "It's nice. Talking with her. It's...nice."

It might have been his tone. Or even the way he didn't quite meet his brother's green-gold gaze. Whatever it was, Raph's smug expression softened. It was the only way describe it. Never easy with thoughts and feelings, expressing them or empathizing with someone else's, Raph's rough around the edges personality never projected an invitation to unload.

But it didn't mean he didn't care. Didn't mean he didn't want to do something to comfort the unsaid things under Mikey's words. He shifted awkwardly in his seat. Then he thumped Mikey's shoulder. "I won't say nothin'. None of Leo's business anyway," he added on a sneer.

Mikey grinned back, oddly relieved. And if Donnie knew then he guessed the tech-head wasn't saying anything either.

Raph stood up, still a bit awkward. He stalked off, muttering something about 'hound dog pitiful.'

When the shell-cell dinged again, Mikey's giddiness was a little less in the wake of their talk.

It was nice to talk with Diya. Incredibly nice.

But it couldn't go beyond that.

Right?

---

Diya's back twanged painfully. Taking that as a sign, she un-hunched herself from over her tablet. Her spine cracked and popped as she took on a position humans were meant to be in, hissing as things realigned.

Her monitor was a mess. Storyboards, emails, and a draft of possible commissions taunted her. She made a face at them all before hobbling off her chair. Her headphones almost strangled her before she remembered to take them off. Lyn had been whining about getting her a wireless headset for months. Diya refused, saying she needed to be able to walk away from her work and she had a tendency to forget she still wore them.

As she stood before her fridge, debating between water and more coffee, her phone beeped. Diya half-hoped it was just her mother with an update on Daniel's late night trip to the ER; another bicycle accident, didn't he learn anything from the last dozen times?
She had too many things happening right now to take on anything else. This latest commission made her pull an all-nighter. Deadlines sucked, particularly when the piece was requested so soon. But it was a previous client who paid seriously good money and she knew their particular likes and dislikes already by this point. And she was the one who agreed on such a tight timeline. A few late nights and early mornings was worth it now that she could pay off next semester’s tuition.

The windows showed a dark skyline with no hint of the sunrise a few hours away. And she had about another few hours worth of work left in her before she truly crashed. Settling on coffee, she set the machine to brewing and retrieved her phone. Seeing that it was from Mikey, she felt a little of the gloom leave her.

**Random question, don’t answer if you don’t wanna.**

**What makes a monster?**

Diya stared down at the message. What brought this on? A few second later, a third message came.

**Like in a person, I mean. What makes someone a monster or freak that people hate on sight?**

She leaned against the kitchen counter, fingers hovering over her phone. Part of her wanted this to be some elaborate lead up to a joke. But it sounded genuine. A hole opened in her chest, cold shivering through her.

She wasn't sure how much time passed while she stood there. By the time she remembered her coffee, it was more warm than hot. She sipped it, biding her thoughts. Grimacing, she sent her response before she could dwell on it any more.

*I'm not sure where this is coming from, so I'm not sure how to answer.*

*Can you give me context?*

*Are you ok?*

That last one, more than the rest, she wanted answered. Diya considered reaching out to April, to see if she knew Mikey was all right.

Time ticked by. Diya curled up on her windowsill, trying to leech some left over warmth from the glass. It didn't help but she let the people passing by on the streets distract her while she waited.

When her phone went off, she almost dropped it.

*I'm ok. It's nothing new.*

*I mean nothing happened! Just a thought that always comes back.*

*You ever get those?*

The hole deepened a little more. Diya thought again of the unsaid things that always hung
around her when texting Mikey. Things she wanted to blurt out. Things she could only guess at.

Things she thought she saw in his works.

*I have a lot of random thoughts.*

*This doesn't sound like that. Seriously, you ok?*

*I'm fine! It came up.*

*don't have to answer if this is too weird.*

*sorry :(

Diya found herself wanting to take the easy out he presented. Maybe she was taking this too far. She shouldn't be reading so much into it. Into any of this.

Boundaries. There should be boundaries. If she went too far, it could ruin Mikey's relationship with Mr. Lee. It could ruin her job. It could ruin whatever relationship was building between them by these texts.

She should respect what little boundaries remained. She should. She would.

Her fingers remained clasped on her phone, refusing to type out the cheery response her mind concocted to change subjects. She looked across the room where her computer sat, monitor angled so she could see it.

The background was a collage of pictures from the gallery Mr. Lee owned. The pieces that spoke to her, the ones that stayed with her long after she went home. It changed every so often, pieces replaced by new ones or old favorites returning. Out of all of them, one had hung around the longest.

It was a wonderful clash of colors and images; caught somewhere between abstract, impression, and memory placed on canvas. The colors sectioned it out, each dominating its own space. They formed an image of a circle in a way that felt more organic than intentional. Seven different colors, each with a unique sense. Serene blue, intense purple, passionate red, radiant orange made up the upper part. Calm browns, comforting yellow, and steadfast grays made up the bottom.

Diya had stared at the original for close to an hour before Mr. Lee had kindly directed her back to work. He even chuckled that he found his eyes wandering to it if he weren't careful, so many nuances to explore, so many things waiting in the shifting colors.

It wasn't the colors that so grabbed Diya's attention. It was the bare space that appeared in each color. Blank canvas, not even a fallen drop of paint touching it. Just space, a little larger than her palm, never appearing in the same spot as the others. And in the middle, almost like an afterthought, there was a deliberate smudge, like something had been started only to be wiped away and covered with a single stroke of white.

So many months later and Diya still hadn't changed the picture. The piece had only spent three days in the gallery before Mr. Lee sold it. She probably would never see it again. So she kept it on her monitor.
The first piece of art Mikey had given the gallery. The first time she had been struck by that
glow. And the bittersweet aftertaste from that sense of longing.

---

_A lack of understanding._

Mickey stared down at his shell-cell. He wasn't sure what he was feeling, reading that response.
He was still surprised he had sent the question in the first place. Tonight, though...

The night started out as an easy night. A few muggers stopped, thieves caught, things that
mattered but weren't high on the task force's priorities. Mikey found himself preferring those
nights; partly because Leo often wrapped up patrol before midnight. It also reminded him of when
they first started venturing out, when there wasn't a looming threat of Shredder or some other
viscous force causing trouble. Just helping the people of New York, like they always talked about
during training.

And, truly, nothing had happened. They were as Splinter taught them: out of sight. No one
cought sight of them, not even security camera per Donnie's assurances. Rather than ease him,
though, it just prodded old memories back to Mikey's mind.

The times they didn't go unseen. The looks. The wide eyes. The horror. The things people said.

He tried to keep it back. Tried to ignore the old ache in his chest. On his way back, he caught
sight of a familiar SUV and decided to check on in Amaya. Seeing how late it was, he was a little
curious why she was running around at this hour.

Then came the screeching of tires. Amaya leaving her car to see what she had hit. Then those guys-

She was safe. Mikey had made sure she was safe. And yet…

The argument that followed felt all wrong. Even when the others got involved, she was unmoved in
her decision. Mikey hadn’t seen Raph seethe like this in years, the giant brother ready to keep
going even after Leo stepped aside and Amaya headed home.

Headed home without letting one of them follow her to make sure she was okay. Because she had
refused that. ‘Absolutely not.’

She hadn’t said anything against them personally. Just insisted she didn’t need to be babysat, that
she’d handled herself through such a thing many times before.

*Absolutely not,* she’d said. *I can protect myself from the monsters out there.*

And just like that, the words were stuck in his head on repeat. Not directed to him or his brothers.
Hell, she never spoke against them in such a way. It was just a old pain too close to the surface,
feeding off the stress of what he had just stopped and her insistence that everything was okay.
When it wasn’t. Stress and pain too close to that word to just leave him alone.

His shell-cell was in his hand before he knew it. And Mikey found himself revisiting that old
question, one that they could never really answer.
A quick succession of beeps pulled him from his thoughts. April had already left, walking over to the other side of the Lair where Leo stood watching the reservoir fill; probably lost in his own thoughts on that argument. Diya hadn't been idle long, sending more in the wake of the first one.

*That's the best way I can think.*

*People are scared of what they don't understand, they lash out, they fight back.*

*Most use words.*

*So they say things that are cruel as a way to keep it away, thinking it'll make them safer.*

*I'm not sure if that's the answer you're looking for.*

*But it's the only one I got.*

Mikey stared down at the texts, a warm bubble filling his chest. Was this what she meant by 'glow'? It certainly felt similar to what she described.

**It's a great one!**

*It was a weird question, sorry again :(*

Probably wasn't best to just spring it on her without notice. Can't take back what was sent, though. And she sounded like she was taking it pretty well. At least she stopped asking if he was okay.

*Hey weird questions plague us all :)*

After that, they chatted back and forth like always, hitting everything from her brother's broken arm to favorite pizza toppings (a frequent topic, each defending their own quite firmly). When she begged off to keep working, Mikey found he didn't want her to. He wished there was another way to talk, though he'd never give up these text sessions if it was the only option.

Mikey frowned to himself as a question came to him. After all this time, why hadn't she mentioned that? She never tried to call, Donnie would have mentioned that (regardless of the fact that the call would have been blocked the instant it happened). And she never talked about calling or meeting up or anything else. Never said she was tired of texting.

Surely...

---

Diya felt a little tension return to her shoulders when another text popped up right after Mikey had signed off for the night. She needed to keep working. But she checked it all the same. After that question, she was loath to ignore him.

*Another random question: how come you've never called? Or wanted to meet?*

Diya's mouth twitched in a little half-smile. An odd calm fell over her. At last, he asked.
In truth, she'd been expecting this sooner. His personality, even through messaging, just sounded like one that was too exuberant for social media on any platform.

Even so, her fingers tapped out her answer without hesitation.

_Because I don't have that right and it would be cruel._

_You've made an effort to stay anonymous. I respect that. Asking you to disregard it would be inappropriate._

_So don't think it hasn't crossed my mind._

_But that ball is in your court._

Returning to her work bench, Diya set her phone at an angle so she could see if she got another message. It remained silent. She got back to work, trying to lose her thoughts in the music and the piece before her.

Still, even as the sun rose and bled light over her desk, she'd peek at her phone, wishing he would take up that offer.

---

Mikey thought his chest was going to explode.

This was a crazy idea. Insane. What was he thinking? What in the world made him believe he could do this?

Yet there he was, one roof over from the art gallery where Diya worked. She was there, he knew. She'd mentioned setting up for a showcase of local artists and that she'd basically be staying at the gallery for the next two days.

And he said he may drop by.

Diya's response was excited, yes. It still held that sense of holding back, like she said. She knew he wanted to stay unknown to the world at large and she wasn't pushing that.

She just didn't know why.

And it wasn't like he had a plan in place. Drop by? With what, a trench coat and hat? Like that would hide him very well. He was still bigger than anyone there.

Unable to help himself, Mikey came out to watch the gallery. Despite it being midday and that the showcase was set for that night, the place was busy. He watched through the huge windows that encased the front. It was hard to track Diya in the mild chaos. He picked her out by her red-brown hair, currently pulled up in a bun. Yet he hadn't seen her face clearly. Too much going on.

A familiar SUV pulled up to the curb and Mikey tensed. A man exited and went inside the gallery, Diya meeting him and shaking his hand. Amaya hopped out from the driver's side and opened the back. People from the gallery came out to help unload, all chatting with Amaya. Once it was empty, Amaya locked her car and headed to the door. She paused, looking up and down the
street with a frown. Then she pulled out her phone.

A second later, Mikey's shell-cell beeped.

**When you're done being a sneaky-ninja, I'll bring some pizza to the roof.**

Mikey let out a breath, relaxing. Amaya was still a little stiff in regards to the night she was almost car-jacked. But miracles of miracles, whatever April had said got through to Amaya. She was adjusting, she said, and it wouldn’t be a smooth transition. But she was trying.

Hell, he hadn’t even known she was going to be here, today. He half-expected her message would be telling him off for following her. This felt like that ‘adjusting’ she mentioned.

Not even an hour later and pizza was indeed delivered. Within minutes, Amaya came out onto the roof of the gallery's building with three pizza boxes. Mikey was there before she could even pull out her phone. The smile she gave eased the last of his worry; if she wasn’t going to mention that night, then he wasn’t either.

"Scouting out your stuff?" she asked by way of greeting. She tossed a whole box to him and sat on a bench cemented in place. The whole roof looked like it was used as a patio of sorts; various lawn furniture scattered about and even several plants overtaking one corner.

Mikey shrugged, hoping to hide behind scarfing down some slices.

Amaya lifted a brow, pausing as she lifted the lid to her own box. "What's bugging yo---"

Mikey heard the creak of the stairwell just in time. Before Amaya could blink, she was alone on the rooftop, staring at the empty space where he had been. A moment later, she jumped as the roof's door opened.

Diya stepped out, wiping at her forehead. "Ugh, we need to fix that AC," she grumbled, glaring down the stairs. She smiled at Amaya, holding up another pizza box. "Think you grabbed Mr. Lee's by mistake. He needs his Hawaiian."

"S-sure! No prob!" Amaya stammered, she scrambled to check the two boxes beside her.

Diya paused, spying the third laying on the ground. "That's a lot for lunch," she commented.

"Skipped breakfast," Amaya lied quickly. "And I'm taking some home for dinner---" She broke off.

Diya picked up the discarded box, easily juggling it with the other she carried. Popping the lid, she looked down at the double-pepperoni, double-cheese, anchovies and garlic crust pizza that was missing three slices. Something flickered across her face. Then the smile returned and she handed both over to Amaya.

Amaya located the Hawaiian one and held it out. "I'll be down to help in a bit."

"Take your time. I've worked with your boss before. Believe me, you'll know if he needs you," Diya said, wagging her phone for emphasis.

"Too true," Amaya giggled as the other headed for the door. She let out a sigh of relief.
Diya paused just before the doorway and glanced around the roof. She tapped something on her phone.

Mikey felt his gut drop when his shell-cell beeped.

Diya's green eyes snapped over to the corner with the plants. A grin spread across her face.

Amaya, in turn, paled. Unable to stop herself, she looked over as if Mikey would be able to give her directions while maintaining the hiding spot.

"Not often you see a pizza order like that," Diya called. "I seem to recall saying that those stinky little fish ruin it completely."

Mikey swore at himself, mind racing. What should he do? He needed to leave. He could easily slip down the building; the plants were thick enough she couldn't see him. Just get away and pray he could play it off. He glanced over at Amaya, who was motioning for him to leave from behind Diya's back. She looked terrified, no doubt certain this was going to get back to his brothers.

A gentle noise brought him back to Diya. She hadn't moved. She stayed in the same place, still holding up her phone, eyes tracing over the plants like she was trying to see though them. Yet she didn't move any closer.

She was cute. Skin a warm caramel, scattered with freckles everywhere. Dressed in leggings and an oversized shirt, sweating from work and the noon sun over head, it was the only word that fit her: cute.

Diya smiled in his direction, a small one. She made a half-shrugging gesture. "Ball's in your court, like I said," she called. She turned back to the stairs, not quite hiding the sad flash across her face.

Mikey's head cleared. And he made the most reckless decision in his life.

He stepped out in the open.

It was Amaya's gasp that drew Diya back around. She looked to Amaya first, concerned. Then those eyes landed on him and went wide. She lost her grip on the pizza box.

In a flash, Mikey darted forward and caught it. He stepped back just as quick, brain catching up and shouting not to crowd her. Holding the box between them, praying it didn't look like he was using it as a shield, he smiled down at her. "Hey, girl!" he said, voice oddly normal. Damn, she was smaller than he thought, barely coming up to his bicep.

Diya blinked up at him. Then the smile returned, slower as she considered what was in front of her. That smile outshone the sun. "Hey," she returned. Then she giggled. "Guess those tabloids my Gran reads about New York's sewers has some truth to them."

"Ah, not all of them," Mikey said, breezily. "Only a few gators. Not that many space babies. And only one giant rat that I know of."

From behind, Amaya groaned.
Chapter Summary

"You're not on your own anymore."

Words she heard yet never truly believed. Tonight, Amaya can't deny it any longer.

Amaya was an idiot.

The full extent to which she was in denial of. But she didn't have time for introspection. And she'd only managed to scrape a pass in her psych classes because her professors saw how hard she tried and pitied her. So maybe it was more that she was in a constant state of denial about herself.

But being an idiot was certainly in there.

She knew the streets were far from safe at night. She carried the equipment to prove it. Yet even that couldn't keep her from taking a job that would lead into the wee hours of morning. The courier gig alone was more than worth it; the side stuff she got because of it even more so. Empty streets were part of that. Seeing just how dark and deserted a place could be simply because it was one in the morning.

So the nondescript man waving her down at the stop light barely registered on her radar. Nothing beyond the usual check that her windows were up and the locks engaged. She kept her eyes forward and hit the gas as soon as the light turned.

It was so routine, she didn't give it a second thought. Not until she was two blocks away and turned a corner. Something darted in front of her, too low to get a clear view. But the crash and thump was more than enough to have her slam on her brakes.

Amaya knew what she should do. Stay inside, call 911, play it safe but get help. After everything, after hearing the things April had to report and the handful of horrors she didn't, Amaya knew better.

But she got out of the car anyway. Phone in hand, she started punching in numbers as she rounded the front of her SUV. "You okay?" she hollered, straining to see past the glare of headlights.

The operator picked up just as she realized what it was she hit: a trashcan.

She had moment---quick, hardly more than an intake of air---where she cursed herself; this was the oldest trick and she fell for it. Then the hands grabbed her. She hit the side of her car, hissing in pain and dropping her phone. The man kicked it away before grabbing her by the arm.
"Keys inside?" he barked.

Amaya nodded, gritting her teeth when he shook her.

"You alone?"

Dangerous question. She just met his glare, taking in what details she could in the piss-poor light of the deserted street. Like it was going to matter much. It wasn't the first time she'd been car jacked and both times the police had never found the guys even with a good description.

The man pulled her away, shoving her towards the street. He opened the door and looked around the inside.

Amaya caught her footing, almost landing in a puddle she didn't want to identify. Another set of hands grabbed her by the shoulders and she froze. "Good enough?" the second man called.

"Car's a car," the first said with a snort. Satisfied with his inspection, he looked over at them. His eyes narrowed. "Let's go."

"In a minute," the second said. He pulled Amaya back, uncomfortably close to him.

She tensed, hands fisting at the feel of his breath against her neck. With a bitten curse, she dug her elbow into his gut.

The guy doubled over but he kept a tight grip on her. Even as she spun away, clawing at the hand still clutching at her, he wouldn't let go.

The first guy shouted something, ordered him to stop, that this wasn't the plan.

He didn't hear. Or he didn't care. Just snarled down at her. Whatever he'd been planning, she had no doubt he just decided to make it so much worse.

The other guy kept shouting for him to back off. Until suddenly he wasn't.

The abrupt silence made both Amaya and her attacker turn. Only her SUV stood there, no sign of the guy save for a discarded gun lying on the pavement.

Amaya felt herself tense further, eyes darting around the dark street. Then she gasped when the guy pulled her in front of him. Using her as a shield, he started backing away. He struggled to get something out of his jacket while keeping a hold of her.

She struggled just as well to dislodge him. He swore and plunged his arm down across her front and drove her back against him again.

The skin along her neck pricked and it had nothing to do with the sudden contact. Despite her situation, she felt her tension start to lighten.

To his credit, the guy didn't shout or make any other crazy acts. He just kept her in front of what he believed to be a frontal attack and backed towards the other side of the street. Had it been anything else, he might have been making smart choices.

Amaya tried to keep herself loose, tried to anticipate the next move. It was still a shock when she
was released. So quick she almost missed it. Off-balance from the sudden lack of support, she caught herself and turned.

The guy hung limp from Mikey's grip, dangling like a bizarre puppet with clipped strings. Mikey held up the hand that had been working in his jacket. The gun looked to be a match for the one of the street.

Mikey tossed the guy aside, gun joining him after the ammo was removed. Then he looked over at her.

Amaya wanted to say something. Anything. But words died in her mouth and thoughts ground to a halt at the pained expression in those blue eyes. She swallowed, throat too tight.

Mikey glanced side to side, taking in the scene. "You okay?"

She nodded, feeling a chill that wasn't there. "I'm good," she said. "They wanted my car and just got rough."

He frowned at the limp body beside them. "Didn't look like he wanted the car."

Another flash of thoughts stopping. Every reason and excuse she had just stopped. Whether it was the pain she saw or the anger she heard, she just couldn't respond to that.

She was such an idiot.

---

April hardly ever got a call from the guys in the middle of the night that ended well. When it came from Mikey, it usually meant something bad. And the call had only been three words before he hung up: We need you.

Fighting fear, hating the nausea that rolled through her gut, April hurried to the lair. None of her usual sources reported anything. So, no world-ending disaster. And none of the other Turtles had reached out to her. Which meant one of two things.

Either they were all unable to do so or they didn't know Mikey called her.

In the wake of how he sounded on that call, she prayed it was the second one.

The lair wasn't silent, which eased the tension in her gut as she made her way inside. Yet there were no loud noises either. Raised voices meant arguments, strong-headed opinions clashing, the thinnest layer of mutiny abound. Mechanical and electrical sounds meant a new invention being tweaked with concerns for its use. Running footsteps and quick, worried words meant a contained panic usually alongside injuries.

A murmur of voices met April. Normal, decent-leveled conversation. Out of place, unexpected, it left her off balance. She lingered on the curve of the platform in the middle of the lair, trying to figure out what the hell was going on.

Donnie was at his chair in the surveillance hub. Data zipped by the screens, too quick for April to catch. He was silent as he worked, another oddity of the night. Leo stood at his side, also looking over the screens in a distracted way. He and Raph were talking, the latter pacing the sunken floor
before the hub. Sai flashed in the light, twirling like a meter for his agitation.

April looked around, frowning as she failed to see where Mikey was. The conversation broke with a surprised, "April?"

She held back on her questions just yet and continued over, matching Raph's nod of greeting and looking to Leo, who still seemed surprised at her being there.

When no one said anything, she offered, "Mikey asked me to come. Said you needed me."

All three winced; Donnie continued to analyze but his grimace remained the longest. Leo rubbed at his head, careful to avoid the still tender edges of his latest scars. "He shouldn't have done that," he said with little heat behind the words.

"Really?" Raph snapped. "Cuz I'm thinking he had the right idea. If anyone can talk sense into her, it's April. Hell, she's known her longer, Leo. She can just---"

"It's not about sense. It's about---"

"What happened?" April cut in.

Raph stopped pacing, sai still twirling. He stared at the ground for a long time before shooting his brothers a hard glare.

Leo visibly held in a sigh. But he turned to April and said, "Amaya was attacked. She's okay. She's adamant that it was a carjacking and nothing more. Insisted it wasn't a big deal and that it wouldn't have been the first time it happened."

"And Mikey?"

"He stopped it. Said it was turning into more than a carjacking for one of the shitheads," Raph spat. "All that and she's still saying it wasn't a big deal."

Part of April heaved a breath of relief. Though only internally. The rest felt a little sickened. And sad.

Some of that must have showed on her face. Catching Leo's questioning stare, she said, "Well, it's not like New York's a crime free place."

"Exactly," Raph said, pointing a sai at April while glaring again at Leo. "That's exactly what Mikey was getting at. So why can't she get it?"

"Wait, get what?" April asked, missing a part of the conversation.

Raph and Leo continued to glare at one another in silent debate. It was Donnie who answered. Leaning back to peer around Leo, he said, "It was suggested that Amaya find safer places to work or that we be informed so we can make sure nothing like this happens again."

April blinked at him. "I assume that went over well," she deadpanned.

Her comment did little to deter Raph. He started up again, citing reason after reason Amaya should accept the offer. Leo calmly kept matching each point, though in a resigned sort of way. It made
April pause, wondering the reason behind that.

Donnie, however, caught her eye before subtly nodding to the other side of the lair. She smiled in thanks and quietly eased away from the trio.

Once she noticed the direction Donnie sent her in, she sighed. She should have realized Mikey would be in his room. It had been his for almost two years now, Raph having claimed a space by the bathroom as his own. He’d been using it on and off over the years as a place to go to just be alone. The 'move' became official, however.

It touched April, knowing how close the two were. Sharing a room couldn't be easy, even for human siblings. Adding that on top of everything else going on in their lives? It just made her appreciate that bond between them.

Since then, Mikey slowly turned their old space into his own. There was more paint than cement. A corner crammed with various art supplies warred with different pieces of equipment for his hover board. The bunk beds were now one massive bed piled so high with blankets and pillows April considered dropping in every time she glimpsed it.

Usually music played. Tonight she heard only the sounds of the lair and the other pair's volley of arguments as she approached. Mikey sat on the edge of the massive pipe that created the room. He either didn't see her or just didn't acknowledge it. April climbed the ladder, heart thudding a little painfully.

'Mikey hurt' was not something she could often handle. It just---It didn't seem real, at times. He was so bright, eager to please, ready to make her smile at a moment's notice. Like nothing could ever touch him.

When it did, it was a hundred times worse.

April swung herself up and sat beside him, one leg dangling while the over stayed hooked on the top rung of the ladder. "Hey, Mikey."

"Hey, Angelcakes." A greeting. Not his usual gusto but she'd take it. His head was tilted down, not quite staring at his hands but not quite staring at nothing either. The stillness around him creeped at her nerves.

She tried to shake it off, focusing on the matter at hand. "So, you were there? "

A nod. "Happen to catch sight of her ride. Thought I'd drop in and say hi. Then she hit a can and hurried out. Guys were on her and I..."

April waited. As the moment grew, she noticed the voices from the others dimmed.

"It's always different when it's a friend, huh?" Mikey said at last. He rubbed his hands together, cloth and leather rasping over scales. "That makes it different. I lost track of the amount of times we caught car jacker's when we're out. Hell, I must've stopped over a dozen on my own. And...and those kinds of attacks, too. Sometimes too late. Most we could do was catch the guy and put in a call to Case'. This just...this..."

"This was Amaya," April finished gently.
"Why is she fighting this?" Mikey suddenly blurted. He turned to her and she was stricken to see the pain there, rimmed with raw panic. "It's not a big deal for us to shadow her. It's not! Donnie's still bench but he's moving a lot better, he could do it for a while, let her see it won't get in her way. And her jobs don't usually pull all-nighters. It'd be easy to work something---"

April laid a hand on his arm and he quieted at once. "I know, Mikey. I know," she said. "I'm not the one to convince."

Mikey shifted so that her hand fell into his. "Can you talk some sense into her, Angelcakes?"

"I can't promise that," she admitted, hating the flash of renewed pain the words made. Why did it hurt so much to see on Mikey? "But I will talk to her."

He searched her face, still desperate, but let out a slow breath and nodded. He pulled away, returning to that in-between stare.

April sat with him for a time, not quite ready to leave him just yet. In the stillness, the lair was quiet.

This was broken by a quick beep. Mikey looked startled out of deep thought, fishing through his clothes until he pulled out his shell-cell. When he saw the ID, a flicker lit his face.

April allowed herself a smile. She playfully nudged him. "Who's that?"

A flush ran up his neck and face, almost reaching the top of his head. 'Flustered Mikey' was a welcomed change.

Not wanting to ruin it with teasing too much too soon, April scooted over and started down the ladder. "Fine, fine, tell me when you're ready," she sang in a sing-song voice.

She was halfway down when a name made her stop. "Diya."

Mikey held the shell-cell close to him, like he was afraid to drop it. And the smallest, dopey little smile tugged at his mouth. "It's---I mean," he stammered, tugging at his mask's knot like he always did when nervous.

April's curiosity soared. This was certainly something worth prying into.

"I'll fill you in," he got out at last. "Just...not yet? It's still---Not sure what to call it, honestly."

"I won't say anything," she promised. Well, this was going to be hard to keep under wraps the next time Diya came to drop off a check.

Mikey just grinned back before turning to the shell-cell. The pain of the night was still there, still waiting for when things got too calm. But the sight of him happily typing away on his phone was enough to buoyed April's heart.

Hitting the ground floor, though, she pulled back on that happy feeling and set to the matter at hand. Donnie was at his hub, still analyzing. Raph had vanished, probably to run the sewers at Leo's order. Leo...

It for a minute before she realized he was standing by the massive pipe that spewed water into the
reservoir in the back of the lair. Hardly the usual setting for meditation. But April admitted there was a calming quality to the roar of water.

Leo never gave any sign he knew she approached. And he didn't say anything when she came to stand beside him. Yet there was an almost casual quality to the way he asked, "How's Mikey?"

"He's processing," she answered. She wished for a better way to phrase it. But that's what it was, wasn't it? Processing?

Leo grunted, still watching the raging waters.

April thought on his arguments with Raph. How reflexive it felt. She chewed on that for a long time---so long her feet started to ache and she leaned against the reservoir wall---before coming to a conclusion. "You're not pushing for it. Why?"

The smallest tension curled his frame. He didn't move but April saw it all the same. "I'm not going to force anything on her she doesn't want. I remember how well that went at the start. Don't want to repeat that."

April frowned. Again, the point was sound but the words just...fell flat. Like he didn't really believe it. "You were the one wanting the surveillance," she pointed out. "And she was up to negotiating it. Willing to work out a system that she was fine with that also pleased you."

Leo winced, actually stepping back and turning away. He walked a short circuit; never one to pace like Raph but always aware of the need to lose restless energy.

That response only made April frown harder, staring at him. "What happened?"

"We told you, she ---"

"No, this is something else," she cut in, pushing off the wall and placing herself in front of him.

Leo's jaw clenched, holding back on words or action. And still he didn't meet April's intense gaze.

"Oh my---you know something," she blurted as the epiphany hit her. "She told you something about that. Why it bugged her."

"It wasn't---That didn't happen," Leo protested, changing his mind halfway through and looking more sour for it.

"Something did," she pressed. "And it's making you hold back. Even when it might keep her safe?"

At last, Leo looked at her. It wasn't comforting. The calm April always expected to see was clouded with something darker. Worse than Mikey's pain, Raph's angry worry, and even Donnie falling behind data and analysis to keep from emoting. Leo was calm but it came from a place or a knowledge that chilled April to glimpse.

"I will not force her to accept this," he said, voice even; the tone she often heard him use when his brothers were being particularly belligerent. "Setting aside the fact that she has been proven able to protect herself, this is still something she should not be forced into. She got the gist of it from me and Don, even Mikey putting in a few good points. But I am leaving it at that. If she wants to accept it, then she will tell us. If she does and I think it is not entirely her own decision?"
The question hung in the air. April didn't shrink back, didn't blink. She didn't feel even an ounce of fear from the open question. It wasn't a threat. It wasn't even a dare for April to defend herself or argue that she'd never considered it.

It was just a point that Leo didn't want to finish. A road he didn't want to consider.

They stared each other down, both accepting it for what it was without needing to speak. Then Leo nodded once and walked away. April watched as he crossed the lair to the doors of the dojo. The sliding screen shut silently behind him.

April checked her watch. Just after 5AM. Good. That meant she had enough time to get topside, get some coffee in her, and prepare to give Amaya the chewing out of her life.

---

Having an office---even if it wasn't really hers---often meant Amaya didn't know what waited behind the closed door. Usually she opened it to find a custodian tidying up. Or one of Professor Prejean's colleges waiting for a meeting. One rare occasion held an undergrad on the cusp of a breakdown sobbing hysterically over a paper that had been returned with a '89' neatly written in the corner.

The last thing she expected to see was April O'Neal leaning against the desk, looking like she was about to tackle an underground fight ring and come out on top.

Amaya should have known, though. Last night's incident wouldn't be taken lightly. Not with how she ended it, not with how taken aback the Turtles had been, and most certainly not with the incident itself. Even so, seeing April waiting there just made her aware of how tired she was.

She kept moving, unloading the massive stack of papers onto the desk and sitting down in the chair. Once done, however, that only left her with the option of meeting April's focused glare. "I'm guessing you talked to the guys."

"There's not many 3AM calls that end nicely."

Amaya bit the inside of her cheek. Shouting would do nothing. She didn't even have it in her to be loud right now. "Look: I'm fine, the car's fine, everything's fine," she listed on a sigh. "They just got overexcited. I can handle this."

Her own words made her wince. Too close to that night at her house, swapping secrets with Leo, praying she wasn't making a mistake, and hating how she felt about it after.

"Everything's fine?" April repeated. "You're sure?"

"Yes!" Amaya snapped. "Geez, it's not like I haven't been carjacked before. It's happened twice and both times the police were able to track my car down. And nothing happened to me beyond getting freaked out. I can cope with that, too."

She accessed the computer, wanting to at least act like she had something to do, maybe hoping April would take the hint but knowing that would be unlikely. That knowing look ate at Amaya, even if she couldn't see it clearly.
"I ran late coming back from a courier job," she said, words spewing like April's silence yanked them out. "I know better than that. I just didn't think it through. I've already talked to the company, made it clear I'm not taking runs that will keep me out that late again. And most of my other jobs have security measures or coworkers that can walk me to my car. Really," she stressed, meeting April's gaze with what she hoped was a firm one, "I'm fine."

April inclined her head, mouth quirking in an almost smile that only made Amaya worried. "You worked it out pretty well."

Amaya nodded, hesitating.

"Covered your bases," she went on, thinking it over carefully. She walked slowly around the desk until she was between it and the pair of chairs visitors used. "Checked in with your bosses. Pretty sure you made a report to the cops, too. Just so there'd be something in the system for that area, at least. Seems like what you would do."

Another nod. Amaya swallowed, feeling her throat go dry. She recognized that tone and it only made her nervous.

"Like you said, not the first time it's happened. And you're competent enough with a taser or mace. Yep. Everything just...fine."

April's eyes narrowed, fire flashing in the dark blue depths. "Except for the fact that it's not. Not in the least."

Amaya floundered, caught off guard by the statement. "I---I told you this isn't something new. I've dealt with it before, April. This is my problem."

"Not this time. Don't even think of denying that. This isn't just some job that's risky or gambling with your safety in a rough neighborhood."

Amaya was thoroughly confused now. What was April talking about? Why was she---

April leaned forward, planting her hands on the desk and leaning in. Not a violent move. April never was physical, not unless someone else got physical first. But it pinned Amaya in place, kept her from looking elsewhere for distraction, made her aware that all her focus should be on April.

"This isn't about the job and you know that," April said, calm and even. No raised voice, either. She never had to in order to make her point. "I don't know what hang-up or trauma you got going on, but you need to get your head out of your ass and realize that this doesn't just involve you. Not anymore."

Anger flared, brief and fueled by old fear. Amaya felt her cheeks warm, felt the tried and true denials that wanted to erupt from her mouth. She bit them back, held them in place. When she trusted herself, said asked slowly, "Did Leo send you to talk to me?"

A smile touched April's face. "No. He actually stood by your stupid refusal."

Another flare of anger, this was of stung pride. But Amaya just didn't have it in her to argue. Not now, not with April.

April watched her, sharp gleam of her reporter's mind distracting enough that Amaya considered
questioning what she saw. Then she leaned back, mouth opening.

The door opened and Professor Prejean stopped just inside, taking in the strange scene in her office. She glanced between April and Amaya, obviously perplexed at the former's prescience.

"This is an old friend of mine," Amaya said hastily. She scrambled to remember if Prejean had a hang-up about non-work related meetings in the office.

April stepped away from the desk, greeting the Professor. Then she turned back to Amaya. A hard edge came over her. "Not everything's fine."

Amaya blinked, mind spinning as to what on Earth could possibly be wrong---other than the whole situation itself.

April didn't glance at Prejean, who looked politely confused yet did not interrupt the vague interactions. April seemed to be weighing her next words carefully in the older woman's prescience. At last, she just said, "Mikey's not fine. None of them are. And that's not something to take lightly."

A deep, dull sort of ache ripped through Amaya. She heard the words. Understood them. But...

Well, no, she believed them. The haunted way Mikey had gaped at her as she point blank refused the offer of protection led to her current poor attitude. It wouldn't leave her. And she'd be lying if she hadn't spared a thought to wonder if things would be different if one of the other Turtles had happened upon her time of need. Would they have suggested the same thing?

She hated that it had been him. Maybe because out of all four of them, he just seemed innocent. She knew that wasn't true. Knew that couldn't be possible with their lives. Mikey wasn't ignorant to the fact that at least one of her attackers had been set on doing more than taking her car.

Maybe innocent wasn't the right word. But she couldn't deny that him being there made the situation worse. Though, thinking it over, she also couldn't deny that the others would have done near the same thing. Done it differently, sure. Yet each would not have let it rest.

Frustrated, hating the sense that this wasn't going to blow over any time soon, Amaya dug her hands through her hair, tugging loose the knot that held it in place, and hung her head until it hit the desk. She groaned, unable to stop the childish reaction. Lack of sleep, fretting over the hostile way she had left things with them, and an already loaded day just seemed to catch up with her.

"That's a sound I haven't heard in a while."

Amaya's head shot back up. The flush from before returned a hundred fold. Professor Prejean sat in one of the chairs facing her own desk, hands folded primly atop the neat stack of papers in her lap and a slight smile deepening the wrinkles around her lips.

April was gone, exit completely missed as Amaya processed her parting words. And who knew how long she had sat there and stewed while her boss watched her.

"I'm sorry," Amaya said, hoping to scrape some of her dignity back in place. "That was---I had a rough night and it...it's not over yet."

"Clearly. Anything I can do to help?"
She shook her head. "I've done all I can," she said, hating how much that sounded like a pout.

"Have you?" Prejean asked. She always had a way of asking pointed questions without sounding obtrusive or demanding. Maybe it was the slight accent. The comforting tones of a childhood spent in the bayous of the South never failed to ease Amaya's nerves.

Amaya considered the question, considered the open invitation it made. She sat back in the chair, arms dangling off the sides, and just let the story out. Highly edited, never alluding to the Turtles true identities or anything like that. Just spoken as though Mikey had come upon the scene and chased the attackers away.

It didn't take very long to get out. And afterwards, she didn't feel any better. If anything, she felt worse. Not as though she was burdened to have yet another aware of the stupidity of her actions. More that it was so tiring to hear it again, to hear her own stupidity out loud again.

Professor Prejean listened without comment or question. And she waited for a good while before responding. "There are two things about this that troubles me," she commented, plain and unadorned as though discussing an Intro to Composition paper.

"Only two?" Amaya quipped.

Prejean allowed a small smile yet did not rise to the bait; too used to the deflection and too used to Amaya to feed it. She, too, leaned back in her chair. On her, it looked regal and poised. "It's a subject I know we've gone over to death, my dear girl," she started. "I will never understand your near obsessive need to be employed during all waking hours. And I'm not about to start it up again. We both have enough on our schedule today to allow for that."

Amaya nodded, conceding both the point and the obvious note that it will be revisited at some time.

"I am concerned that you said it wasn't the first time this happened. You know how to properly handle it and quite responsibly at that. Yet the fact that you so readily accept this as a possibility of your night is...well, it's disturbing." Prejean glanced over her, gray eyes kind behind her glasses. Even without the various photos strewn about the office, it was an expression that told of her long days bearing the titles of 'mother' and 'grandmother' alike.

"Recklessness is never repaid kindly," she said after a moment. "You do not flaunt your safety; I would never suggest such a thing. But you are reckless, Amaya. The laws of probability will not always work in your favor."

Honestly, Amaya wanted her to shout. She had a piss-poor example of a mother. And even her abysmal psych scores were enough to have her admit she most certainly had parental issues (no-brainer there). But the gentle, almost disappointed reprimand was far, far worse than any tongue lashing she had received growing up.

Prejean watched the point sink home, watched Amaya tried to hide her fidgeting with no more than a slight tilt of her head to acknowledge it. Only when she lifted her gaze did the older woman go on. "As for the second thing? Well, it's a little bittersweet, I must say."

Amaya frowned, lost once again. She kept from asking, knowing the point would be made eventually.
Prejean stood, set her stack among the many on the desk, then turned to stare at the spot April had stood while greeting her. "I've known you for many years, Amaya dear," she said on a sigh. "And that was the first time I have ever heard you call someone a friend. The first time I have ever seen someone act like a friend to you. I wish it hadn't been under such circumstances."

Amaya shrank back in the chair. No flushing this time. No. Now her face decided to empty of color as the observation hit her. She felt sick.

"True friends will call you out when you're being stupid," Prejean kept on, idly tapping a hand on the paper stack. "True friends will worry for your safety. True friends...are hard to come by. And so worth it to keep."

She turned, expression still kind, still unrelenting. "Be sure," she said at last. "Be sure you're not making choices with the intent to drive your friends away. You've been alone so long. Far too long. Stop sabotaging yourself, my dear."

A quick glance to a clock on the wall made her straighten. "I'll grab us both some lunches," she said, brisk once again as she tapped the stack closest to her. "We've gotten behind on this section's essays. Working through lunch should catch us up."

Amaya nodded, not trusting her voice. She watched Professor Prejean leave without really seeing it. The dull ache was back, worse than ever. Her head started to pound in sync with it.

She wanted to go outside, find a secluded place, and just scream. It would do absolutely nothing other than ruin her voice. But the cloying ache only got worse the more she thought about...well, everything.

Everything. Every pick up and drop off. Every message and phone call. Every injury and wound. Every stain and mark. Everything...

Everything that proved over and over again that this thing between her and April, between her and the Turtles, between her and everyone had spiraled out of her control. And she couldn't undo it.

At the start, even in the nervous days of being watched to make sure she wasn't a threat to them, Amaya told herself it was just a weird happenstance and would eventually blow over. She got tangled up in it but there were ways to keep it separate from her life.

She told herself it was just another job. Made herself think that way to curb the anxiety that threatened to make her puke that night in April's apartment, talking it over the Leo. Just a job, a favor to a group of people doing their best to help out the city. A way to help people who couldn't voice their need. She would never be a crime fighter but she could drive a car and offer shelter for those who were.

When had it become something different? When had it blown so far out of her control?

Her phone dinged on top of the desk. The screen lit up with the image of an orange turtle. A moment later, a purple one joined it. She pulled it closer and a red one appeared. She didn't unlock the screen. Didn't even read the snippets of the messages beside the icons. Then the yellow heart reserved for April popped up in the line. A while passed with her staring down at it, fighting the trembling in her chest. The phone had come out with barely a scratch to show from the night before.
A blue turtle appeared. The sight of that made her drop the phone.

The ache sharpened. So deep, now, she at last recognized it: guilt. She felt guilty for how she left things with the guys. Guilty for upsetting April. Guilty---she felt guilty for ignoring what had caused the change.

Amaya cared for them. Years of keeping her distance, of barely maintaining a friendship with April, meant ignoring attachments. She could enjoy herself in a group of people, revel in the setting itself. But when things dispersed, she never allowed herself to let any attachments set.

And four mutant brothers shattered that ingrained defense.

Amaya was such a freaking idiot.

---

Leo had a vague sense of déjà vu from his place atop April's apartment building. Another meeting. Another sunset. Another moment of wondering just what was about to happen.

To her credit, Amaya's brief request for the meeting had come just moments after April mentioned going to see her. Not long to think over their conversation. Was that a good thing? Bad?

Her approach was much the same, though a little subdued. Leo watched until she entered the building. Readying himself, though not knowing what to expect, he went back into the apartment to wait.

Amaya entered with a key, neither looking around or being surprised when he came into the open. She looked dazed but focused. Face a little drawn but that could easily be due to the late night and long day.

Red-rimmed eyes? Well, only one explanation for that.

Still, Leo waited for her to speak first.

She came into the living room and sat on the couch opposite where he stood by the windows. She didn't avoid looking at him but took her time before addressing him. As he waited, Leo noticed this was the first time he recalled seeing her without a bag or backpack with her. Nothing in her hands; phone probably in her pocket but ear buds absent from around her neck. Mikey often joked that she wore them like a necklace, always present even if not in use.

All signs that this was a different Amaya than the one who hours ago stood on the streets before him and refused their offer for protection.

Dark eyes sharpened as she took a breath and Leo was instantly attuned to the present.

"I'm an idiot," she stated. There was no real heat or anger in the words. If anything, she sounded tired. "An idiot clinging to boundaries long gone. I could give a dozen reasons for what I said, but they'd really just be excuses."

"You have a right to your own privacy," Leo replied.
"And you guys have a right to a peace of mind that I'm not getting beaten up or raped because---like I said---I'm an idiot." Her gaze dropped briefly, searching for her next words with care. Her face tinged with pink. "An idiot who's not used to having people worry about me. Even...even about simple things. I've been on my own so long, I don't know how to respond to it. It's just---"

She frowned, fingers idly twisting the watch face of her communicator. "---It's new."

Leo took all that in and let her settle from the blunt statements. Nothing about it was surprising to him. Ever since that talk in her house, the exchange of secrets, he'd seen how she held herself at a distance. Knowing a part of the reasons why made him all the more aware of the little things that showed she was forgetting her old habits. It was nice to see, to know on some level she was beginning to trust them as they learned to trust her.

Having that trust abruptly tested only brought it to the forefront where she had to confront it. More than anything, Leo bet that was what this was all about.

She looked just like she did that night, hunched on her kitchen counter and talking about how twisted her home life had been. Only now, she wasn't so much resigned as embarrassed.

Leo moved closer, watching to make sure it was okay. She didn't retreat or even flinch when he crouched before her. They were just about eye level now. "I'm not going to agree to anything that you don't want," he said. "None of us want to make you uncomfortable in any way."

Amaya titled her head, watching him just as closely. "And none of you want me to get jumped like that again."

"Well, yeah. That too."

A smile tugged at her lips. "Not on my own anymore, right?" she said, echoing his words from that night. "Especially with you guys watching my back?"

Anything Leo wanted to say was interrupted by a swoop of movement as Mikey bounded from wherever he had been hiding and half-tackled Amaya into a hug. She let out a 'oof' of breath and held on as he lifted her off the couch.

"Amaya! Girl! You won't even know we're there!" Mikey crowed. "Don't let the bulk fool ya, even Raph can sneak around like the best, though with him it's more of a---"

"Easy, Mikey," April said, rounding the corner from her own hiding spot as Raph and Donnie also appeared. "Let her breathe."

Mikey seemed to only realize then just how tight the hug was. He let Amaya go, catching her arm to keep her from falling. He smiled; sheepish and a little worried he might have ruined things.

Amaya only smiled back. A little red from the move as well as realizing everyone had been listening in on the whole conversation. But she didn't take any of it back. As everyone started talking, Donnie already pulling up a diagram of possible schedules and other items of self-defense she could use, Amaya just listened for a while.

Prejean was right. April was right. ...Leo was right.

She needed to stop pushing people away. This no longer involved only herself. And she wasn't alone anymore.
So Amaya plotted with her friends, laughed with them, and made herself become accustomed to that thought: she had friends. They'd do anything to protect her.

Just as she would do anything to protect them.
While he heals, Donnie finds himself working to keep from boredom. And places the first in a long line of dominoes that wait for the tipping point...

I completely missed that we crossed 200 hits!! To celebrate, here's another post! Thank you all so much!!

It started with a whim. And not even his own.

General concern about the whole thing was well placed, even if her solution was not---well, not new. It was not as though Donnie had never had contact with places or people topside. Quite the opposite; he frequently corresponded with people all around the world for any of a multitude of reasons. And there was nothing like digging through the components of a busted computer to teach himself how to improve it. Whether it be software or hardware, Donnie was a self-taught fix-it when it came to electronics.

Seeing it as a way to relieve his ever growing cabin fever? Well, it was more than a prudent to be discreet about it. No need to cause more stress on everyone as they trudged forward with this new reality that was their life.

…yeah, this was the right call, Donnie decided as his brain continued to run needless tangents about this. When he started answering concerns that weren't being actively voiced, he knew he was about to hit rock bottom.

Being benched sucked.

Donnie could not deny that the opportunity to do something other than putter around his lab or the garage, fully knowing Leo would fume if he saw him lifting anything heavier than a screwdriver, would be a welcomed change. So, when April suggested picking up some freelance computer work, he did not turn it down.

There was an old familiarity in this. Simple, clear-cut jobs. Nothing to tax his resources, no glaring threat to anyone other than the family who owned the thing. Like slipping on a favorite pair of pants, there was a sense of homecoming.
His side and shoulder still throbbed if he pushed himself. And Donatello wouldn’t be Donatello without pushing himself. Finding a rhythm, he easily spent hours filling out orders and finishing quicker than April could run the fixed items back to the shop. He paid for it later with screaming fire down his nerves but the sense of accomplishment was worth it.

Cabin fever did not abate completely, though. And the itch for something reckless grew.

Donnie was working in the garage, repairing the wiring for the cover-launcher on the Shell-raiser, when he got an alert from the repair shop. He had hardly opened it when he got an incoming call.

He studied the blinking numbers, program already tracing it, but he already recognized it. And it was calling the number he specified for the repair shop. Could be just a follow up on the new job. As the program continued to trace, he answered.

“Hey, Don?” came the raspy voice of the owner, Sullivan. “Look, there was a mistake with this last batch that got sent out. Can you tell me the ticket number?”

As the email was already open, Donnie just easily replied, “IRR75325. Looks like a simple enough job. Malware?”

“Yeah, guy thinks his kid was screwing around on sites he shouldn’t and caught it. Anyway, my new guy sent it to everyone in our system instead of who he was supposed to.” There was a muffled sort of whine, probably said ‘new guy’ defending himself. No response from Sullivan, who had never so much as sighed in all their conversations. Probably just a pro at giving a ‘disappointed parent’ type of look. “You can just ignore it. I’m sure I’ll have something more your caliber soon.”

The ticket itself was hardly more than a paragraph long. It truly was a simple fix. Something the owner probably could do had they the inclination to learn.

Pieces of the cover-launcher littered the workbench. It wouldn’t take more than another ten minutes of work before it was fixed. And then…

Nothing. Unless he took something apart and found something to fix.

“Wait on that,” Donnie said, pulling up the hologram of the never ending list of chores he kept for himself. Sure enough. Most everything on it could be taken care of in moments or he was waiting on a new part for the repair. Even with this Amaya helping out, he sometimes had to wait for that to happen.

“Come again?”

“I got the time,” Donnie said. “Sort of house bound at the moment. Do you have anything else I can look at?”

There was a pause, during which the tracing program chirped and distanced the GPS location of the call. It originated within the area granted to Malcolm’s Computer Repairs, as it had been for the last 6 years. Paranoia abated for the moment, Donnie spent about 10 minutes giving a highly edited version of why he was ‘house bound’ and why he could take on any sort of ‘overflow’ the shop received. Sullivan sounded unsure at first but he never doubted Donnie’s capabilities. Probably felt like he wasn’t giving Donnie work that matched his full potential, if anything.
Details straightened out, the call ended. And it left Donnie with the ever encroaching cabin fever. He kept working on all the little things and fought the nagging itch. But before long, he was reaching for his shell-cell and calling Amaya’s number.

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As the night progressed into what Donnie, Amaya, and Casey would ever refer to as ‘the night of the secret joyride,’ Sully stared down at the shop phone in bemused concern. And quietly wished he could go back to his planned night of tinkering. He leaned back in his chair, scrubbing at his scalp through a buzz cut that was in serious need of a touchup, and considered just what that call meant.

People who came to Malcolm’s Computer Repairs often asked for Malcom himself. It dug on Sully’s nerves when people refused to believe that titular man did not work in the shop any longer. But the people who came back for repeat service never complained nor asked questions. It happened so often in his nearly 5 years as shop owner that it was just part of the daily business. Honestly, he only noticed it when no one had made the comment in a while.

Even so, on night like this he wished Malcolm were still around.

That was a wish that held no weight. He pushed the errant thought aside and exited his small cubicle of an office with more than a little stiffness to move. He was only in his early thirties but often felt twice his age. A blown knee from football lead to countless other problems that eventually lead to him deciding to pursue a career in computers. Being able to sit for long stretches of time was a benefit for him. Yet he was proud he only had a little bit of gut to show for the change in lifestyle. Too many of his old teammates courted an early give given how much they’d packed on in their adult years.

The shop proper was mostly shut down for the night, being only 8 minutes until closing. Allen manned the counter, still looking sullen. The kid always looked like he either just finished getting a reprimand or anticipating the next one. A wild, squirrel-like nervousness always hung about him. His pointed, muted brown features did not dispel the image at all. Even now, he jumped at Sully’s appearance and upended his soda bottle. Neon green liquid cascaded across the wooden counter and Sully gave a silent thanks that he had long stopped displaying any electronics there.

Fighting a flush and swearing quietly, Allen hastily mopped at the mess with his own shirt. Sully didn’t even pause, he just walked past him to the supply closet and returned with a mop and a roll of paper towels. As Allen went to work properly cleaning the mess, Sullivan went to the back of the shop.

The back of the shop easily tripled the amount of space claimed therein. Rows of metal shelving filled the area, packed nearly brimming with parts and whole machines alike. Along three of the walls, work benches were welded in place with stationed neatly marked every five feet. During the busy months, Sully could easily expect the majority of those spaces to be filled.

Repairing computers for the modern nuclear family was a nice way to pad the coffers. A way to slowly integrate the new blood into the fold. During the summer, he occasionally hosting week-long camps for teaching kids the basics of computer assembly and even coding.

The real money? Well, he had the less-than-reputable of the city to thank for that.

At the thought, Sully winced. He hadn’t considered that this might be coming. Not so soon. Donnie
had only been with them for a few weeks. Usually it was longer before Sully offered them a bigger take on the various always-there-jobs that the shop had. He tried to spend more time getting to know the freelancer before seeing just how deep they’d go. The last one that cleared had been doing the entry level stuff for four months.

He sat back, box of not-sure-how-burned-out motherboards in his hands. Sharp gray eyes, even though they were more lined than when he first came here, saw that the on top was salvageable. He tinkered with it for a moment, not truly able to dive in yet. He grappled with indecision for a moment before carefully replacing it and looking in on the front of the shop. “Any work calls?” he asked.

Allen, shirt stained but counter and floor cleaned, blinked in surprise. “None. …that I know of?” he finished as a question.

Sully fought the urge to dig a knuckle into his temple. Allen was a good kid, decent enough with coding, but a little---well, the gentle word for it was ‘airhead,’ though he’d been called worse. Instead he just asked, “Has Sullivan called?”

At that, Allen visibly paled. “Oh, no! No, not yet. Is---I mean it’s not---not expected. Right?”

Sully waved him down, not wanting the kid to wet his pants. “Just get me when the call comes.”

“No problem there,” Allen half-muttered half-groaned. But having a clear cut reason to not take the call himself made him sag in relief.

Sully just looked out over the shop, back to the cavernous room behind him, and tried not to wince. So much for a quiet night of tinkering.

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The overflow that Donnie got was of the type that was so simple it bordered on basic. Yet the sheer amount of it more than made up for the lack of complexity. Most of this comprised the shop’s ‘back stock,’ pieces and equipment that was donated in the hopes that it could be recycled. Again, nothing too demanding. Just a lot.

Like a crap load. It merged to a point where April stopped by the lair twice a week just to pick up and drop off a few boxes. Every now and then, Donnie found something he knew would benefit them and just kept it. Sullivan had made it clear that he was more than okay with that.

Whatever downtime he had, Donnie spent it scouring over the boxes of hopeful pieces. It did not completely end his cabin fever but it did give a decent outlet for his attention.

The night Mikey sent out that panic alert, Donnie had been wrist deep in a desktop he was hoping to use as an additional sever. It lay half-smashed on the ground as Donnie raced out of the lair. It didn’t even register to him. All he could think of was Mikey’s clipped message, burned across his vision: we’re down, getting evac, leo’s eyes got cut, BAD.

Donnie’s communicator chirped into static before Amaya’s strained voice spoke. She and Mikey went back and forth as she took directions to his location. Donnie hurried into the Shell-Raiser if only because it was always stocked with medical supplies. He went hard on the gas, not liking the quality to Mikey’s voice despite the forced cheer. Panic was a great motivator. Adrenaline even more. All while he shouted orders for them to meet up at Amaya’s place instead of the lair, Donnie
crossed nearly half that distance. It wasn’t until he had finished setting out what he expected to need for suturing wounds both delicate and not that he realized his side screamed in pain.

He did nothing more than slap a medicated pad over it to numb the sensation. He did the same for his shoulder, knowing it was going to the same before too long. It was a mark of how bad Leo was injured that he never said anything about it.

With everyone passed out in the living room, wounds treated and nerves slowly loosening, only then did Donnie check the mass of messages that had accumulated. Half buried under the pile of blankets Mikey covered the floor with, Donnie let the information feed across his glasses while he navigated it with his wrist control. Anything to keep from having to sit up any longer. The medicated pads had long since stopped working.

Most were nothing. The usual sort of updates he got from the security around the lair, their friends’ places, and even diagnostics on the Shell-raiser. He frowned, noting one particular message about the fuel line and marking it for review later.

Donnie flipped over the rest, easily cataloguing everything where it needed to go. He needed to rest. This was one of those nights where he couldn’t push it back with a caffeine overload. He had to rest or his body would suffer for it.

A jerk of curiosity pulled him out of the stupor as he was almost done with the emails. One was identified as coming from Sullivan though the address wasn’t the one he got the work orders on. Donnie tapped it open and scanned the contents.

A few minutes passed as he read it again. And again. Donnie frowned, both annoyed that the aforementioned rest was being put off and that he was---well, he was confused. The email stated that Donnie had performed exceptional work with the shop and that they wanted his freelancing to continue. Then it mentioned that if he wanted to have assignments of a more ‘delicate’ nature, that a trial run would follow. And that he would be supervised.

Donnie shut down the holograms, shut down all the equipment still in his person. He burrowed further under the blankets, pausing to pluck a pillow from under Casey’s legs for his own use. He held it to his chest and used the pressure to stretch out his shoulder. All the while, pondering just what that email meant.

And who had sent it.

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Contrary to popular belief, Sully did get frustrated. And he did raise his voice. Yet he strived to keep it from happening too often.

His restraint was being sorely tested at the moment. After so many weeks of nothing but an amiable nature from Donnie, suddenly the guy becomes Fort Nox. And it only came after he had given notice that Donnie might venture into the next set of repairs. Donnie gave no other response that a simple ‘I need to think it over’ and since then silence. Sully was frustrated because this also meant he had stopped taking work orders. Which was fine, he could understand needing to take time and consider it. Obviously the guy had a life outside of computers and this might cut into that. It just irritated Sully because he had been doing beautifully with their back stock. The shop had even managed to sell off a number of the repairs.
It wasn’t until he re-read Donnie’s response that it clicked. He stared at the email. Not Donnie’s but the one that had originally been sent. A long moment passed while Sully counted to ten. Several times. Then he quickly shot off another email, left his office, and immersed himself into the back room’s endless supply of distractions.

The tinkering only lasted an hour or so. The door leading to the front shut with a loud bang. Hard not to as it was metal on metal and a heavy door. Yet it was also something to note because he didn’t like having the door closed. When the shop was open, so was the door. Which meant his message had been received.

He kept his intent on the fan he was rebuilding, thin blades cracked when the original system had overheated. The chair beside him was pulled back and a take-out bag dumped on the workbench. The aroma of melted cheese and peppers wafted to him, the only thing that tempted him to stop working.

But Sully was nothing is not an example to his employees. So he dutifully finished his work, cleaned the little area he used, and turned off the bright overhead lamp before turning to face Sullivan.

She was perched in the chair like it was a recliner in her own home. Splayed sideways, legs hooked over one arm while she leaned against the other, Sullivan watched him with a neutral expression while she ate her own sandwich. How she managed that without getting any of it dripped all over her and maintaining eye contact, Sully couldn’t guess. And she allowed him time to work through half of his own before she spoke. “You don’t like how I handle the newbies?”

Sully worked on maintaining his composure while he decided how best to phrase his response. Then he set down his food and fixed her with an even stare. “Putting aside your ‘screening process,’ how did you get into my email?”

She shrugged, nonchalant, and picked off a shred of foil sticking to her hand. “You always use your wife’s name and your kid’s birthdate. You switch up the order, sometimes use her middle name, but you always default to that. I’m a little embarrassed consider how often the shop deals in this sort of thing.” Her head titled to the side, red-black hair shifting under the knit hat crammed low on her head. Dark eyes were equally curious, the blue hue shadowed in the dim light of the warehouse. “The guy didn’t say no.”

“He also didn’t say yes,” Sully said. It was then he noted the large drink resting on his side of the workbench. He took it and popped the top off; vanilla malt. Flavor was off—he preferred chocolate—but he wasn’t about to point that out.

The two sat in silence while they finished their meals. By the time Sully dumped the trash in the appropriate bin, Sullivan was sitting upright in what he coined her ‘working’ pose. Crouched in the seat of the chair with her knees pulled close to her chest, her arms dangled over with enough space to work a keyboard should she need to.

It was also her default pose whenever she was thinking, whether she realized it or not. When he was back in his seat, she turned back to him. “I don’t like how quickly you wanted to move him. Good or not, the guy needs to be vetted.”

“He came on the recommendation of that O’Neal woman. The one dating that cop—or detective or whatever he is? If Donnie hasn’t set off Jones’ radar already, I feel like it's half done right at the
She snorted. “Jones is soft-hearted at his core. Badass enough to take down the worst of the worst but he’s the guy that’ll stop traffic to get a lost kitten out of danger.”

Sully blinked at her. “You wouldn’t?”

“You know I’m hardly out enough to qualify. Be glad it was the end of the month and I was already among the other day lighters.”

The urge to sigh grew with every passing moment. “Even so---especially so---you can appreciate that this guy may have had a bad response to being supervised. I’ve never even seen the guy. I’ve only had two phone calls with him. He might have some condition or phobia that means he can’t just waltz in here just because your paranoia—”

“Paranoia that found out the Reynolds twins were playing it fast and loose with their embezzling scheme,” she cut in with no real force behind the words. If anything she sounded tired. “Paranoia that tracked the recycled laptop and found the monitoring program that led back to the state troopers. Paranoia that has kept this place from the gutter for the last 5 years because of incompetence that will not be tolerated. I’m not gonna ease up because the guy is good and the hockey-fetishist vouches for him.”

It took a second for Sully to process then dismiss that last part; wouldn’t be the first time she slipped in either lie or fact just to trip him up. The rest of it, though, was too accurate to ignore. “If you feel that strongly, then why don’t you reach out to the guy without catfishing him? Just say you want to make sure his skills are up to par and that he’s not going to bring ruin to the shop.”

Sullivan rolled her eyes, fighting a smile. “Aw, come on, Sully. You know catfishing is my favorite pastime.”

“Save it for the celebs you blackmail,” he returned without a pause. “Let’s keep this on the up and up. This Donnie has done great work. It would suck to lose him. I like Allen but I’m not ready to turn him loose on the back stock. And you got your own job to worry about.”

“A job I do in pajamas, if I deem to put on clothes at all,” she said, an air of haughtiness no lessened by the scowl she gave. Then it faded back into the same tension as when she first sat down. “For real? We need to make sure about this guy. Especially with the latest word about what the police are planning. If they really want to do something more concrete than cleaning up after the fact, we can’t have anything that’ll tie back to us.”

It was a sentiment Sully completely understood. One that had been his focus since taking over at the shop. Five years was a long time to rebuild. And five seconds was more than enough to wipe out all that hard work.

It was no coincidence that he was sitting where he was, at this time, in this place, with this person before him. He knew when deals were too good to be true, they were. He knew it was more than a funny kismet that he shared a name with a silent partner in the shop. It was deliberate. He may have worked on computers as a hobby, messed around by doing odd jobs while working on an actual degree, but it had never crossed his mind that answering that want ad all those years ago would lead him here.

The front man for a simple computer repair shop struggling to emerge from scandal, chosen for the
simple fact that his name was Sullivan. Picked because the young woman sitting beside him had not only chosen him but knew exactly what words to tell him that held the right mix of intrigue and stone-cold logic.

A young woman who’s role in the shop was never completely known. Who knew more about police mentality and the true nature of words like ‘dark web’ and ‘conspiracy’ than any sane person should. Yet here she sat, a sound voice speaking of a legitimate concern.

Sully sighed. “What did you have in mind?”

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SULLIVAN: Did the dongle arrive?

DONATELLO: Yes, I received it earlier today. Humor me: what is the purpose for this again?

S: Your work is impeccable, no one can deny that.

S: But in the event you wish to receive work of the delicate nature we mentioned, it would be best if you have already been evaluated beforehand.

D: And this will do that?

S: We are sensitive to the fact that there is a legitimate reason you cannot come to the shop itself for these supervised work orders.

S: To be more open to our freelancer’s needs, this is the solution that was reached. The dongle will be inserted into the device you are working on. As this means the devices will need a USB port, this means your work orders will be limited to ones that can accommodate this. The dongle will allow one of our higher-up technicians to monitor the work in real time.

S: Will there be a problem?

D: No, no problem. I just wanted clarification.

A rather rueful smirk pulled at Donnie’s mouth even as he typed the response. Whatever stunt the people at Malcolm’s Repair Shop were trying to pull, it was amusing to watch as it unfolded.

He didn’t buy the whole “supervision” process at all. And he only acknowledged that he had received the dongle after performing his own scans and diagnostics on the thing itself. It was packed with a multitude of sophisticated yet straightforward tracing software. Basically enabling the one who had the access code to see what was happening to the system it was plugged into. Nothing that he hadn’t been told, already. Sure, there was some other stuff in the software, nothing that caught his eye, nothing that seems to be more than just more of the same.

Yet he knew it wasn’t Sullivan he was communicating with.

Code, science, electronics: all of that and more spoke to him much easier than many things. But not to the point that Donnie missed the style and way the person claiming to be Sullivan messaged him. To the right eye, it was easy to pick out the different speakers within a text-only conversation. And this person---the one who sent that first email discussing him taking on different work orders-
--held such a different cadence that Sullivan himself that it was as though they wrote in different colors.

Donnie did not call them out on it, though. Taking aside the subtle misdirect, nothing overtly inappropriate was being suggested. He understood the need to check the validity of anyone working on sensitive materials.

So Donnie played along. He let whoever this was believe he thought it was Sullivan he was corresponding with. Let them direct how he would proceed while taking on the work orders they sent him. And little by little, he could piece together their end game.

It was enough of a distraction he didn’t think anything of it. Not at the time.

Not until after.
Chapter Summary

Mikey's best laid plans fall through.

Good thing Diya's got a show stopper waiting in the wings.

Chapter Notes

A bit of fluff in return for all you amazing readers!

Sometimes keeping a secret sucked.

It sucked having to lie to Leo and Donnie. He never explicitly lied to Raph, mostly because Raph just smirked knowingly every time he caught wind of one he was spinning for the other two. It sucked knowing that April was in on it. Not that she was malicious or even mean about it. Just that it was another person that might accidently spill the beans. And it sucked because Mikey was honestly happier than he had ever been.

And he couldn't tell anyone.

Whatever this thing between him and Diya was, it was the best thing ever. He couldn't really find the words to better express it. Everything just felt too small or not quite right. Simpler was always better. And the simple fact was this: Mikey couldn't imagine his life without her.

Each time that little fact hit him, the giddy bubble that swelled in his chest was tinged with something cold. 'Cause he couldn't even name what it was that was going on between them.

It wasn't friendship. At least, not on his end. The flutter in his gut when he talked with her was completely new. He never felt this with April. Never grinned stupidly at a text from Amaya. This was on a deeper level, a level that just meant 'more.'

That cold edge to the happy feeling kept reminding him of that. If it wasn't friendship, then what?

And Mikey didn't want to answer that.

He was being stupid, he knew. Hell, the amount of talk shows and soap opera he'd seen growing up were enough to hammer in the basic belief that COMMUNICATION IS EVERYTHING. Yet even when he worked himself into a frenzy, telling himself over and over to just man up and approach the subject with Diya, it all faded as soon as she hit him with that giga-wat smile.
There wasn't much they could do beside talk. And Mikey admitted that he was stalling. There's only so many topics of conversation to have that didn't involve some form of the 'define what this is' variety. But whenever he hurried across the roofs, meeting with her at the art gallery or an out of the way spot in the park on her lunch break or any of the other inventive ways she came up with to meet, Mikey only focused on getting there.

He never brought up the need for secrecy. Probably, she guessed at it from his appearance alone. A few choice words here and there, a conversation with Amaya—who had sighed and rolled her eyes and claimed Mikey was lucky Leo hadn't gotten wind of it yet and didn't even need to swear to keep quiet about it all—and Diya just started sending suggestions of places to meet. Always a places with easy exits, places with cover, or places that were private without being secluded. She got it without needing to talk about it.

Mikey hoped she would be the one to mention it first. Such a douche move, he knew. But he dreaded it all the same. Dreaded the moment this became more.

Dreaded the moment when his brothers were brought into this secret. When he would have to tell them. And when he would have to tell her about them as well.

Sometimes learning a secret was a thrill. And Mikey found out that Diya's birthday was the following Thursday.

Birthdays were something he'd always envied. Sure, Splinter celebrated their 'birth' day growing up. But it was never the same as how he'd seen people did it topside. From full-blown parties to smaller, intimate celebrations, he'd caught glimpses of it all.

So he started planning. Nothing big. He scouted a rooftop garden with lax security, certain he could pull some kind of meal together up there on the fly. She'd caught notice of his board and mentioned him giving her a ride. An easy route through the more scenic views of the city was already mapped out in his head, all passenger approved.

Simple. Basic. But most definitely not something she'd get elsewhere.

Mondays were her long days at the gallery. And this was the third one in a row where she sent a message for him to join her for a late dinner after her boss left. By a stroke of luck, the section of the city Leo had put under his watch during patrols contained the gallery. Easy enough to do a quick once over, make sure nothing overt was going on, and sneak over to the gallery for a while before returning and no one being the wiser.

The gallery was dim and just a touch spooky at this hour. The usual spot lights were off, giving the art hanging on the walls a half-formed feel. Even the few statues dotting the space looked ready to move as soon as he took his eyes off them. It went without saying that he usually just went through a back window and skipped the gallery itself. No need to creep himself out.

The back room was a combination of office and storage room. Every time Mikey entered there was a different set of canvases littered throughout the place. The protective coverings kept it all a secret, so for all he was aware it could have very well been the same pieces just moved around.

At the far back of the room, Diya was perched in a chair at the end of a long table that held five computer stations. Hearing the door shut, she smiled over at him. "Thought you weren't going to show," she said with an eye to the clock.
"Ran into some traffic. No big."

She rolled her eyes and pushed a take-out bag his way. Her own burrito was half-gone, forgotten beside the keyboard she still typed at. The office phone beside her went off and she grabbed it, shooting Mikey an apologetic look. He waved her on, focusing on the food. As she answered the call, he found himself shooting glances at her.

She wore a dress that reminded him of a toga, gathered up on one shoulder and light layers floating around her. She tucked her legs under her in the seat, giving herself a boost as she navigated both the computer and phone. He tuned out her words, not wanting to pry into her job, and just listened to her voice. Professional yet warm, the kind of voice where you know you're talking to someone all business but would drop it in a second if she thought there was something wrong. She caught his eye and grinned, nose scrunching with the motion.

Mikey turned back to his burrito, fighting the urge to flush while grinning back and---

Dammit, she was just too cute.

"We have insurance in place that will cover from Thursday on to next week," Diya said into the phone, brow furrowing as she clicked at the computer.

Despite himself, Mikey perked at that.

"An extension?" she repeated, frown deepening. "No, none at this time. If that changes or if Mr. Lee seems to be considering it, I will inform you as soon as possible. Yes, sir. Thank you again, sir. You as well." She hung up and slouched back in the chair, business-like demeanor vanishing in a moment. She snagged her burrito and bit into it with gusto.

Mikey snorted. "That bad?"

"I hate smoozing," she said, half-muffled. Clearing her throat, she nodded over to the closest stack of boxed art work. "Got a big show lined up, a lot of donated stuff or items on loan. In addition to organizing this and arranging for deliveries both from and back to the owners, I got to be the one to soothe any fears they have about even lending stuff out." She grimaced, took another large bite, and slumped further in her seat.

"The show gonna be long?" he asked, hoping he kept it casual. What he wouldn't give to just peek at the schedule. But that felt way too intrusive.

"A week, starting Thursday," she sighed. "And if it goes well, then Mr. Lee might extend it. And that means more smoozing as taking even one piece out of rotation would alter the flow of the show." Another vicious bite of the poor burrito.

"That's a lot of work. You'll...be busy...the whole time?"

Diya glanced up, hearing the hesitation. She opened her mouth, looking ready to question that. Then she shook her head slightly and said, "Mostly. I usually am during special shows. It'd be great to have it go for longer. Get more exposure and all, you know? I'm just not looking forward to the overtime."

Mikey chuckled, nodding along as she went through an explanation of what such a show entailed.
It was interesting to hear about this side of the art world, about the odd little things that made up the random connection between them.

But even the most interesting topic couldn't cover that pang in his chest. So, she'd be busy on her own birthday? And for a while after. It was on the tip of his tongue to say something about it, to play hooky just for a while. To mention his plans. To ask her---

The notion died when he saw the spark in her eyes as she described the opening night's schedule. He swallowed it back and held it there.

Secrets sucked but he was good at keeping them.

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Thursday came like any other day. Aside from the vague sense of sadness for plans that never got to be, Mikey never considered it would be more than just another day.

A text waiting for him after morning training caught him off-guard. While it wasn't weird to get messages from Diya at all hours, said messages never asked him to call her as soon as he could. It was barely dawn. And she'd already mentioned how busy the day would be for her.

Still, he was never one to let a lady down. He grabbed his board and zipped through the tunnels until he was far enough from the lair he didn't fear being overheard.

She answered on the first ring. "Mikey? Got a sec?"

"More than that, I got whole minutes."

"Can you come by the gallery? I'll meet you on the rooftop."

Again, the abruptness of it made him pause. But he promised to be there as quick as he could. He wouldn't be missed for a while longer, so he simply changed tunnels and boarded his way to the surface.

When he crested the top of the gallery, Amaya was there pacing a circuit while rubbing at her chin. She frowned down at the ground while she walked, muttering so rapidly Mikey couldn't catch a word of it. She spotted him and pulled up short, blinking like she was surprised to see him. It vanished under another bright smile. "Sorry for the sudden call."

"No worries," Mikey said, crossing the space between them and hoping he didn't do it too quickly. "Things going okay down there?"

"Peachy," Diya said through a grimace. "The owner for the showpiece is dragging her feet. Mr. Lee is doing all he can to placate her. If she doesn't release the painting by one then we have to rearrange everything." She visibly tensed at the very thought. Shaking that off, she suddenly looked away. Her hands fidgeted with her shirt.

"Whatcha need, girl?" Mikey asked. The nerves and twitching was unlike her. Sure, she'd get excited about stuff and be twitchy on occasion. But never quietly like this.

Diya chewed on her lip, looking for all the world like she was wrestling some deep internal conflict. She took a deep breath and held it. Then, with a rush, she blurted, "Can I borrow your
Diya took it, looking even more flustered. Her eyes roved his face and Mikey felt each sweep like it was a touch across the newly unveiled skin. A pleasant tingle ran up his spine and he fought to keep it from showing.

Whether the silence dawned on her or she realized she'd been staring, Diya took a step back, clutching tight to the mask in her hands. "Thank you," she breathed, managing a smile through the remains of her embarrassment. She glanced at her watch and paled. "I gotta go, I need---"

"Go, go," Mikey said, gently shooing her towards the door to the stairs. "Got a big day to deal with, right? Don't let me waste your time."

Halfway to the door, Diya stopped and turned back. The flush was gone and the frown was back. This time was different. She opened her mouth then stopped. A half-hidden grimace turned into another smile and she said, "I'll call you later!"

Mikey waved until the door shut behind her. The breeze tickled over his face, reminding him of his lack of mask. It wouldn't be a big leap to grab a spare once he was back in the lair. Leo was usually tied up in other stuff in the mornings, making it easy to evade pointed questions.

While it wasn't a general rule for them to wear the masks, it had become so commonplace that seeing each other without it was jarring. Usually the only times Mikey took his off was for bed or bathing. Otherwise, he was always looking out at a world from behind that strip of orange cloth. Walking around without it felt like he'd forgotten part of his clothes. Namely his pants.

Delaying his return would only increase the risk of getting caught. Even so, Mikey hopped a few roofs over where he could cross to the other side of the street. There, he had a good view of the art gallery.

It was a big building but still only came partway up between the ones on either side. The second floor was home to three studios that Mr. Lee rented out. Diya had mentioned they were looking at other properties to renovate for that same purpose. Even though he made more than enough dealing in art, Mr. Lee seemed to have a passion for helping young artists.

The bottom floor was almost entirely encased by windows. The back where the offices and storage rooms were began at the back third of the building. Gleaming glass caught the eye, drawing any passerby to glance at the art on display. Mikey heard several discussions about the rotation Diya and Mr. Lee went through about which pieces to show within view of the streets. Now, he couldn't recall a single one.

Diya stood at the front-left side corner, talking intently with a guy in coveralls while looking over a tangle of wires coming from the ceiling. From his place, Mikey had a clear view of her frowning face. She was back to rubbing her chin and looking like she wanted to growl. All that did nothing to
diminish the spark of excitement in her eyes.

A brief ripple of unease went through him. Shaking it off, Mikey started back to the lair, all the while swearing that he was finally going to nut up and be the one to start the conversation. The conviction wasn't strong.

Plucking a spare mask out of the heap of random things in his room, Mikey found the conviction wavered until it was gone.

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Thursday patrols hardly amounted to much. Weekends were more likely to be a time when violence would strike. Still, it was a good day to run around the city. It helped them see any changes or mark any change in activity that might spell out trouble for the busier days. The past two months had seen a marked difference in the patrols because Donnie was using it as a way to try out new reconnaissance gear.

Being put out of commission didn't sit well with the tall Turtle. There was only so much his gadgets could do to distract him. Unable to get topside and see if any of the new improvements worked? Well, it was no wonder the guy started getting cabin fever. A single venture out with Amaya---still unknown by Leo as far as Mikey knew---wasn't enough to temper that.

So having new data to distract him from the fact he was still benched was what Donnie needed. And Mikey didn't even blink at the bag of tiny devices Donnie passed out to each of them before starting patrol.

"---out of the way places being the best," the tech was saying, his own gear already blinking as it synched with whatever it was he was giving out. "Inorganic structures would be preferred but if it's looking like nothing fits in an area then---"

"Think we get it, Don," Raph cut in, carefully pulling out one of the things and squinting down at it. In his massive hand, it looked almost like a black and grey Lego.

Mikey shuffled through his own bag, curious despite not following Donnie's rambling explanation of what the tiny things were going to do.

Thankfully, Leo cut the rambling short and the three of them headed to their locations. The novelty of the task wore quickly. After the first dozen of the not-Legos were placed, Mikey found his focus wandering. Which wasn't too bad. The devices just needed to be held to whatever surface he picked and tiny pins shot out of the sides of the things, anchoring it to the building, light pole, whatever it was. A soft beep announced it was secure and he was off to the next one.

Spending so many nights running the same area gave Mikey a firm idea of where to place each device. Hardly more than an hour later and his bag was empty.

Certainly more than enough time for his brain to circle back on itself.

Mikey wasn't even surprised to find himself thinking over it all. This---this thing with Diya. Whether he wanted to or not, it was becoming a bigger part of his life and he needed to address it with her.

Fear, real, uncompromising fear sat low in his gut at the thought. No matter what he said---and he
could spend hours or days composing what to say, could be long-winded and romantic or just blurt out the random thoughts that came to him and prayed they made could be shambled together to make sense---no matter what he came up with, he was afraid.

Afraid of Diya's reaction.

She was never anything malicious. The times he'd seen or heard her be annoyed or irritated were always directed at something else. Even then, never malicious. Never gave the sense of doing more than expressing disappointment or, the very height of a negative response, raise her voice.

There was a backbone to her, he knew. Sensed it when she was talking about a difficult client or having to deal with her family. Never one to be a pushover but never one to lash out when cornered.

Still the question remained: how would she react if Mikey told her what he was feeling? How would that backbone respond when some...someone like him said his feeling weren't that of a friend?

Cold that didn't come from running across rooftops or the dropping temperature wrapped around Mikey. His run propelled him over a roof's edge and he hit the next building with enough force he went up the side at the same pace. Here he landed on the sloped roof and jumped the short distance to perch at the top spire of the church.

It was quiet; no services planned for the night. While not the tallest building in the area under his watch, it stood within a lower point of it all. From here, he could look to all sides and get a sense of anything happening. Usually, the view he got bolstered him for the next leg of his route.

Not tonight. All he felt was that same cold, wrapping tighter around him.

Mikey looked down at the hand not grasping the spire. He made a fist, relaxed it, and did it again. Over and over, he watched the shift of light and shadow over his skin, the twitch of muscle and sinew underneath, and the gentle tug of it beneath his armor. He wasn't sure how long he stood there, the strangest gargoyle the place of worship ever saw. When he managed to force his eyes back to the city, the cold joined the fear in his gut.

The city called to him. More than any of his brothers, more than Splinter, it called to him. The people called to him. He'd been the most excited to go topside, remembered the heady rush that night Splinter allowed it for the first time. He was always the one who wanted to go further, to push the boundaries his father placed, the boundaries Leo set upon them. Limits he knew where made out of safety and love and concern but---

Unwanted, unbidden, the words came back.

Monster.

Freak.

Mikey could pine for the city and wish to join its people all he wanted. That didn't mean they had to accept him.

The only thing that kept that cold fear from over taking him was a memory. That very first time meeting Diya. Surprise and shock melting away to the brightest smile he'd ever seen. And it was
directed at him.

He never asked what went through her head in that moment. Never wanted to know. Didn't want to risk an answer he'd hate even if he'd anticipate it: pity, a nature too pure to push him away in light of how obviously different he was, or even deeply hidden disgust.

No matter what he told himself, Mikey couldn't shake that thought. Couldn't deny it. Couldn't rationalize it away. And he knew the moment the conversation he was putting off began, he wouldn't be able to deny it any longer.

Somewhere in all his musing, he'd started moving again. All of Donnie's devices were in place. And there was somewhere he wanted to be even if he wasn't invited.

The gallery was lit up brighter than he'd ever seen it. People dressed to the nines milled all around it, loitering on the street outside as well as inside. The doors were propped open, freely welcoming people to come and go as they wanted. Even across the street, Mikey got a waft of smells that meant it was being catered.

His dark musings were pushed aside as he watched. He wondered again at this side of the art world, a world he was connected to. Even if he could, he didn't think he could ever go to something like this. It was one thing to create something and have it sell (at ridiculous prices, he thought), but it was another to stand around and talk to people about it.

From his place, he couldn't make out the pieces on display. The front area held informational posters about the gallery itself. A large photo of Mr. Lee took up the left corner while the man himself wove through the crowd. He was a tiny man with a shock of white hair styled so sternly it looked like a helmet. Mikey was sure if he threw a pencil at it that the pencil would just ricochet off to parts unknown. Every person the art dealer spoke with received a firm handshake and business card. After a moment, the tiny man frowned while patting his pockets.

A sudden flash of color made Mikey sit up from his crouch. Diya appeared at Mr. Lee's side, smoothly handing him a new stack of business cards. She was smiling as they spoke though the stress of running this event was still evident. Everything else started to fade as Mikey stared.

Diya wore his mask.

It was wrapped around her head and held back the stray curls of hair that escaped the smooth twist at the nape of her neck. Had he not handed it over to her hours ago, Mikey would've thought it was just a head scarf or something similar. The pop of color went well with her darker dress, accented with jewelry that shared the vibrant tone. As she moved the crowds, Mikey was hit with the strong urge to go to her.

He reined back on that wicked fast. Setting aside that she was surrounded by people, there was the little fact that she was working.

The communicator attached at his shoulder crackled and Leo's voice spoke, "Check in. How's the night looking, guys?"

"Clear here," Mikey blurted, startled out of his thoughts.

"Boring as shit," Raph groused. "When're we gonna follow that lead Casey was talking about, Leo? Can't let it get too cold."
Mikey waited while they argued, Leo insisting Donnie was still working on it, Donnie popping in to agree, and Raph itching to do something productive with his fists. Meanwhile, Diya laughed while talking with a couple dressed in identical suits, leading them towards the bulk of the exhibit and disappearing out of sight. He wondered what the exhibit was about. In all the talks, he'd never asked. Come to think of it, Diya had said nothing about it. A little odd as she usually---

"Mikey, you good?"

"Yeah, yeah, good, Leo," he said, wincing when his voice cracked from nerves. "Just passing some peeps on the street, didn't want to be heard."

Leo's eye roll was audible. "All right, guys. Keep at it. Meet up at 0100."

The communicator went silent. Mikey let out a relieved breath. Few more hours until he was expected anywhere. And with how quiet the night had gone, he didn't think anything would pull him from---

His shell-cell went off. Flipping it around, he half-expected to see Leo's frowning mug flashing across the screen. Instead, it was Diya's name.

Mikey glanced back to the gallery. Diya wound her way through the crowds to the open doors. Shivering, she stood on the sidewalk, phone pressed close to her ear. When he answered, he could see the smile that broke across her face.

"Hey! Just checking in," she said. "I was a little abrupt earlier, sorry about that."

"Nah, nah, girl. You said it yourself, had a lot going on," he said. Hopefully she couldn't hear the echo on his end as a bus lumbered down the street between them. "How's the party?"

She chuckled. "Hardly a party but it's going pretty good, so far."

"That centerpiece get delivered on time?"

Diya flushed, clearly seen under the bright lights of the gallery. "Y-Yes, in the nick of time," she said, glancing through the windows as though to check it was still in place. Shaking her head, she chewed at her lip for a moment. In a rush, she asked, "Are you free later?"

Mikey shifted in place, more curious than worried. Something was clearly on her mind. "What time you thinking?"

"About...two more hours? Closer to midnight? By then everyone should be gone and---and I want to show you the exhibit."

---

Five minutes to midnight. Diya brushed aside the errant thought about a song with a similar title. She always had to fight going down rabbit trails that her brain pulled up when she was stressed. Worse coping mechanism ever.

The gallery was basically deserted. Mr. Lee had gone only a few minutes ago, congratulating her on a well executed opening and reminding her they needed to reopen no later than 10. She didn't
take offense to that despite feeling dead on her feet. The little man had more work ethic than anyone she had ever met. Even contracting pneumonia hadn't kept him from the gallery last spring. A little thing like poor sleep wouldn't even faze him.

Diya kept only the barest of lights on at the front. She lingered by the door, waiting for Mikey. He promised not to go through the back windows at her request. She wanted him to get the full scope of the exhibit. Going in backwards wouldn't be the same as---

Her hand shook where she gripped the door handle. She steeled herself against it, breathing deep and telling herself to knock it off. Still, she couldn't quell the tiny, panicking voice insisting she call this off. To distract herself, she tugged at the end of the mask where it trailed over her left shoulder. Her Aunt Cayla had helped with styling her hair tonight, raising a brow at the odd request to incorporate the mask into the arrangement before going on a tangent about how nothing could be as bad as what she did to her own hair in the late 80s.

The worn, soft fabric made her smile. The panic faded a little though she felt herself blushing harder. This was...this was certainly out of her comfort zone.

But she hadn't been raised a coward. She started this over a month ago and damned if she backed out now.

Diya had to stop herself from yelping when Mikey materialized on the open sidewalk on the other side of the door. He grinned, catching her reaction, but not saying anything. She covered it by unlocking the door and letting him in.

Mikey let out a low whistle and looked around at the promotional posters along the front entrance. She admitted she was a little proud of these, showcasing all that the gallery offered without needing to go through a too-tired speech like when she first started working with Mr. Lee. It was worth the week long process of getting them approved if it meant she didn't have to address the crowds as a whole.

She had to shake off that thought trail, yet another attempt to derail her own nerves as Mikey's bulk slowly moved down the row. He was reading the posters, she realized, taking in what they said so intently it took her aback.

Not for the first time, Diya caught herself studying him. There was never a dull moment in doing so. From the collection of things on his neck and belts, to the sweatshirt that seemed to get switched out every time they met, the hover board strapped to his shell, the shell itself with the spray paint stains and decals half-hidden beneath his gear, to the pebbled green skin and the brightest blue eyes she'd ever seen: nothing about him was boring.

Among it all, though, she found herself looking to the pair of wooden sticks strapped to his sides. Nun chuck, he'd called them before sidelining the conversation to something else. And she'd never brought it up again. There weren't many times Mikey did that but each time it left her wondering. Wondering about the conversations they were both avoiding. That both were ignoring.

There was something there. Something he wasn't saying and something she didn't want to ask. While she hated to use the word, she knew Mikey wasn't 'normal.' While that was obvious from sight alone, there was another layer to it that told her there was more.

Why he always seemed to be out during the night. Why he said words like 'topside' and 'cover' the same way she would say 'street' and 'taxi.' That green skin covered thick, corded muscle that
looked like it got regular use. As big as he was, his movements were always soundless.

There was a word for all that. A single word to describe it all, to describe him. Just out of reach, past everything that was currently taking up all her nerves and feeding into the leftover stress of putting the gallery together. Seeing him move down the line, pausing to take in the poster containing Mr. Lee's bio, she shoved down that inkling. Later, she told herself, later. When she was more sure. When he was able to talk about it.

Mikey titled his head, still reading over Mr. Lee's bio. "How come you're not on up here?" he asked.

Diya moved to his side, wincing as her feet protested. She mentally threw up her hands before kicking off the heels. Screw it, no one else was around and she was tired. Her dress hit her at the knees so she didn't need to worry about tripping over it while going barefoot. She scooped up the shoes and resisted the urge to throw them in a corner.

"He owns the gallery," she said, shrugging. "Not like my name's on the lease. Plus, people want to know more about him, not me."

Mikey frowned at that. She caught his hesitating, blue eyes flicking across the mask she wore. But he plowed on instead with, "He may own it, but you run this place, girl. They should be wanting to learn more about you, too."

She fought down a laugh, not wanting to dismiss the sentiment but appreciating it all the same. Then she fidgeted with her shoes, working up the nerve for her next words. "So...so go ahead," she said, motioning him on the exhibit. From where they stood, none of it could be seen, hidden behind the faux walls installed for the purpose of guiding the patrons through the gallery as she and Mr. Lee intended.

He started forward but stopped when he noticed she stayed in place, still fiddling with the heels of her shoes. "Aren't you coming?" he asked. "I might need a guide to tell me about all this."

Diya shook her head. "You won't. Go on. I'll...I'll be right behind you."

Her nerves concerned him, she knew. He frowned at her, looking as though he wanted to press the issue. But she waved him on and he obeyed. When he vanished behind the corner, Diya felt her pulse skyrocket.

Quiet filled the gallery. So different from even half an hour ago when the last stragglers were gently ushered out to their waiting cars. She felt her heart beat in her ears. A few minutes, that should be enough time.

She wasn't a coward. Neither her parents nor grandparents had raised cowards. But she was beyond nervous about this. Mikey was...both complicated and not all at once. And she wasn't sure how he would react to this.

Unable to wait out her allotted time, Diya gripped her shoes tight in one hand, tugged the mask once more for good luck, then hurried after him.

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The lights in the gallery were set to a soft level. Bright enough that the pieces were on clear display.
but not so that it was a strain on the eye. Turning the corner, Mikey found three more informational posters in the short hallway. Two on the right side talked about local artists that had once been showcased at the gallery, with updates on their current careers and gratitude to Mr. Lee for helping them when they were starting out.

The last one was on the left side just before the---Mikey hoped ---last corner before the exhibit proper. It was a black and white photo of Diya, taken somewhere out in the city. She leaned back against a railing near a lake and smiled in a way that was more mischievous than cute. A plaque beside it read simply: DIYA DAVIS - CURATOR.

Mikey didn't even let himself stop to ask. He hurried on. If she had pulled this whole thing together, he wanted to see it. She'd spent so much time on it, worried and stressed over it, and he wanted to see the final product. There was no way any of the people tonight weren't floored by this. She was sure to have impressed everyone who---

It took maybe a full minute for the impact of what he was seeing to hit Mikey. The exhibit took up practically all of the space left over. Pieces lined the walls and dotted the floor while being supported by freestanding frames. The debris from the opening had been cleaned up though a few trash bags peeked out from the back doorway. All of it gave clear, unhindered views of the art on display.

Mikey's art.

Mikey stood just inside the exhibit, at a complete loss of what to do. Nearly every piece he had given to Mr. Lee to sell was here. Two or three he recognized as the first pieces he ever sold were there, too, though how the man had gotten in touch with the owners he couldn't guess.

Tentative, quiet footsteps fell like gunshots to his ears. He turned, still thunderstruck by what was laid out before him, and was struck again by Diya. She moved on, taking time to look over the pieces before her.

When she stopped, it was before a piece that had to be the centerpiece she'd fretted about. It was placed so no matter where you stood, you'd see it. Her hand traced the surface of it, trailing over the different sections of color, hovering over the middle where only white shone through. And she simply---

So many weeks ago, he'd asked her what she thought of his work. Now, here, he saw what she'd meant.

Diya glowed, radiant from simply being there. And when she at last turned to look at him, Mikey knew.

He was lost to her. And dammit if it wasn't the best feeling in the world.

Diya's eyes cut to the side, nervous once again. She cleared her throat and started. "Mr. Lee is a great boss but he's strict. Time off isn't really a thing of his. I've been with him for close to five years and never have I been able to be off for my birthday," She frowned at that but continued. "Every year, though, he asks what I would like. A bonus. Lunch at an expensive place. He likes to give back in his own way. This year, I asked if I would curate an exhibit." Her cheeks reddened and she spun on the spot, hands sweeping out to indicate the gallery. "And he more than agreed."

"Why---" Mikey's tongue felt thick, too dry, and just plain numbed. Words, get the words out.
"Why my stuff?"

"Because you need the exposure," she said in a crisp voice. A subject he avoided every time she brought it up. Then she softened, smile returning. "But mostly because if I couldn't spend my birthday with you, then I wanted you with me in some way."

Mikey wasn't aware of consciously making the decision to move. He knew he should say something. Start the conversation he'd been dreading for so many days. This was the perfect opportunity. She gave him the right opening.

But it wasn't words that he wanted. Words couldn't convey what he wanted.

Diya stared at him, green eyes wide, but she didn't move. She watched him approach, not a single bit of her showing anything other than that continued glow, that smile she tilted up to him, hand lifted, reaching for him as he reached for her---

It wasn't how Mikey pictured his first kiss. Not how he'd imagine the night to go.

But it was the best thing to ever happen to him, beaten only a few moments later when they broke apart. Diya giggled, nose scrunching and hand resting along his cheek before she leaned forward for another kiss. And Mikey was lost to her all over again.
Ellen

Chapter Summary

Gentle brute. Violent softness. A fierce defender and an equally firm friend. She ignored the ways people described her. It never mattered, anyway.

Until the night she met one who fit those same words.

Third light.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Raphael loved a good fight.

Didn't matter if it was Foot clan or car thief or run-of-the-mill mugger: if it got his blood pumping, he loved it. When a patrol ended, he wanted to feel that high, that sense of accomplishment.

The Purple Dragons rolling around on the alley floor below hardly gave any of that. Leo guessed they might've been newbies. Still, wouldn't do to just let them go. So he and his brothers loitered on top of the building, waiting for the cops to pick them up.

Leo talked strategy or something like that with Donnie over the communicators. Raph tuned them out, pacing on the lip of the roof. His sai flashed in the darkness as he moved, itching to get going. This neighborhood wouldn't give much else; close to some school, it was on the relatively safer part of the city. The newbies below just pushed their luck on the wrong night.

Mikey crouched on the corner of the roof, shell-cell in one hand while the other lazily flipped his nun chuck. He grinned at the small device, oblivious to the rest of the world.

A little of Raph's annoyance faded. He didn't often hope for the impossible, but he did want some kind of miracle to happen. Mikey thought he was being slick, keeping it a secret. But it was easy to tell what was going on. Raph didn't know who it was he texted. But it felt a little less concerning in the wake of the 'Amaya-fiasco,' as Casey called it. Enough of the cynic remained that Raph kept from hoping too hard, though.

A shrill yell made all of them turn. Leo moved a heartbeat later, peering over the roof's edge to the other side of the building.

On that side of the street was the school---conservatory, Raph corrected himself, reading a nearby sign stating the building they were on was the bookstore for the place. The area ahead was part parking lot and courtyard. More signage pointed to other buildings. Coming out from under the trees, a group of people moved.
Through the distance, someone was crying; a girl? More voices, some shouting, others pleading, made the whole scene a confusing mess. Raph just gained a prime viewing spot on the roof when a woman broke away from the group, striding off while shouting dark promises.

A second person ran and tackled her to the ground. She bounced from the impact. Without waiting, the attacker spun her around and decked her straight across the face. Raph whistled at the display. He ignored Leo's warning glare and watched the unfurling fight.

Some of the group tried to break them apart but the second one was having none of that. Through a break in the flailing limbs, Raph got a better look of the attacker: blonde hair half-pulled from an elaborate braid and sharp-featured face stretched into a snarl that would send most tigers running. She ripped herself from the grip of those trying to stop her. Vicious curses hit the air with each punch, kick and dangerous flash of teeth.

*That* was the kind of fight Raph was looking for. Something he could lose himself in. He felt a little envious being on the watching side.

"Dude, they look serious," Mikey crooned as those flashing teeth were indeed put to use; a howl of pain rent the air. "Should we stop 'em?"

"Just a brawl, Mikey," Leo said, though he also watched intently. "Nothing illegal about fighting."

Sirens warbled. Two police cars pulled up to the alley. Uniformed officers hurried out to survey the still moaning Purple Dragons on the alley floor. Another shriek from the courtyard caught their attention. A few detached to investigate, another police car approaching to assist.

Within minutes, both the brawl in the courtyard and the gang members below were rounded up. After some furious questioning, both women were lead around the building to the waiting patrol cars. Despite police presence and being handcuffed, the blonde woman lunged at the other, intent to finish what she started.

Raph whistled again. "She's a brawler, all right."

"She definitely woulda won," Mikey said.

The group from the courtyard remained, huddled together. One broke away, furiously working her phone through tears. A moment later, a car pulled down the street and headed toward the curb where she stood.

Raph tensed, recognizing Amaya's SUV. *Seriously*? Did she ever sleep?

Leo grumbled something similar, glaring down at the scene as though Amaya would see him.

Over the past few weeks, the human had become a part of their odd little group. Getting supplies, bringing food, or even acting as a getaway driver: Amaya proved herself an ally the Turtles needed. Seeing her here, with Purple Dragons on one side and possibly volatile people on the other, all of them felt apprehensive.

Sure enough, the crying girl ran up to the driver's window, words half a shout as she spoke with Amaya. A few of the others followed, each just as agitated.
Raph palmed his sai, waiting, watching for one to make a wrong move.

A sharp order from within the SUV had the others dispersing while the crying girl hurried into the backseat. Amaya's face appeared just before she rolled up the window, tense as she glanced up and down the street.

"Follow her," Leo said, suddenly at Raph's side.

"A little paranoid, Fearless?" Raph quipped though without any heat.

"Cautious," was all his brother said.

Raph sheathed his sai and ran after the SUV. No point arguing. Wasn't anything to argue about. Nothing was going to happen to Amaya. He'd make sure of it.

The black vehicle came to a stop just outside of the same police building Casey's office was. Raph crouched on the roof, watching as both Amaya and the other girl got out. As they did, the patrol cars from the alley pulled in and began unloading. All the Purple Dragon members were hauled away with a lack of gentleness Raph appreciated. Then came one of the women, limping and shouting all manners of things as she was lead into the building.

At last, the blonde brawler was pulled from the car. Even from a distance, she looked ready to keep going. Hair wild from the fight, a splash of red from her mouth, she glared at the cop dragging her along.

The crying girl rushed for her, shouting out a name: Ellen.

Ellen said something, too soft to carry up to where Raph hid.

The crying girl jerked back, shocked, and watched as she was taken inside. Amaya stepped up to her side, spoke softly, and caught her when she threw her arms around Amaya and began to sob.

Raph watched on but nothing else happened. When the girl calmed down, she and Amaya followed them inside. He reported this to his brothers and was already headed back before Leo instructed him to.

The rest of the night passed by without anything else happening. A boring end.

The next day, Raph found himself still thinking about that brawl. He wondered what it had been about. Both had been intent on making the other hurt. And he couldn't forget the intensity on the blonde's face.

She'd been ready to kill.

Unable to shake it, he asked Donnie if he could get any info on what happened.

It took all of ten seconds before Donnie pulled up the arrest record. "Ellen Pembrooke," he read off, "charged with assault and battery on one Catherine Page. And attempting to assault a police officer." He peered over at Raph. "What did she do to get that?"
Raph shrugged. "Didn't see anything."

Curiosity satisfied, Raph pushed it away as other things took center stage. If it came back to him, he just chalked it up to just wondering for the cause of the fight.

---

Talking with Mikey, finding out the name of the one causing him to grin like a puppy, was oddly endearing. Not that Raph would ever say that out loud. Hell no. It was just nice to see his brother excited over something.

The thought still rolled around his head as Raph left for bodyguard duty, as he called it. After almost getting car-jacked, Amaya finally agreed to let one of them shadow her on any jobs that happened after dark. The girl fought them on it, only relenting after April took over. Whatever she said worked and Amaya kept them up to date on her schedule.

The run through the city helped focus Raph's head. He sent Amaya the notice he was there and followed her as she drove to her destination. They came to an older neighborhood of brownstones. She pulled up next to one that seemed in part to be a restaurant; the smells coming from the place made his stomach growl.

A small group huddled on the steps and waved as she pulled up. At once, they began loading the back with various instruments clustered around them. Amaya acted like she knew them, chatting with them as they worked.

The doors of the brownstone opened and two people came out: brawler and the crying girl. Raph blinked, watching as they met with the gathering group. The brawler still held that intense edge about her, like wherever they were going just meant trouble. Beside her, the crying girl looked sick. Standing side by side, it was easy to tell that they were related. They even wore their hair in similar yet mirroring styles, drawing more focus to their shared features. The loose French braid ran along the right side of Ellen's hair, exposing the hair underneath that was dyed a pale green that only stood out due to her natural blonde hue. Her sister's gathered the far longer tresses into a rope of wispy blonde over her left shoulder. Like the others gathered around them, they wore clothes that just touched the line of 'formal,' all of some dark color.

The group split between Amaya's car and another. Raph kept an easy pace with them. Their destination turned out to be the same conservatory. Stopping in the back of one of the buildings, they unloaded the cars. Raph hovered on the roof, thinking he might just prowl around while he waited.

Curiosity got the better of him.

He snuck in easily enough. Finding the right room only took a little doing. The event was easy to find as it took place in the largest room in the building. Most of the floor was taken up with dining tables. People milled around, talking more than eating. Towards the back of the room, right near the hall that lead directly to the back doors they had unloaded the cars, was a stage.

The upper part of the room held a balcony that had been renovated with a control booth front and center. Nestled close by the edge of the railing, two guys worked at the massive console while another consulted a clipboard. Spotlights dotted the railing from one end to the other while smaller ones covered the ceiling. The rest of the space was cluttered with props, costumes, and some weird odds and ends he didn't know the use for.
A quiet hiss caught his attention. Amaya motioned from her place in the far corner, sitting right on the railing. A stack of stereos made a shelter there, easily big enough to hide him. Amaya shot him a side-long look when he settled. "Decided to culture yourself, Red?"

The nickname made him grin. It was a holdover from when she only knew them by the colors Donnie assigned them on her phone. He didn't fight it. Kinda liked it, to be honest. "Nah, just curious."

She rolled her eyes but didn't pry.

They watched the proceedings below in easy silence. It appeared to be a fund-raiser of some kind. A handful of people wore name tags and mingled with anyone that let them near. Music started and Raph looked to the corner of the stage. A group of musicians had set up there, clustered beside a piano. The music was delicate, more background noise than anything else. Easy to dismiss if you didn't want to listen. And it wouldn't have gotten his attention at all if it weren't for one thing.

The brawler Ellen sat at the piano.

It took a second to process that. She wasn't out of place there. Far from it, she looked like this was something she did every day. Yet while her body language was relaxed, her face held on to that stern, agitated edge. She played without sheet music. In fact, her gaze followed someone in the crowd.

Her sister was amongst those mingling with the others. The smile she wore was strained, the line of her shoulders tight with tension, yet she never broke stride as she went from person to person. A few even called to her and spoke with her at length.

About half an hour in, someone came on stage and started speaking. Raph tuned it out when it became apparent this was, indeed, a fund-raiser. He grumbled to himself, wishing he had just stayed on the roof. Amaya poked his arm and shushed him.

After that, people performed on the stage. Students, if Raph understood that correctly. There were musicians and singers alike, some solo and some in groups. Between sets, the background music started again as the stage was reset.

"Didn't think this was your kind of thing," Amaya said as a string trio bowed to the applauding crowd.

"What? Guy can't try out something different?"

She raised a brow, untouched at the aggressive response; she rolled with just about anything he threw at her, never taking the bait and shouting back. It got to Raph, sometimes. Like she saw through any sort of front in the blink of an eye. Yet it never irritated him.

Raph 'grumph'ed, as she called it, and stubbornly looked back to the room below. Thoughts of deflecting her knowing look vanished as he saw Ellen rise from her seat. She moved quickly though not in alarm. Intent, she weaved her way around people and shot out a door on the side. A glance through the crowds told Raph that her sister had gone, too. The question was on the tip of his tongue but he killed it at the knowing smile Amaya wore, watching him.

He stared at the stage, intending to watch the next performance without fail to avoid her. A young
woman came on and began to sing. After a moment, something tickled at Raph's brain. She looked familiar. He just couldn't place it. She wore heavy make-up, clearly seen even at this distance, and he knew there was no name coming to him. But...he had seen her. Hadn't he?

When it was done, she bowed to the crowd and exited the stage with the air of royalty. As she did, he caught a flash of a bandage on her neck, hidden beneath her thick hair.

Like it was covering a bite mark.

Raph chuckled to himself. So, that was the one Ellen fought.

There was a longer pause before the next set. The crowd shifted noticeably, people murmuring to one another while the soft rustle of programs being consulted filled the air. Even Amaya straightened, eager now.

Before Raph could ask, a hush fell over the crowd as Ellen's sister came on stage. A spotlight hit her while another fell just below the stage onto the piano. Ellen had reclaimed her place. She didn't seem to care about the spotlight nor the many eyes watching her. The intensity about her shifted, replaced with worry, as she looked up at the girl on stage.

Her sister stood at the front of the stage, hands clasped together and head bowed. She gathered herself, taking a deep breath, then nodded to Ellen. The music started, different from before, and filled the room. When her cue came, she began to sing.

It was strange, sitting there on the balcony and watching this. Amaya was right: this wasn't Raph's kind of thing. Not by a long shot. But that didn't stop him from realizing just how high a quality of sound hit him. The girl's voice was lovely. The piano was enchanting. Together, it created a hauntingly beautiful thing.

Beside him, Amaya sighed. She watched the duo, a small smile on her face. "You know, you wouldn't get this from anyone else," she said in half a whisper. "No other two could recreate this. The voice and piano work as one. Put too much on one side and it will take the spotlight. Which is a point, sometimes," she added, waving down at the room. "But to keep it even? To showcase both the singer and pianist without bias?" She sighed again, tapping a rhythm on the railing. "Being sisters probably does it. They sense each other's timing and work together."

Raph cocked a smirk at her. "Now you're writing music reviews?"

Amaya closed her eyes and just enjoyed the rest of the song. The applause was notably louder than before. The girl onstage bowed once before calmly walking into the wings and out of sight. In contrast, Ellen was gone before anyone noticed.

Raph frowned, confused at this abrupt exit. Amaya was already on her feet and hurrying towards the stairs. Taking that as time to leave, Raph was roof side before Amaya got to where the cars were parked.

The sound of someone being violently sick hit Raph as soon as he was on the roof. Peering over the edge, he saw Ellen and her sister below. The sister was hunched over, holding onto the wall while she continued to throw up. Ellen stood at her side, effectively guarding her; oddly, she was eating a sucker and didn't seem put off by what was happening.

People started to trickle out the back door, carrying the instruments. They all gave the two a wide
birth. When Amaya came out, she looked at the hunched form in question but backed off when Ellen shook her head.

As she walked away, Ellen turned to the girl. Concern etched in her frown when she heaved again. "You didn't have to come," she said in a flat sort of voice.

Her sister smiled though it was more of a grimace. She still held that green tinge. "I said I'd perform," she said, voice an odd contrast to her sister's, light and airy. Almost like it didn't exist. "I can't go back on that just because it would be awkward."

Ellen grimaced in return, looking back at the building. Raph ducked lower, hoping he hadn't been visible. "She's a bitch," she ground out. The sucker in her mouth cracked, emphasizing her words.

The girl giggled, though she sounded more tired than humored. "She is what she is. I knew that going into it."

"No excuse for what she did. Bitch," Ellen grumbled. She patted her pockets before finding another sucker. She spat the spent stick to the ground and popped the fresh one in.

Her sister frowned at it, straightening. "You're going to get a cavity."

"Better than cancer." With a motion from Amaya, she nodded to the cars and they piled in.

Once everything was unloaded back at the brownstone and she was paid, Amaya got back in her car with a groan. She pulled out her phone but paused. A glance to the back seat confirmed her suspicions. "What'd you think?"

Raph shrugged, not quite meeting her eyes. "Interesting."

Amaya chuckled. She started back for her place, the silence in the car oddly comforting. Raph appreciated that she never felt the need to fill it. She was okay with silences and right now he needed it.

By the time she pulled up to her house, even Amaya couldn't let the quiet hang on. She parked then glanced back at Raph. The question was plain to see but she didn't voice it. Again, sometimes she just seemed to get it with him saying anything.

Raph looked out the window at her house, not really seeing anything but needing to not see that knowing gleam in her eyes. "You get a lot of calls like this?" he asked.

"Some," she said. "They get work were they can, mostly different venues. I'm one of the only people with a car big enough for Ellen's electric piano when she brings it along."

"When's the next one?"

Amaya smiled, though it was subdued. Knowing her, she was already making plans. "I'll give you a call when they let me know."

---

Leo said nothing about Raph's sudden appointment of "Amaya's escort." If Raph's suspicions were correct, Amaya made certain of that. Raph wasn't sure what was happening between those two, but
Fearless seemed to listen to her at times.

Amaya kept him up to speed whenever the sisters called her. Like she said, it was always a
different sort of place. Bars, parties, and a weird little convention: each time Raph didn't know
what he was getting into when he followed the SUV. All he could count on was the two's
performance.

Each time they killed it. It still wasn't his style. Still wasn't what he loaded on the stereo in the lair.
But he looked forward to each time his shell-cell beeped and he saw Amaya's next text. The singer,
named Oralee---what kind of name was that? It fit her though. The girl improved vastly from that
night where all she did was puke. But she always looked a little fragile, like something or someone
too forceful would blow her over. Ellen, in contrast, was always beside her, intense and hovering.
As the days went on, Oralee's fragility lessened. She started smiling and talking more between sets.

Ellen stayed the same as that first day Raph saw the cops cuff her.

Then Amaya sent a text with an odd addition: just Ellen tonight, still wanna join?

It only took Raph a moment before he sent a confirmation. He hadn't spent much thought on this.
Didn't want to.

Donnie was the thinker. Donnie would figure anything out to the extreme. Leo was the planner.
Leo could find out the best possible way of handling the situation. Mikey was caught up in his own
version of this, though he admitted to Raph what was going on.

It's nice. Talking with her.

Raph didn't even have that to use as an excuse. He just listened to the music. Music he didn't even
like. Mikey's words stayed, though. Would it be the same? If a miracle happened and Raph was
able to talk to her---

He shook his head, focusing on his run before he splatted on the side of the building. Amaya's
SUV rumbled along below him, Ellen the only occupant. She was dressed up tonight, hair carefully
braided back and the dyed portion neatly hidden under the rest. That usually meant a fancy type
party or function. Another fund-raiser?

The SUV pulled into an up-scale neighborhood. The houses were just on the lower side of
'mansion,' boasting a good bit of land between their neighbors. Raph resigned himself to loitering
on the rooftops when lights in the yard drew his attention. The party---or whatever it was---was
outside.

He didn't name the relief that went through him at that. He didn't let himself follow what it meant.

Amaya stayed in the SUV, probably listening to an audio book again. Ellen went through the house
and out into the back in record time. She talked to no one. Just made a bee-line for the piano set off
to the side.

Raph scanned the yard. It was still early, by his reasoning. People milled about but it was more
setting up than mingling. Time passed and more came onto the lawn. It was a nice spread and they
were decked out tonight. He couldn't catch what the reason was, though.

When the piano started, he found himself watching her again. She had no sheet music, playing as
though it was what she did every second of the day. What kind of training let her do that? Did she spend all her time at the piano?

Ellen lazily watched the party-goers. One approached and spoke to her. She nodded and the music melted into something different. This happened a few times: people coming up to her and requesting something.

As time ticked on, Raph saw his own boredom reflected on Ellen. She played and played and...just looked bored. A while passed since the last request. She ended the piece, still not quite looking at anything in particular, and started again. After a few beats, Raph blinked down at her.

It was a song he knew. One that Mikey was currently obsessed with. It was so out of place that he started laughing under his breath. Some random bit of hip-hop, played here like it was freaking Beethoven. None of the party-goers seemed to notice. At least, no one remarked on it. The tune went well with piano, he thought.

Ellen played a medley of different songs. More hip-hop, pop, something that made him think of metal, one that he was sure was rap. Raph caught many of them, names escaping him though he knew the melodies and the tunes well enough. He swore she played 'Never Gonna Give You Up' at one point.

He couldn't name what it was that kept him here. What kept him coming back each time Amaya called him. He never liked trying to put feelings into words. He just couldn't. He got frustrated then blew up instead. Always quick to fight, even when there was no need to. That was him.

It was always him.

Movement caught his eye, bringing him out of the funk. A handful of guys circled the piano. The lead one, swaggering like he owned the damn place, talked to Ellen. Her responses were only nods or shakes of her head. She pointedly looked anywhere but him, even staring down at the keys she didn't need to watch. Her playing never faltered.

Then another of the group said something. She kept playing but Raph caught the flinch that tightened her shoulders. She remained stoic otherwise. The group laughed and trailed off. Ellen's face grew noticeable stony. She finished the piece then stood. She made her way to a uniformed man and spoke to him; Raph guessed he was a servant or waiter or whatever the hell people called them at functions like this. The man nodded then went to speak to a formally dressed woman. The woman looked concerned as she watched Ellen leave. She called her name but Ellen kept going.

Raph moved to follow. She didn't go through the house. She just went to the side through a fence to get to the front yard. Her black dress rippled around her, catching the biting wind that blew. She didn't shiver.

Ellen went up to the SUV. Amaya jumped upright, startled out of a half-doze. They spoke for a second then Ellen hopped inside. They drove off with Raph following. He wondered what the hell happened? He had half a mind to go back to the party, marking the guys that talked to her and wondering if Amaya wouldn't miss him if he double backed.

He shook the thought off. No, not his place. Besides, if the night he first saw her was anything to go by, Ellen could handle herself quite well.

The SUV came to a stop at a little bodega about a block from the neighborhood. Amaya kept the
engine running while Ellen went inside.

Raph crouched on the roof across the street. A moonless night, the inside of the shop was crystal clear by comparison. Through the windows, he watched Ellen stand in front of the counter and scan the shelves behind the cashier: cigarettes.

He wondered if the sucker-fixation was rooted in that. After an internal struggle, Ellen visibly sighed. Head high, she marched down the aisles and returned with both hands full of suckers. While the guy rang her up, she unwrapped one and popped it in her mouth.

Raph was struck again by the want to go down. He was just feeling lost, he told himself. She was an interesting person. Truly. That was all.

She exited the shop but didn't get back in the car. She wandered a little up the street, bag of candy dangling from a hand, and just...looked up.

She wasn't sad. She wasn't mad. She just...was. No emotion Raph could read showed in her stony expression. The tension across her frame was different. It more than told of some bramble of thoughts running through her head. It screamed it for the world to see. But she just stood there on the sidewalk, idly working on a sucker, and staring up at the moonless night sky.

The serene night was broken by screeching tires.

Raph took only a second to see the car careening out of control. It whipped around the road, the side punched in where it had been hit. It shuddered across all lanes of traffic. Cars honked or slammed on their brakes. One wasn't so lucky.

The truck had just pulled up to the light at the corner Ellen stood. No way the guy could move in time. No way anyone could.

Except Raph.

Raph sprang from his position on the roof and hit the ground behind Ellen just as she seemed to grasp what was happening. He grabbed her, pulled her against him, then jumped on the roof of Amaya's SUV.

"Amaya, GO!" he shouted above the chaos.

Either she had seen or she held some kind of sixth-sense---Mikey was beginning to think the latter and Raph agreed with him more and more. Amaya gunned it in reverse no sooner than Raph landed. He had to catch himself before he fell off. One hand grabbed the roof of her car, wincing when metal bent. The other held Ellen against him.

It lasted seconds but it felt like forever. When the sounds of the crash faded and voices started shouting, Raph looked around.

The truck had been sent into the very bodega Ellen left. The skid marks travelled from the street across the sidewalk where she had been standing.

Cold gripped him. Not from how close that had been. But from realizing the body he carried had gone very, very still.
Raph pulled back, hands suddenly numb, and ended up dropping Ellen on the roof of the SUV. She lay there, hair flung out from her very white, very scared face. Her eyes were peeled back wide and stared up at him; they were a bright, sharp green. The sucker still sat in her mouth, undisturbed.

Raph was gone in the next heartbeat. He didn't linger to check on Amaya. He didn't go into the shop to check on the cashier or any of the people around them.

He just wanted to get away before the screaming started.

---

Splinter found him in the weight room.

There was an understanding amongst his brothers that the weight room was his place. It was where he went when he needed to cool off or think. Whether it be after a workout or after a fight with Leo, if he needed to clear his head, he went there and no one bugged him.

Splinter hardly ever entered. If he did, it usually meant he was giving a lecture. Raph didn't pause even when the solid presence of his father stopped beside him.

Splinter's patience was unending. The silence waiting went on long enough that Raph couldn't keep up the reps on the bench. He shelved the bar and sat up, panting despite his resolve not to show weakness. The quiet ticked on, broken only by the distant sounds of Mikey on one of his games and the ever present noises from Donnie's lab.

Finally, Raph looked over at his father. He was met with the same expression as ever: open, calm, waiting. And found himself speaking.

"I shouldn't have gone out," he grumbled, hands rubbing his knees, fighting the urge to just shout this all out. "I should've let Leo or Mikey go with Amaya. I got careless."

Splinter titled his head in a partial shrug. "Your presence did not cause the accident," he pointed out in that firm way of his. "Even if one of your brothers were there, surely they would have stepped in to help the same as you. They would not have let the young lady be injured or killed."

His father paced a little ways into the weight room, allowing him time to gather himself. Then he said, "You are not troubled by exposing yourself. So, why are you so tormented, my son?"

Raph stared down at the floor. He felt the words building, that damn boil of emotions that trapped the words until he felt like he was drowning. "I wanted to go," he got out through his teeth. "Every time. Every damn time. I wanted to go. And I didn't like how much I wanted it. Hated how I just...didn't know anything, really."

"Know what?"

"Why." That was what plagued him. It always had. "Why did I want to see her? Why did I keep going, night after night? And even if you'd asked me then, I couldn't say. Not even now." He swore, standing and pacing.

Splinter let him pace; let him swear without a word of reprimand. When his son wound down, he motioned back to the bench. Raph sat without question, nerves still tingling.
"It is always hard to ration out the irrational," Splinter said.

Raph nodded once. He knew how 'fortune-cookie' that sounded but, yeah, it made sense.

"But try," he went on, black eyes ever-calm even when facing Raph's brute temper. "Just try."

"I liked watching her," he blurted. Then he flushed, hating how stalker-like that sounded. He needed to get the right words out. Needed his father to understand. "She was...you should have seen her, sensei. That night, she just fought like her life depended on it. Like she was risking everything. For just a brawl, not even a street fight. And she wasn't even sorry when the cops got her. I don't think she ever apologized. She was so...proud. You know? Like someone who knew their worth and wouldn't apologize about fighting for it."

The words hit him just as he said them. Proud, yes. Unbending. Unflinching. Ellen was someone who knew who they were. And unashamed. Whether at a piano or punching someone's lights out, she knew who she was. She knew her own worth.

And yet...Raph couldn't shake that image of her standing on the corner, staring up at the sky, looking so lost.

It felt too familiar. Too real.

"Finding one's worth is a goal many seek to attain," Splinter said after a while. "But you do not truly think that is all."

Raph shrugged, unable to look him in the eye anymore. "I liked hearing her play," he mumbled.

Splinter chuckled. Not in a teasing way. His father never teased when he got like this, never poked at him when his heart was laid bare. It only made Raph respect him more. This was a chuckle that told he was pleased by what he heard. "The world of music is infinite," Splinter said, stroking his beard. "What about it drew you?"

"She's intense," Raph said, already thinking back on the countless times he watched her play. It was the perfect word to describe her. "Just so...intense. Nothing could break her concentration. She could play and play, and never mess up. Just kept going, even when talking with someone---"

The image of the group of guys talking with her hit him, the way she tightened up. Something about that spooked her.

And if humans spooked her, what the hell would talking with the likes of him do?

The tension around him grew. Splinter hummed, sensing the sudden change. "Talking. Is that it?"

Raph tried to shrug but it was more of a shuffle.

Splinter laid a hand on his shoulder. "We've spent most of our lives without taking part in the outside world. Perhaps too long."

Raph blinked at him.

Splinter walked away to stand at the edge of the platform that made the weight room. He looked out over the lair, gathering his thoughts. "Despite the hardships," he said, "and despite the fear we
have seen, I cannot deny that we have not been wholly rejected by those in the outside world."

"April knew us from the first," Raph began, ready to argue.

"And yet more come after her," Splinter said, gentle. "Casey is now as much of our family as her. Even Amaya, fallen into our hands out of the goodness of her own heart: can you deny our lives would be hollow should she leave?"

Raph said nothing. It would have reeked of a lie to deny that.

"We will likely see more hardships," Splinter said, turning back to his son. "But even so, we should not run from the opportunity to let someone in."

"You didn't see her face," Raph said, voice soft to his own ears. "She looked terrified---"

"And you are sure that had to do with the sight of you?" Splinter cut in. "And not with almost being run over?" When he was met with more silence, he nodded. "You will never know, Raphael, unless you try again. Unless you take that risk, then you may forever miss this opportunity."

When he left, Raph checked his shell-cell and, sure enough, there was a message from Amaya. Given the lecture and the timing, he wondered if Amaya hadn't reached out to Leo or Splinter or even both. She tried to get a hold of him since that night. And Raph ignored her each time. He didn't want to hear what she had to say.

He didn't want to hear how thoroughly screwed he was.

---

This venue was a weird little pseudo-concert out in the park. And the only reason Raph was tagging along was because Amaya made a big deal about being worried of muggers that were supposedly running around the place. Only part of that was bull; Raph was aware of any chatter Donnie got on crime sprees and there had only been a slight rise in the area of the park. Plus, Amaya could probably fend off a mugger on her own.

But Raph knew an offering of neutral ground when he heard it.

The concert was another mis-match of a bunch of different people performing. This was different in that the sisters weren't just in their own group, as he had seen before. They were in several of the different sets, sometimes together and sometimes separate. Again, he saw how Oralee was loosening up, shaking off whatever traumatic event he had caught the tail end of. She smiled so brightly that the crowd cheered with the mania of an idol's groupies.

Ellen was the same as ever. She played and played. She was more relaxed but otherwise unchanged. Unshaken.

Amaya set up on the sidelines to watch. Quite literally. Her SUV as well as a bunch of other cars were used to create the divider for the backstage. She parked at an angle so she could watch while sitting in her trunk. She didn't react when Raph appeared beside her. She had set things up so he wouldn't be seen unless someone made an effort to peer around the edge of the SUV.

She kept quiet the whole time. She hummed along on a few songs she knew, clapped with the crowds, and even passed him a beer from a cooler she had. Yet she never tried to start a
conversation. Again, he was struck by how much he appreciated that.

Fearless was an idiot for dragging his feet.

After a set where Ellen paired with a cello for a bunch of remixed pop songs, the stagehands scurried on stage to help move things around. Ellen hovered while the cellist exited. The piano was moved more center of the stage. As Ellen took her seat, Raph sat up a little.

Ellen straightened the mike set in front of her then peered out over the crowds for a moment. She looked down at the keys, drew in a breath, then spoke.

"This world has its moments. They're beautiful and terrifying all at once. And sometimes it's easy to confuse the two. But there's something I try to keep in mind, every day, as often as I can."

The crowd cheered, a few people catcalled. Raph sat there, taken aback by this change of pace.

She looked over the crowd again before she went on, "We can choose what side we'll be remembered for. By making a fist or holding that same hand to another, we pick where we fall in that divide. Not all horrors are monstrous. And not all wonders are beautiful."

She pushed the mike out of the way and began to play. It was a gorgeous piece, as it ever was with her. Raph was never going to get over the fact that he just couldn't appreciate what he was hearing like it was meant to. Like on those shows Mikey watched about gourmet cooking: he just didn't get it. But he knew it was a masterpiece all the same.

Amaya shifted, half-turning to face him. She paused, listening to the music that surrounded them, then said, "She's asked to see you."

Raph's instinct wanted him to run, to just vanish. Splinter's words kept him in place.

"I thought she'd forgotten it," Amaya went on, pushing forward in his silence. "You know, traumatic memory and all. But she asked about you. Point blank about it, too. I get it," she said in a quieter tone. "I get that you guys need to keep a low profile. But that doesn't mean you have to shut everyone out."

So similar to what sensei had said. Raph wanted to give in, to just blindly agree. But that stark-white fear he had seen stopped him. "How'd she know to ask you?" he said instead.

Amaya smiled. "You shouted my name pretty loud. Not that hard to piece together."

Raph rolled his eyes, swearing.

The music ended and the crowd cheered. Ellen stood and gave a short bow before walking off.

"Where'd she wanna meet?"

---

Ellen shrugged into her jacket, patting the pockets for another sucker. She was running low again. Damn stress. Damn cigarettes and damn the cancer they caused.

She walked along the edge of the trees, following Amaya's instructions. She popped the sucker in
and looked back at the stage. They had one last set to play. Hopefully this wouldn't take long.

Biting wind hit her and she didn't feel it, too absorbed in the tangle of thoughts. God, she was an idiot. Complete, fucking idiot. She should just turn back, agree to forget about the whole thing, and pretend like it didn't happen.

She couldn't.

Not just because of the lawsuit the Wilsons were pursuing in her honor. Which she was already annoyed with and it wasn't even two weeks since that night of their anniversary. But they both were firm in pressing charges on her behalf. Laura was beside herself with the thought that Ellen had left their party and almost been killed. While her wife couldn't get over the fact that Ellen had left without saying so in the first place, leading to the accident in question.

Ellen kept silent about that. She wouldn't make any difference if she had told them their nephew was a piece of shit coke-fiend who had tried to pressure her for money. And she wouldn't cop to who, exactly, had broken his nose later that night.

The Wilsons had taken her in, both insisting she stay after that horrendous accident. A friend of theirs that had been at the party was a doctor and checked her over at their request. Health assured, they got to work calling whoever they could about suing someone for what she had gone through. Her words of protest hit deaf ears and she gave up shortly after. When they were set on something, neither would be budged.

And then their nephew ambushed her, thinking she'd be in a different mindset about his demand. He quickly learned how wrong he was and how much Ellen didn't care who he knew in whatever socialite group he named. She even offered to call the police for him, pointed out which precinct held her most up-to-date records. He'd run off, whimpering and swearing payback. But he hadn't mentioned anything to his aunts.

She grumbled to herself, knuckles aching. She hated keeping things from them. They were good people. Too good to her. Always giving her jobs to do, even stupid-simple ones like playing for their parties. And Laura just seemed to believe her nephew needed money for other reasons than to snort it up his nose.

Ellen chuckled, enjoying how much it was going to hurt him until his nose healed.

She fell quiet when her thoughts kept going. Kept going back to that chaotic moment when the world spun, when she was sure she was going to die between a truck and an over-priced bodega on the street. That moment when something warm and solid captured her. When she hit the roof of a car and looked up to see who saved her.

And seen the stark horror in those green-gold eyes.

She had days to process it. And days to consider that she was losing her mind. Yet no matter how she tried to rationalize the weird things about that guy---green, so much green, scales, red, a fucking shell?---those eyes remained unchanged. And each time it circled back to that, she felt her thoughts calm a little more.

Pressing Amaya for answers had been a trial. The woman was a vault at the best of times. After that night, it was like she fell off the face of the Earth. Ellen used methods she swore she'd never use again to locate her at the University. Cornered, Amaya tried to keep up the silence. She only
broke when Ellen said she was losing her mind over what she had seen in those eyes.

Bits and pieces, that was all she got. Amaya was reluctant to even give Ellen that much. So much secrecy. So much need-to-know that Ellen started to think this was entering the realm of government agencies.

Tonight was a compromise, she knew. The guy---whatever he was---agreed to talk to her. Out of sight. And that was all.

She took it. If only to quiet the restlessness she got when that memory hit her.

Nothing changed. Nothing caught her eye or ear. Yet Ellen stopped, certain that she was no longer alone. She looked along the tree line, awash in shadows as much as foliage.

A break in the shadows made her pause. It moved. She started towards it.

"Close enough," a voice barked.

Ellen stopped, heart pounding. Same voice, she was sure of it.

They both stood there, awkward silence falling into place. Ellen grumbled inwardly, wishing she had made a list of what to say. Dammit, she was horrible at things like this. Flushed, she threw caution to the damned winds and blurted, "Thank you."

The quiet sharpened though he didn't respond.

"For saving my life, I mean," she went on. She still searched the shadows, still tried to pick out the shape of him. Had it been her imagination, fueled by fear, that made him so big in her memory? "Are you okay?"

He snorted out a laugh. "You almost get flattened by a car and you ask me if I'm okay?"

She shrugged. "You were just as close to it as I was," she pointed out. "And unless you're bullet-proof as well as wicked fast, you'd be just as dead."

A pause. "Well, bullet-proof isn't that much of a stretch."

Ellen bit back on the question that brought up. Not the time, not the time, she told herself. She had to ask what plagued her. Had to rid herself of that image haunting her. "Then why were you so scared?"

The air grew tense. She wouldn't take it back though. She just watched the shadows and waited.

"Were you?"

Ellen blinked, frown pulling at her face. "Was I scared?"

"Yeah."

"Almost being hit is pretty---"

"You know what I mean."

Another snorting laugh. "You're a weird one."

She shrugged again. "Normal means boring. And that's never been my sin."

When the quiet fell again, it wasn't as tense. The sky over head started to pink with the sunrise. Just as she was working up the courage to ask his name, her phone went off. Cursing, she pulled it out to see Oralee was freaking out; their last set was up.

"I gotta go," she said; a quick flick of her jaw and the sucker in her mouth turned into powder. She turned but stopped again. She looked back to the shadows. She shouldn't. She really shouldn't, but--

"Yeah?" he asked, caught between a snarl and a drawl.

"Step into the light." She said it brazenly, she knew. That was always her problem. But she would regret it if she didn't.

There was a rustling and the shadow she had been studying moved. He came to the edge of the trees, just within the light from the concert and the brightening sky overhead. Her brain filled in the gaps from memory, both reassuring and not that she hadn't imagined so many things about him. She missed the weapons strapped across his huge form. And yeah, that was a shell on his back.

She hadn't messed up the eyes, though. She relaxed as she looked up into those green-gold eyes and saw that this was the one who had saved her.

Those eyes flicked up and down her form, taking her in as well. Then he tensed, scarred lip curling in a smirk that looked more fragile than assured. "So? Disgusted yet?"

Ellen cocked her head, a move that startled him. He moved back, puzzled as she just continued to meet his gaze without backing down. Then she smiled, and it made him think of the sunrise happening over their heads: of a new day and new opportunities it brought.

"The only disgusting thing," she said at length, never looking away, "was thinking that I was gonna die that night with a popcorn sucker being the last thing I ate. Truly, one of my worst impulse buys."

Those green-gold eyes blinked at her, stunned.

Her smile sharpened and she nodded her head back to the stage. "Stay for the encore, big guy," she said. "I'm sure you'll enjoy it."

He did. He couldn't remember it, still shaken by their conversation. But he couldn't deny that he enjoyed it all the same.
Thanks for reading!! Let me know how you guys like it so far. We still got a ways to go with the gang!
Diya was never good at long term planning.

Usually because life just got in the way. Taking a year to travel abroad before college went up in smoke when her father died two weeks before she was set to go. Refunding her tickets had gone to a savings account to put a deposit on her own place. That had gone, instead, towards books for school when her youngest sister had been diagnosed with leukemia and money got tighter.

Her grandparents often said she was more like her father than her mother. At first, she thought it to be because they were both artists. But as years went on, as life went on, she began to see it was his adaptability they were seeing. And while she liked having that connection with him, it often annoyed her when the rest of the family just took it in stride.

So, when she started turning down invites to various family get togethers and gave little to no reason why, everyone assumed it was just a time when she was needed to work or needed more time to devote to her schooling.

Diya didn't know how to tell them it was because she was avoiding them.

It was her first day off in almost two months. The exhibit she'd curated had been a success, going through an extension into another week and gaining a spotlight from a vlogger who recommended it. It had taken almost a day and a half to clean up after that and return the gallery to its usual setting. Mr. Lee never liked to have an exhibit run for a month; three weeks and five days had been the longest she'd seen in five years and that was only because of a contract one of the donors demanded before giving his wood carvings over.

But it was done and Mr. Lee decided to give her a day off in congratulations. He was meeting with someone about a property he was looking to buy, using the lazy day at the gallery as a chance to walk them through and show what his plans were for the new space.

Diya honestly had stopped listening after he said 'day off.' She'd been ready to throw on some sweats and veg out that instant. A day without needing to check her emails or field phone calls or go on excursions to new artist's studios was like a vacation in and of itself.

And now...

Diya threw open all the windows in the work/living room. The place didn't need airing out but the
urge wouldn't be silenced until she did so. It was left over from the cleaning sprees of her childhood, mother insisting to let in fresh air to help settle the harsh scents of the cleaning products. Despite getting home close to midnight, she'd stayed up long enough to get the bulk of cleaning done. This morning she'd straightened things up, cleared away the clutter on her counters, and made sure it would have passed her mother's standards.

The thought took the shine out of her day for a moment. Her mother was the only one who didn't buy the minimal excuses Diya had been giving the last few days. Shrewd in ways that had haunted Diya's teenage years, Summer Torres-Davis was more than capable of juggling all six of her children's various lives while maintaining room to pick out the anomalies. Probably due to how poorly Diya's older brother's abrupt engagement had been handled, her mother was giving her time to handle it in her own way.

Diya puttered over to her coffee maker. She needed the caffeine, being awake at six after a late night like she was. She shifted, hands tugging at her shirt as she waited. Every little noise had her turning to look out the windows. And she'd turn back, watching the machine percolate, and try to wrap her head around it all.

What exactly should she call this? Well, that wasn't fair. She knew exactly what to call this situation.

It was her day off and she was waiting for her boyfriend to show up so they could spend the day together. The thought had her smiling, feeling like an idiot while relishing in it all the same.

Her earlier thoughts came back. Adaptable. Maybe her picture should be beside it in the dictionary. Because not everyone would have responded the same way.

And the smile became a frown. That was the whole reason for her stalling and excuses. Usually, the boyfriend would be mentioned, she'd field the questions from all manners of family members, and a chance for the family to meet him would be discussed even if it wasn't for another few months. It was a cycle she'd gone through several times.

Now she wouldn't.

The coffee came together without her paying much attention to it. She leaned back on her counter, sipping it while fighting that annoyed feeling. She thought about it, at length and for days leading up to the exhibit because even she knew a grand gesture as it was coming together before her, and kept coming to the same conclusions.

There was more to Mikey than what she knew. Painfully obvious, she thought, smirking into her coffee. She certainly had questions that had yet to come up. Not the least of which was a resounding 'HOW???'

The 'what' was answered on sight. Turtle; okay, she got that within seconds of seeing him, that shell was kind of hard to miss. Mutant; that was something he said, thrown out so casually it had almost felt like a test to see how she would react. The particulars...

Diya sighed, rippling the surface of the coffee. Maybe being so adaptable wasn't such a good thing. She just wasn't burdened with the want to know all the little details like others would be. One look at Mikey and she knew which member of her immediate family would break out the swabs and vials while asking embarrassingly personal questions. And that was only if the others didn't respond in more...negative ways.

On the one hand, Diya didn't care. She didn't need to know how exactly Mikey came to be. It didn't
have any bearing on how he made her feel. How her day got a little better when he'd text or send a
flirty selfie or visit her during her breaks or---

Or any of the dozens of little things he did that made Diya's heart beat a little faster and her chest
feel a little tighter because, darn it, he made her feel wanted. Appreciated. And even loved.

She wasn't blind to the fact that there was more to Mikey. But for now, she just wanted Mikey in
any way he'd have her. So maybe a stray thought got cut off before she could get curious. Maybe
she noticed---for obvious reasons---how he stayed out of public view and made sure to
accommodate it without asking why. And maybe when he made an abrupt change of subject, like
he said something he shouldn't have and blushed something furious like it would upset her, she just
followed along and ignored it.

Looking up, she saw Mikey ease his way through the window, freezing comically like he was
catched in the act of trespassing. Seeing his grin, Diya felt a notion take firm root in her heart.

She'd do anything to keep that grin from falling. And if that meant her family was kept in the dark
then so be it.

---

Usually anyone who could boast nearly 30 different job titles wouldn't care if another was added to
the list. But Amaya was loath to add spy to it. Or smuggler. Or even therapist.

That last one, though, tugged all the more at her brain every day. And today it was particularly
strong.

It was a 'work from home' kind of day. A day where she coordinated any of the random little jobs
she could do on the computer and be done by noon in case anything came up at the last minute.
Either she was particularly focused or the jobs were getting easier because she was done before
eleven. So, she decided to treat herself and relax on the back porch.

As relaxed as she could get, though. Her phone remained at her side, notifications sent to four
separate locations that she was available if someone called in for the afternoon. Otherwise, she
read through the latest selection of short stories that Professor Prejean was considering for her
upper level classes this term.

All the while, two carefully sealed boxes waited beside her.

They learned the hard way that cardboard didn't travel well in the sewers. Amaya had picked up
these sturdy plastic ones that would handle multiple uses along with accurate application of duct
tape. She was still on the lookout for another solution but for now, this was the best way for one of
the Turtles to make a pick up.

The thought wormed in her head, so insistent that she actually lowered the thin book in her hand
and glared over at the manhole visible from her place. Almost three months had passed since
starting this bizarre arrangement. Three months involving steps out of her comfort zone to degrees
that still gave her palpitations. Three months since she gained the strangest assortment of friends.

And yet she had never been to the lair.

It had taken a bit to get used to that word. Lair. It still made her think of dragons and hoarded
treasures. The guys used other words to describe their home/hideaway/base of operations. Yet 'lair'
was the one most common.
Again, it was a stray thought. And one she had honestly considered more in depth over the past few days at length. Sitting on her porch, waiting for a pick up, it just became all the more obvious. She could have easily brought this load to the lair herself. It would have freed up the guys' time. No need to make such a long detour on their way back from whatever they did during the day.

Amaya considered that. She knew they patrolled at night. What the heck could they be doing during the day---

Her senses tingled and she set the book aside without a second thought. She also ignored the funny way her gut lurch. She gave herself the usual mantra of they aren't as quiet as they think I'm just hearing them nothing more nothing exotic to keep it at bay. Moments later, Raphael dropped down from her roof.

The red-banded Turtle ignored the boxes. Instead, he hooked a foot on another of the lawn chairs and pulled it closer. He didn't so much sit on it as sprawl his huge form across the metal and canvas like he was staking a claim.

Amaya smiled, tossing him a water bottle from the table on her other side. "That's usually a pose better suited for the end of the day."

"It's the end of my day," Raph snorted. He cracked open the bottle and finished it in one pull. Accepting a fresh one, he only finished half of it before he went on, "Leo wanted me at some meeting with Casey and Vincent. There's been more screw-ups that usual, lately. Wanted to make sure it wasn't something worse than dropping the ball."

She frowned at that. They'd spoken of the task force on and off, never in depth but usually in frustration. From what she gathered, it was 'dropping the ball' that had led to Donnie's injury and the panicked call April made that brought her into their life. "How're they fixing that?"

Raph shrugged. "Vincent stuck by her people and their info. Cas' summed it up best: if the info's legit, then how they're delivering it is what's screwing everything up."

"How's it effect you guys?" she asked. She shifted in the chair, pulling her legs up and facing Raph.

Green-gold eyes glared over at her without any real heat. "Logistics aren't my bag," he said. "Ask Fearless if you wanna know---"

"I'll ask Leo if I want a debate on division of labor based off political influence," she cut in easily, smirking at the way his eyes narrowed at that. "And I'll ask Don if I want a lecture on proper blanketing technique for crime evaluation. Trust me, already made that mistake," she added. Seeing him still hesitate, she nudged his leg with a foot. "I'm asking you because I know you're going to be honest. As well as tell me exactly how much it screws you guys up."

Raph rolled his eyes. But instead of dodging it, he took a second to think it over before saying, "The task force is still kinda new. It came around after all that mess with Kraang. Wasn't real solid for a while, though. More like an idea? Leo and Vincent were going back and forth about it. Argued about what exactly we would be."

Amaya made a face. "Were they wanting to make you officers or something?"

"Close to it. Think Donnie used the phrase 'beholden to the city.' Whatever. Anyway, a few Foot attacks, a botched invasion from an alien race, and a handful of other just plain weird incidents later? Vincent learned the hard way that there are some things that the police just can't handle. And it was more than working outside the law. There are some things we just do better."
Raph considered the water bottle in his hand. In a blink it was air born. A flash of metal from Amaya's only clue as to what happened. The bottle was now pinned against one of the porch's posts, impaled on a sai just above the water level. The bottle cap rested in Raph's hand. He tossed it into the air with schooled indifference. Squinting, Amaya noticed that not a drop of water had been spilled during the display.

She gave him a pointed look. "Did you have to damage the house?"

He ignored that. "So lately, Vincent's team gets info on things that may be out of their league and we investigate. Otherwise, we just try to keep the city safe."

"I guess they're having issues on deciding what's out of their league? Can't imagine that's an easy pill to swallow."

"Humans are stubborn," he said, teeth flashing in a smirk.

"So are certain mutated amphibians I know." Amaya smirked back, just a touch of glee evident in her tone. "Did you finally call Ellen back?"

It was always strange when one of the Turtles blushed. Each was different than his brothers. And Raph blushing was endearing bordering on saccharine. The greens of his skin darkened while the yellows took on a mottled look and the flush went clear down to his plastron. Had he been human, Amaya was certain he would be the same color as his bandana.

The phrase 'fry an egg on his forehead' was still applicable. And she inwardly cackled when he awkwardly got up to retrieve his sai instead of meeting her knowing gaze.

He hesitated, fiddling with the weapon while ignoring the water bottle splashing to the ground. Then he blurted, "She knows I'll be shadowing you if you're carrying her gear. I'll be there. She don't need to hear it again from me."

"Raphael, my dear, misguided son," Amaya sighed, thoroughly enjoying this, "never keep a lady waiting after she extends an invitation."

Raph paused, considering her words. A smile tugged at his mouth. "Lady, huh? Yeah...yeah she is."

Amaya stared at him. Then she quickly looked away, trying to cover the ear-to-ear grin that hit her without warning. Dear lord, this was too cute. Too friggin' cute.

The silence ticked on for a while. When she glanced back, Raph's expression had darkened into a pensive frown. And he was looking at her.

Amaya raised a brow in silent question.

"Do...You haven't said anything. Have you?" he asked.

"No," she said simply. "For one, it hasn't come up in conversation. Even if it did?" She shrugged. "Not really their business, is it?"

Raph snorted. He looked antsy, like the answer wasn't quite what he wanted. "Leo's not dumb," he said at last. "You can't say he's completely in the dark. Especially since sensei knows about it. Well, some of it," he amended, rubbing at his neck. Another considering frown.

Amaya sat up, sensing that there was something else. Something he struggled to voice. She had a
feeling she knew. But on the off chance she was wrong?

She didn't want to be the one to ruin Mikey's secret.

She lifted a hand and made a gesture between them. "What exactly to you think would happen should it come out? Best case scenario? Worst case?"

"Worst case?" Raph snorted. "Worst case isn't worth thinking about."

"Humor me," she insisted.

"It's not nice," he said shortly. And again, she sensed there was something he wasn't saying.

Deciding there was one secret that wouldn't be as earth-shattering, she opted to go with that. "Leo told me a little about Kevin, the deliver guy," she said at length. "About how it got out he was involved with you guys? And...well, he didn't go into details but he made it very clear that very bad things happened to the guy. I'm guessing worst case would be that?"

"That and more," Raph huffed after a moment. "Don't even want to imagine what would happen if it got around that---" He broke off, once again fiddling with the sai.

"And how does that not affect April? Or does it affect her and I'm just blind?"

A snort of laughter. "April gets herself into situations more than anything. Always chasing a story..." He shook off that thought and went on. "But she's learned a lot. Knows what to look for. She can keep herself safe. Doesn't hurt that, for the most part, Shredder and the Foot just gave up on using her as a bargaining tool. Not worth the trouble she causes them."

Raph's face darkened again. "But she's just a friend. If they ever learn one of us had something---had someone closer than that?"

Amaya shivered, pushing away the images the question brought up.

Raph caught the reaction and nodded. "I may think Leo's overbearing, too strict, a bit of an asshat, and way too caught up in his own head. But I'm never gonna deny that the precautions are there for a reason. You lucked out, girlie. You're so far removed from people there's little chance anyone would ever find out you know us."

She smiled at that. Another person probably wouldn't have taken pleasure in such a statement but she did. It meant she didn't raise an alarm. It meant she could keep on with her life.

Raph opened his mouth, stopped, hesitated, then looked out over the yard. Stalling, Amaya saw. So, she waited, wondering what was causing him to look so serious.

Just about the time she considered picking her book back up, the quiet was broken by three words. "Mikey knows better."

Raph still stared out over the yard, looking older somehow. "He knows all of this," Raph went on, "and he still hasn't said anything."

Well, that cat was out of the bag. Amaya stood and went to stand beside Raph. The neighborhood was quiet, likely deserted due to it being the middle of a weekday. But that didn't stop her from wanting to keep her voice down. "Do you think he should?"

"At least to Donnie," Raph said, partly a growl. "That way he can make sure nothing fishy's going
on. Hell, I already had him fix my shell-cell to encrypt anything going between it and Ellen's phone."

He hung his head, frustration evident. "I get it. I get that he wants to keep it to himself for a while longer. Just wants to be able to enjoy it. And I want that for the guy. Shit, he deserves it. But that doesn't mean her own safety should just be ignored."

"Why don't you talk to him?" Amaya suggested. "For one, if you mention Ellen---"

"It ain't the same---" he started, flush creeping back up his neck.

"---if you mention you're in a similar situation with the potential to get to a different level," she spoke over him doggedly, "then he'll hear it as a brother talking to him out of concern and a familiar head space. Not as a brother giving him orders."

Raph looked at her sideways. "I don't give orders."

"And Leo needs to cut a bit of slack in that department," she said, crossing her arms and glaring over at the man hole. "Guy acts like he's channeling Sun Tzu's ghost and constantly trying to one-up it."

Raph chuckled. "Only you could get away with telling him that."

"I highly doubt so," she returned.

Another side-long look. "No, you could," he said, almost softly. He waved aside her questioning frown. Stepping around her, he hefted both boxes onto his shoulder. "Better head on before I get missed," he said.

"Don't forget to call her," Amaya said to his retreating back. "At least text!"

Whether he heard her or not she didn't catch. She just headed inside to get something to repair the hole in the post. All the while shaking her head at playing therapist to a mutant turtle.

---

Returning to work felt a little off. Not the least because Diya hadn't wanted the day to end. It had been beyond enjoyable to just sit around all day, flipping between crappy Netflix shows and talking for hours on end.

Most of the day, Mikey had been there. He had to leave for a bit in the afternoon, promising to return with take-out. And it had been the best Chinese she'd ever had. She then spent close to an hour trying to wheedle the location out of him. It devolved into a make-out session that further devolved into a tickle fight, of all things.

She couldn't remember smiling so much. Or how nice it had been to finally just TALK with Mikey. No need to use phones. No time limit for her lunch break. No reason to hide in out of the way places. So, yes, she might have loathed to return to work because it was---well, work. But also because it had cut into their time together.

Diya flicked the lights on in the gallery, scanning the walls to make sure everything was okay. Not even a spotlight was out of place. Tim, the intern working with her that day, sent a message that he was picking up coffee and bagels. She went about getting the place ready before checking her voicemail and emails. Nothing too urgent, she found.
While it might be another work day, it seemed like it would be an easy one. She was composing an email when Tim came in. He wisely handed her the venti caramel latte before even dropping his stuff. She made grabby-hands at the bag of bagels while sipping her drink.

"Warn me next time you take any time off," Tim said, pulling a face as he took a seat at his station beside her.

Diya winced. "Was he that bad?"

"Everything that came out of his mouth either dripped with disappointment or lamented your absence," he said, flicking a cowlick out of his eyes.

Despite how well-maintained his style was, that lock of hair always drifted to curl around his brow. A tall, thin guy, Tim easily fit into the hectic yet polished energy of the gallery. Despite his grumbling, Diya knew he'd sooner bite off his own arm than leave.

As if reading her thoughts, Tim's freckled face smoothed into a smile. He offered the bag to her and asked, "So, how was your day? Sleep the whole time?"

Diya rolled her eyes. Picking out the whole wheat bagel, she split it with Tim while they discussed the various shows she sampled. Tim started his speech on how streaming media was affecting the whole as a whole, brandishing a spoon smeared with chive cream cheese as he did so. She smiled, listening but not taking in a single word of it.

He stopped, brow quirking. "Oh, I know that look," he said, grinning devishly. "You weren't just partaking of crappy shows on your own, were you?"

Her cheeks flushed even as she tried to cover it by hastily saying they needed to start the day. Tim chuckled but left it alone. He trotted after her, still smug about having caught that.

Diya allowed him to relish in it. Honestly, it was part of the reasoning for avoiding her family. She just couldn't contain herself when she was happy. They would see it the same as Tim and demand to know why.

Nervous without needing to be, she found herself tugging at the mask wrapped around her wrist. She had taken to wearing it every day. It was fun to find new ways to arrange it into her wardrobe. Wrapped around her hair like a head band or used to tie it back, coiled around her neck like an ascot, or simply twisted and wrapped around her wrist like a braided bracelet: she strived to never repeat the same style two days in a row.

She also couldn't deny the way Mikey lit up when he saw it. Such a simple thing but it made him so happy.

Diya sighed, yet another question she didn't pursue. But ever since opening night of the exhibit, she'd worn it faithfully.

The gallery usually opened around 9AM every morning. That changed depending on the schedules; usually with an exhibit there were more limited hours. Even so, the start of the day never saw much traffic. Usually the only people Diya would see was deliverymen, someone coming for a meeting with Mr. Lee, or people who wandered in to kill time. Traffic didn't pick up until closer to the lunch hour.

The sound of several pairs of feet jarred the quiet morning air. Diya, hidden away in the back catching up from her day off, looked over at the clock in surprise. 9:45AM. That was---
Tim's voice sounded, muffled with distance but also surprised at whatever was going on. Then there was a sharp shout. Alarmed, Diya hurried out of the office to see what was going on. She crossed into the gallery proper only to draw back in shock as a large figure stood in her path.

He was dressed in dark clothing, a red symbol stamped at his shoulder and over the left side of his chest. Gear strapped across his broad frame brought to mind one thing: tactical armor. He swung around upon hearing her approach. He wore a black hood that covered his whole head and a matching gas mask.

A thrill of cold hit Diya when she looked down and saw the automatic weapon he held pressed to her gut.

Chapter End Notes

I fully expect a few of you to hate me right now. Hang tight: ride's just beginning.
When the Foot strike far too close, Mikey's forced to admit what's been going on to the others.
And it forces his brothers to acknowledge that their lives are changing.

It was always worth it when a plan came together.

It was just that….well, fuck if Raph actually had a plan.

Even as he grumbled that to himself, landing blow after blow into the punching bag in the very back of the weight room, the sense of a plan forming was undeniable. More like a feeling? Just… fuck.

In the weeks since that first meeting in the park, not a day passed where he didn’t talk to Ellen.
Sure, usually, it was a quick text or even a meme---that girl could find the most obscure but friggin’ hilarious memes. Or they spoke when he shadowed Amaya during a run to a concert. Little things. Things that probably didn’t even register on her radar.

The next punch landed so hard the metal hook above creaked in protest. Growling, Raph hopped back and made a few sharp jabs into the air until he started to cool down. That had the side effect of letting his thoughts run wild.

What the hell could he expect to happen? Just what was he wanting to get out of this?

Even without answers, he kept going back to Amaya’s smirking words: …the potential to get to a different level.

“Fuck!”

“Whoa! What happened this time?”

Raph jerked around, more startled by how close April was than her actual presence. Shit, he’d been so caught up in his head he missed it.

She looked like she just came from her own work out. Sweat still streaked her skin, hair loose from the pony-tail stuck to her neck and cheeks. Maybe she ran the sewers; she did that, sometimes, given there were a fair number perfectly fit for her skill-level. The hoodie thrown over her tight-fitting gear was definitely Casey’s, given how huge it was on her. She grinned at his bewilderment, tossing him a water bottle. He caught it easily.

“A little lost, big guy?” she asked, leaning against a stand of dumb-bells.

“Frustrated,” he ground out. He looked down at the water bottle and found it was just a further reminder of the conversation he was trying not to think about.
April paused, no doubt catching just how strange he was reacting.

“What brings you down here?” Raph asked hurriedly.

She frowned at the blatant change of topic but just shook her head. “Don said he was getting some readings from---he called them ‘tadpoles’?”

Those weird sensors he’d had them install around the city. The tiny grey and black blocks never seemed like much. And Raph had honestly forget about them until just now. “What kind of readings?”

“Just that something is going down. He’s not sure what but he wanted me here in case whatever it is---”

A sudden burst of noise from the Lair cut her off. They looked at one another, sharing the same thought: *perfect timing.*

Donnie was front and center in the middle of the noise. No surprise there. But as Raph hurried to the HUB, he was puzzled to see just how many screens were alight with information and video feeds. Had those tiny things carried a camera?

“We got trouble brewing!” Donnie called over the ruckus his machines were making. There was little need for him to as Leo was already standing behind him by the time Raph and April got there. This time of day, Mikey was boarding through the sewers. He’d get the alert on his shell-cell and head back but who knew when that would be.

“What kinda trouble?” Raph hollered above the noise. He was still twitchy from the interrupted workout and the needless thoughts that hovered at the edge of his mind. He needed this to end in a fight.

“A good, old fashion Foot attack,” Donnie said, throwing a drawl into his voice. “A sneaky one. But police are already aware and starting to mobilize. Rumor is they have civilians.”

“Where are they, Don?” Leo asked.

Donnie's fingers flew over the keys. Screens flickered with information, video captures, and so many other things Raph just couldn't keep up. They all watched him work, ready to get going, all ready to remind the Foot just why they should leave the city alone.

The main screen became a blueprint of a city block. Multiple camera feeds showed it in real-time, no doubt hacked from others buildings around it in addition to the ‘tadpole’ things. "They're in a populated area," Donnie reported, still pulling up info as he spoke. "Change from the usual, not seeking an easier place to camp out."

"What kind of collateral are we looking at?"

"Depends on what they're planning," the tech responded, almost before the question was out. "If all they have is firearms, then minimal. If someone decided to spice things up with a claymore? We're looking at some serious problems."

"No demands?"

"None that have been reported. Only that they were spotted by a postal worker entering the building. Cops tried the door but it's locked. No answer from phone lines."
"They weren't alarmed by the cops?"

"Approached in street clothes," Donnie said, bringing up the footage. Sure enough, a woman casually approached the building, looked in the window as though she was interested, and tried the door before going on her way. No glaring signs that said she was a cop.

Raph squinted at the screens. The building was large but not the biggest on the street. It wasn't a store or restaurant so there was little chance of it being a robbery. Kinda bland, he thought. What sort of place was it? It was in an area with shops and stuff. So why this building? What was so special about it that the Foot decided to pounce?

Leo seemed to share the thought. "What do we know about the place?"

"A World Beyond: Art Gallery, owned by a Charles Lee for the last eight years," Donnie recited, no doubt having pulled the deed to the place. Hell, he probably had their tax returns at the ready. "Just a run of the mill art gallery, looks like. Nothing that suggests it's a front or covering any sort of illegal activity. A handful of employees, nothing very major---"

Raph stopped listening. At the owner’s name, April drew in a sharp breath and grabbed his arm. He turned to see her staring up at the screens, pale with shock. A flash from one caught his eye and stopped him from questioning her reaction.

A list appeared on the main screen, names with the date of hire neatly printed beside them. One near the top sent a wave of ice down his spine.

Diya Davis.

A soft sound drew him around. Mikey stood there, hover board still in a hand and dripping from the sewers. His eyes were wide, peeled back in horror, as he took in the situation.

At his side, April breathed out a low curse. Raph opened his mouth, tried to come up with something to say.

Leo beat him to it. "Mikey?" he said slowly. "You know something about this?"

---

April had to hold herself back from saying anything. It was hard with the way Leo looked.

He knew. Whether he had noticed the signs and only just now put them together or he was going off on instinct, Leo knew. April wanted to stop it, hit the pause button, just do SOMETHING to keep back the explosion that was sure to happen.

Because Mikey was so torn up it physically caused her pain. He looked like he might be sick.

"Leo," Raph started, taking a step toward Mikey; like he was trying to cover him.

Leo lifted a hand without looking away from the youngest. Raph obeyed though his whole body crackled with tension.

With a great effort, Mikey met Leo's gaze. He swallowed thickly, cleared his throat, then said, "I--- I know the place. I know someone who works there."

The want to jump in with the excuse of it being the place that buys his art hit April. But like Raph, she held it back at the blank cold that settled over Leo.
He held Mikey's stare, blue hitting blue with a thousand words in between. A hard edge came over him as he said shortly, "Have you received any messages? Any type of ransom or demands?"

Mikey shook his head.

Leo nodded and turned back to Donnie. As soon as he did, Mikey deflated, rocking back as though the dismissal had been a blow.

Raph moved first, reaching out and placing a firm hand on Mikey's shoulder. He didn't say anything. He didn't need to. April had seen more than one silent conversation between the brothers. She pushed back her own worry for the moment, needing to concentrate on the situation.

"Nothing from the news stations," Donnie said, glancing at April to confirm.

She checked her phone but nothing new had been sent from Channel 6. She sent a quick message to have someone call her if that changed and that she might have a lead on the present situation. Then another to Casey that something was happening. Just in case the worse---

April clenched her teeth and forced herself not to finish that thought.

Donnie went back to his feed. "We're operating blind on this, Leo. They haven't tried to contact anyone and there's been no sign of anyone else getting inside since it started. We got no idea what this is about."

"Yes, we do," Leo said, eyes cutting back to Mikey.

Donnie mulled that over, making a few indecipherable noises as he did. Then, "All right, hostage situation it is. How do you wanna handle this?"

"Since they haven't contacted us, we should assume something's going on inside," Leo said. "We need to get there and take care of it: get the hostages out and get any new info we can."

"New info?" April repeated.

"We need to determine why they hit this place at this time. And to make sure it doesn't happen again. Raph," he said, motioning to his brother, "make sure the Shell-Raiser's good to go. Donnie, call Amaya. Have her ready as well. She'll be waiting to take the hostages out of the way as soon as they're free. Her ride's discreet enough, she shouldn't be followed. You'll run the Shell-Raiser and do recon but no action unless necessary."

Donnie nodded, already making the call. No comment about still being benched.

Raph remained where he was. He glared when Leo raised an eye ridge in question.

Mikey stepped aside, letting Raph's hand fall. "'S okay, dude," he said, not quite meeting Raph's surprised face. "Go on."

Raph scowled, obviously wanting to protest. He started when April touched his arm.

"Come on," she said, tugging him after her.

"Hey, I---" he started.

"Come on," she said again, tugging harder.

Only the small nod he got from Mikey had him moving his feet. He gave Leo one last look, one
last warning, before turning away.

---

Mikey's heart pounded in his chest. Felt too tight. Too wrong.

So many things.

Diya in trouble. A hostage? Foot was involved. What happened? They were going to get her out. What happened?

Leo shifted and all of Mikey's thoughts ground to a halt under one word: shit.

Not how he wanted this to get out. Not how he wanted to have this conversation. He'd be lying if he said he'd imagined it a certain way at all. Hell, he'd been trying not to think about bringing this up. Tried to keep it under wraps.

Look where that got him.

When he finally registered Leo's expression, he was taken aback to see concern there. No anger, no condescension, no 'this is what you get' look. Just...concerned.

"What's going on, Mikey?" Leo asked, voice so quiet it was almost lost in the noise of the Lair.

Mikey swallowed, heart still pounding. "I---it...I met someone."

Leo nodded; no irritation, no urging him to get to the point. It was easy to forget how patient he could get. Easy to forget out of all of them, Leo could outlast anyone's stubbornness. To forget anything but the rules, the caution, and authority that was his due as leader.

Easy to forget this was his brother.

A little of the tight feeling in Mikey's chest loosened. Not a lot. Just enough that the words started pouring out. Taking the business card from April. Reaching out. The dumb conversations. Meeting her. Falling for her.

On and on until a touch to his shoulder stopped him cold. Only then did he realize he was on the verge of shouting. Hands shaking, it seemed he'd caught up with what was going on. How they were standing there talking and Diya was---Diya was---

A shake grounded him. Leo watched, not a tick of anything other than concern from his gaze to the hand on Mikey's shoulder. Sense returned and Leo took a breath. "We're getting her out," he said, conviction strong in the words. "I swear, Mikey: we are getting her out. Hear me?"

Mikey nodded. He had to pull on all the things sensei had taught him about calming himself. It hardly worked but the crazed frenzy lessened.

Leo started for the stairs, heading for the garage. Donnie hopped up a moment later, intent on the readings his equipment spat out.

"I'm sorry."

Both stopped, turning as Mikey hurried to them. "I'm---I should have said something sooner," he said, hating the fact that he had to say it at all. God, he was so dumb. So damn stupid. "If I had, she wouldn't---we could---"
"Later, Mike," Leo said, cutting into whatever else his frantic brain was coming up with. "We need to move."

Donnie nodded, silent but no less intent. Mikey followed after them into the garage. The Shell-Raiser was rumbling and Raph paced the concrete beside it. At their approach, he fixed Mikey with an intense stare.

Mikey waved it off, trying to assure him without words that he was good, that Leo hadn't done anything. He wasn't sure the message came across. Raph was keyed up, more than usual. Was it the situation itself? Or was it Mikey's fault?

He piled into the Shell-Raiser with the others and tried not to let that thought consume him.

---

Diya never believed she would fear for her life.

There had been low points. Times when she wasn't sure there would ever be an 'up' from the world she sunk into. Moments where the fragility of everything fell over her like snow, all-encompassing and suffocating.

But never had she feared she would die by another's hand. Nor that it would be a conscious choice.

The soldiers---they had to be soldiers of some kind, too organized and the gear was a uniform, anyone could see that---had gathered her and Tim into the back office. Phone lines were ripped out, the computers suffered the same fate, and one pawed through their clothes until he found each of their cell phones. Both were thrown to the ground and stomped into so many plastic pieces.

Diya held herself back, out of the way as the soldiers made themselves at home. She hovered over Tim, who struggled to stay focused. A nasty blow to the head sent him reeling, a gash bleeding down his neck and staining his shirt and jacket. He blinked too often for Diya's comfort though he responded to her voice and touch.

No one spoke to them. Even when manhandling her into the back, none of the soldiers spoke a single word. They moved so smoothly, each finding a task and following through to completion, that she was convinced this wasn't the first time they had done this.

That kept her mouth closed, biting down on the things she wanted to scream at them. A cool feeling in her gut told her that they would talk to her when they were good and ready. Anything sooner?

Diya pushed the thought away, shuddering at the cloying, sick feeling that remained.

There were six different soldiers, from her count. While all were large and equally covered from head to foot, little things told each apart. Heights, different widths of shoulders or hips, one guy was left-handed by how he held his rifle. Nothing else to gleam why they were here.

Diya spent the last few hours or so trying to figure that part out. They never kept money on the premises. If they were after the art, there was plenty here in the office to take. But they were just...

Waiting. They were waiting.

Tim sat propped up against the wall. He held her hand, both shaking, and squeezed back in a reassuring way when she did. An easy and quiet signal that he was still with her. His eyes, glazed with pain, tracked the single soldier that was guarding them. Standing at the door way, he easily
blocked it with his body alone.

If Tim thought they could take a run at the guy, he had been knocked harder than she thought. Diya bore down hard on his hand, shaking her head and keeping her eyes wide in silent reprimand.

Tim grimaced and nodded in response. He shifted, trying to get his feet under him.

The guard's head turned back to fix a warning stare at them. How had he heard that?

Another grimace turned into a wince when Tim settled back against the wall. He went still. Too long for Diya's comfort. A heart stopping moment later, sense blinked back into his brown eyes.

"Stay with me," she whispered. She felt her throat grow tight and her eyes burned. But she'd be damned if she started crying now.

"I'm good," Tim said. And if his words slurred a little, he didn't linger on it.

Diya looked all around the room again, though she knew the contents by heart. Nothing they could use as a weapon. Anything remotely dangerous had been thrown to the far end while they were kept closer to the door. And of course she had picked today to wear flats. Now she wished she would've gone for the stilettos.

Shivering without cold, Diya huddled closer to Tim. She tried not to focus on how his head dipped lower and how his grip loosened a little. She just tightened her own grip and stared at the clock on the far wall.

Another hour or so before noon. Usually by now, she'd have gotten calls and messages from all sorts of people. Mr. Lee would have called to check on things and give her a list of chores because she had been off. Surely by now someone should have noticed that something wasn't right.

Instead of voicing any of this, she hunkered down, watched the guard, and prayed for something to happen.

---

Mikey never anticipated a fight. He wasn't like Raph, looking to give into the adrenaline. And he didn't care for strategy and clever techniques like Leo. Donnie saw any sort of fighting as an obstacle between them and their goal. Any goal.

Right now, he certainly felt like that. But on a deeper, sharper level.

Donnie parked the Shell-Raiser two blocks away from the gallery. The whole way over, Mikey went over everything he'd done the last few weeks---months, even. He tried to think of a time when he had let his guard down, when he'd let a tail follow him, if he'd been a second too late in getting out of sight.

Anything to tell him how much he had screwed up.

The familiar sight of the gallery's neighborhood spurred him on. She was so close, now. If he could just get inside, get a bead on what was going on---

A hand caught him around the bicep, keeping him from going any further. Mikey spun around, angered far more than he was aware. He snarled, reaching for the nun chuk on his hip---

Raph looked down at him. Mikey's response had taken him aback, clearly not what he expected.
But his grip remained.

Shame pulled back on the anger with a whip like speed. Mikey ground his teeth together, gaze dropping to the ground. He didn't say anything. Then again, neither did Raph.

A lot of that happening.

The building was across the street and one block over from the gallery. Standing several stories taller, it held a clear view of the street as well as the gallery itself. Everything appeared normal, like it was any other day. Whatever this was, it was being done covertly.

Mikey tried to take some comfort in that. It didn't work. Nothing would until he knew Diya was safe.

Donnie crouched on the roof's edge, equipment a whirl of lights and soft noises. He muttered to himself yet otherwise did not seem to be in distress by the information. Leo stood a little way back, giving him room while also studying the area.

"No news?" Raph asked quietly.

Mikey quickly checked his shell-cell. Nothing, not even a response from the frantic text he had sent. Not that he had much hope she would be able to keep her phone on her. He shook his head.

Raph cursed under his breath. He stayed at Mikey's side; a notable difference from his usual pacing. He caught Mikey's questioning frown. He rolled his shoulders, copying Leo and studying the street below. After a moment, he said, "Wish I coulda met her under different circumstances."

Mikey's mouth twitched and he let out a single, mirthless chuckle. He thumbed at his nun chuck, nerves racking up.

Raph shifted. A furrow formed between his eye ridges. "You haven't told her about us. Have you?"

A slow shake of the head.

Another curse. "Definitely not how I imagined this," he muttered.

A stray thought came to Mikey, a retort about the one who's been making Raph grin like an idiot. Just like him. But it died at an increase in activity from Donnie.

"Picking up a call from inside," he said, fingers flying over the equipment on his left forearm. A hologram appeared on that side, a narrowing search of the cell towers in the area. A few finger strokes later and a voice spoke riddled with static.

"...up...Status...12 minutes..."

Donnie fiddled with the settings but couldn't get anything clearer. He switched to something else, the audio muted. A grid layout appeared with a red dot blinking near the far edge. "Call is going to a vehicle that is in route to this area."

"Extraction?" Leo asked.

"Seems like," Donnie agreed. "Unless the path changes, it will be here within 10 minutes. Maybe less."

Leo turned again to the street. It wasn't long before he went back to his brothers. After all, he'd had the whole drive here to start planning. Now, it was just the finishing touches. "Okay. We'll have to
do our own extraction, then. In and out with as little contact as possible."

The last was directed towards Mikey. He felt a flare of irritation, some part of him wanting to tear into the people that dared do this to Diya. But it was overthrown by the rest of him that just wanted her safe.

"Entry?"

The question was aimed at Donnie. Mikey, though, found himself saying, "Back offices have no windows, only one exit that way. But there's a stairwell that connects up to the second floor where the studios are."

All three blinked at him, surprised by this. Yet Leo motioned for him to continue.

"That may be the best way," he went on, trying not to fumble. *Do not screw this up, do not make this worse.* "The studios only have a key lock, not much else in security. Stairwell ends right outside the offices."

Leo considered it. He nodded. "What's Amaya's status?"

"She's a block over, engine running and tank full," Donnie reported. A camera feed popped up over his shoulder showing exactly that. April was in the passenger seat, both alert and ready.

"When we signal, have her run to the connecting alley," Leo said, Donnie relaying everything via text. "We'll try to funnel through the back exit and to her. How many inside?"

"Only two scheduled to work Mondays," Mikey supplied. "Just---just Diya and an intern. Tim, I think."

"I'm getting eight different heat signatures," Donnie reported.

Another nod. "We keep this quiet. Two go in. Two stay as backup and recon. At the signal, backup goes for the Shell-Raiser. Agreed?"

They all nodded. Raph clapped his hands together, eagerness etched in every line of him.

Leo gave him a quelling glance. A moment of hesitation, just long enough that Mikey realized what he was about to say.

"No, I'm going in!" Mikey blurted.

"You're on back up with Donnie," Leo said coolly.

"I know the place," he protested. "I can run it blindfolded!"

"And right now, you're running too hot."

"You can't keep me from getting her out of there!"

"I'm trying to keep you from doing something reckless."

"Like you wouldn't do the same thing if it was---"

"Mikey," Raph barked, once again halting him with a hand to his arm.

Leo's eyes narrowed yet he did not move. It was only then that Mikey realized how close they
were. So close, a single step and he'd be in Leo's face. He would be if Raph hadn't stopped him. And his *nun chuck* were in hand.

A shiver ran through him. *When did...*

"I made you a promise, Mikey," Leo said, calm even when facing this unexpected behavior from him. "Can you trust me that I will see it through?" He watched his youngest brother, no sign of what he thought of the raw pain on blatant display.

It was an effort but Mikey nodded. They were wasting time. *He* was wasting time. "Go," he said shortly.

Neither Leo nor Raph waited. Within a breath, they were gone.

Alone on the rooftop with Donnie, Mikey felt cold spread through him. He wanted to be down there. He needed to be down there. But maybe Leo was right. Maybe he was too into this.

Wasn't it like he told April? It's different when it's someone you know?

Any of the times April had been in danger, he'd been worried. Concerned. Even scared a number of times. But never with this sense of helplessness.

The holograms hovering in front of Donnie moved. One grew larger and more defined. A schematic sputtered into life, clearing into a copy of the gallery building. Figures appeared inside, shaded with vibrant hues that shifted; heat signatures, Mikey realized.

Donnie reached out and pointed at a pair against one side. "According to the records, that's the back office. And those two are the only ones not moving from that spot. The others rotate so they must be guarding the two."

Mikey watched the clump of colors. He couldn't tell which was hers. But both were moving. He took in a deep breath and held it.

*Trust Leo,* he told himself.

---

Getting across to the gallery wasn't anything new. Neither was popping the lock on the roof access door and going down into the studio that took up the right side of the second floor. The mess inside was so similar to the little area in the Lair that Mikey had claimed for his own studio that Raph paused. He quickly shook it off and hurried after Leo.

The rest of the floor was deserted. The stairwell was all the way on the other side. At the top, Leo looked over at him.

"Grab them and get out," Fearless said. "No unnecessary fighting. Get them to the alley and into Amaya's car. Agreed?"

Everything in him roared NO. He wanted to fight. Wanted to remind the Foot who they were messing with. Wanted to make them pay for doing this to Mikey.

No one messes with Mikey.

Before he could respond, their communicators chirped. Raph winced, never used to the little thing that sat in his ear slit. If it were up to him, they'd use walkie-talkies. Or just shout at one another.
Or, hell, even sign. Wasn't like they hadn't picked up a little of that over the years. But Donnie couldn't see them and vise-versa. He just grimaced and pressed the ear piece in a little closer to hear Donnie.

"The incoming vehicle is about 5 minutes out," Donnie reported. "And it looked like the guards just changed, second one is back in the front part of the gallery."

All he needed to know. "Let's do this, Leo," Raph said, shaking out his arms and relishing that first spike of adrenaline.

Leo drew his blades on a nod.

Anyone who saw Raph would never believe how silent he could be. It was always a shock. And something he loved to use to screw with Casey. It never got old to hear him swearing at Raph's sudden appearance.

He was a ninja for a reason.

The stairs were metal and concrete, made for utility rather than aesthetic. As such, it made no sound as they descended, using the wall just as much to avoid noise. The end of the stairs was smack in the middle of where they wanted to be. On the right side, the back door stood with the exit sign glaring down at them. A quick glance showed no alarm hooked to it. On the left side, the wall extended out to the hall before the front of the gallery.

A door set on the far side was open and a Foot soldier stood there, weapon at the ready. He turned to look into the office and his wide open back presented such a perfect target.

Raph felt a smile pull at his lips without conscious thought.

---

Diya worried about Tim. He was getting slower to respond to her and his eyes drifted at times, almost crossing before he shook himself. That only seemed to aggravate his head and started the cycle all over again. The blood dripping from his wound hadn't stopped either.

Swallowing back fear, Diya looked to the new guard. "P-please," she said. "He needs help."

The guard turned to her, no expression readable behind the mask.

"Look," she went on, hoping there was some shred of humanity in the man, "just get someone to look at him. Please! I promise---"

She was running on fear. Fear for herself. Fear for Tim. Fear for the situation in general. She had no idea what was going on beyond the very real fact that Tim was hurt and possibly dying while they just sat there. Sitting wouldn't do anything. So she tried to plead to the faceless figure guarding them. Said whatever words came to her without processing them first.

Whatever she was willing to promise, she never found out. A shadow fell on the masked guard, ripping him out of the doorway and out of sight.

Diya sat there, frozen in shock. Even Tim stilled, noted by a pause in his breathing. They looked at one another, unsure what to do. Then a new figure filled the doorway.

The sight of a massive shell and flash of green had her heart soaring. She was on her feet and running for the hulking figure. "Mikey!"
Then the figure turned fully and she pulled up short. Dread clawed up her throat. This wasn't Mikey. He was taller and more lean though his form still rippled with muscle. And the gear and clothing were different even as it was similar; the same sense of thrown together gear but with more practicality and simplicity, blue instead of orange. But...but...

Those blue eyes were too much the same to be a coincidence.

The newcomer cast a look over her then at Tim. "Can he walk?" he asked. Different voice, too.

Diya blinked back to herself. She looked back at Tim, still propped up on the wall. "I---I don't know," she whispered. "Probably shouldn't."

The newcomer nodded, sheathing one of his twin blades as he came forward. He effortlessly gathered Tim up over one shoulder, gentle even as he was efficient. Seeing her still standing there, he nodded to the door. "Out the back. We got a car waiting."

Her feet moved but she couldn't stop staring at him.

Something flickered behind his blue mask. Something painful. "Mikey's waiting for you."

A numbed sort of heat filled her chest. It wasn't pleasant.

A soft noise brought her around. She drew back at the second one standing on the other side of the door. His form was far too large to easily slip into the office. He teemed with energy, a readiness that had no outlet. So instead he made hurried motions for her to come on, teeth grinding down on a toothpick.

A groan from Tim broke her out of her funk. She ran, hardly aware of the two strangers who were too familiar exchanging a knowing glance. Diya was out the back and running down the alley by the time they were on her heels.

An SUV sat at the end of the alley. A tall, dark-haired woman in work-out attire waited restlessly beside it. Seeing Diya shoot out of the back door, she quickly opened the trunk of the vehicle and directed her in.

Diya obeyed without a question. By the time she rearranged herself in the back, Tim was laying down beside her and the trunk closed. No sign of the two rescuers.

The dark-haired woman jumped into the passenger seat, hissing, "Go!"

The wheels were already spinning. The driver, another woman with black hair pulled back in a tight knot, glanced into the rearview mirror and met Diya's eyes. She looked familiar; hadn't they met before? "Duck down," she ordered in a calm, no-nonsense voice.

Diya obeyed. The SUV moved smoothly across the roads. As they moved, the two women talked.

"Anyone see us?"

"Not from what I can see," the driver said. "Hey, Shadow-Man? We got any followers?"

There was a frustrated sort of grunt and the voice from the first one---*same blue eyes*---spoke from a phone mounted to the dash, "So far, we're clear."

"Inbound vehicle coming up the street," a new voice reported, quick-paced and a bit reedy.

"Everyone fall back," the first voice ordered. "We'll find a place to let them off and regroup---"
"No!" Diya spoke up, surging forward between the driver and passenger seats. The dark-haired woman jerked back, startled, while the driver made no move. Diya ignored both and went on, "Tim needs medical attention! He---They hit him and he might have a concussion. Or worse! Please, just get him to a hospital or something."

The last was directed to the driver. She never took her eyes off the road. A beat of silence later, she merely said, "Well, Shadow-Man?"

Diya gulped down air, trying not to panic. Were these people even helping her? Did they care?

And how was Mikey involved in this? Where was he?

A muffled curse came from the phone. "April?" The passenger straightened at being addressed. "Direct them to the underpass entrance. But do not leave the garage until we get there."

"Got it, Leo," she said. Glancing back at Tim, she paled a little. "That might be the best plan. He doesn’t look good."

"No, he doesn’t."

---

Amaya wasn't sure why she wasn't shaking like the girl in the back of the SUV. Diya? That was her name, right? They'd only met a few times before, most memorable that time on the rooftop with Mikey. But names didn't stick sometimes.

Regardless, she felt her heart quicken every time she checked the mirrors to see if they were being followed. Her pulse jumped a little each time she caught sight of the man laying in the back, unmoving in all the wrong ways. Little things that together meant very bad things. The top of the list loomed before her.

At April's direction, they arrived at the very same place where Donnie had first shown her the Shell-Raiser. She didn't say anything. If Donnie hadn't brought that into the open, she wasn't going to ruin it. She was, however, a little peeved she had not thought to investigate it on her own.

Though, she considered as she eased the SUV down the gloomy tunnel the dumpster concealed, it wasn't like she had been very driven to find the place. All this time, all this fretting, and here she was being directed into the Lair itself. Circumstances were not ideal.

Another glance at the back showed Diya checking on the young man. She looking almost as pale as he was, even her freckles bleached out from the stress. It didn't look good. Even with Donnie's skills, he might need a proper hospital. Head wounds were chancy business.

The tunnel never seemed like they were driving through the sewers. Not until halfway through when the cement lining the way changed. Danker, with material that looked significantly older, it held the feel of a place that was not used to visitors. All that in spite of the cleverly designed road that was more than big enough for her car. The Shell-Raiser would even have an easy time fitting through it.

The walls widened without warning. A moment later, Amaya found herself driving into a cavernous room she could easily call an underground garage. The opposite wall was lined floor to ceiling with tools and gear she recognized from working at an auto repair shop (job #31).

She pulled over to the far side and killed the engine. Exchanging a look with April, both tried to prepare for whatever was about to go down. April got out and entered the trunk. She checked over
the young man, wincing as she examined the head wound. A first aid kit was strapped to the back of Amaya's seat. She quickly tore into it and pressed a wad of gauze to the wound. The young man barely stirred.

Diya shifted, looking out the windows. "Where are we?"

"We're waiting for the guys," April said, clearly avoiding a direct answer. "We'll get him looked at and make sure you both are safe."

She tensed, turning wide eyes to the pair of them. "Do...do you think those people will be back?"

Amaya looked to April, very openly letting her take that question. After all, she was still new to this whole weird operation. April was a veteran of this sort of thing. Heck, aside from no mutations and being genetically human, she was practically the Turtles' sister. No better person to ask.

April still cast Amaya a withering glance before saying, "We're going to make sure that won't happen. Did they tell you anything? Make any demands?"

Diya shook her head. Her eyes became glassy and she blinked furiously against it. Leaning against the wall of the SUV, she hugged herself. "I don't understand," she said at last. "Why would they do that? What did they want?"

Amaya hated the silence that filled the cabin. But that was honestly the question on everyone's mind. Casting about for something to change the subject, she found her eyes falling to the girl's wrist. The orange fabric tied there sent a wave of comprehension over her. It left a bitter taste in her mouth.

She turned back around and sagged into her car seat. April frowned a silent question but Amaya shook it off. No way she was going to voice it. Not with Diya sitting back there, looking like she was one hair away from breaking and her coworker bleeding at her side.

It wasn't that Amaya wanted Leo to be wrong. It wasn't that she wanted his paranoia and rules to be groundless. It was simply the fact that this particular situation hit too hard. Came too close to being something so much worse.

A shudder went through her. She clenched her hands on the steering wheel. A rumble filled the air and lights flared from behind them. The Shell-Raiser appeared in her mirror and she swallowed against her suddenly dry throat.

She hoped it wouldn't be as bad as she feared.

---

Had Leo known what would happen, he'd have handled things differently.

He and Raph caught up to the Shell-Raiser just before it got to the underpass entrance. Once inside, the odd silence made him pause.

Mikey stood just behind the driver's seat, hand clenched tight on the headrest for balance as Donnie drove. Leo couldn't tell if he was watching the road, reading something off the holograms that were glowing off to the right side, or just there because it was the closest place beside the doors for when they stopped. Or maybe all of it. Despite how well everything had gone, the tension in his frame only seemed to grow worse.

Leo glanced at Raph but even he looked surprised. There was no doubt that Raph had known about
this...whatever it was. He'd been quick to defend Mikey, willing to stand between them when he considered the worse of Leo's probable reactions. And going by the things he'd seen and heard over the last few days, Raph was heading towards being in the same boat.

It didn't anger him. That small fact was what consumed him as they descended into the tunnels. So instead of talking to Mikey, instead of trying to get a better understanding of why he was so apprehensive, Leo found himself stuck on his brother's shouts on the roof top.

*Like you wouldn't do the same thing if it was---*

Leo ground his jaw but said nothing.

It was too dangerous to think of. Too many risks. This whole thing was a prime example of exactly what dangers and risks.

The new scar along Leo's face itched. It often did when he thought too hard. He rubbed at it on reflex and found himself looking down at the matching scar on his arm.

Besides these, there were other scars. Too many to count or remember properly. Some he received without realizing. Some would itch or tingle at odd times, reminding him of their presence. He and his brothers were no strangers to scars and the wounds that made them.

A horrifying image came to him of that girl---*Diya*, he reminded himself harshly---with the head wound instead of her coworker, red-brown curls heavy with blood. Then one of the very gash he stared at tracing the line of Amaya's arm, slashing through dark eyes---

Leo bit down on his tongue so hard he tasted blood. But it cleared his head and brought him back to the present. The last rise before the garage loomed ahead.

Belatedly, he realized he should have checked in with Amaya and April. Maybe Don had. The SUV waited on the far side of the garage, leaving enough room for the Shell-Raiser closer to the entrance to the lair. When the engine cut out, the garage sounded far too quiet.

In that instant, Mikey was out of door. The trunk was already open and April was helping Diya out before the engine died. Mikey ran for her but at the last moment stopped.

The air was so thick, Leo felt like he breathed in more tension than oxygen. Everyone watched as Diya stared at Mikey, expression too open and vulnerable to be readable.

Mikey shivered and lifted a hand out towards her. "*Diya?*"

The sound of her name broke something. She lunged at Mikey so fiercely Leo almost thought she was attacking him. Mikey caught her, pulling her to his chest with a desperate edge.

For a heartbeat, nothing happened. Then her voice spoke into the too quiet air of the garage.

"You never told me?"

Everyone stopped. Donnie and April, halfway to pulling the injured man out of the SUV. Amaya, stepping out with one hand on the car door. Raph at his side, eyes wide with surprise that faded into a guarded pain.

Mikey looked down at her, his own face pale and stretched in shock. That turned to fear when the girl in his arms went limp. He caught her, falling to his knees to keep her from hitting the ground. He looked up in desperation.
Amaya ran over to help April, freeing Donnie so he could stoop beside them. He was quick though thorough. Even so, Leo found himself wanting to urge him to hurry up.

"Just passed out," Donnie reported. There was a collective sigh from everyone. He glanced up at Mikey from over his glasses then to Leo. "Probably from the stress of everything. She...she may do better waking up in familiar surroundings."

"Maybe so," Leo said, not quite meeting Mikey's gaze. He nodded over to the other Humans. "Let's get him looked at first."

With a nod, Donnie returned to the young man and easily carried him through the Lair to the Needle Room. April and Raph went after him.

Leo watched Mikey as the younger carefully arranged the unconscious girl in his arms. He was so careful, not wanting to wake her up. She settled against him, face tilting into the curve where his neck and shoulder met like it was a natural thing to do.

Something twanged in Leo's chest at the display. He opened his mouth only to stop. He felt a blank expression fall over him, such a reflex by now he didn't even need to think about it.

"Come on, Mikey," Amaya said, lightly touching Mikey's arm to get his attention. "At least go sit down or something. Donnie won't be long."

Mikey nodded, too caught up in the whirlwind of thoughts and emotions. He obeyed her instructions and easily carried Diya into the Lair. His voice traveled after him, too low to make out the words he spoke to her.

Amaya watched him go, one arm hugged across herself while the other idly tugged at her belt loop. When she turned to Leo, he knew.

She had seen it too. Dark eyes glimmered though not with tears. No. No sadness that he could see. If it was there, it was so far buried under the anger that not even she knew.

"I never doubted you," Amaya said after a moment. "Never thought you were blowing things out of proportions. But this? From just a mask?"

Leo shrugged, tugging at the ends of his own mask. "It's not like they're anything new," he said, slowly, as the words struggled to come to him. "We've had them for so long, it's just a part of us. Like our weapons."

"Or the colors?" she posed.

His mouth twitched but he couldn't smile right now. Not really. "Or that. But I doubt Mikey ever thought she could be targeted because of it."

"Are you sure it was just that? Something so simple?"

"I don't believe Mikey was careless," Leo said, surprising even himself by the conviction behind the words. "I really think he kept himself from being seen. But---" At this, he hesitated.

And again, Amaya was right with him. "But if she didn't know about the need to be discreet, didn't know what a tattered orange mask would mean to the wrong people, then all it would take is one time." She sighed through her nose, frowning at the thought. Then she shook it off, turning to face him fully with her hands on her hips. "So, what do you need me to do?"
The question was simple enough but Leo just blinked at her.

She rolled her eyes. "Rush the guy to an ER if Donnie thinks that wise? Drive Mikey back to her place? Because I guarantee you, Shadow-Man, no amount of ordering or yelling is going to get him to leave her side right now."

Leo shook his head, still fighting against a smile. "Let's see what Don says," he relented. "Wounded trumps passed out. Plus, April might be able to tell us what the official story is on what happened. Don't want to get caught on the wrong side of a police investigation."

She nodded once and strolled into the Lair. Crossing the threshold, however, she paused. When she didn't say anything, Leo felt a ripple of unease go through him.

Amaya stared out at the Lair. Going up the stairs, her movements were slow and careful. No one else was in sight, giving her an unobstructed view of---

Crap, was the laundry still in heaps by the bathroom? Is that why she was staring? Had they run out without shutting off the stove and nearly burned down the kitchen? Leo fought the urge to fidget as he trailed after her. He couldn't tramp down on the unease still rolling through him but he refused to give it a voice.

A sharp move from her jerked him out of his thoughts. Amaya half-jumped half-climbed the cement hump in the middle of the lair, standing top the metal grating without a care for the rushing sewer waters churning under her feet. She turned a careful circuit, taking a 360-degree view, before coming to a stop to face Leo.

She beamed at him.

That cramp of unease slipped past his control. "Not much," he said roughly, gesturing around them. "But it does the job and we haven't had any issues with trespassers. Security in the tunnels is enough we can get a heads up---"

"It's home."

Leo's jaw went slack. He squinted up at her, not quite believing he heard her right.

Her smile faltered a little though not from his sudden silence. "You guys certainly found genius ways of converting things," she went on. "And getting electricity to function down here? For that---geez, Donnie likes computers," she interrupted herself, eyeing the surveillance HUB as well as the corner dedicated to both the TVs and gaming consoles. She hopped off the hump, sliding up to the door marked "CRAPPER" in Raph's blocky handwriting and peeking inside. "Running plumbing," she murmured, going on to the kitchen. She discreetly gave a wide berth to the entertainment area, as Mikey had indeed settled there, still holding Diya and oblivious to anything else beside the young woman in his arms.

On and on, she covered almost everything on the ground floor. She delved into the weird muttering she did, words not quite clear enough to be heard. All the while Leo watched and tried to give a name to what exactly he was watching.

Amaya completed an almost full circle, leaning back against the cement hump instead of climbing it again. She looked up towards the collage of lights they had strung up over the years. Hands jammed into her pockets, she looked---

Relaxed.
The thought hardly formed when she spoke, drawing him back to the present. "I can feel you guys here," she said slowly, eyes still roving the walls, taking in the graffiti, marks from sparring or pranks that got out of hand, the multitude of electronic things either working or not. "This is...this is your home."

"Well, it is," Leo replied. Thankfully his voice remained steady. "I mean, what'd you expect it to feel like?"

She shrugged. "Not sure. It's just been a while since I've been in a 'home,' you know?"

The sudden quiet seemed to hit her. A flush crept up her neck and she timidly met his frowning gaze. And more things just fell into place in Leo's head.

He came closer, not quite crowding her space, and took up a spot next to her. His shell scraped against the cement of the hump as he mimicked her position. With the waters beneath them acting like a white noise machine, they didn't need to talk as loud. Which made it a little easier for him to ask, "Why are you renting that giant house? You're not even using all the space and it's a waste. That---" he shifted so he could look down at her clearly, "---doesn't seem like something you'd do."

Amaya hugged herself but didn't retreat. From his presence or gaze. "Prejean's niece is in Budapest for the next two years," she said. "Her husband's a corporate lawyer for some big company and he sometimes has to travel for it. This was the first time it would be longer than a month or two. They didn't want to outright sell the house. She knew I was in a matchbook-sized studio over A Wok and offered it for the same rent. It was stupid not to take it. So I just keep up with the place, prevent the lawn from dying, and play chess on Wednesdays with the neighbor. But---" She looked out over the Lair again. "---it's not a home. Like what you guys have."

A long, slow breath out. Not a sigh. No, that was a grounding breath. Something Leo was all too familiar with. Her next words were even quieter though there was little reason to think Mikey could have overheard them. "If I need to? I can grab a single bag, my laptop, then I'm out the door and gone. And that's worked for me for close to a decade. I don't need anything more. But this?"

She drew a hand over the Lair, lingering up at the glaring lights as though wanting to capture it. "Some times I think I miss having a home," she said slowly. "And then I wonder if I ever had a home to miss in the first place."

Amaya drew her hand back, hugging herself once more. Her head tilted, giving him that same smile again. And this time Leo saw that old pain there. Long healed but still present.

Leo wanted to say something---anything, dammit, just said anything---to get her mind off that. To spare her even a moment of living on whatever hellish memories she had associated with the word.

A soft sound, so easy to misplace amid the roaring waters, caught his ear. He knew what it was. Knew what was about to go down. And for a moment wanted it to stop, to never happen, to stop it---

Amaya tensed, whirling around and taking a step behind Leo. She blurted a phrase, the weird muttering yet now at a volume that echoed around the Lair. "Fils de pute!"

Leo didn't know what to process first: the fact that she took cover behind him, that she swore in French, or that she was watching wide-eyed as Splinter stopped beside them.

His father studied the young woman, making no move closer. He stroked his beard, black eyes gentle even as they were probing.
Leo swallowed, chancing a glance down at Amaya. They had mentioned Splinter to her but he couldn't recall if the fact that he was a rat had been brought up. In the rush of the day's events, he'd never considered that Amaya might be meeting him. Never thought to prepare her for it.

Far too late, he realized they also hadn't prepared sensei for people being brought to the lair. Hadn't told him what was happening before they just ran out. He suddenly felt like a child again, caught doing something he knew he wasn't supposed to do.

His stomach curled and he straightened, starting to bow, to explain himself---

Amaya's hand on his arm stopped him. She leaned around him and stared at Splinter. The wide-eyed shock was fading, replaced with bemused curiosity. "H-hello," she said, voice shaking but calm.

Splinter's gaze flicked up to Leo's for a moment---assessing, deciding---before he gave a small incline of his head to the young woman. "Hello, Miss," he said, clear and welcoming. "I assume you are Amaya?"

She nodded, inclining her head as well. Biting her lip, she said, "I'm sorry for the intrusion. It---I mean, we got caught up---" Her hand twitched where she still held Leo's arm.

The urge to cover her hit him, so strong he rocked on his heels and had to clench his fists to keep his hands in place. He shook it off, reminding himself that this was Splinter, sensei, DAD: there was no reason to shield her from him. "There was a Foot attack," Leo broke in, trying to cover both his reactions as well as Amaya's halting words. "People were injured. We couldn't just leave them."

Splinter nodded. "I have already spoke to Raphael and April," he said. "They believe the young man will need to be brought to the hospital."

At once, Amaya tensed. She checked her pockets for her keys and moved towards the stairs. "I'll coordinate with April," she called to Leo. "Maybe if we get the right story, the police won't be too much of a hassle."

Caught off guard, Leo could only nod as she hurried off. When the door to the Needle Room closed, he was all too aware of Splinter watching her go. He sensed a lecture coming on and again felt like a child waiting for his punishment.

"So that is the one who caused you such doubts?" Splinter commented after a moment.

Leo nodded, hating how dry his mouth suddenly was.

"She is certainly practical." He made a humming noise before turning back to his eldest. "What did the Foot do?"

Leo told him, giving it as clean and precise as any other report. Yet even he knew the gaping hole in the words. And when Splinter's attention shifted to where Mikey sat, hunched formed clearly visible over the back of the couch, Leo's words died away.

Splinter shook his head, sadness pulling at his features. A sadness that gave Leo pause to see. Something untold was there, giving a deeper edge to it.

A flurry of commotion upstairs pulled him around. Raph was hollering for Leo, saying they needed to get the guy topside. Leo called an assent yet stayed where he was.

Splinter still watched Mikey.
"Dad?" he said, unsure what exactly he was going to ask.

Splinter blinked back to himself, looking up in question.

"I don't think the Foot will just let it go," Leo said at last. "But I also don't know what we need to do now...now that---well." He held in a growl, hating that now, of all times, he was at a lost for words.

"Now is the time to heal from this attack," Splinter said. "For everyone. Strategy will come later, Leonardo. After the healing."

Leo nodded. Nothing to say, really. And there was nothing he could do to stop Splinter as he turned and made his quiet way over to where his youngest sat, holding his---

Girlfriend? Lover?

It was Leo's turn to pull in a slow, grounding breath. He forced himself to focus on the sounds of the churning waters. To tune out the gentle voice of his father speaking to Mikey. To block Raph's insistent call.

To keep from hearing the frantic shout in his head.

*Like you wouldn't do the same thing if it was---*

Would he?

Clanging footsteps pulled him out of the lull. Amaya rushed down the stairs, Raph on her heels with the guy draped across his shell. They were talking, April hurrying after them while doing something with her phone, all three caught up in the haste to get him to a hospital.

As she crossed the Lair, Amaya caught Leo's eye. She gave him a brief smile and a thumbs-up. Then she was running down the stairs into the garage.

That cramp of unease returned. And Leo knew Mikey was right.

*Shit.*

---
Mikey's brain was quiet. It terrified him.

Usually, it was a mass of half-finished thoughts, impulses, and a hundred other things that just couldn't be described. But since he saw the art gallery on Donnie's computer, that mass started to slow. One by one, the thoughts quieted or just stopped. In its place, other things came: anger, fear, guilt, panic. And on the ride back to the Lair, with Diya safely on her way to meet him, those as well came to a halt.

Mikey was lost and he didn't know what to do. So he fell to what instinct demanded: protect Diya. When she collapsed in his arms, it sent a spike of fear through him. But sitting on the couch, holding her and pushing everything else away, that fear settled into place. It wouldn't budge.

Distantly, there was a thought that he should see what the others were doing. That guy was hurt. The Foot wouldn't just take this laying down. After all, there was a reason they hit the gallery in the first place. There were things that needed to be done.

Still, Mike just hunkered down on the couch and held Diya a little closer.

She looked drained. So different from last night. The memory of leaving, that parting kiss that sent tendril of heat even through his shell, felt dulled now. Blood stained her hands from where she'd tried to help the guy's wound, smeared on her dress and ruining it completely. Her usual warm skin was paler like she was sick.

Even unconscious, she shifted. She drew closer to herself, like whatever she dreamt meant she was trying to hide. Like the whole situation hadn't left her alone even now.

The arm supporting her tugged her closer and his other hand drifted along the curve of her cheek. "I'm here, Angel," he murmured. "Got you out. You're okay. You're safe."

Her body drew tighter in on itself, curling in his lap. Otherwise, she didn't respond. He tried not to see it as a bad reaction.
The look she gave him in the garage, though...

You never told me?

Mikey shook his head, kept up his soft words, and tucked his face closer to hers. All the while, that fear made itself home in the quiet space of his mind.

People spoke. Someone swore though not in English. And there was a sense of loud noises, hurried footsteps, and more words. Things happened in the background. The fallout of the day not even close to being done.

A sharpness pricked his senses. Mikey tensed, drawing Diya to him as though to shield her. He didn't look up. Not even when a gnarled hand softly lay on his head.

An infinite span of time passed before Splinter spoke. "Michelangelo."

Heart somewhere in his ears, stomach long turned to a twisted knot, Mikey fought the urge to run away from his father. With little more than his name, Splinter seemed to ask too much. And yet he waited. Waited for whatever Mikey gave.

The fear rolled to the surface. Slowly, Mikey unclenched enough to raise his head. The cool air of the Lair hit his skin, chilling the damp trails of tears he never realized he shed. Seeing the concern on his father's face didn't help either. He drew in a shaking breath and said, "I screwed up, Dad."

---

Panic was never a good thing to wake up to. Second only to the smell of smoke. When Diya shot upright, arms scrambling to push back the layers of sheets and hands fisting in defense, dread coiled low and heavy in her gut.

The gallery. The armed men. Soldiers. Tim bleeding against her side. And the people---the turtles---

For a moment, Diya managed to convince herself that it was all in her head. That it was a wild dream, conjured by junk food and a late night with Mikey. She took a deep breath, flopping back on her pillow with a soft laugh.

Someone cleared their throat.

At once, Diya was back upright. The lights were off yet sunlight streamed in through her windows. In the far corner, a young woman sat on Diya' old ottoman.

She leaned forward, elbows resting on her knees and hands loosely clasped between them. Her near-black eyes watched Diya in concern yet she stayed in place. The light threw harsh reds across her black hair, disorienting until she leaned back against the wall. Doing so showed she was dressed simply: jeans, zip-up hoodie, and a yellow t-shirt emblazoned with the words A Wok to Remember over a picture of a pan flipping out several cartoon dumplings, the front pair walking hand in hand and leaving a trail of soy sauce foot sprints.

The woman made no other move, hands still loosely clasped in her lap. She waited for a moment before saying, "How do you feel?"

Diya just stared at her. As the images from her very-much-not-a-dream settled, she remembered. "You--- the driver," she whispered. She clutched at the comforter, wishing she had something more solid between them.
The woman nodded. "Amaya," she said by way of introduction. Then, a bit sternly, "You didn't answer the question."

Diya couldn't name what flared so hot and vibrant within her. She was too wound up in trying to sort it out. But she knew it wouldn't be pleasant. That didn't keep her from snapping, "I have no idea what to even call what---what just happened! My friend was attacked, we were held hostage, and---and---"

The two so much like Mikey came to her again and it kept her from getting the words out.

Amaya's brow lifted as she watched the struggle. Then she reached into her pocket and pulled out a phone with a thick case. "All clear," she reported before replacing it. And still she sat and watched Diya.

All that just rankled Diya. "Just who are you? And what was that about?"

"Amaya, like I said," she repeated, untouched by her harshness or the way Diya glared at her. "I got voted the one to be here when you woke up. I was just letting everyone know you're good."

Good. Good? How in the hell was she good? It was on the tip of her tongue to demand that.

Amaya leaned forward again, still carefully watching. "So, do you need to punch something? Or do you have any pertinent questions I can get to? Because I promise you that we got about ten minutes before someone comes pounding at your door. My money's on family of some kind though I wouldn't doubt it if the police beat them."

"Police?" The heat faded, turning back into that heavy dread.

Amaya frowned, looking concerned. Then she winced, as though she suddenly realized something. "Right, right. You were out for that. The---uh, the situation," she said haltingly. "At the gallery? It got some attention so the police are most definitely involved. But whoever gets here first, they're gonna ask the same questions. And it would be best if you had the right story."

"Story?" Diya grimaced; disgusted that she just kept repeating herself. But she honestly didn't know what else to say. Except---

Where was Mikey?

At the thought, she looked around as though she could have missed him along with the slight figure Amaya made in her crammed bedroom. But that was impossible. Last night had proved---

The dread became a solid ball in her gut, pulling her down and bringing a halt to the flurry of questions. She felt sick even asking but she couldn't stop the words from coming out, "What story?"

Something like pity clouded the other woman's face. She blew out a sigh. "Actually pretty close to what happened. The Foot attacked you guys and held you hostage in the back office. Where it differs? Well, what we told the hospital was that you and Tim were able to knock out your guard and slip out the back. You flagged me down and I drove you guys to the hospital. I was dragging Tim into the ER when I noticed you had vanished." She paused, lifting her hands and making a 'so-so' gesture. "Think the angle we're going for is shock? Like it was too much and you had to get away?"

Well, that wasn't too much of a stretch. Even now, Diya didn't doubt that she had indeed gone through a shock. "But there's no way anyone will buy that---"
"Handy thing about the Foot," Amaya broke in, "is that they tend not to stick around and let themselves be interrogated by the police. Makes contradicting whatever we come up with a tough deal. And Tim had a pretty bad concussion so even he's not going to know exactly what happened. And if he did remember, he might just think it was due to the injury."

At that, Diya straightened. "He's okay?"

"Hospital's monitoring him for a bit. Concerned for pressure or a bleed, I think. But yes, they said he'll be fine, otherwise."

Amaya stood and crossed the room. She came to the bedside closest to Diya though she stayed an arm's length away. Closer now, Diya could make out the brown facets to her eyes, blending near seamlessly with the pupil. She was an odd figure, Diya thought abruptly. Smooth curve to the jaw, straight no-nonsense nose, and eyes so expressive one could tell in an instant that she was keeping her thoughts guarded for a reason. All things that made Diya believe this was someone who knew far more than she let on. Whether that was academic or about the world in general, she couldn't tell at this point.

And here she stood, looking like a delivery girl and watching Diya as though contemplating her future.

Dark eyes twitched, narrowing for a moment as though she read the thought. Then she shook her head, pulled out a scrap of paper and placed it on the bedside table. "Whoever comes, tell them whatever you want," she said. "Just thought you should know what people already think. Throw a fit. Make a ruckus if you want. Hey, give them my name if you so choose. That's my number, there."

That edge sharpened without any outward sign. Diya shivered, looking up at her in silent question. Amaya seemed to be considering her next words very, very carefully. At long last, she said, "You know how to contact Mikey. He'll give you space, for now. As much as he can," she added with a roll of her eyes. "The next move is up to you."

She turned on her heel and strode out of the room.

It was such an abrupt move, given with unexpected parting words, that Diya just sat there staring after her. By the time she finally realized it and shot to her feet, Amaya was already opening the front door to leave.

"Wait!" Diya called, legs not quite wanting to work. She stumbled and had to grip the wall to stay upright.

Amaya paused, smoothly shutting the door and turning to face her.

"I---I don't get it," Diya blurted. She couldn't come up with anything else, no other way to say it. But it was true, all the same. "I don't understand any of this! What happened, why it happened, and who---just who are you and how are you involved in whatever this is?"

Another long, slow breath while Amaya looked her up and down. Another moment of careful consideration. And again, there was an edge to her that sharpened as she spoke. "I'm not the one to answer any of that. Not right now. That's...that is part of why I was picked to be here when you woke up."

The want to shout out a demand for answers was strong. So strong that Diya grit her teeth to hold it in. Because even then, she knew. She knew where to get answers. She knew who to ask.
Who she should have asked all along.

Amaya watched her reach the silent conclusion. Nodding, she opened the door and left without another word.

Diya let her go, hearing the door catch as though from a great distance. The dread grew heavier, bringing with it a wave of nausea. She leaned against the wall, fighting to keep it together.

It was so hard to do. Especially as part of her cried out to call Mikey while another raged at the very notion.

Caught between, she had no idea how long she stood there, propped up on the wall, before a heavy hand knocked on the door.

---

April chewed on her lip, nervously tapping her foot against the floor. She watched the giant screens in the Lair as the latest segment on the gallery played. Her parts were pre-recorded, most of it being an interview with Mr. Lee and how this was affecting the art community. The little man was still in shock, unable to comprehend why some group like the Foot would target his place.

Little to nothing had been said about the employees affected. They kept the names from being printed, something April had to fight for. Even so, she couldn't stop the little voice of doubt that said the producers just might slip them in, somewhere. She didn't unclench until the segment ended and it went to a commercial break.

A noise of relief made her turn. Raph stood there, hands on his hips, and looked like a massive load was taken off his shoulders.

April glanced behind him, taking in the view of Donnie at his hub and the closed door of the dojo telling where Leo was. She wanted to ask where Mikey was but stopped herself.

Raph read it all the same. "Mike's been topside since it happened," he said, his rumble of a voice low so it wouldn't carry. "He's been keeping an eye on her place. You know, in case they try again."

April winced. "Are we sure that's why they were attacked?"

"What else could it be?" Raph countered, throwing his hands up. "Sure as shit not like Shredder wanted to get a painting or something to hang over his bed. We've been thinking that they've been too quiet for long enough. Only a matter of time until they made a move."

"What a move it was," April said, rubbing at her head. A headache started to throb.

He made a noise, part growl and part sigh. He ran a hand over his bandana, restless in his irritation. "Fuckin' assholes," he muttered. "They've pulled some pretty low blows. But this? This is low even for them."

"Any word from her?" April asked. She regretted the question as soon as she asked.

Raph stilled, a little color leeching from his face. He scowled. "Donnie says nothing's come across Mikey's shell-cell," he said jerkily. "No call. No message. He wants to clone her phone after she gets a new one but Mikey refuses to do that. Said to just let her be."

So many questions. Too many. High among them: what now?
April wanted to ask. It burned inside her, fearful and a little angry. This was a screw up of the highest degree. There was no denying that. Blame could be placed on a number of people. She had known, so did Raph, and Amaya hadn't seemed at all surprised. Any one of them could have stepped forward to address the gross mishandling of this...this...

A pang went through her chest. April felt her eyes burn. To anyone else, this wouldn't have been a big deal. Not something that required discussion, negotiating, planning, specialized tech, and so many other things. To anyone else, this would have been a happy thing.

She wanted to shout at the unfairness of it all. Mikey was so happy since this thing with Diya started. He found something she began to think was impossible for the guys. On his own, by happenstance, he found someone who began to care for him the way he deserved.

And the Foot pounced on that.

Now? Now who knew what would become of this. Whatever had been building between Mikey and Diya was shattered. It felt like everyone waited for the other shoe to drop. For the next explosion to happen.

A gentle rumble of an engine cut through the air. A moment later, Amaya appeared from the steps leading to the garage. She paused, seeing Raph and April both looking at her expectantly. Then she looked over to where Donnie sat, also turned to her.

Amaya steeled herself and fixed her stare on the dojo's screen doors. Then she moved across the Lair without looking away.

April frowned, moving to intercept her. Raph's arm almost caught her across the chest when it shot out to stop her. She looked up at him in question.

The same anger and frustration was there, plain to see on his face. Yet his jaw was clenched in a resigned sort of way. "Gotta wait it out," he said when she didn't look away. "See what Fearless says. Or...or sensei."

At the name, April glanced around. It suddenly dawned on her that she hadn't seen Splinter since they rushed Tim to the hospital.

With a soft click, the dojo door closed behind Amaya. Even Donnie looked exhausted when he slumped in his chair, still doggedly working away at the hub.

April nodded over his way and asked, "What's Donnie up to?"

"Trying to figure out who was in that car going to the gallery," Raph said. "He thinks cuz the Foot was just waiting that the intent was to either transport her and the guy in the car or it was bringing someone to them. He got the license number and he's been following it on security cams."

That calmed a little of April's worry. It gave her something else to chew on. Indeed, the whole hostage thing had been odd. Particularly for the Foot. They just didn't operate like that. But they'd been so quiet for so long, maybe this was part of a new strategy they were trying.

A harsh breath left Raph, startling April. He rubbed at his face, scowling so hard it was a wonder he didn't strain a muscle. "Raph?" she ventured.

It was a moment longer before he said, "Just pisses me off. All of it. And I--I keep thinking I could have done something. Said something."
"Same here," April agreed. "But it's not like this has happened before. I mean, did anyone ever ask? A 'what-if' sort of thing?"

Years knowing them, growing with them, and learning all the differences between the brothers was not enough to know exactly what words to say in delicate situations. She never feared it, per se. She knew none of them would ever bring her to harm. Bruised egos, hurt feelings and the sort was a different matter. And Raph was usually the best one to pose such a question to.

Raph gave her a long, studying look. The frustration never waned but neither did he appear upset by the veiled question. If anything, it amused him. "Not often we run a training session based off of what we'd do if our sweetheart got picked up by the Foot. You know, priorities and all."

April fought a smile at the words. She was glad he was trying to make a joke out of it. Still, there was a very real part to it. "Never once?" she pressed. "Not even on a whim?"

"Until you, never thought a gal would ever look our way," Raph said plainly. "And then, never thought of you like that. Yeah, Mikey might've said something. Joked about it while really wanting it to be true. And Leo shut it down every time. Mikey outgrew it. But we never mentioned what would happen if it was someone other than you. This?" He lifted his hands, motioning around to indicate 'this whole crapshoot,' she could almost hear the words in his voice. "Never considered it."

The low pool of anger that swirled in her since the start of this rose a little. She felt it wasn't right for her to be so upset over it all. And yet...

Raph strode away, worked up and caught in his own head. He headed to the weight room, wanting to lose himself in the repetition of the work out. Watching him go, April felt that anger burn a little hotter.

She was not a romantic. Sure, she loved it when Casey pulled out of the stops for a date night and such. But she drew the line at realistic. And it was only realistic to believe that what Raph said was right: they had never prepared for this situation because none of them believed they would be in this situation.

It hurt to consider. Hurt to believe. Even as the cynical part of her just rolled its eyes, she couldn't stop that pang of sorrow as she looked out over the Lair.

The Turtles were...well, they were Turtles. They were unique. Four-of-a-kind. And somewhere as they grew up, they must have entertained the notion, the fantasy, of---of...

April blew out a breath through her teeth. She ran a hand over her hair and couldn't stop the stupid, sad grimace off her face. Nor could she stop the tears that burned in her eyes.

She believed everyone should be happy. Everyone should be able to love and be loved in return. By family. By friends. And, yes, even a lover.

The Turtles deserved that as well. Had probably spent nights talking to one another about it as kids. Daydreamed in that way only kids and the innocent could achieve.

At some point, though, they grew up. They stopped dreaming.

Maybe that's why this cut so deep. For all of them. Mikey chanced it all on the possibility that he could have that with Diya. He could have that dream.

For the first time in years, April wished she had taken Splinter on his offer to further her training. Involved as she was in their lives, it was impossible to deny that learning to defend herself as well
as hold her own in a fight was good. It had probably saved her life more than she knew. Yet she
drew the line after a while. She was a reporter, not a ninja. After today...

The dojo screen slid aside and Amaya stepped out. She didn't appear as worn out as everyone else.
Then again, this was all still new to her. No doubt it just fell in line with everything else she'd seen
so far. She crossed the room to speak with Donnie for a bit then headed April's way. She stopped
halfway to her, face blanking in surprise.

April scrubbed her sleeve over her face, trying to get rid of the tears. They still fell.

Amaya shuffled for a moment, a little awkward, before shaking her head and coming to April's
side. She laid a hand on April's shoulder and asked, "Want a ride home? I can drop you off before I
go to work."

April nodded, not trusting her voice. She doubted that she would just burst into sobbing; those days
had ended shortly after her father's murder. But she didn't want to risk just unloading the burning
thoughts still bubbling in her at this moment.

---

Four days passed since the incident. Four days in which Diya was questioned by the police, had
family members come by to check on her, and even sat down and had a long talk with Mr. Lee that
ended with the old man nearly in tears. Through it all, Diya did little more than eat and sleep. Her
TV stayed off and she avoided the living room as though she feared going in there. The lights in
her room never went out.

Through it all, Mikey felt more and more like a stalker. The rationalization that the Foot may make
another attempt at kidnapping faded after the second day. It was the usual MO to act within 48
hours if the plan was tried again. So they either scrapped the idea or they were simply just
reworking it. Either way, it wasn't likely they would try again for the time being.

Mikey couldn't bring himself to just leave her. And no one told him to. In fact, save for April, no
one had tried to contact him since he brought Diya's unconscious body back to her place and waited
outside the window as Amaya talked with her. He just watched and waited.

He had no idea what he was waiting on. He just knew he needed to stay nearby. Something was
bound to happen and he wanted to be right here when it did. Foot attack. Leo approaching Diya
over what she witnessed. Or...

Throat tight, Mikey flipped his shell-cell over even though he knew there were no new messages.
Diya had replaced her phone yesterday. And it sat on the counter between the kitchen and the work
room, clear to see from the windows.

For a wonder, he had no desire to make the first move. He was sure that was what Leo feared he
would do. And he didn't blame Leo for it one bit. But even if the idea started to form, a spike of
fear shot through him and it unraveled in an instant.

Fear. He was a ninja. Veteran of countless battles. Fought against soldiers that were human, alien,
and mutant alike. Saved the city of New York and the planet Earth more than a handful of times.
He'd been stabbed, shot, cut open, and pounded so hard he blacked out. He knew what pain felt
like. Real pain from an injury that had him questioning if he was going to make it.

And he was terrified of a girl who stood five-nothing in her bare feet.

How could he have known how deep he was until this very moment? Whenever she did choose to
speak with him, he knew it would leave him in ribbons.

*You never told me?*

God, he screwed up.

---

It was getting closer and closer to winter with each passing day. Shorter day light hours were upon the city. It still felt like forever until the sun started to set. When the reddish hues filled the shafts of light coming through her windows, Diya uncurled from the tight ball she'd been in most of the day.

Four days. Her head started to clear after the second. It was only now that she felt her thoughts finally in place. Only now was she able to quell the shivering cold in her gut and do what she needed to do.

She pulled the comforter with her as she got to her feet. Even if she kept the heater on, her skin prickled if she didn't have something to cover herself. She didn't want to pile on layers of clothes so the comforter would do. Wrapped around her like a toga, she slid her feet into slippers and quietly padded into the kitchen.

The quiet heat that first sparked into life that day flickered in her chest. She ground down on the swell of thoughts it always brought up. Instead, she picked up the cell phone. Absently, she was surprised it still had a charge even though it had gone without being plugged in for nearly two days. Yet she hadn't used it at all, either. Brushing that aside, her thumb hovered over the keypad.

Indecision struck her, paralyzing for a moment. The quiet heat flared again and burned it away. She keyed in the number and only four words before hitting send: *We need to talk.*

Keeping the comforter bundled around her, Diya went over to the windows and raised the largest one. She didn't think for a moment that there would be much of a wait. Might as well make sure there was an open invitation.

How many would come?

The question had her pausing, hand still pressed on the window sill. She couldn't even start to consider the question. It just...She---

A shadow wavered on the fire escape. Diya drew back, somewhat proud that the motion was smooth rather than the startled jerk it might have been. She kept backing away until her thighs hit the edge of her computer desk. Leaning back against it, she watched as Mikey made his careful way in through the window.

In the silence of the moment, Diya reflected that no, of course she wouldn't have been startled. That would have meant fear. She was plenty anxious and had a great dose of uncertainty about---well, about whatever the heck was about to happen.

Yet the past four days, her mind had circled one question. Went back over it again and again. Came at it from different angles. Tried different variations. And over and over, she never failed to reach the same conclusion: she wasn't afraid of Mikey.

Fear was cold. That wasn't what kept the quiet heat going inside her.

Mikey came in, fluid and smooth as though he wasn't twice the size of the window. And he only
took a single step inside. A clear and obvious move that made her chest catch as it hit her. He watched her, looking as though he had aged decades over the past four days. The lack of a smile was never as prominent as it was right now.

Even if she didn't feel afraid, there was no denying that Mikey was. Fear leaked out of every facet of him; from how he felt himself, tight and as far away as he could, to how his hands twitched between clenched fists and a forced relaxedness.

Though the words rose up in her, the myriad of questions that needed to be spoken, Diya found herself speechless. Her eyes roved his form as she had done countless times. With the image of the two she had encountered, the likes and contrasts between the three of them, the words she had overheard that day, and the obvious signs before her, she felt something go 'click' in her head.

All along, there was a word that eluded her. A word that summed up all the things about Mikey that she wasn't fixating on. All the things that caused her pause but she brushed aside. Things neither of them addressed---whether by want to keep the reality away or the need to just learn everything else---were blatant between them now. And that word rang loud and clear.

*Weapon.* Mikey was a weapon.

Especially after the other day, there was no use denying that. A weapon, a fighter, someone who dealt with the likes of those who attacked her and Tim. Given that thought, everything made a twisted sort of sense.

Mikey made no move, clearly letting her take the lead. She took a moment longer, needing it to steady her nerves, then asked, "Who were the other two?"

Not the question he expected. He stared at her, clearly shifting from whatever track he had anticipated, before saying, "That was Raph and Leo. Raphael. Leonardo. And you probably didn't notice Donatello. We call him Donnie."

The names flowed around with the rest of the new information. Her mouth quirked, wanting to smile. Clever names. Pushing that aside, she said, "Okay. That's their names. But who are they?"

"My brothers."

"Brothers," she repeated. At his nod, she drew the comforter closer around her. "You have three brothers?"

Another nod. Now he was wary. Still, he waited for her to choose the topic even as it confused him.

The quiet heat flared again and she let it bring the next question. "And you never told me?"

Mikey recoiled. His gaze dropped to the floor.

Diya held in the urge to sigh with threadbare control. The heat never wavered but her compassion rose instead. Struggling between the two, she had to work to get the words out. "There are...so many things running through my head. So many. The soldiers. What they wanted. Who Amaya is or that other woman. What---what's going to happen. What to expect. But that?"

The heat sparked and she couldn't contain the anger. Anger was hot while fear was cold. And it burned in her with a depth she never expected. She wasn't used to it. Tried to not hold onto anger. This...this was so new, so different, she had nothing to guide her.
"You have a family and you never told me," she ground out. "I get that there might be more important things I should be focusing on. I get that I was attacked and that there's no way that's done. But this? You never once mentioned them. Maybe it wasn't a lie---maybe not even a lie of omission, if I'm being honest. I just---" She broke off, biting her lip and forcing herself to look up at the ceiling.

Letting the anger lead wasn't helping. And if she kept at it she would start crying again. Neither of them needed that right now. She let the anger settle, not rising but not falling for the moment. She had to get herself under better control.

"I don't get that, Mikey," she said at last. "Not wanting to talk about the other stuff? The---the fighting, whatever those soldiers were and the reason why they attacked: that I understand. I get not wanting to bring up the dark stuff. But your family? Your brothers? And the way they acted? Seems like it was sort of a new situation to them to." She snorted, unable to stop it as the memory hit her all over again. "Why would you keep them a secret? Why keep me a secret?"

It was a loaded question. One steeped in so many other thoughts even she was uncomfortable asking it. And yes, she should be worried about the violence that his secrecy brought. Not talking about the 'dark things' had lead to a rather traumatizing experience.

Somewhere during this odd courtship of theirs, though, Diya knew that. Subconscious or otherwise, she knew there were things he kept quiet about. And yes, she was just as bad at not pursuing it. This? She just couldn't wrap her head around---

"I was selfish."

The words were clear, spoken in a voice heavy with regret but firm. Mikey kept his gaze on the floor while his hands twisted with the guards on his wrists. Idle movements more like his usual self though far more subdued. His jaw worked, grinding or disliking what he was about to say. Then he plowed on with an eagerness that surprised her. "Me and my brothers are close. So freaking close. Because---'cuz we're all we have. Us and our dad. We're---hell, just look at me, Angel. A mutant turtle. We look out for each other. Got each other's backs. 'Cuz who else will? I just..."

He drew a shaking breath, reaching up to rub at the back of his head. His gaze ducked away from hers even as he turned; afraid of what he'd see or what else would tumble out when he looked at her. He scrubbed a palm over his neck, face scrunching up in thought. None of the unease showed in his voice.

"I knew I'd have to tell you about them. Because I have to tell them about you. It was always gonna come up. It was going to happen. I just kept putting it off. I didn't want to. Not 'cuz I was ashamed or anything like that. I only---I wanted---"

The hand at his neck slid up to cover his face. In the moment of silence as he gathered himself, the confliction showing in every line of him, Diya felt that quiet heat start to fade.

"I wanted you to myself," he said quietly. "I wanted to keep you a secret. 'Cuz as soon as they know about you, it's not just you and me anymore. And I...I wanted that for a while longer. God, Angel, I wanted it so bad. And I---Because I didn't, you almost got---you could've---"

Alarm surge through Diya. She moved with hardly a thought beyond 'stop.' The comforter landed in a heap on the floor as she rushed to him. She took his hands in hers and drew them away from his face.

Mikey blinked down at her, startled at the touch yet not stopping it. Blue eyes, a tad bloodshot and
very tired, shimmered though they remained dry. "I could've lost you," he said, words a near rasp as though it hurt to voice the thought. "You could've been hurt like that guy. Or worse." His shoulders lifted in a shrug. "I screwed up. I screwed it all up. Guess I could still loose you, after all." Another flinch, almost drawing him out of her reach.

Diya's hands tightened, keeping him in place. Then she pulled, lifting his hands to her. His palms fell into place and cupped her face between them. She slid her hands down and gently gripped his wrists.

"I'm here, Mikey," she said, putting as much conviction behind the words as she could. The heat and anger, everything that had been building over the last four days, crumbled. "I'm here and I'm not going anywhere."

His breath caught and she felt the muscles under her hand tense. Then he pulled her to him, nearly crushing her against his chest. She more than allowed it. If she had the strength, she'd very well crush him back. As it was, the most she could do was loop her arms around his neck. That odd little dip just below his shoulders and right before the shell sloped up made the perfect place to anchor onto.

Every point of contact seemed to broadcast all the things that should be a concern. Green scales instead of skin. A pair of nun chuk dug into her hip. The hands that clung to her bore three digits. The shape of his face, buried into her neck, could only be called 'humanoid' and not 'human.' The steady if frantic thrum of his heart beat against her with the odd echo felt through his plastron. All things she had known four days ago. And she had never thought of ending things between them because of it.

Diya ran a hand over Mikey's head, a gentle motion to soothe both of them. She worked for a moment to get the words she wanted to say in order. "No secrets, Mikey. Please. I know this isn't a typical...thing. So we have to be upfront with each other. Probably more so than other couples. Can't be like everyone else."

She felt his mouth quirk in an almost smile against her. Then his grip tensed. "Knew I'd mess up, Angel. Just didn't think it'd be like this. Not like I got any experience in 'things.' Or 'couples,' even."

That small fact hit Diya so hard she physically winced. Well, crap. Duh. She should've acknowledged that.

Mikey leaned back. The lines of fear were gone, leaving an aching fatigue in their wake. She reached up and trailed a finger under the line of his mask, wondering what was going on behind those blue eyes.

The motion triggered something. He caught the trailing hand and eyed the orange fabric that adorned it. Diya frowned and started to question that. She stopped as a sharp look over came him.

"That's how they knew," he said, thumb smoothing over the fabric at her pulse. "How they knew to attack you."

She dared look away from his face to eye the simple thing. "Really?"

"Makes the most sense." Without letting go, he deftly undid the simple knot that held it in place and let the old mask fall to the floor. Thumb still moving over her skin, Mikey seemed to draw comfort at the feel of her pulse. Then he bowed his head and muttered, "God, I'm so stupid."
A flash of movement later, her now maskless hand jerked his chin back up and he blinked down at her.

"We both made a few mistakes," she said; sheer force of will kept the words from being a snarl. As it was, she fought to keep her voice at a calm level. "There were plenty of times I could have asked a question or forced an issue. There is plenty of blame to go around. But don't you ever claim any of this happened because you are stupid because you damn well are not."

When he continued to just stare at her, she huffed in irritation. "Didn't you just tell me that you've never done this before? That this is all completely new? Then how could you have known?"

"I---We only---" Mikey started.

"Uh-uh," she cut in, hand moving to tap his mouth close. "Whatever you're thinking, stop. I already said there's blame to go around. Don't you start trying to pile more on your side of things. We don't need to outline what exactly lead to---to the whole hostage thing. Not as though I can stand rehashing that crazy day right now."

The past four days and the whirl of questions from law enforcement and everyone else were draining in ways she could never have anticipated. And she truly could not do that again. Most certainly not with Mikey.

They needed to. Especially if he was right in that the old mask had been what drew those soldiers to her. They needed to talk. About that and more.

_Geez, she was so tired of freaking talking._

Mikey smiled, the motion felt under her hand before she saw it. Then she blushed, realizing she had said that out loud. His face softened, still edged with that fatigue. When she lowered her hand, he caught it in his again. "I'm sorry," he said quietly, other hand curling around her waist and just holding on to her.

Through the blush, she managed an approximation of a scowl. "I just said---

"I know," he said; his hand trailed up her arm to cup her face again. "But I need to at least say that. Then we can do whatever doesn't involve 'freaking talking.'"

The scowl became a pout. It broke when Mikey abruptly pulled her into another almost-too-close embrace. "'M sorry, Angel," he whispered against her hair.

Diya made herself relax, knowing that nothing she said was going to stop that. At least for now. And she didn't protest when he lifted her easily into the crook of one arm, grabbed her comforter, and deposited them on her couch in the living room. Before she could do anything, he pulled the knitted throw over and basically cocooned the two of them together.

She flashed back to that day off when they'd done something similar. Yet the fine tremors that ran under his skin and the tight way he held her made a stark difference between the two times. Sequestered away from the world, with perhaps the only other entity who knew why, Diya allowed herself to let the remnants of that day fall over her.

They held each other, gentle touches and low murmurs with no words easing one then the other as the night wore on. She never slept and she didn't believe he did either. They just drew comfort in the fact that they were together. Words and discussion would come.

But that was for another day.
Weather changes effecting old wounds was an often researched topic. So often that Donnie had a whole folder dedicated to it. Even so, he was still annoyed when the dip in temperatures came with a stiffness to his shoulder.

It didn't keep him from looking out for his brother and his---

Girlfriend. Mikey had a girlfriend.

A brief flare of incredulity was brushed aside under the need to cross check the police reports that were filed. Nothing so far that indicated any suspicions about Diya's account of the Foot attack. Wisely, she had never named the Foot. Only that 'armed men' attacked them, then she drew a likeness of the uniforms so accurate that it was entered into the report itself, along with the more 'legal' forensic artist's own entry.

All clear on that front.

Perched on the roof of her building gave Donnie a clearer signal as well as a better view. There was little chance that there would be an attack tonight. The more time passed, the more he believed in the theory that the Foot would just try a different angle. Outright kidnapping had not worked out.

And Donnie truly believed that was what it was. Not a hostage situation. A kidnapping with collateral in the form of Diya's coworker.

The holograms around him were dimmed so as not to draw the eye of a casual pedestrian or anyone looking out their window. He still saw everything clear as day. Mostly because he had done little else other than review the footage.

Pieced together from several security cameras and tagged in information from the TADPOLES, the large SUV approached the art gallery at a sedate but steady pace. Upon reaching the gallery, a single man exited from the back at the driver's side. The details Donnie managed to tease out told him that in addition to a driver and front passenger---both Foot soldiers---a fourth person had been in the back seat. The man went to the gallery, was met by a harassed looking soldier from inside, then he hurried back to the SUV. The vehicle departed at that same non-threatening pace and the gallery emptied of Foot soldiers that were never seen on tape.

Donnie had a clear view of the man from the SUV. Reddish-blond hair and beard, neatly trimmed and professional in style. Bright hazel eyes. 5'9" from his calculations. Neat suit with a vest but no tie, all neutral colors that would have fit from Wall Street to the Metropolitan Opera House. Donnie even had a complete retinal scan.

Though that came from the moment the man stared directly at the camera across the street from the gallery. As though he expected someone to be looking at the footage and wanted them to see him before he re-entered the SUV.

A bold and confident individual. Someone who didn't fear being identified. And with good reason, Donnie learned. Because the man was nowhere to be found.

Donnie ran the man through every system he had access to with no luck. Even Vincent and the resources at the task force gleamed no more information. It was as though the man had not existed until he stepped onto the street that day.

His system pinged, an alert to a new email. He scanned it then dismissed it. Something that could wait; another in a line of things that just distracted him.
Donnie glanced down at the fire escape, watching the lights from inside the apartment shift across the metal. Distractions...

No. Distractions had not lead to this. That wasn't the reasoning behind Mikey's reluctance. Even if he hadn't wanted to, Donnie heard the conversation between the two of them clear as day from where he sat. Mainly because he was curious. Also because he needed to gauge when would be a tactful way to bring up any security measures this Diya would allow.

Emotion. Pure and simple. Emotion lead to this.

Donnie rewound the footage to watch the unknown man return to the vehicle. As he always did, the man looked up to the camera. Then he mouthed three words that Donnie didn't need a lip-reading program to decipher.

Another time, then.

A dismissal. A concession. A challenge. All in one. Or something else?

Regardless, it brought a cold clarity to Donnie's thoughts. He could put aside emotion. He could be the one to make the hard calls. The one to bring up the unpleasant options. The one to say what needed to be said.

If it meant keeping his family safe, Donnie could do anything.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading and hitting this milestone with me! I'm floored by the response, it means so much to me!
There were times Donatello’s mind was a mystery even to himself. Like how, in the midst of a situation spiraling out of control, he still did something ingenious.

The increase in chatter from the TADPOLES (Technical Aerial Distance and Periphery Observation Lookout Emergency System) started around 0800. Barely an hour later, Donnie was sure it wasn’t just a glitch but the system actually doing as he’d intended it to and alerting them to a possible situation.

The eagerness for a gadget actually working was overshadowed by the full weight of the situation at hand. Even as his family’s world tipped on a knife’s edge of uncertainty, he was aware enough to notice it.

A blip.

So small, it should have been missed. But it was enough to draw his attention. Enough that he paused mid-type.

But Raph and April’s arrival, paired with Leo’s questions on the situation, redirected him. So while one hand kept pulling records and loading up camera feeds, the other pounded out a simple command into the system before returning to the task.

A week later, Donnie found himself amazed at the foresight of such a thing.

Had it not been for those screen shots and the half-coherent note, it would have all been forgotten. Mikey’s stricken reaction to the situation drew everything into a tight tunnel. The knowledge that there was someone his brother cared about involved, that she was the target for that very reason, smothered any wandering tangent he might have.

All that mattered was getting her safe and keeping her so. Finding the one responsible for it soon took priority as they waited for a fall out that never happened. Donnie poured over the same four minutes and thirteen seconds of footage like a man possessed. And would have kept doing so had he not needed to recharge his communicator and couldn’t find the right cord.

Once it was plugged into his hub, the holographic system report he had been ignoring blared into life and demanded to be viewed. Too large to be contained with the usual HUD around his glasses, this one took the rough shape and form of a TV screen displayed in front of him. Annoyance bled into question. Then confusion. Then a single, cold drop of fear.

Sheer Ferocity

Chapter Summary

The aftermath of the Foot attack has everyone recouping.

And Donnie getting closer to questions rather than answers.
The blip wasn’t a blip. Sure, it appeared so: a few pixels lagging a full two seconds behind the rest before returning. But from what he read, that wasn’t the end of it.

Donnie performed the system scrub, even going so far as to reset the security measures around the Lair and on all their devices. His brothers knew something was happening but only Mikey peppered him with questions. He was too deep, though, to give any kind of understandable answer.

As the new norm of having Diya Davis in their lives settled, Donnie was able to ground out a few key words that raised his own hackles (if he had any). “Something’s trying to breach us.”

Leo’s eyes narrowed, tension upped in seconds. He watched the screens before him with more than a little recognition. While he never dabbled in programming, he was able to at least notice patterns in code and follow Donnie’s rambling better than most. “They haven’t succeeded?”

Always quick to get to the core of the concern; that helped ease some of Don’s own tension. “So far? No. The attempts never last longer than a minute. It’s like whoever or whatever it is darts out, touches the firewalls, then retreats. And repeats in a slightly different way. But it’s been too minimal to do anything other than affect one screen at a time.”

Leo cast a glance over the hub as a whole, taking in more than a dozen working monitors and the handful on the border that flickered between preset images in lieu of any helpful information. He seemed impressed despite himself.

“Until the next attempt,” Donnie went on, “I won’t know if I can trace it back to who it is. Let’s hope they don’t get too frustrated and give up, right?”

Blue eyes rolled, breaking the schooled mask of contemplation. “Only you would wish for that.”

“Hey, always got to update your Christmas list,” he said, shrugging. “It would be nice to get a gift from Santa that would help this mess instead of adding to it. I’m just hoping whatever I get, it’s something warm. Heating unit wants to crap out at the worst times at night.”

There was a beat. Then a grimace Donnie more felt that saw. “So, that’s really happening?”

“Day set and everything.” A click of keys and a calendar app popped up on the screen nearest Leo. The date in question was circled and had an animated Christmas tree on it.

Leo muttered under his breath, probably something foul, but didn’t press it further. And Donnie didn’t believe that any more than he believed Raph about these clandestine meetings with ‘some musician’ being part of keeping Amaya safe at night.

The eldest of them may try to act like it was a frivolous thing but Donnie knew better. Any excuse to have everyone gather, a chance to dwell on something happy, something that kept out the craziness of the world for a few hours: Leo welcomed it even if he never said so out loud.

So Donnie let him stew and gripe about the party, all the while hiding a smile because Leo may be the oldest of them but in many ways his inner child was the worst of them all.

And all the while, working to figuring out just who was trying to break in.

---

Sully was always the first one to open the Shoppe. And none of the others were scheduled to come on shift for another hour. Plenty of time to get a few things done in peace and quiet.
At least, that was how it usually went. But certainly not with this cacophony currently ringing out from the back.

He quickly threw his things down on the counter, wincing at a particularly loud crash, before hurrying through to the back door. Expecting to see parts strewn all about the floor, Sully was taken aback when there as nothing more than a single box sitting off to the side with a few tablets sticking up at all angles.

The crashing stopped. Then Sullivan rounded the corner of the massive set of shelves. She held a single computer tower in her arms, so outdated it took both hands to hold on to. Sully’s question stopped at the sight of her face.

Sullivan was always pale. As she often claimed, she didn’t get outside much during daylight hours. Yet that had nothing to do with the drawn, almost sickly cast to her now. Nothing but fire burned in her eyes, though. If anything, that just made the severe expression even more so.

She stopped short at seeing him in the doorway. Adjusting her grip on the tower, she cleared her throat before saying, “You’re early.”

Sully gave a pointed look to the clock hanging over the doorway before turning back to her.

“Fine, fine,” she mumbled.

Seeing her hover, Sully took pity on her and stepped out of her way. When she still hesitated, it just perplexed him further.

There were many things to expect when involved with Sullivan. High among them: that she never did anything without reason. To see her hesitate was not comforting.

Reading such discomfort cause a little life to bleed back into her. She blew out a breath through her teeth and set the tower on the ground. She straightened, hand on her hips, and more life crept back into her as they talked. All the while, one leg kept pressed against the tower as though to make sure it stayed there.

“You been watching the news?”

“What outrageous claim could be worthy of your attention now?” he asked, wary.

“The thing with the art gallery,” she said. Her jaw clenched as though to hold back on more words.

Sully frowned. “Yeah, but I thought it was all over and done with---”

“Well, it’s not,” she cut in. “At least not yet. There were some…some things that caught my attention. That deserve looking into.” A beat. Then, “Has any of the old crew contacted you?”

A chill ran through his middle. He looked back down at the computer tower. Mentally, he worked back on how old it possibly was. And…yeah, it was plausible. If she was digging out tech from that bygone era…

“None so far,” he said at last. “What about this is worrying you?”

“Police response time,” she said in almost a whisper. “Something about it feels---it just felt off. And if the rumors are true---”

“Rumors that you still aren’t sure of. Hey, I’m still unsure of it and they’ve contacted me directly.”
Sully checked over his shoulder but they were still alone. Even if the conversation was making him feel like they weren’t.

Sullivan grimaced, eyes narrowed down on the tower at her feet. “There’s another player,” she said at last. “Some other party is involved.”

“How sure are you?”

“Enough that I’m rigging my setup with a kill-switch and keeping a grand in cash as well as my passport on my person at all times. This party---It’s weird,” she said at length. “I’ve noticed an uptick in cell tower activity that had nothing to do with phone calls. A particular surge of it happened right before that gallery got hit. Something with one of the employees, I’m sure of it. If the police are monitoring it as well---”

“Certain it’s not the police?”

She shook her head, one hand scratching at her scalp as she thought. “There’s a rough sort of finesse with this stuff. Not police-grade. It’s like---It’s almost as if---” She hesitated and he felt that chill intensify before she even said it.

“Like it was Malcolm?” he asked.

Sullivan flinched at the name. But she nodded.

Sully swore; the situation warranted it. “What should we do?”

“You do nothing,” she said with ease. Hefting the tower back in hand, she nudged the box and motioned for him to grab it. He did without question and followed her out the back entrance.

A town car waited in the narrow alley, the trunk open. The driver nodded at Sullivan in the mirror yet did not say anything nor leave the car.

She deposited the tower in the trunk and he set the box beside it. Both hesitated.

Then Sullivan slammed the trunk shut and said, “If the police come by, let me know. Otherwise, no contact.”

“You sure?” he asked. He couldn’t help it.

Their relationship was always wavering between weird and oddly comforting. As eccentric as she was at times, she was a constant where the Shoppe was concerned. To think that she wouldn’t be involved for a while…

Sullivan nodded. When she looked up at him, she was almost back to normal. A hard set to her jaw had him thinking of all the implications of what the old tech had to do with this.

The old days were…well, it wasn’t a time he wanted to dwell on. Particularly if she was right in thinking the authorities were involved. It was always tricky.

“If there’s a new group making a move on the city,” she said, a bite underlying her words, “then they’re gonna learn what happened to the last ones that tried.”

With that proclamation hanging in the air, she clapped his arm by means of farewell and got in the town car. It drove off without another word said.

Sully watched until the car turned and the tail lights flipped out of sight. Then he went back inside
It was going to be a long day. If he spent it all anticipating either the ‘old crew,’ as she said, or even the police, he would be worn out before noon.

This third party? Well, that had him wondering about a few rumors that had been going around the last few months.

New York City had plenty to go on with gangs and criminal activity. He should know, as deep in the thick of it as they sometimes got. Yet it also had its share of those who sought to protect it.

Those who were never seen. Vigilantes that the city owed for saving it time and again.

Vigilantes… that worked outside the law.

Thoughts brewing, Sully faced the day ahead still wary but now just as equally curious.

---

At the two-week mark since the incident at the art gallery, everyone started to loosen. In a manner of speaking.

Mikey still spent most of his time at Diya’s apartment. Which no one begrudged. Truly, many thought it was more startling when he did pop back to the Lair. And even though she could hardly scrape any time to herself, Diya more than wanted Mikey there with her; even if it was outside.

Alone time was hard to come by once word got out to her family that she was in better spirits. At first, only her immediate and local family had been by to check on her and to hear about the horrid affair from her own mouth. Yet one word from her mother had sent most everyone back to give her the few days she needed to regroup after giving her statement to the police.

Diya had coordinated a whole day in which Donnie put the first level of security upgrades on her place. Physical means were being look at by her building superintendent. So, Donnie had mainly been concerned with making sure there were no electronic means of spying or information gathering. Besides the obvious threat of the Foot, no one doubted there may be more mundane threats now that word got around of who had been involved in the incident.

He never expected said means to be put to the test that very first day.

The twittering alerts started low, hardly background noise as he turned his attention to a few mods to the Shell-Raiser that came to him. Yet it slowly cascaded into a near incessant trilling in his ears. Pulling himself out of the cab, he flicked the blinking screen up to full view.

In real time, he watched as firewalls were tested against her main computer, her phone received spam calls, phishing emails were sent to both her personal and work emails, and even attempts at accessing the apartment’s Wi-Fi. All simple things, truly.

Except that the sheer ferocity of it all was disturbing to watch. One after the other, each attempt was thwarted by the security measures—something he was certainly proud of, no mistake---but another was tried even as the last failed. The tenacity of it all told him one thing.

Someone was probing at the new security set up in Diya’s place.

He put in the call to Mikey even as he headed to the surface. When his brother picked up, he blurted, “Mikey, what’s happening at Diya’s right now?”
“Just some peeps hanging out,” he reported, sounding perplexed.

“Who? Specifically?”

“Uh, family---a few aunts and uncles, all her kid siblings, her mom and grandma. And some friends, by the looks of it. Why? What’s up?”

“I’ll go over it when I get there. Let me know if anything weird happens.”

Donnie expected to get such a notice. But the shell-cell remained silent once he hung up. Given that it was still early in the afternoon, there was a big risk of being spotted if he tried looking through the window.

Luckily, he had other means. A few of the TADPOLES in the area kept a running count of people entering and leaving the building. Yet once he looked at the feed from just before the activity started, he couldn’t find anyone who stood out.

And all the while, the attacks kept going. None succeeded. There still remained the question: who was doing it?

And why?

---

Mikey watched, nervous and hovering, as Donnie kept going with whatever computer-magic he was working to try to figure out what was going on.

He couldn’t keep down the pang of worry. Things had been quiet. Quiet enough that Diya was losing that tension that haunted her. He wanted to call her, ask her if she noticed anything suspicious. But he didn’t want to worry her.

And Donnie kept assuring him what whatever or whoever was doing this was failing miserably. That was comforting. It meant she was still safe.

The clamor from inside the apartment, spacious when it was just the two of them but now nearly at capacity, never strayed from anything but normal conversations. No tension, no underlying sense of something nefarious happening.

The timing was strange though.

Eventually, Diya started scooting people out the door. Many left without protest, having gotten their fill of the story, retold now by others and not just Diya herself. By the end of it, only her mother and a friend remained.

As people left, Donnie shifted, the holograms around him altering as well. Mikey, waiting, a hand hovering over his nun chuck.

“It’s stopping,” the purple-banded Turtle said at last.

Mikey blew out a breath, relieved. “Did ya catch who it was?”

Donnie shook his head. “I am getting a clearer signal on where it came from,” he said, half a murmur.

A beep from Mikey’s phone pulled him away. The message from Diya that her mom would be heading out soon, only her friend Lyn would be staying. First time in a while where the apartment
wouldn’t be housing several more; she saw no reason for the out-of-town relatives to book a hotel for a single night, meaning more than a few who might’ve been curious as to why she turned in so early and kept the door locked shut. The friend had been staying for about the last week and had more than claimed the sofa as her preferred sleeping space.

A giddy bubble in his chest pushed away all thoughts of why Donnie was there. Lately, Diya slept better when he was there. And truthfully, he did, too. Too easy to wake in the dark and let the half-faded dreams feel too real.

Mikey pushed aside a shiver as Donnie straightened from his crouch. He watched his brother turn a slow circle, concentrating on whatever his holograms were telling him. Donnie didn't say anything, though.

Usually that mean good things.

---

Donnie waited until well after his brother ghosted his way into Diya’s bedroom for the night. Night fell over the city in its usual way. As it did, Donnie looked over what the last hours of monitoring told him.

The attempts against the security system faded into nonexistence a little while ago. Even now, he kept pulling up the logs and reviewing this piece or that. Kept looking over the readouts his own tracing software told him.

The programs used for this…felt familiar. He’d seen it before. The where of it was eluding him.

Donnie racked his brain, trying to think of the last time he’d encountered something like this. Digital warfare was not wholly uncommon these days. Besides a few of the extra-terrestrial kinds he and his brothers encountered, there just wasn’t a huge call for the gangs of New York to have someone with this level of coding in their resume.

He entertained himself for a moment imagining Shedder trying to do this. Humor aside, it should have been unlikely to be connected with the Foot attack. The timing suggested differently.

As he waited, he reviewed what files he had on the hacker and other digital-type crimes they had ever been involved in. Compared to the rest, it was minimal. A few names made him pause. Searches on a few individuals showed either a halt in activity or they were still serving their sentences behind bars.

He then wondered if it had been a joint case with the police. That would take a more thorough search. As he mentally catalogued which ones to look for, it led him to another thought.

What if it was just a hacker? Individual or group alike, trying to capitalize on what was perceived as a person traumatized and vulnerable?

Not original yet still in the realm of possibility.

The timer on his HUD zeroed out. Certain the way was clear, Donnie hurried to the other side of the building and peered down to the alley below. This was the side mainly used by maintenance and for various deliveries. The dumpsters were only partly full and the few trashcans not tipped over were empty.

It was also the only location he was able to deduce before the signal had been lost completely. Donnie took a moment to assure himself this was the right thing to do. Then he scaled down the
building and climbed into the first dumpster.

There was a total of four dumpsters. So, of course, it wasn’t until he was moving from the third and into the last one that he saw it on the ground.

Amid the plastic bags, half rotten papers, and things people tossed without concern, there as a single out of place tablet. The plastic case was simple and cheap, too cheap to fully protect it from whoever had thrown it out. A crack spider-webbed across the screen.

Still, it was what it held that was important. Donnie picked it up and turned it on. It booted up with no problem. No passcode protected it. The apps lining the screen were mundane and rather boring. Nothing to give him any pause. Not until he turned it over.

A sticker, at a slanted angle as though it had been applied carelessly, read: PROPERTY OF MALCOLM COMPUTER REPAIR SHOPPE – PLEASE RETURN IF FOUND. The address and contact info were neatly printed under that.

A tight, cold feeling gripped his chest.

Well…looks like he and the mystery ‘Sullivan’ were circling one another. Without even trying.

With a grim smile, Donnie stowed the tablet away to go through it more in depth at the Lair.

The thought that he had been so close nagged at him. And made him all the more determined to find them first.
A Small Sentiment

Chapter Summary

Time turns on and the holidays approach.
As it always does, Amaya fights the memories this brings.

Chapter Notes

Didn't expect this post to fall during the holidays but I'm not gonna complain!

Christmas was a weird time.
It was great ‘cuz the city was such a different place to be. The decorations, the travelers, a general sense that the year was drawing to a close and the new possibilities that waited on the other side.

And, of course, the weather. Leo loved the snow. Mickey spoke endlessly about it, nagged every one of them into going topside and having a snowball fight. Yet there was no way his enthusiasm matched Leo’s. The eldest just didn’t vocalize it like the youngest.

As soon as the first flakes started drifting, Leo was there waiting for it. Even if it didn’t stick, if it was melted long before it touched the ground, the hazy fog that covered the city was always a sight that stopped his breath.

Now, a week before Thanksgiving, the city had more than seen a snowfall. A good few inches topped any sedentary, flat surface. Going off instinct, Leo guessed it would thaw and freeze back into ice before morning. A white Christmas was possible but only after trudging through ice and slush for a while longer.

Even so, Leo was on top of the bridge that housed the entrance to the garage. He watched the snowfall and felt himself settle. A feeling not unlike when he hit the zenith of his meditation wrapped around him. It was the first time in quite a long, long while he’d felt it.

The incident at the art gallery weighed on his mind. About a month has passed with no hint of the Foot looking to try again. At first, he weighed on Diya’s relationship with Mikey would bring them around without hesitation. Yet all of the security measures Donnie had implemented all reported clear signs. Aside from a neighbor who seemed to be dealing in insider trading, nothing amiss could be found.

The girl’s presence in their lives had also been something he was sure would bring trouble. But from her end. She was either adhering to a very particular set of rules someone had given her (he suspected April but was sure Mikey had pitched in, probably Donnie, too), or she was even more paranoid from the kidnapping thing that he thought.
Leo frowned, the warmth from the snowfall lessening at the thought. Kidnapping. Donnie laid that out very clear. And he insisted that everyone be informed. It was one of a handful of times the eldest Turtle could honestly say that his brother had been giving an order without being aware of it. While that was something that needed to be considered all on its own, the very word kept tripping around Leo’s head.

What could the Foot have been planning? And why? Sure, they could have wanted to kidnap Diya because of Mikey. No doubt in that. But then what?

Questions like that chilled him more than the weather did. Not from a lack of answers. There were answer a plenty. It just sickened him.

There were times, when he was around both Mikey and his girl, when Leo caught a shadow crossing his brother’s face. Like a thought was brewing behind his grin and Mikey fought with everything he had to keep it to himself.

Mikey wasn’t dumb. Whatever Leo might say in anger or irritation, that was a truth he would not deny.

The thought circled him. As it had for the last month, Mikey’s heated words from that day trailed along the end.

*Like you wouldn’t do the same thing if it was---*

Mikey wasn’t dumb. And Leo had been more than aware of the unsaid things from that day. The things that lingered.

Night fell over the city. Though more snow was predicted to fall, Leo made his careful way down to the Lair. An uneasy ball shifted around his gut. Partly because of tonight.

How a Christmas party had been agreed upon and planned without him being quite aware of it alarmed him. Yet it was a done deal and rather than be the ‘sad Scrooge sack,’ as Raph teased, Leo just shook his head at the whole thing. Christmas in the Lair was a tradition from before he could remember. Splinter would always manage to find a gift for each of his sons while on a scavenging trip. Never once had any of them been disappointed.

Over the years, April then Casey had joined in. It started to have a little more meaning, then. A sign that their family of five was growing. If he’d been asked back in June, Leo never would have guessed there would be another new face that year.

Things were happening that night due to the hectic schedules of the Humans. April was sure she was going to be on assignment sometime in December, the date unclear. And there had yet to be a year when Casey wasn’t late or falling asleep far too early from being overworked. Diya, they had learned, came from a very extended and very close family. Starting Sunday, she was practically booked until after the New Year. Though Leo had a suspicion she had made certain to set aside time for her and Mikey come the 25th.

Hitting the sewers, Leo felt himself smiling. An old fear lingered in those days after the kidnapping. He had been wound up, on guard and ready for---

Well, he couldn’t really put it into words. The brief interactions he’d had with Diya hadn’t lent him to think she would be violent or even cruel. But there had been every chance that things could have ended, that day.

And now, Michelangelo had a girlfriend. A serious one, at that. It was…
Hell, it was weird just thinking it. That didn’t stop it being true. Didn’t lessen the knowledge that his baby brother had someone who loved him.

…yeah, that topped Leo’s list of “Thing I Never Expected to Weird Me Out.”

Feeling that unease grow, Leo hit the next tunnel at a run. He tried to focus his mind, wanted to keep himself in the moment. Not down the tracks this unease always brought him. Try as he might, even when fulling full tilt through water swollen sewers, it came to him.

Complicated.

Leonardo could summarize the whole situation with that one word. Whether as a brother, a leader, or even as a mutant turtle. It was just…complicated. Being in a relationship was a complication that brought on a headache of worries. It was an added stress to security. It was another tangent that needed to be addressed in their training. It was something that none of them had even bothered to consider as a possibility.

And Leo was also aware enough to know that in all these scenarios he ran, it wasn’t Mikey and Diya he saw.

---

Going from never seeing the Lair to being there at least twice in a week was odd. But Amaya had seen much odder things in life. Didn’t make the surreal feeling diminish any.

She resolutely turned her phone on silent, a promise to April for the night. Also part of her Christmas gift, though April assured that she didn’t need anything else.

Amaya glanced at her rearview mirror, gaze lingering over the bundles resting in the back of her SUV. She chewed at her lip, nervous without fully knowing how to articulate why.

Gifts---no, Christmas was not something she was familiar with. The past three years she endured awkward gift exchanges with Prejean, slowly gaining confidence with each one. And there were a few managers and employers that she made sure to give a little something, even if it was just a gift card.

She couldn’t draw on childhood to act as a guide. A feeling not unlike cold tar ran through her gut at the passing thought. Bright lights, uncomfortable clothes, presents wrapped in shining paper were the least of it. It was always the eyes. Eyes that watched her. Eyes that seemed to leave that cold, sticky feeling even hours later. The feeling that wouldn’t go away no matter how much she scrubbed herself raw in the shower---

A car horn broke Amaya from the reverie. Traffic moved around her as she sat at the stoplight, transfixed by the glaring green. She quickly made the turn, hoping to leave the memories behind.

The trail to the bridge entrance helped. Though mostly vacant, as it often was, the melting then refreezing snow made the streets dangerous enough to warrant her full concentration. As she passed into the concealed tunnel, a wave of relief washed over her.

Pulling into the garage, she saw no clue as to the planned party. Once the engine cut off, however, she heard Christmas music blaring loud and clear. She smiled for what felt like the first time all day.

Amaya hopped out of the car and found her gaze again drawn to the heaps in the back. The car door shut with a hard slam and she made her way into the Lair proper. More lights were strung
across any surface that could support it. A tree was planted on the cement hump in the middle of
the sunken floor, branches crammed so full of ornaments, tinsel, and even more lights that each
looked in danger of snapping off.

She frowned at it, drawing closer as though entranced. The smell hit her, sharp and clean and so
vibrant she held in a lung full just to savor it. How they managed to not only find a real tree but
wrangle it down here was beyond her. She hadn’t been involved in that particular adventure.

The music abruptly cut off amid furious shouts. The cacophony was so garbled Amaya couldn’t
understand anything further than Mikey had done something and Raph was upset about it. And
honestly that could be any number of things. It didn’t sound like something too serious, though.

“Good evening.”

A gallant effort to not shriek at the sudden voice succeeded, though she still tensed. Splinter stood
just beside her, enough space to not crowd her but still close enough it had her sweating. Whatever
it was about the mutated rat, he seemed to be the only entity immune to being sensed.

Splinter’s black eyes glinted under the sharp lights, no sign of what in particular caught his
attention other than the flustered human before him. “Leonardo is out at the moment,” he said
easily. “April and Casey are also on their way, from what Donatello tells me.”

“Good,” Amaya said, fighting to keep the urge to look around for other surprise guests creeping up
on her. “I was afraid I would the last.”

A loud noise filled the air, like a table falling over. With the tree in the way, Amaya couldn’t really
see what was going on. Splinter just shook his head and started for the source of the shouting. He
paused. “Did it work out as you wished?”

Flustered for a whole different reason, Amaya nodded.

Black eyes went from her to the garage entrance in a silent but gentle question.

“I just---I wanted to wait a bit,” she said in a rush. “Let the party get going before I bring it in. You
know?”

Splinter nodded, somehow reassuring without saying a word. She watched him walk off. With him
gone, she had no excuse for the clammy feel to her skin.

Amaya looked back to the Christmas tree. A few presents lay under it, a delightful hodge-podge of
wrapping techniques and material. A few tags peeked out among them. She tried not to feel
surprised to see one with her name on it.

Memories did what they wanted. She could push them aside as hard as she could but they would
still come back. She looked back to the garage and prayed that making new ones would give the
old ones less power.

---

By the time April and Casey arrived, the party already started. There had been a fight about the
food and while it had involved the table being upended nothing of the delicious dinner had been
ruined. Then another squabble about what music would be appropriate, with Master Splinter ruling
in favor of setting everything to a shuffle. He looked like he regretted the decision as soon as the
second parody song started. After that, it tended to more traditional or pop songs. And if Donnie
was fiddling with his equipment from time to time no one bothered to draw attention to it less
Mikey realize it.

The buzz of conversation rarely died down. Diya’s presence was new enough that there were questions and inquiries from both sides. She seemed in awe of the lair, often staring off like she was lost in thought. Then she would grab a sketchbook the size of her hand and cover the pages with sketches so quickly Donnie even tried to film it to see just how she was doing that. She grinned and laughed and talked and generally looked at ease among them.

If her hand wandered to Mikey’s, if they shared a look full of silent conversation, none of it was tinged with worry or concern. Just a gentle sort of glow from both of them, basking in the other’s presence even when surrounding by others.

Not that Leo wanted there to be. It was---ok, fine, he was just being over cautious, as April griped at him. The lingering fears just wouldn’t let him be. So he tried to get lost in the party, tried to keep his own mood from souring and ruining everyone’s good time. And he did enjoy it. It was nice to have a reason to relax.

Dinner itself was a confusing affair of turkey, pizza, a handful of dishes from the Chinese place Amaya worked at, and things Mikey insisted were sides but were probably desserts. It didn’t matter if a sweet potato was a vegetable, if it was covered in melted marshmallows and molasses then dammit it was a dessert.

With so many of them, Raph pushed what tables they had together to make a somewhat-big-enough dining area. April ended up sitting on Casey’s lap for lack of chairs and Diya just perched on the edge of the giant wooden spool that Mikey, Amaya, and Raph claimed for themselves. She hardly took up any space. Though with the way Mikey kept shooting covert looks to April and Casey, he might be trying to figure out a way to suggest she just copy April.

Leo snorted into his lo mein at the thought. Mikey being cautious and nervous was not something he usually considered. Still a nice change of pace, all things considered.

Plates were hardly cleaned before people were calling for presents. In that, the years had changed nothing. A brief scuffle at the base of the tree always happened, no matter how clam people promised to be. Eventually someone started handing out the gifts; this year Casey took on that role. Age could not stem eagerness, either. Wrapping paper flew into the air and people exclaimed or called out thanks at the gifts inside.

From what he gathered by the Humans, this was practically every Christmas. A small sentiment that still sent a bolt of warmth through Leo that some part of their childhood could be considered ‘normal.’ Amid the slow churn of chaos and falling paper, an area of calm caught his eye.

Sensei stood to the side, watching it all with a small smile, no doubt reflecting on past years spent like this as well. Amaya stood near him, neither participating in the mass exploration of gifts nor talking to Splinter. She held her arms crossed tight across her chest, distorting that ridiculous cartoon dumpling shirt she swore was the uniform of *A Wok to Remember*. Dark eyes watched everyone under a furrowed brow. Not in anger or even confusion, as he first thought.

As he watched, her jaw worked as though she were holding back words. When she shifted and caught Splinter’s concerned eye, red dusted her cheeks and she ducked her head. Splinter let out a silent sigh and shake of his head. It was a move that Leo had seen countless times growing up: paternal worry and exasperation. With a hint of amusement.

Leo started for them, curious as to what exactly caused this unusual bonding moment between the two. Diya’s tiny but formidable figure hopped in his way and he had to halt quickly before bowling.
her over. She brandished a gift at him, wrapped in a length of cloth that seemed to be as much a present as the box it covered. A glance around showed similar ingenuity to her gifts.

Diya beamed as he carefully untied the box. “My sister’s a senior in clothing design and she’s been experimenting with her dye techniques. I figured it would also be a more meaningful way to wrap the gifts than just paper.”

Creative to a fault, there was just no way around the fact that she and Mikey were made for each other. Leo’s comment on the fact faded when he opened the plain wooden box.

Nestled inside, a folded length of blue lay. He blinked down at it for a moment. Then he carefully drew it out. A mask dangled from his fingers, the material soft to the touch. Yet when he tested the give, it felt sturdier than just plain cotton. The box wasn’t deep but there were an additional three that pulled away from the one he drew out.

Either she had chosen to give Leo’s his first or no one else had opened theirs yet. His brothers’ voices rose in thanks at the new masks while he still looked his over. Even the color was spot on: clear, bright blue without being a glaring hindrance.

Diya giggled as Mikey looped an arm around her and pulled her back for a noisy kiss to her cheek. She settled against him, hand tangling with his, and said to the group at large, “I figured you couldn’t have too many. And they didn’t seem like it would take much to ruin them.”

“Is it a blend? Spandex and cotton?” Donnie asked. Leo looked over and---yep, the Tech-Turtle had his goggles fixed on his box, holograms blurring as it took readings.

Donnie and Diya went back and forth for a bit, talking about fabric density or something equally confusing. Mikey hooked his chin over her shoulder, grin big and a touch goofy, yet didn’t interrupt. Raph glanced at them, mouth tipped into the smallest smirk he could manage.

April cooed over her own gift from Diya---a scarf that looked like a sunset---before turning to the island of calm that was Sensei and Amaya. “Come on, join in,” she said, waving them over to two stacks that had been untouched.

Amaya’s arms clenched for a second, enough that Leo saw and again wondered about. Another side long glance from Splinter finally broke whatever funk she was in. She blew out a breath through her teeth before saying, “I---uh…I got some stuff I haven’t unloaded yet. Casey? Can you give me a hand?”

The Turtles all exchanged questioning glances, even April frowning after the two as they left for the garage. A few minutes later, Casey and Amaya returned with their arms near bursting from the bundles they carried. Amaya lingered where she had been standing but Casey went straight to the Christmas Tree so she had no choice but to follow and rest her load beside his.

There were six bundles, each wrapped in plain, brown paper and tied with string. Amaya knelt on the floor beside the stack. Her jaw worked, clearly uncomfortable but determined. Without a word, she starting grabbing bundles and handing them out.

Leo tried to catcher her eye, curiosity warring with concern. But she kept her own gaze firmly on the concrete beneath her. He felt the bundle between his hands, noting the weight was more than he thought, and tried to ration out what exactly was making her act this way. If she was that uncomfortable with this, maybe they should wait---

Mikey’s drawn out, “Whoa,” drew everyone’s eye. Never one to wait, he tore into his bundle as
Leo pondered. Whatever it was came in pieces and almost fell out of the paper now that it was torn. Between him and Diya, they both managed to keep it together and spread everything out on the floor. Sleek, muted black was all Leo saw for a moment. His fingers gripped his own gift through the paper, feeling where there was give and where it was firm and unyielding. Then it hit him.

Armor.

As if everyone realized at once, the others tore into the wrappings. A second wave of noise and paper flying into the air crested. In the hubbub, Amaya slowly scooted away until she was sitting outside the chaos. Once again, she and Splinter were an island of calm. This time, though, a small smile pulled at her lips.

Leo was almost at a lost as to what to examine first when he got his set laid out on a cleared section of the dining table. The set was broken into easy to apply clothing: greaves, thigh-guards, vambraces, arm-guards and a chest portion that kept drawing his eye. He gave in and pulled it up, turning it over and peering at all the little details.

It was unfair to call it a ‘vest’ because there was literally no back. The waist attached to itself with a series of fastenings that could be adjusted. The neck was a high collar that was held in place with Velcro so heavy-duty Leo wondered how difficult would it be to get it off. Essentially, it covered what his shell couldn’t. The padded sections for the chest, abdomen, and sides were firm to the touch yet had a slight give to it, like scales shifting for ease of movement. Pressing hard, a comforting hardness met him.

Looking to the rest of the set, he drew a hand down the upper arm guards. Protection while still giving an ease of movement. The vambraces for his lower arms were much the same. Feeling slightly giddy, he pulled on the set for his right arm. It was smooth without feeling flimsy. If anything, it was like wearing thin Kevlar. Having it split into an upper and lower part kept his flexibility at peak.

A sharp whistle brought him around. Raph had donned most of the upper gear and he still fiddled with a vambrace. It fit him perfectly. He did a few stretches before leaping up to grab a low hanging pipe. After a few pull ups with no hindrance to his movements, he dropped back down in glee. Smirk firmly in place, he practically glowed. He rolled his shoulders, the pads there making the motion all the more intimidating.

That sharpened Leo’s focus. Shoulder pads for Raph. No excess of materials over the joints for his. Mikey’s wrists guards held built in brass knuckles, from the looks of it. Donnie’s held loops of elastic or punch outs clearly meant for equipment and customization while not loosing any of the protection.

And it all fit perfectly.

Casey, having marveled at his and April’s similar sets, turned wide eyes to Amaya. “How’d you get these?” he asked.

Amaya gave a tight-lipped smile, still struggling with whatever went on in her head. But she stood, brushing off her clothes, and said, “I didn’t get them. I made them.”

A collective hush fell over the group. She shifted, red darkening her cheeks again. “I had a gig that put me in touch with the right people. I called in a favor and a few of them have been helping me with this. It wasn’t meant to be a holiday thing,” she added with a little glare at the tree, “it just happened to be ready in time. The only thing I couldn’t figure out was footwear. So, glorified shin
guards it is. Or greaves, I guess.”

“Really?” April drawled, holding up a set of gauntlets that could probably stop most blades. “You make stuff like this and gripe about not getting to make shoes?”

“Hey, it’s my one weakness,” Amaya shot back, grinning despite the words. “All the jobs I’ve had, all the errands I’ve run? I have never been involved with a cobbler.”

Hours later, long after the party was officially called quits and the Humans went topside (with Mikey escorting Diya and no doubt getting in as much alone time as they could before her first family obligation), Leo was faced with a mirror.

There were plenty of reasons to have a functioning, full-length, no-Donnie-you-can’t-break-this-one-for-science mirror. The need to assess wounds. Check on the healing status of said wounds. Making sure the citizens wouldn’t be flashed by accident when being saved. And generally keeping well groomed.

Here and now, there was only one reason: vanity.

It felt silly. Almost like when they were kids and they’d dress up in whatever Sensei brought back from a trip topside. Except this wasn’t just ‘whatever.’

He put on the armor in his room, not wanting to get caught and feeling stupid for thinking that. No doubt everyone else was doing near the same thing. Raph had almost caused a scandal by dropping his pants right in the middle of things to finish putting the whole thing on. A quick word from Splinter had sent him off to behind doors to complete it. And when he’d emerged, even Leo had to admit his brother looked badass.

Which might be why he was doing this. Curious, yes. Wanting to make sure everything did indeed fit. But also…

Nutting up, Leo looked up into his reflection. And damn, it was badass.

He worried that the high collar, wrapping around his neck almost up to his jaw, would make him look like a vicar. Instead, it just looked like he was stepping out of the shadows. The black of the gear was so definite that it didn’t reflect light. Shadows just seemed to multiply across the surface with movement. What little pieces of metal were visible were a flat, matte grey. The bottom portions covered him from hips to ankle, more pieces of molded armor that moved with the littlest of movement, with the greaves giving more protection. The outside edge of the greaves was lightly serrated; not deep enough he needed to be careful walking but enough that given the right move it could easily rip into skin.

Leo gave it a few stretches, making sure nothing caught or got in the way. Then he unsheathed his blades and moved through some katas. All the while, he marveled at it.

Such a simple thing. Yet a profound thing.

Panting a bit, Leo eased from the last position back to one of rest. Blades still in hand, he looked over his reflection. Nothing was out of place beside the new outfit. A low grin pulled at his mouth.

Movement from behind had him spinning around. Sensei was there, black eyes twinkling when his eldest tensed at being caught. “I see the gifts are being appreciated.”
“Appreciated? If these work in a real fight as well as it feels, I don’t think we’ll ever repay her,” Leo said. He held a blade over his left arm, gently drawing it across the black material. No give, not even a pull from the edge of the blade.

“A gift does not seek repayment,” Sensei admonished though with no heat to his words. He watched as Leo flipped the blade, taking in both form and the equipment in question. “Amaya fretted over the state of them until recently. She feared the quality would suffer.”

Leo paused, squinting at his father. “You helped her out,” he stated.

Sensei grinned. “She wanted insight into what each of you needed. And also needed samples of clothing for the sizes.”

Leo racked his brain, trying to remember if he noticed that. Wasn’t as though they kept a running tally of their clothing. They used what was available and (mostly) clean. And, honestly, they’d been running through a lot of it recently. Diya’s comment on their masks falling apart was dead on.

He ran a thick finger over the mask he wore, one of the new ones she’d gifted. He wondered if they had planned this. But Diya had been surprised as she awed over the armor.

Then his father’s words reached him. “She fretted? How did you know? Even April was surprised.”

Sensei did not roll his eyes; Leo couldn’t honestly remember the last time he’d witness that. But his father took a breath that gave him time to collect himself before he responded. “Regardless of my lack of interest in it, technology if a wondrous thing. Particularly when one is not involved in a ‘group text’ that beacons at all hours of the day.”

Leo hid a grin at that. He rolled a sword over his knuckles, the want to put the armor through its paces still simmering. As he did, he noted how the vambraces rose over his hand to loop between his fingers. This left the space between his thumb and forefinger free. If the material had wrapped there, it would have caused chafing or even damage to the sword hilt in the long run.

All these small details. This attention to detail that couldn’t have just come from Splinter alone. It prodded at the knot of thoughts he didn’t want to have. Thoughts he shouldn’t have. Thoughts he didn’t deserve.

“I know it is not the season. Not yet, technically,” Sensei said, making his slow turn to depart. “But it would be less than ideal to spend it alone.”

Leo let his father go, still working his blade and still trying to push the knot down. And failing.

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Thanksgiving was always a crapshoot.

Amaya’s schedule was either packed to the brim or so empty even crickets wouldn’t chirp within. Right now it simmered between the two. She spent the morning prepping at an electronic store but had been sent home before their Black Friday sale even started. Seeing as though she had been there at 2AM, she could understand the managers not wanting to explain even more overtime on an already hectic day.

And now, she had nothing. Not until 6AM when that lingerie store wanted her to open for their own sales. A few discreet calls to her usual haunts had turned up nothing. Trying not to sigh,
Amaya just got in her SUV and headed home. If nothing else, leftovers and binge-watching was always a good fallback.

Just as she turned onto her street, her phone chimed. She didn’t check it, not even with the blue tint to the screen telling her who had texted. She waited until she was parked in the drive before even reaching for her phone.

Leo’s blue turtle preceded just one word: peekaboo.

Amaya almost expected to see him waiting in the garage as she got out. But, no, he was the one with some decorum. If it had been Raph, he might’ve pulled that. It wasn’t until she came into the kitchen and started dumping her stuff on the counter that she saw the shadowy figure on the back porch.

Shadow-man. Even after all these months, the name stuck.

A quilt lay neatly folded on a chair beside the back door. There from the last time she had spent some time on the porch with the dropping temperatures. She shed her coat, thankful to get rid of the weird packing-tape smell that always came from unpacking electronics, and wrapped herself in the quilt.

The porch light stayed off though the overcast sky made it feel closer to sunset than it was. Leo perched on one of the lawn chairs that just lived on the porch. He raised an eye ridge at her bundled appearance but said nothing.

“It’s cozy, hush,” she said anyway, ducking her head further under the fold of fabric as she took the other chair. “Everything good?”

“On our end,” he said with a shrug. “How about you?”

Amaya leaned back in the chair, tweaking the long foot rest until it was at the right angle. She still tucked her feet under the quilt and told herself that she was just getting comfortable.

…and not trying to hide.

She snorted to herself. If there was anyone who would call bullshit on anything she said that wasn’t the flat out truth, he was sitting beside her. “Holidays and events are weird,” she said at last. “Doesn’t take a genius of a shrink to know that, though.”

Another shrug. The motion made her gaze linger. He wore the armor, tonight. Probably had plans for patrol or something similar. Unable to help herself, she ran a critical eye over him, looking for imperfections or ways to improve the gear. Nothing glaringly obvious rose to her attention. Then he smirked and she grimaced at being caught.

“It’s been working out great,” he said, extending his left arm out. “Aside from adjusting the internal plates, haven’t done much of anything to it.”

“They were easy to adjust?”

“Donnie figured that out quick.” Another flex and display was more than enough to confirm his assurance. As he moved, the dim light caught the line of scar tissue that rose from the top of the arm guard.

No matter how often she saw that scar or the one arching over his face, a flash of cold bloomed in Amaya’s gut. Memories of stitching that skin together, seeing him bleeding out on the dining table-
She forced herself to turn back to the yard before them, gray and empty. “Always room for improvement,” she said, voice only a touch tight.

Leo set forward, elbows on his knees, yet he followed her lead and just looked at the back yard. The quiet lasted longer than she thought it would. When he finally spoke, it almost startled her. “Were you nervous about the gear itself? Or just the holiday thing in general?”

“Little of both?” Amaya titled her head as she considered it. “Not used to gift giving. And the gear had been giving us trouble before getting the hang of it.”

“What’s us?”

“People who owe me a favor and who don’t even live in the city. Worked at their gun range on and off for a while. Found out an employee was skimming. He makes armor and stuff like it for re-enactors as a side business. I gave him my request and he just went to work. Wanted to use chain mail at first,” she added with a smile and roll of the eyes.

“That would’ve been interesting to see. Not practical, but still.”

“I honestly can’t imagine any of you running around looking like rejects from a cross between the renaissance fair and a sci-fi convention. But he did reinforce some areas with something similar. At least he claims it would turn a blade.”

Another moment a quiet. An unasked question she felt without even looking at him. She felt him wrestle with it, knew the moment he decided to move on. And she just barreled on.

“It sucks you guys had to use trash for so long.”

Leo went still. Nothing like those few times where her hackles raised and the air crackled. It was close but…

Amaya shifted on the chair, pulling the quilt away from her face and deciding to stop hiding. He watched her, blue eyes intense and wary, body at ease while still feeling as though he would spring into action at any second. In the poor light—dressed like the warrior he was, scars plainly shown—it just made him feel all the more real.

She never hated herself more than that moment of weakness the night he got those scars. Of loosing it, of getting the shakes so bad Donnie had to give her some of their own badly needed meds. Of needing to sit, huddled in her kitchen while they dealt with the wounds of the night. Wounds she should have been able to help with.

It had taken meeting Splinter, an off hand remark on their gear—or lack of—and the rat’s tales of his sons’ training for the idea to solidify. She’d reached out to Mason and his group, asking questions she didn’t quite understand. Once started, it wouldn’t rest until she put it into motion.

Amaya couldn’t protect them. She couldn’t stop any bullet or blade or any other weapon coming for them. But she had the means to ensure that if a blow did land that the result wouldn’t be another one of the Turtles laid out before her. If she didn’t use those means?

What kind of friend was she?

She drew her knees up, hugging them to her chest under the folds of the quilt. Yet she didn’t look away from those intense blue eyes. “You used what you could for gear and stuff,” she said, simple
and gentle. “But no matter how good a condition it was in, it was all still castaways. Discarded for one reason or another. And all of it was meant for humans. None of it was what you guys needed. That didn’t sit right with me. I did what I could and I’m glad it worked out. But---” She couldn’t stop the wince at her own words. “---that doesn’t mean it didn’t suck.”

Hand lifted, she shrugged again. “So yes, nervous about the gear in general. And nervous about the party as well. As you can guess, haven’t had many that were decent.”

Leo’s stance loosened. At least something did even though he didn’t change position. Whatever it was, he wasn’t as tightly wound as a moment before. “When did you find out---whatever it was?” he asked.

This was a topic she both avoided and was unable to forget. With him knowing the bare details, it was easy to see he didn’t want to over step with his questions. And he left it up to her. An open-ended question she could give as short a response to as she wanted.

It was her usual M.O. She didn’t like delving into those memories. Now…

“I was sixteen,” she said at last. “Around that time, I knew something was off. We were in a private school with plenty of kids who grew up like royalty. Strange family rules were kinda common even if they had more freedom than I was used to. A school dance---maybe homecoming?” She shook her head and sighed. “Anyway, I had my first date lined up and…and my mother insisted I use this certain corsage combo for us. She got distracted by my brother so I tried to pin my date’s to his jacket. And I found the bug inside it.”

Her hair hung over her shoulder. At some point, she had started tugging at it. The end was loose and fluttered around her fingers, elastic band lost within the folds of the quilt. Frowning, she raked her fingers through it, pulling the it apart and trying to smooth the locks in place. All the while, she kept talking.

“I played it off. But I couldn’t forget it. Couldn’t even focus on my date. Was it to keep an eye on me? Protect my integrity?” She snorted in disgust. “I ended up pulling off my own corsage and taking it apart at the dance itself. Sure enough, there was another bug. After that, I started looking for places where other devices could have been kept. I found more than I expected but not an insane amount. Enough to understand that I was being recorded. And my mother, at least, was part of it. But other than knowing I was being monitored, I had nothing to go on. And I realized that my mother must have realized that I found the bugs. She did nothing. Just…let me continue on.”

Hair loose, nothing else to distract her, she risked a glance at Leo. He was still. So still if weren’t for the green of his skin or the bright blue of his eyes she would truly believe he was just a shadow. He kept his expression as blank as he could; she was familiar with that, too, expected it even. Yet he couldn’t keep that glare of something out of his gaze. Anger? Disgust? Pity?

Whichever it was, she felt it herself.

“My father broke the silence about five days after that first bug,” Amaya said. She fought the want to just shut up, to leave it alone. This part…

This was the part that hurt.

Her throat burned. She tried to clear it and ended up sounding choked when she tried to go on. Leo reached out but caught himself at the last moment. She appreciated the gesture, even an aborted one like that. She tried to smile to show it but it didn’t feel right.
He told me they needed to discuss something important with me. I went to his study and… and their old colleague was there. Dr Perkins. He worked mainly with my mother though he and my father collaborated a few times over the years. My father is very blunt—” Here a small smile did come and it felt more real. “---so he didn’t even give my mother or Perkins a chance to speak. He just told me straight out: your discovery of the surveillance devices have jeopardized Dr Perkins’ work and we need to come to a mutual understanding.”

“Wait---his work?” Leo blurted. “This other guy?”

Amaya nodded. Years had passed since that afternoon. She remembered everything about it so clearly, though. How the sunlight was dull as it came through the windows. The plush rug under her bare feet. Her mother and Dr Perkins sitting on the couch opposite her father’s desk. The irritated frown her mother held. And how Dr Perkins seemed to follow her every breath without even looking at her.

Of the Christmas tree twinkling pleasantly in the corner of the office right behind Dr Perkin.

She wanted to shower. She wanted to scrub at her skin until that creeping feeling of his eyes left her. Instead, she tugged the quilt closer to her and stood.

The concrete of the porch was freezing under her feet. She didn’t fight it, didn’t rush the few steps it took to get to the lawn. It helped ground her. It kept her in the present. The grass was brittle against her skin and just as cold as the concrete.

Amaya leaned back to look up at the sky. Dull, dreary clouds lay bloated overhead. She let out a slow breath through her nose and it fogged the air before her.

“Dr Perkins and my mother had once operated a psychiatric clinic together. By the time my older brother was five, my mother had been recruited by some think tank that was researching behavioral modifications. The details are foggy,” she said on a shrug. “Maybe they actually told me. But I can’t remember it now. Bottom line?”

Amaya looked back, unsurprised that Leo had followed her out on the lawn. There was a passing thought, a concern that a neighbor might see. It vanished at the intensity about him. “They needed a long-term research subject. The more data they had, the better. So the team started looking into avenues and selection processes. A week later, my mother learned she was pregnant with me. She volunteered for the project and by extension, me.”

“What were they researching?”

“Other than wanting to be able to predict behavior, I’m not sure. That’s as far as Dr Perkins got before I started screaming at them. Did a lot of screaming, that night,” she said, wincing at the memory. “It was enough that the neighbors call the police. I begged them to either lock up my parents or to take me away. They did neither.”

There was a bit of quiet before Leo asked, “How’d you get out?”

“One of the officers slipped me a card. I managed to keep it hidden. I knew I only had a small window of opportunity if I was going to do anything. A few days later, my mother left for a conference and we were left in my father’s care. He was lax enough he didn’t realize I had run until the social worker called him.”

A smile cracked Leo’s intense expression. “And how did that particular conversation go?”

Amaya laughed, surprising both of them. But she couldn’t help it. The social worker’s incredulous
face was always amusing, no matter how long it had been. “She thought I was making stuff up. Then she called my father and he confirmed everything. Great thing about being a blunt anthropologist?” she said, cocking a brow and grinning despite the conversation. “He never saw any reason to deny what they were doing. It was enough that the social worker gave me all the information I needed on how to emancipate myself. It took a while because my mother fought it. Not out of any sense of love or something nice like that. But because it would ruin nearly seventeen years’ worth of data. The judge didn’t take too kindly to her saying that to his face.”

Leo stared at her. No wonder frowning, that glare in his eyes had faded as well. Now he just looked…well, the same as the social worker had. Incredulous. Like he wasn’t sure he was hearing her right.

Amaya raised her hands in a ‘what can you do’ motion. The quilt hung on her arms like an oversized robe and freezing puffs of air tickled her skin. “A psychiatrist did interviews on all of us, gauging just how this whole situation affected us. Whatever my parents said, it must have disturbed him. After their interviews, he was practically demanding my emancipation.”

For the first time in years, she wondered about the tiny shrink that has kept his cool demeanor until that last day of testimony. How the way he looked at her mother more than earned him the title of ‘hero’ in Amaya’s eye.

“So, I got out. I stayed with a friend from school—Megan—while I tried to figure things out. A few days in, I learned that Dr Perkins wasn’t going to give up so easily. He had taken to following me whenever I left the house. Tried to install another bug but my friend’s dad caught him. And I saw how my being there was affecting them. I had found an under the table job at a bar so I just took off. For the longest time, Dr Perkins followed.”

“Is he still a problem?” Leo asked.

Amaya eyed him, measuring the cool tone of the words with the tension about his frame. She had no doubt what he was thinking. No doubt as to what he was already planning behind those blue eyes. The part of her that remembered those days of fear and disgust, the part of her that would forever remain no matter how many new memories she made or how far she went, wanted to plead for those ruthless plans.

But it was a moot point.

“He died just after I graduated college,” she said. “My brother sent me the obituary. Unfortunately, that meant my mother took up his mantle for a while. She believed they could still salvage the research. The last few years, though, she’s gotten lax about it. Now, I doubt she even knows I’m in New York.”

“And, where is she?”

“Massachusetts, somewhere,” she said, waving a hand. “And I only know that because Allen just sends a postcard with her new place. My older brother,” she explained before he could ask.

“The one with the drinking problem.”

“Younger brother’s the booze-hound,” Amaya said, a touch of bite to the words.

Leo raised a brow ridge; no way he missed the untold story there.

She scowled. It was always difficult mentioning Jerome. Even more as of late. Holidays really sucked, at times…
A touch of cold hit her cheek. Blinking, she looked up to see that the bloated clouds overhead had decided to start snowing. Small, now, she had no doubt that another heavy fall would come soon.

The scowl turned into a weird little smile. Well, he had originally asked her how she felt about the holidays. Bringing it around full circle seemed the best way to go.

“I don’t have many happy memories of the holidays,” she said at length, watching the snowfall. “But I can’t deny there’s something special about watching the snow.”

Special. Such a small word for such a precious thing.

Her first decent set of memories. Back when she stayed with Megan and seeing how a real family functioned. Of Megan’s younger sister pulling them both out of bed near midnight and cheering at the snowfall. Of standing in the yard, shivering and teeth chattering, and feeling as though she was seeing the world for the first time.

“Probably a dumb thing to say,” she started, shrugging deeper into the quilt. “Snow is snow. I just consider----”

“It’s not dumb.”

Amaya turned, more startled by the softness to the words than anything. Leo watched the snow falling for a moment more before turning to her. He smiled.

The scar that haunted her vanished in the move.

For the life of her, she couldn’t remember if they kept talking. There was a sense of agreeing to leave the open ends of the conversation where they were, though without using actual words. She would be foolish to think he didn’t want to follow up with more questions about her family. The curiosity was there, she felt it as sure as the arm he hooked around her shoulders for a firm but welcomed hug.

The two returned to the porch, each to their own seat. Together, they watched the snow fall.
Doesn't Take A Stretch

Chapter Summary

Things have started to settle.

Then Raph notices how quiet his shell-cell's been...

Just what the hell did they use to make fire escapes?

It was a question that didn’t often came to Raph. Usually it only occurred when he was hanging off one of the spindling things and hoping fervently that it wasn’t going to snap. The one attached to the back of this particular brownstone? Especially spindly. And when a light breeze whipped around him and made it creak, he swore up and down that if it snapped off and plummeted to the sedan parked below, it wasn’t his fault.

The night started off routine enough. It was rare night off, one they were using to test Donnie’s weird security bugs all over the city. Honestly, Raph was glad of it. It was cold as balls topside and he never enjoyed running the roofs when each were slick with snow and ice. A nice night in the lair felt in order. Maybe he’d take Mickey up on that challenge for the new Mortal Kombat game.

Then he noticed his silent his shell-cell was.

It wasn’t usually chirping every other minute. But he sent Ellen a text earlier---stupid, dumb, ‘hey-did-you-see-this’ kind of text---and she had yet to respond. That wasn’t like her.

Raph wasn’t like Leo. He wasn’t going to blatantly lie and say there was nothing going on between them. But he wasn’t like Mikey, either. He couldn’t exactly name what this---hell, whatever this shit was with him and Ellen.

It was something. Something he couldn’t name but fuck if he was going to say it didn’t exist. Not with the way his chest flip-flopped whenever she’d give him a slow smile, not with how easy it was to just be around her. And while she never pushed for anything more, she never gave the sense she was unhappy with this---thing.

Shit, he was gonna have to talk with her about it, wasn’t he?

But even tail spinning around that thought, prodded by knowing looks Amaya gave him, he couldn’t shake the worry he felt at seeing no response after an hour. He sent another message, trying to stay nonchalant. He waited at least thirty minutes before another, less light-hearted one. When he called, it rang out until voicemail picked up.

There was nothing to say that this was a bad omen. No clue to say that the silence was anything negative. But a chill had taken hold in Raph’s gut and wouldn’t let go. The whole thing with the art gallery and Mikey was still fresh in his head, still sent his teeth grinding when he thought about it.

So, across those too-slick roofs he went with hardly a heads-up to his brothers. Mikey had only
given a jerk of a nod at seeing the tension about Raph. Whether he guessed its cause or figured Raph just needed a run, he didn’t say anything.

The brownstone looked as it always did. The restaurant on the bottom floor was alive with activity. No cops loitering around, either. Squatting on a roof across the street, Raph tried calling Ellen again. Another round to voicemail.

Okay. Okay, that didn’t mean anything. There could be any number of reasons she wasn’t picking up.

He struggled with the want to go busting through the dim windows on the upper levels. Not enough light to say someone was home but certainly not bright enough to give him any clue to what was happening inside.

One last thing to try. He dialed a different number.

Amaya picked up after the third ring. “Hey, what’s up, Red?”

“You out on a run?” Raph asked. The question he really wanted to ask clogged at his throat.

“Reorganizing the office for the new semester,” she said, huffing in irritation. “Prejean does this after every set of finals but I swear it’s like we’ve never done it at all.” A pause. “What’s wrong?”

“Have you heard from Ellen? Or Oralee?”

“Not in a few days,” she said slowly. He heard something land with a thump under her words. “Oralee also has finals this week. But Ellen…” She trailed off. The tension fed from both sides of the call, now.

“I’m gonna run by her place. Just to check on things,” he said. He hung up before she had a chance to talk him out of it.

The brownstone hadn’t changed during the short call. It didn’t stop Raph was feeling as though it were watching him as he hurried across the way. He paused on the neighboring one, eyeing the fire escape that crisscrossed the backside of the tall building. A window on the second floor was open, drapes limply fluttering in the chilled breeze.

Raph didn’t let himself think. He just hit the fire escape and surged through the window as fast as he could.

When he hit the floor of the room beyond the window, several things happened at once.

He unsheathed his sai, wanting to be ready for whatever he was about to meet. The lights in the room flared bright and shocking. He sensed someone standing in the doorway, their hand raised. He spun around, raising his weapons---

Ellen stood on the threshold, staring at him in unmistakable chagrin.

They both stood frozen for a second and just stared at one another. Rather stupidly.

A voice from the hall broke the spell. “I think if we use both the contemporary as well as the classical selections you have---”

Ellen tried to cover the open doorway with her body, squeezing the door as close to her as she could. She frantically motioned to the open window, mouthing ‘out out out!’
Raph obeyed without letting himself think. As he cleared the sill, Ellen threw the door open and tried to lean against the door jam in a casual way.

In the frantic pace of the scene, Raph forgot exactly how short a distance it was to the window. He overshot and had to quickly grasp at the fire escape to keep from either hitting the neighbors or the equally unforgiving ground below.

So, there he hung, dangling from the flimsy metal contraption, and swore violently.

---

Ellen was going to kill Raph.

*But first, carry on,* she told herself.

Phillip seemed not to have noticed anything out of the ordinary. He was either very focused on the itinerary in his hands or she didn’t look as frazzled as she felt. And damn did she feel frazzled. Having a friend crash on a job interview was awkward. Having a friend that also happened to be a mutant turtle decked out in killing gear and built like a Mack truck was friggin’ terrifying.

The black gear he wore made her pause. The was new. Then again, she hadn’t seen him in a while. When was the last time? Before thanksgiving, right?

A quick glance across the living room to her phone confirmed a suspicion. Though the screen was off she saw the notification light blinking. Shit.

“Ms. Pembroke?”

“Yes,” she said, trying to keep the panic back down where it needed to be. Phillip looked at her expectantly. Only then did she realize he waited beside the piano.

The living room was not big, not by any means of the word. Yet it was big enough for her and Oralee to use it as a practice room. Her sister went on and on about the acoustics being the best from their portion of the brownstone. Ellen always tuned her out when he went on a spiel like that.

The standup piano had been a gift from their aunt. Its placement in the room---resting along the far wall with just the right angle to the windows for optimal sunlight, nothing else around it save for the matching bench---spoke of the care both sisters tended the instrument with. Oralee never professed to be a piano player. But she knew her way around the ivories better than most.

Ellen quickly crossed over and took a seat at the bench. Phillip was talking again but the words didn’t come. She ran a hand over the keys, fingers itching to start, to let herself focus on something that wasn’t currently hanging outside the still open window.

“---ever you’re ready?”

She blinked back to herself before looking up at Phillip. He thumbed through a stack of sheet music, careful despite the speed he used. Without a word, though, Ellen just glanced at the topmost one and started to play.

As soon as the notes filled the room, Phillip stopped thumbing the sheets. A pleased smile spread across his face and he leaned back on his heels. The music went on, neither speaking.

Each press of the keys, each whip-quick move of her arms, even utilizing the pedals as needed, was all a dance Ellen was intimately familiar with. A well known and well loved routine, it was the
balm she needed to chase the last dreg of panic away.

Of course, now the problem was that she was relaxed enough for her mind to wander. This was such a well-known routine that, well, it was sort of a habit. One she didn’t need to think about too intently. That was the problem with classical pieces: they hadn’t changed in years.

So even though she kept playing, no sign or hint at anything else happening in her mind, it wasn’t her focus. She kept thinking about the surprise guest and wondering why the hell he turned up. It was a question she was going to have to sit on for a while. After that, Phillip gave a suggestion for the next. Then the next. Then he tried to trip her up with a new number, one from several of the works he was currently working on. She gave him credit for trying. But the piece, while lovely and interesting in some parts, wasn’t anything to write home about. Ellen did make a mental note to pass word of it along to Oralee; her sister always wanted to know of the new shows still in production.

Over two hours passed before Phillip gave any hint of having seen enough. While they chatted about dates and times, his eyes trailed her body. Any other time, Ellen would have just rolled her eyes. But knowing Phillip, as well as his latest fling with a slip of a thing in Oralee’s program, she knew she wasn’t his type. No, that was the eye of a professional gauging another professional. Two hours of near constant playing was rough. He just wanted to see how she handled it.

So, Ellen let him look, let him see the lack of tension of her shoulders, how her hands didn’t shake, how her grip was firm but polite when they shook at his departure. She let him appraise her, knowing it would all factor into his decision.

He left and the door clicked shut behind him. His footsteps trailed down the stairs and a moment later she heard the more distant sound of the front door closing. With him gone, she let the buried feelings of chagrin and incredulity surge back in place. She spun on her heel, intent on marching back to the window and hissing down at Raph to get his green ass inside for a proper scolding.

Raph was already there, leaning in the scant space between the two windows and toeing the line between scowling and pouting.

Ellen felt that itch start now that Phillip was gone. *Fuck*, did she want a cigarette.

Instead, she met Raph’s scowl with one of her own and pointed to the hall. Without waiting for a response, she followed her own orders and headed down the way towards the kitchen that took up the other half of this floor. She tore into the cabinet just inside the open archway and yanked out the ancient metal coffee tin that stored her stash. She plucked a plain white stick at random and almost forgot to unwrap the damn thing.

Once she popped it in her mouth, flooding it with the smooth taste of pina colada—not nicotine, not even real booze, but damn it instantly took the edge off—only then did she bark out, “What was that about?”

“Hadn’t heard from ya all day. Got worried,” came his gruff response. Closer than she thought for so silent an approach.

Ellen gripped the counter, peeling contact paper creaking under her nails from the force. She counted to ten, nice and even as the counselors recommended, before looking up.

Raph stood in the archway and matched her glare. He rested his arms up at the top and leaned in; the opening wasn’t big enough to let him just slide in, so he took the option of propping up against
it. With the stark lights from overhead, the deep black of his gear and red of his mask was all the sharper.

Ellen held in a curse, twisting away and hoping she hadn’t let her eyes wander as thoroughly as she felt they had. Hoping to cover it, she said, “I’ve been running around to interviews all day. Couldn’t exactly spend that time on my phone; tends to look bad.” She looked back over her shoulder at him and waved her hands in the air. “As you can see, absolutely fine.”

Now that was a definite scowl.

Ellen rolled her eyes. “If you got worried, I’m sorry. Things have been hectic and it didn’t occur to me to give you my schedule so I could make sure to--”

“I thought the wrong people knew about you and me,” Raph barked, teeth bared in a snarl that had her shutting up. “My little brother’s girl nearly got taken by some not-so-friendly types and still hasn’t gotten over it. So, yeah, I got worried. Worried I was gonna come here and find you had been taken. Or, I dunno---killed.”

The kitchen felt too small. Hell, the building felt too small under that declaration. Ellen just stood there, unable to look away and unable to get a firm handle on the thoughts said declaration prodded.

The archway creaked as Raph leaned harder against it. There was no easy way to enter the kitchen, just no getting around that. His arms flexed under that too-black cloth, shifting like he fought the want to just go ‘fuck it’ and try it anyway.

Instead, he moved back and disappeared down the hall.

Ellen blinked, startled by the abrupt departure into action. She followed him, absently catching the coffee tin and bringing it with her. The way this night was going she might need to restock.

Raph went back to the living room. It was the only place that any sort of area to pace and pace he did.

Ellen eased back on the piano bench and watched him. His tension didn’t go away but it did seem to lessen. She went through another sucker before saying anything. “How’s his girl doing?”

The question stopped Raph but he didn’t look at her. He just glared ahead through the window without seeing anything. “Shaken,” he said through his teeth. “She bounced back pretty quick, even Mikey says so. But she’s…yeah, she’s not as fine as she wants to be.” He ran a hand over his face, toothpick expertly moved aside.

Ellen allowed that to stew for a while as she flicked through the coffee can. She needed to refill, this week. All that were left were the ones she either gave to Oralee or ate when her wallet was stretched super-thin. Feeling the quiet had been long enough, she said, “And you’re pretty sure it’s because she was close to him? Same kind of thing that got you worried tonight?”

The greens of his face darkened in an odd mottled hue. Ellen blinked at that before her brain supplied her with the reaction: a blush. Tactful, she kept mindlessly going through the same eight suckers. She shrugged, hoping he caught the move even as he resolutely avoided eye contact. “The way Amaya and you acted since we met? Figured there was some truth to the rumors that the gangs are at war with the silent defenders of the city. Doesn’t take a stretch to figure you play close to the vest and keep friends even closer.”

“Silent defenders?” Raph repeated.
Another, bigger shrug. “You prefer super heroes? Or the less savory things?”

At that, Raph turned to her and frowned. “Ya never been shy about letting yer mouth run when it wants.”

Her neck tightened as she fought the rise of memories at that. She looked up from the coffee tin and wondered…

Nah, he wouldn’t care. Not if she had the right bead on him. So, taking a chance, she said, “My sister gave me a crash course on using labels without being sure. So until I hear you say it, I’m not going to let anything else fly. Besides,” she added with a flippant smile, “from the sounds of it, your brothers would get a kick out of the defender thing.”

“You have no idea,” he said, grinning back.

Not for the first time, she wondered about his brothers. He talked about them often. Gave names that she first believes to be code-names. Yet she hadn’t seen any of them before. They sounded like a great bunch. And, given the minute information he shared tonight, it might not be a bad idea to meet with one or all of them. Maybe see if that poor girl needed someone to talk to. Ellen may attend the counselor because of court orders, but she knew there was a benefit to talking out one’s problems.

The question was forming just as there came a scrape of keys in the lock.

Ellen stood, halfway to motioning him back out the window, but Raph already vanished.

---

Raph fucking hated his luck tonight. Second time he was on the rickety fire escape. This time, though, he had pulled the drapes on his exit. So instead of hanging off the railing, he just crouched beside the windows.

Ellen threw a frantic look around the room as her sister entered with an armload of groceries. Yet there was no sign of his presence. Aside from Ellen’s own tension.

Oralee threw her a bright smile. “How’d it go?”

“Good, I think,” Ellen said, taking a bulging bag from her. “He’s going to get back with me tomorrow.”

Their voices dimmed as they moved to the kitchen. Despite the nagging that he should up and leave, Raph didn’t. He easily re-entered the living room, soundless. It wasn’t much work to keep out of sight. Hopefully Oralee would turn in early or something. He couldn’t just let this whole thing go though he knew he should.

Raph just couldn’t go through another night of worrying like that. And if he had to go through what Mikey did?

Hell, they weren’t even dating. He couldn’t use that excuse. He had to keep it in check. Keep her and Amaya on the same level, maybe. That might work. He couldn’t deny he’d be just as worried if Amaya never responded. Might be something to look into with Donnie.

Ellen’s laugh broke the circling thoughts. The archway to the kitchen glowed bright and he could see the sisters moving about unloading the bags. They moved with the ease and familiarity of siblings. Raph couldn’t quite compare it to his own experience. They were far more low key than
he and his brothers were. Also their banter was only half-spoken at times as though one knew where the other was going and met her halfway.

Oralee was ever the same in all the time Raph had seen them. Always looking like she was a second away from breaking, too fragile for even loud noises. How the two of them turned out so different was a mystery. It was obvious they were related; just that they hardly acted like one another.

Ellen dumped out the coffee tin and replaced it with fresh suckers. She smiled as she picked through a few preferred flavors. Oralee watched, leaning back against the other counter and warming her hands on a mug of tea. After a minute, she asked, “So you’ve seen him again?”

Ellen frowned over her shoulder. “Him who?”

“Whatsoever it is that puts you in a good mood.” Oralee said, grinning behind her mug. “Even Jamin noticed after our last gig. And he couldn’t tell Sarah was flirting with him for months. He said you’re less likely to ‘rip into someone’s craw’ these days. Whatever that means.”

Ellen rolled her eyes though the line of her shoulders tensed. “It means that Jamin needs to translate his slang better. Not even his host family talks like that.”

“He learned from television, it’s going to be off,” Oralee said with a small shrug. She nudged her sister with her hip, still grinning. “Don’t change the subject: you met with him today?”

Ellen occupied herself with clearing the counter, obvious in her attempt to hide her face. But the kitchen was small and that took all of three minutes before she was left with no other way to distract herself. She leaned in the archway, arms folded as she faced her sister.

If she was trying to obstruct any sign of Raph it was a piss-poor effort. He was abusing the wonderfully exposed beams over head to keep an eye on things while staying out of sight. She hadn’t learned that yet about him. So when green eyes glanced down the darkened hall and saw nothing, she relaxed a little. Had she looked up, she would have seen him smirking down at her.

“Okay,” Ellen said at last. “I ran into a friend tonight. Might not have been the most relaxing of meeting but we talked. Not a big deal.”

Oralee just grinned more. “I knew it. I knew you were hiding someone. Who is it? Someone I know?”

“Doubt it,” she said easily. “Not the socialite butterfly like you are.”

A flush ran across Oralee’s face, darker than expected for such an innocent comment. She flustered for a moment before catching herself. “Still. You don’t need to keep him hidden from me. I want to meet the guy who’s managed to not run away in fear of having his---his stuff forcibly removed,” she ended with another flutter and spark of blush.

Ellen’s grin was pure chaotic energy. “Come on,” she half-purred. “You can say it.”

“I---I said enough!”

“Come one, just once. Just say it: balls.” She drew out the word just to see her sister squirm.

Huffing a little, Oralee turned to look out the tiny window across the kitchen, next to the ever tinier table they used for meals. “You can be crass enough for both of us,” she said, demure even in her embarrassment. “But can you at least tell me his name?”
“Raphael.”

There was no hesitation. No pause to consider it. And when Oralee threw her a surprised look, Ellen just smiled. “Thought I would deny it?”

“Well, yes,” Oralee stammered, still thrown by the easy admission. “It’s just been a long time---”

“You mean a first time,” Ellen cut in, still smiling despite the curt word. “Again, I was never the serial dater of the family.”

“No, we just thought you were a prude that ran your own fight club,” Oralee returned.

There was a lull and both sisters just looked at one another. A thousand conversations could pass in the space between then, all heard and understood. Another thing Raph was familiar with. To see it in action was—well, it was a tad frightening.

It was broken by Oralee finishing her tea and going to the sink. “You know I’m going to meet him sooner or later.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” Ellen sighed. She drew another glance down the hall. Her sharp features were softened by the smile there.

Raph felt something in his chest shift.
The screens of the HUB were never the same twice in a row. Part of that was the constant shifting screen savers as well as the different things Donnie’s brain shifted between. So, seeing the same schematic of the neighborhood of A World Beyond: Art Gallery never failed to send a wrinkle of unease through Leo’s gut.

Weeks had past, now it was slipping into months. And still no news.

Leo knew everyone wanted to put it aside. They couldn’t, for obvious reasons. The very real threat of it all hung over them. At the same time, the want to relax was strong enough to make anyone irritated at the stagnation.

For Donnie, that translated into super-research-mode. Any downtime was dedicated to the information his TADPOLES sent in. By now, nothing related to the hostage situation came through to their end.

But something was up.

Leo watched as the schematics were brushed aside and Donnie showed an animated diagram of traffic flow. Per the title in the lower right-hand corner, this was taken over the course of the last month.

Amid the thousand tiny vehicles, a handful of green and red ones blinked as they moved.

“Last three days alone have shown these same vehicles make stops here in the city before heading out again,” Donnie said, using the mouse cursor to illustrate. “Always the same stops. Gas stations, pharmacies, and pet supply stores.”

“All places to get a wide variety of items without setting off any concerns,” Leo summed up. He checked his shell-cell for a moment then turned back. “Same credit cards?”

“Cash transactions only,” Donnie said. “But the TADPOLES caught chatter pertaining to the same items being bought each time. Gas from the gas stations—obviously—first aid stuff, sports drinks and basic hygiene stuff from the pharmacies, and leashes from the pet stores.”

“Leashes?”

“A crude but effective alternative to ropes,” Donnie replied with ease. “Also, a particular type of dog treats. While alone isn’t concerning, the repeated purchase of leashes is odd enough to grab the TADPOLES attention.”
It was all very strange but it also didn’t tell them anything. Yet. “Where do the cars go?”

“Once they’re out of the city, trail’s lost somewhere in the north west. Always head the direction, though, even if it takes a different route.”

“So, it could be something. But it also couldn’t.”

“At this point, yes.” Donnie looked over the diagram for a moment. “But the system caught wind of something happening at the gallery. I just couldn’t piece it together in time because it was still so new. This?” He motioned with a screwdriver in his hand to the screens. “This is a heads up. Just like I intended. Just need to figure out what.”

Leo nodded. And took another look at his shell-cell.

Donnie caught that. “Amaya?”

Something like panic hit Leo at the name. He pulled it back, leveling a questioning look at his brother.

Panic was not something Leo allowed himself to feel. That didn’t keep him from feeling the sharp edges of it at his mind.

After Raph practically crashed Ellen’s place thinking she was in trouble, there had been a new feature installed on the shell-cell’s that would allow one to ignore an incoming call yet indicate there was no danger involved. It was clean, efficient, and more than adequate as far as Leo was concerned.

But this was the third time today Amaya used the feature. It was late, far past time when she should have returned home. And it was with no small reluctance that Leo admitted she could handle herself. She had not used the panic button at all, merely the mild ‘all clear’ option.

…and Leo just couldn’t shake the feeling that something was up.

Donnie leaned back in his chair, tapping at a keyboard. A readout of call logs pulled up on the monitor between the two of them. “She’s using the same signal,” he said, thoughtfully. “No alarm raised.”

“Right,” Leo grunted.

Green-gold eyes flicked up to him. Too aware, too understanding. “Just because she signals that she’s okay doesn’t mean she is,” Donnie said, giving a little shrug.

It was a too-easy excuse. A flimsy, too obvious, easy to say and just as easy to dismiss excuse.

But dammit, Leo took it.

A nod was all he gave in parting. Donnie was hardly back facing the screens, smirk on his face, before Leo was rushing to the exit and hurrying topside.

As he ran, his mind didn’t stop, either.

Leo didn’t have words for what churned in his head as he ran the rooftops. Oh sure, he knew what this was. There was no way around it. But he just didn’t have the words for it. And that grated on his nerves wore than anything.

When he tried to focus his mind, tried to wrangle all the chaos into a semblance of cohesive sense,
it just made it worse. From the situation with Diya to the budding thing between Raph and this musician he had yet to fully admit to: Leo knew none of them were immune.

The day Diya was forcibly introduced would forever be a scar on an otherwise wonderful thing. It was enough to serve as a warning for all of them. A sign that some things just shouldn’t be.

And with all that telling him otherwise, Leo couldn’t stop the knot of warmth that prodded his chest when Amaya was involved.

God help him if he could pin down when exactly this had happened. It wasn’t overnight. It wasn’t a sudden epiphany. There were no spotlights or choirs or any of the cheesy stuff they said happened when you knew.

Just the knowledge that with Amaya…with her, Leo was always going to panic. In the best possible ways as well as the worse. That left the glaring problem just as clear, though. Actually vocalizing it. And try as he might, Leo’s throat just locked up tight.

The neighborhood was just as quiet and unassuming as any of the other times he peeked out of the manhole. He didn’t let that stop him or pause any longer than it took to survey the immediate area before going to Amaya’s house. From the back porch, the windows glowed from the lights in the living room.

What made Leo hesitate was the car parked in the small alley between this house and the neighbor’s. Neither house used the alley, from what Leo understood. Given the way the day had gone? Probably whoever was keeping Amaya from answering.

They had spent the better portion of five months perfecting the security at Amaya’s place. As such, Leo knew the best way to get inside without anyone being alerted. In through a window on the back hall, right beside the laundry room, and no one was the wiser.

Once inside, he heard the voices of Amaya and a man from the living room. Neither sounded angry or afraid, nothing to make Leo reach for his blades though his hands itched to. Still, he crept closer to see what exactly was going on.

Amaya and the young man were by the front door, positioned as though they had started for the living room but just stopped. The man leaned against the door itself, one hand jammed into a pocket and the other rubbing at his head while he winced. Amaya stood before him, oddly wrapped in a quilt though the air inside was pleasantly warm. She was talking, sounding as though she wanted to be anywhere else but here.

Leo squinted, looking between the two as the conversation continued. The man was tall and broad shouldered with near-black hair in a conservative cut. He was dressed well but not obnoxiously so; honestly, he looked like he had come from working at some corporate-type job. When he lowered his hand and gave Amaya a pointed glare, Leo saw that they had the same eyes.

Her brother, then? Which one?

The thought hardly crossed his mind when the man said, “It’s not asking for much. She just wants you there as a show of good faith.”

“The last time that happened, she low-jacked my car,” Amaya snapped back.

“Dad swears she’s given up on all of that,” he insisted. It sounded like this wasn’t the first time it had been said tonight.
“I’ll believe that when she’s in the ground.”

“Look,” her brother said, lifting a hand between them, “can you do this as a favor to me, then? Show your face? Let people see you? Be gone within five minutes?”

The sound she let out could not be called a sigh nor was it a growl but some weird offspring of the two. “Playing dirty never worked before, Allen. It’s beneath you to even try.”

Quiet lapsed between them. Then a smile tugged at Allen’s mouth. “Well, glad to see you still got that backbone.”

Amaya rolled her eyes, visible even from behind. “It doesn’t take much to tell her ‘no.’ You’d be surprised by how easy it is.”

That brought another wince. “Yeah, I’ve seen how she handles that. It---lord, ‘Maya, it’s just easier to go along. Just for once. If you did, you probably wouldn’t need to work so much---”

“I work because I want to,” she cut in, frost hanging on every word. “And if that’s all you have to say, then get out. I gave you my answer. It’s not changing.”

Another moment of intense yet noncombative silence. Allen straightened from the door, holding his hands up in surrender. He let himself out with a gentle, “Good to see you.”

The door clicked shut. Amaya was right behind it to flip the four locks in place. She paused with her hand on the little security pad beside the door. Without turning around, she asked, “You shut the window behind you?”

“All closed up,” Leo reported, easing out of his hiding place and coming to the middle of the living room. He watched as she keyed in the code to activate the system, probably hitting the buttons a little too hard as she did. She drew in a breath, shoulders hunching under the quilt, and seemed to brace herself.

When she turned, the pained expression sent a bolt of anger through Leo. He didn’t say anything. He let her lead the way. She hovered for a moment, looking to the kitchen in longing. But she veered to the side and slumped onto the big sectional. The quilt lumped around her, she looked up at Leo with a small smile. “Brothers suck.”

“That they do,” he agreed. He sat beside her, giving her space but unable to go any further. He tugged at the quilt. “I guess yours suck in a different way than mine, though. You good?”

Amaya scowled, rolling her eyes again. “It’s nothing new. Allen pops in every so often when Mom sends him to plead her case. He knows I’ll see him. And he knows I never agree to whatever it is she’s asking.” She shook her head. “Honestly, I think he just does this as an excuse to see me. Only valid reason that won’t end up getting her on his bad side.”

“That’s…a complicated look at things,” Leo said, still trying to process exactly what ‘things’ were. She snorted, cocking a brow at him. “Allen wants to know I’m okay but he also doesn’t want our mother to get wind that we’re on speaking terms. Given how my upbringing went---which they fully disclosed to both my brothers, don’t doubt that---Allen knows that if he becomes a steady link to me that he may be the one that’s being tracked. And he likes his life the way it is. And mine, too, for what it’s worth,” she ended with a lesser scowl, hunching and bringing the quilt higher around her.

Leo gave her a minute. Then he said, “Yeah, that did nothing to un-complicate what I just walked
Amaya didn’t flush; not directly, so. But she looked on the verge as she gritted her teeth. “That jab about work,” she said. “He thinks I’m doing it because I’m desperate for money.”

“You’re not?”

“Please, I’m probably the only grad student in the state that isn’t in debt,” she said with a careless wave, hand peeking out just enough for the act before retreating into the warmth of the quilt. “I don’t have many vices, no addictions, and the only credit card I own is only for emergencies. I work because---”

“You like it,” he finished. He smiled at the side-eye she gave him. “That’s not a bad thing. Despite with I say otherwise when others are around.”

“Well, not like it’s news. April tries to give me a lecture about it every few weeks.”

Quiet fell. During it, Leo focused on her presence. Knowing she was there, knowing she was safe, if a little rattled by her brother’s visit, was a balm to his nerves. He couldn’t find it in himself to feel ashamed of that, try as he might. It came down to the simple fact that she was there. And bottom line, that’s all he needed to know.

Hang ups, worries, even the lingering concern after what happened with Diya: all of it started to faded into just background noise as he just took in her presence. They were still there, still waiting for the moment he broke out of this contented bubble. But for now, he wanted to make it last.

Eventually, even he had some things he wanted to ask. “You expected me by? Or were your ‘ninja senses’ telling you?”

Another scoff and eye roll. “Pure logic,” she deadpanned. “I knew if I kept ignoring the calls that you would eventually make your way over. I just didn’t expect him to be so persistent tonight.”

Amaya stood and shuffled over to the big window that stretched across most of the front of the house. It shared the wall with the door and gave a glorious view of the street outside. The curtains were drawn. She twitched one aside and looked out for a moment. “Every time he shows up, I keep expecting her to be right behind him. And even when she doesn’t, it still throws me back there. Back when---when all that was happening.”

Another bolt of anger. Leo kept a tight rein on it. Nothing he could do to a dead guy. And despite everything he wanted to say otherwise, he knew there was nothing he could do to her mother that wouldn’t cause more harm than anything.

“You know,” she said, bringing him out of those dark thoughts, “sometimes I wonder how things would be different if I chose differently. Even if it was as simple as choosing a scientific profession. Maybe then, she’d slack off.”

“Did they want you to?”

“They wanted all of us to. Heck, Allen is a financial manager at a bio-chem facility and Jerome is a fellow at some pharmaceutical place. Both technically in the field of science. And boy did they push that,” she said on a sigh, knocking the curtain back enough so only the thinnest sliver of the window was visible. She pulled her arm back under the protection of the quilt and kept staring out at the darkened street.

“They only exposed us to other stuff because it was good for development. Made us take music
lessons because it was beneficial in the younger years. But as soon as they could, they ended that and started schooling us the way they wanted. Even the clubs at school: all had to have their approval so all of it had to be academic in some way. None of the arts allowed."

She looked over her shoulder. If she was surprised to see Leo only an arm’s length away, she didn’t show. Her dark eyes were tired and heavy. This effected her more than she let on, he realized.

“I’m not living up to their expectations,” she said with a shrug. “Even after all that’s happened, some twisted sense of parental entitlement means that they can express concern for my choice of life. And logically? They aren’t wrong. They---”

“Yes, they are.”

Amaya blinked, startled by his firm declaration.

Before she could protest, he went on, letting his thoughts go before he could try to second guess himself. Not this time. Not with her looking half a second away from saying her parents were right.

“You made hard choices,” he said, hands lifted in a ‘what can you do’ gesture. “You were in a bad situation and you got yourself out of it. But it wasn’t easy. And I’m guessing nothing has been easy since. You’ve worked hard to make sure you were never in a position like your brother suggested. That you would never be at your parent’s mercy in any way. You chose to say that what they were doing was wrong. And it was. It was so twisted. Amaya, no child should have to go through that. Especially by a parent.”

Leo reached out and plucked her hand out of the depths of the quilt. Her skin was cool despite the thickness of the quilt. Just how shaken was she? How much was she keeping hidden?

“What they did was wrong,” he went on, determined for her to hear this. Was this the first time anyone had ever told her so? “You took a stand against that. You told them ‘no.’ Honestly, you should never have to have any contact with either of them for any reason. Ever. You don’t deserve to put yourself through that.”

Her eyes were too bright but she held steady. “You act like it was a monumental thing. Me, running away.”

“Well, it was,” Leo said with a nod. “Probably the bravest thing I’ve ever heard.”

A mirthless laugh escaped her. “Lots of kids run away.”

“A mirthless laugh escaped her. “Lots of kids run away.”

“And you did it to save yourself.” Her hand felt so small in his. He couldn’t think of it as ‘fragile.’ There was no fragile part of her. Since that day she came barreling into his life, she had always been rock solid. Standing up for herself. Standing up to him, even. No part of her was fragile.

With that thought, Leo took a chance. “And…I’m glad. Glad you did. If you hadn’t? If none of this twisted mess happened? I don’t think we ever would have met. I can’t stand to think of that. If we had never met? That’s just as bad.”

Amaya’s face blanked. For a horrible second, Leo was sure he crossed a line. Then that too-small hand gripped his tight and tugged him forward. He saw what was coming, saw what she was doing. Instinct kept him from getting knocked on his ass. But it still threw him.

Amaya’s other hand reached up and pulled his head down. She arched up and threw herself into the kiss. It was quick, messy, and uncoordinated.
But it was real. When she drew back, Leo looked down and saw a warm smile tug at her mouth. The hand she held to his face shifted, covering the scar there. When he pulled her back to him, he felt that warm smile against his own.

When she pulled back, the smile deepened. “I ran away to find myself,” she said, half-way to a purr, “and instead I find you. I think that’s fair.”

Leo cupped her face, thumb tracing the shape of her smile. He leaned until their foreheads touched. They stood there in the dim quiet of the house, being in the presence of one another and knowing they wouldn’t be anywhere else, as they felt their lives shift.

The quilt fluttered to the ground. The window curtain got tugged back into place. Otherwise, the outside world ceased to exist to the two of them.
Chapter Summary

Sometimes the hardest thing is to pick yourself up after a bad fall. The day closes on a mission that will forever haunt them. Shadows close in from all sides.

---

Raphael finds himself seeking out peace he doesn't believe he deserves, in a place he doesn't feel he belongs, with someone who's far too good for him.

...yet still he goes to the promise of light.

---

After. Raphael hated that word.

‘After’ meant that something had happened. Usually something bad. It meant there was a period of time where he would have to reflect on what that something was. It meant there was a fallout.

It meant healing.

And fuck if Raph knew exactly what kind of healing they could expect to have. If any.

Casey was a warm but limp weight against his shell. The Human’s hand kept a firm grip on Raphael’s shoulder pad so he was conscious enough for that. There was no immediate danger, no clock to beat as they moved through the city. Just cautious words Don had given to be gentle; words spoken through numbed lips while his brother’s magnified eyes seemed to be looking past him all the while.

Taking his time, Raphael kept to level paths that wouldn’t jar the Human too much. Which, when you’re going roof to roof on buildings that aren’t always the same level, was impossible to do. A particular landing had both him and Casey grunting. Casey did a full body flinch, the kind that made Raphael pause while his mind chanting ‘shit shit shit’ as he waited.

A moment later, Casey gritted out, “Good---I’m good. Almost there, right?”

“Yes, man,” Raphael assured, hating the taste of the words. It wasn’t true, not as much as he wanted. At least two more blocks lay between them and their goal. A distance Raphael could handle without breaking a sweat on his own. Too aware of the tight breathing coming from behind him, Raphael swore to get him there as soon and as safely as he could.

It was near torture. The want to just rush this home stretch grew. It was beaten back by each clipped sound the Human made. By the time he finally crested the balcony on the eleventh floor---why the fuck hadn’t she taken the top floor, would’ve been a lot easier to climb the service ladder and grapple down instead of scaling the side of the damn building---Raphael felt the strain of the
night pressing on him.

April paced the floor of her living room, her communicator clutched tight in one hand and her phone in the other. The drapes were drawn. As soon as she caught sight of Raph pulling them over the railing, she ran to the windows so fast she hit the glass with enough force it should have shattered. She caught herself and scrambled to open it.

Raph eased Casey off his shell and got him to his feet, grip unyielding under the Human’s growing weight. The guy had eyes only for April even as the pain he was in made them glassy. He half fell through the window, tipping so fast both Turtle and woman almost missed him. April bucked a little under his weight, face pale but set. She caught Raph’s gaze over Casey’s back, eyes widened as she felt the bandages under his clothes and the cloud of antiseptic that hadn’t yet dissipated.

He tried to assure her, tried to tell her something to ease that blatant shock at the state her man was in. But all he managed was a tight-lipped grunt.

She got it, though. The years had forged enough of a connection that she knew what he wanted to say. If he was thinking clearly, he was sure Don or Leo had sent a message ahead to prepare her as well as assure her no one was in immediate danger.

Nothing from Mikey, though. Raph doubted any of them would hear from him for a while.

The sobering thought had him moving back to the edge of the balcony.

“Wait!” April said, never shifting her grip on Casey. “You wanna stay a while? Rest?”

“Nah, you got yer hands full with him,” Raph said, nodding at Casey who lifted a hand in an anemic wave. Might’ve been trying to flip him off but the fingers never got the message to coordinate on that. “I’m gonna head back, make sure things---”

“Raphael.”

It wasn’t often she used their full names. Honestly, it reminded him of sensei when she did it. Except now. Now, it was almost a plea.

The news reports would be rolling in soon. He was sure her producers would be trying to drag her to the station tonight to get the jump of the story. Hell, if one squinted at the horizon, the faintest blush of something other that night-black shimmered to the northwest.

She used his name as a question, a want for answers she didn’t want to hear. But she would get answers soon enough. From her job or Casey or something else.

Raph wasn’t going to be the one to rehash why Casey was so banged up. Why Raph was covered in grime made up of dirt and blood and ash. Why he was just as banged up and fully intending to go back into the night. Why he was refusing the offer to rest. He didn’t let her get the next word out.

He ghosted over the balcony and was on the other side of the building when he caught her clipped curse and Casey’s muffled response.

Unburdened but still heavy, Raph unleashed the pent up energy. He ran the rooftops with a fervor he hadn’t used since the old days. He was either going to tire himself out or injure himself further. Whatever. He’d deal with whatever came first.

No way he could go back to the lair. Not right now. He couldn’t face his brothers. None of them could. Mikey’s departure from the Shell-Raiser, silent and missed, had set the tone for the night. There was no way he could stand looking at Leo, knowing he was going over everything and
beating himself up for missing a crucial clue, knowing he was going to be blaming himself because he was the damn leader and he should have been the one to catch this. And there was no way in hell he was going to see Don, shell-shocked and numbly taking apart his gear to clear away the gore, a silent figure surrounded by his machines and refusing to acknowledge just how big a cluster-fuck it all was.

No way he could handle the silence of the lair. Not with Mikey being out, tonight. When the lair got quiet, when it was too much, Raph needed to know his brothers were there. Needed to see them to keep the creeping panic at bay. So no, he sure as hell wasn’t going back to the lair.

A car horn pulled him out of his own mind. He landed on the next building, chest throbbing underneath the pressure bandage on his left side as he panted. When the landscape became clear, he swore so loudly that people on the street looked around in alarm.

But dammit, he shouldn’t be here. Even as the sharp edge to his rapid pulse eased at the familiar smells from the restaurant and the faintest sound of a piano trickled under the night’s other sounds, he kept swearing. There were so many reasons why he shouldn’t be here. He should turn around, find a place on the other side of the island to haunt. Maybe just perch himself on the fucking Empire State building like the horror people thought they were.

Raph was on the shitty fire escape before he truly was aware of it. He shouldn’t---what if she had company? At least she started using the ‘all clear’ thing Don had set up so she could’ve just signaled that way she was busy. And besides, she didn’t owe him anything. They were friends---just friends, dammit, he told himself harshly---and this was a shitty thing to do to a friend.

So many reasons…and one by one each shut down by a simple fact: he wanted to be here.

He stood there like a dope, trying and failing to come up with a better excuse to leave. So caught up, he missed when the piano faded away. He glared down at the metal slats under him and missed when the window opened.

But he sure as hell heard it when Ellen snapped, “You gonna stand there all night like a jolly green stalker or get in the damn room?”

The sight of her leaning against the open window, arms crossed and glaring up at him with a cocked brow, killed the last feeble excuses he had. He was still thrown by it and it took a minute to catch up.

A minute Ellen didn’t have to spare, apparently. She rolled her eyes, reached out and grabbed him by the wrist, then all but pulled him through the window. He managed to keep from scraping the window frame too badly at the last moment.

Raph glanced around the place. “Oralee---”

“Got a call back then went out for celebratory drinks with the rest of the hopefuls,” Ellen said. She went down the hall and returned with a towel and a huge pack of baby wipes. She tossed both to him and made short work of the misshapen thing.

When Raph stood there, blinking down at the offered items, her brows rose in tandem. “Must’ve been hell.”

“What?” Raph said, breaking out of his stupor.

“Whatever brought you to my stoop,” she said, waving a hand over his form. She turned back to
the piano, shifting her braid over her shoulder, and said, “Make yourself at home. Kitchen’s at your
disposal. I’d offer the tub but it’s been unsteady for the last few days. Not even Oralee risks it.”
She jerked a thumb in the direction of the baby wipes. “Hence the poor man’s solution. You can
use the sink all you want but hot water doesn’t last long either.”

Having said her peace, Ellen resumed playing.

Raph stayed in place for a moment, the easy acceptance more than a little jarring, before mentally
throwing up his hands and muttering, “Fuck it.”

It was going to be a quick and dirty job of a cleanup. No way he could scrub down and get the
worst of it out. And though the armored gear shed water like a duck, more solid matter tended to
cling to it. The wipes went from black and red to just brown after a few swipes at his arms. He
carefully positioned himself over the towels to catch anything that fell off in chunks.

Quick and dirty it may be but it felt good to be doing something. His focus, however, strayed back
to April and Casey. The look on April’s face just… It haunted him. She’d seen her fair share of
blood over the years, shed some of her own at times too. Yet there was no denying the fear and
sorrow that hit her upon seeing the state Casey was in.

And the way Casey just---hell, the guy just fell into her. So certain she would catch him. No doubt
otherwise. Worn down at he was, the guy had been going on instinct and a hardened grit honed
over years fighting back the terrors of the city. Hell, the world, even. Guy saw things more people
will believed to be fantasy.

The two of them… It shouldn’t stick with Raph the way it was. It wasn’t his bag, not his problem.
And he shouldn’t feel---what the fuck was this feeling? Envy? Longing? What the fuck was wrong
with him to be thinking about his own friends like that?

_Friend._

The word drew him back to the present. The majority of the grime had been taken care of. At least
what he could reach. He cringed at what the state of his shell must look like. He yanked off his
mask and used the last of the wipes to clear the itching crap off his face and head. His scales still
grated when he did a final once over but he was sure that was in his head.

He scrubbed off the mask as best he could and put it back on then wadded up the used wipes. He
quickly dumped the load into the kitchen trash before taking the towel out to the fire escape. He
shook it out, letting the clumps of ash and dried blood flutter to the ground below. To hell with
Leo’s paranoia, this time most of the blood wasn’t even his. And he’d be damned if he up and set
fire to something of Ellen’s. She’d probably use his shell as a coffee table if he tried.

…and again he found himself falling onto the fact that he was here. Caught up in the aftermath of a
FUBAR situation, reeling from whatever damn reaction he had to April and Casey, he found
himself here. At Ellen’s. And finding that he didn’t want to be anywhere else.

The piano faded and Ellen’s voice sounded. Raph peeked back inside and saw she was on her
phone. She was being quiet. Not as though trying to hide the conversation but not drawing attention
to it either. She listened for a beat then got up from the bench.

“All right,” she said, making her way over to the window. “I’ll play the usual for the next two
weekends. That a fair trade?” Another beat and she cocked a brow at Raph again. “Okay. See you
in a bit, Madam.”
“Madam?” Raph repeated. “You got some strange friends I should know about?”

Ellen let out a sound that could only be politely described as a purring laugh. She leaned against the window with a different air than when he’d first arrived. “Even if I had a madam or two stashed away, you’d only hear about them if they wanted you to.” She lifted a shoulder in a lazy shrug and the teasing air faded. She looked him over, concern obvious without being cloying. With a nod to the towel, she asked, “Your guys good?”

Raph grunted, giving the towel another shake that was a bit too hard. It snapped in the cold air, echoing in the alley between the buildings.

Ellen made a noise but didn’t press. A knock sounded at the front door. She smirked at the questioning frown he threw her. “Hope you like sweets,” she said cryptically. She made a shooing motion directing him out of sight before going to answer the door.

---

Madame Shawburger was the epitome of Grandma.

Ever since Ellen and Oralee had moved in, the older woman had adopted them as her own grandchildren. The fact that she had eight of her own—as well as fourteen great-grandkids and counting—did nothing to deter her from checking on the sisters and bringing them the occasional ‘surplus’ from the restaurant she ran downstairs.

Just earlier that night she had brought a whole casserole dish of chicken in a slowly simmered cream sauce, a single absent corner marking where some had been taken. And Ellen kept quiet that she knew Wednesday was always boeuf bourguignon night at the restaurant. The first and last time she had tried to assure the woman they didn’t need looking after she ended up nearly crying along with Mrs. Shawburger over some story about her long-passed husband.

Also, the woman was a damn fine cook.

So, times when Ellen would call down with a request—Oralee was sick and needed soup, their oven was broken, was there any bread they were going to just throw out—Mrs. Shawburger always rose to the challenge. And tonight wasn’t just boeuf bourguignon night.

When she opened the door, she was hit with Mrs. Shawburger’s dazzling smile, cloud of neatly styled gray and blonde hair, and the heavenly aroma of honey and fried dough.

Ellen swore she heard her stomach actually growl out the word beignets.

Mrs. Shawburger handed over the tray, heaped so high the foil covering it looked ready to rip. “You are too good to me, child,” she said, her voice gentle and husky and made Ellen think on the hazy memories of her own grandmothers. “You only need to play one weekend. Two is too much.”

“Not for these,” Ellen managed around her watering mouth. Did she add cinnamon tonight? Was that what she was smelling? Daaaaaamn...

Mrs. Shawburger made a “pooh-pooh” motion with her hand. “No, you play for my guests, you get more than beignets. You and your sister will be taken care of those nights. No arguing with me,” she ended with a stern look.

Ellen, already finishing off her first beignet of the night—fuck, she did add cinnamon to some, why did that make it better—nodded. “Yes, ma’am,” she said around her mouthful.
The elder smiled, the motion highlighting both her age and the gentility she couldn’t help but show. She tucked a loose strand of hair behind Ellen’s ear then tweaked her cheek. She started down the stairs and called over her shoulder, “And tell your sister if she still heartbroken, my Emily is coming to visit for a few days!”

Ellen’s response, still muffled, was received with a wave. Honestly, it wouldn’t hurt for Oralee to meet her granddaughter. But the whole ‘eating where you crap’ thing…yeah, probably better not to anger their landlady too much.

She shut the door with her hip, carefully extracting another heavenly square of fried dough and sugar. She wandered back to the windows to find Raph eyeing her warily, sitting on the floor with his shell against the sofa.

Ellen handed over the tray, intent on the handful she claimed for her own. She sat in the open window sill and faced him. “Wasn’t sure if you were one to binge on sweets after a bad day. But I dare you to turn down some of Madam Shawburger’s beignets.”

Raph rolled his eyes but dutifully downed one. His expression perked instantly. He didn’t stuff himself, like Ellen half expected, but there was no doubt the whole tray would be licked clean between the two of them.

With the cold air surrounding her, the ever-present want for a cigarette rose a little higher. She stamped down on it, knowing it would never go away and more annoyed than anything. Damn but she regretted kicking that habit. She regretted picking it up even more. But it could be worst.

They sat like that for a few minutes, each stewing in their own thoughts. She noticed how his green-gold eyes kept tracking back to the piano only to shy away again. That made her smirk to herself. ‘Shy’ was never a word to describe Raphael. Not in the few months she’d known him. Either he was trying to work out the question plaguing him or…

Or he was actively working against what had brought him here.

That black gear had been put to use tonight. Bright white peeked in the gap under his arm on his left side, a bandage. Smaller cuts, odd colors on his green skin that must be bruises, and the grime that covered him when he arrived all spoke to one thing: something bad went down.

Ellen flicked her fingers over the fire escape, shaking off the excess sugar. Well, wasn’t like he was an accountant. Guess she should say something about that but the want wasn’t there. If he wanted to talk about it, he’d talk about it. Until then, she would let those demons lay.

Hell, she knew what it was like, carrying around what haunted you.

Catching sight of the time, she rolled her neck and got to her feet. She absently grabbed another beignet—the tray was down to the last layer—before sitting again at the piano. She shuffled a few things around in the old moving box that was crammed between it and the sofa. Finally, she pulled out a sheaf of papers that was held shut with rubber bands.

She flipped off the bands and thumbed through the thin booklets inside. She pulled out the ones she needed, because Phillip was nothing but predictable, and set them on the piano.

“So, you do use sheet music.”

Ellen gave Raph a side eye that was more amused than anything. “I’m not a cyborg, jolly-green. Gotta learn from the source material. And this is new stuff, newly minted by my ever-gracious employer slash composer,” she added with a flick to the sheet music.
“Yeah,” he said, shifting to face her a little more, “but I’ve never seen you do it. Just from memory. How does that even work?”

Her fingers strayed over the keys, the itch for a cig growing. It was a simple thing to channel that into her playing. Focus through the craving, focus past the itch, and hit the place with there was only the music.

“I just…I do. It’s always been that way.” Ellen glanced over again, weighing options. He just sat there, still picking through the tray, and looking like he wasn’t going anywhere for a long while. And he truly looked interested.

Ellen let out a slow breath. It wasn’t that she hated talking about it. It just made her think of different times.

“I hardly need it after the first time I play,” she began at last, twisting on the bench with one leg tucked under her. She leaned on the sheet rest, one hand still hovering over the piano keys. “Our dad was a musician. Guitar. But he never got a lucky break. He was a dental hygienist by trade. Played on the weekends or picked up gigs where he could. It could never provide a steady income but it never stopped him from loving it. Growing up, there was always music in the house from either him playing or both my parents singing.

“Oralee took to singing like it was breathing. Our folks got her set up with vocal lessons as soon as they could. I remember them fretting, thinking that I would feel left out, but it never bothered me. I loved music but singing just didn’t call to me. Dad started working on the guitar with me and I liked it was but just wasn’t…wasn’t right.”

Her hand had settled over the keys even as she was lost in memory. To anyone else, it might have looked like a possessive move. But Raph saw the small smile that touched her face edged with wonder.

“Sometimes I would go with Mom and Oralee to her lessons. Her teacher would run through the exercises with a piano. One day, he got a call and had to take it. We just waited in the room, Mom with her book, me just sitting there, and Oralee tried to push through the lesson on her own. But she didn’t know the piano like she did her vocal scales. Not yet, at least. So I just got up and---”

She plucked out a few short notes, following the same scale as that day so long ago. “Oralee and I went through the whole warm up. I never missed a note. Mom and the vocal teacher both were staring at us when we finally stopped. The teacher then played a more complicated scale. I played it back. He did this for a few minutes. Then he looked at my mom and said she should get me into piano as soon as possible.”

Ellen rolled her eyes. “Putting two kids into private music lessons was costly. But my parents didn’t want to just ignore me. I told them to focus on Oralee. I claimed that I could learn from books or how-to videos. They wanted something a little more. The solution came in our Aunt Susie. Dad had guitar, she had piano. Once a month, she would visit for a whole weekend and teach me almost nonstop for those two days. I would practice what she taught me and try out the sheet music she left. By the time I hit junior high, she claimed to have nothing left to teach me.”

She paused, straightening with a slight frown. “Aunt Susie was the one to say I was gifted. I’ve never felt that way. I just…I hear the music. And it stays with me. Each note is branded into my brain in the most pleasant way. Words slide out like water but the music stays. It’s not a gift. It’s just how I am.”

In the wake of that story, quiet fell for about a second.
Then Ellen hit him with a look he could only describe as cautious concern. “You really wanna hear about my mundane childhood?” she asked. “Will that or playing the keys help keep you from whatever happened tonight?”

Raph drew back. He quickly caught himself, covering it by getting to his feet. He lifted the empty tray and nodded towards the kitchen as he said, “Not sure what I want. But I don’t say no to you playing.”

She nodded once and spun back in place. By the time he hit the kitchen, music was already filling the room.

It was awkward work to get the tray cleaned off. He settled for inching his way sideways into the tiny kitchen and just rinsing the tray then leaving it in the sink. Once back in the hallway, Raph lingered.

He was startled by her blunt perception. Startled by the easy way she had handled it, too. She had taken in his sudden and obvious battle-worn appearance with such stride it was as though this was a common thing.

Ellen kept playing, intent on the sheet music and frowning at it. Sometimes she’d back up, pick out a certain set of notes, then go back to the larger piece. All intent, no sign that she was secretly listening for his return. No fretting or worrying, no anxiety or demands to know what happened.

Raph stood half in the hallway, stuck in place, as the truth of the situation hit him. Maybe it had started when she’d snarled up at him and yanked him through the window. Maybe it had been any of the times she’d throw him a smirk or give a quip back just as good as she got. Maybe it had been that morning in the park, that first grin and dare that he’d taken without thought. Whenever, however it happened, all that remained was the truth he could no longer ignore.

Ellen wasn’t April. She wouldn’t react like April had, not even how April had been at first all those years ago. She wouldn’t look at his wounds in shock. She wouldn’t tear up knowing he was on a dangerous mission. She wouldn’t bat an eye to any of it. And that was fine. Raph didn’t want her to act like April. He didn’t want April.

He wanted Ellen.
After - Leonardo

Chapter Summary

Sometimes the hardest thing is to pick yourself up after a bad fall. The day closes on a mission that will forever haunt them. Shadows close in from all sides.

---

Leo tries to focus on what to do in the fall out.

...and finds comfort with the light that clears all over thought away.

---

After…

Leonardo needed to go. And there were so many places for him to pick.

Leo knew the city better than anyone. Knew the streets that would be deserted if he wanted quiet. Knew which places had overgrown trees and bushes he could demolish if he needed a destructive outlet. Knew the different artistic venues that held outdoor actives if he wanted to let his mind focus on something creative.

He knew the sewers even more so. Had his preferred routes for running. Had others to practice maneuverability (he refused to call it parkour, however much Mikey insisted). And others more that ended in dead ends just as peaceful and serene as any place topside.

Each place held a memory of him doing just that. Each a testament that he knew what he needed to wind down, lash out, or otherwise exercise whatever demons tugged at him. Some days were easier to deal with than others. Part of life.

Leo didn't have any words for what had happened today.

Part of him acknowledged that he might be in shock. Numb to the full impact of the day. Seeing bad things never got easier. Worse when it happened to his brothers.

Worse when the screams of innocents wouldn't leave him.

A number of locations came to him as he left the lair. He didn't let the sight of Donnie sitting in front of his hub--a blank expression on his face and still for the first time in hours--keep him there. He had to leave. Raph had gone to make sure Casey got home in one piece.

Mikey hadn't returned.

Distantly, a thought came that this would complicate things further. That Mikey shouldn't be going there, shouldn't be making it worse---
With a growl, Leo lashed out, punching the cement wall to stop the thought. The pain raced up his arm in jagged, muted crackles. He saw blood---fresh blood, his own blood---where the skin tore and only felt that quiet rage grow.

He saw the other blood, the grime, the bits of debris that covered him as though for the first time. Another growl, this one almost a shout, and he ran through the sewers.

The pipes were heavy with water, tonight. Mostly runoff from melting snow and out of season rain. He relished in it, fought to keep the fast pace he set himself so. Dodged heavy currents, powered through others, he ran a route he knew would give him a challenge. He ran, chasing nothing and wanting to leave everything behind.

Leo had no idea how much time passed. His muscles burned and his chest pumped to get air by the time he slowed. His breath fogged in the chill of the underground. The sewer waters washed most of the gore from him. Rather than please him, it only irritated him.

He hissed a curse and punched the wall again. The child-like action helped focus him. And in its wake, he realized where he was.

Leo looked up at the manhole cover above him. One of Donnie's cameras nestled just at the top of the ladder fixed on the curved wall under it. The blinking light told him it was in working order. He doubted Donnie was even aware of what it reported.

All at once, an angry flush hit him. He should leave. There was no reason for him to be there. He should go back. Check in with Master Splinter. Check on April and Casey. Or even call Mikey, reach out and see how he was handling all this.

Those screams sharpened in his memory and chased away everything. Everything...expect the want to climb the ladder.

Leo continued to stare, willing his body to move. To leave. To set a damn example even if his brothers wouldn't follow it.

Instead, he climbed the ladder. He was topside in a matter of moments. On a deserted street, in front of the one place he wanted---he needed to be.

Doubt hit him, always so sharp at times like this. He should leave. He should just---just---

The light in the kitchen came on. The shades were drawn, giving only a ghostly impression of the figure moving through the room. Leo followed it, swallowing though he wasn't sure when his throat had gone dry. Over and over, he told himself to leave. To just leave.

*Don't do it. Don't bring her into this. Don't bring this darkness to her. Just don't.*

He expected the light to go on in the living room. Her form headed that way, at least. Then it appeared at the side door. The door that had the clearest view of the small side street where the manhole rested.

In the still, quiet night air, Leo heard the side door unlock. Her figure waited for a moment before continuing on into the living room.

The blatant invitation beckoned.
Amaya's neck prickled even as she dumped the last stack of papers on the coffee table. She eyed the huge thermos that had held most of her coffee for the day, now sad and empty. She resigned to making one pot for the night. If she lingered for a moment too long in fussing with the papers, it was only to give him time.

Honestly, she never got what the big deal was. They were ninja, she got that. So what if she sensed when they were near? It wasn't just them. She just always had a knack for knowing when people were close by. If she wasn't focused on something else, that is. Or Splinter, for some reason.

But pride was pride. And she was loath to go through another round of questioning.

When she couldn't stall any longer, Amaya made her way back to the kitchen. Just as she crossed the threshold, the lingering smell of sewer hit her. Her nose wrinkled; no matter how often she trekked down there, she never got used to it. Then she rounded the fridge and got a clear view of where he stood. The thermos fell from her numbed hands.

Leonardo looked like shit. His armor and gear were worn, one of his swords was either gone or it was missing a handle, and he was injured. The too-weird sight of bruises and cuts against his green skin clawed at her senses, jacking her heart rate up. But the guarded look in his eyes stopped her cold.

"Dear lord, what happened?"

Leo gave a pained smile. "It's been a night," he said.

Great, she was thinking out loud again. Wrestling with the shrieking need to demand answers to questions she didn't want to ask, she drew in a deep breath. She started for the nearby cabinet in the living room and the first aid tackle-box that waited there. Calmly, she asked, "Anyone need me?"

"No, no," he said, shaking his head; all his movements looked too smooth, too controlled even for him. "It's over. It was...it was intense."

Amaya bit her lip, forcing herself to keep from challenging the doge. Instead, she took out the tackle box and moved closer, flicking on all the lights as she passed the switches. The harsh beams only showed more of the same. But she doubted he was seriously injured. Everything appeared superficial.

He dripped water on the floor. She couldn't stop another nose wrinkle and inwardly winced when he caught it. "Sorry," he said, glancing down at the growing puddle under him. "I ran through the sewers. I didn't think---I can...I'll leave."

Amaya reached out just as he turned, grabbing his arm. More than the sight of him in pain---physical or whatever it was that hung over him like a ghost---she hated seeing him like this. The too quiet, too polite shell that was just as painful. And the guarded way he looked at her?

Forget the coffee, did she have any booze? Maybe something left over from that time April came over?

She pushed through the lump in her throat and turned, dragging him after her. He didn't fight her grip but babbled something that sounded like an apology. The rush in her ears muffled everything. She half-kicked the door leading into the garage open, pulled him into the cavernous room, and thumped his plastron hard enough her knuckles burned.

He shut up at that. Or maybe it was the way she snarled up at him, "Don't you ever apologize for coming here. Do you hear me? Ever."
Leo blinked down at her, as though that was the last thing he ever expected her to say.

Amaya's heart hitched and her eyes burned. She quickly looked away, motioning with the hand that still held the tackle-box to her latest project. "I rigged a shower out here," she said; the words were too tight but they were at least understandable. "Hot water's not working yet but it's better than nothing. Get cleaned up and I'll see---I'll check you over. I don't care what Donnie says, I don't want to risk some weird infection on the off chance---in case something---"

She fought to keep going. To keep herself focused. That's what she needed to do, right? That's what she's been doing all these months? Her house was basically a second base, of sorts. It had better security than anyone else on the block. And it was needed for times like this. Times when she needed to help them, needed to focus---

Amaya didn't realize she still held a fist to his plastron. Not until Leo's hand closed over it. And then she realized she was shaking.

"I'll get clean," he said, voice echoing in the garage. "Should I wait out here---"

"No," she broke in. She sucked in a deep breath and held it, counting to twenty. The shaking didn't stop but it was under control, now. "Come back inside. Seriously, Leo, it's just a bit of sewer water. Like I haven't hosed off enough myself? I'm not that squeamish."

A small smile cracked his face. "No, no, you're not. I know that."

She looked up at that. He wasn't as guarded, now. She tried to take comfort in that. She loosened the fist, curling her fingers around his; he kept it place, heart beat strong against her skin. That did comfort her.

Amaya managed a smile, shaking her head a little. "Meet you inside. I think you got some spare clothes from last time, I'll leave them out."

She went inside, leaving the door cracked. The tackle box landed on the counter as gently as she could. She got some old towels and went to work clearing up the wet mess on the floor. Trying to ignore the way her eyes continued to burn.

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Leo fought the urge to just rinse off, cold water or not. He made himself do a thorough job. Bad enough he couldn't stay away, bad enough he'd upset her, he could manage to not stink up her place.

Once started, it was hard to stop. He cleaned himself until the water running down the drain was clear. Then did another once over for good measure. Hoping he wasn't nose blind to any lingering stench, he towed off and dressed with what she had set out by the door.

Leo went over his gear, noting what could be repaired and what was now trash. A few tears in the gear itself but it wasn’t too bad. Most of that had been from an explosion. The left arm sleeves probably should just be replaced, he couldn’t see how a patch job would fix anything there close to it’s original state. Otherwise, it held up fantastically. He hated the damage done to his katana. But it wasn’t as though that left him defenseless. There were spares in the lair and he was more than adequate with a single blade.

A memory made him smile: the crackle and hiss of a taser followed by a very disgruntled snarl. Not too unlike the expression she’d given him earlier.
Don't you ever apologize for coming here.

Leo glanced at the door. No doubt plagued him. No insecurity, either. A dull, throbbing ache went through him. Amaya meant it, he knew. He never doubted her words. She was unusually straightforward at times. Not belligerently so, just enough that no one was left to wonder her sincerity. And she sucked at lying; even she was aware of that.

So why was he hesitating? He wondered if it had to do with what happened last time he was here alone. That kiss...

He'd be lying if he said it wasn't on his mind. Or that it had hovered over him ever since. And the quick glances and faint flushing he'd caught from her more than said it was the same on her end.

He didn't want to bring it up. Not now. Not after today---

Leo shook himself, throwing those thoughts back. They lingered as he expected. But he pushed on. Entering the house, he saw a sparkling clean kitchen and a laundry basket waiting for him. He dumped his sodden things in there just as Amaya came back.

She nodded at the basket. "Run them through the washer after the towels are done. Hopefully they aren't too torn up."

Mere seconds later, Leo found himself pushed onto a barstool. He blinked down at her as she fixed a headlamp in place and clicked it on. Amused, Leo kept from saying anything as she carefully examined him. The smaller wounds were already healing (thank you, mutagen) but there were a number that would take a while. Amaya made an unhappy noise whenever she found one. Tackle-box ready, she cleaned and bandaged each with simple efficiency.

Last time he'd endured this, it hadn't gone quite as smooth. The memory made him chuckle.

She glanced up at that, headlight making him wince. "What's funny?"

He nodded at the roll of gauze in her hand. "You're a lot better at this than Raph ever was."

Amaya almost caught the surprised laugh at that. Busying herself with a long gash on his side, she said, "You know, I never got why Raph did a lot of the triage. Didn't strike me as the type."

Leo shrugged, hissing at the sting of antiseptic. "He's got steady hands. Better for the smaller stuff. He just took to it without anyone saying so. His bedside manner sucks, though."

She finished taping and stepped in front of him, grinning at whatever mental image she drew from that. It turned to a frown at his right hand. The split knuckles still oozed despite the shower. She looked it over, brow raising. "Punch a wall, Leo?"

He said nothing. She didn't pry.

First aid done, she repacked the kit and made quick work of the trash. Leo noted she had a small cardboard box labeled "FIRE" she dumped most of the bloodied stuff into. There was a want to smile, to make a joke about that. It just didn't come.

He felt stuck. No longer seized with the urge to run or get out, he now had nothing to guide him. Like he so often sought during medication, his mind was blank. In the worst possible way, given what happened, but the fact remained. He was stuck.

Amaya poured the entire contents of the coffee pot he hadn't noticed her using into a large
thermos. Like many of her coffee paraphernalia, it was the biggest one he had seen. She screwed on the lid and walked to the living room. As she passed him, she gently grabbed his wrapped hand and tugged him after her.

He followed, amused at her taking such a lead. He dutifully allowed her to direct him back onto the couch. He watched, smile tugging at his mouth, as she flitted around the room. She dumped the stack of papers she’d been carrying earlier on another section of the couch, within arm’s reach but otherwise banished. Then she grabbed the remote and a literal armload of blankets.

Amaya grinned before dumping the blankets on top of him. Leo chuckled, working to unearth himself. She ducked in and wormed her way under it all until she was pressed against his side. They took a moment to arrange both themselves and cover until comfortable. She flipped the TV to some animated show with a simple, “This is my go to when I just want to mindlessly stare at the screen. We can change it after a while.”

“What if I hate it?” Leo asked. He dug out a small throw pillow he’d landed on and tossed it at her face.

She scowled though there was a smile there. “Three episode minimum, that’s my rule. If you can’t stand a show after three consecutive episodes, only then can you pick something else.”

He made a show of rolling his eyes. “Fine, subject me to this unusual torture, strange woman.”

Amaya stuck out her tongue. As the opening started, she tucked herself under his arm with the air of having done it thousands of times. The fact that this was the first time was only told by the slight flush rising up her neck and cheeks. And it took until halfway through the next episode before Leo was able to force himself to relax.

The show was mindless but entertaining. Which was the point, wasn’t it? They went back and forth, talking mainly about the show’s inaccuracies of working in a restaurant---given her employment history, Amaya felt well versed in that---while arguing about the likelihood that the crazy recipes would actually work---Leo felt some of the options didn’t sound half bad while she made motions of throwing up at the thought.

The stack of papers and the thermos of coffee when untouched. The constant throb from his injuries slowly began to fade into the background. It was the only thing keeping him grounded in the present, only thing reminding him of why he was there. He never mentioned it. And aside from Amaya taking his bandaged hand between hers and just holding it, she gave no acknowledgment of it.

They passed her ‘three episode’ rule and the remote remained where it was lost in the folds of the blankets. Another three and both lapsed into quietly viewing. By the time the screen darkened with a query about if they were still watching, Amaya was asleep. His arm ended up wrapped around her and she held onto it like the world strangest pillow. She still held his hand, braced against her middle while her other arm latched onto him as well. Black hair escaped her bun and tickled at Leo’s skin, fluttering with her breath. But damned if he moved her.

In the quiet of the house, now well into the three o’clock hour, Leo fully expected his mind to go back to what brought him here. To review what exactly happened. To get his thoughts in order for when, eventually, he had to talk to sensei, to his brothers, for when he had to figure out what was missed---

Amaya shifted, dragging his arm with her as she rolled into him. She made a noise, part hum and part word he couldn’t make out, and tugged at his arm again as though to make sure he was still
there. Her head pressed against his plastron but she didn’t look uncomfortable. Then nothing aside from her breathing filled the air.

And instead of doing what he usually did, instead of trying to find the weakness in their work tonight, Leo just stared down at Amaya. He watched her sleep, listened to her snore occasionally, and found that his mind just…stayed where it was.

Leo was able to just stay in this moment. Where his most important responsibility was making sure the woman hanging onto him like a koala and drooling on him was not disturbed. Hell, his free hand drifted to check his pockets for the few small throwing stars he had stashed there. Making sure that he could still protect her in such a vulnerable state.

Vulnerable. He hated that word. Hated the times he couldn’t help but be vulnerable. Too much could go wrong. Too much at stake. Even without loss of life, those times were dangerous.

And tonight they were all left in such a state. Cut so deep there was no way to bluff their way around it. Wounds aside, tonight left a lasting mark on all of them.

There were many unsaid things between him and Amaya. Beyond the fact that this thing between them was so new. She had yet to hear of their origin, of how April was involved so deeply within their lives. How long they fought this war with the Foot, Shredder, and the countless others that threatened not just the city but the world.

There were the dumb things, too. Which incense he preferred to use during meditations, how he only kind of liked jasmine tea but drank it because it was his father’s favorite, how he secretly loved Hawaiian pizza but refused to admit that to his brothers.

And the hard things, too. How he worried about his brothers every time they went topside. How Donnie’s injury was just the latest but in no way the worst. How sensei sometimes seemed to grow older before his eyes, aging too fast to be real. How some nights he wondered if it would be the last for any of them.

And how being here with her, right now, made all that fade.

Leo pulled Amaya as close to him as he could without waking her. He wrapped himself around her, breathing in that ever present blend of coffee and spices that surrounded her. He felt her smile, felt her weight shift then settle against him as though she belonged there, felt the warmth of her body seep into him as though he had never been warm before.

His eyes burned. He wanted to shut them, wanted to keep that sign of weakness at bay. But doing so would mean he’d lose sight of her.

So Leo let his eyes water, let them flow as the warmth infused every part of his body, doubled by every point of contact with hers. He let himself be weak for this moment. Because he knew he could.

Because Amaya had given him the chance to just be Leo.

Leo pressed his lips to her head, striving to keep from disturbing her. Even so, he couldn’t help the words he breathed against her hair. “I love you, Amaya.”

For a few moments, they remained that way. Then Leo felt the change, felt the knowledge hit him so hard he stopped breathing: she’s awake.

As he panicked, she moved. The hand still grasping his intertwined their fingers. It was awkward,
given the different number of digits, but that didn’t stop her. She gripped him tight like it was an unspoken dare.

Then her sleep roughened voice said through a smile, “‘Love you, too, Leo. Shadowman.”

That cursed nickname broke Leo’s panic. He barked out a laugh, ducking his face to hide it against her neck. She giggled, still groggy sounding, and curled into him.

The night wore on. Even as the approaching day meant the eventual end to this moment of quiet, neither sought to break it. They stayed, wrapped in one another, until the call came in just after sunrise.

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