All Wounds

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All Wounds

by Destiny_Smasher

Summary

You need time, huh? That’s hilarious, coming from you.
Time doesn't heal all wounds, Maxine. You dip****.
Where the hell do you think scars come from?
(Now being made into a FAN GAME at http://LiS-AllWounds.Tumblr.com)

Notes

There is now a playable demo up of the visual novel adaptation I'm creating (with help!).
https://destiny-smasher.itch.io/life-is-strange-all-wounds

See the end of the work for more notes
Chapter 1 - Trail

The warmth had passed. Things were...colder that afternoon.

Even the rays of the midday sun, seeping through the truck's window, pressing against Max's cheek...it wasn't warm enough. Chloe's coat, encasing her, didn't seem to be helping her warm up, either. Fuzzy, wispy vocals from an indie band she recognized but couldn't place the name of...all it was doing was irritating her. Even Chloe's face seemed...warmer than it ever had somehow, and yet Maxine couldn't bear to look at her as they cruised down the highway.

Maxine still felt cold.

Still felt the stinging ice of raindrops pelting her face.

Wet hair clinging to her cheeks.

Damp clothes heavy on her shoulders, yet feathers compared to the real weight.

Shadows and light, tip-toeing around each other with caution.

Voices shouting, screaming, yelling her name.

Maxine felt so cold...

She was having trouble remembering, in the panic of the tornado, the slamming rain, the fires sizzling through it all...

Which people had she saved?

Which people had she let live, and which had she let die?
Which people had she saved, then un-saved?

Some 'Everyday Hero' she'd turned out to be.

It was all a blur now. Only a day later...not a single rewind since. It felt like an eternity given the past
week. *Pff.* A week. Felt a hell of a lot longer than that...

Maxine was having trouble remembering which people were still alive, and which ones were dead. Her stomach lurched at this realization. The gut punch hit right then.

Was Kate still dead?

*Oh, God,* Max thought in a moment of terror. *Kate*...

Maxine had been so fixated on saving Chloe, so muddled in time, she couldn't--...She didn't *know,* even, if Kate was still alive in this...this reality. She had no clue.

Death had somehow lost its edge recently. That kind of happened when you could just fucking undo it, like mopping up milk with a paper towel.

Whoopsie, I spilled your fucking life on the floor.

Let me just clean that up.

All better now.

No use crying over it.

Dead and back again.

Dead.

Back again.

How many times had Max watched Chloe die by now? A few. More than a few.

Hadn't Chloe shot *herself* by accident one of those times? Jesus.

What about Frank? How many times had she watched Chloe shoot *him?* Or watched Frank kill *her?*
How many times had she watched Mr. Madsen get shot in that bunker?

And yet, with Kate...she only had the one memory of that.
Kate jumped off that roof, one time, and it was over.

That was reality, then, wasn't it?
Shit was supposed to happen once, and that was supposed to be it. That was how reality worked.

So when you could mess around with that shit, what the hell was reality anymore?

That was why Max had to tear that photo. Stop using her powers.
If she didn't stop, reality would...cease to fucking exist, wouldn't it? Or at least, a reality where she wasn't alone.

No more photos of the past to toy around with. They'd all been left behind in Arcadia Bay. And Arcadia Bay was gone. Fucking destroyed, more or less.

Tearing that photograph of that butterfly, letting the tornado swallow it up...that had sealed things. No temptation to go back and try fixing shit.

This was reality now. A reality where a entire town was eaten alive. Eaten alive by a stupid fucking girl messing with shit she shouldn't have been.

Maxine wasn't going to play with time anymore. She'd decided that the moment she tore that last photograph in half.

And yet...

What if something happened to Chloe? What if...Chloe was still meant to die?

She'd rewind then. Only then. Not for anything else.
And doom some *other* fucking town through some cosmic bullshit? Wasn't one town enough? Who was she to be making decisions like that, anyway?

But if she didn't, then wouldn't it mean Arcadia Bay was in rubble for nothing?

Max's shoulders shuddered a bit from the chill seeping up her spine. She wormed her arms around her abdomen, nestling her head against the window of the car door. The trickle of sunlight heating the glass paled in comparison to the chill.

She couldn't keep her eyes open...

The voices from that horrible nightmare bubbled around in her brain.

“*Holy shit, are you cereal? I'm you, dumbass. Or I'm one of many Maxes you've left behind.*”

“*Max, do you really think she has any feelings for us? You're just another puppet. Man, you are soo stupid.*”

“*Why hang out with Max, huh?*”

“*Boredom. Plus, she's like my personal puppet.*”

“*Chloe does a better job of guilt-tripping me than you do.*”

“*Because you let her bully you. It's called 'Stockholm Syndrome.' But you didn't do that homework. So you'll have to learn the hard way. Like Rachel...*”

“*You've left a trail of death and suffering behind you.*”

“*You fucked up space and time for your precious punk, Chloe. You think she's worth all that?*”

“*...ax? Fuck, shit, arghh...No-no, wh...?*” Chloe's voice was bleeding through the red and black haze.
“Mmph?” Max struggled to pull herself back to the present.

Right? The present.

On that cliff, in the rain, the tornado fucking *destroying* that shit hole town full of assholes. Fuck *their* selfies. They could die in fires. Literally. She would *watch*, with Chloe by her side.

Wait, wait.

That wasn't the present. That was the past. Wasn't it?

Erhh, no! Hold up. Max hadn't *wanted* that shit. She'd wanted everyone to be safe.

*Sure you did. That's why you ran the fuck away. Real heroic.*

I had to save Chloe! I had to get her out of there...

*Because that selfish bitch was worth all of this?*

I never said that!

*You didn't have to. We both know it's how you feel. You caused that storm. You let it happen.*

I didn't know! I didn't—...I didn't *choose* that! I didn't *want* to cause that fucking storm!

*You chose to run away, though. Sacrificed Arcadia Bay. Real fucking convenient that it wiped away everything that would've caused a problem for you. Everyone. Now you and your precious fucking punk princess can ride off into the sunset. Like you always wanted.*

I did *not* want all this. And you don't know everyone's dead!
Ha! Oh, sure. Sure. What's the difference between half the town being dead and the whole town being dead? You still caused it. You still killed people.

I didn't kill anyone.

Do you need more psychology lessons from yourself? Denial's a stage of grief, but you're skipping the other steps. Or maybe it's because you just don't give a shit.

The past week has torn me in pieces, you...monster.

Pot, meet kettle. Actually, my bad. Pot, meet fucking pot. You got torn into pieces? Did you forget all that rubble you drove through on your way out?

All of that power, and instead of saving Arcadia Bay...-

Ohhhh, Chloe, you're my buh-buh-best friend! It's destiny! We're destined to be together~

I'll save you from everything~
You're my top priority~
You're alllll that matters~

Look, I didn’t ask for this shit. If it's not destiny, what the fuck would you call it?

I'd call it you being so fucking pathetic, so goddamned desperate for attention, that you'll take it from someone who's just been using you this whole time. You two went separate ways. You go to get an education, and what does she do? Obsesses over some attention whore who didn't even love her back. Gee, sound familiar? Then Rachel goes missing, and she finds out you have fucking super powers and then suddenly you're worth her time again? What do you know?

Do the fucking math, Max.

Chloe was after Rachel, not you.

You're just the consolation prize.

And you're so fucking eager to be that 2nd place that you let all those people die. For this selfish, bratty, childish, self-absorbed bitch. Fuck it, you two deserve each other. Deep down, beneath the red and blue surfaces, you're both the same: selfish kids.
And even now, after all that? Watching Arcadia Bay get ripped to pieces, knowing you saved her life over and over, knowing how much you worked, sacrificed, just for her fucking sake...And did she confess anything to you? Huh? Did she even kiss you like you were hoping she would? Hell no. You're so naive. And you don't even have the fucking guts to do anything yourself. You keep waiting on her to make the move. Like she will. Like she gives a rat's ass.

We've just been through hell. We need time to...deal with-

Time! Ha! Fuh...Christ. You need time, huh? That's hilarious, coming from you. Time doesn't heal all wounds, Maxine. You dipshit. Where the hell do you think scars come from? And shit like what you pulled? All those dead people? That's a pretty nasty fucking scar you've left. Was it worth being Chloe's consolation prize?

Shut the fuck up.

'Hella' powers you had. Destroyed a whole town without even trying. 'Poor thing.'

'Wowzer,' right?

Why are you doing this? Why won't you leave me alone?

Be honest. You were glad to find out Rachel was dead, weren't you? You could have Chloe all to yourself. Super Max to the rescue. Save her life a few times, be a shoulder to cry on...Find out 'whodunnit,' watch him get a bullet in the brain. That'd sure make Chloe happy, huh? Hell, Chloe used to joke about burning Arcadia Bay to the ground, and you managed to actually make that fucking happen for her! Bravo, Maxine.

Shut up. That's not how it happened...Please, fucking please, just...-

What if you could've gone back to save Rachel? Maybe you could have. You didn't even fucking try. Did you? It was way more convenient to let that one stay in the past, wasn't it?

Fine! It was all Max's fucking fault! Max was a murderer, Max didn't give a shit, Max was selfish, Max abused her powers...
That was in the past, it was done. And it was shitty. And Max was shitty.

The \textit{present}. Max needed to be in the present now.

\textit{You think it fucking matters what point in time you're in? Anymore? After this?}

\textit{You left me – us – to die.}

\textit{What do you think happened to the Max that killed Chloe?}

\textit{The Maxes that watched Chloe get shredded by a train.}

\textit{What about the Maxes who watched Chloe shoot Frank?}

\textit{Or the Maxes who watched David Madsen get shot?}

\textit{The Maxes that Jefferson had his way with? The Maxes Jefferson killed?}

\textit{Fucking hell. You didn't just destroy Arcadia Bay. You didn't just play with people's lives. You killed yourself, too. So many fucking times. Sado-masochism plus superpowers equals you being fucking psychotic.}

I undid all of that.

\textit{Did you, though? Or did you just leave it behind? Either way, Arcadia Bay is gone, and you don't seem to give a shit.}

I don't have to listen anymore of this bullshit...

\textit{Uh, doy? Of course you don't. That's what's so sad: I'm you, dipshit. You want to listen to this, or else I wouldn't be saying it, would I? How fucking sad! You can't even talk with her about it, so instead you're just yelling at yourself in this hellhole you call a brain.}

\textit{That's why you like that shirt, you know. With the skull-faced moth on it? That's me. You get that, right?}
That's me reminding you that no matter where you go, Death follows.

You think it's some coincidence the bitch in the blue hair wears skulls on her shirts and bullets around her neck?

Maybe we've had it wrong all along. Maybe Chloe's not the one surrounded by death. Maybe you are, and she's just a catalyst. And you're keeping her around? Wow.

What makes you think this is over?

Because I'm fucking done playing games. I'm done playing with time.

You are so naive, Max Caulfield.

Leave me alone...Please.

God. Fuck. Please, just...leave me alone...Please-please...I can't...-

I didn't want any of this. I just wanted to help. I just wanted to save Chloe.

She's all that matters to me. It took all of this crazy shit just to get me to realize it, but...-

“Dude, do not even fuck with her head!” Chloe? “She knows what we went through together this week, and you don't.” Chloe's voice, shutting her up, just like before. “There's no way you can break up our team! This is reality!”

Maxine's mind was finally quiet after that.

Was it over? Could Max finally wake up?
Everything was shaking.

Everything was...getting warmer.

Finally...

“...the fuck up, already, wh-...?”

Coughing, sputtering, choking...the taste of blood in her mouth, on her lips...Shit, another nosebleed.

“Jesus fuck, Max...” Chloe's voice was desperate, sighing out relieved swears. “Oh, thank fuck...shit...ugh.”

Max propped herself up from the warmth she'd been pressed against. She realized it had been Chloe's lap. The truck had stopped. As Max's eyes readjusted to reality – it was reality this time, right? – she noticed that Chloe had pulled them off the highway. Cars were periodically whizzing past on the left.

In a daze, Max looked down at herself, realizing splotches of red were all over her clothes...like film melting, bubbling away...

Chloe's hands were clamped against Max's shoulders.

“You with me?” Chloe asked, still in a panic.

“Gughh...” Max tried to reply, but her throat caught. She coughed some more. Ow. Damn, that hurt.

“Hey-hey-hey,” Chloe whispered shakily, pounding Max's frail back a couple times. “Breathe. Breathe...” The forced back-patting was hurting more than helping, but Max managed to clear her chest.

Max's chest burned. Her head was throbbing. She turned to face Chloe, her sight still a bit fuzzy. Chloe's hair was a mess, her hat off, forehead riddled with acne and sweat. Her eyes were bloodshot,
bags hanging under them. Maxine figured she probably looked even worse. The past day had been...rough.

“You promised me you wouldn't do that shit again,” Chloe sighed out, her tone mixing relief with fear.

“Sorry,” Max croaked., rubbing at her ribs, her lungs stinging from the coughing.

“What happened?” Chloe asked after a pause. “You didn't...fuck around with...-?”

“No,” Max said firmly, shaking her head slowly, carefully. Her head felt...wobbly. “No more time travel, I told you...Fucking swear.”

“Not just a swear,” Chloe muttered darkly. “Pinky swear. Pinky swears are punishable by-” But Chloe's attempt at levity was met with Max whimpering as a wave of aching washed over her, and another dribble of blood slid down her nostril.

“Shit,” Chloe gasped through clenched teeth, scrounging up another stale napkin from the glove compartment and stuff it in Max's face.

“Sorry,” Maxine groaned, her tone turned nasally from pinching a musty napkin into her nostril.

“How long has it been since you last rewound time?” Chloe checked.

Max shrugged up the shoulder that wasn't being used to level a napkin to her nose.

“I-I don't know, a...day? I guess? Back at the...fucking Vortex Club party...Chloe, I'm telling you: this is the longest I've gone without using it.”

“Kay...” Chloe sniffed in a deep breath, gripping her steering wheel tightly. “I believe you.” The engine was still running. The hum of the truck was more like a raspy rumble. Suddenly, Chloe prodded, “Dude. Is your nose still...-?”
Maxine pulled back the red-tipped napkin from her face. She dabbed at her upper lip, confirming that it wasn't damp. She cautiously rubbing sleeve against her nostrils. Some dried blood flaked off. It wasn't running anymore, at least.

“Mm-mm,” Max hummed with a slight headshake.

Chloe drummed her fingers nervously along the steering wheel, watching a van pass by.

“So...You, uh, need a minute, or...-?”

“I'm fine,” Max lied. “Let's just keep going.”

“Right. Sure,” Chloe mumbled. “You got drugged, kidnapped, bent space and time just to get my sorry ass out of that piece of shit town, watched that town get torn apart...and now you're covered in your own blood.” Chloe started up the ignition, adding bitterly, “But you're fine.”

“OK, I'm not,” Max grumbled testily. She chewed and licked dried blood off her lips warily.

“Is this nosebleed shit something I should be worried about?” Chloe asked, changing gears and getting the truck on the road again. “Wh-...? Is there anything else I should be worried about?”

“Look, I don't know,” confessed Max. “Can we try to not...worry about anything right now?”

“When should I worry about all this?” Chloe snapped, her voice cracking slightly. She cleared her throat, tweaking the position of her rearview mirror. She mumbled, “When your...brain fucking hemorrhages, or...-?”

“We've got bigger problems than fucking nosebleeds, Chloe,” Max snarled, letting loose some of her bottled up frustration.

_Damnit, Max, Chloe's totally worried about you. And you don't even get to appreciate it, after everything that's happened._
Chloe's lips pursed fretfully. She re-gripped the steering wheel, shuffling her position in her seat.

“Yea,” she agreed solemnly. “You're right.”

A heavy pause.

“Did you call Joyce yet?” Max groaned out, desperately wishing she could shake the bitchiness off her tone.

“...Not yet,” Chloe confessed. “She, uh...she called me, though, so...she's...” Chloe trailed off, shrugging up a shoulder.

“When?” Max demanded. “When did she call you?”

“This morning,” Chloe explained. “I don't...” She sighed. “Haven't worked up the guts to...call her back.” Chloe caught Max's impatient glare, and she defensively lashed out, “I don't see you fucking...checking in, either, Max.”

Max seethed steam through her nose. After everything, Chloe was still being...such a...fucking child. Always with the redirects. Always buffering shit off of her, projecting it on someone else. It was always someone else with her...

At the same time, Chloe was right – Max had yet to call her folks, either. Or anyone, really. Her phone had blown up with texts and missed calls, which were all going ignored. She was afraid. Fucking terrified. She didn't want to know who made it out, and who didn't. She wasn't ready for that shit. Not yet.

It was all her fault, after all.

In a stroke of sympathy, Chloe seemed to pick up on Max's downtrodden vibes.

“Uh, sorry,” Chloe breathed out, shaving the edge off her tone. “Just...having trouble wrapping my brain around all this...crazy shit.” She took in a deep breath through her nose, then scratched at her jaw a bit. A moment's consideration later, and she offered, “I could...call 'em for you.”
“Huh?”

“Your parents. Yea. Yea, yea.” Chloe nodded to herself, her hands flicking around with an eager attempt to alleviate things. “Let me call ‘em. Give ‘em the heads up that we’re on our way. I could totally cover for you. You, uh...hit your head. Or...-” She sighed, tilting up a wrist before letting it smack back against the steering wheel. Max’s bloodshot eyes were giving Chloe a disparaging look. Chloe replied, “I get it, OK? You must be...hella fried right now. I know I don't really have a right to say it, but...I'm hella freaking here, too.” Her voice was shaking a little. Like it did the night before, in the rain.

Max's nose wrinkled, her brows curved, her eyes flickered on the edge of tears.

An entire town got destroyed because of them. They'd have to live with that, carry that...

'Hella fried' and 'hella freaking' probably summed it up well enough.

“It's over,” Max whispered under breath. That was the one solace she could find right then.

Chloe’s head twisted slightly, curiously, then she redirected her attention back on the road. Maxine continued, rubbing her fingers at her nose, dusting off the caked droplets of blood that lingered.

“It's all...fucking over. How am I...-? All those people, and-...What...-? I-I couldn't not-...But...what if...-? How was I supposed to choose th...-?” Her brain was tumbling a load of dirty, filthy, self-deprecating thoughts in a wash of cleansing realization – that she was selfish.

“OK. Max? Slow down,” Chloe eased. Max could pick up that tint of doubt in Chloe's voice – that 'OK whoa I don't know how to handle it if you lose your shit 'cuz my shit's already lost right now' kind of feeling. “Don't...overthink this. Shit happens.”

“Shit...happens? Animals don't just fucking up and die like that, Chloe. You saw the whales. And the birds? I knew the tornado was coming. The whole time. I could've...warned everyone, I...I could've stopped it from happening.” Max sucked in a fierce breath, on the verge of hyperventilating as her mind ran circles around itself.
Instead you just focused on trying to impress Chloe.
Shut up, go away...

“Shit happens,” Max repeated, her intonation more desperate. “Rewinding time, watching a tornado that you caused destroy...all the people that...” Max choked on a sob, covering her mouth as if to prevent the guilt from leaking out.

Chloe bit her lip, eyes wide, fingers slowly drumming along the wheel.

“You didn't know how things were going to turn out,” Chloe insisted in a sterile, self-convincing way. “Even...OK.” She took a second, took a breath. Steadied, she cited, “Even if that storm happened because you...fucked with time? Even if? How the hell do you know if you could've stopped it at all? What if...? I mean, what if going back to the beginning, what if that would've still counted as, ya know, screwing around with shit? What if the very first time you rewound time – to save me – I mean, what if that sealed it? What if all that shit was gonna happen either way? Right? You don't know. You can't stop a fucking tornado, Max. Even with your rewind.”

Maxine wanted to let Chloe's theory make things feel better.

It did not make things feel better.

“I couldn't stop fucking anything with my rewind...”

“You stopped the assholes that killed Rachel,” Chloe practically hissed with spite. “That killed Kate. They were ruining people’s lives, and you stopped them.”

Didn't stop them soon enough,” Max gloomily dismissed. “Kind of defeats the point of time travel, doesn't it?”

“Look, look, OK, but you did stop me from dying,” Chloe desperately pointed out. “And after everything that happened, I'm still here. You're still here. We're still together. This is some fucking Fated-To-Be shit, right here. And I fucking promise you, we are always going to be together from now on. So...” Chloe swallowed, trailing off. They were getting back on the highway.

“Together,” Max sighed tiredly. Her tone lacked passion, but beneath the surface she was bitterly simmering in a stew of dissatisfaction.
A few seconds slipped by. Chloe cleared her throat, then turned the radio on. She bitched under her breath about how 'her station' wasn't coming in, then gave up, leaving it on a station playing Queen, which was apparently a fine alternative.

A passable second place. Runner up. Consolation prize.

“You hungry?” Chloe asked, noting an upcoming exit.

“Sure,” Max mumbled. She sighed a cloud of vapor into the window her head was pressed against, watching it quickly vanish.

Maxine let the music fill the pores of her brain for a minute or two as Chloe took them down a highway ramp. They stopped at a crowded red-light. Max's cold fingertips were startled by a stroke of warmth. Chloe had briefly squeezed her hand while waiting for the lights to change. Their hands lingered, loosely together, for a couple of seconds. Max glanced at Chloe, who was occupied with her rearview mirrors.

The delicate contact easily disconnected as Chloe took to the steering wheel again. Max scanned Chloe’s profile. Chloe opened her mouth, as if to speak, then didn't. This happened a second time as she made a turn.

“What?” Max bluntly wondered, her voice groggy. Swallowing saliva to whet her throat, she watched Chloe’s brows raise slightly, then furrow.

“Huh? Nothing,” Chloe muttered vaguely, shaking her head slightly. She pulled them into a parking lot.

It was some kind of trucker diner.

Max's stomach lurched. Flashes of the Two Whales exploding. Pulled apart. The people inside, all around, all hurting...Joyce had been stuck in that place all night. Frank and Warren, too. None of them deserved to sit through that.

“Hope you're in the mood for greasy-ass burgers,” Chloe grunted playfully, switching off the
ignition. Max was so familiar with Chloe's voice by now that she could smell the desperation. Chloe was trying to get things back into their 'Max & Chloe Good Times' vibe. Chloe rubbed Max's left shoulder roughly, pinching it in a way that hurt a bit. “You've earned some comfort food, am I right?”

Chloe popped open the driver side door, flipping her legs out and springing upright. Max just sat where she was, staring at the diner.

Watching it get destroyed in her mind's eye.

Hearing all those voices from petrified forms taunting her in her mind's ear.

“...Max?” Chloe was tilting over, popping her head back into the truck.

“Chloe, can we...go somewhere else?” Max requested shakily. Her fingers were clenching across themselves in her lap. Her whole body felt taut and tight.

Chloe glanced over to the diner quickly, as if expecting to see something wrong or out of place, then paused, lingering in thought for a second before re-entering her car.

As soon as she was back in the driver's seat, Chloe swiped up Maxine's hand again.

“What's wrong?” she asked with some suspicion. Her voice got quick and quiet – excited, almost, but in a serious way. “What happens in there? Did you just rewind? Did you see some kind of shit go down wh-”

“No,” Max sighed. She'd already told Chloe she was done with the rewind. Chloe didn't believe her?

Chloe seemed baffled. Skeptical.

Max explained, “A place like that is just going to...bring back...” She trailed off, her voice losing its strength as she rubbed her haggard fingers across her face. “It’s reminding me of...“

“Shit,” Chloe sighed to herself. She gripped Max's hand tightly.
Ever since they'd held hands in the face of that storm, Chloe had rapidly adjusted to administering little gestures like this. Max wanted to appreciate that, to let that excite her, but...-

“This have to do with yesterday?” Chloe asked solemnly.

Max nodded. Chloe nodded in understanding, glancing out the vehicle's windows as she released Max’s hand.

“Got it,” Chloe muttered. “Well...We, uh, we need to get some food in us, so...Where should we grab some grub?” Chloe was twisting her abdomen, spinning her head around her neck as she scanned for any nearby options. She mumbled in slow, casual syllables, “Commandeth thine loyal servant, Master Maxine.”

When Chloe shot her a sly little smile, Max’s face contorted into a reciprocal smirk. Seeing Chloe smiling – trying – seemed to be enough to keep Max afloat, despite how heavy her heart was.

“Anything that isn’t fast food around here?” Max wondered. She didn’t bother trying to look around.

“Uhh…There’s a Dutch Bros. across the way,” Chloe mumbled warily. “That count?”

“Sure,” Max decided with apathy. Some coffee and bagels in a low key coffee shop would probably suffice.

“Let’s Bro it up, then,” grunted Chloe, settling back in the driver’s seat and twisting the ignition key.

As they rolled out of the truck stop diner's parking lot, Max considered checking her phone for the first time that day. Her phone had blown up so much it was going fucking nuclear. Wowser. A couple dozen texts she had yet to read...probably ten or twenty more she'd read but been too chicken-shit to reply to.

Max sighed quite audibly, not opening a single text as she dropped the phone back into an empty cup holder.
“People lighting up your phone?” Chloe idly asked.

Max nodded, rubbing at her eyes.

“That, uhh—That’s good,” Chloe asserted some relieved but hesitant optimism. She nodded slowly, hunched over the steering wheel as she pulled them into the coffee shop lot. “Right? I mean, if they’re texting you, then...people are...around, right?”

Max shrugged her shoulders uncertainly, resuming her drooping pose against the truck window. She had indeed seen a couple of Blackwell faces in there, but it was looking mostly like relatives. Probably had seen the news, freaked...

“When you said 'what,' um...—” Chloe had parked them, and had taken a somber tone. Max furrowed a pair of puzzled brows. Chloe clarified, “I was going to say something, back at the red light.”

Max nodded, sitting upright as she awaited Chloe's elaboration.

“I said 'nothing,' 'cuz...—” Chloe inhaled carefully, drumming her fingers on the steering wheel. “I was going to ask you, like, 'Max, hey, you OK?’ but, just...—” Chloe shook her head, letting her chin sag against her chest with self-afflicted bitterness. “I realized what a stupid fucking question that was.” She ran her hand across her matted hair, then met Max's gaze. “So I didn't say anything.”

Max swallowed the lump that had gathered in her throat as she absorbed Chloe's softened stare.

“Thanks,” Max mumbled, not really sure what else to say. She pushed stray hair behind her ears as the two of them glanced off to the coffee shop.

“I'm fucking freaking,” Chloe mumbled doggedly, scratching dust from her eyelashes. “I don't know...what to do for you right now,” she confessed, her voice getting raspy and wispy, choking on her own uncertainty.

Max's chest swelled at Chloe's earnest fretting. As if to avoid looking too pathetic, Chloe reached up and over her seat to retrieve her hat.
“It's OK,” Max croaked out in assurance. “I don't know, either...”

“Yes...” Chloe shoved her hat on her head, pushing grease-slicked bangs of blue out of her eyes. “We'll...figure it out. We'll, uh, get some brunch, call our folks, and...play it by ear.” Just before she went to re-exit the car, she gave Max's arm a brisk rub. “Your sidekick's got your back, Super Max. C'mon.” Chloe exited the truck with the same vigor she just had across the street. With that same shaky, 'I'm trying, here' tone, Chloe proposed, “We could...both use some goddamn caffeine, am I right?”

Max nodded, finding the strength to pull herself out, as well.

Max felt stunned to be standing on her own two feet after the day – or was it days? – she'd just been through. She watched Chloe scamper around the truck, pressing her blue-nailed fingers against the hood, pushing herself around its corner. The sight brought some levity to her weary soul.

Chloe grabbed Max's hand, tugging at her arm to snap out of her stupor and follow along.

Max nodded complacently, but let her hand slip from Chloe's grasp. Stuffing her fists into the pockets of the leather jacket she was borrowing, Maxine walked behind Chloe toward the coffee shop entrance.

“Max, do you really think she has any feelings for us?”
“Because you let her bully you. It's called 'Stockholm Syndrome.'”
“Now you and your precious fucking punk princess can ride off into the sunset. Like you always wanted.”

“You've left a trail of death and suffering behind you.”
“You think she's worth all that?”

I fucking hope so.
The cold had passed. Things were...warmer that evening.

A menacing monstrosity of wind and chaos – delicious but horrible chaos – rampaged before her. Distant enough that she felt out of harm's way, yet close enough to still be pretty goddamn terrifying. The raindrops were like needles against her skin, the winds snapping and biting, clawing at her. Everything had just been clawing, grabbing, swiping...Days and days of this, like the universe itself was trying to shred her from existence. The icy fingertips of Death brushing against her neck, time and again.

Time and again.

And again.

But she was still standing.

Watching that tornado slowly pass by...it was like staring Death face-to-face. And Chloe had been ready for it. At peace with it, beside the lighthouse. It had taken the past week with Max back in her life to make her feel this way. Make her realize how fucked up her priorities had gotten. Make her realize how she really didn't deserve to still be alive.

And yet...she was still standing. And Death was drifting by, taking Arcadia Bay away. Like a child, throwing a temper tantrum when it was denied its candy. A fucking big-ass, god-like child. Well, maybe it was more like watching Death drive by, a renegade speeding through a red light, flipping Chloe the bird as it passed. She could hear the fucker shrieking "YOLO, BITCH, YOLOhoho" as it sped past. Er, 'sped' being metaphorical. Watching that tornado roll on by was at once hell-raising, but...not exactly quick, which was...weird, given that tornadoes weren't typically slow.

Anyway. Either way.

Chloe Price was still standing, against all odds. Against all logic.

She felt so warm...warmer than she could remember feeling in a long time. Fucking overwhelmed with...too many different emotions to keep track of.

And the person responsible for this – all of it – was clinging to her for dear life. Max's tears and snot were mixing with the rain, sticking to Chloe's shirt. Max's fingers were tightening, gripping at her leather jacket. Max's breaths were erratic, her sobs heavy, tugging at Chloe's insides.

Chloe had been tempted in the heat of the moment to lighten the mood. Make some kind of crack about a "whirlwind of emotions, amirite?" But, uh...yea. No. Not so much. Poor Max probably wouldn't have been able to handle that.

Oh, Maxine, Max, Max. Maxine-fucking-Caulfield, that crazy, beautiful mistake of nature...Saving Chloe's life and shit.

What kind of crazy fuckery had Max been through that week? Chloe could only imagine. And nothing she imagined up was particularly pleasant. Fucking nightmares, she figured. She'd never seen Max so...broken apart before. Torn up. All for Chloe's sake, at that. Girl must've been through some dark shit.
And thanks to Super Max putting up with said dark shit, there Chloe was, letting Max's warmth fill her...watching her hometown get rendered to rubble.

And Chloe had never felt more alive.

Max's raw emotion was drizzling out in a mess of teardrops and raindrops and snotdrops. Words she'd just said a minute or two prior repeated themselves in Chloe's head, cutting through all the noise.

"Don't say that! I won't trade you!"

"Fuck that! No...No way! You are my number one priority now. You are all that matters to me."

Max could screw around with time and fucking space, and she'd done it for Chloe.

She was willing to let this crazy storm tear an entire town apart just to be with Chloe.

What the fuck do you say to that?

How do you respond?

How are you supposed to even feel?

Fuck if Chloe knew.

What she did know was that somehow, she'd been given a second chance at living.

Max Caulfield actually cared. That fucking much. So fucking much she was willing to make such a crazy choice like that. Mindblow shit, right there.

With Max hung across her in the storm, Chloe's eyes pooled with tears. Her heart raced. Her hands shook as she tried to comfort her heartbroken friend. Her best friend. Her partner in time.

The weight of this realization – of being loved to such a degree – was incomprehensible to her.

How could Chloe possibly make up for such a loss? She was not worth it. There were no two ways about it. Especially now, after being with Max for this past week...it was extremely clear to Chloe how selfish she'd been. What kind of person she was becoming. Well, had been becoming.

But Max had just given her a fresh start. A second shot. And yet, she could...she didn't know...become a fucking saint (good luck with that), and no fucking way could it make up for what was being lost, right then, right in front of their eyes.

What the hell was Chloe going to do?

What other choice did she have, other than to make the most of this second chance?

No. She had to do more than that. She had to at least make sure Max was able to live the kind of life she deserved. A second chance for both of them.

It wouldn't be enough to tip the balance of...fucking fate, the universe, whatever.

But hopefully it would be enough to keep them both afloat.

–
"Chloe. Max."

The barista calling out their names in quick succession like that was...kind of jarring.

Max and Chloe. Chloe and Max.

Hm. Which order sounded better? Chloe could see herself getting used to sound of either, but...they really needed, like, a team name. Not one from when they were kids. They needed a new team name. One for this...post-traumatic world they were now living in.

"Well, if it isn't the Wonder Twins..."

Frank had been sarcastic, but Chloe...kind of liked it.

Agh, but that was dumb, huh?

Shit, had Frank and his dumb mutt made it out of that shitstorm?

Chloe's brain briefly boiled with embarrassed thoughts and feelings. She couldn't believe that Rachel had straight up lied to her about that guy...And come on, him? She could-...

"Max?" the barista repeated. "Chloe?"

She was looking right at them from her spot behind the counter.

Max, still a bit shaken, twitched a bit, as if to get up, but Chloe gestured her to stay seated.

"Got it," she said, pulling herself out of her head.

Chloe got up from her seat, leaving the still-stunned Max in her chair. She paused, noticing that Max had unzipped the leather jacket she was borrowing. Blood stains were littered over Max's shirt. They, uh, didn't need that sort of attention...

"Yo," Chloe quietly called, side-stepping around the table. She tipped her chin up. As if such a vague, on-the-DL motion would make any sense. "Ip-zay on the acket-quay. Jay. Er...-?"

Chloe's eyes squinted as she tried to figure out what she was even trying to whisper in the first place.

Max was doe-eyed and slack-jawed. Still shaken up. Argh.

Chloe took matters into her own hands – literally – and zipped up the coat for Max.

As she did so, she subtly said in Max's ear, British accent and everything, "You've got red on you..."

With that taken care of, Chloe finally approached their tray of goods – two tall cups of some fancy-sounding shit Max had picked out, one with soy (ech), the other with hella raspberry creamer. A bagel-and-egg sandwich for Max, some turkey club deal for Chloe, and a handful of donuts Chloe had picked on a whim. Two donuts each to be exact, just like old times.

Chloe gawked at the two names written on the cups, still kind of bedazzled at the reality laid before her. They weren't just back in action, now. This wasn't crime-busting shenanigans.

This was...fucking living. Ya know, not, like...extravagantliving, but, yea.

It pinched at Chloe's chest for a moment – this was what she had been wanting with Rachel for...a long time. This...Just this. Just...being together, on the road, eating out together, traveling together,
plotting a course for a ship built for two...The S.S...erh, yea, still needed a name.

Anyway, it just...wasn't going at all like Chloe had anticipated.

Chloe felt like a dipshit when she realized she'd just been standing there, gawking at their much-needed meal. The barista, who'd gone off to ring someone else up, returned with a slightly wary expression.

"Did we miss anything?" she timidly wondered.

Chloe shook her head absent-mindedly, flashing a smile that was more friendly than she'd intended before grabbing the loaded tray of items.

On her way back to the table, Chloe reminisced about times, back in middle school, when she and Max would visit the local bakery, built into the grocery store down the street. They made some good shit there, and for cheap. She and Max would take turns picking out a flavor of donut, and would get two of each, making each other try the other's choice.

Not this time. Max was...still out of it. So Chloe had stepped up to donut-choosing duty for the both of them.

Poor girl had made enough tough decisions for a while, huh? Heh.

Hugh.

Ugh.

Chloe couldn't even crack a dumb joke in her own head without feeling like an asshole.

When Chloe reached the table, she realized she'd spent her walk back dwelling on nostalgic crap instead of coming up with the usual witty quip or remark to mark her entrance. She just smiled a stupid smile that immediately dissolved at Max's downtrodden glance. Chloe set the tray down hastily, eager to undo what she perceived as sending Max's mood a centimeter further in the wrong direction.

The girl needed some goddamn food. They both did. They hadn't eaten since the night before. Spending the night sleeping in a truck on the side of the road also hadn't done wonders for their stamina stats.

When Max's eyes lit up a bit at the sight of her meal, it brought a reprieve to Chloe's doubts.

After immediately scarfing down a big bite of her breakfast sandwich, Max sighed out "Thanks," between bites. She was really going to town, there.

Chloe caught herself staring when her stomach growled uncomfortably. Snapping back to her senses, she chowed down, herself. The two ate in peace for a couple of minutes, occasionally swapping glances. Max would awkwardly glance, and Chloe would ever-so-slightly squint back with amusement.

Max scarfed her whole sandwich down before even touching her coffee, while Chloe danced between the two.

The fuller Chloe's stomach became, the more queasy she got. It was the silence between them. It was getting a bit congesting. There'd been way more than enough silence during their morning travels. Max's house was still a little ways off, but they'd be there by sundown.
In either case...silence. It was unsettling.

Chloe desperately brainstormed a...—fuck—...er, searched for a, uh, topic of discussion...

Her eye was caught by a hipstery chalk drawing of the coffee chain's logo, accompanied by a hand-chalked ad for the weekly special.

"Why is it called 'Dutch Bros.' anyway?" Chloe blurted. Before even checking Max's reaction, she pulled out her phone. She quickly murmured out, "They got wifi here? I'm-a look this shit up. Right now. Knowledge is powah."

Chloe's nose wrinkled as she waited for the wifi to connect. Slow as balls. Couldn't afford to waste data on this, though. Literally. Fuck knew how long her inevitable parental check-in calls would be...

"How's the food, anyway?" Chloe checked, already impatient from waiting on her device.

Max nodded complacently. She swallowed the gulp of coffee she'd been on, sighed with some relief, and wiped her lip with the sleeve of Chloe's jacket – which she was still wearing.

"Well, drink up, sistah," Chloe mumbled her encouragement. "Got a few more hours to go."

Chloe lightly drummed her knuckle against the table to the beat of a song that didn't exist.

Max took another sip, scratched her nose, then sighed.

"Uh, Chloe?"

"Yep?"

"We're going to...my house, right?"

Chloe took pause at Max's question. They'd already discussed this, the day prior. They were going to the Caulfields'. Max's parents didn't know that...yet. But Max did. It had been Max's idea.

After taking a moment to recover from her stun, Chloe nodded simply.

"That's the plan, anyway," she said, rubbing her hands on her elbows a little. She was actually starting to get a bit cold without her coat. "You forget?" she added with a light-hearted tint, masking her worry.

"Huh? Wh...Yea, I just...-" Max's head jerked in an uncertain way as she swirled her remaining coffee in its cup. "Sorry," she sighed. "The whole...'reality-jumping' thing? It...kinda...-"

"I gotcha," Chloe assured. With a soft chuckle, she tried to empathize. "My mind would be hella fucked up, too, if...Eh...-" Fuckin'...damnit, Chloe. "I mean, like...if I was...-" Nope. Hella nope. Shut the fuck up now please-thanks-kay-bye.

Chloe's stomach folded over on itself, her still-digesting food causing discomfort. Max's expression turned a bit sour. Chloe knew that Max knew what she'd meant, but, like...She'd totally bombed right there. Shit had come out wrong.

Time to unleash her Desperation Move.

"Uh...-" Chloe cleared her throat, sifted her sidebangs with her nail, and gave Max a pleading, humor-laced smile. "So, I know this is a total dick move, but could you, like...rewind and give me a second shot at not saying that?"
Max gawked for half a second before her expression curled into an endeared little smile that Chloe knew well. It was the first time she'd seen Max smile like that all day.

"Chloe," Max said simply, brushing a fingertip down against her cheekbone. Like dusting off her cheek. Chloe had noticed over the past week that Max seemed to do this gesture a lot during conversation. Chloe's guess was it was some awkward adorable tick when Max was nervous or...didn't know what to say.

After Chloe sighed through her nose in spite of her staring, she realized that Max had not followed up with any kind of verbal reply. The ever-so-brief pause of relief with a weak smile on her face was...-

No. It was not good enough. Fuck that. Max had been through...-

Well, Chloe didn't know what, exactly, or how much, or how far, but...Sure seemed like a lot.

"Sorry," Chloe mumbled out. The word had come out more solemnly than she'd planned.

"It's OK," Max replied, volleying the solemnity right back.

Apparently, Chloe didn't need to even explain what she was sorry about. Awesome.

Wait, Max hadn't just pulled a rewind, had she? Nope. Nah. Max acted weird when she did that. Well, ya know, a different kind of weird than her normal weird.

Chloe went for her first donut, downing the initial bite with a gulp of her caffeine-infused drunk. So much sugar and artificial shit, she could feel her bloodstream getting second-hand effects on the way down her throat.

Max brushed sandwich crumbs on her pants as she stood up. Even though there were napkins right there, like literally right right there. Chloe's chest swelled with a bit of pride.

Max got up, scooting her chair out and leaving it out. An extra +5 Lazy Bonus, nice. Max was at 10 points now. How high could it stack today?

"B.R.B.," Max sighed, her eyes scanning for a restroom.

"Bath-Room-Break," Chloe mumbled, tossing out an alternate but appropriate solution to the acronym off the top of her head. She grabbed a slight smirk from Max and was a centimeter further satisfied.

As Maxine brushed by, Chloe went to reach out her hand. Ya know, give Max an...encouraging...hand squeeze? Or...-

'Good luck with the shitting, Bud! You got this, GURL. BELIEVE IN YOSELF'

Ehhhh yeah-nahht so much. She'd started the gesture, though, so to save face, she just...waved. Like an idiot. Max curiously waved back. Chloe ever-so-briefly considered keeping her company, but...Meh. She'd been over that sorta shit years ago.

Chicks took pisses together – or pretended to piss – so they could...gossip. Chat it up. In private. Chloe had no use for that shit. She was pretty sure Max didn't, either. If you wanted to talk with someone, you did it face-to-face, and not while expelling crap out your ass. And who cared if other people heard what they had to say, anyway?
Chloe scratched her nails at her itchy scalp beneath her beanie, glancing across the coffee shop. Eh. Not much to see in the way of bird-watching, here. A couple solid Sixes in her book, maybe, but...nothing worth committing to memory for later use, much less-

-Rrrrrrrrrrrrrmmmmmmmm!!-

Max's phone had gone off. It was still sitting on the table.

Well, hey, if Max hadn't taken her phone, she probably wasn't gonna be in the bathroom for long, rite?

Chloe waited for the phone to buzz a second time, but it didn't. Thank fuck. She wouldn't have known what to do. What if it'd been Mrs. Caulfield, or some shit like that? Oh, right. Chloe had offered to call them soon, anyway...

-Rrrrrrrrrrrrrmmmmmmmm!!-

Welp. Too delayed to be a phone call. Too close to...not be the same person texting twice in a row.

Chloe was tempted to read it. She could just...flip the phone over...probably glean a bit from the lock screen...Hey, it could be important, or something.

But mostly, she was bored.

Ya know, from waiting for all of twenty, thirty fucking seconds. Waiting was hard, OK? Shut up.

While Chloe deliberated to herself how damn rude it would be to peek at Max's phone, Max exited the bathroom, yanking Chloe's attention right to the sound of the door clicking back closed.

Chloe noted that Max had a clump of toilet paper wedged into her right nostril. It had some blood on it.

A dark, dubious dilemma entered Chloe's thoughts in those seconds, waiting for Max to sit back down.

What if it was all made up?

No, seriously. What if Max wasn't a time traveler at all? What if...something had fucked up her brain? You know, like...medically. It had been five fucking years since they'd hung out, or...even interacted. For all Chloe knew, Max could've...been in a...-

Something could've happened. Something could've messed up Max's brain.

Max cautiously took her seat, scooting back in (-5 points), and avoided Chloe's staring.

What if the whole time travel bit was...a bit? Maybe seeing Chloe for the first time in so long could've, like, triggered some crazy-ass trauma. The time-travel thing was just how her fucked up head perceived shit. If Max's brain was fucking bleeding, she could have some major issues.

"Chloe?"

You stupid cunt, don't go thinking bullshit like that. Max is fine, she saved your life, she...has the powers of...a god...

"I'm OK," Max assured, replying to Chloe's blank expression and dire eyes.
She wouldn't lie. But, erh, if she thought it was real, it wouldn't be lying, would it?

"Seriously, you can be chill," Max muttered, her tone gaining a layer of awkwardness. She gently yoinked out the clump of bloody toilet paper, dropping it on her empty sandwich it somehow proved she was OK.

Chloe uncertainly explained, "Havin' trouble with the 'be chill' when your brain keeps leaking blood out of your face..."

*Max can totally rewind time, you dipshit. You tortured her for like, three days, making her prove she could in how many different ways? She's a goddamn Child of the Atom, fershur.*

"I-I guess it's never been...this bad..." Max dabbed her fingertips against her nostril, as if double-checking that her nosebleed was done.

"It gets better, though, right?" Chloe checked.

"...Usually," Max uttered dubiously. So dubiously it made Chloe uncomfortable. Max took a few seconds, regaining her bearings, it looked it.

Chloe passed these seconds scarfing down more of her donut, desperately craving some kind of sugary relief. Her head went in the stupid fucking direction of...worrying. Worrying about making those 'family calls.' Worrying about finding out about all of the people who were fuckin' dead now, because of a freak tornado that somehow, no one saw coming. Worrying about how Rachel needed a funeral, how...a fucking *lot* of people were...gonna need funerals, fuck...-

Worrying about how Max Caulfield was going to deal with the weight of this shit.

Worrying about *she* was gonna deal with it, while helping poor Max at the same time.

Chloe snapped out of her stupor long enough to notice that Max had...stopped. She was just sitting there, eyes glazed over, face pale. Looking at her phone.

"Max," Chloe mumbled, hoping the sinking feeling in her chest wasn't as obvious on the outside as it was on the inside. "Uh, donuts. Eat one."

"Everything, Chloe," Max murmured, barely brushing out of her trance-like state. "Everything fucking...dies."

"...Uhh?"

Well, yea, Max, *sorta* seems like the cost of...living? I guess?

"Fucking *everything* I touch," Max moaned under her breath, shoving her palms against her forehead. She pressed her hands against her skull, like trying to flatten a...pizza of...despair, or-

"The bunny," Max gasped to herself. Her eyes went wide as her hands pushed across her head. Max then gaped at Chloe with realization. It took Chloe a few seconds of recollection to figure it out.

When Kate had, uh, taken a dive (*damnit, Chloe*), Max had taken it upon herself to adopt the girl's poor pet rabbit. Things had, er, escalated a bit, with the whole, serial killer, kidnappings, time travel, tornado...shit.

Aaaand now Max just had another thing to beat herself up over. As if there wasn't enough thrown off the table already. The girl was finding odds and ends, forgotten scraps, and throwing them off, too.

"Max, that rabbit was...Kate's deal, it-"
"Kate's...-! Oh, God, she really is still...-" She sighed, rubbing at her eyes. No tears yet. Maybe Chloe could get the dam set up in time?

"Max, you were...trying to save people from a...fucking psycho, it's...-"
"Didn't even think to...take her bunny with me, we just...-" We're losing her, Doc.

"There was a tornado, Max. There wasn't time to...urhh-" Aghhh fuck no that was a dumb thing to- "There was always time, Chloe. And I...bombed it. Wasted it doing...stupid shit, instead of...-"

"Max, slow down for a sec, you're hella freaking...-"

"A plant, Chloe."

"...Wh-?"

"I couldn't even save my...fucking plant...Gughh..."

"Your plant?" Chloe was losing her, and fast.

Max wasn't even looking at Chloe now. Just, like, hunched over, elbows on the table, fingers pressing into her temples, droplets hanging from the edges of her eyes. Her voice had dipped into an angry whisper.

"-...n'.. th...p...ff...-"

Chloe had to lean over the table just to hear her.

"I killed her, Chloe. I fucking killed a goddamn plant, I...-"

Hohhhh, boy. She was flatlining.

Max's fingernails were starting to dig into her scalp, shoving her swerved bangs slick against her head. Chloe felt her heart freeze at the panic flickering in Max's eyes.

Chloe just gaped. Dumbstruck. Max usually, like...kept to herself when she was freaking. Kept a chill head. All this shit happening lately really had thrown the chick for a loop, huh? And Chloe had no fucking idea what to do about it. She'd promised to be there, but...just being there was...clearly not enough, here. Or...or maybe she wasn't being in the right 'there'?

Max's quivering hands finally pried themselves from her own skull. She flipped her cell phone up and nudged it past her barely eaten donut. Chloe was afraid to see what it was, but...Max clearly needed someone to join her in whatever dark pit she was stuck in, so...-

On Max's phone was a news article about the tornado. The screen was scrolled to a section listing names of known casualties. Chloe actually recognized a few...shit.

And there was one name there Chloe figured had set Max off: Warren Graham.

"...wouldn't even be here if he hadn't...-" Max was still muttering hysterics. "...do I do? Let him die, 'cause why wouldn't...-"

Chloe couldn't bring herself to read more of the article. She'd...deal with that shit later. Max shouldn't have been dealing with it right then. Too bad Chloe didn't have rewind powers. She'd go back and...take Max's phone from her, or...-

"-...saved her from...fucking...footballs and swimming pools, but when it actually mattered...-"
Chloe sighed, rubbing sweat from her forehead with one hand as she slid Max's phone back with the other.

The girl was in full-on Mad Max Mode now. With an extra-capital 'M' on the first word.

*God-fucking-damnit, Chloe. How's about you stop thinking up dumb-ass remarks and do something?*

After a few seconds of gawking at Max's weeping, Chloe simply uttered a disconcerted, "Whoa."

Nailed it.

"I did this," Max whispered, her voice cracking. The self-defeat was fucking real.

"Max," Chloe snapped. She wasn't going to take anymore of seeing Max do this shit to herself. "Don't start this back up. Talk shit about yourself again? I will hit you. I swear to zombie Jesus."

Max choked on a surprised laugh at the bluntness of Chloe's remark.

Chloe glared at Max with mock threat, levelling up a slap-ready hand.

Chloe seethed, "Say 'what' again."

"Chl-..." Max eked out. It was a weird, like, half-sob, half-laugh thing. But also kind of a sigh, maybe? At least Chloe's stupid sense of humor had its uses.

"Eat your donut," Chloe advised sharply. Sharper than she'd meant to, actually. Like she had some right to be telling a Time Warrior what to do. Like the Doctor's Companions was allowed to call the shots...

"...OK," Max squeaked out.

Well, maybe they were allowed, when the Doctor was fucked up like this.

Max sniffled, grabbed a napkin, and blew her nose into it. Chloe finished off her first donut, hoping more sugar would bolster her Cheering-Up Attack for a turn or two. Max's slightly relaxed body tightened right back up, though. She was staring at the napkin she'd just blown into. Chloe didn't need to see it to know what had happened, because there was still some red streaked across Max's upper lip.

Fuck.

After gaping at her own blood for a couple of seconds, Max sniffed some more. She carefully took in a deep breath, swallowed...She set her slightly bloody napkin next to the not-as-slightly bloody makeshift noseplug she'd used in the bathroom.

"Max?" Chloe murmured half-heartedly. She was starting to think a visit to the hospital was going to need to...be a thing. Soon.

Max didn't pay any heed to Chloe, shakily fumbling for a new napkin. She dabbed at her nose gently. She licked her thumb, using her dampened digit to clean blood from her lip. She dried her finger and face with the napkin. It looked like she wasn't actually bleeding...

OK. All right. Another bullet dodged.

"It's OK," Max muttered with a hasty, subtle nod. She glanced to Chloe – fucking finally – and
repeated, "It's OK."

Chloe was a bit slack jawed at Max's...weird...ness.

"Uh," she sipped a quick sip of raspberry infused coffee. "You ready to blow this...hot...sicle...joint?"

Blow this joint. Hotdog/popsicle stand. Whatever.

Fuck, Chloe had just made herself want to smoke a joint, big time. She remembered she prolly still had a bit of that emergency stash hiding in the glove compartment...Ugh, but she had to quit that shit if she was gonna help Max. Still, a backup was good to have around. At this rate, she'd probably need it as soon as they touched down at the Caulfields'.

"You're...-" Max smiled nervously, evidently dire to find anything funny. "-a dork."

"And you're the dork who saved my fuckin' life," Chloe said with a strange sort of casualty. Casualness. Casual...ness.

Chloe got up from her chair. She gave her coffee cup a swirl – too much to let go to waste, but also too much to wolf down in one go. She'd just take it, as much work as that was. And she still had a donut to spare. Plus an extra for Max. Apple fritters, too, so they wouldn't get frosting or jelly or shit anywhere. She popped them both in the crinkly little bag they had.

"C'mon," Chloe said, noticing Max hadn't moved. "We got rubber to burn, trails to blaze, baby!"

She made to head for the door, leaving all of their trash behind. She lingered, her handprint marking territory on the glass door. Max had gotten up, but seemed to hesitate at the sight of their garbage.

To Chloe's (not really but kind of) dismay, Max tidied up their garbage onto the plastic tray. She carried it to the garbage can to Chloe's side, and dumped it out.


With coffee and donuts pinched together in one hand, the other dirtying the entrance door, Chloe pushed the way open for their exit.

Max was still all brooding, hands in her pockets – in Chloe's pockets, technically. Chloe led the way to the truck, hoping the spring in her step and the junkfood in her stomach would help compensate for all these Critical Fails they were rolling.

Then, Max fell.

The sound of her frail hands hitting the pavement, the gasp that came before the groan...Chloe's heart skipped.

"Max!"

Coffee collided with the tarmac, the crinkly donut bag smacked the ground, and a second later, Chloe joined them. The straps dangling from her shredded jeans slapped the parking lot as she fell to her knees.

Max was sprawled on her hip, barely holding herself up by her palms. Chloe's first reaction was to check that fucking nose – no bleeding. OK, OK, all right, cool, well, not cool but not as not cool as-

"Chloe..." Max winced, her teeth grit. She sucked in air as Chloe grabbed her shoulders. Chloe
propped Max up against her for support, and Max huffed irritably, holding her hands up carefully. Max's quivering palms were scraped up and hella pink, but...not too bad, she was...fine.

Everything was fine. Everything was OK.

If Chloe just...kept on keeping on, it would all stay fine. Fan-fucking-tastic.

Every goddamn thing that had been holding Chloe's life back was gone, so why did her shoulders feel heavier than ever?

Max hadn't exactly put on weight, so why'd she feel so heavy?

Everything was so fucking heavy.

The parking lot was cold and windy, and Chloe's bare shoulders were stinging from the chill, but she still felt so warm somehow. So alive.

Max wasn't moving. Her hands were still, like...hovering there, in front of her own face.

"Max?" Chloe cried, pissed at herself for how a few drops of fear leaked out.

Max coughed, then carefully set her trembling hands on her crooked lap.

"Talk to me, Max," Chloe stiffly commanded, rubbing her hands against Maxine's shoulders.

"Huh?" Max uttered out, her head wobbling a bit.

Chloe choked on a sob, trying to swallow it back down when Max's eyes finally regained focus.

"English, motherfucker," Chloe whispered stupidly, giving Max a relieved grin. "Do you speak it?"

Maxine laughed weakly, worming her hands around Chloe's waist in an adorably careful way.

Chloe could feel her own teeth chattering a little. But she was so fucking warm, man.

"Chloe..."

"Damnit, Maxine," Chloe chuckled softly. "Yer givin' me more jump scares lately than a...uhh...-"

"Insert horror movie reference here," Max weakly eked out, coughing a bit.

Chloe rustled her fingers across Max's hair, letting a trembling laugh drip out.

"Fucker," Chloe snickered, her brain self-defense-mechanism-ing this shit with humor.

"It's like I know you or something," Max said with smarm.

But Max's coughing came back. Chloe could hear an uncomfortable wheezing, she could fuckin' feel the grossness through Maxine's back, pressed against her. Chloe didn't know what else to do other than pat Max's back, like...burping a baby, or...-

"Shit," Max sighed after her coughing spell ended. She sniffed, wiping at her nose. Chloe noted the lack of liquid. "Not a nosebleed," Max muttered out. "My...legs, they just...buckled on me, I...-"

"Buckled?"

"Y-yea."

"You hurt?" Chloe blurted out.
"My hands," Max sighed, rotating her palms upward.

"They're a lil' gnarly," Chloe noted, "but there's some gauze in the truck, no biggie..." Chloe had always figured that first-aid kit Joyce had handed-me-down would've been used for...well, something more sinister than tripping in a parking lot. Chloe followed up, "A little, uh...-" She cleared her throat, shifting her position on the tarmac. "What's a Time Warrior without a couple battle scars, amirite?"

"Psh..." Maxine smirked, rolling her lulling eyes and shaking her head slightly.

Chloe had expected Max to, like...try and get...up...? By now? Didn't wanna rush it, but...there was a dude making his way out of the shop, heading for his car. He gave the two of them a concerned look, but didn't actually approach.

It reminded Chloe of one time she'd just driven right by a car collision a year or so back...just drove right by. Wasn't her problem. Didn't need to get involved...

The guy started up his car, across the lot, and headed off.

"Chloe?" Maxine's arms were still slung across Chloe's waist.

"Yea?" Chloe pulled her gaze away from the passerby and down to her dazed friend.

Max leaned her weight into Chloe's chest, aligning herself more upright. She winced a bit from some pain or another – Chloe hoped to fuck it was just the hand-scrape – and moved her hands up to Chloe's bare shoulders. Ah, she was ready to get up and move, huh?

But Max paused there. Just...fuckin' stopped. Her scratched up hands pressed into Chloe's bare shoulders, asking Chloe to bear both their weight. Chloe could feel little bits of gravel, still stuck to Max's palms, digging into her own skin. Max's face was right there, right in front of Chloe's, hovering, lingering for a few seconds that felt like those 'small eternities' poets babbled about. Max's eyes were a bit bloodshot with bags hanging beneath, yet beneath their glazed surface burned sparks of determination. Her brows were tilted upward with fear and confusion. Her upper lip was caked with dried blood. Her arms wobbled, her eyes quivered, her fingers trembled. She was a hot fucking mess. And Chloe was freezing, her elbows shuddering a bit from exposure to the chilly autumn wind.

But everything was still warm.

The freckles on Max's narrow cheeks plotted a road-map to an undiscovered country.

Chloe was so lost in Max's bewildered expression that she didn't have time to react when Max's lips connected with her own. Her mouth just puckered out instinctively, returning the kiss. Chloe could feel the warmth inside her being willed out through her mouth. Max was so cold...

Chloe let her eyelids slide closed, let Max's fragile form lean against her, let shivering fingertips slide up her neck...

Then Chloe needed to come up for air.

Their lips parted, then lingered, then decidedly separated.

Chloe's eyes stayed closed for a second as her mind swirled through possibilities. She wasn't...*surprised* by Max's gesture, but...-
Chloe suddenly felt...light-headed. Avoiding Max's no-doubt hella intense expression, Chloe slowly laid herself down, her back against the parking lot floor. Something blurry caught her vision from the left, inches away from her cheek. On physical instinct, she twisted her head to see it.

It was a crinkly paper bag with a broken apple fritter hanging halfway out.

Max was breathless above her. Chloe couldn't muster a proper reaction yet. Maybe it was better this way, anyway. Maybe no words was better.

Chloe wriggled her left arm out from Max's loose grasp, shooed away the ground-touched piece of apple fritter, and shoved the other piece into her mouth, chewing it all at once. She grabbed the bag, still housing one un-tainted donut, and with some effort, shoved it above her waist, toward Max.

"Chl...-?" Max choked out, clearly upset. Confused.

Poor kid had just made a move and wanted, like, reassurance.

Well, she was Maxine Caulfield. Of course she needed reassurance.

The difference between Max and Chloe was that Max was brave enough to actually ask for it.

Chloe was swimming in a shit-filled sewer of guilt and good intentions. It was called 'Her Brain,' infested with regrets made into rats. The air was so thick with the reeking scent of hopelessness that it stuck to your clothing.

As Chloe stalled for time, she simultaneously realized what a god-awfully stupid attempt at noir narration that had been.

She kept chewing on her donut. Bit more than she could chew, fershur. Max had yet to take the fritter Chloe was still offering. Instead, Max was feebly working her fingers around Chloe's hand.

A stupid one-liner was forming at the tip of Chloe's tongue, but...there was too much goddamn donut in the way. Max's grip got tighter, and Chloe managed to swallow the appley shit down as quick as she could. She dropped the donut bag in Max's lap. She pushed, and Max pulled, and Chloe was upright.

Max's face was flickering with apology but also with hope.

Chloe had to wring out an extra second or two of tension. C'mon. She had to.

Chloe squeezed Max's bruised hand, then finally delivered her long-awaited zinger.

"You're holding my hand, Chuck. You sly dog."

Max's wary expression warped at the edges with perplexation.

Chloe leaned in, nudged Max toward her into a hug. She planted her lips against Max's shoulder – against the cigarette stenched surface of her own jacket.

"...Chuck?" Max uttered meekly.

Poor kid was so fuckin' lost, huh? It was actually pretty adorable, the little shit.

Chloe's lips formed a kiss against Max's shoulder – again, kind of out of instinct. She lightly scratched her nails against Max's neck, tilting her head against the girl's shoulder.

"Um..." Max didn't know what to say, it seemed. She just...kept holding Chloe's hand. Chloe realized maybe the joke had been too forced. Rather than bail, she elaborated off the cuff.

"I mean, shit," Chloe continued to tease. "You're a Neutral Good. You and Chuck are birds of a feather."

"So..." Max rolled by Chloe's reference. Damnit. She was lobbing softballs here, and they were still sailing over Max's head. "Um, are we...OK? You didn't really...-"

"Well, c'mon, Max. I wasn't gonna be cliché and say, like, 'Been waitin' for ya to do that.'"

"...Of course not," Max chuckled softly. "Too predictable for you."

"Hells yea, too predictable. I'm...Chaotic Good. Get used to it, gurl."

"Oh, Chaotic Good, now, huh?"

"Yeah-huh. Fighthin' crime, solvin' mysteries, gettin' all these Side Quests done while the protag – that's you – takes care of the Main Questline...Bidness."

"Chloe, I...-" Max trailed off with a sigh.

*Hell, Max, I'm droppin' a fuck-ton o' marbles in the Hungry Hippo table and you're not even hittin' the damned lever thing...*

As if coming to some kind of realization of her own, Max eased Chloe off of her. She wobbled up onto her feet, clutching the donut bag between her index and thumb.

Chloe wiped fritter crumbs from her lips with her wrist, let her body shudder from the wind chill, and sniffed a bit of slime forming at the edge of her nostril.

She remained sitting, waiting for Max to say whatever she was gonna say.

"I shouldn't have done that," Max declared.

"Dude, Max," Chloe grunted, dusting off her ass as she got up. "Just 'cuz I said you're like Charlie Brown doesn't mean you have to get all wishy-washy on me...It was a joke."

"This isn't a joke, Chloe!" Max spat, shooting Chloe a glare. "I'm...fucking in love with you, and this...-?" She wrinkled her nose, pointing a hand to the spilled coffee at their feet. "This wasn't how I...-"

Chloe let her inflated skull sink a little, latching her thumbs onto the ends of her pockets.

"Whoa. Max."

Chloe's heart was pounding at her rib cage.

The 'L' word had come out.

Stalling the inevitable, Chloe could only think of the lines,

*I'm in lesbians with you. I really, really, mean it.*
Having wasted her precious moment to formulate a reply, Chloe stammered, "I, uh, we-...we kissed, so what? Just a kiss. That's...all it...-

Fuuuuuuck

Chloe shut her trap right there. That had come out hella wrong. Max's brows furrowed with offense. Like she'd just been insulted. Which she had.

"I-I mean, we...we grew up together," Chloe saved face. Or tried to. "We've...always, like, flirted, joked, n' shit...I-I didn't...think it...-

Keep diggin' that hole deeper...

"Chloe, I...-" Max bit her lip, eyes sunken, tears forming. "I thought I...made it pretty fucking obvious at the lighthouse, when I...-

Chloe knew. She'd noticed. As usual, she'd stalled. She'd forced her to figure it out on the cliff, in front of that tornado. In all fairness, Chloe had done more than her share of taunting, goading, prodding, teasing the truth out of Max over the past few days. Part of her wanted something familiar. Something she'd once held dear, something she'd once trusted...because everything else had disappeared. And it was easier to rebuild something broken than start all over again.

If Chloe was being honest with herself – brutally honest, no halfsies – she'd needed someone to fall back on in case Rachel never showed up. She couldn't just...be alone again.

And Rachel never showed up.

So here she was.

One hand that couldn't let go of Rachel Amber, and one hand that couldn't let go of Maxine Caulfield.

Chloe had just...thought that, with figuring this shit out, dealing with it, she'd get more...time.

There wasn't a punchline there.

Chloe wanted there to be a punchline.

But all there was were thorns.

"People are fucking dead, Chloe," Max whimpered. Or maybe...snarled? Sorta both. "I had to...make a choice, and...-

Max suddenly, like...walked off. She brushed by Chloe, making sure to try bumping shoulders – weaksauce bump, by the way, Chloe hardly felt it – and stormed off to truck.

"Max," Chloe pleaded, clawing at her beanie as she followed.

Argh, fucking...head. It was itchy as hell. Chloe needed a bath.

Max must've been so mentally loopy she'd forgotten she was riding shotgun, 'cuz the girl had stomped over to the driver's seat. Max paused there, hand on the door handle, before her expression soured in spite of herself. Max's eyes flashed dangerously at Chloe, then she rounded the truck.

Chloe stood by the driver's seat for a moment, her head getting hot with frustration. With regret.

She knew what was coming.
Max had tried to open the passenger side door, which was still locked.

Her lips pursed with aggravation, Chloe fished her keys from her pocket. Having skin-tight jeans was annoying when and only when you needed to get shit out of your pockets. The rest of the time they were bad-ass and perfect.

Chloe opened the truck door and sat herself in with a sharp, bitter sigh.

She'd really fucked up again. The whole point of going Chaotic was to avoid consistently shitty rolls. OK, actually, it was because Chaos was perf, but, yea. She was bound to land a Critical Hit sooner or later...

Damnit. Forgot to unlock the other door. The fuck-ups were knocking each other down like dominoes now.

After letting Max in, Chloe tossed her hat behind the seat again. She pushed blue hair out of her face, turned to Max, and waited just long enough for Max to speak. Just in case.

Max stared back, her expression a twisted swirl of...shit Chloe didn't recognize on those features.

"Maxine..."

"Max, never Maxine."

"...What?"

"Augh, nothing...No, nevermind."

"Your...name is Maxine."

"I said nevermind."

"OK, sorry." Chloe had to double back for a sec.

The hell was that about? Chloe had called her 'Maxine' oodles of times. Shit-tons, prolly. Now, all of a sudden, it was offensive? Like, sure, Max got into all that 'trigger-warning' culture bullshit now and again, but, for real. This just made no sense.

Whatever. Moving on. Max's turn to try striking the convo back up, because Chloe was sucking monkey-turds.

"At the lighthouse, when the storm was passing...that's when I realized it."

Chloe nodded in compliance, eager to hear this out.

"I mean," Max mumbled, rolling her eyes thoughtfully. "I feel soo dumb now, I should've seen it...coming, I-... Ulgh." A slight shake of the head. "I couldn't...give you up," Max murmured, staring blankly at the bobble-head figure on Chloe's dash. "I didn't ask for this. I didn't want this. But jumping...through time, experiencing and...re-experiencing the same, but...but different...things, it...It all started with you, Chloe, you were what...I-I couldn't have saved you without this...fucking
Chloe couldn't take her eyes off of Max, spilling all this out.

"Alternate...tuh-timelines, alter-...Different realities, different...ways you could get hurt...Ways you could hurt others, ways the people I loved could die? I just...wanted it to stop. All of it. Muh-maybe that's why the torn...tuh...-" Max coughed into her sleeve.

Chloe was getting fucking cold. But turning the car on, getting the engine running and the heater up, it seemed...kinda rude. All things considered.

"Max," Chloe said, realizing Max was getting so weepy that talking was turning into a problem. "You said you're done rewinding time, right?"

Max nodded hastily. Eagerly.

"Well..." Chloe pressed the tips of two fingers against her own tear ducts, cleaning them out. "Then the past is staying in the past, so...let's stop fucking with it. Leave it alone. Ya know?"

"...Mm." Max nodded again in the same way. "I wuh...On the cliff, Chloe...Chloe, I was going to kiss you."

"Yea. I know."

"But I didn't...Like, I feel almost like I did, like I was...supposed to, or...-"

"Why didn't you?"

Max shrugged wildly. In the way that said 'Don't fucking ask me because I got no damned clue and I shoulda done it.'

"I didn't...-" Max fished for an explanation. "I thought maybe...-"

Chloe didn't need Max to finish. She got the picture.

'I thought maybe you were going to kiss me.'

'What not with the whole 'I just sacrificed an entire town to keep you in my life' bit.'

"It's OK," Chloe assured, still stalling. "Max, what I said just now – out there – I uber borked that. Not that parking lots aren't romantic, but...You're right, first kiss between two awesome ladies like us deserves more than...-"

"It was...m-more romantic than a...eh-elementary school dare," Max eked out. A small, pathetic laugh came as Max wiped at her eyes some more.

'Max Caulfield, did you just sass me? Did you just make a joke? Bravo. Now we're getting somewhere.

Chloe chuckled a little, realizing that after that night they'd spent together, that had been a totally childish way of squeezing some truth from Max. She hadn't expected Max to take the bait, though, come on. Max was supposed to be the grown-up, after all.
"So, what you're saying is," Chloe played along, "We've fucked up three first kiss opportunities in a row."

"Yuh-you said it, not me," Max managed to play back.

"Heh." Now there was a bit of that old spark again.

"Chloe, this is...this is super sudden for me, I didn't...I wasn't...planning on..."

"Yea. Yea, I know. Look, it's like this, Max." Chloe breathed in, exhaled, and rubbed at her cold shoulders. "At the lighthouse, shit got...real. Fucking real. And I, like, realized how much...-"

And there it was again. That troubling 'L' word, hanging out on the tip of Chloe's tongue. No kisses, no donuts, no coffee to cover it up. Chloe wriggled her hand back and forth between herself and Max.

She tried rolling for a Twenty this time.

"...how much you love me, Max. H-how much I love you. I get that now."

Eh, more like a Seventeen or a Sixteen, but...good enough. Chloe finished her Turn.

"Destiny, luck, whatever, I don't care. You're awesome. We're awesome. But...-" Chloe sifted her nails through her dirty hair. "I know I said...that shit about...realities, and...But the fact is – and I see it now, it's uber crazy – you have all of these...memories with me? All this time you have we spent together, it's all there, in your head. But...only some of that's in mine."

Max was finally leveling out, and Chloe was getting this off her chest.

"Some of those moments, those memories Some of those aren't really ours. They're yours. Like, they are ours, for...you? But whatever you've been through – and you don't need to explain any more of it –" Fuck please don't my head can't take any more of this right now and neither can yours "- this past week, what I told you about...making me laugh, and...smile, that...was real, too. For both of us. For me."

Shit, now Chloe was starting to cry. How much blood and tears (and coffee) would two teenage chicks spill for each other within the premisses of a coffee shop on a boring afternoon? Tune in to find out.

Max's hand reached out and grabbed Chloe's. Her poor fingers were still trembling. Fuck, they still hadn't cleaned Max's hands up. Because Chloe kept stalling.

"Uh, let's...get this shit...taken care of while you're wasting time listening to my dumb ass," Chloe decided popping open the glove compartment in a hurry. Chloe really leaned over, hoping her arms would block that carton of cigarettes from Max's sight. And also that pair of condoms. And also that half-smoked joint.

First-aid kit. Boom.

Chloe wasn't a cleric or a...whatever other shit classes did the healy bits, but how hard could it be, right?

Max helped her figure out which thing was the disinfectant, and how to apply it, and then get the gauze wrapped around, and...Well, it was total overkill for just some scraped skin, but fuck it, Max deserved whatever was gonna help right then. Plus, going through the first-aid motions gave both of
them a task to focus on for a couple minutes. Clear their heads some.

"Thanks," Max sighed with some relief, twisting her hands on their wrists a little as she got a feel for the bandages. She looked like she'd been in a street fight or something. Heh, more like she fought with a street, and the street won, amirite?

Haghhh...

Then things settled back into Awkward Land.

"Um, you were...-?" Max prodded.

"Right. Yea. I...-" Chloe cleared her throat.

Goin' for it.

Chloe started up the car's ignition, but left the engine off. She finally turned the heater on.

"Maxine, uh, Max, I-" Shit.

"It's OK. Seriously."

"Fershur?"

"Fershur. It's OK if you say it."

"Oh...kay. Erh, uh, so this...whatever this is, with us..."

"Romantic tension."

Again with the sass, Captain Sassypants. Proud of you.

"Romantic tension," Chloe repeated facetiously, nodding with exaggeration. "I-I mean, it's...kind of hella exciting, no denying that, but there's...I...It's kinda..."

Chloe had no idea what her eyebrows or her eyes were doing, but Max seemed to read things quick.

"Rachel," Max whispered darkly. "Fuck, Chloe, th-this is...exactly why I said I shouldn't..."

It was in this moment that Chloe finally accepted the fact that shit was...a little fucked up. That the two of them were both feeling guilty over someone who...wasn't around anymore. That someone had indirectly brought them together. That someone would've wanted them to be happy. Right?

That someone had lied to Chloe. Played her like a fucking fiddle.

Shit, augh, she hadn't meant to, it wasn't like she'd wanted to hurt Chloe. And she sure as hell didn't deserve what had happened.

Had Chloe maybe been in denial the whole time? Stalling? Clinging onto someone who didn't feel the same way, only to bring them down?

And she'd done it all over again, here with Max. Practically twisted Max's heart into caring about her back.

Fuck that. Rachel didn't deserve what had happened. Max hadn't even asked for this shit, Chloe had grabbed her, pulled her in...used her power...

And now Max Caulfield was falling in love with her? After how selfish she'd been?

And Chloe was falling for her, too. For those dorky vibes and the way she was stepping up so quickly. Filling in that old void while filling in a fresh one at the same time. Were they actually falling for each other, or just for...anything that wasn't loneliness?
Nothing was OK. Nothing was fine.

Shit was hella fucked up.

That didn't mean they should bury themselves in it, though.

"I feel...like the shittiest person, Chloe," Max grumbled out. At least she wasn't crying again? Maybe she'd cried her eyes dry now. "I could've...saved them, but...instead, I made...such a selfish..."

"Hey, no, what did I say about that shit?" Chloe threatened, waggling a semi-serious finger.

"...What?"

Chloe grinned, slanting her brows with mischief.

She quoted, "I dare ya, I double-dare ya, motherfucker, say 'what' one more goddamn time..."

"O-oh. Chloe," Max snickered through her wispy breaths.

"Uh, that was..." Chloe's finger was still pointed. "I-I dunno, I was tryin' to do a double-reference, there. Th Pulp Fiction bit, plus back to the...daring you to kiss me thing? I guess...?"

Max shook her head lightly, smirking in a bewildered way. She scooted across the truck's seat and leaned herself against Chloe. Chloe worked her right arm over Max's shoulder. Max's head fell over Chloe's collar, and Chloe set her cheek against Max's head.

Chloe had kind of been hoping for another kiss, actually.

Was that fucked up? Chloe could really use more kissing right about then.

Should she try and kiss Max herself?

Chloe felt Max's back expand against her chest. Max sniffed. Sighed out shakily. Cuddled her head against Chloe's neck.

Nah, Max didn't need kissing at the moment. What she needed was just...Chloe being there. The right 'there' this time. Maybe it really was enough.

Chloe pulled her left arm around Max's waist, encompassing her in a side hug. Max absorbed it gratefully, which only spurred Chloe to prolong it.

"I'm so fuckin' sorry, Max," Chloe panted out, her voice cracking a little. "You didn't ask for all this crap. You deserve better than..."

"I don't deserve shit," Max grunted, chewing at her lip as she latched her fingertips against Chloe's

"Well," Chloe weakly replied. "Sorry about that, too. I am pretty shit, but you're stuck with me..."

"Chloe." Another timid, confused laugh. "Everything is...so fucked right now, but..." Well, we're on the same page, there, Max. "...all I know is that I need you, Chloe."

"I got good news for ya, then, Max: I meant it when I said I was always gonna be with you."

"Forever," Max mumbled, calling back their moments on the cliff.

"And that was before the prospect of hot make-out sessions."
Max puffed an amused ‘Fff’ through her nose.

Chloe dropped her hug’s tightness a couple notches, but held Max for another minute or so. Chloe noticed that their breathing starting syncing up.

"You're amazing, Maxine," Chloe quietly assured. "Shit happened, and it's done now. Maybe we deserve to feel like shit over it, I don't know. But we're in this together." Chloe gave Max's body a gentle shake. She kissed the top of Max's head. She rubbed her hands across Max's arms. "Mushy stuff ain't what I'm good at, but for you? I'll try anything once."

"I know...Thanks."

"Remember that later," Chloe slyly said into Max's ear.

"Augh, gross," Max giggled, wriggling herself out of Chloe's grip playfully. "You're gross."

"To the max, Max," Chloe teased, ruffling Max's hair as they resumed their usual spots in the truck.

A few seconds of relieved silence drifted by, the car's heater whirring, warming the truck up.

"We ready to go?" Chloe asked.

"We still...should call our parents," Max pointed out, dragging the extremely fucking brief moment back to a serious place.

"Ah. I did offer to do that, huh?"

Max glanced over at her slack-jawed friend, her teeth barely emerging through a shy smile.

"You did," Max confirmed.

"Welp." Chloe retrieved her phone, then gawked at it fretfully. "This is gonna be hella awkward..."

"Not as awkward as...that just was," Max skeptically pointed out.

Chloe chuckled lightly, scrolling through her contacts.

Through her laughter, Chloe said, "Shut up n' eat your fuckin' fritter, Max."
This PTSD shit wasn't fun. But Chloe...being overly assertive was a little annoying, too.

Max did not want to talk. She did not want to think. She wanted to lay in bed with the girl she'd fallen for and cuddle and forget everything for a while.

**Life is Strange**

**All Wounds**

*Chapter 3 - Rest*

“Now you remember, Max: you're in charge.”

“Yes, Ma'am.”

Max couldn't help but crack a smile at Joyce's remark. It was so relieving, just to...hear the woman's voice again after everything. It was a...bit more broken than she remembered, though, but...

“I'm sure you mustn't be feeling too well, so I won't keep ya'll.”

“Oh, no, no, not at all, it's...fine.”

“You sound so tired, Hon.”

“Y-yeah...” Max sniffed. She could still taste a bit of blood that had back-trickled down her throat. “I've, um...had it easier than you, though. I bet.”

Joyce sounded pretty ragged. Max could tell, just from the sound in her voice, that she'd been to a hospital. Still was at a hospital. There was just that...hospital...vibe to her tone. That sort of, 'grateful-to-be-alive' kind of thing. Yea, Max could relate.

“Well, I won't lie...I have seen better days.”

Max had to ask.

She didn't want to ask. But she had to.

“H-...How did you make it out? I, um-...I heard the Two Whales...”

“It held up longer n' I thought it would, I can tell you that. Ironic, ain't it? I'd started dreading that place, feeling like it was stealing my life away, trapping me, and...it ended up giving me more time on this earth.” A heavy sigh. “I only wish I could say that for everyone inside...”

“Warren...”

“Ah. So you read about what happened?”
“Um, I-...S-sort of, only that...he...”

[“I'm so sorry, Max. I know that boy was a good friend of yours.”]

“He was.”

[“There was some kind of...gas leak...ignited. Nothing anyone could do.”]

I could've done something about it...I did do something about it...but then I...-

[“He was...gathering supplies for us old folks. I told him he shoulda...-”] Coughing, followed by another heavy sigh.

Joyce didn't sound quite as...broken as Max might've thought, actually. More, like...tired of it. Tired from it. Because of it. There came a point where you just...ran out of energy to care for a while.

Max knew the feeling. Reading those names...and still not knowing if that list would grow as more bodies were discovered in the wreckage...that was a bitch. She had to keep convincing herself there was nothing she could do now, lest she start slipping back into...-

“How's David holding up?”

[“Better than I am.”]

“I've been worried about him, after what happened...down at...”

Wait a sec. That...didn't happen here. The 'here' Max was in, anyway.

[“At the house? Oh, Max. You were just looking out for Chloe. I'm sure David doesn't hold that against you.”]

“Whu--...Where was David...during the...?-”

[“The storm? Oh, he's safe, sweetheart. Don't go feeling bad, now. If he'd been home, well-...He wasn't home, and he wasn't at Blackwell, and I'm certain that's why he is here with me.”]

“Th...thank goodness.”

Max's heart was beginning to pound. According to Chloe, when Max was spaced out the night before, they had contacted David and told him about Jefferson. Presumably, David would’ve...gotten the authorities on it. Found Jefferson before...-

Shit! Max hadn't been there to warn Victoria. What if Jefferson had gotten to her before David had shown up?

Bitch deserved it. Got what she wanted, too, so I wouldn't feel too bad if I were you.

Which, uh, I am.

Shut up! Victoria did not deserve that. You bitch…

I'm only saying what you won’t.

Max uttered an involuntary sound that might’ve sounded like a sob. It must have, based on Joyce’s reaction.
“Oh, Max,”] Joyce uttered with some sympathy given Max's sheepish silence. [“It must've been so horrible, seeing someone you trust take people away like that. Don't you worry. David and his boys got that awful man last night. He's locked up and he won't be troubling you any more. Just so happened that his...sick...torture room was a safehouse from the storm, to boot. I'd reckon that sending David and the boys after that mad man probably...Well, gosh, Max, it mighta saved those officers' lives.”]

No. Nuh-uh. Max was not going to take credit. It was just a coincidence, anyway. But...at least it meant David had been protected from the tornado. It was the least he'd earned after saving Max. Erm...w-well, this David hadn't...technically done that, but...but he did still stop Jefferson, either way.

*Doesn't sound like he used a bullet this time, though. Tch. Too bad...*

“So...So, David, he's...OK.”

[“As OK as one might expect after such an ordeal. Did you need to speak with him?”] Joyce offered.

“Nuh-No. Thank you.” Max cleared her throat. Chloe, from the driver's seat, gave Max a brief glance of confused concern.

[“You don't need to worry about that teacher hurting you any more, Darlin’.”] Joyce assured.

Max dreaded inevitably having to deal with that whole mess. She'd need to be interviewed by the police, maybe even...show up to court, ulgh. She might still have to see Jefferson again. In person. Her stomach felt awful just thinking about it. But if that was what it took to make Jefferson pay, then she'd have to do it.

And she'd have to get her fucking facts straight insofar as...this reality she was now living in, or else she'd end up looking...crazy.

*Little late on that one, heh!*

“Ihhhhht's been quite a, uh...quite a week,” Max muttered out after a slow, sputtering start. “Hasn't it?”
“It surely has, for all of us. But my husband is safe, and my baby girl is in good hands with you. It makes me feel like the luckiest woman alive.”

“Heh. I’ll keep her out of trouble, Joyce.”

Max gave a wry smirk to her side, and Chloe, focusing on the road, replied with a small grin.

“I know you will, Max. You always did back in the day. I’m...truly grateful that, despite all of this, something good has come from this week.”

“Good?”

This concept didn’t compute in Max’s state of mind.

“You,” Joyce said, as if it were obvious. She chuckled softly. “You, coming back into Chloe’s life. I was...” Joyce’s tone got quiet. “I was worried I’d almost lost her, but...even in these trying times, I can already tell you’ve helped bring my baby back from the edge.”

“...Yea,” Max uttered solemnly. Had to agree with Joyce there, anyway. Thank God Joyce didn’t even know the half of how far that ‘edge’ was...

“You just keep doing what you're doing, Max. Keep her out of trouble.”

“I can't make any promises the other way around,” Max joked light-heartedly.

“Oh, I know. But won't you do your best for me?”

“Totally.”

“Thank you, Dear. You take it easy now, you hear me?”
“I'll try.”

[“Good. Now you go on and put me back on speaker, would you?”]

Max switched Chloe's phone setting over, holding it up before her. (Joyce refused to speak to Chloe not on speaker, since Chloe was driving.)

[“Chloe?”]

“Joyce...Er, Mom.”

Max laughed through her nose, shaking her head slightly with amusement. She could see Chloe's nose wrinkling begrudgingly.

[“You need anything, you don't hesitate to call me. All right?”]

“Yea...”

[“Drive safe.”]

“I will.”

[“And try not to give the Caulfields a hard time.”]

“I won't,” Chloe sighed out, her tone getting more exasperated with each forced reply.

[“Don’t go taking advantage of their hospitality like you did with the Am-”]
“'I got it,” Chloe groaned, clawing at an itch on her hairline.
Joyce's tone was at once sharp with disappointment but soft with regret.

There hung a moment of quiet. Awkwardly holding Chloe's phone aloft, Max could feel the tension lighten as both women dropped their old swords to the ground in truce.

“Sorry,” Chloe murmured tiredly. “Focusing on the road, n’ shit, and…-”

“Chloe will behave herself,” Max piped in, hoping to quell things further.

Man stole a mischievous glance at Chloe, who reciprocated with a raised brow that said, ‘That’s what you think.’

[“Call me as soon as you get there.”]

“We will,” Max replied, sparing Chloe another grumpy acknowledgment.

[“I'll leave you both to it, then.”]

“Kay,” Chloe blurted distantly. It was like she trying to pay so much attention to driving that she wouldn’t have to pay attention to anything else.

Joyce paused before saying, [“I'm so glad you're both safe.”]

“Yea,” Chloe murmured, having apparently dropped out of the convo.

“You, too,” Max softly added, layering on as much sympathy as she could in two syllables.

[“I love you both,”] said Joyce. Max could hear her voice cracking a bit.

It felt pretty cool to be included in that statement. Like Joyce was right back to viewing Max like a second daughter. Just like the old days.
Max's stomach tingled with warmth from the gesture, but that faded over the next few seconds when Chloe said nothing.

Max tapped the back of her wrist against Chloe's thigh.

“Luh-

uv you, too, Mom,” Chloe spat out, almost apologetically.

“We love you, Joyce,” said Max, more confidently.

[“You stay careful, now. Talk to you soon.”]

“Bye,” Max gently bid.

“Later,” Chloe simultaneously mumbled.

Max ended the call and set Chloe's phone in an empty cup holder.

Chloe breathed out a heavy sigh, her grip on the steering wheel kind of tight. Her fingers stretched out a little, flexing before readjusting their grip. It was like opening your mouth to loosen your jaws when you realized your teeth were too clenched.

Max barely opened her lips before Chloe beat her to the punch.

“I know,” Chloe said simply. “I said ’sorry.’”

“Chloe, your Mom? She’s been through hell. I was there, believe me.”

“Yea,” Chloe said with a dismissive tint. Her head twitched with remorse before she said, “No, you’re right.”
“You've...gotta start being chill with her,” Max stated, bridling her disappointment.

“I know, I know,” Chloe repeated, rolling her head a little.

“You said so yourself at the lighthouse: Joyce deserves better.”

“I know,” Chloe snipped, her voice getting prickly.

Max sighed through her nose, giving Chloe a moment to cool off. Max decided that perhaps she’d drilled it in a little too hard. Max folded her hands in her lap, her gaze not content to land anywhere. She finally settled her eyes on Chloe’s profile. Chloe scratched dust from her eyelash as she slowed at a yellow light.

“Max,” Chloe mumbled tiredly.

“It’s OK,” Max assured in her timid ease. “I understand. Old habits...”

“No kidding,” Chloe puffed out, a bit relieved at Max’s easygoing demeanor with this. “I’m with you, ya know. Joyce has been through enough of my shit. I meant what I said in the storm. All of it. ‘Kay?”

Max nodded, fussing her fingers together in her lap.

Chloe continued, “But...yea. Habits.” Chloe fluttered air out through her lips as she glared at the red light.

Rain was beginning to patter against the windshield. Max watched as droplets pooled together before their collected weight caused them to slide down. Through her sight line, the bright red from the stoplight ahead made the water shine red.

Chloe turned on the wipers, and the liquid smeared over in one direction, then was cleaned off in the other, only for more to pour down.
“I’ll work on it,” Chloe reassured, referring to things with Joyce.

“OK.” Max nodded. Something else was tugging at her. “And I don’t…-“ She paused, rubbed her fingertip against some oil on her cheekbone, and sighed.

“What?” Chloe wondered gently, her fingers drumming on the steering wheel.

“I don’t regret backing you up with David,” Max stated, setting that remark in the past. “Surveillance cameras in the house? That is so not OK. But he is not as horrible as you-”

“I know, I know,” Chloe groaned, bumping her head on the wheel. “He... he ‘saved’ you, or...-”

“He saved me.”

Chloe seemed rather bitter about this fact. Well...was it a fact, now that it...hadn't happened? Either way, Max could see this weird kind of jealousy spark in Chloe's eyes. She'd wore it the night prior, when Max had convinced her to not go to the Vortex party. What had Chloe said back then?

'I should've been the one to save you, but... I'm so grateful David was there.'

_Huh. If she was so grateful, why's she still kinda butt-hurt over him?_

She's been through so much over the past day. We all have. You can't just...expect people's feelings to line up nice and neat.

_Fff. Clearly._

_I mean, look at us._

Ugh.

“Sorry, Max,” said Chloe hesitantly. “I believe you, that he...that he saved you, I just...I wasn't there, it didn't happen here, so...-”

“He’s still doing his best,” Max defended. “And Joyce loves him. He cares about her so much. And he...-“
Max’s mind flashed with David, standing over Jefferson’s corpse in that bunker. Max knew – she’d seen it – David only shot Jefferson if he found out what had happened to Chloe.

“David loves you, too, Chloe.”

Chloe rolled her eyes, shrugging up an indecisive shoulder.

The light turned green. Chloe slammed her foot on the pedal with a bit more force than she needed to.

“He did some things that were not cool,” Max conceded. “But...so have you. So have I.”

‘Not cool?’ I think you mean more like, 'Hella-fucked-up.'

As if what I've done wasn't 'fucked up?'

Of course it was. So, surprising no one, you're defending a fellow psycho.

Defending Chloe, defending Frank, defending Victoria, defending David...
Keep it up. Rate you're going, you'll be defending Nathan, defending Jefferson.

Everyone's human. Some just more fucked up than others.

Ha. Ya don't say.

Chloe’s dulled eyes were locked on the road. Her lips pursed.

“You’re right, OK?” Chloe huffed. “Is that what you wanna hear?”

“Chloe…”
“Would be nice if you, at least, would get off my back.”

“N-no, I’m not…” Max planted her hand on Chloe’s thigh, gripping it firmly. “Chloe, don’t do that. You know that’s not what I mean. But we have a second chance, here, I’m only…-”

Max, still staring at Chloe’s profile all this time, watched Chloe’s eyes narrow, watery at the edges, her nose scrunching up, biting at her lower lip.

Max concluded, “I want to help you get through this…place…you've been stuck in. But I need you to meet me halfway.”

Rainwater sloshed against the tires. A splashing puddle Chloe ripped through spattered the air outside the truck. The engine was grumbling progressively louder as Chloe broke the speed limit. Past the ‘+5’ soft-rule.

“Chloe,” Max snapped with some fear, her grip on Chloe's thigh clenching tighter.

Chloe eased up on the gas a couple seconds before she would've rammed bumpers with the car ahead.

“This past week?” Chloe said sharply, not giving Max her eyes. “It was a huge fucking slap in my idiot face, OK? Wake-up call received. I get it. I don't need salt on the wound, here. A little fucking patience would be great.”

“Yea, of course,” Max murmured, rubbing her hand in a comforting manner across Chloe's leg. “I'm not trying to... rush you to get over shit, I...I know it's tough, I just....need to know that...-”

“You're worried I'm gonna fuck things up again.”

“I didn't say that.”

“You didn't have to,” Chloe said, her tone passive aggressively calm.

“Stop thinking that I doubt you.” Max insisted. Her words were soft but lined with steel. “Chloe, what else do I have to do prove how much I care about you?”

Hurts a little, doesn't it?
No.

That you let Arcadia Bay burn and even that wasn't enough to keep the doubt away. She still wants more. Nothing's good enough for her, is it?

Nothing's good enough for you.

Stop.

“It's not about that, Max,” Chloe grumbled, some of her steam slipping out. “It's not about how much you care, I know you do, I don't doubt that, OK?”

See?

Yea, yea...

Chloe took a second from the road to read Max's expression, and Max was ready for her with a warm, solemn smile and a nod. Chloe's eyes went back to the rainy road.

Chloe gazed at the cloudy sky for a few seconds as she drove them through the rainfall on a lazy country road.

Chloe then explained softly, “I'm sick of fucking everything up, Maxine. Bombing shit so bad that even you, after five fucking years apart, already realize how much of a mess you have to clean up. How much shit you have to fix here.” She flicked an irate wrist toward herself, steadying the wheel with the other hand. “I'm a walking shit-show.”

“Chloe, I'm a mess, too,” Max insisted.

“Because of your rewind?”

“...Be...because of-”

“Because of all the bullshit from this week?”

“Yes.”
“You never asked for it. You didn't bring this on yourself like I did...”

“Yes, I did. Once I started screwing around with time, I...”

“Augh, I knew you wouldn't get it,” Chloe sighed out, trying to drop the subject and push it away.

“No, not cool,” Max protested, letting a bit of frustration ooze out. “I do get it, Chloe. Look, we are in this together. I have been trying so hard to break out of my mold. I just want to see you break free from yours, too.”

Chloe nodded in concession. “You...have stepped up your game for me lately, Max. Hell, even more th...” Chloe trailed off in a deliberate way, devolving into a shrug.

**Ahhh, she was about to say 'Rachel', huh?**

I don't know.

**Yea, you do. And it makes you happy.**

I'm not happy that Rachel is dead.

“Point is,” Chloe picked up, “You're single-handedly cleaning up my fucked. Up. Life. Max, it's-...Hargh. I was just, ya know...planning cleaning up my problems myself.”

“You can, Chloe. You will. You're strong. And this...is a process. I haven't done shit, I just...got you out of-”

“Don't be so humble, Max, that...pisses me off.”

“Huh?”

“You're amazing, you're my fucking hero, like, for reals. OK? Shit went south, but...jesus, you need to stop doing this to yourself. Fuck, I will be more bitchy if it helps you feel better, just...stop doing it yourself.”

“Chloe.”

“I hate seeing you like this,” Chloe quietly confessed, her voice barely audible beneath the rainfall.
Max had no idea how to reply. She was not amazing. She was not a 'hero.'

But...it felt pretty fucking nice to hear Chloe saying that, and knowing that she meant it. Max didn't need to feel like a great person or a super hero, not as long as she was Chloe's 'Everyday Hero.' That was more than enough to keep her going.

Max's increasing urge to shower Chloe with physical affection overtook her. She rested her head on Chloe's shoulder. Her hand still clamped around Chloe's thigh, she rubbed her thumb against the shredded denim.

Chloe took a shaky breath, and Max could feel Chloe's bottled up pain in the way Chloe's shoulders shuddered. Still focusing on the rainy road before them, Chloe tilted her head to her right, sighed into Max's hair, and breathed in deeply – longingly. She then pulled her head back upright, giving Max a gentle nudge.

"I'm a pretty rad pillow," Chloe joked, "but, uh, I wanna keep us...safe, on the, uh, on the rain-slick precipice of darkness here. And so...-

Max lifted her head up from Chloe's arm, laughing softly.

"I guess I wouldn't want to distract you from the road," Max said in a facetiously begrudging way.

"You can be pretty distracting," Chloe confirmed slyly.

Max gave Chloe's leg a jesting pat, then yawned. "Whoo. Why am I so...beat?" she murmured drearily, feeling her eyelids sinking.

"Uh, kinda been a long day, Maximus. Take another nap. Don't bleed on me this time, huh?"

"Heh. Yea. I'll just...do that."

"I'll wake you up when we're close. Or, uh...if I end up needing directions."
“Heh. OK,” Max yawned out, tucking her hands in the pockets of her (Chloe's) jacket and leaning her head against the passenger window.

Sleep came easily.

–

Max's hands. She couldn't...move her fucking...hands. Her feet, too. What the...fuck?

She was strapped to a chair. Duct tape was wound around her wrists, around her shins.

The light was turned off. Everything was...dim. She couldn't see shit.

But someone was taking pictures of her. No flash, no tripod, but Max could still hear that clicking, still see a hazy figure lingering over her.

No, no-no no no fucking no this is not no how could this is bullshit I

-Click!-

I told you, Max. I told you this wasn't over.

You...

You mean, you. How can you still be in denial over this shit?

I'm not like you. I don't act like this!
Of course not! Jesus, Max. You'd be certifiable if you acted like this. If you said these things.

Why do you think I'm here? I'm here so that I'm not out there.

What the fuck do you want this time?

There we go. Getting right to... bidness'...

-Click!-

Fuck you.

Hey, I don't like this any more than you do. I mean...obviously. I am you. So you just told yourself to fuck yourself. Heh.

Well?

 Aren't you going to say it?

Come on...You know you want to.

Fuck yourself.

-Click!-

See? Not so hard, was it?

...

Mm.
Yea, I guess that wasn't that funny, but we're not exactly comedians. If we were charming or witty, we probably wouldn't need to fucking manipulate people with super powers to get them to care about us...

Smart, though. It's always smart to use the sharpest tools, and hide away the rusty ones. That's why you keep all that dumb hipster joke shit to yourself.

Because you know if you said that crap out loud, you'd look like an idiot.

Are you done?

Almost. Sorry.

You know me. Once I open my mouth, I can't ever fucking shut up.

-Click!-

Anyway.

You almost made me forget the reason I was here. You were making this about you. Can't say I'm surprised.

But.

-Click!-

I'm actually here because of her.

Chloe?
Who the fuck else? Like you’ve got anything else on your mind right now. Ya know, besides yourself. Obviously.

That is not true, I'm so f**ked up right now from reading th-

So heartbroken over Warren that you throw yourself at Chloe.

So sympathetic about Rachel’s death that you drag Chloe’s attention right back toward you.

Warren’s dead now. Rachel’s dead now.

Nothing holding you back, huh? No guilt.

-Click!-

Even I can’t stop you – or, us, huh?

But...since we’re stuck together now, I figured I'd send some positive reinforcement your way.

-Click!-

You look like you need it.

Just wanted to tell you nice work back there. At the parking lot? Sending Chloe on that mad guilt trip. Hella’ good work. Collapsing and shit in front of her, too...that was a nice touch. Very nice.

You picked the right pose. You set up the right angle. You framed the subject just right.

Then you took the shot.

Always take the shot, Max.
-Click!-

Get that fucking camera out of my face!

**WOW**, are you for realsies? Hypocritical cunt. I'm just doing our job, here.

-Click!-

*Capturing the moment.*

*Speaking of which. You did such a good job back there with Chloe, I'm just trying to pick up the slack.*

I did *not* mean to do that with Chloe, it just...it just *happened*, I...I couldn't...-

*You've been dying to do that for days. You're still dying. You want to put your hands all over her. Touch her, smell her.*

Stop.

*Taste her.*

Augh! No. Gross. Stop...-!

*Fine, fine. Don't need us getting all wet and bothered, here.*

You're disgusting. Your bullshit isn't working on me. I'm not going to do that kind of thing with her.

*Not ever?*
Eventually, maybe, I kind of...don't want to jump into...

Ugh. You think you've grown so much, become so much more 'assertive.' Still a pussy when it comes to getting what you actually want...

What I want? I want you to leave me the fuck alone.

I want to be with Chloe. I want to protect her. I want to make her realize that she's never going to be abandoned, never again.

Never's a pretty long fucking time. Too long even for you.

Twisting time around your fingers wasn't enough, huh? You want more than that. Have to wear Chloe like a ring. You had the powers of a fucking god, and you're giving that up for a puppet. That's what she is now, you know. You used to be her puppet, and now? Oh, she's forever indebted to you.

It's her choice to be here with me.

Yuh-huh.

She said it herself:

“Commandeth thine loyal servant, Master Maxine.”

“Your sidekick's got your back, Super Max.”

“…your loyal and faithful companion.”

And that was before you got her hopes up about getting busy in bed.

You do know she's not going to let go of that now, right?

Chloe's still coping with Rachel. She won't be stupid.
Hah! Yahhh shur kk.

She’s Chloe-fucking-Price. The moment you two are alone in your bedroom? She knows you like her now. She’s gonna get on dat ass. Not there's much ass to get on, but she's fucking desperate. She’s so starved...Hungry like the wolf.' She'll take whatever table scraps she can lick off your bony-
FUCK you are so gross just STOP.

Eh. I guess it doesn't matter. She'll still do whatever you say. Your personal slave. Heh, maybe your sex slave, soon enough. Your pet. It's all pretty sick, really. Fucking disturbing. Once again, you two deserve each other...

Why will you not...stop?

I'll stop when you want me to stop. Just because you say the words doesn't mean you actually want me to go away. You still need me.

I don't...-!...Why?

Ohhh, even your tears, Maxine. You bawl your eyes out when you find out your friends are dead...And you can't even cry for them. Only for the fact that you're guilty. Because everything has to be about you.

Why the fuck do you think you’re talking to yourself right now? Why didn't you imagine up, like...Mr. Jefferson? Or Chloe? Or even just a shadow, a voice?

It had to be me. It had to be you.

Your own fucking brain is so full of itself you turn this shit into a selfie.

Not a shocker, though, I mean...when you were asked to hand in a photo of a HERO, who did you take a picture of?
Your fucking self.

Max couldn't stop the tears. It was like there was no end to them. She couldn't speak, she couldn't breathe, she was just suffocating. Endlessly suffocating. She tried to move her arms, but they were taped down. She tried to move her feet, but they were taped down.

The Other Max before her just...laughed. It wasn't, like, that evil villain kind of laugh. It was...her laugh. A dorky giggle. It just kept going. And going...

—

Max's consciousness stirred from the tender sensation of Chloe's fingers straightening our her bangs.

Max's eyes made clarity of the hazy world, and what she discovered was the familiar site of her house. The porchlight was on, streaking hot yellow against the gravel path that connected the driveway to the front door. It was night time. An unlit jack-o-lantern sat on the bottom step of the porch.

Mr. Razzle, Dad's silly full-scale plastic skeleton, was posed on the lawn, top hat and cane fixed in place. He had a bow tie hanging around his neck. Looking snazzy, Razzy.

Some other odds and ends from Halloween decorating were still there.

As Mac adjusted to her new environment, Chloe planted a small, brief kiss on her forehead. Max felt her spine tingle in the best possible way. Then the worst possible way.

Chloe's hand squeezed at Max's shoulder.

“How'd that beauty sleep go?” Chloe asked, eying the front door. Waiting for Max's parents to emerge.

Groggily rubbing sand from her heavy eyes, Max puffed out a laugh.
“I feel like the prettiest girl at the ball,” Max sarcastically grumbled.

“Welp.” Chloe's hand rubbing turned into a firm pat as she grabbed her hat, casually cramming it on her cranium. Unlocking the driver side door, she said, “Let's go, Cinderella, before the clock strikes midnight.”

“...Huh?”

But Max didn't have time to ponder what the hell Chloe's mixed-fairy-tale reference was supposed to mean. The bells on the front door jingled, and there were her parents. Chloe was already out of the door, waving toward them.

Max caught their gazes in a second of panic. They looked...afraid, but relieved, at once. Max's eyes darted away as quickly as she'd seen them. She sniffed, rubbing her hand across her nose. Dry, thankfully. She briefly glanced down at Chloe's jacket – seemed OK. Any obvious traces of blood were out of sight, though in this dim lighting it was hard to say. By the time Max was done self-checking, Chloe had rounded the truck and popped open the passenger side door.

Like a courteous chauffeur, Chloe extended a hand down toward Maxine.

“M'lady,” she said in a quiet, mischievous tone.

“M'lady,” Max weakly chuckled back, a bit embarrassed as Chloe took her by the hand and eased her still-groggy self from the truck.

“No, no,” Chloe hissed in a mockingly indignant whisper. “I'm 'Ser.’”

“Fff, you wish.”

When they were both out, Chloe slammed the door closed. The whole vehicle seemed to rattle and groan, a parched and exhausted steed after an epic quest's conclusion. Max's palm stung from the contact with Chloe's hand – her wrists were still bundled in a light layer of gauze. At least her scrapes weren't feeling quite as sensitive.

But now that they were in the gravel of the Caulfield driveway, Chloe's hand hadn't left Max's. Chloe nudged Maxine toward her, giving her another light kiss on the side of her head.
Oh, no. No, no, why was she
This was very very deliberate, she was
What was she thinking
The 'M'lady' thing had just been...she thought

_Ughh, Chloe...

Chloe's grip on Max's hand became iron as she led the pair of them toward the front porch. Max's parents descended the steps, cautious to give their no-doubt muddled daughter space. Chloe had sounded really convincing about Max being in no state for conversation. Max felt partly obligated to play that role. She _was_ feeling like shit, so, well, it wasn't _hard_.

As her Mom and Dad drew near, Chloe eased Max forward, finally releasing her and letting the Caulfield reunion take place.

A bunch of words of relief, sighs of exhaustion, mutterings of concern...It felt nice to be in her parents arms again, though.

"-were losing our _minds_ for a while there."

"Sorry," Max uttered to her parents. "I-I meant to call sooner, I just..."" I was filling the tank to drive right down there when you called."

"Heh." Max knew her Dad was dead serious, too.
"Your hands OK?"
"Y-yea, just...had a spill, I..."
"Your eyes..."
"I'm fine, Mom, I...just woke up from..."

"Christ, Max, this week must've been torture for you..."

Max's muscles tightened. Invisible duct tape clung to her skin. The door light felt hotter than it should have, whiter than it was.

"Your friend Kate, this, this..._psycho_, and this storm?"

"Jesus," her Dad agreed with Mom's exasperation, slowly shaking his head.

Their three-way hug broke. Mom's hand gave her shoulder an extra squeeze. Dad's hand lingered, straightening bangs out of her eyes.
Dad said, “Sounds like you two really dodged a few bullets, huh?”

Chloe’s skull, shattered by the shot, her brains exploding into the air behind her. Bullet shells jangled from her neck.

Mom said, “Yea, thank God you got out of there in time.”

The flickering, the flashing, the pools of red bubbling at the edges of her vision, the stinging pain as her brain was clamped tight, each second wound backwards a rotation on the vice.

Max's stomach lurched. She felt like she could throw up.

“Max really held it together,” Chloe noted, with a certain...stiff formality unbecoming of her. “You should be proud of her.”

And everyone nodded and hummed their pleasantry, as if Max deserved praise.

Just as soon as Mom and Dad let her stand on her own two feet, there Chloe was, like a fucking magnet, right back at her side. Right back to the hand-holding. The obvious, blatant, 'I'm-your-daughter's-girlfriend' sort of hand-holding. Why was Chloe doing this? And why wasn't Max stopping her? Why wasn't anyone talking about this?

Max Caulfield had rewound time, faced her suicidal friend on a rooftop, blown a pipe bomb in a school she’d broken into, shot an unloaded gun at a drug dealer, spit in a serial killer's face, and faced a fucking tornado.

But in the face of her parents? She felt like she'd...somehow devolved backwards. She didn't like this. Her parents, they didn’t…fall into the equation of all of this crazy shit going on. She’d been keeping them at a distance. She couldn’t decide if Chloe was making it easier, or making it worse.

As Chloe swayed their interlocked hands with a child-like playfulness, Max could see that flash of realization on her parents' faces. That 'Oh? Ohhh' moment. They swapped relieved smiles, and Dad’s brows lifted up, as if to say, 'I told you so.'
“You ladies must be starving,” Dad declared, giving Mom a pat on the arm as he turned around to the front door. “As soon as we knew you were coming, we got a stew going.”

“Yea, we can catch up inside,” Mom decided, easing the two 'ladies' in. “It's pretty chilly out tonight.”

“Fuck yes, it is,” Chloe grunted under her breath, shivering her shoulders.

Max puffed out a disbelieved breath. So much for the formality. But the Caulfields were cool. Their daughter could...bring home a blue-haired, stoned-looking thug and they'd be 100% behind it. Max didn't even need to hear the conversation – they trusted her judgment. They wouldn't have let her go down to Blackwell all by herself if they hadn't.

Still, though. This was not how...the 'meeting your parents' thing was supposed to go. Not after what they'd just been through. Not when they hadn't even, like...set terms. They hadn't had 'The Talk.' That's what couples did, right? They Talked? They made it Official?

This was not Official.

This was kind of Fucked Up.

Max couldn't afford to cause drama at that moment. Too exhausted to call Chloe out (in the ways of old, per their M'Lady/Ser arrangement, which she refused to accept, as they were BOTH Ladies, or BOTH Sers). She was too damned tired. Too hungry. Too mentally and emotionally wiped.

So she would play along, and deal with issues later.

After all...it wasn't exactly uncomfortable to be holding Chloe's hand.

The familiar sights, scents, and sounds of Max's home somehow didn't feel quite as inviting as Max would've expected. It was night time, so things were dimmed down. There were some candles burning on the dining room table.
“Take off your shoes, your coat,” Max's Mom eased.

Chloe was already slipping her boots off, dropping them unceremoniously to the floor. Max, in a daze, untied her laces and set her sneakers.

Max reached for the zipper on Chloe's coat, right by her chin, then remembered: her shirt was covered in splotches of blood from her nosebleeding that morning. Shit.

Chloe had recollected this at the same moment, and was easing Max by her shoulders.

“Hey, Max,” Chloe said casually, quietly. “Go, uh...frrrreshen up?” she mumbled dubiously, one eye squinting with disgust at her own verbiage. “Put somethin’ warm on, I'll, uh, help your folks set dinner up.”

Max, slightly slack jawed, saw her Mom nod in approval of this idea as she was laying out bowls and silverware on the dining room table.

As Max wobbled her way to the narrow, cramped stairs, Chloe made a request.

“Mind grabbin’ me a sweater or somethin' while you're up there?”

Max nodded in reply, eager for just a moment's respite from the eyes, the voices, the touches, all of the senses of people hammering away at the plastic mask of 'I'm OK' she was carrying.

–

Chloe was insistent, wriggling her hands to shoo Max's Dad away from the sink, which was now full of gross, stewy ridden dishes and a big ol’ pot with grungy veggies stuck to the bottom.

“Nah, nah, I got it, Pops,” Chloe teased, asserting kitchen-erial dominance.

“Jesus. 'Pops?'” laughed Max's Dad. “Holy shit,” he quietly ruminated, scratching at his beard. “It's been years since anyone's called me that.”
“Old habits die hard,” Chloe said with a certain smugness, rolling up the sleeves on the dark blue sweatshirt she was borrowing from Max's wardrobe.

“Looks like they picked things back up quick,” Max observed, endeared to be seeing Dad and Chloe up to their own antics.

The sink water ran, and Chloe went to scrubbing dishes, setting them in the drying rack to the left. Dad shrugged off his dish duty, leaving it in Chloe's hands, and took a trip to the bathroom. In the dining room, Max and her Mom sat, across the table from each other. Max, wearing a deep red turtleneck for extra coziness, had her hands folded in her lap as she watched her Mom rearranged candles on the now cleared table. Relighting them. Adding a few extras.

Kate, kneeling down before her own memorial, lighting a candle in the dark, tears streaming down her cheeks.

'I'm going to hell, Max.'
'I'll say 'hi' to Rachel for you, though.'
'We'll make sure to reserve a room for you and Chloe.'
'We'll have a high tea party.'
'We'll all burn nice and warm.'

“Hey.”

Max's Mom was suddenly there, to Max's left, in the seat Chloe had occupied. As Max brushed her sleeve against her dried out eyes, her Mom gave Max a gentle hug. The scent of her coconut shampoo and aloe hand lotion was weirdly comforting, taking Max back in time. The actual way going 'back in time' was supposed to work.

“If you need to talk about anything that happened this week, we're here for you,” Mom assured quietly, beneath the trickle of dishwater and whatever tinny tune Chloe had playing from her cell phone's speaker in the next room.

Max hummed her acknowledgment. But 'anything' felt like an overstatement. There were some things that had happened that...Max wasn't sure she'd ever be able to tell anyone. Maybe not even Chloe.

“Do you need anything for your hands?” Mom checked, lightly, carefully tilting Max's arms to inspect them.

“Th-they're fine, just got some scrapes,” Max tried to put Mom at ease. She smirked, her cheeks getting a bit warm. “Ch-Chloe, she, um...she got worried, and...sort of overreacted, I...-” A light shake of her head as she trailed off with a shaky laugh.
“You...weren't kidding when you told me how...different she is now,” Mom noted in a whisper, glancing over her shoulder to the blue-haired back of Chloe's head. There had been a hint of doubt in Mom's voice, but it evaporated when she added, “But, it looks like she cares about you as much as ever.”

Max nodded eagerly with a sniff. She scratched the edge of her nose and nodded a second time.

“We, um...We really reconnected this week,” Max murmured, her eyes wandering to the candles on the table. “I-I dunno, despite everything, it feels like we're...closer than we ever were.”

“So I noticed,” Mom said. And then the question Max knew Mom had been dying to ask. “Uh...did you...?- Are you, like...-?”

“We're figuring it out,” Max quietly replied. “There's, uh, I mean...there's something there that...wasn't before, and so...erm...-”

Mom's brows lifted and she sighed, taking Max's vague words in for the truth they conveyed.

“Looks like I owe your Dad twenty bucks,” she said with light humor. When Max raised an amused, confused brow, her Mom set forth the reassurance. “I hope this wasn't something you felt like you needed to hide from us, because we would never judge-”

“I-I know, Mom, it's cool,” Max chuckled weakly, grasping her Mother's wrist with her bandaged hand. “Seriously, this is, like...a brand-brand-new thing, I only just-...w-we're still-...I-I mean, with...with everything going on, it didn't...feel...-”

Mom just nodded, and Max knew she didn't have to say anything more.

Her Mom ran her lightly wrinkled, squishy soft hand across Max's temple, then tipped the back of her wrist on Max's head – checking for a fever, no-doubt.

After releasing her hand, Mom concluded, “If she makes you happy, Max, then we're happy. That's all that matters. You deserve something good after the week you've been through.”

Max's lips pursed. She very badly wanted to express her disagreement, but it would've just made everything worse. Max felt super uncomfortable with this. With how Chloe had basically just...made this a thing, right off the bat. Max wasn't going to make a fuss and deny what was going on. But she had wanted to take things slow here. Wait until she was comfortable with it before telling her parents.

Damnit. It was her own fault, for making that move in the parking lot. She regretted it, but... didn't. That contradiction was really annoying.

And it sounded like Dad had already figured it out, anyway. Maybe not having to hide it was a good thing?

“So, what's the plan for the evening?” Dad had emerged from his restroom respite.

“Uh, I was thinking of...just...chilling out for the evening,” Max decided. “Sorry, I just...I need...-”

“Whoa, hey, it's all good,” Dad insisted, hovering over Max's shoulder. He gave her head a ruffle, messing up her hair a bit, and she smiled. “We can all catch up tomorrow. Long week, long day, long trip, but you're home now. You and Chloe should take a load off. Anything you guys need?”
Max, shrugged, shaking her head. She was way too out of it to even think of what she 'needed' right then, outside of just...laying down and snuggling. The kissing, the hand-holding, the keeping-up-appearances, the confronting-shitty-life-things...That was too much work for her right then. But she could do snuggling.

“Something comes to mind, you let me know,” Dad offered. “I'll make a Wally World run.”

“Thanks,” said Max. “I'll leave that to Chloe. I'm too messed up right now to even think about groceries...” She wiped some sweat from her forehead onto the sleeve of her turtleneck. She sighed tiredly.

“Yea, yea, no problem,” Dad eased.

Mom wondered, “It's a little cold tonight, Honey. Do you need to borrow the space heater?”

Max shook her head. She appreciated her parents trying to make sure everything was all tidy and stuff, but...she really just wanted to escape everything for a while.

Mom cited, “There's an extra blanket on your bed, that'll help a little, anyway.”

“We'll be fine, Mom,” Max said softly, wearing a smile to convey her thanks.

“Are you sick?” Dad checked.

“If you feel under, you know where the medicine is,” Mom added.

Max again wore her tired, tired smile and nodded.

“Sorry,” said Dad, scratching the hair on his jaw as he thought of what to say.

“It's OK,” Max insisted. “I'm tired is all. I'm just glad that...-”

Max trailed off with a shrug.

She wasn't really sure what she had been planning to say. It was like her brain had tried to shove a bunch of ideas together.

Glad that Chloe is alive? Glad that at least some of the people in Arcadia Bay survived?

Her Dad walked around the table, gripping his wife's shoulders brusquely. They both just...kind of stared at Max. She could feel it, right then.

They both could see how fucked up she was. How tired she was. That something horrible had happened that she wasn't talking about. The elephant in the room was definitely the whole 'Jefferson' shit, and Max was at least thankful they weren't bringing it up inside the house. It was a conscious decision.

The sink stopped running, and Chloe's garage band music was switched off.

Chloe entered the room, eagerly scanning the Caulfield vibes as her quick-wit formulated an 'intro.'

Chloe ended up saying, “Not leaving me out of any reunion group hug action, are you?”
Max couldn't decide if she appreciated the effort or wished Chloe would just stop trying so hard.

“I'm a little too wiped out for any kind of 'action' right now,” Max confessed sheepishly, getting herself up from her seat.

Her Mom let out a sort of 'Aw' noise of empathy, and her Dad nodded in understanding.

“Why don't you guys go unwind? We can clear out of the living room if you like.”

“I'm about ready for bed, honestly,” Max voiced.

“It's cool, Max,” Chloe agreed. “Take a load off, I'll help out with...whatever...” She glanced over to the Caulfields. “Ya know, whatever needs helping, I guess.”

“Pah,” Dad laughed. “We're good. But thanks for knocking out the dishes, Chlo.”

Chloe nonchalantly replied, “No prob, Pops.”

‘Chlo?’ ‘Pops?’ Aaaand Max felt thirteen again. This was weird. Not as weird as, like, being...more literally thirteen, like she...had been, a...a few days ago, but...

“You've been driving all day,” Max's Mom reminded Chloe. “You deserve a break, too.”

Deserve, deserve, deserve. I'm getting really sick of that word...

“Uh, sure,” Chloe responded with a shrug. She gave Max a light slap with the back of her wrist. “Wanna go watch a movie and chill?”

“...And chill?” Max dryly – skeptically – replied.

“Yea, we'll relax,” Chloe spit out, her confidence slipping up a bit as her flashed with realization of what context that could've denoted. Right in front of Mr. and Mrs. Caulfield.

Max prayed that her parents had no idea what the context was. Thankfully, they didn't seem to.

“The bed's already made,” Max's Mom advised. “If you guys need anything, you know where to find it.”

Both girls nodded. Chloe put her hand on Max's shoulder and gave it a squeeze. A rather blatantly affectionate squeeze. And a rather blatantly affectionate look. It made Max's thighs tingle, but her stomach tense.

Her parents both seemed to be smiling. Or maybe looking neutral. Or supportive? Neutrally supportive? Sneakily supportive?

Ulgh, wowser, was it hot in the room, or was it just Max?

When the silence amongst the house lasted a second longer than seemed appropriate, Max fumbled her way up out of her chair with a nervous clearing of her throat.

“Sorry,” Max meekly mumbled. “N-not feelin' so hot today, I...-”

“Max, you don't need to apologize,” Dad insisted. “It's been nice just to have you here. Just knowing you're safe.”
“You've had enough to worry about recently,” Mom agreed. “Go rest up. There's nothing to worry about here, nothing to apologize for.”

Max nodded in compliance, letting Chloe worm their arms together. Letting Chloe escort her upstairs.

Each step they climbed, Max's heart slowed.

'There's nothing to worry about here.'

Warren dead TORNADO
YOUR FAULTTTTT
Alyssa dead DEADZachary
Evan dead Dana DEEEAADDD
Rachel DEAD
DEAD allll deadd

'Nothing to apologize for.'

YOURdEAdFAULT
yourfaultSUFFERING
yoOouUrarrr fauUIt
DEATHfaultYOURS

“Ow, fuck, Max,” Chloe hissed with surprise, flinching her arm out of Max's grip. “Suh...Save it for the bedroom, huh?” she nervously joked under her breath, flicking her wrist to shake off pain.

“Shit, I'm sorry,” Max mumbled as they entered her bedroom. “I didn't...mean to hurt you.”

“Obviously,” Chloe agreed with disbelief. Max entered her bedroom behind Chloe, and Chloe closed the door behind them. With privacy present, Chloe gently checked, “What up, Max? You a'ight?”

Max shook her head ever-so-slightly. Chloe's eyes flickered with curious concern, but Max avoided them.

Max then walked to her work desk. It smelled of citrus. Dad had probably cleaned it up not that long before they'd arrived. Max rolled her mesh desk chair out a bit and took a seat. She needed some space for a minute. Chloe seemed to intuit this – gee, maybe from the way Max had just hurt her – and wandered to Max's bookshelf, which had more DVDs than it did books.

Max unwrapped the light bandaging that had been on her hands. It stung a little, but...it really wasn't as bad as all that. Max smiled involuntarily as her memory went back to Chloe being all...cute, and fussing over such a minor injury. The gauze had speckles of pink on it. Her hands seemed OK. Still sensitive, but no big. Max dunked the gauze in the wire mesh waste bin to the right of her desk.

She reached for the mostly empty hand sanitizer dispenser on the right hand side of her desk and, after a brief hesitation, squirted some on her hands.

It burned like a son of a bitch, but she didn't need to be getting an infection from something as stupid as slipping in a parking lot. Max managed to keep all of her pain to herself.

She was getting pretty damned good at that recently, she figured.

“How's the hands?” Chloe wondered in a reserved manner, scanning DVD titles. “Those,
uuh...superpowers of yours come with any healing goodness?"

“No,” Max replied curtly, shooting Chloe a brief glare. Based on the way Chloe's face paled, said glare might've been fiercer than Max had intended. She was not in the mood for many things that evening, and superpower jokes – even, even references to the Rewind? – they were close to the top.

“My hands are OK,” Max mumbled, softening her voice back down.

“Something happen while were with hangin' with the fam?”

Max's eyelids fluttered with contained irritation.

“Just bad memories,” Max half-lied.

This PTSD shit wasn't fun. But Chloe...being overly assertive was a little annoying, too.

Max did not want to talk. She did not want to think. She wanted to lay in bed with the girl she'd fallen for and cuddle and forget everything for a while.

“Uh...” Chloe scratched the back of her neck awkwardly. “This 'bad memory' a sorta...'All In the Family' kinda deal, or...-?”

Max's brows furrowed.

Stop with the jokes, Chloe. Just chill.

Chloe didn't seem to get the hint.

“I-I mean, are these 'Family Matters' something I should be worried about?”

“Chloe.”

“Adding me to the mix make this a 'Full House'?”

Max closed her eyes, waiting for the wave to pass.

“Or didja bring me here to help with some 'Home Improvement'?”

Max opened her eyes halfway, brows lowered calmly. They weren't even funny, just dumb. But Chloe trying so hard was admittedly adorable, if misguided in the moment.

“Sorry, Max, gettin' it allll outta my system. Been savin' this shit up all day, ya know? Might as well burn 'em all out while we're at it.”

“...”

With only a half-hearted attempt at an Erkul impersonation Chloe eked out: “...Did I do that...?”

Max's expression winced in self-conflict. Her expression, all sheepish and child-like, it had been super cute. Like ‘wowser’ cute. But Max was still a little pissed at her.

Shaking her head with a jerk reaction, pink-cheeked smirk about her, Max muttered facetiously, “Damn you, Chloe...” Chloe shrugged teasingly.

The burning from the hand sanitizer having passed, Max sighed, getting up from her desk chair. She approached Chloe, who had her arms tucked behind her back. Chloe was wearing one of Max's
sweatshirts. It was Max's size, so...on Chloe's bod, it accentuated certain features. Max had found it distracting during dinner. She found it distracting right then, too.

Max managed to realign her eyes with Chloe's face by the time she'd reached Chloe's side. Max let herself fall against Chloe, her arms wrapping around Chloe's back. Chloe worked her own hands over Max's waist. A chin on a shoulder, a cheek on a neck, bosoms pressed intentionally together, and Max took a steadying breath.

Everything was not OK.

But this was.

“Are we cool?” Chloe whispered in Max's ear.

“Frosty,” Max said back, just as softly.

As their hug broke, their cheeks slid against one another. Chloe's head tilted slightly, readying to kiss, but Max withdrew.

Letting her arms sag at her sides, Max sat at the corner of her bed. She checked the clock on her phone's lock screen: [8:12pm] Ugh, even more notifications. She caught Stella's name in one, Kate's Dad in another...but she wasn't up for reading any of them just yet.

It was barely nighttime, and she'd napped, even, but she was soo bushed somehow. Max was not at all certain about being able to stay up through a movie.

But she was certain that falling asleep with Chloe as her pillow was going to be awesome.

“Pick out a...” Max yawned. “...a movie?”

Chloe, still standing, nodded. She bent down in front of Max's book case – Max retrained from ogling – and came back with a DVD case in hand.

Staring at the case, Chloe said, “Uh...I think I'm, like, in a mellow 'Blade Runner' mood. I always...cry at the end.” She gave Max a solemn smirk. “Plus-” She pointed to her head. “-rockin' the crazy hair for mah gurl Pris.”

“Ah.” Max nodded, trying to smile. But something...felt weird. She said what came to mind. “You do look good in blue...”

But...something felt strange. Max couldn't pin-point it, so she tried to go with the flow instead.

Chloe passed the DVD case to Max. Max got lost staring at it for a moment. The neon lights, the ugly-pretty 80's logo title. Harrison Ford, looking sharp at usual, Good Sir. We can always count on you to shoot first when the shit hits the fan.

“Come on,” Chloe pleaded, picking up on Max's pause. “Swear, I won't fall asleep this time.”

Max softly chuckled, “You always fall asl...” Something caught in her throat.

This was all wrong. This was familiar in the wrong way.

Chloe, oblivious to the fear Max was still hiding beneath her stoicism, stuck out her pinky finger.

“I will pinky-swear this shit, Max. You know I ain't playin'.”
Max was bewildered. Afraid.

She couldn't...she couldn't let on how familiar this was.

She accepted Chloe's pinky-promise with a wary smile of plastic, then went to retrieve her laptop from her messenger bag at the foot of her bed.

“Fuck,” Chloe sighed out, sprawling herself on her back over Max's bed. “This is tight, Max. I am excite. _Blade Runner_ is such a dreamy movie...”

With Chloe behind her, Max remained at the corner of her bed. She opened the laptop and stuck the DVD in.

It was all wrong, it was... _strange._

Max, her hand starting to shake, wrestled with the laptop's touchpad and got the DVD started. She skipped the ads.

Max was afraid to look behind her. This was all _wrong._ When the screen went dark for a moment, she could make out Chloe's reflection. Chloe was taking off the sweatshirt.

“So, Max,” Chloe grunted as she undressed. “Got a question for ya.”

Max turned around as the main menu loaded.

Chloe was getting _incredibly cozy_ in Max's bed. Her shirt was draped over Max's bed post, and she was sliding right into Max's sheets. Max gawked, her legs tingling, her head whirling, her stomach queasy.

Chloe, finally noticing Max's off-ness, smiled sheepishly.

Chloe then asked, “Uhh, so where do you stand?...Do you think Deckard is a replicant?”

No. No, no, no.

Max couldn't go on with this. She already _had_ gone through this. In a reality where she overdosed a dying Chloe per request. So much of what Chloe was saying was the same as that day. All of these same things that other Chloe had talked...the night before she wanted to kill herself.

“Uhh, sorry,” Chloe eked out. “I see you're...not wide awake like me.”

Max slapped the laptop closed, nearly dropping it on the floor.

“Whoa,” Chloe murmured, confused as she watched Max set the laptop on the mattress and get up from the bed. “Max?”

“C-Can we maybe just...go to bed?” Max asked with some desperation, running her hands through her hair as she paced aimlessly around.

Chloe gaped at the closed laptop, then back to Max.

With her voice trembling, Chloe said shakily, “Max, you're...freaking me out.”

“You're freaking _me_ out,” Max lashed out from her gut, her voice squeaking and quiet. She planted her palm on her lips as soon as the words had spilled. “I mean...-”
“Wh-whatever I did,” Chloe quickly spat, “I’m sorry, we...uh, we can do whatever...you want.”

Max huffed out a sigh, grabbing her laptop up from the bed and setting it on the night stand. She placed her phone on top of it and, without a word, crawled into bed, slipping under the sheets. Max yanked her own sweatshirt off from the bed post and set it in Chloe's lap.

“Uh...” Chloe seemed a bit offput by this.

Max simply folded her hands in her lap, tugged the fluffy comforter up to her abdomen, and sighed yet again. Then she yawned. Then she looked at Chloe with a silent plea.

Chloe put the shirt back on.

“Am I gonna get an explanation here?” Chloe grumbled.

“I don't want to argue with you again today,” Max whimpered, her eyes getting teary from all the pressure against the inside of her skull.

“Argue about what?” wondered Chloe, playing dumb.

Maybe how you decided to make my parents assume we're already dating?

“You know what,” Max cited, biting the edge of her lip.

Their eyes locked.

Chloe replied, “...The, uh, proper timing of sitcom-related puns?”

Max laughed through her nose. Goddamnit, Chloe seemed to keep catching her with those ‘playing-innocent’ jokes. The way her voice would squirm with uncertainty, the way her lips would curve awkwardly...Max loved that. She loved seeing Chloe slip into that dorkiness, the stuff hiding underneath the shell of ripped denim, tattoos, and cigarettes.

Max, trying to keep her smile out of Chloe's sight, just leaned her head against Chloe's chest, snuggling the blanket up to her neck. They sat for a couple of moments, with Max setting her cheek against Chloe's left breast.


“Yea, sorry about that,” Max teased. “I won't be able to return that favor...”

“Eh, you're still young,” Chloe said with wistful optimism, shifting position so she was lying flat on her back.

“Wouldn't get your hopes up,” Max said with warm cynicism, rolling onto her side and working her arm around Chloe's waist.

“Oh, my hopes are down,” Chloe replied. “Below-the-belt down.”

“Gross...”

“You say that now...”

“I don't even know what you meant, but I know it's something gross.”

“Good job, detective.”
“Mm.” Max hummed a pleasant hum.

“So, like, this whole ‘snuggling’ thing is kinda new to me, Max? But like I told you...I'll try anything for you.”

“Sorry I'm going all weird on you Chloe. I just need a night to... not ...have to think about things.”

“Not thinking. Ya know, I might be able to manage that for ya...”

“Thank you.”

With her ear resting against the left side of Chloe's ribcage, Max could hear Chloe's heartbeat, feel Chloe's breathing. It was exactly the sort of relaxing sensation she needed in that moment.

Chloe's heartbeat, her breath, it was proof that Chloe Price was very much alive, and Max knew that Chloe was very much going to stay that way for some while to come.

And that was all Max needed to know that night.
Chapter Summary

[To: Maxine]
[wakey wakey bakey. ;D]

Chapter Notes

A/N: First off, thanks so much to those of who you have supported this project so far, especially everyone who has taken the time to leave a comment. Apologies for the amount of time this chapter has taken. Many factors this month have impeded this chapter, including stress at work, sickness, and spending earnest efforts trying to make new friends online. So, thanks for waiting.

Nextly, exciting news: I have officially started development on a completely non-commercial fanwork tribute game, adapting this story into a visual novel. For more info and to follow updates, the official tumblr account is @lis-allwounds, and my personal account is @destiny-smasher. Feel free to get in touch even personally, as I could always use more social interaction. I'm a current resident of the San Fran Bay Area, and would love to meet fellow Life Is Strange fans from around here.

In any case, I plan to release a game demo to the public by the end of December. The game version of this project will feature extra content as I edit/adapt/add upon what I'm writing here in fic form, so even fans of the prose version will have something to look forward to. It won't detract from the fic since the game is being built from the fic, so don't worry about that.

Also, the process of converting my fic from doc file to websites seems to mess up spacing on some websites. Sorry about that, not really much I can do unless someone knows of a way in OpenOffice to solidify the spacing so it'll be consistent across different websites.

—

Life is Strange
All Wounds
Chapter 4 - Mix

—

[To: Maxine]
[wakey wakey bakey. ;D]

After sending the still-sleeping Max a morning text, Chloe resumed her egg scrambling. It was admittedly kind of fucking weird, going about making breakfast in this house that wasn't hers as if it
were hers. The Caulfields had went off to work, leaving a note on the fridge about what food was readily eatable and all that jazz.

Upon waking in the still house, Chloe had opted to let Max continue snoozing for a bit. After hauling her ass out of bed, Chloe had put on a loose, elastic pair of PJ pants from Max's dresser and a fuzzy brown sweater with some godawfully tacky ugly-cute patterny shit. While shirts they could share, the pants were a little tighter and a little shorter than Chloe would've preferred. Plus, Chloe's feet were a bit longer than Max's, so she was stuck either wearing the same pair of socks from the past few days, or no socks at all. Chloe had gone with the latter, but she was quickly starting to regret it given the cold linoleum floor of the kitchen.

The eggs were starting to crust over, leaving burnt residue on the pan. Gragh. Chloe had used to be a solid chef in her younger years, but...not so much anymore. It wasn’t like riding a bicycle – you could not, in fact, just hop on and remember how to do it. Not without burning a bit of shit first, anyway.

Chloe switched the stovetop off, scraping her enormous clump of unevenly cooked eggs around. She inspected the platter of greasy bacon goodness tempting her on the counter top. Bacon was a lot easier to cook, anyway. A little under and they were tender and juicy. And a little over and they were crispy and crunchy. Either way, it was still fucking bacon, and it was still fucking delicious.

Chloe figured it was about time to get plates and glasses and all that crap set up. She inspected the coffee maker. A half pot, nice and dark. Max's dad had made a full batch and left the heater on after getting his fill. It was...maybe an hour old? Chloe began scanning the unfamiliar cupboards for mugs, plates, n' junk. Hm, snack cabinet, can cabinet, oh, liquor cabinet, nice, she'd remember that for later...Plates – ceramic and black. Glasses – empty jam jars, coolio. Mugs – oh shit, for reals? A fucking Hawt Dog Man mug? Chloe had given that to Max eons ago. And she'd kept it all this time? Damn. That felt pretty cool.

Chloe couldn’t help but wonder what other pieces of their childhood had been brought along to this place. It made Chloe wonder why the hell they’d fallen out of touch. Well, fuck it. That time was over.

Let the 'Max & Chloe Good Times (tm)' roll on.

Chloe went to pouring coffee for the two of them, leaving extra room for creamer. Jam jar glasses got the OJ treatment. Plates got loaded with piles of bacon and eggs. Shit filled up both plates. Chloe hoped Max had built up an appetite. Fuckin' donuts and stew had not satisfied Chloe’s stomach, anyway. Everything smelled slightly burnt, but it was still music to Chloe’s nose. Like garage band jam sessions: the bacon was the hot guitarist who was dressed like shit but you didn't care, the eggs were the vocalist that was trying too hard and sung unevenly but got the job done, the coffee was the drummer who nodded along with everything every else said, and the orange juice was the bassist who had a chip on her shoulder about not getting enough credit despite how fucking essential she was to a complete breakfast. Er, band. Erh...Yea. Whatever.

By the time Chloe's brain had put together and fucked up that analogy, everything was all set.

Chloe checked her phone. No reply. She brought the plates to the living room coffee table. No sounds from upstairs. Hm. Might need to give the girl a wake-up call.Scratching her ass with a yawn, Chloe waddled back to the kitchen for coffee. She took a few sips. The creamer had cooled it down to actually fucking drinkable temperature. Not as sweet as Chloe liked her coffee, but...Hm. She took a gulp, making more space in the mug, having decided hers needed a little extra summin'-summin'. Poking back into the cabinets, Chloe inspected what was in stock. Not much, but beggars couldn’t be choosers. She decided on a sample of the Jack Daniels whiskey from the mostly full
bottle. She loved the weight of those big-ass whiskey bottles. The way the brown liquid sounded as it sloshed around in its chamber. Like flicking a revolver loaded with bullets ready for your own brain. And the sound of it trickling into the glass – or mug, in this case – smooth. The harsh scent unpleasantly dampening the warm coffee smell...Nice and grungy. After drizzling a shot’s worth in, Chloe took a sip – whoo, yea. It had been a while since she’d had a Irish coffee like this. A long while. She took a heart swig and poured a second shot in. She’d been feeling a bit antsy, having been winding down her cigarette intake. Maybe replace one addiction with another, eh?

After setting the whiskey back in the cabinet, Chloe scooped up both mugs and carefully escorted them to the living room. She set them down right on the coffee table by their plates. She was certain Max would, like, grumble about how they needed coasters, n’ whatever, but...Chloe didn’t know where those things were, so, like, yea.

One last glance at her phone out of habit, and Chloe decided it was time to wake the Max. Uh, not before grabbing a second sip of that coffee. Had a nice bite to it. With her phone sagging in a pajama pocket, Chloe tip-toed upstairs. Fuck, why were these stairs so...tall, anyway?

The door to Max’s room was still open, as Chloe had left it. Chloe found Max curled up on her side, facing where Chloe had been. In Chloe’s absence, Max had wormed her arms around her own pillow, drooling onto it a bit, jaw agape. Max was snoring in shallow, quiet breaths that were like ocean waves lapping a shore in the distance.

Chloe’s chest swelled with warmth, her stomach tingled. Smirking to herself, Chloe pulled out her phone. Leaning over the bed cautiously, Chloe ninja’d a closeup of Max’s adorable face, bed-head and all. With a soft chuckle under her breath, Chloe set the pic as her phone’s background. Satisfied with her espionage effort (totally made good use of that high Dex stat she had), Chloe set her phone beside Max’s on the night stand. She hovered over Max for a moment, hands on her hips as she considered her options.

Jump-scare for the LOLs? Nah. That’d be too dickish.
Shake-awake for practicality? Meh. Too rough, but not in the good way.
Morning-grope for...because...Chloe wanted to? Kinda badly. Really badly.

Eh, but they weren't quite ready for that, huh? Well, Max wasn't quite ready for that.

Welp. Chloe went with the option that made the most sense: Wakeup-kiss. Not her strongest tactic but she had a suspicion it would be Max's preferred method.

Chloe worked her left knee up onto the mattress. She leaned her weight on it, planting her hands on either side of Max's shoulders. Hovering over Maxine, Chloe's weight shifted the mattress enough to cause Max to start stirring. Chloe lingered, her face approaching, savoring Max's morning moans. Chloe went for the kiss. At first she was gentle, but as Max's mouth worked quicker than the girl's eyes, Chloe...got a bit more aggro with it. Perhaps due to Max's morning grogginess, they accidentally bumped teeth a little. Nailed it, hah. A few seconds passed, and Chloe didn't let Max up for air.

Without thinking – just doing – Chloe shifted her left hand over, pressing it down against Max's chest.

That had apparently been the 'Nope' line for Max, since as soon as this happened, Max sputtered and gasped and wriggled like a fucking fish out of water. Chloe retreated – and Chloe hated retreating, at least from that – and she wiped her mouth while stumbling backwards and off the bed. Max quickly rose, tossing the heavy comforter and blanket off of her. She was still dressed in jeans and her red
turtleneck. As Max choked on saliva for a sec, regaining her breath, Chloe pondered if the girl sleeping in her day clothes was adorable or lame. Well, both? And Max had managed to get Chloe to do the same the night prior. Girl seemed to be having a thing with keeping clothes on? Like they hadn't slept together in their underwear just a few days prior...Why was that, anyway? Made no fucking sense.

In either case, Chloe realized she'd overstepped, as annoying and frustrating as that was. She had half a mind to grumble out, 'Good morning to you, too,' but managed to take the high road instead.

“Got carried away there,” Chloe mumbled sheepishly – *yikes, way too* sheepishly. “Heh, s-sorry. I, urh...” Having cleared her throat, Max was staring at Chloe with this really cute, like, *I'm-pissed-at-you-but-also-liked-that-maybe-but-grrrrhh* kind of look. Chloe responded to it with, “Guess you're just, uh, too irresistible for me to deal with it, Maxine.” Chloe accidentally accentuated this comment with a really lame, squeaking laugh. Bleh.

Max sighed through her nose in that stifled way she did, unwilling to admit Chloe's puppy-routine was working, yet unwilling to chastise her, either.

Chloe's guts intertwined with dread. Max's eyes were flickering at her with this confused, disappointed expression. Not a word. Damn, it really stung. More than it maybe should've. Fuck.

Chloe could just *feel* a 'talk' coming on. Fuck that shit, she was *not* awake enough for that, and...and neither was Max, so...-


Before anything else could transpire, Chloe made a swift exit in as cool and casual a manner as she could muster. But by the time she got to the stairs, she was nervously clawing at her straw-like strands of overly dyed hair.

Damnit, she'd fucked something up again. *Damnit, argh...*-

Why was Max pulling this 'hard-to-get' bullshit, anyway? Max was *better* than that!
They should be taking advantage of the fact that they were *alive* and *together* (and home alone in a cozy house), not this fucking 'beating-around-the-goddamn-bush' shit!
*Urgh,* did it make Chloe a whore, to want this so badly? So soon after Rachel...
*Fuck* that, Rachel had *lied* to her, fucking right to her face! Multiple occasions!
Rachel had been a tease the whole goddamn time, hadn’t she? Fooling around with Frank, with that fucking psycho art teacher, with...who the fuck *knew* who else?
It burned. So fucking cock-sucking *much,* it burned...Chloe hated herself for it, for how much it burned. She could feel her mind slipping down that slope of anger, of rage.
*Fuck you, Dad, for leaving me. *Fuck you, Rachel, for leaving me, too...* It was dumb, it was shitty to think like that. Fucking juvenile.
Chloe didn’t care. That was how she was feeling, right then and there.
*Aughhh,* fucking...Rachel.

Ugh, shit. Rachel.
By the end it had been a goddamn battle just to keep Rachel's attention before someone else swiped it away from Chloe. Over and over. Chloe had worked so hard to hold onto that girl's affection, but...-

Had Rachel ever really *loved* Chloe back? The way Chloe had loved her? A while back, when Chloe had been sticking missing posters all over, and Chloe wouldn't have doubted it. Not for a fucking second. But now?
Ugh, Rachel had played Chloe like a fucking...

Shit, ugh, Rachel was gone. She was fucking gone. Buried beneath a fucking trash heap. OD’d by some snot-nosed asshole. Rachel was probably in a morgue by now. Shit. And Chloe was latching onto Max now. Clinging for dear life because even if she had come to some fucking revelation about Joyce, about David, about Maxine Caulfield, Chloe still had no idea what to do with that. Any of it. Well, Chloe knew what she wanted to do with Max, and Max seemed to know what to do with her. So Chloe would keep clinging.

So.
Yup.
Whore = very yes.
Fuck.

I just need this right now. I need to feel this. I need someone else to feel this for me. With me. At me. Around me. Fuck. Max, why does this have to be so fucking difficult? Maybe I'm being a selfish prick but I don't know what else to-

“Eulgh...”

The sound of Max coughing in disgust from the living room yanked Chloe out of her head. She realized she'd been pacing around in the kitchen, swimming in a cesspool of emotional bullshit.

“Chloe, how do you fuck up coffee?” Max chuckled warily, trying to make light of her own choking from the other room. “I mean, it's not that hard...”

Chloe suddenly realized that Max must've taken a swig from the wrong mug. Heh.

“Wr-wrong mug, Max,” Chloe nervously chuckled, sweeping her way into the living room without anything to show for her kitchen travels.

Max's expression was contorted, both grossed out but puzzling things together. She took a sip from the other mug to try and wash down the after taste of Chloe’s Irish coffee.

“Mm,” Max hummed analytically as Chloe sat down on the couch beside her. Max, however, rose up just as Chloe sat down. Rubbing her tragically adorable turtle-necked throat, Max groaned, “Augh, that burned a little, Chloe. What did you put in your coffee?”

“Eh, ya know,” Chloe vaguely replied, leaning back casually. Folding one bare-toed foot over the opposing knee, she took a sip. Agh, good shit.

Max sighed, opening a slim drawer from the front of the coffee stand.

“Booze?” Max guessed in a grumble.

“Your detective skills never cease to amaze,” Chloe said with smug facetiousness, waggling her brows up as she sipped a bit more. “Whiskey,” she added in a satisfied grunt, jiggling her ankle on her knee. She was feeling uneasy with Max being up, avoiding sitting with her, avoiding eating the food she'd made.

From the small drawer on the coffee table, Max had yoinked out a pair of cork coasters with some pub brand on them. Ah, so that’s where the fuckers had been hiding. Max dropped them against the wooden coffee stand and made her way back to the couch.

“Where’d you get it from?” Max asked, referring to the liquor.

“Guessing your old man,” Chloe said with a one-shoulder shrug, sipping some more. Aurgh. Yep,
yep. This had been a fantastic decision. She was already starting to feel just slightly dizzy.

Despite a full plate of breakfast before her, Max hunched over the couch. Max clawed at an itch on her neck beneath her turtleneck, then just stared at the food, then stared at Chloe as another sip of Jack-infused coffee was consumed.

“You want some?” Chloe offered, mostly facetiously.

Max's expression was flat, groggy, and a little annoyed. That was a 'no,' then, but Chloe would've totally obliged if it had been a 'yes.' Fuck knew Max could use a stiff drink some time soon with all of this brooding going on. Brooding didn't suit Max, as far as Chloe was concerned.

“Chloe...” Max breathed out, pressing her palms hard against her forehead, slowly pushing them upward.

A bit frustrated with Max's judginess, Chloe grumbled out, “I'm a piece of shit, yea, I know.”

“What is with you?” Max growled out. Finally.

Chloe knew that question was coming. That exact question, with that exact emphasis, with that exact wispy, exasperated voice. It had been on the tip of Max's tongue since the night before. Chloe knew it had. Knew Max had been aching to ask it, but didn't have the energy to deal with it. To deal with the answer.

And judging by the way Max's eyes were a bit bloodshot with bags hanging underneath them, Chloe had a feeling the poor girl still wasn't ready to deal with the answer.

So Chloe stalled. Again.

“I needed to take the edge off,” she answered. She realized after the fact that the statement could be applied to more than one thing, and found herself feeling oh-so-clever with her accidental crypticism.

“If my parents found out you were drinking...”

“They wouldn't give a shit.”

“Ugh, yes, they w-...Th-that's not even the point, Chloe. Why are you acting this way?”

“What way?” Chloe continued to play dumb with another sip of her mellow coffee. She was going to make Max say it. Play a little chicken, so to speak. Get Max to step up and call Chloe out on her shit.

Max whimpered with frustration, “Why are you acting like we're...-? Luh-...Like we're a couple?”

Ow. Fucking ow, Max. Aren't we one? What the actual fuck?

“You make dating me sound so disastrous,” Chloe grumbled bitterly, deflecting the sting in her chest. “I mean, I know the parking lot wasn't the best place for romantic escapades, but...”

“Chloe.” But Max saw right through the redirect.

“Wh...?” Chloe briefly tried to 'Are you serious? Max with a look. It didn't work. “Aren't we a couple?”

“I don't know,” Max spat, her tone a bit panicky. “We never talked about it.”

Chloe tried to keep her heart in her ribcage. She wore a smirk, rolled her eyes knowingly, and shook her head with a light, facetious scoff.
“Tongues shaking hands doesn’t count as talking?” she joked.

“I like you, Chloe,” Max blurted out. “Like, like...like you...like you.”

“Like, like, totally like...” Chloe mumbled in a rapid-fire murmur, almost petrified by trying to confront this topic.

What was this, fucking 2nd grade? Did they really need to slap a fucking label on it?

They didn't need to talk. Talking made things...like, physical. Talking made Chloe have to think about shit she did not want to think about.

Like how Rachel was dead.

Like how much it fucking hurt that Rachel was dead.

Like how much it fucking hurt that Chloe had maybe fallen for Rachel, and never got the chance to tell her...and maybe Rachel had not fallen for her, at all, and had never gotten the chance to tell her.

Because fuck thinking about that shit. It hurt too much. It was...in the past.

If Max wasn't going to use her Rewind, Chloe's brains should, like, totally stop Rewinding, too, right?

“Hey,” Max snipped with some impatience at Chloe's lack of proper response. “Chloe, come on...”

“Max,” Chloe sighed, scratching residue from the edge of her nostril.

Time to bail. Stall Mode: Activate.

Chloe got right up from her seat, leaving their still untouched breakfast where it sat. Max twitched as if to pursue, but realized Chloe was just going to the kitchen.

“Chloe, please,” Max practically whimpered from the other room. “We...we both have a lot of shit on our minds, we should...I-I dunno, we should talk about it. Things have happened so...so fast, I don't think we should just...-”

Run away? Oh, we ran the fuck away, Max. Half a state away.

Chloe opened the cabinet.

“Talking won't change a goddamn thing, Maxine.”

Chloe took the whiskey bottle.

Max replied irritably, “It'll help us feel better.”

Chloe lingered, savoring the weight of the bottle, the smoothness of the glass, the color of the liquid encased within, sloshing around.

“It won't help me feel better,” Chloe disagreed.

“Well, it will help me,” Max huffed, losing her patience.

Chloe's head jerked upward at these words, glancing nowhere specific as her head reeled with a jolt of regret. It had literally not even occurred to her that, like, having a talk wasn't just about them, as an
item. That it could be about them individually, separately. That it could help Max. That Max needed it, even if Chloe did not.

*Wow, I'm such an asshole...*

“Oh.” Chloe managed to utter. Chloe quickly re-entered the living room, clasping the bottle like an Exotic Loot Drop (equipping it would sure as fuck give a boost to her Endurance).

“Chloe,” Max sighed at the sight of the Jack Daniels bottle.

“Let's talk, then,” Chloe firmly conceded. Ech, maybe with a little too much passive-aggression, so-... “If it'll help you feel better, I mean...yea. Let's chit-chat.”

Chloe took her seat beside Max. She drizzled another half shot of whiskey into her mug. She noted Max's defensive sitting posture. Kind of hunched over, one foot on the couch, her hands wrapped around her own knee. Chloe also noticed the full breakfast getting cold on the coffee table before them.

“I didn't put any liquor in your *food,*” Chloe pointed out, nodding to the untouched plate. “Doesn't mean I didn't fuck it *up,* of course – I am *me* – but, uh...”

Max just sighed, sifting her fingers through her disheveled bangs.

Chloe sipped from her increasingly strong coffee. She took up her fork. She stabbed at a chunk of scrambled eggs – a nice, dry clump – and ate it. Max readjusted her posture, clutching her Hawt Dog Man mug and slurping some coffee. Max set the mug back onto the counter.

Chloe was nervous. She couldn't get a read on Max. Maybe this was what Watson felt like, all the fucking time, trying to figure out what Sherlock was thinking even in the stillest of moments. It was a really fucking annoying feeling. Especially since Max wasn't even, like, a super-genius or anything like that, so Chloe felt somehow that much stupider for not 'getting' what the issue was here.

*It's elementary, dear Watson: she's fucking falling for you, you ungrateful ass.*

Chloe drank a bit more. Ate a slice of bacon. All the while, her eyes kept darting sideways, observing Max. Studying the curve of Max's shoulders beneath red fabric. The way Max's bed-hair was tangled together. The way the puffy skin beneath Max's eyes said so much with so little. Most importantly, though, the way Max's bloodshot eyes were dangling between food, coffee...and the whiskey bottle.

Chloe could see it in Max’s tired, sore eyes, like muddy puddles on a cloudy day. In those pursed lips, holding back a lustful kiss. Max wanted a taste of that numbness that Chloe was slipping into but felt ‘naughty’ for wanting it. The girl's poor fried-out brain was suffocating on a plastic bag of guilt. Max wanted to relax, to unwind, to just...calm the fuck down. But she couldn't. Max's body physically just could not seem to un-tense the fuck out. Booze was 'bad', sex was 'bad,' couldn't go enjoying things like that when you didn't 'deserve' them, when your Renegade Meter was too far left of Neutral for what you felt like it *should* be.

Well, that was what Chloe was picking up from what Max was putting down. Or...*not* putting down, as the case was.

But anyway, shit like that? Problems like that? It was was what alcohol was fucking *there for,* Maxine Caulfield.

With a grunt, Chloe leaned over, reached for the bottle, and grunted again as she settled back into her
seat. She twisted the cap off, placing it squarely on the table. Leaving the bottle open.

Trying to be thoughtful and shit, Chloe spewed out casually, “I like to think of liquor as, like...a gun. Ya know?”

Max raised her brow, picking up a piece of floppy bacon. She twisted her head to face Chloe.

“You, thinking of non-gun-things as if they were guns?”

*Max Caulfield, you little shit.*

“I dunno, Chloe.” Max bit at the bacon. “You n' gunff 'on't gebalowmm...”

*Swear to god, Max, just 'cuz I couldn't understand what you just said doesn't mean I don't wanna kiss that sassy mouth.*

Watching Max chew on bacon and struggling to not imagine other purposes for such mandible gestures, Chloe chuckled softly and elaborated.

“Uh, yea. So. Bullets n' bottles o' booze. Heh, that's my new band name, by the way...” Crickets. It was early. “A-annyway, so, like...” Chloe slid the whiskey bottle toward her a bit. She scrounged her bullet necklace up from under the sweater she was still wearing from the night prior. She rattled the necklace a little. “Bullets.” She drizzled an extra shot of whiskey into her mug. “Bottles of booze.”

Max bitterly grumbled out, “Can't say I've seen either do you much good...” She added even more softly, “Especially in combination...”

“Yea, well, you haven't exactly been *around* lately to...-”

Chloe bit her tongue, and Max avoided the indignant flicker in Chloe's eyes.

*Arghh, fuck, Chloe. Let it fucking go, already.*

*Well, but, no, like, Max hasn't been here for so long...So much shit has happened in just one year, much less...five.*

“I-I ain't mad,” Chloe sputtered out, eager to save face. Save all the fucking face as soon as possible shit shit damnit. "I'rn just saying, Max, like...same way you've got all this...Rewind shit, alternate realities? Stuff I wasn't really *there* for? I got my own shit *you* haven't been there for.”

*Shit you don't wanna know about, Max. Do not fucking ask, do not...*

Max stuffed a mouthful of eggs in her gob and chewed at them. She shrugged up her shoulders and nodded in a conceding sort of way.

Jesus fuck, when would this stop being an issue between them? Was the trick to, like, confront it and hash bullshit out, or, like, just leave it all behind? Chloe thought they had taken the 'leave the past in the past' route. And yet here Chloe was, bringing it up. Goddamnit.

“Anyway,” Chloe blurted out after their moment of frustratingly tense silence. She let the bullets on her necklace fall, colliding with her sternum gently, comfortably. She took another gulp – a big one – of her lukewarm Irish coffee, letting it collide with her throat gently, comfortably. Chloe decided she'd stop trying to be all linguisticsical with it and get it out. “You shoot shit to protect yourself. To survive. Sometimes, the shit ya gotta shoot dead is *inside* yer fuckin’ self.” Chloe rattled her knuckle against her ribs, jangling her bullets around. She could feel her gestures getting the slightest bit sloppy from the coffee's influence.
Chloe burped. Well, it'd been a squeak of a burp. OK, maybe it had been a hiccup. Or both at once – double Lazy Points Bonus. Whatever.

Max snorted a laugh.

“Point is, Max, guns don't kill people. People kill people. Booze don't fuckin' hurt anybody, it's how ya use it.”

Chloe was desperately hoping that somehow telepathy was a superpower Max had, and just wasn't talking about, and she'd read Chloe's mind and got that the whole dating/smoochy/sexy times shit was, like, totally the same deal: didn't hurt anybody if you used it for good. Or, at least, for not bad.

*Oh.*

“Luhhhh-ike your superpower,” Chloe slowly pointed out. “Great powers, great responsibility, blahblah...” Chloe was kind of guzzling down her coffee at this point. Yep, finished it off. “Sooo, we gonna talk this talk you were wantin' or...-?”

Chloe slammed the empty coffee mug onto the cork coaster – it felt like a little game, of sorts, with her reflexes having lost some of their edge.

“Umm...” Max was watching Chloe now. “Y-yea, I just...I'm actually hungry, so...I was thinking we'd, ya know, eat first...”

“Welp.” Chloe grabbed the opened whiskey bottle. She drizzled some into her glass of orange juice. “Just gave ya some food fer thought, so eat up, sistah.”

“Fff, yea,” Max agreed softly, shaking her head slowly.

Chloe noticed that Max seemed to be waiting on something. Chloe set the bottle back on the coffee table, but before releasing her grip from it, she glanced to Max. With a raised brow and a tilt of the bottle, she silently asked the question again: ‘Want some?’

Max took in a deep breath through her nose. Max's eyes flicked from the bottle to Chloe – who was waiting with a smile of mischief – and then back to the bottle. Biting her lip in a hesitant, guilty smile, Max took the bottle.

“I guess I *could* probably, um...use a...-” Max tried rationalizing it, pouring some into her coffee.

Excited, Chloe slapped Max on the back brusquely. Max spilled a few droplets onto the coffee table.

“Yea-hea. 'Atta girl, Mad Max.”

If Max was gonna jump into Chloe's life, saving people, doing good, all that jazz...leaving that 'positive impression' Joyce wanted on Chloe...well, fuck it. Chloe would just have to follow suit the other way around. Shooting the shit in the junkyard, breaking into the school, boozing up...At this rate, the two of them would meet each other halfway and be, like, normal people, or something, heh.

Chloe gawked with giddy glee as she watched Max slurp up the Irish coffee. Max sputtered a cough, chuckling to herself, took a sharp breath of relief, and went for more.

*Way to be, Maxie. Way to fucking be.*

Ten minutes down the line, and breakfast was gone. Bellies were full of inconsistently cooked foodstuffs and a nice, uneven mix of liquids. Forks clattered against plates. Max screwed the top of
the whiskey bottle and set it to her left, on the floor, to stop them from indulging in more.

With her Conscious out on its smoke break, Chloe reached out her left arm to Max. When Max didn’t get ‘caught’ in her grasp, Chloe wobbled her abdomen over, laying herself down in Max's lap. A lot of finickiness and adjusting and posturing went down, until the two of them were unevenly spooning on the couch. Chloe was in the inner spoon, which she wasn’t used to. Max's fingers had found their way into Chloe's scalp and were smoothing out her hair, separating the straw-ish strands in slow strokes. The tickling sensation against her skull always got to Chloe. Like rubbing a dog's belly, or whatever.

Chloe wriggled her chilly bare feet together, trying to warm them by wedging them between the cushions of the couch.

Mm, cozy. Pajamas, a sweater, a full belly, the warmth of a cute girl against her back, a soft hand to her head…

Chloe could see the appeal of being a dog. She couldn’t help but think of…fuckin’ Pompidoo. Fuckin’ Frank…

Aghhh…


“What’s…goin’ up?” Max mumbled curiously. “…On.” She corrected herself. “Whus' goin' on?”

Chloe let out a low-pitched “Hee,” amused by their state of light intoxication.

Max snorted some approximation to a laugh. She sighed out in amusement.

“What?” Chloe grunted curiously, warmly.

“Have'n...heard that laugh'na...long time,” Max reminisced, her syllables slurring.

So cute. Just two, maybe three shots and Max was a little drunk. Chloe was only buzzed, having a higher tolerance. She’d tried drinking more to compensate. But it was always easier to let yourself feel more drunk than you were when your company was also getting loopy.

Max was continuously running her right hand over Chloe's head. Chloe very much did not want this to stop. However, Chloe did very much want to talk with Max while the girl was...erh, well, while her inhibitions weren't so high. As far as Chloe was concerned, Max was limiting herself, holding herself back from fucking, just, enjoying this.

“Soooooo...-” Chloe began. She reached up her right arm, lightly scratching at Max's arm, savoring the bits of fuzzy, barely noticeable hair. “What's up is, uhhh...you wanted to talk?”

“Oh...” Max's scratching hand paused.

No no no no don't stop I am a pathetic dog that requires attention keep going keep Max's fingers went back to work.

Yaaaassssss...

“Chloe, I...mm...jus'...whuht you, errr...-” Max sighed, fluttering her lips.

Chloe exercised patience, smirking at Max's seeming inability to formulate a sentence.

“Nnnot cool,” Max mumbled tiredly. “Jus', when you, lyke...made my parents think...-”
“Figgured we'd, uhh...get dat shit outta da way,” Chloe murmured back, shrugging up one shoulder sleepily. “If yer folks thought we were, like...already a thing...gives us more freedom, n’...”

Max sighed again.

Each exhausted sigh from Max’s lips was another needle pricked into Chloe's stomach. And they were happening way too fucking frequently now...

“Kluhh...” Max coughed, seemed to choke a little on her own saliva while trying to say 'Chloe.' Pff, adorable. “Chloe,” Max grunted out.

“Careful, Champ,” Chloe teased. Max lightly whapped her wrist against Chloe's forehead.

“Izz just...if this... uss thing? If uss iz gonna be a thing, Chlo...” Max cleared her throat a little. Her fingers tightened together, and she wiped beads of sweat of Chloe's clammy forehead. “Wee godda communicate, n’...”

Chloe could tell from the momentum of Max's abdomen that the girl was making some kind of hand gesture in the air, outside of Chloe's sight.

“Yea, yea...Gotcha,” Chloe eased gently, soaking in the frail palm still pressed against her face.

“Cuz, 'cuz, like...yuh...you went n’ did that , Chloe, n’ I hadda...play along, n’...I-I’m not comfordill-... comm... com-f-turr-bull... -”

Some giggles passed between them.

“Good job,” Chloe whispered teasingly.

“Shut up,” Max chuckled quietly.

“Welp.” Chloe readjusted herself, intentionally pressing their abdomens together a bit more. “Sorry fer wanting to show off my new girlfriend ...Dunno if you know her? Name's Max, she's, uhh...pretty much my hero...Been told I can’t shut up about her these days...”

Bait = set.

Max puffed out air through her lips, worming her hand back around Chloe's waist. Chloe clasped Max's hand and lifted it toward her face, planting a slightly sloppy kiss on Max's wrist. Seemed she was a little more tipsy than she thought. Awesome.

“Ohhh, no, it'z a trap,” Max groaned playfully, softly. “A hella gay trap...”

“It workin’?” Chloe taunted, pushing Max's palm against her cheek.

“Mmmph ,” Max huffed out air critically. Well, she wasn't wrong, this was indeed a trap. “ May bee,” Max grunted through Chloe's hair, kissing the back of Chloe's head.

Hook = caught.

Chloe paused. She had to be careful. Not just for her sake, or her desires, but for Max's.

Max wanted this. If it hadn't have been obvious before, it was now. Same way Max had wanted a stiff drink.

So Chloe asked the question, quietly, innocently (enough?).

“Uh...So, what's holdin' us back, then, mm?”
The hairs on Chloe's head were tickled by a longing breath.

“Ah...Ah don'-... Mm. Fffff...”
*Give the line some slack...*

“Talkin' troublez?” Chloe smirked. The booze seemed to be settling into Max's brain pleasantly. She approved.

“...Ffff fuck you,” Max wheezed in a weak, embarrassed laugh. “’M chokin' on yerr... hair. Gulgh. You stink, Chloe...”

*Talk more mumble to me, Max, you precious little shit...*

“Yeeaaa yea,” Chloe scoffed dreamily. “We toez...need showers. N' shit.”

Max had not moved, though. They remained attached to one another, Max talking into Chloe's skull. Despite the apparent stench. Or – ooh, la la – *because* of it? Eh?

Max coughed again.

OK, yea, so probably not *because* of it. Wishful thinking.

Oh, speaking of which...

*Reel-reel-reel-reel-reel...!*

“I am so not...” Chloe yawned. “...lettin' you change the topic. Bee-tee-dubb.”

“Yooooo...weakened my rezolve,” Max eked out with a childish kind of pout. “With... *whiskee*. Yoooo sneaky...monkey.”

*Line and sinker.*

Chloe struggled to rotate herself around to face Max. They were glued together on the couch, which was a bit too narrow for both of them. Chloe's elbow bumped the corner coffee table – *OW* – her left foot slipped off the cough, slamming the floor – *shit* – and in her squirming around, her skull rattled with Max's – *fuck*. They laughed stupidly, and Chloe belched, the contents of her stomach jostled. Max's face contorted with disgust, her nose wrinkled as she choked a bit as Chloe snickered.

Alcohol, it seemed, for all its wonders, also had its downsides in the ways of romancing.

“Sssssick, Chloe, *ewww*...” Max was waving a flopping hand at the air. In between coughs, she burped, too.

Chloe's chuckling leveled up, elicited a nice little toot from her ass, right into the air in front of the couch.

Max, covering her face at this point, whimpered out through a snorting laugh, “Chloohhhhh-hoh...eee...”

Nailed it.

Chloe, her breath deteriorating from just how hysterical this all was to her, was basically just wheezing dry laughs, gasping for air.
“Yerrrr so immachurr,” Max gasped out, rubbing at her eyes, which were getting watery from laughter.

Chloe was pretty far gone by now. She ended up falling off the couch, slamming her arm on the goddammn table again, landing on her ass. Just the very idea, the inkling inside her intestines that another fart was coming, it just snatched her reflexes up and the silent, breathless laughing went on.

This was a special kind of torture reserved for the most childish of beings, and Chloe was loving it.

Sitting on her rump, uncomfortably pinched between the couch and the coffee table, Chloe needed a minute to catch her breath, clear the tears of laughter from her eyes, recuperate her goddammn idiot self.

Max, meanwhile, just huffed with disbelief and rolled her eyes and squirmed onto her back, propping her knees up as she waited for Chloe’s fit to subside.

It took a minute or so, which felt so much longer, but Chloe eventually caught her breath, calmed down, regained her composure. Ya know, what little composure she had fucking left at that point, heh.

Leaning against the side of the couch with her legs uncomfortably crossed, wedged between pieces of furniture, Chloe let her head lull a little. The pleasant warmth of dizziness from alcohol had her feeling light, fragile, and chill. Well, chill in a very warm way. If that made sense.

Max's fingers found their way back on Chloe's head. Like a sleepy dog, Chloe absorbed the affection for a few moments. Then she twisted herself around on her knees to find Max sprawled on her side on the couch. Max's scratching hand slipped off Chloe's head from the movement. Max's hand slid down Chloe's collarbone, lingered for a second or so, then retreated. The girl's freckles were cast against a pink hue of relaxation, but Chloe's gaze became fixated on Max's lips, barely open.

Despite the discomfort of her position, Chloe leaned in for a kiss on said lips. It was brief. But when Chloe went to pull her head away, Max's hand tugged at the ugly sweater Chloe was in, nudging her back down.

Two, three...Chloe lost count of the little kisses before Max let her breathe. Her own face growing hotter by the moment, Chloe had to stop her hands from going places that were lower than Max's neck. The alcohol made this even more difficult, but Chloe wasn't as far gone as Max was.

After their faces disconnected, Max drearily shoved her body upright. Chloe puffed a laugh through her nose when Max's head just kind of flopped against the back of the couch, like she could just take a nap sitting upright. Chloe managed to push her rump up onto the couch in kind, and the two sat, sides inelegantly mashed against one another. Max's arm meandered a little until their hands met, then wriggled her own fingers inbetween Chloe's.

Chloe realized she was now sitting where Max had been. She glanced to her left, down to the carpet. Yep, just as she thought: the whiskey bottle. Now within her reach. Chloe eagerly leaned over, her body kind of flopping around as she grasped the bottle. Ugh. Movement. Hard.

“Augh,” Max puffed out throatily. “Chloeeee...” Yet Max did nothing to stop her.


Try again.

Chloe untwisted the bot—there we go.
The big plastic cap fell, bouncing off Chloe's foot before landing unceremoniously in the carpet.

Max nudged at Chloe, like a toddler pleading with its parent.

“Chloe, no...no, Chlo...ee...”

“Heh.” Chloe smirked and took a sip, right from the bottle.

Cute, Max. But even you can't stop me on this one.

Turned out, a half full bottle of this size was, uh, kinda heavy. Chloe dribbled a bit down her chin by accident. Coughing from the fire liquid, she had to prevent herself from laughing. Burned good, anyway.

Having clearly lost some 'Cool Factor' with this move, Chloe wiped her chin with her sweater sleeve, awkwardly tilting the bottle in Max's direction.

Max just shook her head, her brows contorted with an amusing combination of disgust and humor.

“Yer loss, Maxie,” Chloe scoffed facetiously, setting the bottle with care back onto the table.

After spending about twenty seconds struggling to pick up the cap from the floor and twist it back on, Chloe gave up when she accidentally dropped it. Max ended up somehow managing to get the fuckin' thing screwed on, and took it upon herself to place it back in the kitchen.

Chloe felt kind of guilty with Max's blubbery disapproval. Then she felt annoyed. They deserved to fucking mellow out for a bit. When Max returned, dragging her feet with an incredibly relaxed expression about her. Chloe couldn't help but smile. Max looked fucking chill. No regrets.

Max stopped at the couch, her whole abdomen swaying a little off balance. Chloe kept staring. She could hear her lips curling upward.

“...Whut?” Max said slyly, her brows lowering above a one-sided smirk.

Chloe propped out her lower lip.

“U mad brah?” she said in a pouty whimper, adding a sparkle to her puppy eyes. Probably less of a 'sparkle' and more like a 'donut sprinkle.'

“Mad?” Max wondered, her face getting solemn. Overly solemn. Intoxicatedly solemn.

Chloe had kind of been joking, but if Max was gonna be serious...she'd use that to their advantage.

“My lil' bender goin' on,” Chloe said dismissively, waggling her wrist in front of her. “You pissed I'mma bad influence? Eh? See it in yer face, Max...”

Max puffed out air through sputtering lips, settling herself back down on the couch.

“Noooooo,” Max said breathily, her eyes closed as she pressed her left shoulder into Chloe's right.

“Actually, I am...kinda happy, this is...uhhhh...” Her eyelids blinked slightly out of sync. “Sorta fun, heh. Know that...nothin' bad gonna happen, it is...just us...” She shrugged up her left shoulder, rubbing arms with Chloe. “Feels good...Relaxing...”

Wiping her cheek with two fingers – I see you, Max, I see your cute little fuckin' tick – Max chewed at her lip a little, gazing down at her own knees. Chloe planted her hand on Max's lower thigh and squeezed it a bit.
“I hear *dat*, Maximus...”

Max's hand patted at Chloe's wrist. The two sat for a few moments of quiet. The house's ventilation creaked and grumbled from the wall behind them as the heater kicked in. A car passed by down the road in front of the house. A dog barked at said car from the distance.

When Chloe let her gaze settle from the half-curtained front window back to Max, Chloe noticed that the girl's eyes had sagged closed. Max's abdomen was slowly expanding and contracting in a slow rhythm, like she was sleeping while sitting up right. Max's lips were hanging open a centimeter. Reddened lines accented her eyes, puffy bags still hung beneath. Her cheeks were flushed, her brows arced in a weird way. Some acne was forming on her forehead beneath a film of skin grease. The girl's hair was a train wreck...

And goddamn, she was beautiful.

Chloe pushed her own frazzled mass of blue straw strands from her face. She took a slow breath in through her nostrils. As she exhaled, Chloe leaned herself into Max, letting her head fall on Max's shoulder – which required fidgeting her position on the couch a bit.

Chloe could feel Max's breath intake suddenly at the contact, followed by a nondescript hum. Chloe let her grip on Max's leg relax, but kept her hand there, the way Max was keeping her hand overtop Chloe's.

“...hey,” Max eked out, rubbing grit from her eyelashes.

“Yo,” Chloe whispered back, her eyes wide open, staring down at their layered palms.

“Now what?” Max murmured groggily.

“Well...You didn' answer mah *question*, Buddo.”

“...Huh?”

“Whuh's holdin' us back, Maxine?”

Chloe slid her thumb left and right along Max's leg. It was a comforting feeling, that sensation of denim texture against a squishy meaty cuddly body person thing.

They were both avoiding each other's gazes. Chloe imagined that Max, too, was staring at their two hands, overlaid atop Max's lower thigh.

“Chloe,” Max wisped out, her voice like a breeze on a rainy day. “Yuh-...You still-...Raychull...”

Goddamnit.

“Dude,” Chloe sighed, continuing to comfort Max's leg. If Chloe was going to get some uncensored opinions from Max, now was probably the time.

“I-I dun'...wanna be a *rebound*, Chloe, I...-”

“Wuh-? Whoa, nuh-uh, Max,” Chloe said quietly, wobbling Max a bit by the knee. “That ain't fair.”

“Yoooo...*just found out...about* her, like...-” Max shrugged up her right shoulder. “A few *dayz* ago...”

“Sh-sure, but...-’” Damn, Max, tryin'a get you off the guilt train, don't drag me aboard.

“You, uhm...-” Max gripped Chloe's hand from above and jostled it a bit. “Yoooo *really* liked her, Chloe, you *did*.”
“I did...And now she's gone. If Rachel was alive, you think I'd like you any less, Max?”

“...Whhh...?”

“Cuz I don't think I would. I don't-...Fuck, I don't know what I'd do, but that is...not how shit is. Rachel's gone. You're not.”

“...oh good, I...am leftovers...” The bitterness in Max's mumbling was convincing enough to indicate that it wasn't sarcasm or her just playing.

“What? That is bullshit, Max. That is...” Chloe could feel her warm face squinting with irritation. It was taking effort to make sure her words were formed properly. She rotated her hand, trying to lock fingers with Max. It didn't quite go elegantly, but palms were attached to each other. “That's bullshit,” Chloe grumbled as solemnly as she could. “You are not fucking leftovers, Maxine Caulfield, 'n I better not ever hear you say fuckery like that again, ever...”

“I tried, Chloe,” Max puffed, her mind drifting. Chloe was worried her point had been missed in the fuzz of whiskey. “Tried ta save her for you...-”

“You did, Max. You tried your best, but...-”

“Did I do that...? Thing? I dun'...think I did...”

“Max, you did try. Hard. I saw it. But...-”

'Dude, Rachel. Seriously. Whatever is up, you gimme a holler, gurl. I'll back you up.'

'Heh. Thanks, Chloe, but I have things handled.'

“...sometimes your best ain't good enough...”

“Yea...”

Max's nose sniffed, and she brushed her sleeve over her face, messing up her bangs even further. There was a breath from Max that was weird, and Chloe couldn't tell for sure, but it might've been, like, holding back a sob or some shit. Fuck, they were entering 'Sad Drunk' territory.

“Chloe, whhh...why do you...wanna rush...-?” Max murmured drearily, sliding her palm against Chloe's, as if trying to scrub their hands clean.

Chloe stopped Max, gripping her hand in her own, and clenching the girl's left arm with her other hand.

Might as well try to explain, right?

Chloe finally pulled her head up off of Max's shoulder – comfy as it was – and cautiously tilted Max's face by the chin, ensuring their eyes locked. Blinking was happening a little too frequently, eyes were glazed over, heads were hovering a bit over their necks, but they managed to stay eye-locked.
“Max. Everyone I ever loved’s abandoned me.”

Chloe found it adorable the way Max's face melted with sorrow, regret, but in a childishly over-emoted way.

“Chloe...I didn't...”

“Even if,” Chloe cut Max off. She rubbed her index and thumb against Max's chin before letting it go. “Even if they didn't mean to. Even you, Max. We all...have reasons for that shit, people make mistakes, everyone leaves eventually, we all die alone, blabla, turn it into a Mr. Rogers song, or some shit, I just...-”

Chloe could feel her throat catching.

Dad walked out that door and died on her.
Max up and left.
Joyce just...gave up on her.
The cliques, the one-night-stands, the fake-friends...
And Rachel. Didn't stay with her. Died on her, too.

Chloe sniffed, containing whatever allusion to tears had formed.

“I...came back,” Max defended herself. Slowly, thoughtfully, but earnestly. “Kuh...Chloe, I came back, I...”

“You did, Max,” Chloe said with a swell of relief, letting her hand graze Max's neck with gratitude. Like admiring a work of art that saved your spiritual self, got you out of your artist block. “N’...Here we are, amirite?” Chloe chuckled weakly, giving Max's shoulder a brisk rub with one hand as she dried her eyeballs with the other.

“Chloe, no, I didnin’...I did not want to hurt you, it...-” Max choked up a bit. “Should never done that to you, n’ I...Fffuck, I am so sorry, Chloe. Chloe...Chlo...” Max flopped herself forward into what equated to a hug.

Chloe chuckled softly, a bit taken aback by the gentle intensity of Max’s drunken remorse. She could feel Max's breathing get a bit unsteady against her shoulder. Chloe did her best to support Max, encasing the sniveling girl in her arms.

“Suh-sorry, Chlo...Ugh.” A gross-sounding sniff. “If...I never...did thah to you...muh-maybe...nunuh this...-”
Chloe wasn't sure what to say at first. Her head was floaty, a piece of driftwood in a still pond of whiskey.

“It's chill, it's OK,” Chloe mumbled sheepishly, letting her right hand reach Max's head. She tried to reciprocate the dog-petting deal. Was a little hard to get subtle movements goin' on in her fingers, what with the booze n' shit, but—...Ech. Max's hair was kinda as nasty as it looked, heh. They both could do with a wash.

“It is...not chill, Chloe! Chloe...no. It's soooo not chill...”

Chloe felt a hiccup ride from Max's chest, into her own. She had to say, she was feeling pretty OK with how Max seemed to be, like...just kinda eager to say 'Chloe' so frequently.

Max managed to gain enough composure to separate their hug. Her eyes were quivering and earnest, her lips trembling.


“Heh, O-OK Max,” Chloe replied, trying to hold back another chuckle. Goddamn, this was just too fucking cute.

“It is...nnnnot funny, I am so not laughing.” Max stuck out her pinky finger, which kind of wobbled in the air. “We...We're gonna be together ferrever. Pinky fuggin' swear.”

Max had brought up that word again: 'Forever.' The word Chloe had been...kind of abusing that week. In all of her dope-as-shit wishes and hopes and dreams...But here, now? After the storm had passed – literal and metaphorical – saying it like that?

Forever?
The was kinda bullshit.

And then it hit Chloe.
This was her point. What she'd been trying to explain.

Staring at her intoxicated partner, Chloe made a noise through her nose. A sigh? A grunt? She wasn't
“Ya know, Max,” Chloe started, her voice a bit shaky. “Been thinking about that word. 'Ever. 'Forever.' We keep saying that.” Chloe took Max's pinky-extended hand within her own and closed her fingers around Max's. She cupped Max's frail fist within both of her own palms. For a thoughtful second. “'Forever', Max? Mean...that's...a long-ass...fuckin' time...”

Chloe could see Max's eyes flicker with fret. Her lips wither with confusion.

“Buhhht...-” Max began.

Chloe released Max's hand, only to lift it to her face and drop a slimy, intoxicated kiss onto it. She set Max's hand down, but wriggled her fingers inbetween Max's.

Chloe started letting shit spill out.

“Am I supposed to think that...when...-” Chloe burped a little. “...when I die, I'm gonna become a happy ghost, uppin heaven? And...an' Rachel's gonna be there, waitin' for me? Smile onner face, and you, me, 'n her, we'll just have a merry fuckin' orgy up in heaven? Huh?” She stared at Max's quivering face. No reply. “Cuz, uh, sorry, Maxie, buuuut, ah don't believe that bullshit.”

Chloe breathed out raggedly, bobbing her head.

Max whimpered out with all due guilt, “But...Rachel...”

“What about Rachel?” Chloe snapped in a fierce whisper, not thinking – just saying. “Rachel is fucking gone, and even you can't change that. And what if you did? Brought her back. Wouldn't change the fact that...-” Chloe trailed off, shaking her head. She was getting too worked up.

*Don't take it out on Max, don't take it out on Max, she doesn't need your shit right now, don't take it out on Max this time...*

“Ya know, Max,” Chloe murmured somberly and gently. “Shitty thing 'bout love? Dun'it always come back to ya. So when it does?” She tightened her grip on Max's hand. She tightened it so hard it hurt for a second. “Ya hold the fuck on.”

“Chloe...” Max's lips were pouting in a weird – almost hilarious – way that Chloe couldn't remember seeing before.

Chloe got it. She got that Max was too whiskey-addled, guilt-ridden, traumatized, mind-fucked to
know what to say.

Great thing about this shit was that Max didn't have to say anything.

“I get, Maximo. You gotta taste of the Price, the Price of Hella Good-Times, n' yer willin' to pay it, amirite? Heh.” Chloe wasn't really sure what she saying. She'd sort burnt out her insight on the last bit. Needed a turn to recover, re-charge from that Hyper Beam.

“Love you, Chloe,” Max spit out through a shaky chuckle. She sniffled again and rubbed her nose on Chloe's shoulder. At this rate, every piece of clothing Chloe put on would get a 'Max's Snot Stain.'

“Love you, too, Maxine,” Chloe quietly replied with a smirk. “Which...is why weeeeee...should stop dickin' around and get to the good part of dating. Mean, dunno 'bout you, buuut, uh...I am so totally over this 'courting ritual' bullshit...”

“Chloe-hee-heh,” Max snickered into Chloe's sweater.

“No, but, real talk, Max, c'mon.” Chloe nudged her shoulder around, easing Max up so they could gaze longingly into each other's...Gawk awkwardly at each other's half-awake messes of faces. “You wanna make it official, Max?” Chloe nodded eagerly, her brows raised. She flashed out her hands. “Bam. Callin' it. Official-ated. 'The Talk' has been...talked. Uhhh, can we get to the walk yet?”

“Chloe, I...urm...” Max, ya don't have to work my name into every sentence, girlfriend. “It's...not that...easy? Weee...can't jusst...” “Hells yea, it is, Max.” Shit, am I working Max's name into all my sentences? “It really is. Here-here-here.” Chloe fluttered her hands around. “Question for ya, Buddo. Question.” Chloe made sure Max was looking right at her. She presented her hand out to Max. “Are you. Into me?”

Max blinked drowsily, wiping her fingers over her cheekbone. She then nodded.

“Good answer,” Chloe whispered facetiously. She pressed her fingertips against her chest. “Kay. Now. Am I. Into you?”

Max seemed to think it was some trick question for a second or so before she caught on and she nodded again, slowly this time.

“Two fer two, Maxie, killin' it,” Chloe chuckled. “It is that fuckin' simple. People just make it so goddamn complicated. And we...are better n' that, rite?” She nodded, squinting her eyes expectantly.

“...yyyyesss?” Max slowly answered, warily, as if she were stumbling into a trap.

She was, of course. 'A hella gay trap.'
Chloe brusquely scratched an itch behind her ear, then another at the front of her hairline.

Chloe clutched Max's hands again. Extra-girly-like. Warm-fuzzies all floatin' in the air around 'em. Chloe felt like her eyes could catch fire with eager desire, like a laser, burn a hole through the iceblocks of guilt and self-despair Max was hiding in.

“Me from two weeks ago?” Chloe said. “Totally woulda called bullshit on any o' this crap goin' down...”

Max smiled a little – fucking precious little smile.

Max mumbled slyly, “'N here we are...Chloe...wasted on...my couch, bein'...-” She opened her mouth, and a silent burp came out. Chloe could smell it, even if she couldn't hear it. She didn't even care right then. “Bein' hellll- uh gay...”

Chloe's smile finally cracked open wide at Max's silliness. This caused Max's to open up proper, as well. Chloe could tell: Max had thought herself so clever. It was fuckin' adorbz. Chloe ruffled Max's hair playfully, and Max swiped the lot of her bangs off to one side, the both of them giggling like children all the while.

“Know whatta past week has taught me?” Chloe posed.

Max simply gazed at her. Through the puffed eyes, the bloodshot retinas, the dreary husk of a face, Chloe still saw it: that roadmap to an undiscovered country, plotted out in the freckles on Maxine's narrow cheeks, each speck on her skin a new destination to pass through. And Chloe wanted to visit each and every fucking stop along the way.

Despite that truth that Chloe could see, Max's hollow expression conveyed a desperation for an answer. Some explanation, some fucking purpose to everything they'd been through recently.

Way Chloe figured? There wasn't one.

“Life is strange, Maxine. So fucking strange. Never got any idea when it's gonna change. How it's gonna change. No idea...fuckin'... who's gonna be there, for how long, what's gonna happen, where yer gon' go. Life's also shit. So much fucking shit. N' this?” Chloe squeezed Max's hand desperately. “This is not those...things! This is hella bomb, 'kay? So, like...Le's be a team, like we used ta, n' get through the strange and the shit together, eyy?”
Over the course of her rant, Chloe had watched Max's face gradually swell with a crazy-ass mix of emotions. Chloe had no idea what her expression had looked like – probably some weird mix, too – but she could feel the edges of her eyeballs gettin' wet. Along with other things...

Before Chloe could get a read on Max's reaction, Max closed her eyes, her lips wide ajar, leaning at Chloe. Poor kid was aiming for Chloe's collar. Despite her intoxication, Chloe managed to finagle her head around and caught Max's lips in hers.

And boom goes the dynamite.

Chloe's chest was swollen with excitement. Her knees were weak with anticipation. Her hands were jittery with anxiety. Her stomach queasy with uncertainty. Her thighs tingly with arousal. This was more like what fucking living felt like, right? No goddamn clue what the future had waiting, but pumped the fuck up to find out.

Words seemed to have lost their meaning at that point. A few minutes passed by without any words being spoken, and after allll that exhausting talking? Chloe was pretty damned OK with that.

Chloe still couldn't quite get Max to, uh, kick things up to the notch she gunning for, but...one step at a time, and shit. Max seemed worth that wait.

In a moment of down time where they were both catching their breaths – warm vapors pressing against each other's faces – Max coughed a bit. Chloe just grinned. She knew what was coming.

“Uhhh, Chloe, eyee luv you, buuut...-”
“I'm gross.”
“Yer so gross. I-im so grossssss, augh...”
“Izz your shower big enough fer two?”
“Chloe, no...”
“Heh. Eventually?”
“Eh...eventchully...”
“Heh.”

Chloe managed to pry herself from being attached to Max's form.

“Better show me where shit is, then,” Chloe advised. “I'll go first.”

As Chloe watched Max hobble onto her feet, a thought hit Chloe's head.

“Bee-tee-dub, Max...-”
“Yea?”
Chloe stood awkwardly, flicking her hands toward the couch they'd just occupied.

“Was, that, like, 'Official' enough for ya? Are we, like, a thing now? We good?”

Max snorted a laugh, sighing pleasantly as she led Chloe upstairs.

“Sure,” Max warmly decided.

Thank fuck for that, then. Jeez. They could start movin' on to the good stuff.

–

By the evening, Max's Mom had returned home. The two girls had wasted their afternoon snuggling, and cuddling, and kissing inbetween episodes of randomly selected cable channels. Psh. Max's parents had cable. Who the fuck had cable in this day and age? They didn't even have Netflix. Thank god Max had brought her laptop. They could watch shit on Max's account that way. Which was currently what they were figuring out.

The whole 'cuddling just for the hell of it' bit was still a bit odd for Chloe at first. Cuddling was a thing ya did when you were gearing up for sexy times. Or unwinding from sexy times. Or maybe inbetween sexy times. But, man, just...doing it just because? Felt kind of weird at first. A few hours later, though, and Chloe had quickly adjusted. Max was obviously a hella great teacher.

When Vanessa (Mrs. Caulfield for formal shit) had come home from work, she'd made Chloe put together a list of groceries and crap to be taken care of later by Ryan (Mr. Caulfield; Chloe hated Mr./Mrs./Ms. crap, they were people, they had names)

After that, the two of them actually bothered cleaning up their mess from breakfast. And lunch. Because picking up dishes seemed really hard when you were buzzed, and even more hard when you had free making-out-space to enjoy for a while.

With things cleared away, Max had insisted that they give the living room to Vanessa for a while. Let the woman watch her afternoon talk shows and whatever. Lady looked bushed, so Chloe was totally cool giving her some space. Heh. Let her husband come home, they could keep each other distracted while Chloe kept Max distracted...happy household.

So. There they were. Back in Max's bedroom. Cleaner, sober, and in higher spirits than they had been in for a few days.

Max seemed to have a bit of a spring to her step that Chloe recollected from the morning they'd both been putting the pieces together about the Prescott bunker. Only instead of solving...a...mystery about...a fucking psycho asshole...Max was solving the mystery of what they would Netflix-and-Chill with.

'No, Chloe. Netflix-and-Cool,' Max had corrected when Chloe had presented the idea. Apparently, this was, like, the same thing, only a few degrees...colder. Eh. One step at a time.

Chloe was perusing the items strewn about Max's bedroom. Seemed a little sparser than she remembered it, but...that was prolly 'cuz Max had hauled her shit to school. Which, uh, meant it was
Vanessa had been cool and picked up some socks for Chloe on her way back from work, so at least Chloe’s feet were happier now. She’d just re-worn the same sweatpants, but had swapped the fuzzy, ugly as shit sweater for one of Max’s T-shirts—it had some kind of dorky X-Files reference. Max, meanwhile, was in very fuzzy red pajama pants (with an army of little monkeys patrolling around in a crazy pattern) and a cozy long-sleeved shirt with chibi art crossing over the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and Squirtles.

As Chloe sifted through the clothing hanging in Max’s closet, Max was lazily sprawled on her stomach, browsing for a movie to watch.

“Have I shown you Unbreakable?” Max wondered.

“Unbreakable? The fuck is that...?” Chloe was inspected a dress. Max owned dresses. Like, only a couple, maybe three, but...That was...news.

“Super-powered Bruce Willis?” Max clarified.

“Max.” Chloe gave her a deadpan look, letting the dress in her hands slide back into the closet. “Bruce Willis is super-powered in every movie he's in.”

“Heh. OK, yea, but...this one's by M. Knight Shyamalan.”

“Oh.” Chloe's stomach churned and her brows lowered. She burst out in an hasty grumble, “That fucker can die in a fire.”

“Whoa. That's...really harsh,” Max noted, a bit curious. “I love Unbreakable...”

“What? Why?” Chloe barely remember the movie, but she did remember it was like every other one of that hack’s films: disappointing.

“A superhero movie that focused on the man, not the Superman.”

“Ugh, I shoulda known.” Chloe rolled her eyes facetiously, trying to see if there were more dresses she could mentally insert her new girlfriend into. “That movie was boring as hell, of course you’d like it.”

“Chloe. It's a good movie. Give it a chance.”

“Fine, whatever, but he butchered Avatar. That's like slaughtering a sacred cow, I'll never forgive that dumbass.”

Scrolling absent-mindedly on her computer, Max replied, “Huh? I thought that was James Cameron.”

Chloe’s eyes widened with indignation, her brows simultaneously furrowing. She dropped her clothing hunt. This had to be addressed. Immediately.

“...Max.” Chloe was shaking her head in slow, consistent motions as she spoke. With pity, she mused, “You sweet summer child...”

The lights in Max’s eyes switched on. The alarms went off. The error of her ways became apparent.

“Ohhhhh, no-no, th-the cartoon. You meant the movie based on—...I didn't see that movie, everyone said it was a shit-show.”
Watching Max get so flustered and defensive about it was enjoyable. Chloe would push it a bit.

“*Hoo,* nice try on the recovery, sistah.” Chloe plopped herself into the bed, squeezing up beside Max. “But the damage is done.”

“Damage?” Max puffed. “*C'mon...*”

Laying on the stomachs, side by side, Chloe rubbed her hand up and down Max’s back before giving it a solid smack.

Patronizing her, Chloe regrettably said, “You mistook *Avatar* for the 'one-with-the-blue-people.' I am *disappoint.* So much *fail.* All of your *dignity* are belong to *me.* Very miss. Wow.”

Their faces inches apart, Chloe delivered her best sassy, flat expression, clicking her tongue a little in humored dismissal. Max gave her a playful shove on the cheek, and they both snickered a bit.

“Jeez, take it easy, Attack of the Memes,” Max grumbled through her laughter, obviously endeared by Chloe's irritatingly unrelenting use of bad jokes.

Chloe rolled onto her side, pleased by how Max followed suit.

“I don't always quote memes, but when I do...” Chloe adjusted her posture to align with, of course, another fucking meme.

They interlocked limbs and kissed once, wrapping themselves around each other.

“Yo dawg,” Max whispered with a certain hint of competition. “I heard you like memes, so we put some memes in your memes, so you can meme while you-”

-Knock-knock-knock!-

The door to Max’s bedroom had been rattled. Max and Chloe realized how...potentially questionable to a parental's point of view their current...bodily...positioning...was.

By the time Chloe had even processed this, Max had already detached herself from Chloe's grasp and rolled over to face the doorway.

“Yea?” Max called out.

The door opened a crack. Mrs. Caulfield's top half poked in through the door, as if she were expecting...well, something *more* inappropriate than had been actually transpiring. When she noted the coast was clear, she fully opened the door.

“Are you two troublemakers hungry?” she asked.

“*Trouble* makers?” Chloe scoffed.

“The biggest,” said Max mischievously.

*Oh, Maxine. You think we're so sneaky now? Cute. Wait and see, gurl...*

“Well, I amfuckin' hungry,” Chloe said lightly, adding a laugh for good measure.

“Guess I am, too,” Max murmured with less certainty.

Mrs. Caulfield asked a followup: “*In the mood for anything in particular? Ryan's at the store, I could*
ask him to get whatever you want."

Max shook her head. Well, sort of. It was a barely a motion.

“I-I dunno,” Chloe spat out. “Uh, I would eat the hell outta some max n’ cheese right now. For real.”

“Uh...” Vanessa's expression withered into an amused, snicker.

Confused, Chloe glanced to Max, whose eyes were wide, cheeks red.

“Y-yea,” Max spit out staring at Chloe with embarrassment. “Some *mac n' cheese* would be *good, Mom.*”

Vanessa's laugh just increased a little.

And then Chloe realized her verbal slip up. Fuckin' eh...

Max, realizing her Mom was chill, started laughing sheepishly. Chloe just smirked in spite of herself, feeling her face light up like a Christmas tree full of red fucking light bulbs.

Her nose wrinkled, Chloe proposed to Vanessa, “Would now be a bad time to say we've been bein' *good*?”

“I don't even want to know,” Vanessa confessed, apparently just amused by the whole thing. “What happens here is *your* business,” she chuckled. Heading out of the room, she advised, “I'll have your dad see if they have any *Max n' cheese* at the store...”

Aaaand she was gone.

Godamnit, this felt like one of those, 'not-living-it-down' bits.

When Chloe turned back to Max, the girl's face was buried in some bunched up sheets.

“Uhhh, dude,” Chloe laughed weakly. “H-how is *your* mom so chill about this kinda shit? Why can't...?-?”

Chloe trailed off, suddenly realized she *so* did not wanna talk about that shit. Joyce and David always gave her *so much* crap whenever she brought someone over...

Max yanked her bashfully puffed face from her sheets. Intuiting Chloe's desire, she replied to the first question alone.

“My Mom's chill because my *Dad's* chill, I guess. How'd you think *I* turned out this way?”

“Mmmmyeah, good point,” Chloe conceded, glad to be rid of that awkward bit. “Anyway, we, uh, we watchin' this shit, or what? Huh?”

Chloe trailed off, suddenly realized she *so* did not wanna talk about that shit. Joyce and David always gave her *so much* crap whenever she brought someone over...

Max yanked her bashfully puffed face from her sheets. Intuiting Chloe's desire, she replied to the first question alone.

“*My Mom's chill because my Dad's chill,* I guess. How'd you think *I* turned out this way?”

“Mmmmyeah, good point,” Chloe conceded, glad to be rid of that awkward bit. “Anyway, we, uh, we watchin' this shit, or what? Huh?”

“I *remember* how bitchy you get when you're hungry,” Max mumbled teasingly. “And it *still* just...never ceases to surprise.”


Max started the film up. As they waited for that loading screen percentage sign to climb to 100, they resumed their honeymoon hug.

Chloe went to kiss Max, but, catching her off guard, Max jerked her head back at the last second.
After letting Chloe catch her sneaky, sneaky little shit of a smile, Max joked.

“Oh, Chloe...If only someone loved you.”

“If only,” Chloe replied with a cheshire grin.

Their lips met halfway.

—
Chapter Summary

[From: Stella]
I don't even know what to think. I'm scared, Max.
I came here to escape them. I can't go back there.
And this shit with Jefferson? I feel so stupid for spreading those rumors.
I should've done something about it. Told someone. Like you did.
I wish I was brave like you are, Max.

Life is Strange

All Wounds

Chapter 5 – Smoke Signals

It was a big day. Max's first full day of being in a relationship. Max's first full day of being with Chloe. A small weight had been lifted from her head, totally, but...there were still a lot of weights hanging. Kisses and hugs with a pretty girl could only fix so much. Some of the shit Max was avoiding required more effort. So, while eating breakfast that morning, Maxine had decided she would finally read through her mountain of messages. And maybe even work up the guts to reply to some of them.

A half hour into this process and it was getting repetitious. Most of the messages were, well, ya know. Generic sort of...distant messages. [omg hope ur ok], that sort of thing. Max did her best to reply to every single one, even if the response was short and simple. Even if she copy-pasted the same response for half of them.

But then there were the messages from people in Arcadia Bay. People like Principal Wells, thanking her for her assistance with the Jefferson shit. Reminding her that it might have been boxed up but it wasn't wrapped just yet. Max's folks still hadn't really asked her about it, but having spent the morning with them both home, she could tell it was eating at their concerns a little.

The list of known casualties had grown since Max had last checked. She forced herself at last to read through it. She couldn't commit every name to memory. But she could save the list. Make backups of it. She'd have to figure out something to do with it. Some way to...fucking...honor their memory? She didn't know. What the hell could she even do, anyway? But it made her feel a bit better in a way, to confront the list. The names.

Max had caught a few messages from students she knew who had survived. She intentionally saved those messages for last.

[From: Stella]
I don't even know what to think. I'm scared, Max.
I came here to escape them. I can't go back there.
And this shit with Jefferson? I feel so stupid for spreading those rumors.]
[I should've done something about it. Told someone. Like you did.]
[I wish I was brave like you are, Max.]
[I'm trying not to worry about everything. People here need help right now.]

*Oh, Stella. Jesus... You've got so much shit on your plate but you're not sitting around moping...*  
Like me.  
Dealing with that abuse, surviving that storm and still trying to help people?  
You're the brave one, Stella. I'm a fucking coward...

[To: Stella]  
[I am sooo sorry you're dealing with all that.]  
[I wish I had advice but I don't know what to say.]  
[I am totally here for you tho. I mean it. Srsly.]  

[Please. If there's anything I can do for you, if you need to talk]  
[if you need money, a place to stay, whatever you need]  
[pls pls pls let me know. I am serious.]  
[I don't know all I can do but I will do whatever I can I swear.]  

[PS how is your arm?]  
[. . . Sent!]

Feeling like a useless piece of shit, Max gulped down the last of her lukewarm coffee. It was kind of gross. So it felt appropriate. Max deserved gross. Chloe was the only good thing she would allow herself to have right then, and it was kind of more for Chloe's sake than her own. After all, no fucking point going through all of this bullshit to save someone you loved if you weren't going to make sure they were at least happy, right?

All the same, the time she'd been squeezing out of the past 24 hours with Chloe...it seemed like being with her, especially now that nothing was being held back...it was the only thing that was helping Max forget the horrors in her head.

[From: Stella]  
[That means so much to me, Max, thank you.]  
[I really need a friend right now.]  
[It feels like you're the only one I have left from Blackwell.]  
[How far away are you?]  

[My arm is ok. The doctor says as long as I can take it easy it'll be fine.]

_Holy shit, Stella, no, nono, you'll get through this... There's people who care about you. I did this to you, ohmygod, I fucking ruined your life, I...-

Max's whole body jolted when a firm grip clamped down on her right shoulder. She exhaled with relief when she realized it was just Chloe.

“Sorry,” Chloe mumbled, having instantly removed her hand at Max's twitching.
“It's fine,” Max sighed, closing her eyes. She dropped her phone disparagingly onto the dining room table in front of her. She reached up her hand into the air. She needed more Chloe cuddles. Right that second. Her face felt like it could pop from all of this grossness building up inside.

“Doesn’t sound so fine,” Chloe noted quietly, a bit critically. She wrapped her hands around Max's chest, resting her palms against Max's collar bones and leaning her cheek into the back of Max's head. “You OK? You've been fightin' a text war for a while...”

“I could...maybe use a break,” Max murmured, letting her eyes close as she took in Chloe's scent. Some kind of cologne...

Max's phone vibrated, jarring her from her pleasant mini-escape. With Chloe encasing her in warmth, Max checked her phone with Chloe right there, hovering above her. Either Chloe would snoop – which was fine, Max had nothing to hide – and make some remark about it, or Chloe would...not snoop, and...probably still make some remark about it?

[From: Stella]

[PS have you talked with Victoria yet?]
[She won't listen to me but she asked about you...]
[I know you must have your own shitstack to worry about]
[but she's really not doing well, Max.]
[I think she's worse off than I am right now.]
[I can't even imagine what Jefferson did to her.]
[It feels like a nightmare. Everything.]
[Like god just took a shit all over this town...]

_Not too far off, Stella..._

“Which one's that, again?” Chloe murmured into Max's ear.

Max set her phone into her lap and gently grasped her hands at Chloe's forearms.

“Who, Stella?”

“Yea.”

“Uh, she's one of my friends, um...”

“Got that,” Chloe teased flatly. “name sounds familiar...Brown skin, glasses, bookish?”

“Yea,” Max replied, kind of surprised. Chloe wasn't exactly good with, well, remembering people. “How do you know her?”

“Frank,” Chloe replied plainly. “She was a regular.” Max suddenly recalled Stella's name being in Frank's log book. “Actually,” Chloe blurted. “Shit. Pretty sure me and her medicated together once done at the beach...”

“Jesus,” Max sighed. Maybe she shouldn't have asked.

“Hey, no judging,” Chloe mumbled with a grouchy tint. “Thought we agreed on 'No Judging'...”

“I'm not judging,” Max said shakily. “Just, I feel bad for her...”

“Hey, whoa, I am fun to get high with,” Chloe said facetiously.
Max let her face sag a bit in dull silence. Chloe couldn't see it because of the angle of their current cuddle state.

“Stella's been through a lot,” Max sighed out. She ran her fingertips along Chloe's wrist. The sensation of that physical shape was quickly becoming comforting. “I...guess I don't blame her...” Max took a deep breath in through her nose, absorbing the scent of Chloe's cologne. “We all...have our vices, I guess...”

*Especially you. Using your Chloe addiction to hide the truth from yourself.*

*Give it a rest...*

*Arcadia Bay is in fucking ruins. They don't get to have a rest.*

That...isn't really my...problem anymore, it-

*Holy shit, are you fucking joking?*

*Not your problem anymore?*

*We both just read the same fucking text messages, Maxine.*

*OK, I get it! Fuck...*

What am I supposed to do from all the way out here?

*Huh?*

*Exactly. You can't do shit from out here.*

*You think some kind words and empty offers are gonna fix anything?*

*Get your mother fucking ass back down there.*

*God, you're such a piece of shit.*

*Hiding out with Mommy and Daddy while you drown your shit in this blue-haired drug.*

*I needed a break, I needed time off.*

*Fine. You took it. It's been a couple days now. Going on three.*

*You had your fucking pity break. Had your coochie call – not that you've even got the guts to go through with it, jesus. Now get off your lazy ass, stop being so pathetic, and go help that town.*

What the hell am I supposed to do?! How could I help?!

*You saw what happened when I tried to help...*

*Maybe keep your time-travel-dick in your pants and think of helping in a way that takes some fucking work, Max. Waving your hand around whenever you make a 'whoopsie,' that's not work. That's not hard.*

*There's survivors. Plenty of 'em, sure.*

*Goodie.*

*The ones you didn't murder just have their fucking lives flipped upside down now.*
We both know what a sack of shit you are, what a lazy bitch you're being.

So, yea, you won't do much. You can't do much now. Which is for the fucking best, giving how much you've already done.

But swear to god, Max, if you don't go back there when they need it the most?

I will keep haunting your ass until the day you die – which I'll make sure is soon, in a bathtub, with a razor.

She grabbed Max's hand suddenly, the blade slicing into her wrist, spattering-

“Haugh-!” Max gasped.

Max's whole body jerked from the sensation, tearing her wrist out of...Chloe's grasp.

Chloe had instantly removed her presence from Max's back, and when Max craned her head around, she could see a panicked expression.

“Sh-shit, Max, your...your hand looked...fine, I didn't think it...-”

Max realized that Chloe was referring to her scraped hands from the other day.

“No, no, no,” Max dribbled out in a hushed voice. “You're fine, Chloe, sorry. Fuck, I'm sorry, I didn't...mean to freak on you...”

Max double-checked her wrist for a cut that wasn't there. The scent of Chloe's cologne wasn't calming her like it just had moments before.

Chloe was warily scanning the perimeter, which caused Max to do the same. Max's Mom was in the kitchen, the hum of microwave having washed out Max's reaction. Dad was in the living room, watching his football game.

With a concerned, cautious look on her face, Chloe took a seat beside Max. She kept her physical distance in a way that made Max melancholic. Their eyes finally reconnected.

“Dude,” Chloe whispered solemnly. “What is up? It's like, one sec you're with me, the next you're...like, I don't fuckin' know, daydreaming.” Her brows still arced with worry, Chloe tried to joke a bit. “You figure out how to unplug from the Matrix? 'Cuz I want in on that shit.”

“I-I guess it sort of is like a daydream,” Max mumbled under her breath. Chewing at her lip, she fidgeting her hands together a little. “More like a day-nightmare...”

“That sounds pretty fucking terrible,” Chloe lamented quietly, scratching her nose. “Sorry.”

“It's...it's not a big deal,” said Max. “Jitters. Shakes. The, um...” Max double-checked their surroundings. Leaning in, she hushed, “All the times I was Rewiding, I, um...I-I think it...fucked with my brain, um...a little, or...-”

Chloe's eyes popped open with a disbelieving flash of terror.

“Yea, no shit,” Chloe seethed, barely audible. “Think I figured that out when fucking blood started streaming down your face...”

Max's phone vibrated, causing both girls to twitch. Max ignored it.

“I haven't had a nosebleed in, like, two days,” Max insisted.
Based on Chloe's expression, this hadn't been as reassuring as it had sounded in her head.

The microwave beeped from the kitchen, causing both girls' muscles to tighten up again, if only for a moment.

“Mmmmaybe it's, like, PTSD,” Chloe guessed.

This whispering argument was...hella awkward.

“Luh-...Like, um,” Chloe's wrists wriggled with quiet frustration as her face scrunched up, trying to explain it away. “Motion sickness,” she suddenly blurted. “Like when you get on a roller coaster, ya get off, yer fuckin' dizzy, amirite? Mmmaybe it's time sickness, eh?”

Max pursed her lips and avoided the hopeful desperation in Chloe's eyes. Those fucking attractive eyes. They were making these serious convos harder and harder.

“Y-yea, maybe,” Max agreed, just to make Chloe feel validated.

Max had no fucking idea. Whatsoever. But Chloe could cherry pick plot devices from Star Trek, Star Wars, and Dr. Who, roll it up into a Bullshit Burrito, and Max would happily eat it if it made Chloe worry even slightly less.

The phone vibrated again. Max ignored it.

Chloe slid her fingers along both of Max's knees. Max was wearing her coziest pair of sweatpants – the ultra fuzzy ones with the monkey pattern. The sensitivity of Chloe's touch was extra cozy against her knees.

“I bet I got an idea of what it's like,” Chloe said, letting her voice lift a decibel or two. “Sometimes, when I'm comin' down from my, uh, high-as-a-kite nights?” Chloe...! My parents are literally both like twenty feet away...! “I-I dunno, like, my brain'll see things I know ain't there, but...-” She trailed off, continuing to rub Max's legs, slowly working her way up. Max's legs were getting warmer.

Suddenly, Max's Mom swooped in, carrying two ceramic bowls with steam billowing out.

The scent of macaroni and cheese quickly drowned out Chloe's cologne.

And Max's legs got cold.

Setting both bowls down before the gors, Mom said with a dumb smirk, “Here's the left-Chlo-vers of that Max-'n'-Cheese...”

Max was too, too messed up to, like...find such a bad pun funny.

Chloe managed to 'snrrk!' a bit, though. Of course.

But it made Max's blank, fretful face melt a little. Seeing Chloe smiling or laughing was doing that easier all the time.

“I'm never gonna live that down,” Chloe half sighed, half laughed, as this truth seemed to strike her.

Max's Mom whirled back to the kitchen to grab utensils.

The clattering of the silverware drawer felt...unnerving.

Dad's game swelled. So much fucking yelling...Dad had jumped up to his feet and was cheering, fist-
The phone vibrated again. Max ignored it.

“Damn, Max,” grunted Chloe, grabbing the salt and pepper shakers from the center of the table.

“This whole ‘War-of-the-Texts’ seems to be a neverending battle, huh?”

“A nEvErEnDiNg BaTitLe
neverendingneverendingneverendingneverending

“Ryan, did you want want some of this?”
“Sure thing, wanna bring it in for me?”

-whrrrrmmmmmMMMMMMMM-

The CLATTERING OF SILVERWARE in the distance was unnerving
-shek-shek-shek-shek- pepper scratching at the inside of her skull
-MM MMM MMM MMM-

Ashes, ashes...they all fall down.
The phone vibrated again. Max ignored it.
Warren’s Voice: 'I have to go back, Max. I have to rebound with Brooke at the drive-in. You won’t even let me? You really are selfish, Max...'
-MM MMM MMM MMM-

neverendingneverendingneverendingneverending
Stella's Voice: 'You ruined my life...I have to go back, Max. He's going to beat me. Again. And again.'
'andagainandagainandagainandagainandagainandagain'
The phone FUCKING VIBRATED again. Max ignored it.
-MM MMM MMM MMM-

“...you want any salt...?”

“-this could be the moment the Seahawks have been waiting for, will he-”

“COME AWNNN! Seriously?!?”
“...uh...max...?”
-MM MMM MMM MMM-

Kate’s Voice: 'Chloe was supposed to pay the PRICE, MAX.'
'It was in the NAME THAT GOD GAVE HER.'
'But I guess you can just pay that Price FOR HER.'
'You have to go back, Max.'

I CAN’T FUCKING GO BACK ANY FURTHER

-BEEP. BEEP. BEEEEEEEEP.-

The motherFUCKING PHONE WOULD NOT STOP FUCKING VIBRATING SO MAX IGNORED IT!!!

-Clakkaklat!
Max had shoved her phone off the table, sending it flying to the hardwood floor. The battery had been knocked out of it.

Chloe was saying something in Max’s ear. Hella freaked.

But the Other voice was louder.

*You have to go back, Max.*

*You have to go back, Max.*

Max stretched out her hand toward the phone. Her sinuses burned, her temples ached. The edges of her vision blurred in a bubbly red haze. She could almost feel it, feel everything finally shutting the FUCK UP around her as it all came to a stop, just for a millisecond of perception, just long enough to see the phone barely tilt up off the ground-

“Max?”

Chloe’s arms had ripped Max’s abdomen around.

“What’s wrong?” Chloe almost shouted, her voice trembling. “Huh? Huh? Snap out of it, Maxie, Max-a-mil, c’mon...” Chloe’s hands ran through Max’s hair once, then twice, then swept against Max’s cheeks.

Max was a deer in headlights.

Cosmic fucking headlights.

And she was about to get plowed off the Road if she didn't move.

Chloe’s grip on Max burned, it ached. Max's thighs were on fire. She wriggled herself free. She whipped her head over her shoulder to look toward the corner of the room.

The broken phone was still on the floor, unmoved.

Chloe was dazed, scared, mumbling something. Something about ’*How could you let my Dad die all over again, how could you let me die all over again?’*

'andagainandagainandagainandagainandagainandagainandagainandagainandagain'

'LET ME EAT YOU ALL UP MAX SKULLFUCK YOU SIDEWAYS HUNGRY LIKE THE WOLF'

andagainandagainandagainandagainandagainandagainandagainandagainandagain

Dad had muted the TV and was on his feet, staring with horror at his serial killer daughter. Her fingernails pressed into her skull, Max felt her eyes water with embarrassment as the entire house finally shut up, but Max did NOT shut up, never fucking shut up ’*such a fucking child, CHRIST, I KNOW.*’

Mom had stopped in her tracks at the doorway from the kitchen, a steaming bowl of leftover Max-and-KillYourself-SecondPlace-ConsolationPrize LEFTOVERS in her hands.

Max could feel all their eyes, burning, aching.

*You have to go back, Max.*

I have to go...back?
“Back...” Max whispered.

She'd misunderstood before.

She understood now.

“...What?” Chloe hissed with petrified impatience.

“Back,” Max whimpered, her whole body a quivering mess. “We have to go back, Chloe. We have to go back!”

Through her teary eyes, Max could barely see the details in Chloe's alarmed, wide-eyed expression.

“M-Max, h-hey, don't...don't go all Jack Shepard on me, here...” Max's eyes intensified. Really? A *LOST* reference? Right now? “You'd...look terrible with a beard...” *Fucking really, Chloe?*

“What happened?” Mom asked, suddenly at Max's left.

“Everything OK?” Dad checked, suddenly across the table.

Chloe was gripping Max's hand from the right, running her fingertips across Max's wrist.

Checking for a pulse?

Pulses were for alive people.

Pulses were for people Maxine Caulfield hadn't murdered.

“Sh-she's been through, uh, *hella* shit lately,” Chloe warily, feebly tried to explain. “I think, umm...I-I think all that drama, it, uh...it's...”

Mom gave Dad a sharp glare. A knowing glare.

“I'll give her a call,” Dad sighed from across the way. He grabbed his cell phone from the coffee table. Dad seemed to intuit, as he usually did, that what Max needed that moment was some space.

Space.

Cosmic Road.

Deer in Fate's headlights.

*Better get out of the way...*

*You have to go back, Max.*

Mom set Max's cell phone and battery on the table before her. She kissed Max on the head, then parted, taking a seat across the table. As if following Mom's lead, Chloe, too, kissed Max, but on the cheek.

The muscles on Max's face felt like the lights on a carnival ride at night.

She felt her nose...*no.* Shit! No...

False alarm. Her nose was dry, just a bit of gunk built up inside.

Max saw the state of her smart phone. The screen was cracked in the top right corner.
Chloe's hands were, just, fucking-...Max didn't know. Sensory overload. Good kind? Maybe? Soft, frisky, warm hands just running all over, all around, in safe places. Chloe had scooted to the edge of her seat. She seemed to be nudging Max toward her.

Maxine gave in.

Rubbing her tears against Chloe's shoulder, Max took a deep breath.

“Arcadia Bay,” Max whispered shakily. “We have to go back, Chloe...”

–

The sky was clear that evening. The air was cold, crisp. It smelled like salt.

It had been a quiet, silent day. After her freakout the prior afternoon, Max's parents had called the family shrink for an emergency meetup. The doctor hadn't been able to help Max that much, but...she was a good doc. It wasn't her fault that her patient had tripped on a fucking wrinkle in the time-space-continuum and landed flat on her fucking face.

Mom and Dad hadn't been cool with the whole, 'we have to go back' thing at first. But the shrink had agreed. Confrontation was a strong step toward coping with post-traumatic-stress. Facing your fears, seeing them for what they were, instead of what you thought they were, shit like that.

Chloe was resistant to it. So resistant. She was scared. Max could tell. They both were. But Max was actually really fucking relieved, too. The doc had made her freak-outs almost...kind of make sense. Yea. Max's brain was just, like...trying to protect itself, or something. Deal with shit, work through it, sort it out...She had been hurt, and her mind was trying to keep her from getting hurt again, that sort of thing.

So here they were. Parked in front of Arcadia Bay's hospital. At the outskirts of town, the building hadn't received too much damage from the storm. A small relief, seeing as the place's location in and of itself had saved lives, no doubt.

Max's parents had wanted to come with her, but Max insisted they stay home, go to work like usual...Part of it was that Max wanted time with Chloe alone, part of it was that Max just...felt so fucking uncomfortable with the idea of Mom and Dad, like...seeing it. Seeing the destruction. Even if they didn't know it was Max's fault, Max knew, and just, it...ugh. Max had managed to keep her parents at a distance from this shit. She kind of wanted to keep it that way. Plus, if her folks were at home, Chloe could spend time with Joyce and David while Max checked in with people.

And so a plan was set: Max and Chloe would visit Arcadia Bay for an evening, spend the night somewhere nearby, and probably head back home the next day. It was going to be a busy evening.

Chloe had been surprisingly chill the whole ride down. Max could tell that Chloe wasn't really sold on this, so she appreciate Chloe putting on a brave face. Chloe had tried convincing Max that she would go on her own, check in with her family, then be right back, but Max refused. That wasn't good enough. They both owed this town. And they were piss-poor by comparison to the debt they owed, but...not even trying? That wasn't an option.

Max's parents had transferred some funds to her meager bank account to pay for the trip. It had probably been more than she and Chloe had needed, but...'No excuses, you need to take good care of yourselves,' that kind of thing...

The truck ride down from Seattle had been, well...quiet. Max and Chloe had taken turns connecting their phones, playing music, having some idle chatter. Small talk. It was kind of weird. Sort of like,
now that they were girlfriends – like, girlfriend girlfriends – there was this awkward unspoken obligation to kind of, well...chat about technical things. Swap stories about their five year hiatus, why it had been a five year hiatus, their relationships with their families, how Max had ended up at Blackwell, how Chloe had dropped out of Blackwell...

And then Arcadia Bay drew near. And the reminders started to hit.

The destruction on their way in was, well, not as bad as it had been on their out a few days prior. Just from their drive, Max could tell that cleanup crews were hard at work. Repairing damage she caused. Sweeping away debris she caused. Retrieving bodies she'd wiped the life from.

\textit{Shouldn't you be out there?}

I didn't \textit{do} this. I didn't \textit{cause} this...

\textit{If you really thought that, would we be here?}

Chloe held Max's hand the entire walk through the parking lot. Max was glad that she'd brought a hoodie, \textit{and} a beanie, \textit{and} a long-sleeved sweatshirt. The moisture in the air was chilly that evening. The sun was on its way down, but it wasn't quite sunset yet.

The process of checking in to the hospital was a fuzzy haze. Max was so lost. So...not \textit{there}. Chloe's hand was a tether, tying her to reality, while her mind drifted elsewhere. Wandering, sifting through her memories of Blackwell Academy, of the Two Whales, of Chloe's house...and accepting that memories were all those places existed as now.

They were standing around in the extremely crowded waiting room. Max couldn't even tell what purpose the damned place was. People were waiting, standing around, all over the place. In front of the hospital, in the hallways, just...everywhere.

The phone in her hoodie pocket vibrated. Max answered it.

[From: Stella]
[\textit{I know it's a long drive from Seattle so just let me know when you wanted to meet}.]

[To: Stella]
[\textit{We just got here. Gonna see someone first but sure.}]
[\textit{Haven't forgotten u promise! Maybe gimme like 30 min?}]
[\ldots Sent!]

[From: Stella]
[\textit{That sounds good. I'll be helping at the Salvo trucks in front of the hospital}.]
[\textit{If you can't find me just hit me up k?}]
“Max,” Chloe whispered, giving Max a light tug by the hand.

“One sec,” Max insisted. She could feel a nurse looming in the corner of her vision.

Chloe was impatient, but she gave Max a moment to reply.

Max was going to do her best to stop ignoring her phone from now on. These people were fucking suffering. The least Max could do was not leave their messages waiting. A fucking text, it took, like, five seconds, but it could mean the world to the person on the other side.

[To: Stella]  
[will call u soon as rdy]  
[ . . . Sent! ]

Max stuffed her phone into her hoodie and took Chloe's hand. The hospital hallways were brightly lit, making all of the suffering faces they passed that much easier to absorb. Max tried to impress each face into her mind, though she knew it was all ethereal, easily lost.

They found David Madsen sitting in a chair in the hall, reading a book. Max recognized the cover – it was one of the self-help books she'd snooped at when poking around their house a few days prior. Some of the things David had done...were not OK. But the man was trying. That was something he and his step-daughter had in common, at least.

As they approached, Chloe hesitated. He hadn't noticed them yet. Chloe's grip on Max's hand loosened. But just as Max thought their handhold would break, Chloe wove their fingers together. Max rubbed her thumb along Chloe's wrist as a subtle sign of encouragement.

“Hh...Hey,” Chloe eked out, her first attempt catching in her throat.

David's brows lifted, his eyes snapping from his reading. He dropped the book to the floor beneath his chair and got right up to his feet. Max saw the spark of relief in the man's eyes as he approached Chloe.

Max let Chloe go so the two estranged family members could have their reunion. Tucking her hands in her hoodie pockets, Max gawked at their somber hug from a few feet away. A hospital staffer came rushing by with a rolling table of supplies, eliciting Max to glue herself to a wall.

Max felt displaced in the moment. She couldn't help but study Chloe's body language. She was
invested in Chloe's relationship with her parents, after all. The way Chloe's shoulders shuddered a bit when hugging David...she was breathing unevenly. David was muttering, whispering in her ear. Max could see it in the arc of his brows – the man was apologetic. It was a start.

When the hug broke, Chloe's head whirled around with an eagerness. When her gaze met Chloe's, Max saw watery-eyed relief. It warmed her chest to see it. If all of this bullshit could help Chloe and her parents actually, like, start getting along? Well...then not everything was shit.

Chloe grabbed Max by the hand again and pulled her over toward David.

“So, uh,” Chloe murmured out, scratching the side of her head sheepishly. “Mmm-Max and I, we're, like...a thing now? We're together. Like...yea.”

David nodded contemplatively, scanning Max's face. Max felt like she probably wasn't...emoting...much.

“Suppose that makes sense of a few things,” David muttered, his hands on his hips. “Listen, Max, I...-”

“I'm sorry,” Max jumped the gun. “I...I didn't mean for...I was just...”

“You were lookin' out for Chloe,” David read. “N' I was outta line. Wouldn't be the first time...” He sighed, glancing at Chloe as the two girls touched hips. “Prob'ly won't be the last,” he admitted with a solemn shrug. “This freak tornado's at least reminded me that I oughtta be damn grateful for what I have left.”

Max and Chloe both nodded in agreement.

“But I'll shoot straight with you,” David said, running his hand across the layer of scruff that has formed on his jaw. “I'm gonna need both o' yer help keepin' Joyce's spirits up...She's, erh--She's seen better days...” That tone, that flicker of fear in his expression, it set a pit in Max's stomach. “So, please. Can I count on you two?”

“Of course,” Max instantly replied.

“Yea,” Chloe agreed.

“She might be asleep right now,” David noted, nodding his head toward the door to the left of his
chair. “But, seein’ as she's been waitin’ all day on ya, sure she wouldn't mind a wake-up call...”

That pit in Max’s gut grew a bit.

“Y-yea, I'm...-” Chloe glanced to Max. “Uhhh, Max's got some...peeps to check on, but, like, I'm...gonna be here. I'll totally be here.”

David nodded, resuming his position in his chair.

He said, “We'd appreciate that, Chloe.”

Chloe went to lead Max into the patient room with her, but David stopped them.

“Actually, can I...have a word with your fr-...uh, with Max, here, while you wake her up?”

Chloe paused, the door halfway open. She glanced to Max, who nodded, even though she wasn't...quite entirely comfortable.

Their hands slipped apart. Chloe entered the patient room. Max's hands hid within her hoodie pockets again. She clutched her right hand around her phone, just out of instinct.

“Max,” David said solemnly. “Look. You've...seen me in...-”
“It's OK,” Max interjected. She got it. David was full of regret. Good. He'd helped balance the equation out by taking care of Jefferson. By saving her – even if it was a different David in a different reality. Everyone had done shitty things, everyone was full of fucking regret. Max had more than enough damned regret to go around.

Max didn't want apologies. From anyone. She didn't deserve them.
And yet, no one could understand the apologies she owed them.
It was fucking frustrating.

“Well.” David scratching his nose, avoiding Max's deadened gaze. “I don't know how you and Chloe figured out about Jefferson, but...-”
“It took a lot of hard work,” Max explained brusquely.
“Figurin' it did...I knew that bastard was up to somethin’...”

“And now he's going to pay for what he did,” Max bitterly stated. It felt good to say it out loud, here, in this...reality.

“He is,” David grimly agreed. “You helped save a girl's life with your tip, Max.”

Max swallowed the lump in her throat.

_No, David. Don't you dare fucking give me praise. I didn't do shit._
_Saving one or two fucking people doesn't make up for the people I didn't save, for the people whose lives are ruined._

“I'm...I'm just glad that maniac is where he belongs,” Max mumbled darkly. “I’m so...fucking _freaked_ that I went to his _classes_, that I…-” She shook her head. Nope. No more talking about that asshole.

“Did he hurt you, Max?” David asked, softening his typically gruff tone.

Max hesitated. Then she nodded.

“And Chloe,” Max added quietly.

“Christ.” David moaned with the same pain Max had seen him express down in the bunker, when he thought Chloe was dead. Well, because Chloe _had_ been dead…

An alternate reality, but David still had a soft spot for Chloe. It was actually kind of...encouraging, in a sense.

Somewhere in that fucking bunker, there was probably a binder full of photos of Chloe from that one night...thank fuck Chloe hadn't found them. Sounded like David hadn't either. Probably had let 'his boys' dig into that. For the best.
“S-sorry, David,” Max mumbled. “I'm...n-not really right...in the head for...-”

“Aw, Jesus, you're right,” David grumbled with remorse, shaking his head. “I'm sorry, Max. Go on, check in with Joyce. I don't wanna...-”

“It's OK,” Max insisted firmly. “You're doing your job. You, um...-” Max swallowed a second lump. “To, uh...to be honest with you? Some of the things you did were not OK.” Before David could apologize again – Max didn't want his apologies, she just wanted everyone to start getting the fuck along – Max followed up, “I don't regret what I said the other day, because...I love Chloe. I love Joyce. Me and Chloe? We're together now. I have to look out for her. So some of the things you’ve done, I am not OK with. But...I get it. You were trying to protect them.” David nodded earnestly. Max felt a little tinge of...power in that moment. Max had helped wedge David apart from Chloe and Joyce. She had some leverage, even if he didn't know her well. She just...had to avoid abusing that. “I...I did some shit to protect Chloe that I'm not proud of either. So I get it. But Chloe and Joyce need you, so...so please, just...You have a second chance. We all do.”

David bit his tongue and nodded. Max appreciated his silence. If he wasn’t talking, goddamn guaranteed he was listening.

Having spoken her mind – or, well, enough of it, anyway – Max entered the patient room.

The sound of Chloe sobbing was immediately off-putting. Max's heart froze momentarily. Her stomach lurched. Those weren't happy, relieved sobs from Chloe. They were sad ones. Why?

Max saw Chloe's back, hunched over a hospital bed where Joyce sat. She approached cautiously, slowly.

“...Hey,” Max weakly greeted.

“Is that the lady of the hour I hear?” Joyce croaked groggily. There was some coughing.

Chloe peeled herself off of Joyce's bed.

And then Max saw it.
Half of Joyce's face was wrapped in bandages. One of her eyes was completely covered in gauze. Her head looked shaved bald, but there were so many bandages...

Fucking christ. Jesus, shit. The gas explosion...

And then Max noticed Joyce's right arm was covered in burns, too. She looked...so pale. So tired. So damaged.

Max's stomach felt weak.

Joyce smiled faintly at Max's presence. It was like watching a ghost smile at her.

_You did this to her._
You did this.
And you can't take it back.

Max couldn't pry her eyes from Joyce's left eye, which glimmered with a sense of hope unbecoming of the rest of the woman's body.

“Juh...~” Max choked on her own words. “Joyce...!” The word was pushed out, forced in a desperate puff, a gasp.

Chloe stumbled into Max drearily, enclosing her in a hug. Chloe needed a hug. Fuck, Max needed a hug, too. Their bodies wobbled a bit against each other as Chloe struggled to stop her own dry sobbing.

While hugging Chloe's trembling form, Max still couldn't take her horrified gaze off of Joyce's partially disfigured face.

“So sorry,” Max breathed out to Joyce, her eyes filling with hot tears.
“It wasn't your fault, Hon,” Joyce meekly assured, wearing a smile. So fucking strong, this woman. An entire phone conversation, and Max had no fucking idea this was what state the woman was in. So fucking brave...

'It wasn't your fault,' what a load of bullshit. It was entirely your fault. Don't listen to her, Max. We both know...

You did this.

I did this...

You did this.

Max's tears slid down her cheek without her permission.

“Why...didn't...?” Max sobbed out in confusion.

“She didn't want us worrying,” Chloe whispered shakily in Max's ear, wiping Max's tears away with her fingertips.

It was simultaneously a beautiful feeling – Chloe cooing and wiping her tears, Chloe's hands all over her face, Chloe trying so hard to circumnavigate the horrible feelings she knew Max was dealing with, feelings no one could understand – and yet it was all so fucking godawful and horrible – her stomach nauseous, her eyes burning, her cheeks stinging, her head throbbing, all of this guilt she'd been bottling up, now personified.

Joyce was disfigured. Joyce was burned. Damaged.

She'd done absolutely fucking nothing to deserve this.

Max and Chloe just cried at each other for a minute or so.

Joyce let them. When Max stole a glance, she could see Joyce's sorrow – not from her own pain, but from witnessing theirs. And yet, the woman still didn't cry. She was too tired to cry.

After a bit of this awkward as shit crying fest, Joyce spoke up.
“Girls...Girls, please...Ya'll have...been through so much. Wasn't like I was goin' anywhere...”

Chloe brushed her own tears away with her sleeve. Max frantically cleaned her eyelashes of saltwater. Max was afraid to look Chloe in the eyes. Petrified of some...some hatred, some anger. Some kind of ‘you fucking disfigured my mom‘ kind of burn emanating from those beautiful blue eyes.

But it wasn't there. All that was there was grief and loss and empathy.

“I am alive,” Joyce firmly stated. “I almost was not. But I am still here. And I get to see something I thought I'd never see...”

Max and Chloe inched toward her, trying to keep their unsteady reactions in check.

Joyce replied in a warm croak, “I get to see you two darlin's happy again for once. For the first in a long time.”

“Joyce,” Max whimpered out, emotionally confused.

Max held her stomach in check. She kept her weak-knees firm. She held back the tears as best she could. Chloe pulled them both toward Joyce. They hugged her. Her grip on them was weak, but...unwavering at the same time.

“I don't feel so happy,” Max confessed in a quivering, pathetic tone against Joyce's shoulder.

“Oh, Hon, I know,” Joyce squeaked, her voice cracking with sympathy. She planted a clammy hand on Max's cheek. “I appreciate the sympathy, but...I ain't a stranger to loss, and I always come out a stronger woman...”

“You have,” Max whimpered – insisted.

“And the same is gonna happen here,” Joyce assured. God, how much strength could one woman have? Max could only hope that between her and Chloe, the two of them could muster half as much as Joyce had. To still have such a positive outlook on shit after everything she'd been through...Were
people just born that way? Had Max missed out on that gene? It didn't seem to have passed down to Chloe, either...

The hug broke apart. Max distanced herself a little, watching Chloe clasp her mom's hand with a tenderness Max didn't recognize. A tenderness she was actually kind of proud of. Chloe and Joyce had their tension, their bickering, but they really did love each other when push came to shove. And this was...jesus...about as far fucking shove as you could get, huh?

How much more fucking 'Price' would this family have to pay? Goddamnit...

Max suddenly grew self-conscious. Joyce was an old friend from growing up, they'd, ya know, reconnected a bit over the past week. That familiarity was still there. But, shit. Max felt so out of place here now.

“I-I should...” Max began to mumble under her breath, her hands awkwardly latched in front of her waist.

“Wait,” Chloe blurted, leaving her resting mother briefly. “Where are you going?”

“Chloe,” Joyce gently eased, trying to be light-hearted. “Max will survive without your protection for a while...” She chuckled softly, her throat dry. “Have some faith in the woman.”

For some reason, that had been the first time Max had been called a 'woman' that...didn't make her feel uncomfortable or out of place.

Chloe hesitated, but she couldn't resist. There was a conflicted, pleading twinkle in Chloe's eyes as she closed the gap to Max. She grabbed Max's hands and squeezed them. They kissed on the lips gently, as if Chloe was...fucking seeing Max off to some battle. It made Max's chest boil and wither and melt, but she had to reshape it, reharden it for what was ahead.

Chloe needed time to cope with this news, to catch up with her family, to survive without her Partner in Time for a while.

And Max? She had work to do.
Max should've known better.

She should've seen it coming.

But...ugh...she hadn't. Because she was a fucking idiot...

It had taken a few minutes to find Stella in the small sea of wary citizens in front of the dinged up hospital. The sun was making its way down over Arcadia Bay. The horizon was...disturbingly visible, what with the lack of...buildings. The air was chilly. Max pulled up her hood over her head, hoping that between that and her hat, she'd stay warm.

Despite the state of things, there Stella was, as expected, helping sort out Salvation Army supplies into care packages. Near one of a few cargo trucks. She was wearing a long-sleeved shirt branded with a chibi whale and bold text: 'Save the Bay', surrounded by others with similar apparel and Salvo logos.

'Busted her ass for Blackwell,' now 'busting her ass for Arcadia': with a blackened eye, a nasty scratch on one cheek, and her arm in a sling. Her eyes were a bit bloodshot. They lacked...life. Her motions were mechanical. She looked like she could pass out from exhaustion at the drop of a dime.

Max's mind replayed her last conversation with Stella before shit had gone down. It was a conversation that had actually...never happened in this timeline. And maybe that was for the best...

'I hope everything turns out your way in the end.'

'Aw. Thank you, Max. I really appreciate that.'

Yea, good job, Max. Thanks for the trauma! Thanks for destroying my entire life! Just the way I wanted! Now I can go back to being trapped with domestic abuse! Thank you, Max. I really appreciate that!

I was so fucking naive. That was such a bullshit thing to say...I didn't think about...

What's that? You said some pretty words to a pretty girl just to get her to think you gave a fuck?

Ha. Yea. Yea, that doesn't sound like Maxine Caulfield at all.

...

Got nothin' to say about that this time, huh? Good. Now's not the time for fucking talking.
Max accidentally bumped into an elderly man on her way through the the forming crowd of...refugees. Survivors. She profusely apologized, tugging at her hoodie. She felt...suddenly so fucking self-conscious of anyone seeing her face. It was illogical, but...-

“Max?”

Ah. Stella had spotted her. Hands stuffed in her pockets and hood drawn over her head, Max shuffled awkwardly to Stella. Now that she was close, she noticed that Stella’s glasses were being held together by a few bits of duct tape. Something had happened to her lower lip, looked a little bloody. And her left hand, the one that wasn’t broken, it had a band-aid wrapped around the ring finger.

Engaged to Pain, getting ready to spend a life together...

Happily ever after.

“Aw, Max, man...!” Stella wobbled to her feet from the table she had been working at. She faltered briefly, but caught herself. She was walking with a bit of a limp. Sprained ankle, maybe?

Max's insides, twisted up from Joyce, unwound and retwisted in the opposite direction. She came to her senses enough to close the distance to Stella, and was caught off guard when Stella embraced her with an eager if cautious hug. Petrified of causing any more hurt – HAHA oh now you care? – Max returned the hug. It...lasted longer than Max had anticipated. But, she didn't mind.

“God, I'm so glad you're OK,” Stella said after a couple of moments into their hug.

“Y-yea, you, too, Stella,” Max replied, struggling not to start fucking crying again.

As their hug broke, Stella's brows furrowed. She kept her left hand attached to Max's arm for a moment.

“Hey, your face looks so intense,” Stella noted with concerned. “Are you OK?”

Max said what came to mind, her voice cracking a little.

“Um, no, I-I'm actually not OK...I...-” Her throat seized up a bit from the chill, and she coughed. Stella released her grip and gave Max a second to catch her breath.

Fuck. There was that creepy-ass deja-vu again – they'd swapped the same words in another reality.

“What is it?” Stella inquired. It was like she'd recollected some energy at the very sight of Max. Given that Max wasn't seeing a single Blackwell Student around, maybe Stella was just relieved to see a familiar face. “What happened?”

The POUNDING of feet.
The MURMURS and WHISPERS behind her back.

It was unnerving.

“I, uh...-” Max felt a bit dizzy, but kept it together. “C-could we, maybe...-?” She glanced around warily, suddenly feeling claustrophobic as the crowd of people was pooling into lines, desperate for rations and supplies.

“It is a little loud here,” Stella agreed. Her head flicked around. She readjusted her busted glasses a bit. “Gimme a second.”
As she waited for Stella to check in with a Salvo staffer, Max shuddered from the chill sweeping up her spine, her teeth chattering a bit.

It wasn't even *that* cold, it just...-

“Here, let's go,” Stella called, nodding her head back toward the hospital. Folks were pouring out from the main entrance, but Stella led Max to a side door. “I know a place that's, uh, a little calmer.”

As they drew closer to the hospital, Max couldn't help but notice that some neon letters were missing from this entrance, likely torn off by the storm.

{ H_S__T_L }

The two entered the side doors and took an elevator, descending down into a dimly lit but somewhat inviting nook. A couple of vending machines sat at the end of the hallway, next to a weathered bench. It was pretty dead — quiet, it was pretty quiet. There. In that space.

“Oh, good, those kids are finally gone,” Stella grumbled under her breath. “Here, we can rest over there.”

The two took a seat at the bench. Max could feel the enthusiasm — or was it a lighter shade of desperation? — emanating from Stella's twitchy mannerisms.

“So. So, uhm...Are you OK? What's up?” Stella was staring at Max intently.

Max wiped some sweat from her cheek, self-conscious that it might've been a tear.

“I...just found out an...an old friend was hurt. Uh, puh-pretty bad, um...-”

“Oh...R-right, I remember you said you...used to live here?”

“Mm.”

“Is your friend...gonna make it?”

“Y-yea, they're...Mm-hm. She's pulling through, she's a tough woman. She just, uh...-”

“Well...I'm glad to hear that, at least. You're, uh...you're pretty tough yourself, Max, huh?”

Max finally turned to look back at Stella.

“What...-?”

That did *not* fucking compute. At all.

“I heard you helped the police bring down Jefferson...”

“O-oh, that...”

“I-I don't even...know what to *say* about that shit. I mean, that's...just...-!”

“There's not much to say,” Max stated. Untruthfully. There was a *lot* to say, actually. Max did not want any of it to be said. “He was...fucking disturbed.”

“Right? And we had his photos, blown up, all...decorated across campus? Can you *believe* that shit? I just...*Whew.*” Stella creased her brow with disbelief. “I still can’t believe it. I used to...-” Stella
trailed off, her hand sliding down her face and resting over her lips as disgust and regret mixed across her expression.

Max knew where Stella's mind had gone to. They'd both crushed on that man, they'd geeked out over him a few times. Jesus fucking christ...

“He's done,” Max stated darkly. She could feel her face sneering a bit, inadvertently. Her nostrils widening with resentment.

_Haha, he is fucking done, ain't he? Caught the killer. One of them, anyway._

_Now, who's gonna catch you, eh? Who's gonna make you pay for what you've done...?_

“Good riddance,” Stella agreed with Max's verbal sentiment. “We've got...bigger problems to worry about right now, anyway...”

Stella's expression became distant for a moment.

“Max, have you...heard from Victoria yet?”

Max's heart skipped. Second time Stella had brought that up. Why?

“Nnnnooo?” Max slowly replied, partially confused, partially afraid, partially annoyed. “Should I...have?”

Stella brushed her fingertip against her glasses, removing a dust speck. Her expression squirmed, wobbling between a few different emotions in quick succession.

“Max. You saved her.”


Besides Chloe.

“The cops _saved_ her.”

“They wouldn't have had _any_ idea where she was if it weren't for you...”

“I was just...-” Max huffed, conflicted. “Glad she's OK, anyway.”

Stella eyed Max contemplatively. She smiled a little. It made Max's ears warm. She wasn't comfortable with people... smiling like that right now. Like they knew what a good person she was. It felt wrong. It felt _cool_, but...also horribly wrong.

“Victoria's...kind of a bitch,” Stella stated plainly. They'd both been thinking it. “But she didn't deserve...whatever Jefferson did to her. I think it might've...changed her a bit, Max.”

People don't change. Not really.

We both know that, don't we, Maxine?

You might as well accept it now. Chloe's never going to grow up.

Not really.

Neither are you.
“So...so, uh...” Max shook off the Other voice in her head. “Is she OK?”

Stella's brows lifted uncertainly, her eyes drifting sideways in thought. Her lips pursed, she tilted her head a bit in what approximated a shrug.

“I mean, she's alive,” Stella stated. “I, uh...I've tried checking in with her a couple times, but...-” Stella grew quiet and somber. She scratched her nostril a little. “She just asks me about other people...like you.”

_Oh, Stella..._

“Sorry,” Max sympathized. “I...I know what it's like. To be, ya know...kind of lost in the background.”

Bleh. Pity party...Being introverted kinda sucked sometimes...

“Yea.” Stella nodded a bit, appreciating the empathy. “I guess you get it, Max. And you really stepped out of the background this week, didn't you?”

“I, uh, I had some help...” Max dismissed, shaking her head. “And it's...not like it mattered in the end...”

“Well...I'm sorry about Kate. But, Max, that's...on all of us. I could've done something, too. Any of us could...At least you tried. And look – Victoria is alive. Jefferson was going to...fucking kill her, Max. So the fact that you tried? Maybe it doesn't always make a difference...but sometimes helping is better than...not helping at all.”

“I guess...”

“Kate's gone. And that's...awful. But...”

“You're still here. And you're not alone.”

“Huh? O-Oh...That's...Thanks, Max, um...”

Stella seemed flustered. Max suddenly saying that – it was a gut reaction. Max just hated Stella thinking she was alone. She hated any of her classmates...well, ex-classmates...thinking they were alone. Fuck that shit. They weren't alone. Not anymore. Chloe was the start, but...being here, back in Arcadia, it made Max feel determined to spread that to others.

“E-exactly,” Stella course-corrected. “See? Y-you get it. I know she was a total jerk to you, Max, but...She's so broken after all of this. I think Victoria needs us to be there for her right now...”

Max just gawked at Stella for a moment. She didn't quite know what to say to that. Stella looked so serious, so insistent, so...caring. Max found herself regretting having not spent more time with the girl back when...things had been simpler in Arcadia.

But it was like Stella was saying: at least now they all had the foresight to not let opportunities drift by.

Max wiped her fingertip against her cheek, clearing away built up sweat. She took a deep breath before she responded.

“You're right,” Max said. Plainly. Simply.

_It was simple._
Fucking do something for these people.

An awkward gurgle erupted from somewhere, echoing down the linoleum hallway.

Stella was clutching at her stomach with her able hand. She sighed tiredly, fluffing her lips.

Do something. You're so fucking desperate to help, fucking do something.

“S-Stella, when's...the last time you ate?” Max cooed, quickly shaving off the bitterness.

“Oh,” Stella blurted, shaking her head slightly. “I, uh...-?” She shrugged.

Get up. Get the fuck up.

Max rose to her feet without a word. She walked past Stella, a few feet forward, where the vending machines were. Yes, bingo. They took debit cards. Max plugged her card in.

“Y-you've gotta take care of yourself, Stella,” Max mumbled. It was hard, making those words come out. As if she had any right to be giving this poor girl any advice. “Here, I'll...get you something.”

“N-no, no, Max, you don't...-”
“I do.”
“No, really, I'm sure you have enough...-”
“It's fine. Really.”

Max paused after scanning her card. She had no idea what kind of snacks Stella liked.

“Um...” Max's lips curled with uncertainty. She turned to look at Stella. “Wh...What do you want to eat?”

Stella shrugged up her left shoulder warily. Another squirmy little growl escaped the girl's stomach.

Most of the options were candy, but there were some kinds of chips, too.

Uhhh, yea, Sun Chips, let's go with that. Oh, some pretzels, too.

“Anything to drink?” Max wondered, watching two bags get dumped into the tray at the bottom.

“Max, it's OK...”

“No, it's not,” Max insisted flatly. Dryly, with sterile syllables. “You look like you've been hauling ass all day, you need to refuel.”

“Mm...” Stella creased her forehead again thoughtfully.

“Water?” Max wondered.

“A-actually, some...-” Stella seemed almost ashamed to just...ask for something. It made Max's insides crawl with anger at the world. “I bet some Mountain Dew would pick me up, heh.”

“Not a problem,” Max stated, swiping her card and punching in the appropriate code.

She gathered the items and brought them to Stella, setting them down on the bench between them, within the girl's left-handed reach.

Stella went right for the soda, then paused.
Oh. Doy. Max, you idiot...

“Shit, sorry,” Max spit out in a social panic, instantly grabbing the bottle from the one-handed girl and struggling to open it. Her greasy fingers slipped on the first try. She used her hoodie sleeve to help, and handed it back.

“Thanks, Max,” Stella said with a timid smile. “You're so sweet.”

“That...that's nice to say, Stella, but, hell no, you're the one...out there, helping everyone...”

Max watched Stella gulp down a few mouthfuls of soda. Max carefully opened both bags of snacks as Stella drank.

“Thank you, but...” Stella said again, cautiously picked up the bag of pretzels. “You sound so down on yourself...”

“Y-yea, don't...worry about it. Loose ends...”

“Oh...kay. Aren't you hungry?”

“We just had dinner on the way here,” Max dismissed. Truthfully, Max hadn't eaten much. Half of her dinner was sitting in a take-out box in Chloe's truck.

Max drummed her fingers against her knees as she watched Stella dig in. The girl noshed pretty quickly, so Max knew she'd really been hungry. It felt a little cool just to...do something nice.

Gold fucking star for Maxine Caulfield. You bought a girl fucking chips and soda.

Slow clap it out.

Whoa, wait. Hold the fuck up, Everyday Hero. Don't go, uh, saving the whole world so fast there.

Pace yourself.

I am fucking trying, here...

Try harder.

“Stella...Um...” Max pushed the hair on the right side of her head behind her ears, making it easier to see her bench companion. “Why are you...still here? Ih-in Arcadia, I mean...”

Stella finished eating the mouthful of pretzel she was on. She coughed a bit. Dry, salty snacks. She took a swig of Mountain Dew, avoiding Max's concerned, wary gaze.

Stella held a half empty bag of pretzels in her lap as she paused.

Max bit her lip. Swallowed saliva. Drummed her fingers more against her denim-coated knees.

“I'm scared, Max,” Stella said. Her voice was hushed. Weak. “I...I can't go back home, they...-”

Max could feel her eyes quiver. It seemed like no amount of tears were enough for a day like this one. Max let Stella continue.

“Blackwell was my escape plan,” Stella explained. Her tone had hardened. It was colder. “It was my way out. I was going to...graduate, get...” She fussed with her busted glasses. “...get a scholarship, go to college...Start a new life. Away from...-” She took a moment to steady herself, taking a deep,
shaky breath.

Chewing her lip, Max placed her right hand on Stella's thigh. It was the only thing she could think to do in that moment. She wasn't going to dare fucking interrupt this girl.

“A-anyway,” Stella mumbled meekly. She smiled sheepishly, seemingly unaware of how to react to Max's gesture.

*Wow, one fucking day with Chloe and you're already flirting with other girls?*

*You really never are satisfied, are you?*

Hey, fuck you, I'm trying to be supportive.

*Yea, yea. How'd that work out on the last girl you had a crush on?*

She...she jumped off a roof...

*That's right. Try not to lead this one on too much, yea?*

Stella's straight. She's not gonna think...-

“I'm just...” Stella sighed, sniffing as she held back what was clearly pounding at the inside of her chest. “I couldn't go back there. So I guess I decided...it was better to stall things here. I-I mean, what're they gonna do? Come...come *kidnap* me from the relief staff?” Stella laughed.

It was a fucking uncomfortable laugh.

A terrified laugh.

“Jesus,” Max whimpered, using all of her willpower to hold back her guilty tears. She took her hand off Stella's leg and moved it to the poor girl's shoulder. “Is it really that *bad* back home?”

Stella shook her head slightly, shrugging the shoulder Max was touching. Max could feel the uncertainty, the fear, oozing out from the girl's gesture.

“To...to be honest, I'm not...*sure.*” Stella ate another pretzel.

*Eat, Stella. Take your time. I swear, I won't be taking any more of it from you...*

“I've barely been in touch with any of them all semester,” Stella confessed. “They, um...they stopped helping with my tuition, so...so I had to...take on extra work, and...”

“Like the Vortex Club party?”

“Y-yea, how did you know about that? I didn't...I didn't see you there...”

“I didn't, *uh,* I didn't go inside,” Max mumbled. “Me and...I, um, I saw you working the entrance, and...”

“Yea...Mark Jefferson asked me to do that...fucking...job, I can't believe I...” Stella panted in frustration, a tear slipping down her cheek.

“Shhh, shhh...” Max scratched Stella's arm a little. “He's *gone,* Stella, he is *done,* he can't...”

“Th-that's just *it,*” Stella winced. “Ffff...fucking *serial killer* on campus, and I...That's not even what
I'm scared of anymore..."

“Oh, Stella...Aw...”

“You don't understand the things I've done to...to stay here, Max.”

Stella took off her glasses, furiously – carefully – drying them against the fabric on her chest.

“My parents, they couldn't...keep up with my tuition on their own. Not after my brother...Augh. And then my sister went and...A-Anyway, I...I had to...do some things I'm not...proud of. To stay here.”

Max's nose wrinkled as some pieces clicked together. She sucked in a deep, cautious breath through her nose.

Fuck it. Stella needs to know I don't judge her.

"'Dachshund,'” Max said quietly.

Stella froze for a moment, her eyes wide. She scrambled to get her glasses back on.

“You...-?” Stella began.

Max lifted a palm up, as if to quell Stella from talking. Who knew who could hear them in this place?

“I promised Frank a few days ago I'd...help track down Rachel,” Max said in a whisper, suddenly worried as to who might overhear. “He let us check his...logs. We, uh-...I saw your name in his logbook.”

“Wh-~?” Stella's shoulder tightened, but Max gripped it, hoping to settle her.

“It made me worry about you,” Max confessed. There'd been too much other shit going on.

But seeing the names of her classmates in that book? It had filled Max with concern.

“Why, Stella?” Max firmly inquired, her eyes steel-plated.

Stella covered her mouth with her hand, her eyes damp.

“Max...I'm so sorry...”

“Was it...to help you 'study?'” Max wondered.

Stella nodded, but...in a sort of halfsie kind of way.

“Sometimes,” she admitted. “It-...Th-there's-...It's complicated, Max, I...-”

“I understand,” Max reassured.

Stella shook her head, her eyes flashing with self-loathing.

“'You don't,'” she whispered under her breath. “'But...but it's really sweet of you to...say that. To say you were worried.'”

Max felt uneasy. An ice cold electricity was charging from Stella's abdomen into Max's. It felt...wrong.

“Stella...It's...it's not like you were the only one...-”

“He's dead, Max. Frank? Did you hear?”
Max swallowed, her face frigid.

“Some freak fire accident during the storm,” Stella grumbled bitterly. “He wasn't a...a star citizen, but...Frank deserved better than that.”

Max kept her hand on Stella's shoulder. She didn't know what else to do with it. Stella went on.

“I-I mean, we were never...close, but...but I mean, we knew each other. And...and I can't even go to his funeral. I can't. I won't.” Max glared at Stella, confused. Stella explained, “The suspicion that would cause? The attention that could put on me? I-I don't need that, Max, I've...-”

Max massaged Stella's left bicep.

“Take a minute,” Max advised in a sterile sentence. “Eat.”

Stella consumed the rest of the pretzels. She washed it down with another gulp of soda.

Max would let this girl talk. She knew she wasn't going to like what she was going to hear. But she'd hear it, all the same. It was the least she owed Stella.

“Dad means well,” Stella said, suddenly switching gears. “He does. But Mom, she...Hugh. And none of them will stand up to him.”

“Your brother,” Max theorized, based on her fleeting conversations with Stella.

“Mm. They just...let him, and he always get away with it, and...now my sister's on his side, and-”

“I'm...so sorry, Stella, I...-”

“I can't go back there, Max.” Stella coughed on a sob. Max rubbed her hand gently against Stella's back. “I just can't.”

“You don't have to,” Max assured.

“Wh-...? Where the fuck else can I go?” Stella spat in squeaky desperation. “After what I've done? I can't...-”

Why was Stella doing this? What could she possibly feel so guilty about?

“Stella, self-medicating isn't...It's not good, but...you sound like you've got...a lotta shit going on, I don't...blame you for...I-I mean, my girlfriend, she's been there, she...-”

“Girlfriend?”

Max had been avoiding this. But she couldn't help it, it seemed. Chloe had been through a 'phase.' A phase Max was going to make sure didn't get repeated. But Chloe wasn't a bad person for having a weakness. At least...smoking some loopy shit didn't completely ruin people's lives, like getting addicted to time travel did...

“Y-yea, my, um...-”

Wowser. It's weird to say it out loud.


Stella's brows tilted.
“Price? That...that punk chick who was putting up all the Rachel Amber posters...?”

Max nodded.

“We, um, w-we grew up together, n' last week, we, um, we hooked up, it...-”

“Max, that girl is...-” Stella's face wrinkled with doubt.

“She's troubled,” Max stated, hoping to assure Stella that she knew what she was getting into. “It sounds like you are, too,” Max added defensively. Fucking nobody got to criticize Chloe without facing the fact that they weren't any more perfect, after all.

“...Y-yeah...” Stella shed off her judgmental tone. “N-no, you're right, I just...I-I didn't know you were...-”

“To be honest I didn't really know I 'was', either, until...-”

Max shrugged. They were going off on a tangent. This wasn't about her love life.

“Stella.” Max took her hand off of Stella's shoulder. Max folded her hands in her lap. “It feels like you're not telling me something.

Stella craned her neck to glance across the hallway. Both girls grew silent. The whirring of the vending machines was the only sound.


Max nodded vehemently. Her already twisted stomach tightened.

But she owed Stella. That broken arm? That damaged face? The broken glasses? The fact that Stella was gripped with fear for her well being, for her future?

The tornado had done all that.

Max had done all that.

Stella leaned toward Max, her lips inches from Max's ear. Max felt her whole body tingle from Stella's hot breath against her neck.

Stella whispered in the most hushed of ways, “Max, I...I think I was...part of Jefferson's...-”

And Stella stopped. She sobbed, clamping her hand over her mouth.

“I think he used me,” she confessed in a whimper. She sniffled. “Nathan was having me...get things from Frank. For Vortex Club parties...I-I didn't even think it was...for that. A-and the Vortex Club party? He would have me, like...text him. When certain students showed up. I-I was a fucking idiot, I thought he was...was just worried about students getting...y-ya know, mixed up in bad shit, but...-”

*Chloe was drugged. Hurt. Probably photographed.*

*Because of drugs this girl helped Nathan and Jefferson obtain.*

*No wonder she's so guilt-tripped over Victoria. She probably played a part in it happening.*

Max's stomach started boiling.
“I thought it was recreational,” Stella defended herself in a wispy panic. “I didn't know—...I mean, I did know Rachel and Jefferson, they...messed around...I didn't judge them. B-but I thought Rachel ran away, I didn't think...”

Max's hand clenched at her side. Her teeth grit.

“Nathan's family was rich,” Stella went on. “It was...it was easy money, I-I needed to pay off my tuition, I-I couldn't go back to...”

Max closed her eyes.

Don't you fucking dare lash out at her, Max. She was protecting herself.

She still couldn't protect herself from you. Fucking look at her.

Chloe's hurt people. David's hurt people.

You've hurt the most people.

Do not fucking dare get angry at her.

I'm not angry.

I'm sad.

“M-Max, you have to believe me, I-I didn't know the shir I was getting into, th-that it was being used for...”

“Stella...” Max grabbed the opened, untouched bag of Sun Chips. She set it in Stella's lap. She took the empty pretzel bag and crumpled it in her fist. “Eat.”

“...Max?” Stella pathetically murmured. “Y-you believe me, right?”

Max shook the bag of chips, not giving Stella her gaze. She needed a moment.

She would not project her anger. Stella was a bystander in all of this bullshit. Frank was just as culpable, but he was apparently gone, and...Stella didn't deserve to be caught up in this bullshit. Fucking none of these people did, and they had been. Fucking none of these people deserved to have their lives turned sideways by all of this fucking bullshit...

Stella...The poor girl was working so hard, like her life depended on it.

Because it did.

Max couldn't begrudge her that. Max herself had done some shitty, desperate things to keep her world afloat. To keep Chloe alive.

“Max...” Stella pleaded softly.

“I believe you,” Max said. She'd meant it to be a calm statement. But it hadn't been.

“I didn't know,” Stella sobbed, forcing her voice to contain itself. “I swear, I was just...I just needed the money, Nathan scared me, b-but I also felt bad for him, and...and I-I didn't even know him and Jefferson were, like...doing...”

“OK,” Max grunted, her eyes squinted shut, her head nodding impatiently. This was getting just
plain painful to hear. “Stella.” Max sighed, keeping her eyes closed. “Eat. Give me...give me a
second to...-”

The crunching of Sun Chips to the right ran cracks through Max's brain.

Nathan, Stella, Rachel, Kate...even Chloe. Fuck, Victoria, too, even if he hadn't meant to. And
Principal Wells, maybe? Who the fuck else had Jefferson manipulated?

“I'm sorry,” Stella wept. “I'm so sorry...” Her quiescent sobs ached Max's skull. “I-I needed to tell
someone, I-...I'm sorry...”

Max leaned her head toward the right. She slowly, discreetly worked both her arms around Stella's
shoulders. She pressed her forehead into Stella's temple.

“Shhh, shhh,” Max lulled, closing her eyes back up. “I'm here for you, Stella. I meant it when I said
it.”

“Thank you...”

Stella cried for a few moments. Max let her cry. It made so much sense now, why Stella had been so
eager to talk. After everything that had happened, Stella needed to unload this shit. Max could relate.
If Chloe hadn't been around, she would've unloaded all of this time travel shit on someone. Probably
Warren? Either way. She couldn't have kept it bottled in for so long.

“Th-they're dead,” Stella gasped, sniveling in Max's arms. “Wh-what if something I did...-?”

“You didn't know,” Max insisted, squeezing her fingers against Stella briefly.

A couple more moments of therapeutic silence went by. When Stella's breathing seemed to even out,
Max straightened her posture back out.

“Stella, you have to go to the cops with this...”

“I can't,” Stella meekly insisted, her face wet with tears, flushed with shame. “Th-they'll find out
I...-”

“O-OK,” Max backed off. Maybe it wasn't a good idea. Then again-... “It's just...S-Stella, when me
and...my girlfriend, wh-when we were looking into this...we didn't go the cops right away. We
should have. We might've spared some people from that fucker if we had...”

“But you did,” Stella pointed out. “Y-you did go to the police, and...and they caught him, and...n-
now it doesn't matter.”

Max scanned Stella's disparate eyes.

“It does matter,” Max concluded coldly. She tried to soften her tone. “But...I...I've done some things
I can't take back, either...” Max sighed, bobbing her head. She took her hands off of Stella, putting
them back in her hoodie pockets. “I understand. Stella, your secret's safe with me. A-and Chloe. I
promise, we won't...mention it to anyone...Just promise me you'll consider taking it to the cops.”

“Max...!” Stella's breathing was irregular. Relieved. She sniffed, wiping her tears. “Thank you...I-I
will, I swear.”

Max nodded solemnly. In the immediate moment, she'd been angry. Then she acknowledged the
truth of things. That fucking no one at Blackwell -- not a soul -- was completely innocent.
Well.

Not anyone that was still alive, it seemed...

Stella hugged Max a little now. Max felt her abdomen swell. It felt cool to...feel like a hero for someone. Even if it was pathetic. Max glanced sideways to Stella as the girl recuperated herself.

“Whew,” Stella sighed out, wiped sweat and tears from her face. She caught her breath. “Augh, it, uhh...it just feels good to...to get that off my chest.”

Heh. 'Chest.' It's OK to stare, Maxine...

Wh-?! I wasn't...! Shut up. I wasn't staring.

Yuh-huh. You've crushed on Stella for a while now. And fucking Kate.

I'm with Chloe.

Yea, yea. And here you fucking are...when Chloe needs you.

Chloe needs her family right now.

I'm allowed to fucking be there for other people.

The eyecandy doesn't hurt things...

Ugh.

“Y-yea,” Max sputtered. “I'm, erh, I'm glad I could...be there for you. You've...you've been through so much Stella, I...”

Stella just nodded bitterly, contemplatively, still brushing her face down with one arm.

Max swallowed the lump in her throat.

It felt...strange.

But she still felt compelled to say it, anyway.

“I hope everything turns out your way in the end.”

“Aw...” Stella's voice trembled with gratitude as she wiped away her tears. “Th-thank you, Max. I really appreciate that...”

It wasn't enough just to say the words.

“Is there...I-I mean, anything we can do...?”

“Huh? Like...what?” Stella wondered. “Y-you let me...spill this crap on you, that's...I-I mean, that's enough, you don't even understand...-”

“Friends are dead,” Max stated frigidly. She clamped Stella's knee. “Stella, you...you seem so alone. But you're not. The look in your eyes?” Max paused. Stella stared at her. Yup. There it was... “I know that look, Stella. Kate Marsh had that same look in her eye the day before...Please...please don't...”

“Oh, Max...” Stella's expression scrunched up with sorrow. “No. No, no, no. I won't...I'd never...-“
“D-do you need a place to stay?” Max asked weakly. “We could...-” The question had been lingering in the pit of her stomach all this time. She hadn't asked. Mom, Dad, Chloe...she hadn't asked. But...-

“That's...very sweet, Max. Aw...” Stella's face forced a smile. Her eyes were still watery. Her glasses were fogging up as she clutched her chest with gratitude. “I-I'll figure something out. I'll be OK...”

“But...but Stella, if...-”

“No, it's OK. I got myself into this mess...I'll find a way out.”

Max admired the spark in Stella's breath in that instant. That slow but sharp inhalation. She puffed out raw determination through her nostrils. She straightened her dinged up glasses. She licked blood from her cut lip.

“What can I do for you, Stella?” Max asked earnestly. “Do you-...? I-I mean, do you need...money? Do you need...-?”

Stella ate a Sun Chip.

“I'm sure you have your own problems, Max. This...? Just this, I mean...after the past few days I've been through...you don't know how much this means to me...Just this. Just having someone I can talk to, someone who really cares.”

Max sighed longingly.

“I think I have an idea what it feels like,” she empathized, thinking of Chloe. “And I do care, I really do. You're sure there's nothing I can do...?”

Stella swallowed. She rubbed at her chest. Probably a sharp chip edge had scratched her throat on the way down. Ugh, Max knew that feeling, ow...

“A-actually, there is something...”

“What is it?” Max eagerly asked, hopeful to move away from...all of this dark shit.

“Can we keep in touch?”

Max's curious face bubbled into a warm smile.

“Of...of course, Stella, yes. Yes, I'd love that...”

–

And we all are sending smoke signals
Keep pretending we're one
We're all descending
No strings
We keep pretending we're one

Step out beyond the edge and start the motion
~ 'Smoke Signals' by Darren Korbe (Transistor)
Chapter Summary

I swore the other day that I'd whisk you away
From all of this pain, from all of this pain in you
I've seen you turn around, I've seen you hit the ground
From all of this pain, from all this inside of you

~ Andrew Koethe (@KoetheKoethe)

A/N:

ALL WOUNDS IS BEING ADAPTED INTO A GAME.

Oh, sorry for the capitals, there, just making sure that if you read this fic and haven't heard...now you know!
With the help of some friends and fellow PriceField fans, I'm adapting All Wounds into a visual novel. And there's a demo out!

You can follow this project and try out the current version of the game at the Tumblr blog, @LiS-AllWounds

--

Life is Strange

All Wounds

Chapter 6 - Price

"I swore the other day that I'd whisk you away
From all of this pain, from all of this pain in you
I've seen you turn around, I've seen you hit the ground
From all of this pain, from all this inside of you"

~ Andrew Koethe ( KoetheKoethe)

[To: Maxine <3]
[yo u ok?]

[To: Maxine <3]
[hello?]

[To: Maxine <3]
[where you at gurl??]

[To: Maxine <3]
[could really use some Maximum Cuddling rite now…]

[To: Maxine <3]
[like for real. txt me plz?]

[To: Maxine <3]
[u alive…??]

A half hour felt like for-fucking-ever as Chloe sat in the chilled hospital room. Each text she fired off had been maybe five minutes apart, but it felt much longer. Stepd-…David had fallen asleep reading his book in a chair he’d propped up by Joyce. Chloe, sitting on the opposite side of the hospital bed, had held her mother’s frail hand for a long while before she realized that Joyce had fallen back asleep, too.

She was alone again. Trapped in a bubble of quiet. With no fucking clue what to do with any of this. Was this how Max felt when she Rewound time?

Chloe needed her Max-imum Comfort Times. Stat. ASAP. Immediately fucking right then and why the hell was Max not fucking answering her goddamn phone had something happened had someone done something was everything

Just as Chloe considered what to say in another desperate follow-up text, the tiny screen in her lap lit up.

[From: Maxine <3]
[Hey. Yea. hi. Sorry.]

[From: Maxine <3]
[A lot on my mind. =_= Sorry sorry! D’: ]

[Reply]
Max didn't reply as immediately as Chloe wanted. Chloe sent another text.

[Reply]
[miss you btw]

[From: Maxine <3]
[dude Chloe it's been like an hour. :P ]

A pause. Chloe wasn’t sure how Max had meant that… Come on. ‘I love you’ and ‘I miss you’ back to back, and nothin’? Then Max sent a follow up.

[From: Maxine <3]
[ok yea I miss you too. :'( ]
[we're kinda sad huh?]

Chloe’s eyes got damp in the corners and she smiled like a fucking childish idiot down at her phone.

[Reply]
[only when we're apart eyyy?]
[so where r u? Do I gotta hunt down ur skinny ass or what?]

[From: Maxine <3]
[how are your parents? Are they ok?]

No? Prolly not? Shit. I don't even know. Why aren't you telling me where you at?
[Reply]
[theyre sleeping.]
[prolly need it too.]
[want me to meet up w/u?]

[From: Maxine <3]
[Well there's someone else I have to visit but]
[I mean if you want to yea you could come I guess.]
[Is it really OK for you to leave them alone tho?]

This reply kind of irked at Chloe's intestines, tugged 'em a bit. Chloe hadn't figured Max was so buddy-buddy with her classmates. Bleh. But all of this shit goin' down...probably had forced Max on a one-way trip to Angst Town via the Guilt Train.

And besides, Joyce and David were just…sleeping. What was the point in Chloe being here when she could be with Max? Er, supporting Max, you know? Chloe couldn’t support two broken people who needed some shut-eye. She was useless here.

Argh. Poor Joyce. Poor mom. That really fucking sucked. Urgh. Joyce hadn’t deserved to die in a fucking diner. She hadn’t deserved to go through that, either. And now she’d be stuck with it for the rest of her life.

Shit…

Chloe really needed Max in that moment. But Max wasn’t there.

Because apparently, other fucking people were more important. Gurgh.

[Reply]
[my mom needs her beauty sl]  
Chloe stopped, catching herself. God fucking damnit. *And the prize for Assholiest Daughter, Queen of the Assholes goes to…-

Chloe deleted the draft text. She sent a fresh one.

[Reply]
[parents are asleep.]
[no point sitting here.]
[getting lonely. too much to think about.]  

Chloe sat on these words for a few moments after sending them. Before receiving a reply, she sent a follow-up. A desperate, selfish follow-up.
Chloe shoved her phone in her pocket bitterly as she awaited Max’s arrival. She tore her hat off, clawing at dandruff-ridden itches on her scalp. She buried her face in her palms, elbows on her knees, exhaling a long, exhausted, quiet sigh.

*Pull yourself the fuck together, Chloe.*
*You’re not the only one hurting right now.*
*But...shit.*
*Realizing that doesn’t make it hurt any fucking less...*

Chloe sniffed in air and snot through her nostrils. She rubbed her coat sleeve against the edges of her nose, brushed shit out of her eyelashes, and let her sight readjust to the sterile, dim lighting of the hospital room, the sunset. Chloe craned her neck to catch a glimpse out the hospital window. The view to the beach line was...well, pretty clear, especially from this height. And, ya know...the town being fucking flattened.

The sunset that evening…it was the same shade as Rachel’s hair. Chloe’s mind flickered to a time they’d hung out by the Lighthouse and watched the sunset together. Chloe had tried to hold Rachel’s hand, but...not so much with the succeeding.

The meekest of tapping stirred Chloe from her neck-twisted gaze. It was Max, poking her fingertips against the window panel of the hospital door, tapping at it to get Chloe’s attention. She had a very neutral look.

An obligated look.

Like Rachel had the week before she’d disappeared. That distant, *Uh-huh, I’m listening, Chloe, except it all just went out the other ear* kind of look. *I’ve got more important things on my mind than you, Chloe.*

*More important people.*

Chloe felt her spine shiver as she got up from her chair. It squeaked a little against the linoleum floor,
causing her to flinch. The fam was fast asleep, she was all good. As Chloe approached the door, she saw Max’s head twist casually to the side, looking elsewhere. At other people, other things.

Chloe was careful with the twisty-bar door handle, trying to put her Sneaking perk to good use.

Once Chloe was out in the hall and the door was quietly closed behind her, she and Max stood awkwardly for a moment. Chloe wanted so badly for Max to hug her. To kiss her. To ask how she was doing.

Max instead just took her hand, and asked, “Is she doing all right?”

And Chloe felt selfish again.

“Uh…Yea, yea, she’s…“ Chloe swallowed gunk in her throat and nodded with a soft sigh. “She’ll be fine, she’ll make it OK. I-I mean, where d’ya think my tough skin comes from, huh?”

The side of Max’s lips curled up slightly. An obligated kind of half-assed smile. *Fuckin’ sorry, Max, that my humor ain’t cuttin’ the goddamn mustard today…*

Max dodged a passing patient and nurse, still attached to Chloe by the arm. The two of them up were pinned up against a hospital wall for a moment, side by side. Chloe ogled Max’s pale, withered profile. The guilt was fucking real, all over Max’s face. Shit.

Chloe had been right, coming back here had been a bad idea. Why the hell had that psychiatrist said that- *Ohp.* They were…moving.

Max was leading Chloe to the end of the hall, to the elevator.

“Wh-where we goin’?” Chloe wondered, having just now remembered: Max had come back out of obligation. Because you took your girlfriend places. But Max’s mind was still clearly set on something else.

“We’re, um…“ Max sifted hair behind her ear as they waited for the elevator. “…going to check in with Victoria.”
“Uhhh…OK,” Chloe replied dubiously. No, she was not going to hide her dismissal, sorry, Max. Fuck that bitch.

Victoria? The pixie-cut whore who’d tried to bang that psychotic fuck? The chick who uploaded that vid that made your friend fucking kill herself? This self-entitled cunt is more important than me right now? My mom’s face is half burned off and you’re more worried about…-?
I cannot fucking believe you’d w-
-Ding!-

They entered the elevator. It had stupidly relaxing music playing. It felt like mashed squash being rubbed in Chloe’s ears.

After punching in the floor button and letting the door close, Max leaned her back against the elevator wall. She tugged Chloe against her by the edges of Chloe’s unzipped jacket. She gripped at Chloe’s back and a quivering breath escaped both of them.

Max drizzled out a pathetic whisper into Chloe’s ear.

“I’m sorry, Chloe…I’m so fucking sorry…Joyce, she didn’t-…I-I—Fff—fuck, Chlo—…Chloe, I—”

And Chloe felt selfish again.

“Nuh—No, no, nope.” Chloe was spitting quick and quiet words, gripping Max’s hips tightly.
“Don’t you fucking dare, Max, this is not your fucking fault.”

Chloe glared at Max’s shaken expression. Max gawked back.

“It is my fault,” Max disagreed dully. “It’s all my fucking fault…The least I can do is—”

But Chloe gave Max a stern shake by the waist.

“Fuck that ‘my’ shit,” Chloe winced. She kissed Max on the forehead cautiously. “‘We,’ Max. It’s our fault. We. Us. Together. ‘Kay? Got it?” Max didn’t reply, her mouth agape. Chloe kissed Max’s head again, rubbing the girl’s hips briskly.

Max was starting to tear up again. Chloe would let her entire coat get drenched in tearstains over and over until Max got through this. Until they, both, them got through this.

“Max,” Chloe said, eager for a confirmation. “Got it?” she repeated.

Max finally snapped out of it and nodded, biting at her lip some more. Chloe felt some relief at that, at least. She kissed Max on the lips. Max’s hands suddenly found their way further down Chloe’s back, Chloe returned the motion, one kiss became two…and then the elevator stopped, causing that uneasy motion sickness.
The frozen moment, that bubble where everything else was on Pause, it stopped…Time sickness.

They both sucked in air as Max broke their kiss and hurriedly straightened her shirt. The doors opened. Hand in hand, Max led them both out. Chloe’s chest swelled. Here she was, being led by the most adorable hipster, hands locked, past all sorts of people who could marvel at them being a couple. But that feeling didn’t last long. This floor wasn’t quite so busy as the lower levels, but…still a little bit crowded. Like they just needed a building with heating to stay warm. A number of them had Salvation Army boxes, clutching their everyday contents like tweakers with needles. Seemed like every fucking room in the place was probably taken up from tornado victims, and a lot of people sitting around in the halls looked…dirty.

And Chloe felt selfish again.

Max paused when they came upon an Asian chick with red highlights sitting on the floor, cross-legged, next to a patient room. She was playing her modern Game Boy dealio. It was a DS? Right? The one with two screens – chick she had glasses, too. Chloe knew there was a joke in there, somewhere, but…-

“Brooke?” Max recognized her. Another Blackwell kid, right?…All their faces had kind of blurred together for Chloe at this point. She’d honestly too medicated in most of her interactions with them to really remember the details.

The girl’s dull face lit up barely a shade as she glanced up. Closing her portable game system and setting it in her hoodie, this ‘Brooke’ chick fumbled up to her feet. Her sneakers looked like they’d seen better days, and her hair was a tangled, frayed mess, not done up in any style. Her face had some acne descending upon it and she looked like she was sick – like a flu or something.

“Max,” she said. “You’re…here.” Her voice had this kind of…irritable quality to it. Plus, it sounded like her nose was plugged up. She did look pretty sick…

“I wasn’t sure if you got my reply,” Max sighed with relief and a nervous laugh. Max then gave the puzzled girl a hug.

‘Brooke’ did not seem to know what to do with hugs from Max Caulfield, which Chloe knew were to be treated with utmost gratitude and respect. ‘Brooke’ gave Chloe a stink eye from over Max’s shoulder. Or maybe Chloe was just reading into it. Chick seemed to be the sort who just always looked a little grouchy. Then ‘Brooke’ coughed and sniffled.

Chloe understood that Super Max had to, like, try to save everyone and shit, but…if Max came
down with something, Chloe would…eh-…Damnit.

“Are you OK?” Max checked, gripping Brooke by the shoulders as she inspected the girl’s features.

“Liddle sick,” Brooke dryly cited.

“Poor thing,” Max murmured under her breath. “Why hasn’t your family come to get you yet?”

“On baycation,” said Brooke flatly, wiping her hoodie sleeve. Her voice was kind of funny from her stuffy nose. “Dey had to cut it zhort. On deyr way here dunight to pig me up. Fvinally.”

“Oh, that’s good,” Max said. “Aw, I’m just-…I’m really glad you’re OK.” Girl was clearly trying to be all courteous and stuff, but Chloe could tell from the context that Max seemed relieved that here was a person she knew who, ya know, hadn’t had everything twisted sideways by the storm. “I was so worried you’d gotten hurt…”

“Only psychologically,” Brooke sassed. Fucking eh, you whiny little…-!

“Bud yea, thankz, Max.”

“W-we, uhhh-…” Max pushed hair strands away from her eyes, her body language kind of flustered and sheepish. “I-I didn’t know you were still in Arcadia…”

“Whud’s left of it…” A tired sigh. Chloe appreciated sass and all, but not to her Max. Not right then. “Nod even a forecast. Zeriously? Nod even a forecast…”

“Y-yea, all of this…all of this crazy weather lately,” Max tried to small-talk. “Wowser.” Yea. Yea, real smooth flying, Maxie. “W-we should, like…talk. If I’d known you were stuck here, I-I would’ve…set up…-”

“Whudz to dalk about?” Brooke shrugged up her shoulders. Dang, fucking…-! Max does not need your shit right now. “All my vriends are dead. No razhional explanation. No reezon…” She sucked in snot through her nose with a lot of bitterness, and it made kind of weird honking sound. “Besides, you n’ your friend loog like you’re on a mizzion…”

“Girlfriend,” Chloe corrected, her fists jammed in her coat’s pockets.
Yes. Max and Chloe were friends. Very good friends. They were also seeing each other. In a romantic way. This tongue was having playdates with that tongue. Hands were grabbing butts in a more-than-friendly way. Max was Chloe’s girlfriend. This was important and everyone needed to know it, especially whiney little brats who had given Max shit over a boy Max hadn’t even been going after.

“Uh-huh,” Brooke replied, her brows furrowed. “Didn’ know you were seeing someone, Max. When’d dat happen?”

For-fucking-real?

“W-we, uh, we hooked up last week,” Max dismissed, obviously uncomfortable. Come on, Max, don’t let her passive-aggressive bullshit scare you. “Anyway. L-look, Brooke, I’m…sorry all of this happened. I’m so sorry. F-for what you’re going through.”

Chloe’s gaze wavered between Max’s earnest, heart-breakingly sweet apologetic…sappy…shit, and this other chick’s whiny, pouty, grumpy…just…bull…shit.

“Everyone is…is hurting and confused right now,” Max empathized. “And-and I totally am, too, but…we need to be here for each other, y-you know? So…I…I just wish there was something I could do for you, if…if.”

“There’s nod. But t’anks.”

Chloe’s jaws were tightening. She had to self-consciously unclench them to keep from scraping her teeth together. Max, you ‘pal’ here doesn’t give a shit. Lost cause. Move on. Chloe wanted to punch the highlights out of this chick’s hair.

“Agh, Brooke,” Max grunted quietly. She hugged Brooke again. “It’ll be OK. Just...Keep it in mind, OK? I-I am totally here for you, I promise. Whatever I can do…”

It rattled Chloe’s ribs to see Max, just, like...urgh. Bending over backward, like she somehow owed this girl something.

When their hug was over, Brooke had...a slightly softer demeanor.

“Mighd dake you up on thad, Max. Zorry I’m...-” She shrugged, wiping her nose with the edges of her fingers. “-...in a mood.”
“N-no, no, I get it,” Max cooed. “Don't apologize, you've been through so much shit recently, it's fine.”

Puh. Don't encourage her...Come on, Max...

Chloe was getting a bit sick of this. She brushed her shoulder against Max's, somewhat deliberate in her intrusion on their 'moment.'

Chloe awkwardly, impatiently blurted, “We don't wanna leave...” Fuck what was that bitch's name again?? “...'em waiting...” NAILED IT.

“O-Oh, right,” Max replied, fussing with her face a bit. More cheek dusting, more hair fidgeting...Like she was getting ready to look presentable? What the actual fuck, why did...-? “S-sorry, Brooke,” Max meekly said, as Chloe took her by the hand. “We've gotta go, buh...but remember what I said, OK?”

Chloe just nodded her head brusquely at the girl, who was nodding to Max. People with actual fucking issues who actually wanted Max's help and would appreciate her were a better use of their time, far as Chloe was concerned.

Which reminded her, why in the shit were they going to see this prissy bitch, again?

They'd had to wait a few minutes while a doctor checked in with her, but...Max and Chloe were allowed to visit the hospital room of...'Victoria Chase.' The blonde bitch of Blackwell. The prissy little whore who'd defaced Max's dorm room. Who's stirred shit. Who's posted a video of Max’s friend online, leading the girl to commit fucking suicide. The chick who'd had a hard-on for that psychotic asshole who'd hurt Max, who was responsible for Rachel's death.

And here they were. Standing in front of her hospital bed. Like they gave a shit.

The worst part?

Chloe could tell that Maxine Caulfield did give a shit. And that was...fucking infuriating.

The catty girl with the pixie cut hair had seen some fucking better days. Damn. She looked...just...
pale, gross. Cute features, though. But pissy vibes. Chloe no likey. She was sitting upright in a hospital bed, no tubes, no needles, empty plate of food on a tray next to her. She was looking at her cell phone in her lap, her eyes glazed over with disinterest.

“Hh…-“ Max’s voice seemed to catch, so she cleared her throat. “Hey…Vv…Victoria…”

Max was speaking with this weird tone, like fear and pity had a baby. Ugly fuckin’ baby.

“How are you?” Max softly asked when the chick didn’t respond.

Victoria blinked, like waking up from a nap. She took in air as her brows furrowed, set her phone face down in her lap, and glared up at Max with a bizarre look. Chloe was good at reading Max’s expressions, but Miss Grumpy Cat, here? Chloe had no fucking idea what was going on in her head. Just that it was…a lot.

“How are you?”

Max paused, off-put. Scratching at her temple nervously, Max tried again.

“How are you?”

Victoria’s eyes glimmered with fire, as if offended by the question. Her lips pursed. Her eyes shifted to one side. Her brows furrowed. Her nose wrinkled as she pulled in a sharp breath through her nostrils.

And then, a moment later, as she quietly sighed, her entire face relaxed itself. At last, words came out. They were sharp, but rusted and dull.

“How are you?”

Victoria, why would I even be here if…-?”

You psycho-dick-sucking-ass-kissing little cunt, you have no fucking idea what Max has been through, I will fucking break your-

“Yes!” Max insisted, in a bit of a whimper. She approached Victoria. “Yes, yes, I care! Wh-? Victoria, why would I even be here if…-?”
“Oh, please,” Victoria murmured, rolling her eyes. “Don’t give me your rhetorical, patronizing crap.”

“Victoria, I’m not,” Max insisted, keeping her tone soft.

_Gragh_, Chloe was already hating this, too. Hating seeing Max snapping in half like this, just…just devolving back into this weak _puddle_ of apologizing, and…-

Chloe watched the mixed feelings bubble and rise between both girls’ expressions, each trying to read the other. Chloe instantly felt uncomfortable by this.

“Seriously,” Max pleaded gently, walking right up to Victoria. She hesitated, then grasped Victoria’s hand in her own. Chloe’s stomach lurched. “Victoria, please don’t be like that. Can we…? L-look, let’s just put this bad blood crap _behind_ us, OK? **Please**? We’re both _better_ than.”

Victoria’s eyes flickered. Chloe could see it – Victoria was discovering the Powers of Super Max. Yea, join the Fan Club. Just, uh, remember that Chloe Price is President.

Victoria’s face scrunched a little with embarrassment and her head wobbled in a half-nodding sort of way as she squeezed Max’s hand back before pulling their grip apart.

“We can _try_,” Victoria puffed uncertainly. “But in case you haven’t noticed, I’m _kind of_ dealing with a lot of shit at the moment, soooo…I’m kind of in an emotional _place_ right now?”

Oh, hey. Another snot-nosed brat Chloe wanted to punch in the face.

What in the hell, Max? **What are we doing here?**

“I can imagine,” Max somberly sympathized, latching her hands in front of her waist. “I-I don’t even…know what to say…”

Chloe shoved her hands into her pockets and swayed on the heels of her boots a little. She and Victoria exchanged looks. Chloe could practically feel her face go all _Guard-Dog-Mode ENGAGE_ but Victoria didn’t seem too fazed.
“Where’s your family?” Max wondered.

“They visited for a day when it happened, but...” Victoria’s face tightened as her head bobbed back and forth knowingly. “…with all of the property damage and...everything that’s been going on? I guess there’s ‘more important’ things that need their attention.”

“Wowser...that...sucks.”

“They visit me in the mornings, it's...better than nothing. I can't blame them for having lives.”

“I guess...So...so you've just been alone for the past few days?”

“Is that concern in your voice?” Victoria teased. Or maybe just taunted. Urgh. “I've had company, here and there. Courtney spent an evening with me. Some relatives over the weekend. To be frank? I've needed some time alone, anyway, so...it's worked out.”

Max shuffled her fingers together awkwardly for a moment as Victoria raised her brow at Chloe. Just before the prissy bitch could say something, Max spoke.

“A-Are you hurt? What...-? Did he hurt you, did he...?-? Wait, no, you don't...have to answer that, I-”

“I'm fine,” Victoria snipped with an icy glance. “Yes. He hurt me...” She shrugged up one shoulder half-heartedly as her nostrils tightened. Jaws clenched, her face withered with disgust.

Even Chloe could pick up the major vibes of regret coming from the girl's face.

“For weeks,” Victoria mumbled. “I wasted weeks...months, maybe, fucking...pining after that...psycho...” Victoria sniffed roughly, brushing at her eyes in a flustered way. “For so long, I wanted to see what Mark was like. Not Mr. Jefferson, not the teacher. What he was really like, who he really was...Hmmph.” Victoria shook her head in a slow, bitter way. With eyes like embers, she quietly said to Max darkly, “Careful what you wish for, right?”

“I'm so sorry,” Max whispered gently. Shamefully. The aching in Chloe's stomach grew with each apology she had to see Max force out.
“Don’t be,” Victoria said with an iron tongue. “Max, I heard that...you...were the one who told the authorities to look in that bunker...”

Chloe, boot tapping impatiently against the linoleum floor, intently watched Max's reaction.

Max's lip hung open for a moment, her eyes glazed with uncertainty. Then Max nodded.

“Y-yea, I was.”

Victoria sighed. It was a weird sigh.

“How did you know?” Victoria asked breathily. Dubiously.

Max shrugged up her shoulders. Chloe could see poor Maxie’s eyes flicker with hesitation.

“We figured it out,” Chloe answered in Max’s stead. Coldly, but also very specifically with the word ‘we’ thrown in there. “Did a lil’…P.L. shit, investigated…-”

“Well...” Victoria's head lulled a little. “Guess I...owe you one, huh?”

“Victoria,” Max sighed back. “No, I...I'm just so glad you're OK.”

“OK’ is a bit too optimistic, I am not OK,” Victoria grumbled. Another bitter breath. “Thanks for the pity party and all, but this does not make us friends...”

“Hey,” Chloe snipped. “Max busted her ass off to stop that asshole, and she's trying to be nice, so...-”

“Chloe,” Max gently eased, setting her palm up. Like requesting a barking dog to back down. Well, fuck, Chloe would bark all day until people stopped being dickweeds to her Maxine.
Victoria lashed back, “Who invited you here, anyway?”

“I'm just looking out for Max,” Chloe stiffly replied, crossing her arms and holding her chest high.

“I've seen you around,” Victoria bit back, “You can barely look out for yourself.”

“Guys,” Max spat lifting both hands in the air. “We are all on the same side, here. Jefferson has hurt all of us. Hasn't he done enough damage? Could we at least try to not do more to each other?”

*Damnit-fuck, Max, I hate when you're right...*  
*But it's hella cute seeing you step up like that...*  
*And hella annoying to see you be nice to this ho...*

Victoria swallowed, trying to cool her head again. “I hate to admit it, but Max is right,” she said. “But we don't have to try forcing ourselves to get along, though...We don't have to make friends.”

Max just nodded. “I...I'm willing to do what it takes so that we are friends, Victoria. I know we could be...”

Seeing Max lapping up this ungrateful prick's crumbs like a starving cat…Chloe couldn't stand it.

Victoria sighed. Avoiding eye contact some more – this chick sure had a knack for that – Victoria added, “I guess what I'm trying to say is...Sorry for how I’ve been acting. You…got me out of a bind. Thanks, Max.”

*Oh. Oh, a bind? That's just fucking...*  
*She saved your life, you prick.*

“I’m sorry, too, Victoria. And I didn't...do all that much,” Max dismissed the compliment. *Fucking eh, Max, take some credit! Shit. “But if I helped stop him from...hurting you...”*

“You did,” Victoria confirmed. Chloe's blood vessels boiled as Victoria reached out and took Max's hand. *Daqfiq was this shit? Didn't these two hate each other? “Max, you really should try to find some confidence in yourself. I get that you're still, you know, all down on yourself about Kate? And*
what happened was *tragic*, but...that was nobody's fault.”

“*Uhhh, yes it was,*” Chloe barked. “It was *your* fault. By the way.”

The fucking gross hand-holding broke, much to Chloe's relief.

“You, I've heard *all* about what happened,” Chloe said with some defensive snark, hands on her hips. She could see Max shaking her head in her peripheral vision, but that aching regret in this bitch's eyes was too rewarding to look away from. “You and yer fucking *Asshole Club* dosed that chick, snapped your pics n' your vids, uploaded it all over the webz...” Chloe shook her head and let the guilt linger.

“I deleted that,” Victoria tried to counter.  
*GOLDEEN* used fucking *SPLASH*, nothing happened.

“Yea, and then, like, the *next* fucking day you recorded her *killing* herself, yea, real *saint.*”  
*NIDOQUEEN* used *POISON STING*, super effective, *bitch!*

“Hey, *fuck you,*” Victoria growled back. The edges of her voice were crumbling, the water was starting to trickle through the corners of her eyes. “I am not *perfect, OK*? I'm a teenager at an art school...*Was,* anyway, before it got turned into fucking *debris.*” She turned to Max in some pathetic attempt for sympathy. “I swear, we were *not* even going to *do* any of that with Kate. Then we had some wine and got *stupid,* OK? What do you want me to say?”

Her arms crossed, Chloe retorted, “Pretty sure nothing you say is gonna bring Max's friend back from the dead...”

“And *I'm* pretty sure that you trying to guilt-trip me isn't going to bring your 'angel' back, either. Like she was *so* innocent to begin with. Maybe if she hadn't gotten involved with Jefferson in the *first* place, sh-”

“*Whah-howww,* I knew you were a piss-pot, but I had *no idea* what a fuckin' hypocrite you could-”

“*Guys,*” Max winced, walking over to Chloe and grabbing at her arm suddenly. “Please...Just *stop,* OK?”

Chloe shrugged off Max's grip. No. Nuh-uh. This bitch did *not* get to talk about Rachel like that. Did *not* get to talk to Max like this, either. The *'I'm so innocent'* bullshit, this fucking *disgusting* attention-grabbing, *no* way.
“Max, what the hell? Why are you taking her side, here?”

“I-I’m not taking a side, Chloe, we should all be-”
“I’m your girlfriend,” Chloe growled, “and you’re going to give this bitch more-”
“What?”

At Victoria’s startled and stiff remark, Chloe just flipped a bird her way. *Ha, yea, dat's right, ho! She mine, hands the fuck off!*

“Ch-Chloe, calm down...” Max shoved Chloe’s bird-flipping arm back down.

Max seemed to get so fucking flustered whenever Chloe made the fact they were into each other apparent. *Why? Why would Max feel the need to hide that shit?*

Max whispered irritably, “What is with you?”

Chloe retorted in a grumble, “Gee, Max, maybe how my house is in fucking rubble, my...friend is dead, my mom is wrapped like a mummy, and you're acting like this chick deserves more attention?”

“You actually think you're better than me,” Victoria puffed. “No fucking way, you tweaker urchin.”

“Victoria,” Max sighed. “Don't do this...”

“Then tell your attack dog to back down,” Victoria snarled back.

Max could sigh everyone's names over and over but maybe if she did something – like, gee, dunno, sided with her girlfriend – maybe the situation would wrap itself up sooner.

“Max, let's leave,” Chloe grumbled, slapping the back of her wrist on Max’s shoulder. “I know you're trying to make friends from all this shit, but you don't need fake friends like her.”

Victoria sneered dryly, “Dyed hair, tacky tats, and an entire wardrobe from Hot Topic, but I'm the fake one?”
“Come on, both of you…” Max rolled her eyes and siiiiighed again. Ugh.

“No, you come on,” Chloe grumbled. “Let's leave this pity party.”

“Chloe, chill,” Max huffed, shooting Chloe a wide-eyed glare over her shoulder. “Jesus, I don't know what's gotten into you but you are not helping…”

Ouch. That look of disappointment on Max's face fucking hurt. Why the hell was Max not backing her up, here? This prissy bitch was clearly bad news. And yet Max stood on that side of room, practically ready to fucking hold hands again.

In disbelief, Chloe's mouth hung open and her shoulders popped up as she took a step back.

“Fff…” Chloe could barely force a word out. She could feel her throat tighten, tears threatening to storm the fortified gates of her cheeks against second. “Fine, Max, sure,” Chloe eked out shakily, balling her fists and rushing for the door. “Not helping, huh? Better leave you to it, then…”

“Chloe...!”

Chloe tried to slam the door shut behind her, but it was one of those stupid slow-closing doors, and fuck that!

Gullghhh ugh ffffff rrrmmmmmph...!
Chloe's everything was hurting, burning. Her stomach felt so fucking empty, her cheeks were on fire, her vision was getting blurry as water raced up, out, and over.

Lingering by the closed door, Chloe waited a moment.

Max didn't chase after her.

It fucking hurt.
Her intestines felt like they'd wrapped themselves around her stomach. Her fingernails were digging into her palms.

What were they even *doing* in there? What the actual *fuck* did they share in common besides fucking selfies? Keeping out of sight, Chloe pressed her ear to the door and eavesdropped, having to tune out the noise of the hospital hallway around her.

“...but *I am* sorry, and...you're right, Max.”

“Those words must be hard, coming out of your mouth. 'Sorry,' 'you're right'...Heh.”

“Pff. You've got me there. But, *seriously?* I'm *so* fucking done with everyone right now.”

“I heard you. I...really appreciate you trying to be understanding, at least.”

“Try, try, try...What else *can* you do in this bullshit town? What's *left* of it, anyway...But if you cared so much about being sensitive, maybe you should've left your *attack dog* at home.”

“Heh, sh-she's just...really protective...I-I mean, I get it, Victoria. Everyone's high-strung right now. We all...have our own issues. I'm *so* sorry that happened just now. Really. She didn't mean it, she's...got a lot going on, too. She almost lost her mom.”

“I almost lost my *life*, and I *did* lose people I cared about. People like...-”

“I know.”

“It's no excuse, Max.”

“We're both...dealing with a lot of private stuff so, please, just...try to understand.”

“That-...? *She* is your...girlfriend?”

“Yea...”

“Seriously?”
“Seriously. I'm...really into her, I...I don't know...”

“Color me surprised.”

“Ha, me, too.”
Oh, man, that laugh. That warm, cozy laugh...

“Guess that explains why I've seen you two together all over the place lately...”

“Y-yea...She was my *best* friend growing up. And...now she's...*more*, I...I don't know...It just kind of happened.”

“Well, at least she's...alive.”

“...Yea, I-...Victoria, I'm so sorry. I heard about...-”

“It's like you said: we all have our issues right now. I wish I could...take back some of the shit I did this semester...If I'd *known*...-”

“Victoria, trust me. Even knowing what's coming? It...doesn't mean you can change how things happen. You've...done some things that have hurt people. But, I-I mean, I have, too. We can still try to make up for it...”

“You're right. And I will. I'm not *evil*, Max...”

“I believe you, Victoria. But I *don't* understand you...”

“That makes two of us. I always feel like I have to overcompensate.”

“Uh...O-Oh...”
“Max?”

“I-I'm fine, just...just a bit dizzy. Wh...-? Sorry, what did you say?”

“Oh, just...how I feel like I'm forced into this position where I have to overcompensate all the time.”

“Right. W-well, you know, Chloe does, too. I think...spending time with her lately, I think in a way, it's helping me...try to look past the surface level shit, you know? Start...I-I dunno, seeing people for who they are, not just...how they act out...”

“...Damn, Max. Hugh. I don't know how you do it. How you put up with people, and still...give them a second chance like that.”

“I've...had enough second chances given to me lately where I...think I can really appreciate their value, I, um...I guess. They don't cost much on one end, but they can mean the world on the other...”

“Mm...”

Chloe's eyes had been twitching all around as she tried to make herself look like she was, just...like, leaning against the door...But she could see a doctor and a nurse coming and didn't want to draw attention to herself. Shit.

*Ulgh. Gag me. Like I need to listen to more of this bullshit, anyway.*

Pushing herself away from the hospital room door, Chloe nearly punched a hole through her pockets with how forcefully she shoved her fists into them.

Chloe was fuming. She could feel the fucking steam pouring out of her ears.

She needed a serious chill pill. And then she remembered – she *had* one still. Emergency backup. The joint tucked away in her glove compartment.

*What happened to all of this 'you're all that matters to me' shit, huh, Max? What the fucking hell? Argh! I can't believe you right now...*

*Everyone pretends to care...until they don't.*
Chloe watched the last wisp of smoke drift along, disintegrating, fading...

Nothing lasts. Nothing beautiful, anyway...

Chloe's vision was a little blurred. The shit she'd just finished smoking hadn't been quality, but...it'd hit the spot good enough. As it turned out, her 'emergency joint' was more like an 'emergency stump.' Past Chloe had been greedy. And probably flying high when she'd fancied herself so smart to save it for later. Hadn't tasted too good, either, but...fuck it. She'd barely hit that first little 'step,' that phase, she'd wanted.

Everything was just...a little surreal. Her head buzzed just a little. The setting sun felt warmer then it should've against her cheeks. That golden glow across everything? It was fucking magical to her eyes. She could stare at this shit for hours, felt like. Her nose felt funny, her thighs felt a little tingly. She felt a little dizzy. It was fan-fucking-tastic.

The air was salty and humid. The setting sun cast a golden sheen over Chloe's vision. Like that time she and Rachel had done a sleep over at their hideout in the junkyard. They’d set down a picnic blanket to mellow out on, medicate…Chloe had sat backwards on a folding chair she’d brought, leaning against the metal panel, gazing down at Rachel. Rachel had laid herself out on the blanket, her river of golden hair flowing upstream toward Chloe’s feet. There’d been a magical moment in there – Chloe staring down over the edge of the chair, gazing down right at Rachel, staring back up at her. They were both high as kites, and Chloe had…said some stupid shit. Couldn’t even remember.

Whatever she’d said, Rachel had found it hilarious. Her face had lit up so fucking brightly. The glow of Rachel’s laughing, serene face, her hair flowing around…It was like looking at an angel.

Chloe giggled to herself, just from the memory.

She caught herself staring at the ember from her puffed out joint, below her feet. She stamped it out with her boot.

She could hear footsteps. Crossing that rickety bridge by the beach.

“Chloe,” came Max's voice in the distance.

Chloe sighed, dipping her head, scratching her scalp, closing her eyes, trying to regain some fucking composure.
“How’d you find me?” Chloe wondered.

“I guessed,” Max replied bluntly.

“Good guess...”

“You walk all the way the fuck out here?”

“No, I, uh-...Brooke's family came to pick her up, I asked them to drop me off here.”

“...Huh.”

With her hands in her pockets, Chloe finally turned. Max was nearby now. She slowed, her face scrunching up.

“Augh, Chloe, you smell...—”

“Like pot?”

“Chloe...”

Aaaaand there was the disappointed sigh, complete with disappointed name-drop and disappointed crossing of arms and shaking of head. Yea. Fine. Whatever, Max. What happened to 'no judging,' huh?

“I'm...in a shitty mood, Max, OK? I just had a little, don't freak out on me...”

Max's hands seemed to tighten against her own elbows as she closed to the distance.

“You said you were gonna quit,” Max pouted, glancing sideways. Adorable little grump.

“And I'm gonna,” Chloe testily assured. “Just don't...don't fucking rush me, all right? Last time I tried quitting, I got hellish rushed, and it...I just slipped back, so don't...rush it.”

“OK, I'm not rushing you, I'm...I'm just saying.”

“What, Max? What are you 'just saying'?”

Chloe was eyeballing her now, hands on her hips, leaning a bit with expectation. Were they gonna talk shit out, or were they gonna roll on?

Shrugging at Chloe, Max murmured, “I guess I'm a little annoyed that you bailed, just to...smoke.”
Chloe’s eyes started to roll, but she made them halt, her lips squirming awkwardly.

“You were preoccupied, I needed time to just, fuckin’...vent out my system.”

Max nodded thoughtfully. Actually believing Chloe's lie.

What she needed was Max's attention. Max's reassurance, Max's apology for focusing on all those little Blackwell dickweeds who didn't treat her right.

“Fair enough,” Max conceded. She took Chloe's hand and gave Chloe a brief side-hug. Chloe kissed Max on the hat. Plugh. It was knitted and woolly and...kinda gross. She got wool strands in her lips.

Max broke the hug apart, but their hands remained connected.

“Wanna take a walk on the beach?” Chloe offered, eager to just move the fuck on and...get somewhere private.

“Uh...Sh-sure, yea.” Max was clueless. Chloe's brain sighed.

Chloe took the lead until Max's pace kept up.

The pair walked in silence for a bit, coming off the little worn out bridge – which was still standing, somehow.

The silence felt fucking great. Max's hand in Chloe's felt so warm. She felt light-headed, each step a small challenge, her legs weak at the knees, but everything was warm. Whether it was the brief smoke or Max herself, Chloe was certain that their sensations were mixing fucking wonderfully.

“So...” Max said. Awkwardly. “You need to, like...talk?”

Chloe shrugged. She took a deep breath through her nose and thought. Her brain seemed to absorb ideas from the ether of the universe or some cosmic bullshit, haha. Hohh...Man. This felt strange, but in a nice kinda way.

Chloe replied after letting her brain float for a moment.

“It's...weird...hanging out with you again.”

“...Huh?”

“Juh...-” Chloe's chest stiffened. She felt like a sob and a laugh were both fighting with each other inside. A cough came out, instead. “Haugh, just, this past week and a half...you. Being here. Back in my life, so...suddenly, and-and just...all of this crazy ass shit, and now we're, ya know, fucking dating?...I-I dunno, it's just fucking insane how much has changed in two weeks.”
“Yea,” Max sighed out sheepishly. “When I stop to think on it? This is all...unreal...”

“It's been nice that you've...actually spent time with me. Like, consistently.” Chloe scratched at her eyelashes, avoiding Max's turned gaze. In a wistful mumble, she added, “That's more than any of my other friends have done...”

Max's lips opened. Chloe knew they did. She could hear just the slightest intake of breath that came before Max would say something...controversial.

It hurt a little when Max didn't speak. It hurt to see Max still being so unsure of speaking her mind. Like she was afraid to say what they were both thinking.

‘More than any of your friends? What about Rachel?’

Chloe wasn't really sure how to answer that question. The, uh, question Max hadn't actually asked. Chloe's feelings for Rachel had become so warped and twisted in this hella scary way over the past few days. This fucked up mash of nostalgia and longing and desperation and anger and betrayal and melancholy, and...-

Chloe had to brush the past off so she could focus on the present right then.

“Probably easier to...focus on all those other people than...deal with me right now...” Chloe's tone had turned sour. She quickly tried to lessen the sting by adding, “I-I don't mean that in a bitchy way. Not...not totally.”

Still struggling to shake off those fucking adorable eyes gazing at her profile, Chloe kept staring off at the sunset before them.

Chloe then decided, “You've...probably been trying to avoid awkward conversations like this.”

“Uhh...” Max's voice quivered a bit. “Puh...Pretty much, yea.” At least she was being honest. Chloe much preferred that over...some bullshit fake attempt at sympathy. Like fucking Victoria, ugh. “Chloe, I know you're going through...so much right now, I...I don't even...know what...-” Max trailed off uncertainly.
Chloe was loving Max's hand in hers, their thighs brushing against each other with each step. But she was hating Max's wishy-washy words...

“Look,” Chloe sighed. “The worst thing you can do is treat me like a baby. I still want to laugh, and...talk shit with my best friend. Pff.” Chloe met Max's timid expression, her lips pursed. “I mean, my girlfriend. OK? You don't gotta treat me like all of those people back there, dude. I'm...different from them. Or, I mean, I should be, to you, anyway, amirite?”

Max swallowed, and nodded. Courteously. Respectively. She was acting a little strange.

Trying to work around this, Chloe's gaze averted back to the ocean. To the radiance refracting against the shimmering surface of the waves. To the glorious glowing orb, hovering just above the horizon.

“Can we, uh, hold up a sec?” Chloe requested, pulling the duo to a pause.

She clamped her fingers against Max's tightly as they both turned to look over the torn up beach. Chunks of debris and wood still littered the sand. A couple of rotting whale carcasses remained, having without the tornado, it seemed. Contrasting this was the fucking pretty ocean, lit up by the setting sun. Chloe was aware enough to realize her stoned senses made everything fucking glow into her brain more than it really did...But damn.

“This is seriously the best view of the sunset,” Chloe mumbled, rubbing her thumb against Max's wrist. “What do you photographers call that?” Chloe turned to Max, who looked...pale.

Damn, what the hell was up with her tonight?

“Uhh...” Max seemed at a loss. Not like her with this sorta shit.

Chloe swallowed the unease in her throat as her memory suddenly sparked.

Snapping her fingers, she recalled it.

“Nah, I got it, I remember: 'The Golden Hour.'”
Max seemed a bit startled.

“Y-ya, that's...that's it,” Max whispered. “How did you know?”

Chloe smirked smugly at first. But then she could feel her expression wither.

“...Rachel.”

“...Oh.”

Shit. Awk-sauce. The very fucking topic they were both trying to avoid...Fucking damnit.

“Y-ya, because she...was...-”
“She was into photography, too,” Max said sullenly. “I remember...”

Of course you do. With how much you've put up with me fucking blabbering about how amazing she is. Ugh, fuck. How amazing she was. Goddamnit...

“I-I, umm...-” Chloe cleared her throat, swaying Max's arm back and forth gently. “I seriously think you two woulda got along, you, uh...Bet you two would take some amazing shots of this shit, right here...”

“Mm...” Max's head bobbed and she stuck her left hand in her hoodie pocket. Chloe squeezed Max's right hand within her own and tried to figure out what the hell strange shit was going on in Max's head.

She hadn't seen Max so much as snap a selfie with her phone. Not a single photograph since before all the crazy crap had gone down.

Chloe couldn't figure out what to say to Max's silence. She gazed around their more immediate surroundings. Away from the sun, and the sea.

“Those beached whales look so sad,” Chloe quietly and solemnly lamented. “I...kind of know how
they feel.” Chloe sniffed in the salty air and rubbed her sleeve against her nostril. Damn, so much for a change of topic. It was like her brain wanted to stay stuck in this depressing shit. Optimism, man, optimism! “At least...I'm alive, here with you. Wish we'd spent more time out here tonight, instead of...dickin' around with what's-their-bitches.”

“Stella,” Max mumbled. There was a...weird bitterness to her tone. “And Victoria, and Brooke. Chloe...They're not that bad.”

“I'm just saying, Max, you left me fucking hanging for, like, a hour and a half. And then dragged me though an obstacle course of brats who obviously don't give a fuck about you, when we could've been chilling like this. Together. Alone. But, no, they were more important. Not fucking cool.”

“’Not fucking cool?’” Max seethed in an furious whisper.

Shit. Chloe had maybe picked the wrong moment to get crap off her chest, huh?

“Chloe, most of the people I knew from Blackwell are either dead or I'm probably never going to see them again. We are together because this town is broken. We owe them.”

“We don't owe anyone shit, Max!” Chloe snapped in a whisper. “Maybe this town deserved this, I mean-”
“’You stop right there, Chloe Price.’” Max broke their hand hold. “You take that back.” Max jabbed her index finger toward the sand. “Right now.”

Chloe's eyes were getting damp. Ugh, fuck. She was careless with her words again. As-fucking-usual. Seeing Max upset seemed to be bringing out all of this...crap. She'd just spew thoughts out, thinking that there was some way to talk Max out of feeling like shit. The past few days, it just seemed to be making things worse.

“O-OK, I'm hella high-strung right now? My home is fucking gone, my mom is disfigured, Rachel is dead, my entire fucking life – which, by the way, was already dipped in shit – just got set on fire. A'ight? So...-”

Max, who had been nodding – a bit impatiently – through Chloe's rumbling, squeezed Chloe's hand fiercely. Chloe felt a pulse of arousal swell through her from the intensity on Max's voice, in her body language, in her voice.
“But like you just said – at least you're alive, at least you're with me.”

“Y-yea...” Chloe was a bit stunned. Mad Max, with the ocean breeze tussling her hair a bit, it was...kind of a lot to take in right that moment.

But Chloe couldn't let herself get distracted. Maybe Max was a bit annoyed, but Chloe was fucking pissed, come on, now. How could Max not understand how much she was hurting? Was Max really so occupied with all her Blackwell flunkies?

“Ffff-Fine, whatever,” Chloe spat, grabbing Max by the arm. “I'm not cool with all this shit, either, OK? I'm just talking shit 'cuz I wish you'd stop fucking over thinking it and we could just...be us.”

“Chloe, I under ...thoughted – thought – all of this. That's how we ended up here. I kept fucking with shit, and got to a point where I couldn't fix it.”

“Know what you coulda fixed? Me being stuck, alone, staring at my half-burned mother for like, an hour.”

“Wh-...? Chloe, she's your mom...”

“And there's abso-fucking-lutely not a goddamn thing I can do for her right now! I was losing my shit sitting in that room while she fell asleep. I've caused her enough bullshit for right now, she...she should be with David, at least...at least he fucking seems able to make her feel better...”

“Dude, Joyce loves you, you don't need to...to do anything to help her right now, just to be there.”

“Case you haven't caught onto the running theme here, Maxie, I'm kinda shit at being there for people, because I've never had anyone to teach me how.”

Max's eyes flickered with this awful, hurt look, and this slight eyeroll, and Chloe knew she'd, just...fucked up again. Damnit. She was just trying to be honest! Come on...

Yea. No, yea. *Fuck it* if it made Max mad.
Chloe had to get this shit out. Besides, like, as Max's girlfriend, she was, like, totally obligated to be honest, be open, communication, discourse, all that, right?

“Chloe, Joyce has been there to—”
“ You sure fucking haven't been there for me.”

“What ...?”

“For five fucking years , I wasn't worth the effort, was I?”

“Stop.”

Max tore her hand out of Chloe's. Chloe tried to re-grab it, but she was just high enough where her reactions were sluggish.

So...Chloe promptly did as she'd just been told. She stopped. She stared. She couldn't remember when she'd last seen Max with so much ice in her expression.

“Chloe?” Max's nose was wrinkled with some disgust. It hurt to look at. “Ever since we...got back together, I...I could tell how much you were dealing with. I felt like fucking shit that I hadn't been there for you. And you let me feel like that. You've been making me feel like...like garbage off and on, and...and off and on again ever since we reconnected. Like the shitty way you treated me after we found out about Frank and Rachel? That was not OK! That was... toxic. I keep...I keep pushing it back, telling myself...'Chloe can't help it, she's just got a lot going on right now.' But, no. You don't get to...to keep saying that crap to me, Chloe. This 'five years' bullshit? Did I ever call you, or write you? No. You...I moved, my whole life was rearranged, I lost touch with everyone back here, because I had to bust my ass off to keep up with my new life. How do you think I even got into Blackwell? Because it sure as hell wasn't by...by playing hookey in a fucking junk yard, treating guns like toys, hanging out with...with drug dealers and 'self-medicating.' I didn't have a step-dad working for the school to get me in, I had to earn it. I basically had no social life because I was...in some hurry to grow up. I disconnected from everyone in Seattle, in Arcadia...I felt like I didn't matter, not unless I made something of myself. Do you know how sick I am of everyone telling me 'how mature' I am for my age? Being with you, Chloe, it made me realize...I don't want to be some mature grown-up, I want to be... Max. Just Max, you know? And I am so grateful you've helped me figure that out. But this 'five years' shit? This has to stop. Chloe, you didn't fucking write me, either. Not once.”

Max paused. Let that ugly truth simmer.
And Chloe felt selfish again.
She was afraid to just... *swallow* , with the way Max's eyes burned into her own. Max wasn't done yet.

“Shit goes *both* ways. And it is fucking *selfish* of you to pin all that on me, as if I am *any* more to blame than you. We *both* let our friendship fall apart. We *both* chose to...to bring it back. And if this – *us*? – if it's going to work, we *both* have to put in the effort, which means *you* have to stop this fucking...projecting, this crap where you refuse to accept responsibility. Where you refuse to accept consequences. The past ten days of my life have been so fucking twisted, but I am *fully* aware that every single thing I do? It has *consequences*. So instead of *wasting* what I'm doing on...on...fucking petty shit, I'm going to *be there* for people. I'm *trying* to be there for you, too, Chloe, I *am*, but I *have* been for days now, and *other people* need me, now, too! I *owe* them everything. You owe them everything. But...So...So...this...” Max's face was damp with tears by now, her cheeks red. She sniffed and rubbed a sleeve across her face. “This is *all* I can do for them, Chloe...*You* need to...do something, any fucking thing, to...at least *try* to make up for all the damage I've caused. I can't live in a...in a fucking *vacuum* with you, I need...*people* .”

Chloe’s heart felt like a hundred needles had just been jabbed through it. The last one hurt the most.

Max needed *more* than Chloe? Chloe wasn't enough.

Of-fucking-course not.

Chloe was *never* enough...

“Muh...” Chloe’s mouth was sluggish. “Max...” She tried to take a step toward Max. Max took a step back, her brows contorting in this weird way that made Chloe ache.

Fuck. No...Wh...? 

“Max...I-I get it, I *get it*, OK? You-...You're *pissed* , and...and that's my fault, and...I'm fucking *sorry*, OK? But...but I *needed* you today, and...you just... *bailed* on me, but I *needed* you. You just...spent all this time with all these *other* bitches, like...like you being *nice* is gonna change something. And-and you keep fucking *guilt tripping* me about David, like he's some...misunderstood fucking hero. And fucking *Victoria*? You just *totally* blew me off around her! Right in front of her! Made me look like an asshole. Fucking kept...kept *holding* her hand! What the *hell*, Max? That chick is a fucking *whore*, she treated you like shit, she *killed* your friend. And...and *I'm* the asshole?”
Chloe’s rant drizzled to a stop. Max’s face had somehow turned even more angry, with these wide eyes of disbelief.

“Are you fucking serious right now?” Max seethed. “Did everything I just said go in one ear, out the other?” Max’s hands found their way up to the sides of her head. She pushed them beneath her hat, clawing at her temples and shaking her head. “This is exactly what I am talking about, Chloe, oh, my God.”

“I-I’m trying to explain where I’m coming from, here.”

“I know where you’re coming from, Chloe!” Max spat back, bumping the volume up a notch. “You spent a whole fucking week making sure I knew where you were coming from, OK? I understand, you’re dealing with shit. So is everyone else. I am trying to balance all of this shit and it’s like all you can see is what’s in front of you…”

Chloe’s hands were starting to shake.

“Wh-…? N-no, dude, I am doing my best, here. Like, like, I am trying, OK? I spent time with my mom and David, and-”

“And you’re whining about it!”

“Nnnn...-! No! I wasn’t whining, I just...-”

“You act like doing one half-decent thing is, like, this big deal! Like you deserve a gold-fucking-star!”

“Maybe it is for me, OK?! Maybe I’m so fucked up that doing whatever good-fucking-deeds you think I should be doing is fucking difficult for me!”

“Well, it shouldn’t be! It...it should just be common fucking decency, Chloe.”

“Oh. Oh, yea? Yea? I ain’t exactly decent, or common, so...so maybe I need some fucking examples, Caulfield.”

“Uhhh,” Max’s head jerked to one side with offense at the notion. “Well, since you brought it up, how about Kate? You think it was all on Victoria? ‘Cuz no, it wasn’t. That’s on everyone. Including me. You remember the morning before she died? She called me, Chloe. She needed someone to talk to, and...and for whatever reason, she thought that someone was me, but...-” Max tossed up her arms with self-loathing, her head lulling up toward the sky. “She was fucking wrong, apparently! My friend was hurting, and you wouldn’t let me answer the fucking phone! And I let you not let me answer the phone. She killed herself, Chloe. Fucking killed herself. I was too busy dicking around with you in a goddamn junk yard because you didn’t trust me about my powers, even when I’d just proven it to you! You couldn’t even fucking wait five minutes...Believe me, I saw it, I answered that phone call, and I saw you throw a fucking tantrum, and it hurt, it hurt too much seeing you in pain, seeing you disappointed with me, seeing you get into an argument. So I Rewound. And I gave you what you wanted. But looking back? It was selfish. You were selfish, and I let myself be selfish with you when we both should’ve put poor...God. Fucking Kate...We should’ve put her before ourselves. I should’ve told you to grow up and have some fucking patience for once. But...I
couldn’t,” Max’s intonation weakened at that last word and she sniffed, biting her lower lip. “Can never say ‘no’ to Chloe Price…and look what keeps happening…” Max savagely tossed an arm out up the hill, toward the debris of Arcadia Bay. Max puffed out in a desperate whisper, “Fuck…”

Chloe's legs were feeling weak. Her stomach felt...awful. She couldn't even describe it right, like she wanted to puke, but wouldn't be able to even if she tried?

“Max,” Chloe squeaked out, coughing on her own pent up sob. “Wh...What are you saying?”

“My choices aren't the only...ones that matter, Chloe...Even from the start...in the bathroom? That my choice to save you. It was Jefferson's choice to...to manipulate Nathan, and...and Nathan's dad was an asshole to him. And it was Nathan's choice to...bring a fucking gun in there, and it was...?” Max swallowed, giving Chloe a glare that Chloe feared she'd never forget. “It was your choice to get involved with him in the first place. To...get involved with that kind of life...To sink to that level...To get in so bad you needed to...fucking steal from the handicapped to get out of dodge? Jesus. Chloe, any of those choices...All of us. If any of us had chosen differently, just one of us, that moment in the bathroom wouldn't have happened the way it did. Wouldn't have happened at all. All of our choices fucking matter. They all have consequences. Not just mine. Fucking Chaos Theory? We live it, every goddamn day. The smallest fucking thing we do is going to ripple. It's going to matter, somehow, somewhere. Even if we never see it. I want...-”

Max's breath escaped her, and she clamped her palm against her lips, her eyes squinting as a well of emotion boiled like a volcano.

Max's wrath seemed to wither and melt in the face of what Chloe expected was a really pathetic, hurt, stunned kind of look on her own end. Max took in a long, ragged breath through opened lips, then expelled through grit teeth.

Max then replied cautiously, in a whimper, “I-I need...a minute...”

And then Max turned around, shoving her hat back straight on her head. She pulled her hood up over it, going to march off on her own.

What the...?- No! Fucking leave. Max couldn't just...just call Chloe out like that and just...leave. Fucking leave. What the shit?!

“Hey!” Chloe growled, stomping toward Max. “Where the hell are y-?”

“Leave me alone!” Max hissed, spinning her abdomen around, shoving her palm out at Chloe.

Startled by Max's sudden gesture, Chloe's whole body flinched, her eyes squinted shut. Her knees felt weak all of a sudden, her stomach queasy. She felt sick, dizzy...

When she opened her eyes, Max was...gone.

Like, gone gone. Like, literally magicked out of sight.

No. No way. No fucking way! For real?!

This was like the door at Blackwell when they'd been busting in. Max could, just, like, fucking teleport with her Rewind somehow. That was so...-! That was out of line, right? Totally unfair. Chloe wasn't crazy to think that was out of line, was she?

Max had swore she was done Rewinding. Promised. Pinky-swore.
Pinky-swears had used to mean something between them.

_Puh_. Apparently, not anymore.

Apparently, Chloe had pissed Max off _that_ much that she was willing to break promises.

Ouch. That realization hurt _so_ much...

And then allllll of the realizations crashed at Chloe, all at once. Everything Max had just said. How solid her case had been. How right she was.

OK, OK. Yes. Max was...totally, like, in her right to call Chloe out. Fine.

All of that anger, all of that built up _shit_, Chloe could tell so much of it had been, like, bottled up. Stored. Like all this time, Chloe was annoying Max, and...and Max was just being quiet about it. Mostly, anyway.

Suddenly, everything was starting to feel...like a lie, of sorts. Max had broken her promise. She'd been, what, pissed off this whole time, or...-?

_Everybody lies. No exceptions._
_Everyone pretends to care until they don't._
_Even you, Max._

Chloe couldn't just stand there. Waiting. She just couldn't. No way. She noticed the footprints in the sand, there was an extra set of them – heading back where they'd come from. Three sets when there shoud've been only two. Chloe's line of vision turned toward the lighthouse in the distance. Yup. That was exactly where Max was heading. Chloe was damned sure.

With nothing but the ocean waves and a million regrets to keep her company, Chloe shoved her beanie down over her head, covering her ears to keep them warm. On the way toward the lighthouse, her mind was reeling with so many thoughts. Too many thoughts. Too many feelings. Her tears lost their meaning for a few minutes. Everything was tears, a state of existence – sobbing uncontrollably but in small, steady spurts.

Chloe tried checking her phone to take her mind off of everything for a moment.

But there were no new messages.

Max's phone had been going fucking _crazy_ all this time. But Chloe's had barely had any activity.

And then it dawned on her.

_Maybe the reason you feel so fucking alone is because you keep pushing everyone away? Maybe you keep trying to fill this gaping fucking hole all with one person, but one person can't live up to your expectations. Not even Max Caulfield. She's not perfect. And you're so fucking far from perfect...no wonder Max needs more. Needs other people...You're doing a shit-ass job of being what she needs right now. She has been there for you, through all of this crazy shit. She gave you both things you wanted most, both things you needed: an answer to Rachel, and what you wanted from Rachel in the first place._
Now she needs you, Chloe Price.

Maybe try to step up your fucking game?

Staring at her lock screen of a darkly dreaming Maxine, Chloe pondered what to do with her phone, her hand flexing and relaxing with it between her fingers. She could think of something else she'd rather be flexing her hands around. A couple somethings.

Erh, shit, now was not the time for that, huh?

But, c’mon, it would seriously help them both feel better, right? Ehhhhh?

Mmm?

Hehh.

Ugh.

Your game. The 'being a fucking adult' one. Step it up. Like, for real. I mean, I don’t know what the actual fuck I'm doing, but I sure as hell ain't trying hard enough. It's time to start.

Chloe swiped her phone to unlock it. Thunder rolled in the distance, jarring her a bit. She glanced upward, wary of rain. But the clouds were distant, off across the sea. Whew.

Chloe sent a string of texts as she crossed the beach's humble bridge and made way for the pine-riddled cliffside.

[To: Maxine <3 ]
[that was so not fair.] [but guess i haven't been fair to u either.]
[thought we're supposed to talk shit out tho rite?]
[i'm on my way.]
[i'm really fucking sorry i really mean it.]
[for everything.]
[ xoxoxo ]

Chloe didn't receive a reply, but that was expected. Chloe dropped her phone back into the pocket of her brand new cargo pants Max’s mom had snagged the day prior. You could buy new clothes, but not second chances. Hopefully by the time Chloe found Max, they'd both have cooled off a bit and try this again.

All the same, Chloe still felt…fucking annoyed. Infuriated at, just, like…everything. If that goddamn bitch had just kept her hands off Max, stayed in her own fucking lane…-

Gragh. There Chloe went, trying to pin it all on one person. Some other person. Some other person beside Chloe…

Goddamnit, Max, fucking hate how right you are about me...

Step up your goddamn game, Chloe Price.
Try harder.
Be better.
Maxine deserves it.

By the time Chloe had found her way up the cliff, up the path, through the pine trees, the sun was grazing the ocean's surface on the horizon.

And there she was.

Max was sitting on the bench by the lighthouse. She was hunched over, elbows on her knees. Chloe was still a ways away, but...she could imagine what awful shit was stewing in the poor girl's head. Slowing her pace, Chloe kept her gaze intent on Max.

The closer Chloe got, the more details came into her perception.

The way Max's shoulders shuddered.
The way her arms quivered.
The sound of her sniffles, her sobs, her coughs.
Damn...

Chloe found herself merely feet away, still undetected.
So much stealth. Just...snuck right up on Max.
Same way Max had...snuck right up on Chloe over the past week.
Seemed like Max had used that Bonus to get a Critical Heal going...
And Chloe had caused a Critical Hit, instead.

Chloe just stared for a few moments in silence, letting Max's pain, just fucking oozing out her fragile form, just...just let that pour all over Chloe's brain. Chloe needed to capture this moment. Lock it up in a bottle, keep it handy, pull it out the second she started being an asshole. Remind herself.

I did this to her.
She tried to fix me, fix my broken, shitty life, but...
Instead, I just made her broken, like I am.
Fuck.

I have to do better.
She's totally fucking right, I have to do better.

Chloe rubbed her fingers against her nose, brushing gunk off as she cautiously took a seat on the bench beside Max. Their hips touched. Max made a low-key groaning, whimpering sound, scooting a bit to the right. Max furiously rubbed her palms against her face.

“Max, I...I don't get it, why are you so...gung-ho about these...pricks? About...me? If I'm such a...bitch, a-and I mean, I have been, I just...I don't...get why you...-”

“People can change, Chloe.”

“Yea, well, it doesn't make the bad shit they've done disappear, Max.”

Max crossed her arms bitterly.

Max retorted crossly, “I guess that goes double for me, then, right? Fucking...triple, even...”
“Wh-? Max, what the fuck? I was...I was talking about...me, about...about-”
“There you go again! Holy shit, you just-...Just everything's all about you...?”
“No! No, dude. That is not fair, I'm trying to own up, here...”

Max sighed, her head sagging to one side. Her expression wrinkled with pain. She rubbed her sleeves against her face, struggling to keep her cheeks dry.

“Aghh,” Chloe huffed with frustration. Max's head was bobbed, avoiding Chloe's eyes. “What do you want from me, Max? Just...fucking tell me, please! I'll...I'll do whatever...you want, I will, I just-...”

Max quickly lifted her hand up to Chloe's face, cutting her off.

Augh, fuck. Chloe felt ill. This was all getting to her.

Sorta felt similar to like, fuckin' hangover stomachache. When Chloe got hungover, it was pretty much always in her stomach, not the head. Just...queasy, weird, bleh, shittiness.

This moment felt like that. Like a motion sickness. Maybe the pot had been a dumb idea, after all...

When Max's hand fell back into her lap, something was strange about her. She was, like, really crying again. All of a sudden. Like, her cheeks were fucking wet and shit, even though she'd just dried her face. Right? Chloe had seen her dry her cheeks. But...the waterworks were all over again. Tears pattered to the ground beneath them.

But some of them were red drops.

Because Max's nose had started to bleed.

_Fucking hell._

Max whimpered, squinting her eyes in anguish. She sniffed, and sniffed, and rubbed her hoodie sleeves against her face, the tears and the trickle of blood all washing together.

Chloe was speechless for a few seconds.
No fucking way.
Just...-!

Why?

“Max...M-Maxine Caulfield, do not tell me that you just fucking Rew-?!”
“Shut up.”

Max's words had been quiet, but so rigid. So fucking cold, so sharp, like a...like a sword across Chloe's neck. Chloe couldn't...speak, she couldn't...breathe.

Max sobbed through her sleeves, struggling to dry her face. Her bangs got all messed up and stuck to her forehead, her eyes looked trashy, she just looked...so out of it, so...hurt.

“Chloe Price,” Max countered the full name drop. Her voice trembling, she pleaded darkly, “Just...please shut up for, just...a minute. OK?”
Chloe managed to nod her head in quick, nervous gestures. Shit, fuck...wh-what was up? What had happened?

“I can't fight with you again,” Max whimpered, her voice cracking. “I can't...-! Wuh...-! We just argued, like...thr...three times, I can't...do this, I...can't. I gave you three tries, and you just...-!” Max wrapped her arms around her ribs and squeaked out a desperate sob.

Jesus fuck, Max...

“Wh...-? Whhhhat can I do, Max? Huh? Maxie?” Chloe's voice had turned soft, shaky, quivering, gentle. She rubbed at Max's shoulders, but Max shrugged the gesture off. “Wh-what can I do? What's wrong? Huh? C'mon, c'mon. Y-you gotta tell me...” Words were just spilling out, she just...she needed to fucking understand, she knew she needed to do something.

“Stop talking,” Max pleaded desperately. Her eyes caught Chloe's in a net of panic. “Think before you...say shit. Please, Chloe. I need you to think before you...Hughh...!” Max escaped back into her sleeves again when more tears started to trickle out.

God fucking damn, Max.
What did I say to you?
What did I do?
Well, that's obvious: I fucked up.
Three times, apparently. Sounds like me, all right...

Shit. Fuck.

OK, OK, OK. Stop panicking. Stop. Stop it.
You just had a fucking smoke and you're already shaking again? This is fucked up.
I shoulda known that shit wasn't quality. God...damnit, Frank, still fucking me over from the grave...

AGHHH. Stoppit stoppit stoppit!
The fuck is wrong with you?!
Stop avoiding, stop flying off the fucking rails.

She is in MAX-IMUM MELTDOWN MODE like six inches in front of you and all you can think about is that you just smoked shitty weed?! The fuck is your problem?!

Try harder.
Be better.

Cool, we got a plan, here. I can work with this, I can...I can run with this...
Wait. No.
No running. No off the cuff bullshit. No verbal magic tricks. No jokes. No witty fucking references.
Just fucking stop.
Just fucking breathe.
Just fucking think.

Chloe tried to stare off into the sun, barely poking up out of the horizon.
About to be snuffed out sooner than Chloe would've preferred.
Like Rachel.
Chloe tried to gaze to her left, toward the beach. Torn apart. Dead whales rotting. What birds that lived picking at the remains to sustain themselves. Like Arcadia Bay.

Chloe tried to gaze to her right, up to the lighthouse above. Still standing, still there, simultaneously motionless but apart from the town. Protected in its segregation, yet not alight, not guiding, just...standing there, useless. Like Chloe Price.

Chloe tried to gaze back down to Max, right beside her. All that pain, all that shuddering and shaking and whimpering and moaning. The confusion, the self-inflicted torment, the guilt, the love, both having lost so much and being lost. So fucking lost.

Chloe extended her hand – cautiously, so cautiously, she was not going to fuck this up. Max's wrist tilted toward hers, and Chloe took Max's hand, laced their fingers together.

Chloe stopped to think.

And words finally came.

“I'm sorry...”

“Me, too,” Max eked out, barely.

“I was...I was a total dick for blowing a fuse when Kate called last week. I had no idea what shit she was going through. I stopped you from being her friend...and...now she's gone. You saved me, instead...even though I did not fucking deserve it...So, uhh, um-...I was outta line today. I've been...trying to stop you again. Like you said. Trying to stop you from being a friend for those...those other people.”

Max nodded slowly, sniffing in snot. Chloe let the moment linger some more. She thought some more. But Max spoke up first.

“Another thing, Chloe? I know you're all...like, hyper jazzed about us dating – believe me, I am, too – but you've...gotta stop outing me in front of people.”

“Whhh...-?”

Outing? As in, you're not, like, 'out'? Out out?

“You totally messed up what I'd wanted to do with my parents,” Max sighed. Her tone lacked that hard, sharp edge, but it was still burning with disappointment. “You just...took over, when you...should’ve let me...-”

It was foreign to Chloe's brain, this idea of not being 110% out and open about basically everything, anything, anytime, all the time.

But the way Max had put it: 'took over.' Suddenly, so many of Max's little...weird...so-and-so's over the past few days, it made sense. Shit. Chloe was all about self expression, and she'd...kinda taken away Max's ability to express this pretty fucking awesome new part of her life with people in her own way, at her own pace, whatever.

“Chloe...I didn't...want us to just leap into this. You were so...all about Rachel. Just days ago.”
Chloe's stomach swerved at this topic, but Max was intent. “There's no way you're just...over that. How do you think it feels for me? Trying to...to live up to this **perfect** idea of a person you were chasing after?”

“Max...no. No-no, that...”
“How do you know you're not just...fucking **rebounding**?”
“What?” *Oh, ow, shit, augh...Shit.*
“I-I'm saying like it's...your **fault**, I just...”
“Pff, go for it, every other fucking thing sounds like it's been my fault...”

“Chloe, *no*, don't...take it like that. I'm just saying...this is why I wanted to take things **slow**. We both have...**issues** we've gotta work through.”

“So...wh-what, do you regret...hooking up?”
“No, I **want**...you. Being with you, I want that, so **bad**.”

Eyes googled at each other stupidly, fucking sparkled even, for a moment, like one of those animes Chloe had used to watch.

“Me, too,” Chloe eagerly – desperately – insisted, her voice softer than she would've liked.

“And we are **gonna** argue,” Max sighed, clamping her palm against her forehead, tipping her knit cap back a bit. “I won't pretend we won't. You **know** we will.”

“H-hells, yea,” Chloe conceded nervously. Where was this going? “I-I'll let you win every argument from now on if that...”
“N-no, Chloe, **pff**, it's not-...Arguments don't have a winner and a loser with us. OK?” Max flicked her wrists out with firm resolve, her tone sharp. Chloe likey. “Not with us.”

Chloe just nodded, still perplexed but totally OK with seeing Max take charge.

Max explained, “They're a way for us to find the same page. OK?”

“Sure. Yea. Totes.” Chloe was being uncharacteristically agreeable. Max noticed.

“**Ech,**” Max sighed throatily, robbing her fingertips against her forehead, creasing her brows.

“W-we'll figure it out,” Chloe decided, attempting to shake off her warm fuzzies and get back on topic.

“Yes,” Max said, nodding. The glimmer vanished from her face, replaced by that solemnity again. “**We, Chloe. We** will figure it out. That means you've gotta start...” Max paused, her shoulder stuck shrugged up. “You've gotta start doing **better**,” she concluded. “And not **just** to me, I mean, **in general**.”

“Fuck, Max,” Chloe sighed. “I'm sorry, shit. I've been...such a tool. Such an asshole to you...**Ugh.** You just keep coming up with new mistakes I've made, goddamn. Shit. I have been **such** an asshole, jesus...To you, to my...**parents**? I'm...sorry, Max. For all of this. I didn't...I didn't mean to, like, drag you into all this. I didn't **plan** on this, on...**us**? I-I mean, I am...**sooo** fucking...-!”

Agh, **shhhhhitt.**
Now Chloe was starting to cry.
“Hugh, I'm really fucking grateful...” Aaaand there goes my voice. “Th-the past week has been, like...the shittiest and th-the best week, I...Agh, shit...” OK. Calm down. Wipe your eyes. Breathe. You're good. Keep going. “Like I said before, life is strange, Max, I-I don't even know...” Look her right in the eyes. Do it. See? She's listening.

Chloe laughed weakly. Nervously. In spite of herself, maybe. Must've been contagious, because Max laughed back in the same pathetic way.

See? She's freaking just as much as you. Keep going.

“Y-you're so...” There are sooo many fucking adjectives I could put here, gurl. “You're fucking thoughtful, Maxine. Luh...” Chloe cleared her throat. “Like that shit about...consequences? I mean, shit, you know me, I..I don't think like that. N-no, you're... so spot on, I've been...fucking...coasting. Tunnel vision. Just...getting myself mixed up in shit I shouldn't have. Max, I was fucking lost without you, I..I know it's no excuse. OK? All right? I-I'm not making up excuses.” Yea, she's nodding, OK, good...Catch your breath. 'Kay. “I...I just can't fucking believe I've been...hurting you so much, I didn't want that, I didn't mean that. It's no excuse, y-you're...totally right. I've gotta...” Chloe paused to wipe her jacket sleeve against her nose.

Max scooted a bit toward her and their hands found their way to each other's hips.

Chloe wanted to kiss her so fucking bad. But the timing wasn't right. Maybe fuckin' Super Max here could screw with that, but...Chloe had to be careful with time.

Stop getting distracted by those lips, by those freckles, by those cheeks, by those Stoppit stoppit stoppit.

Back on point.

“Whew.” Chloe had taken these moments to clear her passages and kind of steady out her fucking sniveling...Staring Max right in the eyes, she stated, “I've gotta try harder. I've gotta get better at this...being-there-for-you...shit.” Shit, nope, sniveling had re-commenced. Goddamnit.

“Chloe...Th-this isn't...just about me, you...You want to start proving you're trying? You should with your mom right now. She needs someone to be there for her.”

“My mom has David. If I leave you alone, who do yo u have, huh?” Chloe jiggled Max by the waist. “Who do you have, that has any fucking idea what you're dealing with? If...if you want me to be there for my mom, then you gotta come, too, 'cuz... Shit.” Chloe tried to flick gunk from her eyelashes. “I am not leaving you alone to deal with this shit. And I need you. I don't know what the fuck I'm doing, OK?”

“I need you, too,” Max pouted. “Augh... This...suxorz.”

“Pff! Wh-...? Sure. Sure, it suxorz.”

Max's hands worked their way up around Chloe's back, and she pressed her face into Chloe's chest. More tearstains...But this time, Chloe was leaving her own all over Max's hoodie. Their hug started off awkwardly, this weird sideways...half-assed thing. Sniveling and sobbing all the while, Chloe tried to get Max's legs positioned overtop her own, but she could instantly feel her legs falling asleep. Chloe eagerly pulled Max up from the bench, insisting on this moment continuing.
Pressing themselves against each other like two magnets – opposite polarities and all that biz – they clutched at each other's backs, resting heads on shoulders, crying into each other for...twenty, thirty seconds.

It was comfortable. It was difficult. It was all a mess and it was what they both needed.

Their breaths began to sync up as the sobbing settled down. Thank fuck. That shit was tiring...

“Maxine Caulfield,” Chloe whispered.

“Mm?”

“I'm fucking sorry you had to fall for...such a broken ass piece of shit like me...”

“Chloe,” Max panted out a sympathetic laugh.

“I know I bitch about how...how fucked up my life is, but...-” Chloe took a deep breath, her chest quivering into Max's as she exhaled. “As long as you're gonna in it? I'm...pretty sure things are gonna get better. Because I'm gonna make ’em better. For you, for me, for us...I fucking promise, I'm...really gonna start trying to be better.”

They swayed a bit, back and forth, on the cliff side. The golden sun was gone by now, a haze of purple casting its glow across the sky.

“That's...exactly what I needed to hear,” Max sighed with relief. “Ohhh, that's... Ugh. Yes.”

“I do better this time?” Chloe prodded, just an inkling of playfulness about her.

“You did,” Max chuckled sheepishly. “I guess...you just needed a little direction...”

“Sounds like me,” Chloe said with some longing. “Like, if you can...call me out on my shit? Point me in the right direction? I mean, like, seriously – have some faith in yourself, Max. Talk to me, yell at me if you have to. If you can speak up more, I...can definitely try harder.”

“Deal.”

“That's what I'm talkin' 'bout, sistah.”

Their hug was still going. Chloe's insides were burning.

“Are we good?” Chloe asked quietly. “You forgive my assholish ways?”

“I forgive you.”

“That's good. 'Cuz it was super suxorz if you didn't...”

“Psh.”

Yup. Stilllll...hugging.

“Yo. Maxine.”
“Yo, Chloe?”

“Can we, like...-?”

“Yes.”

And before Chloe could react, Max’s lips devoured her neck. Chloe took her round and replied in kind. They locked lips a bit, their heartbeats quickening, their breaths getting shallow. Whispered gasps of ‘I love you’ in between the motions... The next couple of minutes were a wash of sensations, waves crashing against the shores below, lips and tongues and hands and legs and hair and fucking everything Chloe had wanted to do the last time they were here, in this same spot, on this same cliff, beneath this same lighthouse.

And while there wasn’t an ominous fucking tornado looming ahead... that evening made Chloe realize that the storm had not fully passed.

Chloe had every intention of waiting out this storm, right at Max’s side.

The walk down the cliff was... invigorating. Refreshing. Or maybe that was Chloe's high starting to come down, heh. Or maybe it was Chloe having gotten some of that sexual tension out with the make out session.

Either way. Good shit. Chloe was fuckin' excited.

Their hands clutched together with an anxious but excited warmth, they descended the cliff pathway, using a flashlight app on Chloe’s phone to find their way. Max seemed... a little afraid of the dark, clinging to Chloe’s side intently, warily. Heh. Cute.

A-actually, these woods suddenly were getting hella creepy at this hour... Chloe wasn't used to walking all the way down to the beach at night like this. Yeesh. Fuckin' rustling bushes n' shit... Blech.

“Dude,” Max chuckled softly.

“Huh?” Chloe was still in a stupor.

“Where’s your truck?” An awkward pause. “Tell me you know where your truck is...”

“Uhhhh yeaa, duh, it's...-” Chloe trailed off, trying to remember where she'd parked it.

“You... you don't know where you parked your own fucking truck? ” Max’s voice withered from this so-so thing to this ‘WTF are you kidding me’ to this ‘OMFG Chloe’ kind of... progression.

“N-No, I mean, it's... totally near... that way. Past the, uh, past the bridge, and...-”

Max ripped their bodies apart, stomping off on her own.

“Fucking unbelievable,” Max growled under her breath. Yikes, what the fuck? She’d been OK, Chloe was, like, really for realsies sure Max was OK. Now, suddenly, she wasn’t?

With loud thumping steps, Max marched ahead across the wooden bridge. On the beach now, the faint glimmer of the sun and the impending moonlight made things more visible. Chloe sighed,
tucking her phone away as her brain buzzed. More Rewind shit...? Or what?

“Dude! Max!” Chloe grunted irritably, “What is up all of a sudden? I thought we were cool...”

“Cool...” Max murmured to herself. In this scary way. She’d...stopped. As Chloe caught up, she was...fucking freaked by what Max said. Like...someone else was speaking for her. A quiet murmur. “Ha. Heheh. You think we're cool? You IDIOT. I have to Rewind three fucking times just to get you to...”

Chloe grabbed Max's shoulder firmly, utterly baffled and fucking scared.

Max gasped, coughed, sputtered, like waking up from a nightmare. Chloe twisted Max around by the shoulder to see the girl's expression, pale and wide-eyed. She looked...like she'd seen a fucking ghost.

“What?!” Chloe hissed, her nails digging into Max's shoulders with concern. “The fuck just happened, Max? I've never seen you talk like that before, not since...-” Back when we were kids...

Max turned her face away from Chloe's gaze, heaving on a sob. She coughed, cleared her throat.

“N-nevermind, I was...I just Rewound back when we...were arguing it...it just...messed me up a bit, d-don't-...Just ignore whatever I just said, I...-”

“What'd you say?” Chloe asked skeptically. “Could barely hear you.” But Chloe had heard it. Max didn't talk like that when she Rewound. She was still...Max, just...knew things.

And there was sudden sinking feeling in Chloe's stomach at the lurching realization that Max was right – Chloe had driven Max to fucking tears, multiple times in a row, just, apparently, continually fucking their attempt at resolution right up the ass. Y-you know, in the...bad way. The bad way, shut up! Chloe was desperately trying to stay serious.

“I-I don't know,” Max replied, trembling. Her eyes slid closed and she just melted into a puddle of sobs again. Jesus fucking christ. So much crying tonight, but apparently they needed it. Chloe felt like a knife was being stabbed through her heart at the site of Max so fucking torn up like this. Feeling so uneasy herself, Chloe held back the pain. Someone else was in need of Maximum Cuddling right that second. So Chloe gave it to her.

“Dude, Maximus,” Chloe whimpered, cooed into Max's ear, hugging her tightly from behind. She clamped her hand against Max's shoulder, closing her head in close. “Whatever the fuck's up? We got this. Together.”

“Together,” Max replied quietly, in that adorably tender but determined way she did. She sniffled as she gripped Chloe's wrists.

“I love you,” Chloe insisted in the quietest of tones, her words mixing with the nearby waves, as natural and fluid and lively as the ocean.

“Love you, too,” Max whispered, her breath like stardust to Chloe's ears, each syllable she spoke a star in and of itself.

They stayed like this only briefly before Max breathed out tiredly, indicating she needed space again. They stood at the edge of the small bridge as the purple shade of sky above them was fading, leaving
only the stars above. Fucking gorgeous freckles against the biggest cheeks of black...

As Chloe let Max catch her breath, she decided to do what had worked just up on the cliff. She stopped, she thought...Yea, she remember now, it was... this way...

Walking up ahead of Max, Chloe pulled out her phone.

“Let there be...”
Chloe switched the flashlight app on.

Max laughed under her breath, apparently amused for some reason.

Chloe shone a beam of light ahead of them. She pulled to the left, and a speckle of light refracted back at them from the shadows. **Boom.**

“Found it.”

–

“There's so much darkness in this world, and I can say that...I've experienced all of it, and it's like, something I still struggle with every day. Um...But I just want everybody to know, that um...Even though you may experience these struggles, and it may feel like they define you, you can still go so far despite that pain that you have. And the best part about it is that you can use your pain for something beautiful.”

~ Hannah Telle (the voice of Max)
"I'll take you on a road trip to Portland for the day. We'll stock up on tatts, beer, weed, and donuts!"

Chapter Summary

Life is Strange

All Wounds

Chapter 7 – Ratio

Cracks. So many cracks. Big ones, small ones. Ripples and tears and fractures...

Everything was fractured.

The lighthouse, perched upon a crumbling cliff, its lamp torn off.

Kate, sprawled against a sidewalk, the barely visible shape of her form clearly not correct, even from that far above...

A Max, an Other Max, Another Max, but so many Maxes...realities, minds, shredded to pieces.

The cracks, widening across Max’s skull...

So many cracks, making everything hard to see.

The entire screen of Max’s phone was just...shattered.

Poor thing.

It still had a job to do, though, so on it trucked.

[From: Stella]
[Aw, I’m so glad to hear you worked that all out.]

[Reply]
[yea it was intense but you were right. we just needed to talk.]

[From: Stella]
[I’m happy I was able to help somehow.]

[Reply]
[we’re both good at pep talking each other, huh? ]
Max hopped rails to another text chain.

[From: Brooke]
[Yes, they picked me up. Still sick, though.]

[Reply]
[glad you're on your way home. Aw sorry you're still sick. :( ]
[what can you do rite?]

[From: Brooke]
[Increase my Vitamin C intake, consume plenty of liquids, and get lots of rest.]
[Actually.]
[ :P ]

[Reply]
[lolol ok yea. Also that. xD ]
[But hey how are you holding up? I mean besides being sick.]
[i'm sorry we never got a chance to talk.]
[like REALLY talk u know?]

[From: Brooke]
[It's fine. Not like I have much to say about all of this, anyway.]
[Other than complain about the local meteorologists not doing their damn jobs.]
[I think I'll just drown myself in more Fire Emblem now...>3> ]
[But thanks, Max. I didn't really think you cared about me.]

[Reply]
[Dude no I totally care! You're way different than most of my friends.]
[but that's what makes it fun to talk with you.]
[I know we had a rough start and we've lost a lot of people, but...]
[I really mean it, if there's anything I can do for you i'll be here ok?]

[From: Brooke]
[I'll keep that in mind.]
[Later.]

[Reply]
[have a safe trip home!]

Shifting to another thread…
[From: Victoria]
[Sorry for the drama last night.]
[You and your signif kiss and make up?]

[Reply]
[something like that. -^^- ]
[but what about you?]

[From: Victoria]
[What about me?]

[Reply]
[How are you holding up? We talked about a lot of hard things last night.]
[I dunno, I'm just worried that you'll feel alone. :S ]

[From: Victoria]
[Don't fret your hipster head, Caulfield. You've already got your hands full with that attack dog of yours...]
[I hear she bites, btw. Watch out for that.]
[I'd hate to see you catch rabies...>:D ]

“What's so funny?” Chloe mumbled from the driver's seat.

“Nothing,” Max sighed quietly, recovering from her chuckle. “Just...something dumb.”

“Must be, if you're laughin' at it,” Chloe teased playfully, sticking out her tongue when Max turned to her.

Max grinned and gave Chloe's thigh a light rub before going back to her phone.

[Reply]
[She's definitely keeping me on my toes lol.]
[but srsly thank you soo much for opening up to me last night.]
[I never knew you have to deal with some of that shit.]
[I totally get why you'd feel like you need to stand out and stuff.]
[I'm glad we can both try and put all that bs behind us.]
[we should vidchat in a few days when shit calms down.]

[From: Victoria]
[When 'shit' calms down?]
[Sounds like you might've already been infected. :) ]

[Reply]
[lolol well there's no cure for rabies...]

Aaaaand back to Stella...
[From: Stella]
[Thx. ^-^ BTW how’s Victoria? Whatever you said, it must’ve helped.]
[She was a lot more chill when I visited her this morning.]

[Reply]
[rly? Oh I didn’t say much. She’s been through hell I just tried to listen.]
[we decided to put our differences aside. Too much shit has happened you know?]
[she’s doing super well considering what she had to go through…]
[btw I must’ve helped? How so?]

[From: Stella]
[I agree. You were so right, we all have to look out for each other through this kind of thing.]
[I don’t know what you said or did but she was way better today than a couple days ago.]
[Victoria actually let me hang with her for a while, it was…weird. But also cool?]
[We talked about shit that went down last week, how we’re dealing with it…]
[She even apologized for getting me roped into Vortex Club junk.]
[She’s not so bad when she’s not trying to keep up appearances.]

[Reply]
[yea yea for real. She got sucked into the vortex but I think she’s free now.]
[I guess we all are.]

[From: Stella]
[Those of us left standing, anyway. -_-]

And Max's delusions of being valuable or useful were shrouded in a fog once again. Unsure of how to reply to such a message, Max sighed to herself, setting her phone back in her lap.

“What is it?” Chloe asked from the left, navigating the truck down a straight shot highway. She bumped her palms and drummed her finger against the steering wheel to the beat of the music playing through the car system.

“Checking in on people,” Max explained.

“Yah, doy,” Chloe blurted, rapidly adding, “You were havin' a jolly ol' time until five seconds ago…”

Max could pick up a slight sense of jealousy in Chloe's tone. That couldn't be helped.

“So, c'mon, Maxie...What's up? You OK?”

But...Chloe pushing that jealousy aside? Carrying on despite it? That was a help.

“Y-yea, I just, um...-” Max locked her phone and set it in the cup holder. “-...need a break. I guess.”

“Fershur, fershur,” Chloe muttered, nodding to herself as she changed lanes on the highway. She shivered a bit. “Damn. You cold?”

Max shrugged passively, letting her hand settle on Chloe's thigh. She was cozy in her hoodie and hat. She noted that Chloe had taken off her coat and was only wearing her typical skull-themed top.
“Why don't you put your jacket on?” Max suggested, running her palm up and down Chloe's thigh. The girl's cargo pants were cute, but a bit too baggy for Max's interests.

In regards to her jacket, Chloe grumbled, “Been wearing that thing for, like, two fuckin' days straight.”

“Is this your way of trying to get me to keep you warm?” Max flatly teased.

“Pff, you wish, Maximus. Pretty sure I'd be a little distracted, and I'd prefer to not get into a car crash today, so...-”

Chloe trailed off with a silent sigh through her nose. Max squeezed Chloe's knee with encouragement. It always kind of stung to watch Chloe inadvertently remind herself of things like that...especially since Max couldn't really prevent it. Well...not without cheating reality, anyway.

“Want me to turn the heat up?” Max suggested.

“Uh, sure,” Chloe decided, craning her neck to inspect the road signs ahead as she shook off what Max knew were memories of William.

Max had acclimated to the way Chloe's heating system worked by now, so she cranked things up a bit and switched the system on. The whirring, pulsing heat was soothing after the day and night they'd been through.

After their big...nuclear blowup beneath what was still standing of the lighthouse, they'd spent the night at the hospital with Joyce and David. It had been incredibly uncomfortable, and Max's back had been thrown out trying to sleep in a damned hospital chair, but...it had been so nice to spend the morning with Joyce. Max could really tell that Joyce was so grateful for their company, and there was this glimmer in her eye at the sight of Max and Chloe being, well...a couple. It felt really cool, almost like Joyce had been secretly hoping for such a thing to happen the whole time.

Max's conversation back in the Price kitchen with Joyce suddenly...made a lot more sense.

“Max Caulfield, are you actually jealous of Rachel?”

“Maybe. Rachel was so much cooler than me...”

“Hohoh, you think? Then why has Chloe been telling me she wishes she could be more like you over the past five years?”

“Doubt it. Um...did she really? Five years ago feels like a thousand now...”

“And that makes me, what? A century old? You're only 18, Max. Ah, youth...If only I could go back.”

“It's not all that, Joyce...”

Everything was...getting fuzzy. Static. It jarred Max from her thoughts.

Oh. The radio.

“Shit,” Chloe sighed. “Fuckin' reception on this piece of crap...”

Max stirred herself from her memories, snapping herself awake.

“Uh, yo,” Chloe said, dialing the radio static down. “Why don't you put somethin' on?”
“Yea, OK.” In Max's attempt at movement, she realized how very sleepy she was. Their car trip back up to Seattle had just started – the sun was barely up – and Max was ready to sleep some more. At least Chloe's truck was more comfortable than the hospital...And this heat, fuck. Heat seemed to always make Max sleepy. Especially in a car. The rhythm of Chloe’s truck was becoming really comfortable, and the warmth was so inviting...some music would make things even more mellow, and Max knew she could just slip right into sleep.

Yawning, Max plugged in her phone and set up something mellow. Something that made her think of her and Chloe, and their whole...new lease on life. When Max breathed out her yawn, it came out as an irritable groan.

“Dude, I slept like shit, too,” Chloe sighed, sympathizing with Max's yawn. Then she yawned, uttering a “Fuck” as she exhaled. “Don't worry about me, take a nap, gurl.”

“N-no, I'd...rather not,” Max mumbled, rubbing sand from her eyelashes. She tore off her wool cap and set it in her lap.

*Oh, I see how it is.*

*I go through all of that shit for you and Blue and you're gonna avoid me, now, huh?*

Stop.

*Come on. I did my part back there.*

*Oh, I see. You're still mad I pushed open the door a crack. Let some fresh air in.*

Chloe wasn't supposed to see that.

*Not my fault you're avoiding telling her.*

*I bet it still bothers her. The way you let me slip out like that? Heh.*

*Bet it's bugging the shit out of her, actually...*

Everything's not about you.

*Oh, no. Of course not. Everything's about us, apparently.*

*Or maybe you, I don’t fucking know.*

*You start crying a little and you have to fucking abuse the powers of a god just to cope.*

*If that's not self-centered...-

“Y-you know, I'm really glad we spent the night there,” Max said, trying to escape herself. “David was really trying to, like...be supportive and stuff, huh?”

“Yea,” Chloe said mildly, shrugging up one shoulder. “I guess...”

*Ohhhohoh, I see how it is.*

*You let me take charge when you need some fucking balls to stand up to her back there.*

*I don't even get a 'thank you,' huh? Just gonna ignore me?*
“And Joyce was so full of energy,” Max went on, straightening out her matted hair.

*I let you take the reigns back and you end up fucking Rewinding three times, jesus christ, you IDIOT.*

“She was all about breakfast, right?” Chloe recalled with a hopeful smirk. “*Ha,* didja notice how she didn't touch her toast or sausage until her eggs were gone?”

“The eggs always come first,” Max recanted one of Joyce's old sayings. “She's still her...”

“...Mostly,” Chloe murmured with a tint of sorrow.

*Heh. 'Mostly' still her, huh?*

*Sounds a little close to home, doesn’t it?*

Will you ever shut up?

*Something's obviously on your fucking mind or else I wouldn't be talking, dipshit.*

*And that something ain't fucking scrambled eggs.*

“She's...she's totally gonna pull through,” Max meekly insisted.

Chloe nodded, her lips pouting briefly as she held back whatever gut-twisted emotion had crawled up her back.

“Totally,” Chloe agreed with a voice that did not match her expression.

“We will, too,” Max added. “I-I'm just...so relieved we...talked all of that shit out...”

“All of it?” Chloe instantly retorted, keeping her eyes on the road, even though it was a sparsely populated straight shot of highway.

*Heh.*

*Heh.*

*Told you.*

“Uh, wuh-...” Max stopped herself from stuttering around and paused. She was really not in the mood to try dealing with more...of *that* right now...

“I know something’s still bothering you,” Chloe said brusquely, adjusting her rearview mirror as she tried to hide her irritation. “A couple somethings, based on the way you just looked at me. But, like...damn. We’ve had enough arguments to last a while, to be honest, so, like...I don’t mind if you’d rather leave it for now.”

Max swallowed.

*Still don’t have the balls to be honest with her on your own.*

*And she...? Pff. She's too fucking scared to ask the real questions.*

*See? Still fucking need me around...*

*So. We doing this? Right now? Or what?*
Nope.

*Heh. Figured as much.*

*Later, then.*

Later, then.

“Uhh...” Max had to give Chloe some kind of reply.

Maybe if someone would shut the hell up, they could function. SHE. She could function...

“No. Dude.” Chloe shook her head, keeping her eyes on the road. Avoiding Max's eyes. “It's cool. I'm cereal.” She shooed her wrist about. “Take a nap. I got this whole 'driving-in-a-straight-line-for-the-next-two-hours' thing...”

Max quietly pondered for a moment.

The blue feather dangling from Chloe's windshield caught Max's attention.

“Chloe?”

“Don't need to chit-chat to nap-nap, Buddo.”

“Chloe...” Max sighed reactively, struggling to stifle the gesture so Chloe wouldn't notice.

Chloe noticed.

“...What?” said Chloe flatly.

She seemed to be getting good at that: masking her own desires behind comments meant to make it out like she was looking out for Max's interests. When, ya know, really, she was just trying to avoid shit.

“Nevermind,” Max dismissed in a mumble, setting her head against the window and closing her eyes.

“Aughhh,” Chloe groaned in a drawn out puff. She then whimpered irritably, “Could you not do this shit to me? Please? One day?”

“No, you're right, we already...spent enough time arguing for now...”

When Chloe was silent, Max opened her eyes, glancing to her left.

Chloe was just gaping, jaw ajar, disbelief streaked across her expression.

The truck began to vibrate as the left tires were hitting those bumpy strips on the edge of the highway. Chloe grunted grumpily, realigning the truck.

“Whatever's going on that has you all pissy and weird, shouldn't we just get it over with?”

Max's chest was tight, her heart rattling against her ribcage. Felt like if she wasn't wearing her hoodie, the thumping would probably be quite audible.

“Fine,” Chloe huffed. One hand gripped her steering wheel, the other gripped her temple. “Talk, don't talk, whatever, can we just make a fucking decision about this? We've got way too much on
our minds to—"
The words had slipped right out, pushed, forced by all of the pressure built up within.

“Huh?” Chloe blurted, brows furrowed. She cast a puzzled look to Max before retreating her eyes back to the highway.

“What...-?” Max started, then stopped herself. Was this a question she really wanted to ask? Yes. It was.

“What is it about me that you...like so much? What made you fall for me where you got so...eager to start dating?”

“Max, I-...” Chloe's brows were furrowed, her mouth hanging open as she contemplated an answer. Grabbing the steering wheel with both hands, she shot a quick glance at Max, as if double-checking that this was a serious question. “I still am falling for you, this...this is a fucking work-in-progress, all right? What're you getting at?”

“What if Rachel was OK?” Max pressed, crossing her arms as the bitterness seeped up into her chest. “I-I mean, if she was OK, and...I-I dunno, down in LA or something...”

Chloe puffed out this indignant breath, as if offended by the idea.

“Whh...-? Well, I guess I'd...be falling for two people at the...same time—Look, look, I don't get where this is coming from, Max.”

“So, you'd...what? Date both of us, then?”

“I-I dunno, maybe?”

“What?”

“S-sorry, I-I don't...-!”

“Really?”

“Dude, what the actual fuck, Max?”

“Wow. Simple as that, huh? Just...-”

“What do you want me to say?”

“Unbelievable...”

“Seriously. What?”

“If you had to choose...-”

“You can't ask me that, Max, that's not fucking fair...”

“Well, I did have to choose, and I chose you, but...”

“What-?”

“It's cool to know that's not reciprocated.”

“Max...”

“You're not over her.”

“Whhhat, Rachel?”

“Yes, Rachel, who the hell else would I-”

“I don't 'get over' people, Max, I move on-”

“-be talking about? You should just own up to-”

“-which is kinda fucking difficult when the person-”

“-the fact that you're not in love with me, you're-”

“I fell for was fucking murdered and the other person-”

“-in love with the idea of someone actually caring-”

“I fell for is freaking the fuck out on me-”

“-about you instead of me, as a person.”
“-at the drop of a fucking *dime* every *goddamn day!*”
“Chloe!”

-BEEEEP!-

The truck suddenly lurched as Chloe stomped the brakes. She'd almost ridden them into the minivan ahead, only to be beeped at and yelled at simultaneously for tail-riding.

Both girls were dead silent as Chloe readjusted her position on the highway, taking care to switch lanes and get them out of dodge.

Max's heart had stopped briefly, and was now pounding. Clutching at her chest from fear and anger and stress and just-...*fuck!*

GODAMNIT, CHLOE.

URGH.

“Watch what you're *doing,*” Max hissed with more venom than she'd meant. “Jesus...”

Then she realized that Chloe was crying. Holy shit. Chloe's arms were locked straight, she was stiff and upright, her fingers were trembling, tightly gripping the steering wheel.

Seeing Chloe like this? It hurt. Like a physical ache in Max's stomach.

Rewind. She could just Rewind, and...just undo that argument. Like she had yesterday. *Not* say anything, *not* cause that pain. It would take just a second...

*Don't you fucking dare, Maxine.*

But...*look* at her, she's...-

*Gee, maybe you picked a shitty time and a shitty place to guilt-trip her?*

*I mean, don't get me wrong, you know I love a good guilt-trip, but...damn. I am stuck in here with you, sooo, I'd kinda prefer to not end up through a windshield.*

*And not end up fucking with more time-travel shit.*

*Can we at least be on the same page about those two things?*

*For cereals?*

Oh, god. Oh-god-oh-god I made her upset, I made her mad, I made her- *Jesus...Get a fucking grip.*

*You started it, might as well end it.*

“Chloe...”

“*Hhhnnn...-!*** seemed to be about all Chloe could muster in reply, her teeth clenched. She clicked on the turn signal again, shifting another lane to the right.

“I-I'm *so* sorry, Chloe, I shouldn't...-” Max's voice squeaked in an awfully pathetic way.

“Gas stop,” Chloe winced, struggling to keep herself steady.
Max took note of the exit Chloe was aiming for. She was silent for the next few minutes, keeping to herself as Chloe pulled them off the highway and into a gas station parking lot.

Well. Ya know what? Good. Maybe now she has an idea of how she's made you feel lately.

That's bullshit, Chloe has...helped me...deal with-
Helped turn you into a murderous psychopath struggling with some split-personality shit.

I'm sure Chloe's own mental issues are totally helping us with that, bee-tee-dubbs.

Weren't you going to shut up for a while?

HAH. You're right. I was.

Sorry, couldn't help it, you're just doing such a great job of being an asshole without my help, I'm impressed, really.

The truck's engine suddenly jolted to a stop.

They were parked now.

Chloe buried her face in her hands and started sobbing. Without eyes making contact, Chloe found herself in Max's grasp, laying her head down in Max's lap and...just fucking bawling. It made Max start crying, too.

Jesus, how had the two of them not run out of tears by now?

“I-I'm sorry, Chloe,” Max whimpered, rubbing her thumb against Chloe's neck. “I'm just...I'm so sorry, I...” Max wiped her sleeve across her face, catching her breath.

“I'm such a piece of shit,” Chloe managed to choke out inbetween sobs. “Y-you're right, you had to...make a choice, and you chose me, and I...I couldn't make that choice, the...the fucking universe made it for me, I don't...”

“I-I didn't mean to hurt you, Chloe, it's just that...I feel like...”

...

Well? Fucking say it, already.

“-...I'm a...consolation prize. Like...you're only going along with this be-...because there's no other...person who's...who's actually there for you? Like...like, I-I dunno, I worry you rushed into this with...with me, this thing, all this, this 'us' thing, because...like, you can't deal with not...having this? I-I don't know, it just...doesn't feel good to feel like I'm...just a rebound, just a...consolation...”

But Max's words were cut short. Chloe had grabbed the freckled hand clasping her neck, and had begun kissing it in trembling, gentle pecks.

“No-no-no-no,” Chloe winced desperately. “Muh-....! Maxine, Maxie, Max, Mmmm...no-no...I don't-...Th-that's not...”

Max's chest swelled. She'd never seen Chloe so...broken before. Rachel's death, finding her at the junkyard, Chloe had broken down, but...something about this was different. Like the pain of that discovery was compounded with the guilt Max had just shoved at her?
Or the realization of how much awkward, weird, fucked-up pain Max was in over all this made Chloe that upset?

It felt simultaneously godawful to see Chloe in such a broken, splintered state, and yet...so relieving to see that Chloe's feelings for her were strong enough to, well...bring this about.

The two just pathetically sniveled at each other for about thirty seconds or so. Chloe kissed Max's left wrist and Max kissed Chloe's head until eventually lips met lips a few time, and...and then the gross sobbing interrupted it, and then awkward, pitiable laughing interrupted the sobbing, and then foreheads were pressed together, and...-

“I love you, Max,” Chloe eked out in a most adorably pathetic and earnest way.

“I love you, too,” Max replied with a half-sob, half-laugh.

“I'm sorry shit's so whack right now...”

Another hybrid sob-laugh slipped out of Max at Chloe’s words, and the way they’d been squeaked.

“It's not your fault,” Max moaned.

“It kinda is, and you don't deserve to have to deal with that shit...”

“You don’t deserve to lose all the people you care about...”

Chloe kissed Max on the cheek, whispering with a smirk, “Good thing I haven't, then, huh?”

They both laughed through awkward, grateful sobs, nuzzling and kissing some more.

A minute or two later, and it seemed like the tears had finally dried up. The two of them were left staring at each other, faces inches apart. Gazing over Chloe's wary face, Max's hair draped down like curtains, shading them both in a private, temporary veil of whispered apologies and hopeful eskimo kisses.

“The night you slept over,” Chloe murmured a reply, out of nowhere.

Scanning Chloe's fretful face from her sideways angle, Max lifted her brow.

“After we broke into Blackwell,” Chloe specified. “I think that's when I realized I was starting to fall for you.”

“Oh...” Max's stomach fluttered with unease. “When you...had me try on-?”

“No, before that,” Chloe winced, already reading Max's mind. “Like, at the pool, I guess? Morning after, fershrur it was on my mind by then. I-I dunno, I think seeing you in Rachel's outfit, though, it kinda...-” Chloe's eyes shifted sideways.

Chloe looked back at Max, lifting her hand up and sifting Max's dangling mess of hair between her fingers.

“It was weird,” Chloe sighed, trying to smile, but her sorrow seeping through. “Seeing you in Rachel's clothes, after those few days we'd been through...you were working so hard to help me, and you...like, were all brave and shit, helping me break in and get clues – I seriously thought you were gonna chicken out on me, but...you didn't.”

Max shook her head, absorbing Chloe's hand against her temple.
“A-anyway,” Chloe sheepishly continued, “I guess that morning after, it all just kinda hit me at once. Like, how cute you became – puberty's awesome like that, a-amirite? – and, like, you were all passionate and...and...like...smart as fuck, and artsy, and adorbz, and...-” Chloe's wary smile grew, her eyes twinkling. “Yea,” she meekly finished. “I mean, I was still, like...focused on Rachel, but...Look, Max.” Chloe wriggled her body a bit, working her other hand against Max's face. “I-I know it's shitty, but I fucking swear, you are not, like...I'm not just 'settling' for you or...or some bullshit. You are Maxine Caulfield, and you are amazing, and even...-” Chloe's eyes flickered, squinted a bit with pain, and she swallowed. “-...even if Rachel was still alive,” Chloe forced herself to say, “I would still be feeling this way about you...” She pressed her fingers against the sides of Max’s head. “I can't prove that, I know I can't, but...please. Just believe me.”

Max's lips contorted into a thankful smile, which made Chloe's smile grow a little.

“OK?” Chloe pleaded, praying for Max's understanding.

Max could feel her cheeks burning up, and she bit her lip and nodded. She placed a kiss against Chloe's forehead, and Chloe took a nibble at her neck as she did so.

Sighing, Max joked, “M-maybe one of these days, we can go, like, an entire day without, ya know...bawling our eyes out and arguing.”

“Pie in the sky shit, Maximus,” Chloe chuckled weakly. “Dunno, man, dunno...Seems like a lofty-ass fuckin’ goal for us...”

“If we put our heads together...-” Max said wryly, her eyes squinting down. “Great things seem to happen,” Chloe finished, extending her head up with puckered lips.

Another soft kiss, another flash of relieved if wary smiles.

“Fuck,” Chloe whispered, her eyes shutting tight as she laughed to herself.

“What?” Max wondered with amusement.

A convertible parked beside them, eliciting Chloe to yank herself upright. A girl, a few years younger than them, had just exited the car and was giving them a bewildered, embarrassed look, like she'd just walked in on two strangers having wild sex.

Max and Chloe both reacted with giggles, and Chloe gave the girl an amused peace sign – probably with a dorky expression, if Max were to guess. The girl's eyes widened with shock and alarm and she hurriedly whisked herself away with her parental, heading for the gas station.

“Hohhhh, man,” Chloe sighed after snorting a laugh. “Gay agenda, workin' its magic...”

Max grabbed Chloe's hand and squeezed, digging her thumb into Chloe's palm.

“Hey,” Max nudged, trying to cull Chloe's attention back to a place of solemnity.

“Yea?” Chloe said, straightening out her hair as she faced her partner.

“Thanks for...putting up with my crap,” Max said earnestly.

Chloe paused, taking in Max's vibes.

“Hey. Hey, yea,” Chloe cooed, patting the back of Max's wrist. “Dude, after all of my shit that you've put up with? You are hella welcome.”
Their eyes glazed over at each other for a moment.

“We are...living in weird days, Buddo,” Chloe stated. “Sorry you've had this junk bumpin' in your attic. Like, I get it, I know what it's like feeling like you're...not as important as...you thought you were? But...Seriously, for reals, though: do not fucking think of yourself like that, OK?”

Max wasn't entirely sure if she could promise that.

“OK?” Chloe double-checked, jittering Max’s hand a bit. “You are important to me. The most important. Period. Rest of my days. Whole shabang. Got me, sistah?”

Max nodded, her gaze flickering elsewhere.

“Good.” Chloe sniffed, wiped at her raw face a bit, and took a deep breath. Max followed suit.

“So…” Max scratched her eyelashes, then wiped the remnants of tears from her face.

“Know what we need?” Chloe decided, wriggling Max’s arm around. They stared each other down, Max trying to read Chloe’s childlike giddiness that was building. “A fresh fuckin' start. An escape for a while. That fuckin’ road trip. Remember?”

Max’s brain sizzled with recollection. Back in Frank’s RV…Chloe had daydreamed about them going on a road trip together.

Of course, Chloe had…imagined that with Rachel along, as well, but…it was really sweet that Chloe hadn’t forgotten the idea.

“To Portland,” Max said thoughtfully, nodding. “With...with, um...-”

“Tatts, weed, strippers...” Chloe's eyes narrowed and she grinned. “And so many donuts we get sick.”

“Yeeeaaah,” Max sheepishly. “I think just...getting a single tatt is gonna be like a moon jump leap for Max-kind.”

“Dude, Maxine is gettin' a tattoo,” Chloe declared, to the...universe? Or something. Bumping elbows with Max as enthusiasm gushed out, her nostrils flared as she smiled sneakily. “But what of?”

“I-I didn't say I was getting a tatt,” Max mumbled, suddenly wondering if even implying was a good idea.

“When you give a mouse a cookie...”

She's just having her fun.

“So will you, twenty years from you when you have to hide the ink when job-hunting...”

“You are totes getting a tattoo now,” Chloe panted. “And don't you chicken on me, we're talking, like, visible skin, here.”

“Chloe...”

“GAWD fuckin' damn, Max, you would rock some kind of artsy tattoo. I know this one guy, been meaning to pay him a visit, he could do some abstract shit for you. Dude, we could get matching tattoos! How the actual fuck had this not entered my useless brain yet?”
Max just sighed peacefully, contently, her eyes sliding upward, then rightward. Might as well let Chloe soak in the fantasy. As Chloe ranted about the process of getting her entire arm colored up, Max considered what the hell she’d even get as a tattoo...

*Well, fuck, if you're going through with it...*

*I've got an idea...*

Something simple.

*Simple.*

“I-I'm not really sure I'm up for something too complicated…”

“Uh...Y-yea, that's cool,” Chloe acknowledged, seeming to come off her excitable high. “No prob, Bob. Any ideas, though?”

“Ehhh...Gimme a couple days to think on it, Chloe.”

Chloe just flashed Max a content thumbs-up.

“Um...” Max scratched her head a bit, trying to sift her hair back into place. She glanced off toward the gas station as Chloe released their hand hold, removing her car key from its slot. “So. Chl-...Chloe, wanna be *my* Everyday Hero?”

Chloe tilted her head with eager curiosity, like a puppy eager to play catch.

As a dumb grin crawled across her face, Max timidly requested, “Wanna see if this gas station sells Zebra Cakes for me?”

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+*(Following scene draws inspiration from the piece 'It's Over Now, Stay Close' by wildernessspirits, one of the lead artists for the visual novel)+*

http://fav.me/d9nj3lp

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It still stung.

The tattoo artist had told Max that her skin seemed really sensitive and it had trouble absorbing the ink, so he'd had to go over the design twice to make sure it stuck.

It had hurt like a bitch, but at least the design she’d settled on was a *lot* simpler than Chloe's. Chloe's had been bigger, more detailed, and contained different colors.

Chloe had been so proud of mild-mannered Max Caulfield enduring the burning pain 'like a pro.' Apparently, she'd been more chill about it than some middle-aged men that had come through the place. It had felt like, well, exactly what it had been: a sharp edge being dug into her wrist, over and over...

The design Max had settled on was a swirling purple spiral. Her brain had come to think of Rewinding time like...traveling along a spiral. Traveling through time didn't feel like...like a straight line, so much as this, like, chaotic looping thing. Twisting, spinning, circling, spiraling...engulfing an entire town...
Simple.
Simple.

A reminder.
Of the consequences.

Of your choices.
Of my mistakes.

Of their lives.
Of their deaths.

-Rrrrrmmm!-

Max’s phone vibrated in her hoodie pocket, stirring her from her tattoo staring.

[From: Dad]
[looking good kiddo! How’s it healing?]

[Reply]
[it still hurts a bit but I’m taking good care of it.]
[following all the instructions they gave me.]

[From: Dad]
[Thanks for the update. We’ll let you go now.]
[Anything comes up do NOT hesitate to call.]
[Stay safe. Have fun. We love you.]

[From: Mom]
[To: Me, Chloe]
[make good choices!!!]

[Reply]
[To: Dad, Mom]
[lol thx. Love u guys. <3]

Max took in a deep breath as she placed her horribly cracked cell phone back into her messenger bag. The cup holders were occupied with coffee, lukewarm by now. Chloe had really guzzled hers down but Max had taken it slow, and by now a third of her cup was left, going to waste, too...room-temperature-ish to enjoy.

At least there were still donuts. A dozen seemed...excessive, but...they’d already gone through three a piece. Naturally, Chloe had ordered six types – two of each. And, perhaps unsurprisingly, they were both saving the apple fritters for last...

“God damn,” Chloe breathed out, breaking the comfortable silence that had fallen between them.

As the truck continued down the countryside road and emerged from within a patch of pine forest, a glorious swath of hills and plains burst into their vision. The early morning sun, shyly peeking up
over the horizon behind them, cast a delicate glow upon the expansive landscape before them.

“‘You seein’ this shit?’” Chloe sighed with blissful wonder, having not even checked to see that Max had set down her phone.

As Chloe admired their environs with wide eyes and jaw agape, Max just absorbed the peaceful look cast upon Chloe's face.

“This view's fuckin' gorgeous,” Chloe grunted with disbelief, slowing the truck down

“Sure is,” Max said slyly – facetiously, narrowing her eyes at Chloe.

The awkward pause that followed led Chloe to glance over, to which Max waggled her brows with flirtatious embellishment. The two couldn't hold the moment together, and both dissolved into childish snickering.

“Dude, for reals,” Chloe breathed at the edge of her laughter. “We should make a stop here, take this shit in, ya know?”

“Sure,” Max said with a shrug. She wasn't entirely in the mood to stop.

The past day had been a crazy blur. Twenty four prior, the two had set out from Seattle. Portland was actually closer to Seattle than Arcadia Bay was, but Chloe had strategically padded the trip out with a stop to a strip club, which had been the most awkward situation of Max Caulfield's life, maybe. They'd had to settle on a club out in the suburbs because the apparent multitude of strip joints in the city was 21+. Chloe's initial idea had been to just try crashing one, but Max had insisted Chloe look up an 18+ club instead. Chloe begrudgingly agreed. And it was still awkward as fuck.

Chloe had really enjoyed herself, though, and Max had...enjoyed seeing Chloe letting loose and having fun. They'd gotten a lot of really weird looks, and a lot of douchey pick-up lines from dude-bros. Max kind of clammed up at it all and let Chloe take charge, which had worked out well enough. They'd met a gay couple that Max had found adorable – Chloe had tried to work in some kind of interest for a...foursome? Or some crazy nonsense. Without checking in with Max first, of course. Oy. Much to Max's relief, turned out neither of the boys 'swung both ways', much to Chloe's dismay, and Max had apologized profusely. They'd ended their time at the place with a private session with a stripper named 'Destiny.' Chloe insisted up and down that this could not possibly be her real name and kept making hella puns that were...eye-rollingly bad. Which Max adored, and 'Destiny' seemed to find amusing enough. Or maybe that was just the money talking. When things started to take a turn toward the more overt, Max kind of shelled up and let Chloe, er, have her fun. In the end, Max actually got more out of learning about how strip clubs worked than she did the actual stripping. As a memento for “Bae's first strip club,” in Chloe's words, she'd snagged a bumper sticker featuring 'Destiny' on their way out, promptly slapping it right on her truck's front bumper. Hugh, boy...

After that serving as their awkward afternoon entertainment, Chloe had whisked them the rest of the way to downtown Portland. They'd eaten at a really chill, really crowded place where they'd had to wait for like twenty minutes before they could even be seated. Chloe had been all about PDA the whole time, too. It made Max feel a little weird, like she was being shown off like some trophy. But the more Chloe initiated it, the less was caring if other people saw.

They visited some shops, cruised through a mall, picked up some new clothes...just kinda burning time before their tattoo appointment. Max had picked up a couple of new books, and Chloe had gotten some cartridges for Max's dinosaur of a camera at some specialty shop...Thank god for The Impossible Project still making film for these kinds of cameras. The shop had even had a single box
of Silver Shade, special black and white polaroid film. Thing with this kind of camera was that the film was really freaking expensive, and each pack only had eight photos. So Max had to make every shot count. It was this kind of pressure that Max felt had been really pushing her personal photography to the next step, but...after the past week? That...that pressure, it wasn't...fun anymore.

And beside that, Max was still wary about using the poor thing. She hadn't taken a photo in over a week now – since the entire Arcadia incident. Probably the longest Max had gone without snapping any pics since she'd really gotten into it...

Ah, but, then there had been the final event of the evening – the tattoo ceremony. Pff. A long, painful, amusing process. Max was surrounded by 'Chloe's People,' as it were. Leather, piercings, studs and spikes attached to clothing in ways that just made no sense...There'd been this one chick, brown skin, lots of piercings and tattoos, with this crazy spiked mohawk of black with bright red highlights. Max wasn't one to swoon over strangers nearly as easily as Chloe, but she'd enjoyed the fact that said girl had gotten her tattoo down right beside Max's chair. Chloe totally teased her about it after the fact when the chick's beefcake of a boyfriend had come to pick her up.

It hadn't been nearly as awkward as the strip club, much of which Max was already purging from her memory banks out of horrified embarrassment. But the tattoo parlor had still felt so alien and foreign, like she was a tourist. Well, like, OK, they were tourists, technically, but...yea. Chloe seemed right at home, and Max was not.

But things wound down when they rented a hotel room for the night. It had been hella awkward at first, trying to cuddle and snog and shit in a strange room on a strange bed, but...Chloe had found ways to get Max to chill and enjoy herself – ways Max hadn't consciously been aware of until that evening. They'd still kept their pants on – mostly – as Max hadn't been so gung-ho about diving into the deep end. But it had been an enlightening evening, all the same, set to the tune of some CSI episode to snuff out unintended noise. Make-out sessions, as it turned out, were made just a bit more awkward with both parties had open wounds on their wrists to be careful with.

Max couldn't get much sleep, either. The strangeness of an unfamiliar bed in an unfamiliar room, it was...weird. Chloe had made things comfortable, but in ways that made Max...paranoid. Snuggle-times of that nature were just, like...uneasy, when you knew that twenty feet away, there were other people who could...maybe hear you? But these were places people went to to have sex and crap? Wowser...

Max had stirred early, before the sun even rose, and had dragged Chloe out of bed and out of the hotel, eager to engage in Day Two of Max and Chloe Fun Times Roadshow.

So there they were, their tatts still healing, with donuts as their breakfast, driving off the road and into a field of grass. Chloe apparently had more plans lined up for the day, and Max wasn't privileged to know what they were until the 'time was right.' But right then would've been a, uh...pretty right time to know what the hell they were doing...?

As Chloe took her truck off the road and through a patch of grass, Max was able to really soak in the sights before them. Chloe had put it correctly: it was pretty fucking gorgeous out there.

As the cranky old engine coughed to a stop, Chloe grabbed the box of donuts and eagerly bounded out of the truck, egging Max to do the same.

Max was startled and confused. Why were they stopping here, exactly? Leaving her things behind, she got out of the truck and followed Chloe to the hood.

Chloe grabbed two chocolate-encased donuts from the box, then set it on the roof of the truck. She
took the donuts around to the front bumper and leaned herself against the hood, wearing the donuts like...giant rings on her index fingers. When Max reached her side, Chloe pointed a donut-finger dramatically in Max's direction. Raising a brow but smirking all the same, Max took what Chloe offered, and together, they ate and watched the sunlight slowly beginning to spill across the edges of the hills before them.

“Um...” Max began, halfway through her donut.

“Phuggin mife, mm?” Chloe mumbled through a mouthful. Shoving the last bit into her clogged cheeks, she wiped crumbs on her jeans.

“What're we... doing?” Max wondered, trying to keep her question neutral, though she was slightly annoyed with the random stop.

Still chewing on her food, Chloe took Max's hand and squeezed it for a moment. She pulled Max in, and they hooked hips for a moment.

Max chewed at her donut as she absorbed the beauty of droplets of dawnlight speckling Chloe's profile.

Chloe swallowed at last, coughed a bit, pounded her chest, and breathed with satisfaction.

“You should, like, totally snap a pic of this shit, Hotshot.” Chloe gave Max a gentle nudge as she suggested this.

“Uhh...” Max's stomach went queasy. “I-I don't know, I...haven't been, um...”

“Exactly.”

Chloe's tone had grown solemn in an instant. Their hands disconnected. Max popped the last bit of donut into her mouth, and Chloe grabbed her hips, spinning them both to face each other. Without thinking, Max's hands found themselves resting along the top of Chloe's butt. It seemed like a natural...hand resting spot?

“You haven't taken a single photo in days, Max.”

Max let Chloe's concerned stare burn into her skull.

“Yea,” Max conceded with a wary shrug. “I-I don't want...to risk...like...the temptation, or-or, like...I-I dunno.” She dribbled out a disparaging sigh.

“Maxine.” Chloe scratched her fingers against the denim on Max's waist. “Gotta get on that horse n' shit, yea?”

Max's brows contorted with uncertainty as her cheeks began to heat up.

“Haven't been up to taking photos lately,” Max explained the obvious.

She was feeling uncomfortable all of a sudden. She let Chloe go, loosed Chloe's grip from her, and stepped off aimlessly through the grass. Chloe pursued gently, wrapping her arm around Max's shoulder. Connected at the side, they paced through the grass a bit as they talked, the sun emerging slowly beside them.

“Come on,” Chloe sighed with worry. “You, like, love photography, right?”
Max nodded half-heartedly. After all of the pain and suffering her photos had caused lately, she was starting to feel uncertain.

“Then you can't give up on it,” Chloe decided. “You've got a fucking gift, dude.”

Jefferson's voice:  
'And Max...has a gift.'

Max’s nostrils took in a sharp breath as her wrist muscled tightened, struggling to break free from their duct tape restraints. Her head spinning, spiraling, swirling in a drug-addled haze. The hot lights against her face, the snap of latex gloves...

“Chl-...” Max coughed on her own saliva, regaining her bearings. “Chloe, I'm...not so sure I still have it in me. Not after everything that's happened.”

Chloe paused. Max could see the sting of disappointment in Chloe's eyes.

“I know this shit can't be easy,” Chloe acknowledged, shrugging a bit as their steps began to sync up. “But you can't just give up. Don't let-...Wh-what was his name again?”

Max's chest swelled at the way Chloe seemed to have read her mind.

“Jefferson,” Max muttered dully.

“Don't let Jeffershit ruin this for you.” Pf. Jeffershit, huh? “All right? He's a...fuckin' psycho. N' you're not.”

**NOPE. WE'RE NOT PSYCHO AT ALL  
AMIRITE MAXINE?**

“Look, Max, I'm not saying you should, like, rush into this. I'm just-...Ugh. I just want you to keep that...that spark, ya know?”

“Spark?”

“Yea, that, like, poetic, creative thing. That enthusiastic...-! That...that thing, that, I-I dunno. It's sexy, OK?” Chloe grinned sheepishly, and Max felt her cheeks get warmer. Big tough punkish Chloe was totally into nerds, as she'd confessed back at the pool a week or so ago. Max was very OK with this. “I want to see you rise above all of this bullshit and do what you would've done, anyway. Which, ya know, seems like it would've been the whole photography bit?”

Max took in a deep breath.

It wasn't so easy to separate the art from the artist. Not for her.

But...

“You're right,” Max sighed, letting Chloe loop them back around toward the truck. “I can't just give up on what I love, huh?”

“Didn't give up on me,” Chloe reminded. “And that seems to be, uh...goin' OK?”

Max swallowed, glancing down at her pinkened wrist as it sent a pang of stinging pain at her.

“Right?” Chloe inserted, growing a little hesitant from the silence.
“N-no, yea, you're right,” Max agreed again.

“Max, I don't care if you're, like, a crime-buster, or a time warrior, or whatever. I just want you to be, like, you, and...and I mean, photography and shit? It's how we got back together, ya know? I-I just want it to be, like, your thing. Our thing.”

“Psh. You just want me to get your good side on camera.”

“Ha, damn right, gurl. If you don't show the world, no one'll believe it exists.”

Max latched her hand around Chloe's waist. Their footsteps aligned in rhythm as they traversed the last bit of land back to the truck.

“So,” Chloe started back up when they reached the truck. “Why don't we, like, do a photo shoot, huh?”

And suddenly, it occurred to Max why Chloe had stopped here. This was a really pretty spot. And the lighting at that moment, with the sunrise happening behind them...it was nice.

A new dawn. A new start. For both of them.

“Y-yea, sounds like fun,” Max decided. Her chest grew warm with excitement as she went into the truck to retrieve her things.

Yea. Yea, fuck Jefferson, fuck Blackwell, fuck that...that tornado, and...all of the...-
No, fuck all of it. At least for a moment. Max needed a moment. Just for her, a moment to accept that what was past was fucking past and she was allowed to have a fresh start. And so was Chloe.

Max scooped up her messenger bag, slapping its strap over her shoulder. She pulled out the thick photo book she'd picked up at the bookstore the day prior. She popped open the film compartment on the front of the camera and loaded a fresh cartridge of film, locking it in place then slapped it shut. It whirred, spitting out the black card that protected the film in transit. Max loved the aesthetic of loading film into a retro camera. This camera worked a bit differently from her old busted 600 model. But she had quickly gotten used to the Spectra that Chloe had given her days back...William's old camera. Helping Max relive the past in ways that...that didn't fuck everything up.

Pretty grateful for that thing, huh?

Thank you, William...

The truck bobbed, lurching forward a bit. Max glanced through the windshield to notice that Chloe had propped herself up on the hood. All right. OK.

Max took her items and closed the truck door with her elbow. She clambered awkwardly up on the hood, and Chloe smiled at her. It was this encouraging little smile.

'Get it, girlfriend.'

The two of them sat for a few moments, legs dangling over the front bumper. Max opened her book and went to try and find something – anything – that would give her an idea of...what to snap a pic of. Or, like...how to do it. The art half of her brain was fried.

“Gettin' some insight?” Chloe wondered casually, lightly knocking the heels of her boots against the
“Mm,” Max hummed, flipping pages. She was trying to get to a portion about landscape photography. Like, horizons, and stuff. She ended up getting sidetracked by a chapter about candid profile shots, street shots...you know, like, capturing moments where people didn't realize they were being filmed?

‘Now, can you give me an example of a photographer who perfectly captured the human condition in black and white?’

‘I could frame any one of you in a dark corner, and capture you in a moment of desperation. And any one of you could do that to me. Isn’t that too easy? Too obvious?’

Ugh...Those donuts suddenly weren't settling so well in Max's stomach...

“Hey, Max,” said Chloe, nudging her partner out of her reading. “C'mon. I know I'm, like, not at all a genius at this artsy-fartsy stuff, but I'm pretty sure photos get taken with a camera...not a book?”

When Max glanced up at her, Chloe shot back an exaggerated wink with a bit of her tongue sticking out. Max was momentarily distracted by said tongue, but shook it off.

“Smart ass,” Max chuckled softly, bumping her elbow lightly against Chloe's arm. She took note of her page number, then closed the hefty book.

“Smart ass,” Max chuckled softly, bumping her elbow lightly against Chloe's arm. She took note of her page number, then closed the hefty book.

“Oh, dude,” Chloe said excitedly, twisting her abdomen round. She gestured her head toward the cab of her truck. “You should totally get on top of the roof, I bet you could get some hella gnarly shots from up there, man.”

Max smirked at Chloe's enthusiasm.

She dryly, facetiously replied, “Yea, some tubular shots, uh-huh...”

“To the max, Max,” Chloe topped off their 80's slang, sharing a wide and toothy grin. “Get that fine ass on the roof.”

“Psh, all right,” Max decided after a moment's thought. She made sure her messenger bag was secure on her shoulder, and made her way up to the top, taking care to not rock the truck too much. The poor thing creaked and groaned under even Max's light weight. Max worried just how many more road trips the rustbucket had left in it.

Her sneakers on the truck's hood, Max found the roof of the vehicle surprisingly comfortable. The boost in height maybe didn't matter much for what sort of photos she was about to take, but, well, perspective. Even a slight change in perspective was always refreshing.

“Yo,” said Chloe, craning her neck and holding out both palms. “Hit a sister up with a donut, wouldja?”

Tinkering with her camera, Max smiled, setting the camera down to her left beside the book. The box of donuts, still resting beside her on the roof, had two apple fritters, a bear claw, and a strawberry-frosted sprinkle.

“Which one do you want?” Max wondered, hesitating. She secretly hoped Chloe would not pick the fritter. It...would just be kind of neat if they both ate them last, but...moreso if Chloe also had the same idea.
“Uhhh, what's left?”

“Fritters, strawberry, bear claw...”

“I already had a bear claw, that one's yours.”

“You could have the second one if you wanted...”

“No way, that'd break the Donut Truce Act of 2007. I look like a traitor to you?”

Max burst out a laugh. Holy shit, she remembered that now...

“You never did get me to sign that,” Max recollected in a bemused sigh. Chloe had typed up an actual document and everything.


“So I did,” Max played along, scooping up the strawberry donut. She readied a throw, flexing her wrist and watching Chloe's body tense up like a dog waiting to catch a treat. Max flicked the donut out like a frisbee – half expecting Chloe to catch it in her mouth – but Chloe snagged it with her hands, and it broke in half at the impact.

As Chloe went to chow down, Max shook her head to herself. Man, they could not make a habit of this or they'd become whales in no time.

BEACHED.

ROTting IN THE SUN.

Uhhh...Ahem. A-Anyway, Max went back to fussing with her camera, and finally got around to snapping a couple of photos of the horizon, following the rule of thirds. They were, ya know, pretty and all, with the dawn playing games against the hills and stuff. But...Max didn't know, it just didn't quite grab her. This lack of pizazz, it was...fucking annoying. Had she lost her touch? Had she lost her passion, or was this just a slump? Art-block?

Maybe she just needed, well...a more engaging subject with...a much closer proximity. Heh.

Predictably, her gaze fell to Chloe, who was inelegantly sucking donut crumbs and sprinkles from her fingers. Max was momentarily distracted by said, er, crumb-licking...and took advantage of that.

-Click!-
-Whrrrrr...-

As Max retrieved the photo, Chloe's eyes widened, her thumb still in her mouth as she froze.

Max just smiled sneakily down at her.

Drying her fingers off on her jeans, Chloe shook her head slowly.

“Fuck, Max,” she chuckled. “Told ya to get my good side.”

Looking down at her camera's setting switches with narrowed eyes, Max's smile widened.

Max shrugged, citing, “A photographer makes the best with what they've got...”

Chloe puffed out a “Pfft!”, shoving her middle finger up at Max.
Max lined up her angle so that Chloe's hand shielded one of her eyes.

- Click!
- whrrrr...-

“Yo,” Chloe protested, dropping her hand into her lap, “What happened to the scenery shots?”

Max's brain fizzled, trying to come up with some pickup line out of the many possibilities Chloe's statement opened up.

“Uh...” She shook her head lightly, watching the last photo slowly develop in her hand. “I-I'm...ya know...capturing the most beautiful sights in front of me...”

Chloe's eyelids slide halfway down, her brow lifting. Max's teeth showed as she grinned stupidly.

“We seriously need to work on your one-liners,” Chloe dryly stated. She flipped herself sideways, spreading her legs across the front of the truck's hood. “I could pose for you, ya know,” she cited, sprawling herself out in a faux pinup pose. Max wasn't going to lie, it was kinda doing something for her, but...was also just too silly. Too ridiculous.

So, of course she had to take a photo of it.

- Click!
- whrrrr...-

Max snorted a laugh to herself, and Chloe sat upright. She pulled out a cigarette and lit it up, swallowing in its toxins and spilling them into the air. Max wasn't cool with this habit and all, but...damnit, cigarettes made for neato pics, she had to admit. Fffffuck. She couldn't resist...

- Click!
- whrrrr...-

Without even needing to be prompted, Chloe began to shift pose again. Spread on her back n the hood, she Crossed one leg over the opposing bent knee. She rested one hand on her stomach with a certain softness, and held her cigarette upright with her other hand. The early morning sunlight trickled across her in a wonderful way, casting awesome little shadows, contrasted by the glow of her cigarette's tip and the wisp of smoke raising up. Max steadied her camera, waiting for the right moment – when Chloe inhaled, and the cigarette's ember glowed a hot orange.

- Click!
- whrrrr...-

One more shot left in this cartridge.

As Max eagerly watched this latest photo develop live in front of her, she felt the truck wobble and groan as Chloe once against changed position. Pf. Girl was a natural subject who knew how to chill to get her pictures looking...natural. It was, well, pretty exciting, actually. Max could already feel her brain buzzing with ideas for shots. Ways she could take advantage of the setting, of the different angles she could get with the truck's height.

She was already setting her camera back on Chloe, who was casually sitting in this totally mellow way on the truck's corner, holding her cigarette in maximum-chill mode. Just...just glancing off toward the horizon. Max let her eyes follow where Chloe's were looking.
The open space of grass and hills and trees before them, it was...really something. The sunlight was slowly seeping its way across the landscape, swallowing the darkness up. The night was over, and a new day was beginning.

“My pose wrong?” Chloe asked, still maintaining her oh-so-suave demeanor. She sucked in a drag on her cigarette.

“N-no, not at all,” Max cited, recollecting herself. “I just, um...I was taking a moment.”

“Been a while since I've, like...just mellowed and took in mother nature n' shit,” said Chloe wistfully.

“Yea,” said Max, letting her camera rest in her lap for a few seconds. “I like to stop once in a while, just...stop. Breathe. Take things in, I guess.”

“Contemplate life, the universe, and everything?”

“Fff. Something like that.”

“Mm.”

And Chloe was quiet for a bit. And Max was quiet with her. And it was comfortable.

*Man,* Max thought to herself. *It's so hard to believe that...after everything that's happened, that Chloe and I can just...have a moment like this. It's weird, just being with her like this, like...like everything's finally going to go back to normal.*

*I know. Lame it sounds, life has to go on.*

Jefferson’s words from the week prior kept fucking *haunting* her this morning. And yet he was fucking *right.* And that pissed Max off so much...Someone so...so *twisted,* so psychotic, how could they still form, like, normal thoughts like that?

*Isn't that just the question we're wondering ourselves?*

Max closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Somehow, she’d find a way to clear all of this shit out of her head...

“What's up, Max?”

Heh. Well, there was the 'somehow,' of course.

“Oh, uh, it's hard,” Max confessed, running her fingers across the old camera fretfully. “I-I dunno, I'm just...I'm worried all of this crazy shit that's happened, it...it might've, like...messed me up a bit.”

“Oh, chyeah,” Chloe puffed out, scooting herself backwards up the truck’s hood. “Dude, *everybody's* messed up from this fuckery, don't, like...-” Chloe dialed back her intensity for a second, extending her hand up and setting it down on Max's left knee. “Don't be hard on yourself. I-I mean, like...psychological shit, it happens when you see things like that.”

“You don't *see* the shit I'm seeing,” Max muttered under her breath.

“Huh?”

Max's face felt so hot with embarrassment and fear with the way Chloe was looking up at her.

Well? Did she have nothing to say? No smart-ass remark, no guilt-trips? Max's 'Other' voice was
being suspiciously quiet.

“Chloe,” Max began, her voice started to tremble. She bit her lip nervously, setting the camera down by her photography book.

“What?” Chloe asked quietly, intuitioned this was something serious. Max could see it all over Chloe’s expression. All over Chloe's body language. Chloe knew something weird was up and had been dying to hear it.

“I'm...-” Max's throat caught. Her brows furrowed. Her eyes darted rightward, upward, admiring the field of cirrus clouds above, and the harsh way the morning light cast its glow on one side of them whilst shadows consumed the rest. “I feel like I'm broken,” Max explained, trying to keep her voice solid. Still staring skyward, she added, “Something in my head, it...it's fucked up, Chloe. I-I keep having these...nightmares. These...”

Chloe was hoisting herself up on the roof beside Max, pushing aside the materials to Max's side. She grabbed the bear claw from the donut box and shoved it in Max's face.

“N-No. Thanks, I'm not...-”

“Comfort food, come on.”

Max paused, absorbing the weak, desperate little twinkle in Chloe's eyes. She took the bear claw. Awkwardly cradling the bear claw in her hands, Max felt Chloe's pressing gaze, questioning, worrying, waiting...

Max broke the donut in half. She threw one half to the ground, letting it fall off the truck's edge. *Fuck it.*

“In my nightmares,” Max explained, gazing at the broken piece in the grass feet below. “I talk to...myself.”

Chloe's hand pressed itself into Max's thigh. Chloe's fingernails dug against Max's leg with this weird kind of...longing. Chloe was being quiet. Chloe was focused 100% on listening. Max...appreciated that. Needed it.

“Ih-It's like...-” Max clawed her hand against her scalp, took in air through her nostrils, then puffed it out through fluttered lips. “It's like there’s another...me. In my head. Just...being a total bitch. All the time. Guilt-tripping me, and...I-I dunno, I mean, *duh,* right? I feel...*horrible* about everything. All of those *people,* Chloe. They're *dead* because of me.”

Max managed to push her eyes to Chloe, who had taken her hat off. Chloe looked so solemn, so serene, so calm and steady and solid. It was an expression Max couldn't exactly figure out, but it was serious, and it was strong. Like Chloe understood that Max needed a rock to rest upon.

There were no tears spilling. No sobbing, no whimpering.

“Ev...-Every time I...fuck with time, Chloe, it's like...I-I don't know, it's like I lose part of myself. And...and now I'm so scattered, just the...smallest shit, it'll set me off. Like...just taking fucking photos, I can't...*not* think about Jefferson. What if I'm...going to end up like *him*?”

“Max,” Chloe sighed, her head lulling with disappointment. She clamped her hand down on Max's leg, then wrapped her arm around Max's back, rubbing at Max's right ribs.
“I'm serious, Chloe,” Max groaned. “I'm literally having arguments with myself. Like, there's another me in my head, and...and I can't control her. What if my Rewind, all this...jumping realities, and...and fucking with time? My nosebleeds, I-I mean, what if I fucked up my brain? What if I'm losing my mind?” Max questioned, her eyes squinting with fear.

Chloe shook her head with uncertainty, tugging Max toward her. She made Max set her head down on her shoulders. The scent of Chloe's sweat, of her jacket, of her deodorant, it was weirdly comforting.

Still no tears.

Max took a bit of the half bear claw. Chloe kissed her on the top of her head.

“Another 'you,' huh?” Chloe mused softly, running her fingers through Max's hair as Max nibbled at the donut. “She talk any shit about me?”

Max burst out a confused laugh. It was actually...relieving, the way Chloe was taking this in stride.

“Oh, yea,” Max replied, trying to be light. “She talks shit about everyone, but, man. She really has it out for you...”

“She's probably just jealous,” Chloe said facetiously. “Tell her there is more than enough Chloe to go around for however many Maxes are hiding in that head of yours.”

For whatever reason, Chloe making a joke of all this was very OK. It was what Max needed.

Yea. Max was just overthinking this shit...

“Uh, but—” Chloe said through a deep exhale. “-you've been through hella shit lately, Max. And your nose ain't bleeding for no reason...Maybe after we get back home, we should...call up your shrink? Maybe see a doctor?”

“Wow,” Max said, bewildered but in agreement. “Chloe Price, suggesting medical treatment. And not just the self-induced kind.”

“OK, hey. Now. We are totes gonna self-medicate in the meantime...”

“Oh, really?” Max said with skepticism.

“Everybody's got demons, Max. Everybody's got, like...coping mechanics.”

“Mechanisms?”

“That's what I said.”

Max smiled, letting Chloe's calm, collected approach to this soak into her skull. She nuzzled her cheek against Chloe's shoulder, shoved the rest of her donut into her mouth, and encased Chloe's waistline in her arms.

“Drugs, sex, and rock n' roll,” Chloe recanted. “It's what that stuff's good for, ya know? Making all this bullshit life throws at us, like...tolerable.”

“Mm...” Max felt like there were, well, better ways to 'make bullshit tolerable,' but...this was where Chloe was coming from. And to be fair, Max hadn't really tried those sorts of things.

“It's PTSD,” Chloe stated suddenly. Max agreed without even really thinking about it. “What you're
dealing with? David, he, uh, I mean...he still deals with that kinda shit.”

Max swallowed her food so she could speak.

“And it makes him do...dumb shit,” Max concluded. “Like...put cameras in your own house. Or hit you...”

“Yea,” Chloe sighed. “Well. Makes me do dumb shit, too, like...deal drugs and...fucking try threatening psychotic rich kids...But, I mean, that's...life. It's whatever. You're better than us, Maxie, you won't...let that sorta stuff happen. Heh, you're not as stubborn as I am, maybe a doc can actually help.”

“You have to come with me.”

“Oh, uhm...Y-tea, totally. Fuck knows my head ain't screwed on tight, either...”

Max kissed Chloe on the neck. She could hear a longing breath pass through Chloe's lips.

“Well,” Chloe said nervously, briskly rubbing Max's side and breaking their contact. “Then we've got a plan.” She slid down her windshield. “See? Teamwork. Boom.”

Max noticed that Chloe had left her hat over her camera. Max took the liberty of stuffing the hat on her head – her ears were cold. It was cozy. She grabbed her camera and pointed it down the side of the truck as Chloe dropped herself off the hood and went for the truck door.

“Hey, Chloe,” Max called. Chloe looked up at her in reply, her hand gripping the door handle.

Leveling the camera up to her eyes, Max honed in on Chloe's face from above. Chloe opened the door, perplexed.

“I love you so fucking much,” Max said, her voice cracking a bit under the weight of everything pressing against her skull from the inside. “Thanks for keeping my crazy-ass held together.”

Chloe’s face let a warm smile spill out, her eyelids flickering thoughtfully.

- Click!-
-whrrrr...-

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+( Recommended listening: )+

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xJn3q9F3wgk

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jW4DwEN2CuU

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The early night sky was a gradient of purple to blue to black, clear and clean, not a cloud in sight.

Laying in the back of Chloe's truck, Max and Chloe were snuggling together on a comforter, staring up at the cosmos. And the cosmos was smiling back down at them.

That moment...if it wasn't what 'destiny' felt like, Max Caulfield wasn't interested in 'fate.'

Her field of vision full of rich, dark hues and speckles of glimmering lights so far away, Max wished
she could take a photo of that moment, of the exact image and framing and just...everything.

But her analogue, old-school camera just wasn’t built for capturing stars. As Max rolled her head to her left, she realized just how dizzy she was. Instead of a gentle, seductive slide from her back to her side, she more, like...rolled and flopped like a manatee out of water. She could feel the beer in her stomach sloshing around inside. Felt weird. The entire truck rocked a bit from Max's movement.

Chloe was sprawled flat on her back, struggling to open a small plastic container of ointment for her new tattoo. Some empty beer cans were littered against the edge of truck beside her.

“Got that, there?” Max teased when Chloe dropped it.

“Shuddup,” Chloe grunted playfully. She tried a second time and dropped the cap. Sighing, she applied some to her wrist before passing it along to Max. Max swiped a small dollop of the stuff and went about moisturizing her own dried up wrist, re-settling herself on her back.

The night sky above was so clear, so clean, speckled with stars. After another day of Portland shenanigans, Chloe had decided they'd forgo a hotel, revisit the field they’d stopped at that morning, and just...spend the night camping out in the back of the truck. Max had been wondering why Chloe had insisted on bringing pillows and blankets with them. Chloe had probably planned this the whole time. Hell, maybe it was why she'd stopped that morning in this very field. Scouting the place out and all that.

With the stars as a background, Max kept her arm lifted above her. It was almost a challenge to keep it held in place with the way the beer was giving her a nice, warm, gentle buzz. She just admired her spiral tattoo for a few moments. Then Chloe's right hand raised up to match her left. Chloe's tattoo was of a blue butterfly, inked on the underside of her wrist, like Max's. Their two hands crossed wrists and connected, arms aimed up toward the stars above.

“Why'd you, um...get another butterfly, anyway?” Max wondered sleepily.

“In'nt it obvious?” Chloe replied. “Uhhh, it's, like, how we hooked up.”

“But...you already got so many on that arm,” Max cited, still confused.

“Eh. Guess my arm was ready for you to come back into my life before the rest of me was,” Chloe decided. “Still gotta mark the occasion, ya know? You tore the photo, so...still need a memento.”

“Aw...” Well, that was kinda sweet. Chloe seemed big into keepsakes and mementos and stuff. Still a softie sucker for that stuff beneath the punk exterior, huh?

“What about yours?” Chloe wondered, baffled. “I mean, I know you’re a closet gamer gurl n’ shit, but...Dreamcast?”

Max was thrown for a loop. She stared at her tattoo, as if trying to decipher some meaning she had overlooked. Her tattoo looked nothing like a dreamcatcher, other than that it was...round? Wait, 'gamer'? Max had been out of the 'gamer' loop for some time...

“Pinned you as more of a ‘Nintendo’ girl,” Chloe noted.

Max's brows twisted with confusion, her lips curling as she readied a response. Her mind swimming with memories of playing Super Nintendo with Chloe back in middle school, Max turned her head to her left, and Chloe noted the look on her face.

“The tatt?” Chloe specified, jiggling their straightened arms around in the air. “It’s not the Dreamcast
“I don’t even know what that is…”

“Ohhh, Maxie. Max. Max-a-mil.” Chloe let their arms fall down to their sides, hands still linked. “You sweet summer child…”

“Oh, wait,” Max grunted, shuffling through the filing cabinets of her brain. “Sounds so familiar…”

“What the heck is it supposed to be, then?” Chloe asked. “It related to your new shirt?”

“Huh?” Max tried to prop her head down, as if she could see her own shirt from this angle. A futile effort. She let her head fall back against the pillow and tried to visualize the shirt she'd picked up the day before during their mall visit. It depicted a big, like, snail shell, with the text 'Golden Ratio.' It was an art reference to, like, how a piece could be set up with its visuals guiding the eyes around a loop, meeting a climax in the center. Huh. Max hadn't really connected those two dots together, but maybe that had something to do with why she thought of that pattern with her Rewind?

“Spiral thingy?” Chloe reminded, still waiting for an answer. “C’mon, hipster, you can't be that drunk…”

Rubbing her eyes and yawning, Max rubbing her thumb against Chloe's hand.

“It's a memento, too,” Max explained. “I guess…”

“What's it mean?” asked Chloe.

“It, uh—W-well, when I use – used – my Rewind, I'd kind of, like...think of going backward, like, going backward around this...spiral. I-It's dumb,” she suddenly dismissed herself, “It's stupid, I just—”

“Nah, that's cool. So it's, what? Like a...memento of how we met?”

“Sort of. I-I mean, yea, but also...” Max sighed.

Their hands dropped down to their sides, still clamped together.

“Like a reminder?” Chloe figured.

“Yea. The price I paid for...fucking with time.”

“Oh...”

“What I did, it...changed a lot of people's lives,” Max reminded sternly. “I can't...ever let myself forget that. You know?”

“Mm...” Chloe sounded a bit uncertain.

And Max suddenly realized that, by association, now Chloe was probably going to always connect her own wrist tattoo with the same.

Well...good. The people of Arcadia Bay at least deserved to remembrance.

“Shit,” Max sighed under breath, clenching her eyes shut as memories pounded at her.

“What?”

“Funerals,” Max winced through grit teeth, gripped at her forehead with some tired despair. “Kate's
Dad texted me this morning to see if I was coming, haven't...replied yet. N' then there's the Arcadia Memorial thing...”

Max could hear crinkling from her side as Chloe was fussing with a baggie or something. Max could smell the stuff and sighed. Well, Chloe _had_ planned on beer, tatts, weed, and strippers...her 'friends' at the tattoo parlor had 'hooked a sistah up' or whatever. Max knew what was coming, but was as of yet undecided as to whether she'd partake.

“One step atta time, Max,” Chloe grunted as she rolled.

Max was feeling pressure building up in her chest, in her skull.

Funerals. Fuck. Max was _so_ not sure she could do funerals, but _so_ did not want to bail on them. Ugh.

- _Flick! Flick!-

The smallest flame, the smallest fire. A gentle huff, a soft puff.

Max opened her eyes, her vision a bit blurry. Not really the alcohol in her system, more just...having corked her head tight in her stress. She saw the smoke wisping up, dissipating in the air to her left. It smelled weird. She coughed a bit, her sinuses overwhelmed.

And then Chloe passed the joint toward her. Max stared at it for a moment. Its glowing orange tip, a drizzle of hazy smoke lightly lifting toward the stars above.

“Chloe,” Max sighed in an uncertain whisper.

“Max,” Chloe sighed with much more certainty. “C’mom, Babe, try it. You need to relax. Bullets and-” Chloe burped. It smelled like beer and burritos. “-and bottles of booze, remember?”

Max took the joint between her fingers like a pen, considering what she'd draw in the stars – what shape she'd connect the dots to form. She slowly spun the joint in small circles, creating the illusion of a swirling pattern with its smoke.

“Take a small drag,” Chloe gently nudged. “Don't overdo it, Buddo.”

Max wrapped her lips around the foreign object. It tasted gross. It smelled weird. She inhaled deeply. Should've taken Chloe's advice.

She nearly dropped the joint on herself as she started sputtering and coughing from the burning sensation. Chloe took the joint from her, chuckling in a half-hearted way as they both sat upright.

Pounding Max's back, Chloe sighed, “Toldja. Damn, Max, you got nothin' to prove here...”

“Urgh,” was about all Max could muster. It was surreal to have seen the smoke pouring out of her own face.

Chloe took another hit, and passed it back over. When Max went to grab it, Chloe made her take pause.

“Small toke this time,” Chloe cautioned. “Got it?”

Max nodded. She just wanted to get out of this mindset. Get out of feeling like a useless pile of shit. Get out of feeling like a whiny, whimpering, uncertain mess. She could handle it. Couldn't be worse than messing around with time, but at least it'd help her relax, right?
Max was a tad more hesitant on the second go around. Smaller breath. More choking, more fire, more smoke. There was a satisfaction to it, not unlike swallowing down beer for the first time.

“Kay-kay,” Chloe spit, swiping the thing from Max just before Max went to take a third inhalation. “Take ’er easy, heh...”

Max rubbed at her chest. She was feeling dizzy, but not so much from the weed. She couldn't feel anything. But her head was still wading in beer and just plain exhaustion.

“Pbbhhh,” Max fluttered out goggily.

“What's up?” Chloe wondered. “Got all quiet on me.” She took another, deeper drag.

Max curled herself up against her knees, resting her forehead against them. Chloe wedged her hand up beneath Max's shirt and scratched Max's bare back. Scratching turned into full-palm rubbing. It tingled, gave max goosebumps in such a good way. Max could just fall asleep like this...

And then Chloe snapped Max's bra.

Startled awake, Max gave Chloe a slap on the leg. They both snickered a bit.

“Don't go snoozin' off,” Chloe insisted. “Gotta stay with me, here.”

“Yea, yea,” Max conceded with a small smile, brushing hair out of her face. She coughed again. Her throat was feeling pretty dry.

“Don't need you upchucking all over the truck,” Chloe teased. “Or me.”

“I'll make sure to aim right for your face,” Max joked. Leaning toward Chloe, she reached her hand out.

Chloe was motionless, letting Max's fingertips slide down her lips.

“Right there,” Max whispered, grinning sneakily, pressing her palm against Chloe's mouth playfully. Her 'seductive' manner dissolved in an instant. “That's where I'll throw up.”

“You are into some kinky, disgusting shit,” Chloe laughed. There wasn't a lot of light bathing them but Max could practically see Chloe blushing just by the way the shape of her facial structure changed.

“Kidding,” Max defensively whimpered. “Joke, it was a joke, I was joking...”

“I know,” Chloe said calmly. She passed the joint to Max. It was a bit harder to hold now, shrinking in size. As Max took another hit, being just a bit bolder with this one, Chloe posed a question. “You thought about that stuff, though? Like, uh...” Chloe scratched at her neck, bobbing her head left and right slightly. “Y-ya know, what sorta things I could do to, uhh...getcha goin’?”

Max's stomach filled with butterflies at the suggestion.

Let me pin you down. Let me eat your neck, press down on you, squeeze-
What? No! Ew, stop, no, gross, ugh...
Oh, did we wanna be on the bottom, then?
'We' don't...want...

Just figured after being pushed around so much you'd wanna come out on top...
Rghh...
“I see those gears spinning, Caulfield,” Chloe taunted, waggling her eyebrows.

Max rubbed at her nose, huffing smokey traces out of her nostrils as she handed the joint back to Chloe.

“*Whew*,” Max shakily breathed out, wiping at her forehead. “Ch-Chloe, I haven’t even, like...*done* anything like that yet, let...lemme figure out the basics first?”

Chloe shrugged, rubbing Max's shoulder briskly.

“Yea, yea, I gotchoo.”

Chloe took one last drag before she rubbed the edge of the joint against the edge of her truck and dropped the dud off the side.

“Will you go with me?” Max asked suddenly.

“*Yup*,” Chloe replied.

“*Pff*, I didn't...even say wh-”

“*Yup*,” Chloe chuckled. She scooted herself to the side.

Setting herself on her hip, Chloe latched her hands on Max's shoulder.

“To the memorial, and...and Kate's...-”

“*Yup*,” Chloe insisted, breathing out with some disbelief. She squished her palms against Max's cheeks and forced Max's gaze against her own. With a shimmer of starlight cast against her eyes, Chloe said in a solemn whisper, “Everywhere and anywhere, there and back again, Maxine.”

*Aw, well isn't that so goddamn touching...You should grieving the people you killed.*

*Not going all googly eyed and...getting fucking wasted.*

Max gently pulled Chloe's hands off her face. She gripped the sides of Chloe's palms, letting them rest on her shoulders. Her eyes slid closed and she bit her lip as the guilt began to push and press and fold her brain.

“Chloe...Whhhat if this is wrong?”

“What?”

Max opened her eyes, daring to face Chloe's features. So close. So wide and vast and occupying her field of vision.

“I-I mean, like...-” Max burped unpleasantly. Chloe's face wrinkled with disgust at the smell but she was still grinning through it. “*Gugh*, this isn't...-” Max wobbled a little, losing some of her balance briefly, but Chloe had her. “*Woo*, this is pretty illegal,” Max sighed, kind of humored by it all. Drinking, smoking weed...hell, for all she knew they were trespassing on someone's property or something.

“Emphasis on *pretty*,” Chloe said in a deep, jesting voice. She slipped her fingertip on Max's nose in a dumb way and they both chuckled.

“Whhhat if we get caught?” Max pondered, a bit of worry clutching at her neck.

*All fun and games until you get caught.*
Fact you're even worried about it maybe a sign you shouldn't be doin' it, huh?

Fuck you, I deserve this. After everything I've been through, I deserve a little bit of happiness.

Don't I?

I mean, I definitely do, right...?

...

“Like this is the first time we broke the law together,” Chloe dismissed, rolling her eyes and giving Max's shoulders a fierce rub. “Dude, chillax, my darling hipster. Live a little. You've earned it. Isn't that the whole reason we took this trip?”

“Yea. Yea, it is, isn't it?”

“Your parents, even your shrink, they all specifically were like, 'Have a good time, no frowny faces' blabla.”

“I guess...”

Max's eyes wandered down to Chloe's lips. To Chloe's bare shoulders. To Chloe's chest.

Don't even think about it.

I'll think whatever I want to think.

Obviously.

I want to, like, move forward. Move on.

You should at least honor the dead before having some fling in a fucking field.

Chloe wants to.

Yea, no shit. She also wants to drink, and smoke, and bang you so hard your eyes fall out.

YoUr EyEs CaN't SeE wHaT i sEe MaX

“Dude, don't space out that much,” Chloe said, shaking Max lightly. “No fallin' asleep on me, not until you drink some water.”

“Huh?” Max murmured, rubbing at her sagging eyes. Time was

slowing
down a

bit...

Water. Water. Fuuuuck, Max suddenly wanted water so bad. Her throat was like a desert. So dry, dry as a bone. Dry as a desert.

Lost in a desert. Skeletons littering the sand. A sandstorm, whirling, twirling, tearing Max to pieces, leaving her skeleton to rest with the others. Rotting in the sun.
Whales rotting in the sun.
Birds rotting in the sun.
Rachel rotting in the sun.
Kate rotting in the sun.
Warren rotting in the sun.
William rotting in the sun.
Joyce rotting in the sun.
Chloe rotting in the sun.
Max rotting in the sun in the sun in the sun in the sun in the sin sinsinsinsin
Kate's eyes fall out.
'I sEe YoU sInNiNg MaX'
'tHeY sEe YoU SiNnInG mAx'
'YOU LIED TO US, MAX.'
'YOU SAID YOU'D SAVE US, MAX.'
'WE NEEDED A HERO. NOT A WHORE.'
'NOT A LYING SINNING WHORE WHO WANTS TO HIDE FROM US.'
'HAVE YOUR BLUE IDOL'
'DRINK YOUR BLUE DRINK'
'YOU THRISTY WHORE'
So thirsty...
Oh, water.
Fucking water, finally.

Max guzzled it down. Some slid down the wrong tube and she choked. Chloe pounded her back a bit – it hurt more than it helped.

“Behhhh-ter?” Chloe checked when the commotion died down. Everything had calmed down.
Everything was blue. The stars were so blue. The sky shimmered in Chloe's boobs. Chloe's eyes smirked, Chloe's lips twinkled.

Of course. Of-fucking- course, how could Max be so blind?

She could see, she could see, she could see.

Chloe grew bigger. Chloe was big.

“hhHHooww dooooennnn thhhaiirr?”

Pfff, Chloe. That jokiest jokester.

Ha. Haha.

,said Max “Life is...so weird”

Gawd, this water was so so good.

Gawd, Chloe's hair was so so blue.

Of course, of course. The blue, the blue, Max wanted to swim in the deep blue sea

~just keep swim-ig, just keep swim-ig~

Max could see the water in her bottle sloshing and splashing. She drank some more, spilling a bit on herself. She laughed.

So thirsty. Mm.

The water was gone, but Max wanted to keep swimming.

Max told Chloe how beautiful she was, how beautiful the stars were, how beautiful every was and could be and might be and would be.

Chloe made a joke about Max being high, and Max laughed. She just kept laughing, it wouldn't stop.

Chloe kissed her. Max closed her eyes. Everything was somehow more colorful that way. So many colors, so many shapes, so many colors, so many shapes.

Time was an illusion, time was a lie, time was a fucking lie.

Max lied to herself over and over.

Every moment, every instant, every laugh, every joke, every touch, every look...

It was all a lie, wasn't it? A marijuana-induced lie.

The lies went on for small eternity, and then...

Gravity felt so heavy suddenly.

The stars were spinning, swirling, forming a tornado of light.

Max fell asleep.
When Max was back to her senses, she felt a bit sick. She was laying on her side.

Chloe was right in front of her, smiling.

Max felt herself smile, too.

“Have a nice chillax, Max?”

Max grunted, rolling onto her back to face the night sky. There were some clouds floating by now. Her nose felt cold, but her body was cozy enough. She realized that Chloe was pressed against her, and that they were resting between two thick blankets. There were some empty water bottles beside their stray beer cans now, as well as some snack wrappers.

Max burped, and the aftertaste was...unpleasant.

Rubbing her dazed head, Max laughed involuntarily.

“What...did I do?”

“Uh, well, a lot of giggling,” Chloe said with a grin, rubbing her hand against Max's stomach. Max suddenly realized that neither of them had on pants.

“Was that...all I did?” Max asked nervously.

“Pretty much,” Chloe replied with assurance. “You, uh, ya did grab my tit for a sec there, but I managed to get you to back off and laugh about it.”

“Sorry,” Max sighed, wiping sand and grit from her eyes. Her face felt hot, but more from embarrassment this time than alcohol or anything.

“Pff, don't be,” Chloe insisted casually. She reached across and brushed hair from Max's cheeks. It was a rather soothing feeling. “You think it's the first time I've had to get some stoner offa me?”

“Ih-it's not like me to...do that,” Max reasoned, her head spinning with concern.

“Eh, maybe not the old you,” Chloe decided. “The you from like, two weeks ago.”

Max pushed herself upright. She was really thirsty again. She fumbled her hand for their mini cooler, the shivered when her fingers were groping at melted ice. There was a single bottle left, so she took it.

As Max guzzled water, Chloe just gawked at her, all doey-eyed. That relaxed, mellow admiration in Chloe's expression that was so rare...It made Max tingle in all the right spots.

But the nausea hadn't left her stomach. And as Max stared at the empty cans and wrappers, and reflected on her, uh...bracing experience...it hit her.

You feel sick because you've been doing all of this shit you think you're not supposed to do.

Time-traveling, breaking and entering, making out when I should be grieving, strip club, beer, and now weed...What is wrong with me?

I'll give you one guess...
It's all because of Chloe...

So what's more important, Maxine Caulfield?

Upholding whatever misguided sense of morality you think you have?

Or moving the fuck on with life?

Wait, what are you saying? What do you want?

Ugh, dumbass... We want the same fucking thing.

Then why have you been so pissy about Chloe?

Not a fan of change. And since that chick's come back into the picture?

Everything's changed.

We're broken, Max. We're broken.

We want to be whole.

We want to be whole.

More I see those fucking googly eyes, more I feel the butterflies in your stomach, the more those butterflies spin around and around... the more I gotta admit...

If anything's gonna make us whole, it's looking like it's her.

So...fuck it.

“Ground Control to Astro-Max?”

Chloe was sitting up right now, too. The night air was seeping past their backs, sending a chill up Max’s spine. Chloe warmed Max with another brisk arm rub. Max’s chest felt, like... tight. Like pressure was building up. She took one last sip of water before screwing the top back on and setting the bottle aside.

“You looked pretty spaced out there, Buddo.”

“Yea,” Max sighed. “Just...thinking. Part of me wants to... but the other part of me, it...”

“Dude.” Chloe patted Max's thigh. Brr. Her hand was kinda cold against Max's skin. Max liked it. “You tell this other part of you to shut the hell up and get on board the ChloMax train.”

“ChloMax?”

“W-well, we need a team name. How's about Super Max and Wonder Chlo?”

“Eh...it's better, I guess,” Max decided with a smirk, clasping her hand against Chloe's on her knee. “Not feeling very 'super' after all this...”

“Thing about super heroes, Max? They don't fucking exist.”

“Well, obviously, but...”

“Real life people don't got all that juice in 'em. To just keep savin' the damn day? Over and over?
Sounds like hell to me. Dunno 'bout you..."

"Mm..." Max's head felt wound up, like a washcloth having the dirty water wrung out.

"Humans gotta take breaks, Max. There's this, uh, I-dunno, this thing, called, like, 'sleep?' Like humans are hardwired to chillax at regular fucking intervals?"

"Pff."

"I'm just saying. You stop sleeping for – what is it, 72 hours? – you're clinically insane, right?"

"I think..."

"Exactly. You need a break. You physically need to let shit go. Not forever, not forget it, but...Max, you ca-...We can't have a life if we spend it all fussing over everyone else's problems all the time. Leave that to the comic book characters and the superhero movies and whatever 'cuz ain't no one gonna live like that. No one real, anyway...Max, your powers are cool as fuck and all that, but I'm not fallin' for Super Max. I'm falling for just...Max."

Max couldn't describe with words the way the night sky framed Chloe's form in that instant. The way everything was beautiful, the way everything led to Chloe's face...Max couldn't explain it without getting hokey and lame.

But it was the perfect shot.

**I love you.**

**I love you.**

The pressure stored in Max's chest leaked out in a longing sigh as Max lunged her head forth, grabbing Chloe's head and diving right into a kiss. As they kissed, Max could feel Chloe trying to wrap the blanket into a tent around them. It was freaking cold, after all, so whilst maintaining the make-out, Max awkwardly fumbled the blanket around her other half, too.

The kissing continued, longer than Max had planned. Max's hands clawed at Chloe's scalp, pushing the girl's beanie off, while Chloe's hands slid up Max's shirt. Max felt her thighs shiver, her stomach tingle. All the butterflies in her gut were spiraling. She kept kissing Chloe on the mouth, tongue-tied, her heart thumping so loudly she worried Chloe would hear it.

Chloe's hands wedged themselves beneath Max's undergarment, pressing themselves against her chest. The sensation knocked the wind out of Max. Gasping out of the kiss, Max's forehead leaned into Chloe's. After a few involuntary sounds spilled out of her lips, Max realized that as exciting as this was, she was being neglectful. Not at all feeling too original in the heat of the moment, Max's hands worked their way into a mirrored position. Chloe's chest was much warmer than her hands were. Things spun in slow circles for a bit, and Chloe's lips descended upon Max's neck.

When the circles slowed to a stop and gave way to gentle pressure, Max became self-aware of just how hard her heart was pounding against Chloe's palm. How hard Chloe's heart was beating against her own hand. Chloe laughed sheepishly, and even in the dim lighting, Max could see that Chloe was blushing. Max had lost track of her own face's temperature.

Ice-cold and lava-hot at the same time in different places and different ways, Max's body was taken over by the spinning storm of butterflies within. They both found themselves in a mess of blanket and each other with the truck as their bed and the stars as their ceiling – limitless. Their two forms melded together like Yin and Yang in a way that finally made sense of things, that crumbled the
pedestal Max had put things up on.

During their whole road trip, Max's feelings had been...swirling...spiraling, spinning, guiding themselves around tighter and tighter, just to reach this center. This climax, this focal point.

Their road trip had been leading up to this moment they'd both wanted – leading up to them both being the center of each other's gaze.

A Golden Ratio.
"Sail on after me, Love. Will you sail on after me?
Will you fight the waves of oceans? Will you still believe?"

"You know that it's a long way down
You know I may not come around
You know that we're a far way now
To where we're coming from

What have we become?"

~ KoetheKoethe, *Sail Away*

The waves rippled and wrinkled, they did. The rain splashed and sprayed. ‘Twas a stormy evening, indeed. The air was thick with salt but so hungry they were for the taste of sand, they could smell it through the haze. Their sort was one with the sea and all that, but...hell, one needed a good grog now and then. A fresh grog.

And there she was: land ho and all that. Chlo could make ’er out through the drizzle. Storm was fading fast.

“Cap’n!” she shouted, turning to look down from the crow’s nest.

“Aye!” bellowed the gruff Cap’n, nodding e’er so slightly with anticipation. Chlo hadn’t even needed to say nothin’ ‘bout no land, the Cap’n could just tell from the sort o’ shout what she’d bellowed.

Cap’n Maximus had an iron grip on the wheel, her face stoic, but her eyes emblazoned with determination. Cor, she was determination incarnate. Aye, Maximus Hawkmoth was a pirate of pirates, brave and true...Ne'er was a First Mate so o'er the moon for her Cap'n. And as First Mate, Chlo Morpho had assumed bodyguard duties for her Cap’n, as well as, ehrm, duties which closer proximities might require. The crew knew. Course they did, t’weren’t a hiding sort o’ thing. And any who protested were thrown o'erboard, and that was that.

As Chlo whipped down the ladder with a bold, rain-slicked slide, a wide grin poured ‘cross her face as she remembered what it were they was lookin’ fer at all.

Treasure, ‘o course. What pirate weren’t lookin’ fer that, eh? But this? Nah, t’weren’t any ol’ thing. Sentimental, it was. Valuable, too, certainly. *Ideally*, a fine stash o’ gold n’ jewels and what-have-you would accompany it. But t’was the Crown what Chloe and the Cap’n were most lookin’ for.

Aye, the ol’ Crown of Pirate Queen Ray Sunlace. Been years since the Queen’d stalked the high seas, and none were the wiser o’ where she’d retired off to. Some rumors’d have ya believe she’d
taken to a quiet life on land. Others were she was hopping 'cross the Caribbean, having her fill of pleasures with the riches she’d taken o'er the years. But the most common rumor, one which way or t'e other, were that Sunlace'd stashed away her Crown and some riches somewhere close to home in the hopes that her ol' crew might find it and carry on her pillaging duties. And Chlo, being an ex-member of said crew and previous confidant o' the self-appointed Queen, was quite interested in such an expedition.

So it was that Cap'n and First Mate were patrollin' antiquated waters for the first time in many moons, sniffin' round for clues. They set anchor down at the crowded docks of Arcadia Bay. Leaving their skeleton crew to their tasks, Chlo and her Cap'n put boots (and wooden peg) upon soil – odd feelin', that – and were quick about heading for the Two Whales.

“Ya think'll do us any good?” Chlo asked through the rain. She made to take Maximus by the hand – proper escort n' all, eh? – but the Cap'n's grip weren't so ironclad that evening, and the hands didn't stick for long.

“Aye,” the Cap'n growled in a stoic reply. “Someone 'ere, they'll give us somethin'. All 'bout askin' the right questions.”

The pair popped right into the Two Whales. 'Twere as busy a pub as Chlo e'er recalled. Assorted lollygaggers hummed n' grunted their shanty songs. A pair o' Brits in their stuffy naval suits hovered with their tea at a table out back. Shot Chlo n' her Cap the stinkeye. Ha, and what wouldja know, there was ol' Brownbeard Frank nursing a can o' beans with his beer. Gods below, Chlo found herself hungerin' for beans all a sudden.

While much felt familiar 'bout the place, 'twere missin' its proper host: Ms. Morpho, Chlo's mum. Last scroll Chlo had read from 'er, mum was settled further inland with that husband who'd washed up ashore howe'er long ago. Some militant what defected from the British Navy or some such.

So, instead o' Ms. Morpho, servin' as beer wench that nightfall were a pouty-faced seductress Chlo recollected. Tori the Chaser were no-nonsense, a pursuer o' rumors n' recantations. An' Chlo knew the lass had an eye for the Cap'n, and had, true to 'er name, done some chasin'. Chlo'd shot that down right quick. A pub wench with her Cap'n Maximus? Nay. If the Cap'n needed some whores on the side, she deserved premium grade, not parched alleycats in heat.

With eyes like ice and a smile sharp n' cold, Tori approached the two pirates at their stools.

“Well, well,” she hissed pleasantly. Too pleasantly. “Sights for sore eyes, both o' you.” Her fairy gaze settled upon Maximus, who were strangely intimidated. “Still weepin' o'er butterflies and breaking hearts, aye, Maxi?”

Chlo could feel 'er eyes roll through through the back of her own head. She pulled out her satchel of coin and pounded its heft upon the countertop.

“Beer wench,” Chlo grunted, tapping her hook hand with all impatience upon the bar. “Me n' my Cap'n came to this 'ere establishment fer some drink. So best not taunt us n’ make with the ale. We are a dangerous sort, ye mighta heard.”

“Heard it, I have.”

Chlo and Tori fired canon gazes cross the counter. Tori planted her pointed elbows on the counter, folded her spiny fingers together, and rested her chin upon her wrists with a wry pout of a smile.

Maximus sighed, scratching at an itch right beneath her eyepatch. She said naught.
“Thirsty pair, aren’t we?” Tori said with sweet venom on her lips, narrowing her eyes at Chlo. Her devil’s smirk turned to Maximus. “Mayhap some of our private reserves are in order.” She reached out a hand, tipping the Cap’n's hat up slightly. “If, that is, yer purses are heavy enough for it...”

Chlo watched Maximus fuss with her hat, straighten out her mustache, shift her eyepatch back in place, and scratch her nose, cheeks pink with temptation.

Maximus then frowned a bit, much to Chlo's relief.

The Cap’n then grumbled, “Our purses are heavy enough for what ye might know 'bout the Crown.”

Tori's minxy mannerisms withered at the retort, an' she straightened out.

“Roit, then. All business, is it?” Tori snipped. “Truly are a breaker of hearts, you are, Captain.”

“Yer a Rumor Chaser,” Chlo stated. “Ain'tcha? Do the rest o' yer chasin' on your own time. Now, do ya want ye some easy coin, or not?” She prodded her hook against her full purse of gold pieces.

“Tell us what ye know, Tori,” Maximus muttered. “N' we'll all go back to tendin' our own troubles.”

Tori inspected the bag of coins.

“N don't go skippin' on the drinks, either,” Chlo insisted. “Been weeks since we've 'ad a fresh stout. We're a thirsty lot, 'ere.”

Tori's brows slithered up and down as the twinkle of gold pieces caught her eyes.

“So you are,” she noted. Checking that no onlookers were snooping, Tori swiped the satchel of gold behind the counter. She then nodded her head toward a back table in a lonely corner of the pub.

“Well, I know a man who might point ye in a direction worth yer time...”

Chlo and Maximus cast inconspicuous like eyes o'er to the corner. 'Twas that bloody rascal Brownbeard, drinkin' damn beans from the bottom o' his tin can. Chlo could feel her insides crawl with rage at the notion of that sack o' lard havin' laid his paws anywheres near the Queen's Crown.

Chlo concluded, “A bit o' interrogation might be in order while we wait for that ale, then.” Chlo knocked her hook hand against wood for luck.

“Have at it,” Tori dismissed. She paused, watching Maximus fidget with her mustache. “'Fore that, though, there's a bit o' extra info I can lend, on the house.”

With brow raised, the Cap'n murmured an “Aye?”

Tori leaned o'er the counter, wrist to her lips, hovering round the Cap'n’s ear to dish some secret. Chlo hunched toward them, intent on whate'er tidbit this might be.

Tori whispered, “Ya blew me down fierce when last ye boarded, Maximus...”

Tori's fish face latched upon the Cap'n's lips.

Chloe’s eyes opened gently, calmly, soaking in the trickle of dawn drizzling through the cracks in their window blinds. She could feel her heart thumping in her chest from her dream…something about pirates?
And Max had a mustache…? And Victoria had been there, and…-

Chloe had been having these dreams lately. Like her brain was trying to play out some fucking SyFy miniseries. But by lunchtime, she’d always realize she’d forgotten the details, only recalling that pirates were involved. Like their childhood days…

Shit. That crap felt so ancient now. It’d been…damn…like, ten years? Middle school junk. So much was different now. Why was Chloe’s mind trying to recreate that stuff, anyway? Maybe she was just going stir-crazy. She decided she’d oughtta call the commissioner that afternoon, try and see if there were any side-gigs she could get in on until her spot in the list was back at the front. Hopefully that mall renovation would pan out. That’d be weeks of solid work, easy. Months, even, maybe. It felt weird to have such an inconsistent work schedule, when Max was on the 9-to-5 train, but…Chloe's job was also a lot more fucking exhausting, too. Construction, welding, and shit like that was probably a little teensy bit more tiring than serving frappucinos.

Bleh. Ain’t no rest for the wicked, eh?

Chloe rolled over from her right side to her left side, her belly aching a bit as she did so. Fuck. She could feel the nausea coming on. Hangovers aside, Chloe had come to hate her stomach, a pudgy chunk just sticking out, like she was in a perpetual state of early pregnancy. Sighing through her nose at the thought, she reminded herself that such was the cost of beer and meat. Meh. It was worth it. Max seemed to like Chloe’s belly pudge well enough, anyway, and what else really mattered?

Now facing her bed mate, Chloe admired the messy waves of brown and red that draped across Maxine’s cheeks, like curtains shielding her from the morning sun. Or something. Gah, screw it. Chloe couldn’t resist. She gently nudged her thumb across Max’s forehead, pushing brown and neon red strands off to the side. Sliding hair off of freckled cheeks. Max didn’t seem to care for bunching her hair into a bun at night, and Chloe did not mind at all. The little river of brown and red was spilling across the pillow in this fucking rad way. Man, Max was really growing her hair out this time. . .Longest Chloe had ever seen it, down past her shoulders and stuff. Damn, just thinking on it was making Chloe feel a little self-conscious about her own hair. Well, the two-thirds of her hair that was more than half an inch long, anyway, heh. The undercut bit seemed to be going pretty well, and getting all the right kinds of attention, especially from Max, who practically had an on-the-spot orgasm when she’d first seen it, heh.

Max stirred a little, her breath swooping in through her nose in this cute manner. Chloe realized she’d been letting her fingertips linger on Max’s face. Better leave the girl alone. Only had another twenty, thirty minutes left before she had to wake up, and Maxie needed all the sleep she could get. Taking care to work her way out of bed without fuss, Chloe’s feet absorbed the gentle jolt of cold floorboards. She stretched up her hands, rolled her neck a bit, and tried to work out the morning kinks. They remained pretty, uh, kinked, but . . .ah, well.

Chloe had no plans for the day, and Max would be gone until the afternoon, but…by now, Chloe had come to realize that keeping a regular sleep schedule made the days when she would have to wake up early not so bad. Plus? This morning routine on her off days was giving her hella practice at learning to cook. Well, breakfast, food, anyway. And, really, come on: Ron Swanson had it right on when he posed that humanity no need for any other kind of food than breakfast food.

After slipping on a pair of…slip…ers. Uh, putting on a pair of slippers – TMNT brand, of course. Not the retro kind, either, the newer Nick one. Better than you would’ve expected, TBH. Anyway, with feet feeling much more cozy, Chloe popped on one of her many meme-tacular t-shirts and a fuzzy pair of pajama pants with Storm Troopers printed all over them. Ah, Coziness +4. Suited up with appropriate armors for the following encounter, Chloe headed off to the kitchen.
All right, Day. Time to...take you on. And whatever.

Chloe set up her smartphone to stream music – cooking was always better with music – and she got down to work.

Scrambled eggs, some sausage, maybe some English muffins...aw, yea. Breakfast time. Happy breakfast time.

The sausages were simple enough. Nothin’ like the smell of friggin’ meat in the morning to awaken the beast. Chloe already had a plan to drizzle a bit of honey on the suckers when she was ready to eat.

Next was the eggs. The hardest part. Eggs were easy to cook, sure, but they were so hard to get just right. And there were so many ways to get them just right, too. But on that morning? Scrambled. Stickin’ with the basics.

Opting to re-use the same pan from her sausages – a little bitta meat dust never hurt no one. Well, Max might be annoyed with it, but Chloe would cook Maxie’s eggs on a different pan. Chloe broke an eggshell on the frying pan's edge, letting the goop plop with a soft hiss. She repeated with a second and a third. However, as she’d finished with the third, she’d realized a bit of eggshell had fallen in. Shit. Chloe reached her fingertips in to try and remove it, then quickly retracted when the sizzling egg goo bit at her fingertip. Damnit. With a sigh, Chloe tried to fish out the shard with her spatula.

As the eggs started to cook, Chloe gave ‘em a good shuffle. A weird thought hit her in the brain right then: this was nice. Just this. Just Chloe, and eggs, and happy breakfast cooking music. Ulgh. But the bit of hangover left over in her stomach? Not so nice. Even farting wasn’t relieving the gassy, nauseous feeling. Prolly just needed some food in her belly. And some juice. Mm. Orange juice sounded really fuckin’ good right that second...Chloe left her eggs briefly to go pour some, then had to quickly fuss around with them to keep the bottom from burning up, chugging some juice as she did so. Hit the spot, right there.

As the eggs were close to done, Chloe popped a pair of English muffins into the toaster. By the time she had unevenly cooked scrambled eggs and greasy little sausages lined up on her plate, the muffins were done. She swiped some provolone cheese from the fridge and squished it between the still hot muffins, letting it melt together. A drizzle of honey on her sausages, a splat of salsa and a dollop of sour cream on her eggs (dollop, such a good word), aaaand a refill on the OJ. Bam. Breakfast was set. Now she just had to prep the coffee maker to brew while she waited...-

With her treasure trove of breakfast fun, Chloe plopped herself down at the tiny little folding chair in their tiny rectangle kitchen, opening up their tiny netbook computer that had found a home there, then logged into their tiny...-

Er, she logged into their mutual e-mail address. Well, technically, they had two. One for personal stuff, and then one they used every time they had to order stuff online, or sign up for subscription shit. At first, Chloe had been a bit wary of sharing an e-mail address. But after doing it for a year or so, she had to admit that it made things simpler. Plus, it had been the perfect way to implement their ‘Team Name.’ After much deliberation – and much online fanfic reading – Chloe had proposed they just combine their last names together. Jokingly, Max had retorted that they could legally change their names.

[ Hello, PriceField InCrime ]

[Amazon] – [Recommended for you: Because you bought...]

Chloe’s stomach twisted a weird way at the sight of the Arcadia Bay newsletter e-mail. She’d been regretting having signed up for it, but Max had been insistent on keeping their subscription. Chloe knew what that e-mail meant. It meant that Arcadia Bay was gearing up for its...f**kin’ five year anniversary with Death. Augh.

But more importantly than that, it *also* meant that Chloe and Max’s five year anniversary as a couple was just around the corner. Kinda shitty that such a good occasion had to fall so close to such a...not-as-good one. But it was Chloe’s own fault for insisting she and Max hook up so quickly after the fact. Ah, well. Que sera, shit happens, ‘it is what it is’, all that circular pointless crap people said; ie whatevs, bruh.

Chloe swapped accounts to check on personal messages.

[ Hello, PriceField InTime ]

[Victoria C.] – [Wine Tasting]

*Ugh. Barf.*

Max had mentioned that Victoria had been trying to get the three of them together for a wine tasting trip or some shit. Chloe was *not* interested. And Victoria fucking *knew* why. She'd find a way to squirm, wriggle, guilt-trip Max into coming, which meant Chloe could either deal with the two of them going off together alone – fucking *nope* on that – or Chloe would have to be schlepped around with all that prissy crap, and...*urgh*. Chloe could already hear the impending argument: 'Victoria's sorry, she didn't mean it, everyone deserves a second chance, blabla,' and just...*ugh*. And Chloe would have no counter for that. Maxine’s open-mindedness and just, like, her sweet as hell adorable pursuit of people, it was a good thing. It had been getting Chloe to actually have a social life, which wasn’t as bad as she’d feared.

Still, though. Chloe was *way* not cool with Victoria up and trying to work her way back into things after the shit she’d pulled.

[Brooke S.] – [Sundays]

Goddamn, that e-mail thread with Brooke was friggin' 45 messages long, jesus. Prolly Brooke just passing along info to Max about their Sunday nerd meetups. Chloe had been attending them out of obligation at first. She still didn’t really care much for Brooke, but Stella was all right, and the card shop always had some fun dorks around on Sundays for Magic card tourney shit, or D&D, or whatever thing was going on. It was as close to a steady social commitment as Max and Chloe had, so...might as well keep with it.

[Richard M.] – [Memorial]

Ah. That one was for Max. It was Kate's dad. Chloe had heard that along with the lighthouse memorial they were gonna build a new bench in Kate's memory or something. Poor dead kid's dad was prolly just letting Max know the deets so they could be there for that.

Ech. Memorials, speeches, plaques, all these fancy ways of dwelling on the fact that hella people died in the same week. And the most frustrating part was that *obviously* that shit was important, right? Chloe wasn’t excited about it, and neither was Max, but...they’d promised themselves they’d go. Every year. And both of them getting off of work for a week to do that crap, it wasn't easy, and it...
sure as hell meant they couldn't both get the weekend after that off, either, which meant every time their couple's anniversary rolled around? No trips, unless eating out and seeing a movie counted.

Chloe had decided that year, though, that she was gonna make something of their anniversary – at home, but something special, ya know? She just... had to figure out the details. With the thought on her mind, Chloe minimized the e-mail window. She pulled up a computer search: [ladywood]

Sure enough, the text file she'd tucked away showed up. Fun play on words that Max would never suspect – 'wood' was the, like, Fifth Anniversary material, or whatever, right? Brilliant.

The text file detailed Chloe and Max's dress sizes, 'cuz hell if she'd be bothered to memorize that crap, but she'd need it to rent out something to wear for the two of them. She also had phone numbers and addresses for a few different restaurants so she had the info in a pinch. Separate playlists, movie ideas... and it was all divided into three categories.

[ Pirates ]
[ Secret Agents ]
[ Sci-Fi ]

Chloe had come up with a few more ideas for the 'Pirates' possibility – musta been from her dream, or something – so she typed them in and saved the text file.

“...Chlohm...?”

Ah. A half-awake moaning from the next room over pulled Chloe from her planning, so she closed the text file and brought the e-mail back up. She chomped down another sausage for good measure as she got up from the table to greet her partner.

A disoriented Max waddled to the kitchen doorway, her hair a tangled mess. While Chloe was fully clothed and ready for her day at home, Max was barely cohesive, barefoot in nothing but a white spaghetti strap and a pair of Adventure Time boxer briefs. Princess Bubblegum branded, of course. Chloe had yet to pick up a matching Marceline pair, but... eventually.

“Hey,” Chloe greeted, heading right over. She latched her hands on Max's bare midriff, gave it a brisk rub, and kissed Max on the lips.

“Your hands're cold,” Max whimpered pathetically. Chloe chuckled sympathetically, nuzzling her nose against Max's cheek as she shifted her hands against Max's back, which had a shirt on to shield against Chloe's oh-so-freezing hands.

Max's hands found their way against Chloe's pudgy belly and gave it an affectionate rub. At least someone liked the shape of Chloe's stomach. Max hummed groggily, and Chloe hummed back pleasantly.

“Sleep all right?” Chloe asked, sweeping the girl's bushy bangs off to the side.

“No,” Max croaked, her lips pouting into a childish grumpy-face.

“Aaw,” Chloe cooed, giving Max's forehead a soft peck. She buried her fingers into the frazzled sea of red and brown hair she adored.

“Smells good,” Max murmured, clearing her throat a bit as she buried her face in Chloe's neck.

“Me, or the food?” Chloe posed teasingly.
“Not you,” Max said with a weak laugh, though she took in a deep sniff, anyway.

“Want me to make you some?” Chloe offered, sifting her fingers through Max’s long hair and sorting strands loose from each other.

“Mm-hmmm. . .” Max’s hands slid from Chloe’s tummy round to her lower back.

The two of them absorbed each other’s warmth like this for a quiet moment.

Chloe then checked: “Vegan, Not-So-Vegan, or Hella Meat?”

“Hella Meat,” Max decided with a tint of crankiness.

“Sure?” Chloe double-checked. “It won’t fuck up your stomach?”


Max’s lips opened upon Chloe’s neck, and the warm, wet sensation sent cozy chills up and down Chloe’s spine. In reaction, her fingers involuntarily tightened around Max’s hair. Max nibbled at Chloe’s neck some more, her hands finding their way against Chloe’s buttocks. Kissing and tongues and squeezing commenced for a few seconds, until heads wound up gaze-locked in a sleepy staring contest of warm smiles.

“Cuddly today, eh?” Chloe noted, a bit relieved. They hadn’t gotten any snogging in for the past few days now, what-not with Max having social plans and just being in a generally bad mood all week.

“I guess,” Max conceded with a shrug. She kissed Chloe on the lips once, then pressed their foreheads together. “Ugh. Chloe, I really don’t wanna go in today. . .”

“I know, Babe,” Chloe sighed. “But hey, when you get back, we can have all the cuddles you want. . .” Chloe slyly ran her hands up under Max’s shirt from behind. Max gasped quietly – maybe from the cold hands, maybe from the tingle of fingertips against her shoulder-blades, maybe both. Just that sound of Max’s breath taking uncertain turns always seemed to excite Chloe’s nethers.

“Mm?” Chloe hummed, checking for a response. Heh, not she minded if Max was too distracted to reply. “That sound good?”

“Chlo. . .-” Max panted with frustration, her brows arced nervously as she shrugged up her shoulders. Chloe took the hint and pulled her hands out. “I’m gonna be late,” Max reasoned, her words dripping with longing. “Thank you, though.”

Chloe rubbed Max’s freckled shoulders and slapped them roughly, grinning with understanding.

“We’ll pick this up tonight.” She went about gathering ingredients for Max’s breakfast.

“I want to,” Max groaned bitterly, pushing her hands against her face. “I have plans tonight after work, so . . .we’ll see if I have the energy.”

“Oh,” Chloe blurted, her chest burning with disappointment. “With who?” She retrieved a fresh frying pan from the cupboard, causing some clanging to incite a pause in the convo.

“Stella,” Max replied through her hands. “I keep putting off time with her, or, like, forgetting plans. I’m such a shitty friend. . .And she’s been hella lonely since her breakup, I just. . .need to make sure I’m there for her.”


“Five it is.” Chloe turned the stove on. “So, should I, like, come pick you up after work? We could all hang together. I haven't hung out with her outside of the card shop in I dunno how long.”

“Mm-mm,” Max hummed in the negative. It was instantaneous, but. . .she backpedaled. “Um, I-I'll ask her, actually. Maybe she's up for that. It's gonna be in Berkeley, though.”

“Argh,” Chloe grunted. “Won't have anywhere to fuckin' park. . .”

“I'm gonna meet up with her at the BART, we could just rent a parking spot for the night.”

“Eh,” Chloe sighed with a shrug. Might not be the best use of money, but Chloe actually did want to be social, go out, do shit with Max and friends after spending the past couple days cooped up at home.

“Cool. Yea, just text me when you find out, I'll, eh. . .” Chloe wriggled her hand toward her half-head of wavy hair. “. . .look respectable, n' shit.”

“I'll let you know,” Max confirmed. Pushing her wild hair behind her shoulders, Max finally found the strength to reach the coffee maker, which was ready with a fresh batch.

Standing side by side, Chloe took the opportunity to give Max's right butt cheek a playful double-pat. Where Chloe's accrued body fat was settling all over the place, what little Max had accumulated had found its way directly to her ass, which Chloe was pretty all right with. Max just smiled a small, stupid smile at the gesture, dropping two sugar cubes into a sentimental coffee mug with an inspirational quote on it (Christmas 2k14, gift from Joyce and David). As the sausages sizzled, Chloe went to the fridge.

“Egg whites, or full-on eggs?”

“Urm. . .” Max rubbed at her bleary eyes as she poured coffee. “Just the whites today.”

“Heh, already takin' one hit from the Vegan Police today, huh?” Chloe teased.

“Pff. Yea, don't wanna test my luck too much.”

“No Vegan Diet, no Vegan Powers,” Chloe continued the reference.

“Yea, well,” Max grunted, a little off-put, apparently. Max took a sip of her coffee, her face squinting with distaste. “Ugh, wanna...wanna get me the almond milk while you're there?”

“Yep, yeppurs,” Chloe confirmed, grabbing a small jug of the weird stuff Max would use as creamer substitute. She bumped the fridge closed with her ass, set the almond milk down for Max, and went about getting the egg-whites cooking on the second frying pan that was still out.

Max drank from her coffee, Chloe cooked. . .They set into a nice little morning routine silence. It wasn't every day they got to enjoy both waking up and getting around like this at the same time. On Chloe’s left, Max reached up her hand and scratched at the blonde buzz-cut portion of Chloe's head. Max did this all the time since Chloe had chopped her hair this way. It was an awesome feeling.

“Hey,” Max said, breaking the silence with a tone of worry.

Chloe tilted her head to her left as she rotated the sausages.

“Where's your ring?” Max asked with this dejected kind of mumble.
Chloe realized that she was not, in fact, wearing her ring. Damnit. She kept leaving it on the nightstand.

“Ah, just. . .forgot to put it on when I woke up,” Chloe assured. “It's, uh. . .back in the bedroom.”

Max fussed her fingers around her own corresponding ring in a self-conscious, slightly. . .weird way.

“Where?” Max checked. “Nightstand?”

“Y-yea, probably,” Chloe replied, a bit disconcerted with how Max suddenly swept by her and beelined for the bedroom. “Wh. . .-?”

“Probably?” Max whispered under her breath with some disbelief, disappearing.

Confused, Chloe sighed to herself as she tended to Max's breakfast. She appreciated the whole act of engagement rings and all, but. . .Max seemed pretty, like, protective about it recently. After the whole Gay Marriage thing went through, Chloe had planned on proposing to Max, but she was still in college at the time, they weren't together all that often. . .so Chloe had chosen to wait 'til after Max was done with school -- she'd needed to delay things an extra semester (ironic for the time-travel girl?), which had frustrated them both and added some strain to things. But they'd survived -- as people somehow did when they wanted to be together. And the week after Max was done with classes, they took a private Christmas vacation to the east coast with funds Chloe had saved up over a hard summer's work. Funny enough, Max had proposed to her first, ring and everything. In a humored fit of panic, Chloe didn't answer the big question -- she was a bit too prideful, perhaps, but she needed to reciprocate a ring with a ring. She'd left Max hanging at the restaurant, had scrambled to retrieve the ring from a secret spot in the truck of their car and had burst back in, practically skidding to her knee and nearly tripping over a waiter as she gave a weeping, surprised Max her own ring as her reply. Max was had been so...emotionally wrought by this, apparently, that she, in turn, left the restaurant -- Chloe had to chase her down to 'put a ring on it.' It had all been comical and weird and embarrassing as hell -- Chloe had felt like such a jackass, having to walk back into the restaurant to pay their bill after what had probably looked like a dine-and-dash. But, all was well that ended well? They had proposed. They were gettin' fuckin' hitched, ya'll.

And so, they'd been engaged for nearly a year now, with absolutely no concrete plans on a wedding or whatever. It wasn't the ceremony that was too important for the time being – it was the commitment. The promise. And that was really all a marriage was right? The wedding was just the kick-ass party you had to celebrate it. And that year was. . .not proving to be a good year for a big, expensive party.

Max showed back up with Chloe's ring in tow. Chloe smirked warily as she stuck out her hand and let Max fit the jewelry in place. Where Chloe had one ring, Max actually had two – the engagement ring, plus the promise ring Chloe had given her when she'd headed off to college. Max seemed more into the whole, like, symbolism with stuff like that. Like, even with her tattoos, they all had some special meaning, but. . .with Chloe, it was more like, yep, yea, that was a cool thing that made her feel things, might as well wear it. Or ink it on her skin for the rest of her life. Though, in Max's defense, Chloe had grown over time to find her own meanings in crap like that.

“I'm not going anywhere today,” Chloe noted with a shrug when Max put the ring on.

“You might be,” Max said. “Besides, it's. . .just, like. . .I mean, what if you had work today and forgot it?”

“Dude,” Chloe nervously laughed. “I don't have work today, so I didn't forget it.”
“Argh, but...” Max awkwardly tousled her hair as she took her coffee mug to their tiny table. “I just, I'd... really prefer if you just had it with you, all the time.”

With brows furrowed in perplexation, Chloe switched off the heat for the sausages and shuffled the egg white goop around, which was already solidifying.

“You afraid of somebody trying to snatch me up?” Chloe tried to joke.

“Chloe...”

“Cuz, like, I think that's more something we should worried about on your end, sooo...”

“Wh-? That was not...!”

“Joking, I was-”

“Chloe, I was, like, out of it, it didn't mean...”

“Meant somethin’ to her, clearly.”

“W-well, what about when you and that 'party,' when-”

“I asked your permission first,” Chloe pointed out. She was not gonna be guilted over that. “And that's way different, I haven't even talked with those guys since.”

Max huffed irritably, clawing at her hair before shaking her head and taking a gulp from her coffee.

“Y-you're right, sorry, I-...Fuck, I'm sorry, Chloe, I'm in a bad mood, I...”

“Woke up on the wrong side of the bed, it happens.”

“Right.” Max drizzled an exasperated sigh through her nose.

“Why don't you go get changed, Babe? I'll finish your food here.”

Max groaned quietly, rubbing gunk from the edges of her nostrils. She dropped her elbow to the table, sticking her forehead with despair against her palm.

Chloe's heart ached at the sight of Max being so grouchy and tired and just...whatever was up with her.

“C'mon, Maxine. Need time to eat today, huh? Most important meal of the day?”

No response.

“Max? Ringin’ any bells?”

Max sighed again, much louder this time, and dragged herself off. By the time she came back, Chloe had already set up her full meal of sausages and egg whites with some OJ for good measure.

Max now had her hair brushed out, her stud planted in her nose, some simple little Triforce earrings on (Max's birthday, circa 2k16, present from Stella), and was dressed in her cafe uniform, complete with name tag: {MAX}

As Max poked and prodded at her food, apparently lacking an appetite, Chloe finished off her own meal as she went about e-mail again.

“Have we heard back from Vickie yet?” Max wondered from across the cramped table.

“Uh...” Chloe hated that this was the question Max had asked first.

“About the wine thing,” Max clarified.

“Chloe.” But Max wasn’t blind. “You two are gonna have to get over it. OK? I mean, I have.”

Chloe didn’t want to say what was actually on her mind, so she just stifled a grunting sigh.

They were gonna avoid that one for the time being, so Chloe quickly switched topics.

“Anyway,” Chloe moved on, “Brooke says we should bring our DS’s to the shop this weekend.”

“Oh?”

“Yea, retro Pokemon tourney. Winner gets store credit, I guess?”

“Neato.” Max nodded thoughtfully, finally chewing into a sausage. She hummed affirmatively at the flavor, to Chloe’s delight. Mweheheh. Yesss, return to the dark side of dieting . . .

“We could, uhh, like, practice tomorrow or something,” Chloe offered.

“Oh. You still have it saved on your thing?” Max checked.

“Hells to the yea, I do,” Chloe said, balking at the notion she would delete her forty seven hours of Pokemon Red Version from her 3DS.

“Mm, aweffumm,” said Max through a cheekful of meat. She swallowed, then added, “Yea, we should totally practice together. I’d like that.”

Ah, smiling Max. Good.

“What else. . .?” Chloe murmured, doubling over their inboxes. “Oh, shit. You have next weekend off, right?”

“Mm?” Max was working through sausage number two.

“Nnnnext week?” Chloe slowly repeated, wide-eyed at her partner. “Arcadia Anniversary stuff. . .?”

Max's eyes bulged open wide.

“R-right! Augh, fuck, I. . .I forgot to ask Steph for time off. Damnit, now I-. . .Oh, she’s in today. I'll ask her today.”

Max was checking her phone all of a sudden.

“Don't forget, Buddo,” Chloe advised.

“Yea, I won't. Um. . .but text me? That way I for sure won't forget.”

“Yea.” Chloe nodded, though her still-uneasy hungover stomach quivered with uncertainty. How could Max forget something like that? Well. Moving on again. . .“Also, uh, Kate's dad wants us to attend the, like, swearing in of the bench thing? It's the same weekend.”

“Mm!” Max nodded, now chomping into scrambled egg-whites while still glancing over her smartphone. “Fershur. Tell him we're totally going.”

Chloe went about typing a reply, trying to be all formal and respective and jizz, but Max quickly popped up from her seat.

“Shit, I'm gonna be late,” she growled, swelling with irritation.
“Max, Maxie. Maxamil.” Chloe lifted her palm up to signal Max to slow the hell down for a tick. “I can just drive you. ‘Kay? No big. Finish your food, OK?”

Max froze, staring at Chloe like a deer in headlights. She swallowed the mouthful she had been chewing, shuffled her hands through her hair with a trembling, stressful sigh, and sat back down. Chloe's breakfast was done, and she was finally in the mood for coffee, so she went about getting some set up for herself.

“Is something goin’ on with you today?” Chloe asked seriously. Watching the way Max's big rush of eating had suddenly screeched to a halt was only making her more suspicious.

Max shrugged one shoulder up with a wary headshake.

“Not in particular,” Max mumbled. “Just... hella stressed, frustrated with shit, I dunno.”

Max was bobbed over the table again, face in her hand again. Chloe nodded sympathetically as she poured a bit of pumpkin spice creamer into the bottom of a Troy and Abed in the Morning mug. Her favorite gay couple on TV – Max’s, too, so far as Chloe knew. Or maybe it was some shit from Supernatural at this point... And, well, Community hadn't been on TV for years, but, whatever. Now, favorite lesbian couple on TV? That was still a total toss-up.

Chloe poured coffee overtop the creamer, watching it mix together. The steam and the scent was inviting. She took a sip of the stuff, savored it, then went to sit back down at the table, shoving the netbook aside and placing her emptied plate on top of it. Max looked like she was almost... asleep. But in pain.

“Headache again?” Chloe asked.

“Rrmnmph,” Max grunted, like a dog grunting with dissatisfaction.

“Tsh.” Chloe smirked at Max's pathetically cute gesture. “You take some ibuprofen?”

“Yea, when I was getting changed,” Max sighed. “Shit hasn't kicked in yet...”

“Well, ya keep takin' it lately,” Chloe pointed out dubiously. “Prolly got some tolerance shit goin' on.”

“It's been better this week,” Max dismissed Chloe's concern. “Didn't sleep right last night, think I pinched a nerve or some shit.”

“Damn. Sorry.”

“Not your fault.”

“Uh, I could, like, give you a back rub if you want?”

“That sounds hella nice right now,” Max said breathily, wiping her palm down her face.

Chloe chugged a couple gulps of her coffee before getting up and working her way round to Max. She began pressing and pushing her fingers down, looking for knots in Max's muscles. Sure enough, there seemed to be a really tight one near Max's left shoulder-blade. Max moaned pleasantly, grunting a bit inbetween points of pressure.

“I love you so much,” Max panted with relief.

“I know,” Chloe said in a mock brag. She kissed the top of Max's head, taking in a whiff of hair gel.
“Love you, too.” She dug her thumb right into that knot of tight muscle. “N I always. . .got your back.”

“…”

“Like, literally, right-right now, ‘cuz I-”

“Hoh, jeez. It’s gonna be a long day.”

“Warmin’ up for tonight. Gotta cheer Stells up with these sick puns.”

“Yuh-huh.”

One benefit to Chloe's time working construction was that taking in hella groceries from the car by herself wasn't an issue. She'd felt her phone go off in her pocket on her way up the stairs of their apartment building, and she knew it was Max. After a late morning request to send Chloe off for groceries, Max had been radio silent all afternoon. Trying not to trip over bags of groceries, Chloe made sure the milk – *real* milk, not this weird pretend milk – was secure in the fridge. Then she allowed herself to check the phone.

(Maxine) – (Did you remember to get stir fry?)

(Chloe) – (nope sorry. You didn't put them on the list.)

(Maxine) – (Pretty sure I did.)

Chloe sighed and rolled her eyes at herself. Max’s memory conniptions were getting to the point of a daily irritation. Maybe they needed to get her back on medication. . .

Chloe went up to the whiteboard on the fridge, still doodled up with grocery requests. Abso-fucking-lutely no stir fry on there.

*C’mon. Yer killin’ me, Smalls.*

(Chloe) – (just double-checked. Ya didn't bud.)

(Maxine) – ( Damnit.)

(Was really in the mood for some after work.)

(Chloe) – (though we were eating out w/Stella?)

(Maxine) – (What? Where?)

Chloe's chest tightened as she sucked in an irate breath. This was stressin' her the hell out now. Last time Max acted like this, the aftermath was. . .very not fun. Before Chloe could formulate a response, however. . .

(Maxine) – (Shit I forgot.)

(Why didn’t you remind me?)

(Chloe) – (uhh cuz you didn’t ask?)

Chloe’s stomach *had* been feeling better but this chat was bringing the queasiness back. She started putting away the fridge stuff. Mostly veggies, but some potato salad, too. And, ya, know, some beer, of course – some Shock Top, since it was a kind both she and Max liked.
(Maxine) – (I did I specifically asked u to txt me a remindr)

(Chloe) – (ya. Bout askin time off. Which I was gonna do. After groceries.)

Chloe moved on to the frozen junk. Frozen veggies. All the veggies. So many fuckin’ veggies. Chloe had learned to not had them, and even grown to like some of them, depending on the day. But, eh. Now, the frozen pork she’d picked up, that was more like it.

(Chloe) – (Fack.)

Yea.

(Chloe) – (don’t go slippin on me again Maxine.)
(want me to set up an appt?)

Snacks n’ crap was next. Cheezits. White-Cheddar kind. Chloe could never resist those suckers. Some fat-free and reduced fat stuff was the order of the day recently. Turned out it tasted pretty OK in and of itself. Usually.

(Maxine) – (prollly should, huh? -_-)
(I’m sorry Chloe. I’m a nutcase. D; )

(Chloe) – (Hey we are both nutcases. Its ok baby.)

She sat herself down on their linoleum floor and opened the doors of their little pantry cupboard and began stuffing cans in. A few cans of turkey chili, some various veggies (god damn so many veggies), a stack of tuna, some soups (how the hell did Max enjoy lentils, BTW?). . .

(Maxine) – (It’s not ok but I love you. I’m glad I’m YOUR nutcase anyway.)

Chloe could feel her expression wither, but it was a warm wither rather than a cold one.

(Chloe) – (well it’s GONNA be ok)
(if you quit the emoji. :P )
(and I love you too.)
(now stella time. That a thing that’s happening? Or what?)

(Maxine) – (break over.)
(gotta go.)
(Yes 2nite.)
(txt her 4 me plz?)

Chloe puffed air through her lips. Max had a tendency to end their text chats lately all in a rush like that, with text etiquette dropping sharply. Chloe found it a little cute, actually.

(To: Stella)
(Chloe) – (Yoyo gurl. Max is on overdrive w/work. Wants you to know we’re on for tonight.)

Chloe wrapped up putting groceries away – fucking expensive, too, even at the cheap stores, goddamn California drought shit still goin’ on. Her phone buzzed a few times. Stells had a tendency to reply in multiple parts.

(Stella) – (Thanks for letting me know. )
(We’re still on! Any place you guys want to eat?)
(Max told me you like diners. There’s a few around here. Vegan ones too.)
How are you and Max btw? Things going all right?)

Chloe drummed her fingernails on the back of her phone as she contemplated a reply. Her stomach gurgled unpleasantly at her, and she realized it was high time for an afternoon snack. Not a full on lunch, wanted to make sure she was good n' hungry for dinner.

Chloe deliberated, then opted for a small bag of popcorn. As she waited for it to cook, she fired off a reply.

(Chloe) – (We can try a diner. see how Maxi feels. If not? plenty places there.)

Chloe kind of. . .avoided the other question at first. But she changed her mind.

(Chloe) – (I'm kinda bored as fuck w/my work schedule and Max is hella tired lately.)
(btw has she been acting like weird at all with you?)

(Stella) – (Ah, yea, that's gotta be so weird being on-off with work like that.)
(You know you can always stop by the shop on your days off, right?)
(There's always people there, even on the weekdays.)

-BEEP-BEEP-BEEEEEEEP!-

Popcorn = done.

(Chloe) – (yea I dunno man just not my scene w/o Max ya know?)

(Stella) – (Gotcha. I've got a lot of spare time myself, lately.)
(And you still haven't forced me to watch Twink Peaks, sooo. . .)

(Chloe) – (lol damn I forgot about that. Yea maybe we could try that.)

(Stella) – (I know we're friends through Max but I never get girl time with just you.)
(And I would be down for that. I care about you as a couple but also individuals. You know?)
(Just keep it mind, okay?)

(Chloe) – (totes I will. Thx.)
Shit. Gotta, erm. like. . .reciprocate. Or something.
(ur pretty chill too so it goes both ways.)
Nailed it. Now back on topic.
(But max. she been aight lately?)

(Stella) – (Oh, I think so. Why? Is something wrong?)

(Chloe) – (been off the past few days. Forgetting shit.)

(Stella) – ( o_o;; Do you think she's regressing?)

(Chloe) – (dunno. Fucking hope not. We'll get her to the doc soon.)

(Stella) – (Hm. Now that you mention it, she HAS been kind of distant.)

(Chloe) – (kk. Well dont take it personal. She just told me today she feels shitty about like)
(not being there for you and stuff I guess?)

(Stella) – (Shit I didn't want her to take it that way. >_<)
(I'll talk with her, thanks for letting me know, Chloe.)
(Chloe) – (no prob bob.)

(Stella) – (Are you guys driving down here?)

(Chloe) – (bart n' fart.)

(Stella) – ( O_o )

(Chloe) – (lolol takin the bart gurl. Fuck Berkeley traffic. Nowhere to park.)

(Stella) – (Oh, haha. Yea, I know what you mean.)

(Let's meet at the Shattuck station at ??)

(Chloe) – (see u thar Stells.)

(Stella) – (Later!)

(Chloe) – (oh dude btw should I bring some medication? ;D )

(Stella) – (That's OK, it's my turn, isn't it? I've got some at my place if you want.)

(Choice) – (noice.)

After a bag of popcorn and an episode of Bojack Horseman, Chloe decided she could stand to make herself look decent for the evening. She'd gone grocery shopping in her sweats because fuck it, but, uh, wasn't really in the mood to do that for dinner out.

After a quick shower, she spent a little time sorting out her hair, curling the edges slightly with an iron – there was a weird kind of satisfaction to it, and Chloe liked the end result of her haircut being like three different styles combined into one. The chaos was representative of her spirit, though she'd admittedly been kind of more. . .

'ech, 'quaint?' 'Homey?'

Chloe had not had the opportunity to be quite as rabble-rousing in recent weeks as she truly desired. The fact was that with her and Max sharing a living space and being adults and all that, they still had to, ya know, be adults n' shit. And with Max being out of sorts, it fell to Chloe to pick up the 'maturity reigns' a bit. Bleh.

Speaking of maturity, Chloe had to pick her attire for the evening, heh. She opted for her pair of maroon cargo khakis – with a strategically torn hole in one knee and another in the opposing thigh, mweheh. Chloe glanced through the multitude of hangers in their closet, a 'shared space' of shirts that they both fit into and swapped interchangeably. Hm, a simple black crewcut tanktop. . .yep. That would do.

Oh. But it had been cold all week, better to add a hoodie to the mix.

Oh, duh.

Chloe retreated to her half of their chunky wardrobe, retrieving a purple zip-up hoodie with a pair of big, chubby bumblebees printed on the front (Christmas, circa 2k15, present from Stella). You wore shit someone gave you when you went to see 'em, gave 'em a nice reminder that you, like, appreciated them and whatever.

Chloe reflected a moment on how the hoodie, being a couple years old now, was. . .a bit tight on her beer belly. Ech. She still looked good, though.

With shirts on, Chloe dug through her jewelry box. She slapped on a couple rings from her collection
without really putting thought into them. Orange and gray looked neat together, sure. Ah, but the necklace. Mm. She still wasn't really feeling the ol' bullet trio one. The goth bird skull bit was... too pointy for that night. Brooke was more into that than Stells. Oh, but yea, what about the metal skull butterfly bit? Chloe was never one to say no to skulls and butterflies. She was going longsleeve, so, yea, no tattoos showing, might as well rep that shit around her neck, eh?

Aaaaand lastly. The 'coo-deh-graysee.'

Chloe went to their dresser and inspected the square wicker basket set atop. The 'beanie basket.' An assortment of various hats, mostly beanies, that the two of them shared, though it was more Chloe's thing than Max's. Hm. A rainbow striped hand-knit one for when Chloe was feeling 'hella gay'. A pink, blue, and purple one for when Chloe was feeling 'hella bi.' Aaaaand well, the pink/yellow/blue one for when Max was feeling 'hella pan.' They'd bought them off Etsy a couple years back more as, like, a sign of support and whatever, buuuut they had their uses. The peeps Chloe had gone to that party with back in the summer? Max and Chloe had been rocking the bi and pan-colored beanies, and someone had noticed. So.

There was a cat-eared monstrosity of a hat that Max would wear now and again, and a matching dog-eared one for Chloe. Max apparently way dug that one on Chloe. Fucking. . .'Vickie' had made a crack about rabies one time when Chloe wore it out, and. . .it had somehow soured the whole thing for Chloe. She hadn't worn it since.

Hm. A few just plain ol' beanies. Dark purple, black, brown. . .

Heh, oh, damn. Blue and red beanies with these specific jewels printed on them. From that cartoon Max loved with the space-rock-alien-lesbian-moms. Uhhh. . .Steven Universe, yea, that was the name. Max had got the pair of them matching hats themed after Ruby and Sapphire. Chloe could still remember Max having to explain the metaphor and whatever and why it was important to her. Fucking cute, watching Maxie get all passionate and excited and giddy about that sorta stuff.

Oh dang, she still had that?

A hand-crocheted beanie, pink with beady eyes and a sadistically cute smile, tassely-things on the side: a yarn-looking Kirby hat (self-appointed present, circa 2k14, because Chloe loved to inhale all the food). Dude, Chloe hadn't seen that one in months, thought she'd lost it. Max must've found it when she'd cleaned the house back in September. Welp, screw it. Did not match what she was wearing but Chloe couldn't resist.

With her outfit set, Chloe approached the bathroom to double-check her face. There was acne going on, but. . .eh, like Stella would care. Although, Chloe was kinda feeling in an odd mood for glossed lips. She borrowed Max's gloss and put a layer of sheen to those puckers of hers. Hm, all right, not bad, OK. . .

Yech, frick, Chloe suddenly caught herself, like. . .being all girly with mental wandering of makeup and whatever. That was more Max's territory, and even then, nothing fancy. They were just going to hang with Stells, anyway, not the biggest deal. Because makeup would go well with a fucking cartoon hat, psh.

Chloe spruced some cologne upon her – Max would like that, help calm the girl down after a day at work – and decided she was all set to go.

Chloe headed out of their apartment complex, finding her way to their small car. The ol' truck had retired herself a while back.
Probably in a junkyard by now.  
Everything Chloe seemed to love found its way to a junk yard. . .huh?

Um.

Jesus.

Been a while since she'd let her mind slip down that old alleyway.  
Anyway.

Their car had been in a bit of a fender over the summer which they hadn't bothered to fix. Bit of a dent in the front, no big, but totally noticeable. Gave the car some character, at least.

Like a scar.

More important to Chloe than basically any other feature of it, it sported a bluetooth radio, meaning whenever she entered, the car's doohickey picked up her phone, synced it, and would stream music. She could even use the radio to do phone calls, speak aloud text messages and stuff. Handy shit. Technology, and all that. Max had wanted an electric car to 'save the environment' and whatever, but that was expensive stuff. Maybe some day.

Chloe started up the car and began her drive to Max's cafe. Chloe commanded her phone to send a text message.

“To: Maxine.”
[“-bleep!-”]
“On my way. Period.”

–

“Yea? Well. . .Fuck him, then.”

Max nodded with a spark in her eyes, hands crossed round her waist.

Stella sighed and shrugged at Chloe's words, rubbing her thumb across her nostrils, then sighed again.

“He's not a bad guy,” Stella then mumbled, eyes glazed at her omelet.

“They're all bad,” Max muttered, shaking her head.

Stella's eyes rolled a little at that. Even Chloe found the remark a little off-putting, but she silently ate her BLT.

“Max,” Stella said with a hint of irritation. “You think every guy I date is 'bad.'” And yes, Stells used 'air quotes.'

“That's 'cuz they all are,” Max cited, drizzling some dressing across her Caesar salad.

“Oh, whatever,” Chloe teased, rubbing Max's back lightly with one hand, leveling her sandwich in the other. “Don't mind her, Stells, she's grumpy.”

“I am grumpy,” Max acknowledged in a touchy way, scooting an inch away from Chloe. “No offense, but, like, can we not talk about what assholes men are now? We gotten enough of that out of our systems for today?”
Stella and Chloe exchanged wide eyed looks as Max brooded over her salad.

“Um, y-yea, sorry, guys,” Stella spat out, fussing with her glasses as she stabbed at her omelet. “I didn't mean to. . .make it all about my shitty love life. . .”

“You're cool,” Chloe assured.

“You're cool,” Max asserted her grouchiness. Ya know, despite having just said she didn't want to talk about men.

“We're still friends,” Stella cited, her brows furrowing a little.

“Dat shit is not easy,” Chloe commended. “Respect.”

“Well, you know,” Stella said with a shrug. She chowed down on her meal, then continued. “I just don't see the point in burning bridges. Is all.”

“Some bridges are better off burned,” said Max with a bitterness about her, eating her salad in an ornery fashion.

Everyone fell silent at this as their waiter showed up with Chloe's banana milkshake. Ignoring her drink, Chloe focused on Max's disgruntled demeanor.

“Max,” Chloe sighed. She rubbed her palm against Max's knee beneath the table. She whispered, “C'mon, Babe, what's the deal?”

Max's eyes closed. Her lips pursed as she chewed her food. She put her hand over Chloe's.

“Long day at work,” Max cited, and not in a whisper. Her face flashed with self-realization before she puffed out, “Shit, I'm sorry, Stella.” She took a deep, exhausted breath, rubbing at the bags beneath her eyes. “Got into it with. . .one of my co-workers today, and just. . .urgh.”

“Hey, I understand,” Stells assured, slicing her omelet in strips with a butter knife. “You have to put up with dozens of random-ass people every day. I'd be in a bad mood sometimes, too.”

“N' they give you this stupid specific order,” Max ranted under her breath, “and you give it to 'em, and then they've changed their mind but they act like you misheard them when you definitely didn't mishear them, and they're holding up a line of seven goddamn people because of some stupid fucking thing like caramel drizzle instead of chocolate drizzle, and I just. . .want to punch them in the fucking face, and it's just so pointless, like, I could be doing something with my life right now, I mean, what was the actual point of college if I'm just gonna be stuck with fucking. . .”

Max's hands were shaking a bit by the end, shuffling her salad angrily before stabbing through some leaves and stuffing them in her face. Chloe scratched Max's back a bit more in slow, rhythmic motions. She remembered back when she was still getting used to construction while Max was in college. Day jobs could suck the marrow right from your damn bones.

Max swallowed, running her hand through bushy bangs, sweeping them to the side with another breath of self-awareness.

“Sorry,” she mumbled apologetically. “I know you're the one dealing with hella crap right now.”

“It's OK,” Stells assured. “The family stuff is. . .just. . .you know.” She shrugged up one shoulder warily, her eyes going vacant for a moment before coming back to life. “Nothing I can do about it from out here, anyway.”
“A-fuckin'-men to that,” Chloe asserted, still scratching at Maxie's back beneath the girl's mane. “Sounds like you couldn't do much about it even if you were there.”

“Mm.” The hum Stella let out through a mouthful of omelet was contemplative and uncertain, but laced with guilt all the same. She swallowed, then added, “I'm so done with that shit by this point.” She paused to clean the right lens of her glasses on her hoodie sleeve. Chloe took the moment to appreciate the adorable shape of the girl's face. Eh, she could see what Max was into with her. Too bad on the whole 'straight' thing. Eh, actually, then again, probably was a good thing to have at least one chick in their lives they could hang with who would not cause complications n' shit, huh?

Yea, mentally looking at you, fucking. 'Vickie.'

“Anyway,” Stells breathed out tiredly, putting her glasses back on. She added some pepper to her omelet before eating more of it, nodding a bit to herself in approval of her decision. She then nervously muttered, “If it's not one thing, it's another, right?”

“No lie,” Chloe agreed, slurping on her delicious milkshake.

Max stabbed at her salad, bitterly saying, “Same shit, different day. . .”

“C'mon, Chlo-boh, c'mawnnn. . .”

It was criminally enticing, the sly, sneaky smile on Stella's face as she tried to pass the joint over to Chloe. She grabbed Chloe's shoulder and squeezed. Fuckin' eh.

Max, you coulda warned me. Ya know I got a weakness for nerds with a naughty streak. . .

“Nah, nah,” Chloe said with a wary smile. “Couple tokes' enough for me.” She waved her hand loosely toward her chest. “Designated. . . driver, and whatever.”

“Chlo-eeee,” Max sighed with a child-like whimsy, jiggling Chloe's right leg by her thigh. Her fingers then wormed them way into the hole in Chloe's pant leg, rubbing and squeezing at her bare leg. It felt great, but with Stells watching, it made Chloe feel awkward.

“I'm good, for reals.” Chloe chuckled, gently pulling Max's hand out of her pantleg and locking their fingers together. “You guys have yer fun, eh? Need it more. . .” She scratched her nose, her chest smoking and tingling. Cleared her throat. “Hurm. Need it more n' I do.” She gave Max's profile a stern, glazed-over gaze as Max sucked in a deep breath through her joint. She rubbed her thumb against Max's wrist. Max was a little too out of it to reciprocate, apparently.

Cute girl's hand on her left shoulder, fuckin' beautiful girl's hand locked in hers? Chloe didn't need to get high to feel high that evening.

“What were we. . .?” Stella murmured, her eyes squinting. She released Chloe's shoulder, took her glasses off, and rubbed at her eyes. “Something. . .” She rested her face in her own palm for a few seconds.

Max took another toke.

Stells snapped her fingers in realization.

“Ohhhh yeah!” She shoved her glasses back on, smoked another breath in, exhaling a puff of wispy gray vapors as she got up from her seat on the stone steps. “I was gonna let you borrow that show. . .
“Mm?” Chloe was confused.

“That anime about time travel,” Stells cited with a nod. Another toke. Another nod. “With the guy and his cell phone? Remember, Max?”

Max twisted her head slightly into what approximated a nod. Her eyes were bloodshot.

“El. Psy. Kongroo,” Max murmured drearily. She nodded to herself, her eyes fluttering in this weird way.

“Yea-hah,” Stells chuckled, slapping her own leg. She stuck a finger gun toward Max. “Y’remember, huh?”

“Yep,” Max grunted an acknowledgment. “Seemed. . .cool.”

“Huh?” Chloe pushed out her confusion yet again.

Stells explained.

“Oh, it's this thing I showed Max a while back. We watched a few episodes but. . .life. Ya know?”

Chloe blinked blankly.


Chloe’s stomach full of milkshake and BLT was churned by the reminder of things long past.

“Yep,” she gruffly replied with an uncertain nod.

“Any romance in it?” Max wondered, not looking up from the parking lot pavement before them. She inhaled through her joint.

“Mmmmm,” Stells hummed, her eyes squinting slyly. “A little, sure.”

“Cool.” Max puckered her lips out, blowing out a slow, thin stream of smoke. “Anything gay?” she followed up.

Stells let a giggle slip. She took one last toke of her joint, then stamped it beneath her sneaker.

“Hee, not exactly, buuuut a lil' implied stuff, I guess. . .”

“What are talkin' about?” Chloe specified her curiosity.

“Steins;Gate,” explained Stells, pushing her glasses up the bridge of her nose. “Gimme a sec, I'll, uhhhh. . .go grab it for ya.”

Chloe nodded. Max did nothing.

As Stella disappeared into the apartment building behind them, Max and Chloe sat on the steps together. Alone. Hands still locked together. They were silent.

Some middle-eastern looking dude with a neato beard came out of the building, got into his dinged
up little car, and took off. By the time the guy was out of the cramped apartment parking lot, Max had finished her joint, dropped it to the pavement, and was staring at its still-glowing ember.

“Baby,” Chloe sighed quietly, jiggling Max’s arm a little. “What's up? Huh?”

Max's head sagged. Her body lurched into a hunched position. She clamped her right hand against her face, her left hand tightening around Chloe's fingers. A wall of brown and red strands separated her profile from Chloe's gaze.

“I feel broken,” Max choked out.

“What?” Chloe was a bit taken aback by the swell of intensity in her fiance's tone.

Max sniffed, coughed, and pushed hair back behind her shoulders.

Facing Chloe with her baggy, bloodshot eyes, Max asked, “Wanna know a secret?”

Chloe nodded intently, brows furrowing.


Max smiled, but. . .more like a 'Joker' smile than a, um. . .Maxine smile. Yikes.

She Rewound. She'd fucking Rewound. Again? After all they'd talked about not using it. OK, important stuff, Chloe could get, but. . .this was just. . .

“Max. . .” The word trickled out of Chloe's despairing lips as she rubbed her forehead irritably. Disappointingly. “You can't just. . .”

“I'm so sick of this, Chloe.”

“I know, Babe.”

“I got through four goddamn years of college studies. . .”

“Mm.”

And you cheated your way through parts of it. . .

“-. . .an' I'm stuck in fucking retail bullshit. At a coffee shop.”

“I know,” Chloe cooed with some sorrow, leaning her head against Max's.

“It fucking blows. ”

“I know. A-at least we've got each other, though, right?”

“Sure,” Max grunted. Catching herself, she corrected, “I-I mean, like. . .augh, fuck, Chloe.”

“Doesn't, um, matter so much,” Chloe hypothesized, “when work has ya down, eh?”

“Mmph.”

Max tipped her head to the side, and the two nuzzled heads together for a moment, like exhausted lionesses in a time of drought on a sweltering day.

Except a lioness couldn't slide her hands down a fellow lioness' pants and start massaging—

“Max.”

Chloe had gasped out her partner's name, tugging Max's rogue hand out in alarm.

“Dude!” Chloe chuckled in an amused whisper, to which Max just snickered sneakily. “What did we agree on about parking lots?”
"Heh." Max's eyelids were closed, but she nodded with a dumb smile about her.

Buttoning her pants back up, Chloe exhaled through her nose, a slight shake of her head accompanying a wary smirk.

Aaaand then the kissing started. Screw it. Max was in a mood to make out, Chloe was gonna take advantage of that. Er, enjoy that.

"Aren't you two cuties?" Stella's voice cut through. This did not deter their kissing. Stella had seen more than enough of it, it didn't faze her. "Damn, girls," Stells laughed quietly. "You can borrow my couch if you want. Get some privacy, at least."

Chloe hummed an affirmation, her tongue slipping round Max's at the moment.

Stells slapped the both of them with the back of her wrist.

"OK, all right, come on . . ." She pried them apart.

Chloe savored that moment, where her eyes were glued to Max's, and that old, familiar arousal was there in full force. Eyelids heavy, eyes glinting with mischief, lips barely open and damp with each other's spit. At least over time, they hadn't lost that sense of desire for each other. All things considered, that was a relief in and of itself.

Stella managed to drag the two of them upstairs to her apartment. Brooke was out and about (thank god) so the place was quiet enough. Stells had initially moved out into Berkeley via subletting a summer apartment. Brooke had decided to make the move to the area, too – why, Chloe did not know. With Stells, it made sense, 'cuz the girl was trying to start over just like Chloe and Max were. Bay Area seemed like a good place to start fresh without being impossibly far away from Oregon.

Stells and Brooke managed to each have their own bedrooms, with a parlor/kitchen area inbetween them. Was a nice, simple setup. Took Chloe back to her days when Maxie was in school. She'd rented a leased place out in San Rafael. She'd intended to try moving to L.A., but . . . yea. Not so much. During that time, Chloe had hopped between a couple apartments. By this point, she couldn't even remember any of her roommate's names. Ken? Becky? Or was it Betty? Meh. Whatever.

They had never cared much for her, she had never cared much for them. And so life went on.

Stella and Brooke's living room had all sorts of weeboo knick-knacks. Comic character figurines, a Cowboy Bebop wallscroll – Radical Edward all the way, bitches – some prints of some godawful harem shit Brooke was into. . . and some prints of some godawful swimming anime Stells was into. Nobody was perfect.

As Chloe took in this apartment – which she'd only visited thrice now to date, including this visit – Stella got the Bluray started up on her PS4, getting some tea brewing while Max and Chloe cuddled in a lazy pile on the pleather couch.

Chloe tried to relax herself. She was feeling tense from Max's suspicious behavior, aroused from Max's sudden assertive gestures, and self-consciously nervous about trying to build some rep points with Stells.

Some green tea was set down on the coffee table before her. Stella wriggled her hip a bit to indicate that Chloe and her lady ought scoot to make room. This was when Chloe noted that Maxine had fallen asleep. Chloe grinned like a toddler as she took the opportunity to pinch Max's butt cheek to wake her up.
It worked, but also got Chloe in indignant glare, growl, and a slap on the arm.

“We'll watch the first few episodes for Chloe,” Stella decided, clicking at her controller to get the show going while she took a seat at Chloe's right.

Max fumbled up from Chloe's left side and onto her feet.

“Gotta take a piss,” Max declared with a yawn, hobbling her way to the bathroom.

“Thanks for the update,” Chloe teased, taking a cautious sip of the steaming hot tea Stells had prepared. She had her suspicions that Max required more than 'pissing' in the bathroom, but she'd keep that to herself.

“Have fun~” Stella sang, fluttering her lips and blowing air at her tea. “Don't make a mess!”

The two if them sat silently for a moment in the parlor space.

“I see what you mean now,” Stella quietly acknowledged.

“’Bout Maxine?” Chloe checked.

Stells nodded solemnly. Chloe seconded the gesture. They both sipped some tea.

“I got ’er an appointment squeezed in before we head back up to the Bay,” Chloe eased. “Hopefully they'll, um. . .get her back on some stuff, and. . .”

“Agh, shit,” Stella groaned quietly, grinding her palm against her face. “M-maybe I shoudn't have gave her that weed. . .”

“Nah, nah, you're fine,” Chloe said casually. “Actually helps her out. Psh. Helps me out when she gets like this, too.” Chloe stared down at the dark tea in her mug.

“OK,” Stella mumbled hesitantly, her lips wrinkling with regret.

“Seriously, Stells, you're good,” Chloe assured, nodding fervently.

“Damnit, Chloe,” Stella quietly laughed. She wiped a dust speck from her glass lens with the tip of her thumb, shaking her head slowly. “Still trying to get 'Stells' to stick, huh?”

“It does stick!” Chloe chuckled, hand on her bubble stomach.

“It really. . .doesn't.”

“It is stuck, gurl. As stuck as 'Chlo-Bo ,’ anyway.”

“’No prob, Bob,” ’’ Stella recited in an exaggeratedly dorky tone, drinking more tea. “’ Hella fuckin' shaka-bras.’”

“Shut up,” Chloe warmly warned.

They both sighed and drank some more.

“For real, though,” Chloe started.

“For cerealz ,” Stells taunted with a narrow-eyed wry smile, the little shit.

“Oh, you got jokes , huh?” Chloe puffed, lips pursed with a sarcastic nod.
They exchanged a quick, quiet, jesting repartee as Stella mocked Chloe's assortment of nicknames for her lover in her dorky voice.

“Max. Maxie. Maxamil.”
“Shut.”
“Maxipad.”
“Stop.”
“Maximus.”
“Swear to god.”
“To the MAX, Max.”
“Shuttit.” Teeth grit in a facetious smile, Chole slapped Stells on the arm. She was too busy snickering to feel any pain.

“Haaaghhh, sorry-not-sorry,” Stells sighed out, waning out of her schoolgirl giggling.

Chloe gave the chick a playful shove, then flicked her wavy-edged hair behind her shoulder with a thoughtful breath.

“Glad you're around,” Chloe insisted, chin up as she pushed through Stella's jokes. “Seriously.”

Pushing her beanie's tassel out of her line of sight, Chloe smiled thankfully.

Stella smiled back.

“Aw,” she winced sympathetically, clutching a hand to her chest. “I am, too, Chloe. You and Max really helped me out of a bind. I want to be here for you guys, too.”

Chloe could tell when people were lying. Stells wasn't.

“So, uh,” Chloe had to break that moment of, like, warm fuzzies and shit. Yea, yea, Stells was a straight arrow and junk, but it was just that kind of sentimental shit that Chloe didn't know how to deal with. Not, like, out in the wild, anyway. “This show?” she changed gears. “What's it about?”

“Heh. Uhhhh,” Stella's eyes squinted with amusement. “A...microwave that's a time machine?”

“. . .Oh.”

“Tch. It's more than that,” Stella scoffed, flicking her wrist and getting the BluRay unpaused.

“I'm sure it is,” Chloe conceded, relaxing herself with a warm mug of tea on her pudgy stomach like a mini table.

Ticking of a clock.
Buzzing of cicada wings.

This show Stells was insistent on them watching had started. Some smooth-voiced chap began waxing rhetoric against a backdrop of vague sky shots and stuff. As the typical anime-intro-monologue commenced, Chloe's mind wandered back toward fear.

[“Consider: can the universe be justifiably called 'infinite?' Doubtful.”]

* Dafuq did Maxie mean back there? 'Broken?' Why's she feeling 'broken?'
[“It may not have a discernible end, but it had a beginning.”]

*I mean, yea, Arcadia Anniversary thing, that's rough – for both of us – but that can't be all it is.*
Can it?

[“And its component parts definitely have a limited cosmological shelf life.”]

Sure, her day job is shit. So's mine, right? So's...most everybody's. She's got a gift. She'll get somewhere with it if she keeps trying...

[“Splitting hairs or not, if history tells us anything, it's that scientists often make very poor poets.”]

“You hear that?” Stella murmured suspiciously, leaning over from the couch and setting her mug on the coffee table.

“Hear what?” Chloe pondered, sipping from her tea.

[“We're all just a ship of fools chasing phantoms, heedless of what underwrites natural law.”]

“Is that...Max?” Stella tilted her head toward her own bathroom, down the hall behind them.

There...was some kinda sound.

[“Okarin?”]

Stella paused the show.

Coughing – shit, gagging, more like – could be heard from between the walls behind them.

“Max?!” Stella cried with some concern.

Chloe's worries expanded from within her ribs, filling her chest with a tight, paralyzing fear.

Not this shit again.

They'd gone so long without it...come the fuck on. If Max could just keep her word and not use it...

“I-I, urhh, I got this,” Chloe feebly assured, shooing Stells to stay seated.

“I'll get some paper towels,” Stells asserted, refusing to sit idly by.

Chloe made her way to the bathroom, closing the door behind her. Thing was so cramped there was barely room for the both of them in there.

And there Max was, on her knees, bent over the toilet, holding her hair back behind her. Her eyes looked dull, her lips hung open. A nice blend of drool, vomit, and blood was dripping from those lips. She spit a nice gob of grossness into the toilet bowl.

“Hey,” Chloe quietly sighed, sitting down on her hip and tearing off some squares of toilet paper. She passed them to Max, taking the girl's hair to allow her to clean herself up.

“Ulgh,” Max moaned pathetically in reply.

“Well,” Chloe whispered, letting some irritation rise. “Ya fuckin' go dickin' around with you-know-what and then have a joint afterwards? Real smart, Max. The hell were you expecting?”

Max's brows furrowed. She looked too pissed and sickly to have anything to say.

“I get it,” Chloe said even quieter, leaning in and hoping the bathrooms acoustics were too poor for

Max just shook her head bitterly. Some more blood trickled out of her nose, dropping into the toilet bowl.

The unnatural soup rippled.

-knock-knock!-

“Things OK?” Stella asked worriedly from the other side of the door.

“Yeah,” Max croaked out through grit teeth, clutching her forehead in pain.

“You got some painkiller around?” Chloe asked, raising her voice a bit for Stella.

“Ibuprofen in the med cabinet,” Stella assured. “Are you sick, Max?”

Max just nodded, her eyes squinted shut. Chloe rubbed Max's back. Max just kept nodding.

“Take it easy, Baby,” Chloe murmured, feeling a bit numb to this whole process by now.

It hurt, it burned, how numb Chloe was becoming to this shit.

“We have to be whole again,” Max winced in the tiniest of tones. “Chloe. We have to be whole.”

“I know,” Chloe tiredly sighed, continuing to rub Max's shoulders. “I know, Babe. . .”

–

“You tell yourself that you're lucky
Lyin' down never struck me
As something fun, oh any fun
Stabbing pain for the feelin'
Now your wounds never healin'
'Til you're numb, oh it's begun

Before we all become one”

~ Darren Korb; We All Become
Chapter Summary

[It was you who pushed everything to its edge.]
[It was you who led the world to its destruction.]
[But you cannot accept it.]
[You think you are above consequences.]

Chapter Notes

A/N: So, uh. It's been a while. Yes, I'm back to work on this. Suffice it to say that 2016 has been kicking my ass, then kicking me some more when I'm down. This project has become incredibly difficult and painful to work on, but I've decided that's all the more reason to go through with it.

On top of gaining friends, losing them, feeling my life break apart as I try to rebuild it, dealing with the realization that my life has been on a loop for the past decade, going through an existential crisis and dealing with heavy depression I thought I'd gotten over years back...yeesh.

Beyond that, this chapter presented a lot of plot points that I needed to figure out to make sure what I put out here will line up logically with what I have planned.

It's not my best chapter so I'm not sure it's quite worth the wait, but I am also working on the VN adaptation of this story, too.

As for the visual novel, there are two chapters ready. You can download the most recent version at Tumblr blog @LiS-AllWounds.

LiS-AllWounds.Tumblr.Com/Downloads

"All of these beautiful human beings that I've stumbled across. Colliding by way of art. We would seek any possible means of self-expression in the face of this daunting reality.

Where we used to feel so insignificant, we made meaning and importance for our existence. In each other we constructed something so much larger than I could have possibly imagined.

Leonardo Da Vinci once commented that, “art is never really finished, only abandoned.”

I wonder if the same holds true for people."

~ Samantha Peña
“Wowser...”

At Max’s awed state of confusion, Chloe’s face slithered its features into a smug smirk.

“How?” was all Max could think to utter.

With pursed lips, Chloe bobbed her head a little, as if teasing a secret.

“Eh, pulled some strings...”

Max's brows furrowed with skepticism.

“With who?”

Chloe stuck out her tongue briefly.
“With who?” Max repeated, bemused.

“Brooke.”

“Brooke?”

“She owed me a favor...” Chloe gave Max a waggle of her brows.

Max quipped back with nothing more than a skeptical scowl.

“Eh, I fixed her sink a couple months back,” Chloe quickly grumbled with faux dejection, since Max had ‘taken the fun out of it.’

“Fff, I remember.” Max was still in disbelief at the mystical monster. “How did she get a Mew in the first, though?”

“Mm-mm.” Chloe shrugged wildly. “Some kinda glitch, I guess. She had a spare.”

“She had a spare Mew?”

“Dude, she's got, like, all three versions.”

“Well. She is...her.”

Max’s eyes glazed sideways as she recollected a half hour ‘discussion’ in which Brooke had lectured Max on why Pokémon had such an active adult fanbase – she cited the explosion of popularity the franchise had seen with adults back in ’16 when Pokémon GO hit cell phones, the merits of EV training and the complexities of breeding and blablabla...Brooke had been hella defensive about it, which was not required around Max. Max did not buy into the stupid idea that ‘cartoons were just for kids’ and all of the nonsense. So there was totally no need to get defensive around Max with that stuff. But Brooke was Brooke, so everything was about fortifying walls and arming troops, all ready to fight in metaphorical battles. Conversations were never really conversations with Brooke Scott – they were always debates. Sometimes, though, Max liked that. Or she’d learned to like it, at least. Mainly when Chloe was there.

“She owed me a favor-” Chloe clarified, “-n' when she was braggin' about having three fuckin' Mews, I couldn't resist but, uh, cashin' one in.”

“Hm.” Max shrugged. “Fix a sink, get a Mew.” Amused and a little impressed, Max handed Chloe's system back over to her. “Seems like a good gig.”

“Still gotta teach it decent moves,” Chloe cited, her system archaically blipping tinny Game Boy menu sounds. “But, eh...yea. Cool, huh?”

“Cool.” Max nodded gently, reaching her hand to the lower level of their glass coffee table and pulling out her own 3DS – it bore a print of Isabelle, the charmingly adorable yellow dog from Animal Crossing. Or, as Chloe called it, Furry Furniture Sim. There was just something about the ever-optimistic, hard-working Isabelle that filled Max with determination. Hm. It had been some time since Max had booted up her copy of New Leaf. Hell, Max hadn't even picked up the game until years after its release. She and Chloe were getting back into gaming, sure, but they were still a generation behind. Hm, but Max had really gotten a lot out of New Leaf. Maybe she should revisit her cutesy simulated town, for old time's sake.

She could almost hear Isabelle's adorable gibberish voice, greeting her in that dark little room with the spotlight cast over her:
Good evening, Mayor Max!

It's, um... It's been a while since you last stopped by, Ma'am!

But it's good to see you. I'm relieved you're here!

You see, I've been... doing my best to watch over things while you've been away, but...

Arcadia has become a little messy despite my best efforts...

There are weeds. Everywhere.
The flowers, they're all... wilted.
The trees have all disappeared.
Oh, and... the villagers all left.
Everyone is gone.

EVERYONE IS DEAD.

Except me, of course! Hehehe...

I'd never leave my duties behind. I'd never abandon you.

And my patience paid off!

Because you came back! With you here, we can surely fix everything back up!

If anyone can save our humble little town of Arcadia, you can, Ms. Mayor!

You can fix everything back up!

Just like you have in the past.

Just like you have in the future.

Just like you always have, and always will!

That's our Everyday Hero!

I'll be waiting here in Arcadia for you.

Forever.

Waiting in this Void of nothingness, trapped inside a plastic card you're too scared to plug in.

Too scared to face what you've done.

Too scared to face that you left us all here.

You left us all here. Left us to the Void.

And the Void misses you, Max.

They all miss you.

So I'll just keep waiting here. For you...

Forever waiting, because of you, Max.

Oh. It looks like Mr. Resetti wants to have a word with you, by the way...

Something about cheating at life?

“Yo.”

Max snapped awake when Chloe's hand gave her shoulder a shove.

“Those meds kickin' yer ass, huh?” Chloe theorized.
Max's eyelids were heavy. She rubbed at her face as she felt her head wobble around.

“Seems that way,” Max groaned. She drizzled out an exhausted, “Fuck.”

“You sleep OK last night?” Chloe wondered, rubbing a hand against Max’s arm in slow strides.

“Nope,” Max earnestly replied, rubbing at her eyes.

“Figured,” Chloe sighed. “Tossin’ and turnin’. Woke me up, like, four times.”

“Sorry.”

“Uh.” Chloe shook her head gently. “Not yer fault.”

Chloe kept rubbing her hand up and down Max’s arm. Max shivered from a weird chill.

“Whew,” she shuddered, tightening her hands around her waist. “You cold?”

“A little,” Chloe decided with a half shrug. “Want a blanket?”

“Can’t we just turn the heat on?” Max grumbled, curling her feet up onto the couch.

“Uh, prolly shouldn’t,” Chloe grunted, getting up and heading for their bedroom. Her voice carried across the hall as she vanished from sight. “Gas bill last month kinda skullfucked us a bit? So...”

Oh. Lovely picture, Chloe...

As Max waited for Chloe to return, she wondered why the hell she was so cold, anyway. Didn’t people move to the Bay to get away from cold weather? Mmph. They did live right by the water, though...

With a lump of wrinkled quilt wedged in her armpit, Chloe returned, flicking her one-sided mass of blue hair back over her shoulder. There were loose strands of blue poking out in different directions from her skull, especially at the part in her hair where things had been buzzcut.

“’Ere ya go,” Chloe barked, dunking the quilt into Max’s lap.

Max chuckled lightly, worming herself into the heavy, handmade quilt. It smelled a little weird, but not in a bad way. Max took a moment to appreciate the hodgepodge of materials composing the thing. It was about a year-old, a quilt made by Chloe and Joyce over Thanksgiving the previous autumn. Max, having recently graduated, had felt obligated to spend the holiday with her parents, while Chloe had chosen to see Joyce and David. It had been a little hard – the two had only spent a couple months living together for more than a few days at a time. At that point, Chloe was pretty well adjusted to life in the Bay at their apartment, but Max was not. Joyce, being intuitive to this, had suggested that they make something comforting for Max. Stitching together pieces of old scraps of clothes – denim jeans, plaid shirts, patches torn from jackets, all sorts of odds and ends from stuff Max and Chloe had worn and outgrown from their first year after the Arcadia Incident...

Anyway.

It was a cute quilt, and had been a thoughtful and practical gift, stitched together by Max’s fiancé and her soon-to-be-mother-in-law, with some advice from her Mom.

In-Law.
Fiancé.
Engaged.
Rings.

Max nervously wriggled her hand out of the quilt’s safety to double-check that her rings were on her hand: metal promise ring, studded swirling engagement ring. Check and check.

As Chloe sat herself back down, she wrapped one arm across Max’s back, stroking her hand down Max’s hair – the other hand rested in her lap. And there it was, that simple ring Max had given her. OK. Good. Everything still made sense. Moving on.

“So,” said Chloe. “What’s the plan today, Buddo?”

“Plan?”

“Uh, why don’t we, like, practice up for that Pokémon tourney?”

“Mm.” Max shrugged uncertainly, slowly leaning herself toward Chloe. “Yea. In a bit.”

“I was thinkin’: you could bust out the ol’ six-string, practice that a little, too?”

Max was silent at that.

She was...not in the mood for guitar. The last time she’d played guitar, it’d...gotten her into trouble.

“Eh?” Chloe prodded, rubbing her thumb against the base of Max’s neck.

“I dunno, Chloe,” Max mumbled sheepishly, tilting her head a bit. She closed her eyes as she let Chloe's hand dissolve into her spine.

“Maybe do a photo shoot, instead?” offered Chloe, tossing out ideas.

A stifled sigh puffed through Max’s nose as she resisted the urge to dismiss Chloe’s optimistic ideas.

“I could dress up all fancy n’ shit,” Chloe teased, lathering on some seduction as her hands really dug into Max’s neck in all the right ways. Max’s left ear was flooded with warmth as Chloe’s lips encased her ear lobe.

Max whispered a reply, “It'd be more interesting if you didn't dress up at all.”

Their heads melded together for a few moments. Chloe's lips worked their way down the side of Max's neck.

Just as the heat building in Max's chest began to boil over, Chloe pulled back.

“More interesting, maybe;” Chloe slyly agreed. “Buuuut prolly not the sorta shit you wanna stick in your portfolio, huh?”

“...What?” Max's shoulders tightened a bit under Chloe's sultry grip. She twisted her head around.

Chloe wiped blue hair out of her face as she blinked back at Max's irritation.

“Your...portfolio?” Chloe repeated meekly.

“What about it?” Max grunted testily, entrenching herself deeper into the quilt.

“It, uh-...” Chloe's eyes flickered with anxiety as she pulled her hands off of Max. “Just, um, been a while. Since I seen you work on it...”
“Maybe I haven’t wanted to.”

“W-well, yah.” Chloe inserted a nervous laugh to mask her solemnity. “That’s sorta my point.”

Max slipped out some bitterness.
“OK. Whoa.”

“OK. Whoa.” Chloe’s claws came out. “That is not even why- ...” Chloe paused. The claws retracted with a stifled breath. “Look, Maxie. You haven't been playing guitar. I haven't seen you take so much as a selfie in I don't know how long. And now this week you're acting all weird.”

Max's eyes rolled a little. She didn't need Chloe's pity. Max was a wash-up. Her grand delusions of being a big photographer were flushed down the shitter, swirling in a seemingly endless whirlpool of miserable day after day, wasting away what life she had. Watching those around her waste away what lives they had. Hurt and frustrated because such was life, empowered with the ability to fix that for at least a small handful of people, and she couldn't even get that fucking right. Her photography was a dead end. Her college education was a waste. Her dreams were just that. The world didn't need another indie photographer. No one cared about the pictures Max took. Not really. Well, no one but Chloe, maybe. And that was enough. Usually.

It just...hadn't been enough lately.

She couldn't even fathom where she'd be if she didn't at least have Chloe around. And even then, even with that one steady beacon – which she was endlessly grateful for – even then, the truth was starting to creep up on her again, even after all those years.

Max was scarred.
Max was broken.

In half.
In half.

Scars never healed. And Max was finally starting to come to grips with the notion that, despite her old optimisms, she could never be un-broken. She could try and try, this way or that, tell herself she was different, convince herself she'd changed, but in the end it was all just another illusion. Like everything else she'd convinced herself of to keep on going.

'Keep moving forward,' 'things will get better,' 'you'll make it eventually,' all of that trash. Junkfood advice. What had moving forward gotten her? Like, shit, even moving backward when she wanted hadn't gotten her where she wanted. Not that she even knew where that was, but...anyway.

She kept going forward as best she could. Convincing herself of the lies that everything was fine, or would be fine in some 'guaranteed' future which had no fucking guarantee. She was still trying, though.

This all wouldn't be such a problem if it didn't cause everything else in her vicinity to shatter, in kind – nothing, not even Chloe, was strong enough to endure the pressures of her entire weight.

Max was supposed to stand on her own two feet, right? How was she supposed to do that when every time she did, she'd trip, and knock someone else down with her? It begged the question: why not just stay on the floor this time?

Even if she Rewound over and over, there were some scars that remained. There were some cracks that never resealed. The more times she broke, the more cracks remained. The easier those scars were for everyone to see. She was left exposed, swirling in a spiral where each time she broke, it made the
next break happen that much easier. Overexposed, the already blurry photo now washed out and pale. Film melting at the corners. Blood spilling down her nose, eyes hollow and wide, hands trembling as the Void whispered in her ear, all the while waiting.

Just fucking waiting, so much waiting, waiting for the Storm to finally pass.

But time didn't heal all wounds.

Forward or backward in time, she couldn't un-break what was truly broken.

Glue a shattered mirror back together and the cracks are still there.

**WE NEED TO BE WHOLE**
We need to be whole.

“Anyway,” Chloe breathed out fretfully, rubbing at her forehead. “It all kinda...has me worried.”

“Worried?” Max probed. “About what?”

“Uh, doy? Worried about you.”

“Tch. Specifically. What about me?”

“Well...-” Chloe gawked a little. She was afraid of speaking her mind. Kind of funny, really, given the girl Chloe had once been.

“Just say it,” Max sighed.

“Dude,” Chloe murmured warily, scratching a bit at the shaved half of her head. “I-I dunno, you just...seem super, like, out of it lately.”

“Yea,” Max shrugged dismissively. “Sounds about right. I’m hella stressed, I mean...I don’t know what else to tell you. Anything else?”

“Uh. I know you said you didn’t wanna talk about it, but, like...how long ya gonna leave me hangin’ on what went down at Stella’s?”

Max’s nose wrinkled.

**LEAVE ME ALONE STOP SHUT UP LEAVE ME ALONE LEAVE ME OUTTA THIS**

“A while longer,” Max sighed, rubbing grit from her eye.

Chloe sighed back in response, and Max avoided the irritated, concerned gaze she was likely getting.

“Use your imagination,” Max mumbled with some exasperation. Couldn’t they just drop this? “Just...just a panic attack, I-I guess, it wasn’t a big deal.”

Chloe pleaded, “Can we at least, I dunno, like, do something about it for now?”

“Like what?” Max whimpered, quickly having worn out of this conversation.

Tossing up her hands with bridled irritation, Chloe grumbled, “Whatever’ll make you deflate all this damned stress in your skull, I don’t fucking know.” Seemed Chloe had reached her limit, too. She ran her hand across the base of Max’s neck. “Huh? Anything?”
“Chlo, I don’t even know what we could do. What could help. No idea. OK?”

Max sent out waves of desperate impatience, and Chloe bounced them back.

“Ya know what?” Max decided, scraping sand from her eyes. “Some space. That would help.”

“Gotcha,” Chloe said with a tint of dejection, removing her palm from Max’s neck. Swooping her hand across her hair, she walked off to the kitchen, leaving it at that.

Max felt emotionally drained from the interaction. When had interacting with people become so damn exhausting? And this was Chloe, even. The person that was supposed to fill Max up, not deplete her. The worst part was that Max knew it was tuckering Chloe out, too. Now that the two of them were living together, their relationship had entered this whole new phase. And that phase was freaking hard.

Things had been so much easier when they were in middle school. Everything had.

Now, in fucking ‘Adult Land,’ everything was...work. Effort. Even being with the person Max loved. And, well, holding onto what mattered most, of course that took effort over time, but...Max was worried she wasn’t going to be strong enough to keep herself together for much longer. Not with how strange things had recently...

With each passing day of this new life together, Max found herself increasingly concerned with the question, ‘What happens when Chloe can’t put the pieces of Max back together?’

—

“Max,” said Steph, who was re-doing the drink order. “Wanna wash what's in the sink there before you head out?”

“Sure,” Max conceded tiredly, fussing with her cap. The ponytail her hair was taut into was starting to make her scalp hurt. It had been a frustrating and exhausting day at work. Max wished she could say it was unusually busy. Unusually tiring. Unusually frustrating. But it wasn’t. Somewhere along the line of months of this crap and every day tested her patience.

Steph wrapped up with a customer, who complained about Max’s ‘attitude’ a bit before heading off to what was clearly such important work that it warranted making such a big deal over a fucking cup of coffee and getting a manager involved. All Max had done was followed what he’d freaking ordered. It wasn’t her fault the ass-clown had changed his mind by the time she was done.

“Aiden,” Steph called across the shop. It was in that stern way when she was trying to get her employees to get back to work. And Aiden was flirting with his girlfriend, who had been stopping in every fucking time the guy was on shift and loitering around. As if Max needed more reasons to be annoyed with her co-worker. “Aiden,” Steph repeated, when she was ignored the first time.

“I’m on my break,” Aiden cited. As if that excused him from PDA while in uniform.

Max scrubbed cream and milk from various containers. The water was uncomfortably hot, but Max didn't even care anymore. She wanted to leave for the day. Ten minutes left and she'd be home-free.

Her hip vibrated. Text message. Probably Chloe. Probably a reminder about her appointment.

“Max,” said Steph from behind Max. She was tidying up their workspace.

“Yea?”
“The shitstorm's over, it's slow again...you can, uh, head out a few minutes early if you want – after you finish up there.”

“Oh.” Max was puzzled. Steph wasn't the sort to hand out offers like that. She was pretty nit-picky about time when it came to work.

“Something going on with you?” Steph then probed, trying to be casual about it as she set up a new brew of the day's dark roast.

“Huh? Like what?”

“Seem in a bad mood,” Steph observed.

Understatement, there.

HAHAHA 'bad mood,' she says. More like going fucking crazy.

I'm at work. Not at work, remember? You're quiet when I'm at work.

Eh, you're punching out a few minutes early, I'm punching in a few minutes early. Big deal.

“So,” Steph added after the lull. “Are you in a bad mood?”

“Yea,” Max bluntly admitted, not letting up on the scrubbing.

She couldn't get it clean. Never could get it fucking clean.

“Well,” Steph sighed. “Life happens n' all that, but I need you to leave it at home.”

Max's eyes rolled at this, which Steph couldn't see.

Steph continued, “I've gotten three complaints about you today – just today – and all of them were about you messing up people's orders, and acting a little...off. ‘Bad attitude,’ n’ what-not.”

“It's busy, I...mix stuff up,” Max blew off the caution. She scrubbed extra hard at some gunk that had gotten stuck to the bottom of a blender jar. Grunting through this act, she defended, “Got a lot on my mind.”

Am I really such a hassle? Thought we'd gotten used to each other by now...

You know what I meant.

I do. And it's a goddamn mess I thought you knew better than to make.

Guess I'm just a pro at making messes.

“So I heard,” Steph said with a sigh. “Chloe told me what happened the other day.”

Max's heart skipped. What the hell? The other day as in what happened in Stella's bathroom?

GODDAMNIT CHLOE she needs to shut her mouth this is OUR business not everyone's why would she URGH GRAH RRRR

Steph added, “And I know with that memorial trip coming up, you—ya know, you're probably pretty stressed, huh?”

“Mm,” Max hummed her admittance, rinsing off the plastic jar. Her hands were trembling a bit. Her
knees felt weak.

“"You know,” Steph said carefully, “Max, you've got some sick hours saved up...”

“I'm not sick,” Max flatly swatted the idea. She was not gonna waste precious sick time unless she was actually sick. The last time that had happened she’d lost her voice entirely for three days. That was what you used sick time for. She couldn't afford to take the day off just because she was in a bad mood.

*Oh. So that's what we're calling this? A 'bad mood.'*

“No, I'm...-” Max caught herself replying out loud. “-...I'm not sick.”

“There's different *kinds* of 'sick,’” Steph reminded. She waited for Max to reply, but hell no to that. “Anyway,” said Steph with a sterile tone. “If you want, I could figure out a backup plan for Monday, maybe Tuesday after your trip. Just in case you might call in.”

Max sighed. That sounded nice and all, but...Max would rather take time off to celebrate her anniversary with Chloe. Well, wait. Maybe she could, then. Hm.

“Um. Sure. Thanks,” Max muttered out. “I'll think on it.”

**DIFFERENT KINDS OF SICK**

**KINDS OF SICK**

**SICK**

**WE ARE SICK**

**SO DAMNED SICK**

Max finished up the dish-washing, eager to stuff her quivering hands in her pockets. By the time she was done, Aiden was back from his break. He brushed by Max without incident, but she intentionally avoided his gaze.

“Max? You’re good,” Steph assured. “You can head out. Pretty slow today, anyway.”

“'Kay,” Max mumbled, trudging her way over to a computer to clock out.

Max went to the cramped little office room in the back to get her stuff. She went to log into the computer to access her time card, but...damnit all, her password wouldn’t take.

*It's this one, YOU IDIOT.*

What? No. Maybe this one...

*OH MY GOD I'm telling you, it's THAT one, add the numbers...*

Oh.

*FRIGGIN' TOLD YOU MORON*

Yea, yea...

Max finally punched out, then double-checked her time card. Steph was right, she had at least two days' worth of sick time saved up. Hm.

But when Max went to retrieve her personal belongings, the only thing there was her hoodie. For reals? She was pretty sure she’d brought her messenger bag. Max double checked around the room,
but...it wasn’t like there were many places it could’ve gone off to. Had she seriously just forgotten it? Straight up? She never forgot it...

*Forgetting everything lately. I WONDER WHY.*

Whatever.

Max would check with Chloe.

(Chloe) – (appointment w/shrink after work.)
(don’t forget.)

(Max) – (chlobear.)

(Chloe) – (chickadee?)

(Max) – (gross.)

(Chloe) – (u started it bby)
(bae)
(shawty)

(Max) – (ew ew stop no)
(stop.)
(:P)

(Chloe) -- (NOOO emojis my only weakness!!)
(anyways. Wut up?)

(Max) – (did I leave my bag at home?)

(Chloe) – (yepper)

(Max) – (k thx)
(on my way to the appt btw)

(Chloe) – (call me when it’s over. I’ll pick u up.)

(Max) – (k)

With a sigh of frustration at her own lapse of memory, Max put her phone in her pocket. Hoodie draped over her shoulder, she yanked off her cap, untied her apron, and hung both on her hook on the wall. She headed back out to the café floor, which was still pretty slow. No one new had shown up since she’d popped out.

And as Max approached the entrance double doors, she noted how hard it was pouring rain outside, and the lack of customers made more sense.

“Are you fucking *kidding* me...?” Max grumbled to herself, shoving on her hoodie.

“Huh?” Max’s manager, Steph, cast a glance out the windows. “*Oh*. Yikes. Cats n’ dogs out there all of a sudden.”

“Yea,” Max sighed, slinging her messenger bag around her shoulder. “*This’ll be fun*...”

“Why don’t you call Chloe, have her come grab you?”
Air slipped out of Max’s nostrils in a wistful way. Her eyes wandered to the droplets slamming against the sidewalk outside of the glass double doors.

“Nah,” Max dismissed the idea. “I’ve got an appointment to catch on the way home. Don’t want to...drag her around, and...-”

“Well. Stay dry, stay clean. There's a bug goin' around.”

“Yes.”

“See you tomorrow, Max.”

Max stepped out into the storm.

It’d been dry all damned day. Not a cloud in the sky when Max had left for work. And – of course – when she was finally free, it had to be raining. Hard. She hadn’t brought an umbrella. And her hoodie certainly wasn’t made for rain, either. A minute of miserably stomping through the rain and Max could already feel her nose starting to run. She scrambled to stuff earbuds in – not those stupid ones that you plugged all the way up into your ears, she hated those – and swiftly got some music playing from her phone before the screen got soaked.

The wrong song played.

Max let it play, anyway.

–

- (Two Months Earlier) –

Max locked the latches on her guitar case, leaning it against the wall. The party guests hadn’t been too enthralled about her performance, letting her fade into the background. Which Max was used to. She didn’t understand why the hell Victoria was inviting her to these private parties, anyway. The public events at Vickie’s gallery, that made sense. But these house parties afterward? Max just didn’t...fit here. But now that the crowd had packed it up and gone home, here Max was. Still. For some reason.

Some reason.

“It’s a shame, really,” Vickie lamented from her fancy kitchen, where plebs weren’t allowed to tread.

“What is?” Max wondered, staring absent-mindedly out the apartment window and toward the Golden Gate Bridge off in the distance. Vickie sure had a pretty sweet setup here. But Max had lost track of the conversation.

Opening a cabinet, Victoria posed, “I mean, do you really see a future with her?”

Oh, right. They’d been talking about Chloe.

“Yes,” Max replied instantly. “We get married, we, um...-” Max trailed off. Her mind was blank.

Marriage.

Then...-?

“Yes, Max, I am aware of what an engagement ring entails,” said Victoria as she entered with two glasses of red wine. “But are you two going to stay trapped in that stoner town for the rest of your
days? Are you just going to keep working at that quaint coffee shop until retirement?"

“Hell no,” Max insisted, accepting her drink but lingering by the window still. Victoria took a seat at
the couch.

“So, then. What's the plan?” Victoria crossed one ankle over the other as she leaned back into her
leather couch, sipping at her wine glass.

Max scratched at her scalp squeamishly while she pondered Victoria's question.

“I don't...have a plan,” Max confessed before taking a gulp of wine. The sour, bitter flavor was
overwhelming. She didn't drink wine much, since Chloe was more into hard liquor and cocktails.
Coughing a bit, Max added, “The plan was to go to school, get a degree, n'...” She shook her head,
ips pursed. With an irate shrug, she concluded, “I don't know. I obviously overestimated my own
talent, or something, because no one seems to give a shit.”

“Ohh, Max,” puffed Victoria with some disappointment and pity. Sipping between sentences, she
advised, ‘This is the art world, my dear. It’s true: no one gives a shit. You’ve got to pull the strings,
lay the nets, capture what you want yourself. Overestimating your talent is a good first step, but it's
all about who you know. It's not about what you're capable of as a creator, it's about getting someone
else to notice.’

That concept – no, that reality – made Max’s stomach writhe a bit.

Staring down into the dark liquid of her glass, Max found herself observing the way she could make
out traces of red at the edges. She walked away from the window and toward Victoria’s leather
couch. Max plopped herself down into the plush mass of poofy black leather, nearly spilling a bit of
wine.

“Do not even dare to get wine on my couch,” Victoria dryly snapped.

“Well, there goes my plan for the evening,” Max teased, setting the glass onto an ornate coaster on
the dark marble coffee table before her. “I mean, I obviously stuck around specifically to make a
mess of things.”

Wouldn't be the first time.
Ech. No, I guess not...

As Victoria puffed and rolled her eyes, Max stared at the wine. Deciding to suck down a hearty gulp,
Max cleared her throat, then grumbled tiredly, “Soooo...Making it in the art world. It comes down to
fucking luck, then.”

“Sure,” Victoria said airily, shrugging. “It’s a game of chance. That’s why you rig the game. Bend
the rules.”

Victoria slid her hand up and down Max’s arm slyly, making sure Max turned to glance at the sneaky
smirk she wore. Max pried her eyes away from the sheen of Victoria's glossed lips.

“Bend the rules, huh?” Max murmured thoughtfully, escaping Victoria's face with another helping of
wine.

Like Rewinding to cheat on an exam you were too fucking lazy to study for?
Like Rewinding to get out of that speeding ticket?
Like Rewinding to undo saying that stupid thing that made Chloe pissed off at that party last month?

Like Rewinding to try and save lives?

Like Rewinding to keep Chloe alive?

“I dunno, Victoria,” Max decided sullenly, “I think there's more to finding success than just...bending rules.”

Victoria chuckled softly, slinking her way back into the open kitchen behind the living room. She'd already finished off her glass, and Max was getting there with her own, too.

Vickie scoffed, “Like you've broken a single rule in your life, Max Caulfield.”

DIS BITCH LOLOL

IF ONLY YOU KNEW HAHA

“You'd be surprised,” Max said foxily, eyes glazing over at Victoria’s fancy coffee table. The way the whites and blacks streaked across each other was mesmerizing.

“Oh?” The way Victoria said it was filled with sultry intrigue. “And I suppose we have Ms. Price to thank for that, don't we?” Victoria mused from the kitchen. Max could hear the bottle of wine being opened again. “After all, you're not the innocent little hipster waif you once were.”

Max scratched at her scalp thoughtfully, shifting her ass around. This couch felt like it was swallowing her up.

Victoria returned with a half-emptied bottle in one hand and a rubber stopper in the other.

“Back in high school...” Max began with a sigh. She had to hold up the dam – keeping back the torrent of shitty memories from overwhelming her. She'd had years of practice at it by now, at least.

“What about high school?” Victoria pressed, refilling her glass and adding a bit more to Max's.

Max sighed again as her mind ran circles, a spiral path of memories, swimming through more wine.

WE BROKE INTO SCHOOL AND BOMBED A DOOR heheh
Eh, yea, and stole from the handicapped...
AND GAVE IT TO A DRUG DEALER
To get Chloe out of dodge.
WE WATCHED PEOPLE GET SHOT OVER AND OVER
Trying to figure out how to stop it!
It was STILL HILARIOUS
It wasn't.
ESPECIALLY WHEN CHLOE SHOT HERSELF LOLOL WHAT AN IDIOT HAHA
Ugh.
'MAX! MAX I FUCKING SHOT MYSELF REDO REDO!!'
Stop.
EVEN THIS BIMBO RIGHT HERE
SPILLED PAINT ALL OVER HER PRECIOUS CASHMERE~
Do I still have the pic of Victoria covered in paint...? Or did I undo that?
Selling us short, Maxine. WE TURNED THAT TOWN TO RUBBLE GURL
RUBBLE.
“Well?” Victoria taunted. Max stole a glance at the way Victoria's skirt hugged at her thighs as the woman sat beside her. Vickie's eyelids lowered and her glossy lips curled as she murmured, “I want to hear these untold tales of Max Caulfield’s unsavory teenage deeds.”

“Psh, yea, I bet you do,” Max mumbled back, watching as Victoria adjusted her shirt a bit. The low-cut of her blouse had been a bit distracting to Max all evening.

“Indeed, I do,” Victoria confirmed. “Gossip away, Caulfield. I might as well jump on the opportunity while you’re inebriated.”

“Heh.” Max shook her head slightly and avoided Victoria's anticipatory smile.

Victoria leveled her wine glass toward Max, who took her cue and scooped up her own. They clinked glasses, then took another swig.

“Um...-” Max sniffed, rubbed her nostril with the tip of her thumb, deciding which story to tell from that hellish week. “Well, ehm...There was that time me and Chloe broke into Blackwell at night.”


“Few days before the storm hit,” Max explained. “Trying to dig up details on the Rachel Amber case.”

“Mm.” Victoria was suddenly rather sullen and quiet.

QUIET FOR ONCE
Quiet for once.

Max added, “We found out that Nathan was...connected, and, um...-”

“Connected?” came Vickie's bitter retort. “More like, taken advantage of.”

That sting in Victoria’s expression – that bitter ember in her eyes – it filled Max with a sense of fiery familiarity. It was comforting, in this weird way, to see someone so normally calm and cool and collected be lit aflame with the coals of regret and loathing and...hurt.

Ahhahaaa. You like to see Vickie in pain, eh?

“I-I dunno, I guess,” Max conceded. “Sure. I mean, Jefferson used him, and...-”

“That psychopath killed that poor boy.”

Whoa. No way. ‘Poor boy?’ Not exactly the phrasing Max would use for Nathan Prescott. Ever. Victoria knew the guy better than Max did, but no. No fucking way. He got used, he was abused, there were reasons why Nathan did what he did. Max would not argue that at all. But Nathan still chose to do them. Chose to drug girls, chose to participate in Jeffershit’s twisted mess, chose to capture it on film. To capture Chloe and Rachel and Kate. It wasn’t that Max felt Nathan ‘got what was coming to him’ or whatever...but if he hadn’t even allowed himself to dive into those depths, he wouldn’t have risked drowning in the first place.

DROWNING IN BLUE
WE know aLl aBoUt DrOwNiNg... . . . . . . . .
LUCKY US
YOU HAVE A CLOCKWORK LIFE VEST
“I’m sorry,” Max sighed with melancholy. It was a horrid mixture of things. “I’m sorry I couldn’t save him,” Max specified. She was certainly sorry for more than that, but...

“Yes. Well. You did manage to save me,” Victoria puffed out, sanding down the sharp edge of her tongue. “So, there is that. But if Nathan had just...listened to me when I...” She stopped herself, closed her eyes, shook her head, bit her lips. Paused. Re-opened her eyes, swapping sullen glances with Max.

And there it was again. Those coals in Vickie’s eyes, still smoldering with that faint glow even after all that time had passed. The conversation was only fanning what flames rested within.

Max wanted to douse them.

“Ugh, see – this?” Max groaned quietly, rubbing her palms over her eyes. “This is why I didn’t want to talk about Blackwell. I-I’m sorry that I brought up-

“Play a song,” Victoria blurted.

Max was gob smacked.

“Huh?”

Victoria took a huge gulp of her wine, swallowing down the last of her second glass already. It was like she was on a mission to get drunk, which was odd given how selective she'd been all evening about her intake.

“Your guitar,” Vickie quipped. “Play a song. Those uncultured peacocks couldn’t appreciate it earlier, but I certainly can.”

Max’s chest felt tight. Victoria had never expressed any genuine interest in Max’s music. It was shit, to be frank. She didn’t even really sing, come on. She only brought her guitar to this party because when she inevitably felt lost in the crowd, she could at least still contribute with some background music. Always in the background...

“I...I wouldn’t know what...what to play,” Max fumbled out sheepishly. She suddenly felt a bit light-headed. Wine was hitting her harder than she'd expected. Then again, wine mixing with the weed from that afternoon probably wasn’t helping? What was that called? Double-dipping, or...-?

“Whatever comes to mind,” Victoria insisted. “Max, I don’t even care, just...something.”

Max sighed tiredly, her cheeks slightly warm. Could've been the wine, could've been the mischievous spark in Victoria's eyes. Probably was a bit of both.

“Come on,” Victoria goaded, giving Max a gentle shove on the shoulder.

Max shook her head slightly and smirked as a silly idea came to mind. She got up reluctantly and retrieved her instrument from its case.

“Just ‘something,’ huh?” she checked, tuning it as she sat back down.

“Anything,” Victoria groaned with a roll of her head and a sip of her drink.

“Anything,” Max chuckled softly, trying a few test strums, and drinking a little more inbetween.

Satisfied with the sound, Max started to play the opening chords of Wonderwall, just to spite Vickie
in good humor.

“Anything but *that*!” Victoria snarled, snorting on a laugh. “You know I abhor that pretentiously hipster anthem. It’s a plague on our culture.”

“You said anything,” Max insisted with as straight a face as she could muster, continuing to play.

“Ugh.”

Max started to sing, laying on her best wispy singing voice.

“~ Today is gonna be the day
That they’re gonna throw it back to you ~”

“Stop.” Victoria crossed her arms and pouted in this adorable way that Max adored.

“~ By now you should’ve somehow
Realized what you gotta do~”

“You’re horrible, Maxine. Absolutely horrible.” Victoria shoved Max’s shoulder with her own, but Max persisted, lathering on some exaggeration to her performance.

“~ I don’t believe that anybody
Feels the way I do, about you now ~”

At this point, Victoria was leaning over Max, lazily trying to get her to stop playing. Naturally, Max tilted her guitar out of Victoria’s reach, trying to play all the while. This made Victoria reach with more desperation, until the guitar strumming came to a stop, the guitar was dropped beside the couch, and Victoria was in Max’s lap.

And then her hands were on Max’s chest.

And her lips were on Max’s lips.

And months – years? – of whatever had been bottled and contained between the two of them was suddenly seeping out through cracks in the glass.

*CRACKS IN THE GLASS*

*sHaRdS oF bRoKeN mIrRoR

*BROKEN*

*Broken.*

Couldn’t pick up the pieces.

Couldn’t find the pieces.

Sharp. Too sharp.

*Tongue. So sharp.*

No, stop.

Red was leaking in. Pouring in. Swallowing them up.
STOP.
We need to STOP. Why won't you fucking STOP?!

WE'VE WANTED THIS FOR TOO LONG

No. No, you've wanted this. I haven't-
YOU HAVE. WE HAVE.

That doesn't make this OK!

FEELS PRETTY FUCKING OK TO ME HAHA

This is wrong. WOULDN'T BE THE WORST THING WE'VE DONE
Stop, NOW.

Coughing. Sputtering. Choking. Drowning. Everything was too hot.

Everything was too red.

Max pushed and shoved. Scrambled herself sideways along the couch. Out of Victoria's grasp. Wiped spit off of her face. Pushed hair out of her eyes. Straightened her shirt.

SPOIL THE FUN WHY DON'T YOU??

“Max,” Victoria grunted with a sharp sting of remorse. Not in her action, no, but in that her action had been rejected, right?

Max pushed out her hand.


REWIND REWIND REWIND

WHY IS IT NOT...?! RED IT'S ALL RED WHY IS IT ALL RED?!

WHY WON'T IT FUCKING GO BACKWARD?!

IT BURNS IT HURTS WHY DOES IT OW OW OW FUCK

I ToLd YoU i FuCkInG TOLD YOU

“Max? I didn't-”
“Back,” Max spit out, her vision blurred, everything a throbbing red haze.

She flung her hand out again, and Victoria obeyed a command Max hadn't intended to force on her.

“Shit, fine, whatever,” Victoria growled under her breath, giving Max space.

Max's chest suddenly felt hollow, each heartbeat deep and heavy. Her skull was throbbing. Still, she tightened the muscles in her arm, desperately struggling to grasp the temporal string and tug it, yank it, but it was pulling back far too much.
“Wh...? Max, your nose...-!”

Max gave up. Of course she couldn't Rewind this. Just like the day before, when she'd gotten off at the wrong bus stop, and she couldn't go back. Why the hell could she not go back?

Red spots were forming on Max's pants, dripping from her face.

Victoria was in a tizzy, hurriedly reaching for a box of oh-so-soft tissues. She ripped three out of the box and shoved them at Max's hands, as if too scared to touch the girl. Too scared at the sight of a few drops of blood.

*She Should Be Scared HAHA*

Max shoved two tissues into each of her nostrils and tried to wipe at her pants with the third.

“Vic,” Max whimpered with frustration. She could *hear* the complaints about 'staining my expensive couch' already.

“What the actual *fuck*, Max?” Victoria sighed, pacing in front of her coffee table. Yup, here it came. But instead, there was...concern. Fear.

“Are you all right? Did someone put something in your drink? I *knew* I shouldn't have let Reginald mix the-”

“*Victoria,*” Max growled, her vision still a haze, her head wobbly.


To be fair, Victoria, I don't get myself right now, either.

Victoria's expression winced a bit, and she mumbled warily, “Could you...at least try to bleed on the furniture *slightly* less?”

Max groaned irritably at the remark.

“I *told* you not to play that song,” Victoria murmured with some bitterness, hands planted on her hips.

*HAHA she's trying to make this all your fault that is FUNNY*

Like the ONE TIME shit isn't your fault
PFFF screw this bitch amirite?

*Let's tell her off.*

*I'm engaged!*” Max huffed, her voice muffled by her plugged nose. “I've been with Chloe for years. What the hell would make you think that-?”

“I *said* to forget it happened!”

“Are you for real right now?”

“Your girlfriend would beat me to death with a tire iron if-”

“You just...just threw yourself at me! Why?”

“Oh, *please.* You're being dramatic, I just...”

“You jumped on my lap and *grabbed* me, I don't-”
"You were taunting me, I was-"
"No, fuck that! I did not want-"
"So I suppose you've been staring at my tits all night because you don't want-?!"
"No way, I was not-"
"Looking at my lips when I talk instead of my eyes?"
"What are you even-?"
"Even Francine noticed you doing it, she asked if we were-"
"Screw Francine, I don't even know which one of them that-"
"'a thing,' and then Reginald agreed I should act, but then-"
"-was, and fine, fuck it, so what if I stared?"
"-you reciprocated when I made a move, and-"
"So what?! That was just a...a reaction, like...."
"So you admit it."
"Whatever, it's not exactly private knowledge that you've wanted me since high school."
"Oh, well played, Caulfield. You've got me. Going to guilt trip me for taking an interest?"
"I'm gonna guilt-trip you for making a fucking move on me when I'm engaged."
"If you're soooo in love with that blue-collar urchin, then why does she never show up with you?"
"What?"
"I never see you two together. A little odd, isn't it?"
"We live different social lives. How is that relevant to-"
"They're pretty different, all right. I bet your pet goes stray all the time without you knowing."
"She doesn't."

"Regardless," Victoria bellowed, keen on ending the discussion. "She does not need to know about this."

"Oh, she does," Max insisted, getting up from the couch, still dabbing at her nose. She hadn't even Rewound anything, why was it...-?

"Max, you will not tell her about this," Victoria commanded as Max headed for the door. "Y-your instrument," Victoria remarked.

"I'll get it some other time," Max dismissed, her head ready to pop from all of the pressure.

"Maxine!" Victoria cried, her tone immediately shifting from demanding to apologetic.

"Max, don't fucking call me 'Maxine,' I never said that was...-"

"Don't just up and leave, we're not-!"

- 

"You just...walked out on her?"

"Yea," Max spat at Chloe's question. "I just...I'd heard it all before, it wasn't like she was gonna tell me anything new."

The car was cold that evening. It was still raining.

"Dude," Chloe sighed. "You don't go to see a therapist because they're gonna give you some...some grand revelation, you go so they can tell you what you need to hear."

"And she did, OK?" insisted Max. "She did. She told me what I needed to hear. And then she just...kept going on, and on. More stupid questions for me to answer, and then more stupid remarks
Max saw Chloe's fingers tighten around the steering wheel. The windshield wipers clicked and squealed softly for a few seconds of tension between the two of them.

“Did you at least get your prescription re-upped?”

“Yea, sure,” Max blew off the question, kicking the paper bag by her foot. “Like it's been doing me any good.”

“Well, I-I dunno, maybe if you weren't...adding your own 'medicine' to the mix it might...work better.”

“I don't think a little weed is gonna do me any wrong, Chloe. It helps me sleep.”

“Ech.”

“Like you're one to talk. We had a full bottle of vodka on Monday. Now it's nearly gone.”

“Yea, that helps me sleep.”

“Every fucking night?” Max posed skeptically.

“I've had a shitty week, OK?”

“Well, see? So have I.”

“Seems like every week's been shitty lately...” Chloe shook her head bitterly.

“Yep.” Max crossed her arms with a sullen breath. “It's almost like that's what being an 'adult' is all about.”

“Well.” Chloe sighed deeply. “That's life, and then you die, I guess.”

Max grumbled sarcastically, “Restoring my faith in the future. Thanks, Chloe.”

“Ugh. Look, Max. Just- ...Hey! Asshole!”

Chloe was shouting about the blue car speeding up beside them and shifting lanes right in front of them without so much as a turn signal.

“What a dick-nugget.” Chloe grumbled, clicking her turn signal and sliding to the left. “Fuckin'... California drivers, amirite?”

Chloe sped up in turn to pass the guy. Max noticed it was some older man. And a girl in the passenger seat? Teen, maybe. Like a grandpa and his granddaughter or something. They both looked in a bad mood. Maybe the universe was just making everyone feel like crap that day. Or maybe Max was projecting. Chloe turned her signal on again and put herself right back in front of them.

“Turn signals!” Chloe blurted. “Learn how to use 'em, prick!”

“He can't hear you,” Max pointed out, trying to sound teasing but...coming off a little more grouchy.

“No shit,” Chloe sighed, rolling her eyes as they went down a highway ramp. The blue car followed them.
Max wanted to say something to apologize, but...it wasn't for a specific action. Just her whole mood that day. Before she could figure out the words, Chloe’s expression turned sour.

“Ulgh,” Chloe groaned suddenly, gripping at her stomach. “Maybe I shouldn't-a had Chipotle for lunch...”

Max suddenly felt queasy, too. Maybe something about the way Chloe was driving? Like, when Stella drove, it always made Max feel carsick. But Chloe was a solid driver.

“M-Max,” Chloe grunted, recollecting herself. “Are you OK?”

Why did Chloe sound all serious like that? Kind of scared, even...

“Uhhhh...” Max stared at Chloe's profile, waiting for her nausea to pass. “No? Isn't that the whole point? That I'm not OK, which is why you forced me to go see the shrink?”

“No, like, I mean...Did you just...?” Chloe asked, narrow-eyed. She stared at Max suspiciously.

Max glared back with furrowed brows of confusion.

The windshield wipers clicked and squealed. The rain pattered down. They swapped tight, frustrated glances.

Chloe then simply shook her head. “Nevermind. Just nevermind.”

Max felt hella uneasy. Something was up, and it wasn't about burrito bowls.

“Chloe, talk to me,” Max insisted as the light turned green. “What is it?”

“Nothing, OK?” Chloe snapped, shooting Max a wary, wide-eyed glare as she turned the corner. “Can we just stop bickering for, like...”

—

NOISE.

GLASS.

BROKEN.

—

Max's head was burning all of a sudden. Everything was blurred. And wet. And hot. And tight.

Why was Max's face wet? Why did she smell smoke?

Why was her hair falling sideways over her face?

Chloe was coughing and sputtering, and...and wincing? She was in pain.

Why was Chloe in pain? Why was everything sideways?

CRACKS IN THE GLASS.

BROKEN MIRRORS.

There was broken glass everywhere. So many bits and shards of car glass, like grains spilled from an hourglass.
But the mirror – that's what caught Max's attention. The way the rear-view mirror was shattered.

“Muh...-? Hughh. Max?” Chloe sounded afraid.

Max pushed hair out of her face, and in doing so realized she was, in fact sideways. Because the entire car was sideways. Her vision mostly restored, she realized they'd gotten into a crash.

Her face was wet because it had blood on it. Chloe's blood.

Not again.
Not again not again not again not again
NOT AGAIN NOPE NOPE NOT HAPPENING AGAIN
WHY IS THIS HAPPENING AGAIN??
I FUCKING FIXED THIS A FEW DAYS AGO I FIXED IT WE'RE GOOD
THIS IS SUPPOSED TO BE FIXED
SECOND TIME THIS WEEK WHAT THE HELL

Calm the fuck down, Maxine!

CHLOE IS HURT LOOK AT HER SHE’S IN PAIN
NO NO FUCKING NO
I AM NOT WATCHING THIS AGAIN

She's just dinged up, you're overreacting!

NO NO NO I WILL NOT LET HER GET HURT AGAIN


There ya go. Let me do it.

Max took a deep breath and closed her eyes.

She took the dive.
She took the dive.

–

“Well.” Chloe sighed deeply. “That's life, and then you die, I guess.”

Red, everywhere. Red and brown.

Windshield wipers. Rain.

Max's head was on fire, her neck felt like rubber. Her head sagged against the window as she tried to steady the pounding in her chest.

“Ugh. Look, Max. Just- ...Hey! Asshole!”

Blue car. Speeding by.

Whew. She'd gotten them back. She really was getting better at this. Then again, she’d been practicing, so...-

“What a dick-nugget,” Chloe grumbled, clicking her turn signal and sliding to the left.

“Fuckin'...California drivers, amirite?”
Agh, shit. Right. Had to...make sure...

“Chloe,” Max panted out, her throat clogged up. She pounded at her chest. *Augh,* everything burned. Chloe hit the gas pedal. “*Chloe,*” Max raggedly snarled.

“What?” Chloe snipped, letting up on their speed.

“Let...-” Max's vision bubbled and blurred. “Just...let him...-”

“Dude, this prick sped up *just to get in front me and slow down,* I'm not-”

“Let him, *please,*” Max whimpered, her eyes suddenly getting wet. Her head felt like a boiler.

Pressure. So much pressure. Her skull could just *pop* any second.

And then the mirror would break again. And all of the sand would spill out.

Max was struggling to get her hands to open the glove box.

“O-OK, fine,” Chloe decided, slowing back down and letting the blue car roll forward.

Max popped the glove box and rifled through the contents.

Chloe beeped her horn a couple of times.

“Turn signals!” Chloe yelled. “Learn how to use 'em, prick!”

Max nabbed the package of napkins she'd been searching for and her shaky hands tore the plastic open.

And there it was, that...fucking nosebleed, right on queue. She sniffled and wiped a napkin against her upper lip, catching it right in time.

“*Ulgh,*” Chloe groaned suddenly, gripping at her stomach. “Maybe I shouldn't-a had Chipotle for lunch...”

And then Chloe saw Max, wiping at her nose, and her expression turned sour. Just like it had last time.

So.

That was new.

It was like...Chloe had somehow *felt* Max's Rewind *before* she'd used it?

Over time, Chloe had been experiencing what she'd referred to as 'time-sickness.' She'd described it as this motion-sick feeling, whenever Max would use her Rewind around her. Chloe's running theory was that by this point, she'd been in the vicinity of Max's Rewind so many times, she was starting to be able to tell when it had happened. Max hadn't wholly bought it – Chloe was always full of sci-fi-fantasy theories – but this one was starting to seem more and more true in some manner.

Either way, Chloe had never gotten that feeling *before* Max had used the Rewind.

The car lulled to a stop at the end of the highway ramp, right at the stoplight. Blue car in front.

Windshield wipers. Raindrops. Turn signal clicking.
“M-Max,” Chloe grunted, recollecting herself. “Are you OK?”

“Mm-hm!” Max innocently hummed, trying to hide the nosebleed, trying to distract Chloe from driving ahead.

“Dude,” Chloe whimpered, her voice suddenly getting way quivery and weird. “Dude, dude, Max...did you just...-?”

Max nodded, her own face contorting with fear to match Chloe's involuntary sob.

“Did we just...-?” Chloe whispered, her expression perplexed and pained.

The light turned green. Chloe didn't hit the gas. The blue car did.

NOISE.

GLASS.

BROKEN.

Chloe let out a short shriek at the impact that occurred right before them. Her foot slammed on the gas, then she pounded the brake, jerking the car a couple feet forward. Like some kind of physical twitch reaction. Max, meanwhile, just stared at the car crash, imagining – remembering – what it had felt like.

Heh.

Watching it from the outside wasn't so bad...heheh.

*Right?*

“What the *fuck?!*” Chloe bellowed, pounding at her steering wheel as the collision stopped. “Jesus-fucking-...SHIT!” Now Chloe was clawing at her head.

Heh. Damn, Chloe, why are you so worked up? We're fine.

“Dude!” Chloe gasped in a panic, unbuckling her seat belt. “W-we gotta...-! A-are they, like...-? *Hohhhh*, shit-shit.” Chloe went to open the driver side door, but it was locked. She fumbled around, realizing she had to turn the engine off.

Max, meanwhile, just stared across the way.

Smoke. Rain.

So much broken glass. Fucking *everywhere.*

So many pieces, strewn all about. Chaos.

The hourglass was shattered.

So many reflections – no, *parts* of reflections – all over.

*We have to be whole.*

“Max!” Chloe was shaking Max about. “Dude, fffffuck! Snap out of it! C-call 911! I-I'm gonna go and...-”
Max gawked at Chloe's panic, her stomach uneasy, her head light and spinning.

Blood trickled down her lips.

Chloe looked...so scared. Max didn't understand why. They were fine. Max had protected them, they were fine. She'd fixed it.

Chloe slammed her palms against her face and forced herself out of the car. She slammed the door shut, paced for a couple seconds.

Max sniffed, rubbed her sleeve against her nose, and then realized she still had napkins in her lap. Duh-doy.

Max was startled when Chloe ripped the door open again.

“Dude,” Chloe whimpered with frustration. “I said call...-!”

Tears were starting to slide down Max’s cheeks. She didn't really know why.

Now Max was scared. Because Chloe was scared. Why were they scared?

EVERYTHING IS FINE I FIXED IT GODDAMNIT.

Chloe, damp from the rain, grabbed one of the napkins in Max's lap and dried her hands. She took her phone from the cup holder it had been in and made a call.

“I-hello? I'm, uh...reporting a, um...reporting an accident. Car accident. Mm. We're on, uhh--...Juh-just a sec, I'll...I, um...-”

Chloe shakily pushed herself out of the car and began searching for street signs. Even though this place was right down the street from their house.

_Huh. She's really out of it, huh?_

Yea.

Think they're alive?

We're alive.

_I meant them, dumbass._

Who...?

_In the fucking car wreck right in the front of you._

Oh.

_Look. LOOK AT THEM._

No.

_Really? Seriously?_

They're fine.

_They just got t-boned._
They'll be FINE.

Yea, you tell yourself that.

I don't care. Chloe's fine.

Bullshit, 'you don't care.'

I don't. I can't.

But you need to.

Max closed her eyes as the pressure was coming to a head. To her head.

Raindrops pounded against the glass like damned stones against her skull.

Or was that her heartbeat?

Suddenly, a swift surge of pain ran across the right side of Max's head.

“Max?”

“Ow, shit. Wh...?”

Max opened her eyes, but that fucking blurry haze of red and brown filled her vision. Son of a bitch, did her head hurt.

“Dang, Max, did you just pass out again? I didn't think you'd gotten that wasted...”

Wait, who the hell was talking to her? Where was Chloe?

The rain had stopped. Max looked to her right at the car window she'd just banged her head into.

Glass.

Her glass was full of cracks. So many cracks.

The car jolted to a stop, and Max felt her stomach jump into her ribs.

“Chl...?” Max turned to her left to try and make out the driver.

“Daaaang, you look so messed up,” chuckled the driver. Max knew that voice. As the car went from being parked at a red light to jumping around a left turn, Max's guts swerved against her side. Max still couldn't make out the details, so she closed her eyes again and leaned back in her seat. Her hair felt...weird. It felt short. Shorter, anyway.

It was Stella. Stella was driving the car. Stella was picking on her.

“I told Warren you were a lightweight, but I swear, he never listens to me...”

Goddamnit.

“Sorry he pushed that Jaegerbomb on you. You do know you don't have to always go along with what he says, right?”

Max's head was spinning, but she managed to work her hands across her own fingers to check.
“You can always say 'no' to him.”

No rings.
No promise ring, no engagement ring. **No fucking rings.**

It had happened again. Just like the *last* time Max had Rewound to keep Chloe safe, just earlier that week.

Max was frantically flapping her limbs around to keep her mind above water. Above all the red.

No. No no no again? Why? What is this shit why does this keep *happening* why can't-

Wait. Where are you? Where is me? Where did you – I? – where’d you go?

...

Shit, did I leave me behind again?

...

Damnit damnit how do I get back? What did I do last time?

...

Please please please where are you where am I??

I can't do this without me I can't I need you here I need me I need-

Oh. Oh, I remember. Right. Yea, yea. Like we planned.

Like I planned.

Max's vision was finally clearing up. Her head still burned like a bonfire, though. She could feel the blood vessels around her skull pulsate, stretching her own skin slightly with each heavy beat of her heart.

Max carefully bent over, steadying her own head with one arm as her neck couldn't seem to carry the weight on its own.

“Whoa, Max, a-are you gonna throw up? The garbage bag's still tied to the back of your seat, in case...-”

At least in *this* reality she'd found herself with Stella, instead of just...by herself. Even if it wasn't the same Stella that Max knew well, it was still...weirdly comforting to have her there. Still concerned over Max's well being.

Max's eyes closed again, the searing headache too much to handle the stimulation of looking at this alternate reality. She scraped her hand along the bottom of this foreign car, her fingertips scraping along, struggling to find-

Aha! Yes.

Even in this alternate reality, Max was still... *Max* enough to keep her emergency stash of weed in the same place. Better to keep it there for right now.
OK, all right, OK. Now she just needed...

Max scrambled her palms around, trying to find a phone. Damnit. Where...?

Ah. In the cupholder, of course. Wait, was that her phone? It was in a red case with...a yellow star! Of course. *Steven Universe.* Yea, had to be hers.

Max fumbled around with the smartphone, searching for her *Facebook* app. Her eyesight was about back to what it should be. She could do this. Sooner the better.

Max's seatbelt crushed at her stomach when they hit another hard stop. Yep, still Stella, still a rowdy driver.

“Hey, Max? When we get to the apartment, you want me to make you some...tea? Or...?”

“Huh?”

“You look *really* smashed. Don't you have work in the morning?”

“Uh, y-yea, sure.”

Max was flipping through her photo albums like mad.

College. College.


Stella went on, “Last time you showed up to work late, Victoria *really* laid it into you, didn't she?”

High school.

Further back, further back.

“It's seriously not a problem if you need me to help sober you back up. That's what roomies do, right? And I-I mean, it *is* my boyfriend's fault that you're...so...”

Middle school!

Yes, OK, perfect, just...a little further...

“Max? Can you hear me?”

“*Mm!* Yea. Sounds good. Thanks.”

“Hm...”

Now Max was being careful, scanning each photo with care. Which was pretty frustrating with how bumpy the car ride was. When Max got back to her reality, she had to...like, have words with Stella about keeping others into account when driving, maybe.

“What are you doing?” Stella cautiously asked. “I hope you're not drunk-texting. Last time that got you into *big* trouble...”

“No, no, just...just looking something up.”

“OK...”
HAHAHA YES found it found it found it! Oh thank god yes yes OK she could work with this!

A photo Joyce had taken of Max and Chloe back in middle school, doing their pirate role-playing.

Max locked her phone, letting some relief wash over her.

She'd done this a few times now over the past few months. It was getting easier to do each time. But then, that was what the weed was there for – somehow, it made those deep dives so much easier...

Max remained quiet on the ride home. Stella tried to have small talk about this and that. Max didn't honestly care about this reality. It even sounded like she worked at an art gallery with Victoria, but...screw that. Max didn't even bother trying to figure out where Chloe was – assuming Chloe was even alive.

She didn't have rings on her finger, which meant Chloe didn't have Max's ring, which meant this was not Max's...reality. The one she'd been working so hard to maintain, to keep steady.

She had to go back, she would go back, and that was all that mattered.

Chloe was all that mattered.

When the car finally parked itself in some foreign apartment complex Max didn't recognize, Stella remained in the car, giving Max this really worried look. It made Max feel...sad. But, kind of also...happy?

"Max. You've been acting weird all night. Is everything OK?"

It was just...kind of reassuring to know that even on another temporal plane, some other Max and some other Stella were still good friends, it seemed.

"I, uh..." Max didn't really know what to say. It wasn't like she could actually explain herself. Hell, if she said something dumb, she could just make things worse for...this...Max she'd kind of...popped into...

"You know you can...talk to me, right?"

"Yea. Totally," Max said, not even really thinking. "N-no, I know. I just, um..." She drummed her fingers nervously against her phone. "Leh...Lemme handle a phone call first, n'...then we'll...talk."

Stella scanned Max's wary expression for a moment.

"All right," Stella decided with a smile, pulling her keys out of the ignition. "I'll go, um...get that tea going."

"Thanks, Stella."

As the young woman removed herself from the car, she paused, glancing back into the window with that puzzled, worried look. Max just nodded with a shy smile, lifting her phone to her ear. Stella headed off down the parking lot toward...their apartment, apparently.

As soon as Stella was out of eyesight, Max upturned the car, looking for a lighter. Grabbing the weed. Pulling up the photo on her phone.

Max took a few quick hits on her blunt, filling the car with a nice gray haze of wispy smoke to lose herself in.
She focused on the photo, and with each passing moment, it got harder and harder to focus on it – on her own memory. Time started to slow a little.


Everything turned red.

Max took the deep dive.

–

You've met a terrible fate, haven't you?

Get out of the way.

Heeheehee.

I'm not in the mood for your bullshit right now.

Why weren't you there when I needed you, anyway?

You left without me. What was I supposed to do?

Someone has to hold the fort.

–

“Jeez! Oh, jeez! Augh, man, Max!”

Grass. Sunlight.

But it was obscured by that usual cloud of red and black and brown.

So Max waited for it to clear.

“Like, I didn't mean to hurt you!”

Ah. Yes. Chloe's voice. A little squeaky. A little...weird.

But still Chloe's voice.

“I thought you were ready, you were all, like—...Y-you had your guard up, and everything!”

Max could... feel how much lighter she was. Physically. It was strange.

“Girls!”

Joyce...

“Agh,” Chloe gasped. So adorable. “W-we were just playing, Mom!”

“Max? Hon, are you all right?”

“Nnngh,” was about all Max could muster for words. She fumbled her arms around, pushing a wooden sword aside. She struggled to get up, let her eyes take everything in.

Shit. She couldn't...she couldn't see anything in her right eye! Wh-?

Doy. Eyepatch.
Max peeled the eyepatch off, letting Chloe help her back up.

Man, it was still so bizarre to see Chloe so young. So...smiley. So... blonde.

Joyce was scolding them.

“Now, what did I tell you about the sword-fightin’?“

“I-I didn't hit her with it!” Chloe pleaded. “Right? Tell her, Max. Sh-she just lost her balance, and...”

“Yea,” Max croaked. *Ulgh*, her voice was in that...weird pubescent phase. Yikes. “N-no, I just, uh, got dizzy and fell over,” Max defended, giving Joyce an earnest if sheepish smile.

Joyce scanned the two of them and shook her head slightly.

“How much water have ya'll had to drink today?” she wondered. “It's like a furnace out here...”

“Not a lot.” Max confessed, further playing up that she was...like...having a heatstroke or something. It'd make her weird state of existence more plausible, anyway.

“Augh, jeez, Max,” Chloe mumbled. “You should've told me the heat was gettin' to ya.”

“Sorry,” Max mumbled, shrugging.

Joyce surveyed their play area – the Price backyard, with a freshly painted mural of pirate shenanigans leaned up against the fence. A divot had been ripped out of the yard on the left. A bunch of pennies were scattered all over the swing set.

“You girls sure love makin' a mess,” Joyce remarked.

“We sure do,” Max agreed with a small laugh.

“We'll clean up when we're done,” Chloe assured politely. “Scout's honor.”

“You certainly will,” Joyce agreed. “But how's about ya'll take a load off? Poor Max here looks like she's dyin’ o’ thirst out in this heat. Made some sandwiches for you both, how's about I get some lemonade and ya'll can relax?”

“Can we eat out here?” Chloe pleaded.

“Long as ya'll stay in the shade, I suppose that's fine. Lemme go git your lunch ready.”

“Thank you, thank you~” Chloe chirped with a peppy bounce in her step and an excitable wave.

Man. The times, they had a-changed.

As soon as Joyce had disappeared back into the house, Chloe pulled Max aside, seeking shade behind their backyard fence, just beneath the wooden mural. They sat cross-legged in the grass together.

“OK, OK, OK,” Chloe rapidly spat. “So Chlo and Maximus have their big duel, right? Aaaaand, um, well, Maximus is still, like, hurt from her encounter with that shark, right? So she loses her footing, and Chlo gets the upper hand.” Still sitting, Chloe grunted as she leaned to her side, clawing at her wooden sword from the ground. She smirked mischievously, pointing the sword at Max's throat.
Chloe stared intently at Max, waiting for...something?

But Max was too busy grinning like an idiot, full of so much...relief.

“Yargh,” Chloe growled in...a super dorky way. Pff. So cute. “Lady Luck be on me side today, Maximus! I done bested ye once again! But I can't let ye off so easy this time! Now, will ye accept my terms, or is it the plank with ye?”

Max couldn't hold a straight face. She burst out into giggles, nudging the wooden sword away.

Joyce came out with a tray – tuna fish sandwiches and lemonade. She took careful steps so as not to spill it.

That didn't stop her from heckling Chloe again.

“Gosh darnit, Chloe, now, what did I just say about the swords?”

“They're just wood, Mom.”

“Max has already taken one spill today, she don't need another.”

“We're sitting down,” Chloe protested.

“It's time to put the swords away.”

“But Dad said th-”

“Chloe,” Joyce sternly huffed.

“OK, OK...”

Chloe rolled her eyes and ditched the wooden weapon to the grass, then sprung up to her feet.

“Max, are you feeling well?” Joyce checked.

Max nodded emphatically. Physically, she felt...really crappy, actually.

“Well.” Joyce handed the tray to Chloe, who eagerly knelt down to set it in the grass. “Now, don't spill it.”

“I'm not.”

“Careful.”

“I'm being careful, Mom.”

Joyce nodded warily.

“Chloe?”

“Thank you!” Chloe burst out.

Max could feel...everything shifting again.

The clouds at the edges of her brain were forming.

The Storm was brewing back up.
“Ya'll can go back to your playing after you finish your lunch. And I mean all of it.”

“OK.”

“Thank you, Joyce,” said Max, giving the woman a warm smile. She got one in return.

She’d forgotten how lovely Joyce's smile was before the accident...

“You're welcome, kids. You let me know if you need some more lemonade when you're done, you hear, Max? We've got plenty to go around, and I will not be seeing you having a heat stroke in my yard.”

“Yes, Ma'am,” Max chuckled softly, taking a sip.

Joyce let the two of them be, and Chloe went right back to their roleplay.

As Chloe talked, Max's vision began to blur more and more.

“So! Chlo offers the Cap'n a truce. Chlo doesn't have a ship, and Maximus does. Maximus has a ship but her First Mate got eaten by that shark. So...there's something to be gained for both of them. They meet at the nearest tavern to discuss terms.”

“Yo, ho, ho, and a bottle of lemonade,” Max squeezed out the words, holding out her glass.

“Here, here!” Chloe belted, reciprocating the toast.

And then Max came up for air.

Max's body felt...like it was supposed to. Only hella dizzy. And nauseous. Jumping from a tween to a twenty-something was pretty uncomfortable, even if she'd done it a few times now. The nausea never went away.

Her head floating against something soft and cushy, Max wriggled her hands against each other.

Fuck.

Shit.

No rings. NO RINGS? What-?
NO NO NO that should've worked, it-

“Still with me in the land of the living?”

CHLOE OH GOD CHLOE YES OK YES YES

Fuckin' eh, you're back.

Back? I'm back? I'm BACK.

God damnit does it hurt when you pull this shit.

“Max?”

“Huh...?” Max could barely croak out a single syllable.
“I made that tea for ya to sober yourself up,” Chloe sighed from...somewhere up ahead. “It's gettin’ cold, gurl. Drink up.”

Bleh. Do not drink that tea, it's gross.

“Grughh...” Max planted her palms against her head.

The Other voice was back. That was a good sign.

Oh, now you're happy to have me around, huh?

Where the fuck were you?

It happened again.

Goddamnit.

Yea.

Gettin’ real sick of this shit, Maxine.

I know.

Max felt a weight shift to her side.

She was on the couch. Her rings were on the coffee table right in front of her.

Why had she taken them off?

Don't ask. Let's just say that rumbling in our stomach is because I made some extra room.

Ugh.

“Are you back to normal yet?” Chloe asked from Max's left.

“Haha, nooooo,” Max groaned out earnestly, still rubbing at her aching temples.

Chloe massaged her back a little.

“Look. I know you don't wanna talk about what happened back there, but...I know you used your Rewind.”

“Mm.”

“You've gotta cut that shit out, Max. I'm tellin’ ya.”

“We got into an accident. You were...”

“Was I dead?”

“Wh-? No, I saved you, so...”

“Did the accident kill me?”

“No, because I fixed it.”

“Wh-whatever, look, I mean, when the accident happened, was I-”

“I fixed it, damnit, don't worry about it.”

Max could feel tears forming at the edges of her eyes. She couldn't handle this conversation right
now.

Chloe's doubt was piercing right through Max's heart. It stung pretty bad.

“Uh...Sure,” Chloe eased, backing off of Max. Removing her hand from Max's back.

“Agh, Chloe, I-I'm sorry, I didn't...I don't...”

“-wanna talk about it, you never wanna fucking talk about it.”

Chloe was not having it. Max could detect the impatience and frustration oozing out of Chloe's body language. Sure enough, she got right up and walked out of the room.

“Just freak on me with no damn warning,” Chloe grumbled as she left. “Act all strange, scare the shit outta me, and then ya never fuckin'...Grrghh...I can't deal with this right now...”

Chloe slammed the door to the bathroom.

*Yeesh. Tough crowd.*

I FIXED IT.

What's her problem?

*Me. Well, us. You.*

*Whatever this is.*

Yea...

*I'm tellin' ya, she's gonna get sick of it sooner or later.*

Chloe would never abandon us.

*She's still a friggin' human being, ya know.*

*She can only take so much.*

Good thing she has me to help her, then.

*Oh, pff! Yea. OK.*

*Yea, good thing.*

*You're broken.*

*You're a mess.*

*We are a fucking broken mess.*

*She can only pick up the pieces so many times before she forgets how to put it all back together.*

She can do it.

*Ugh.*

*You've gotta stop using it. You've got to stop Rewinding.*

I'll stop when the fucking universe decides to leave us the hell alone!
Max, Maxie, Maxamil: shit happens.

You can't protect her from everything. No one can.

So, what? I'm just supposed to let the world run her over?

Just let everything trample all over the person I love?

All over me?

That's life, and then you die.

Right?

–

“This planet is a broken bone that didn’t set right, a hundred pieces of crystal glued together. We’ve been shattered and reconstructed, told to make an effort every single day to pretend we still function the way we’re supposed to.

But it’s a lie, it’s all a lie.”

~ Tahereh Mafi, Unravel Me
Chapter Notes

A/N: Nerd alert.
Also, goddamn, this chapter is long. Had a lot of moving pieces to set up here.
Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Nobody 'completes' anybody. That's not a real thing. If you're lucky enough to find someone you can half-way tolerate, you sink your nails in and you don't let go, no matter what."

"So...So, what, I should just...settle?"

"Yes! Thank you! Exactly, settle. Because otherwise, you're just gonna get older, and harder, and more alone. And you're gonna do everything you can to fill that hole -- with friends, and your career, and meaningless sex, but the hole...doesn't get filled. And one day, you're gonna look around and you're gonna realize that everybody loves you...but nobody likes you. And that is the loneliest feeling in the world."

~ BoJack Horseman

Chloe’s hands were shaking, barely able to hold the steering wheel steady. Damn rainstorm still hadn't let up. Chloe had barely been able to keep her shit together when the authorities showed at the scene of the wreck. They’d questioned her about the accident that had just happened – the one that had gone down right in front of her? – and yet she had no concrete witness account to give them. She’d been too fucking distracted by Max’s goddamn Rewind.

When it had been the town that Chloe had grown to loathe, she’d been capable of swallowing that pill.

But now? Seeing a bloodied grandpa and his weeping granddaughter…

Sure, they’d lived. Everyone there had walked away – well, not the grandpa, he’d rode out on a stretcher...Nobody had died, though.

But people had been hurt. People who wouldn't have been if Max hadn't stuck her hands in the temporal cookie jar.

And Chloe couldn’t help but feel like this wasn’t the only time recently.
Nor could she shake the worry that there'd possibly been other times where people had died.
How many times had...time been fucked with, then? How many more people had been hurt in
Chloe’s stead? There could be ones she didn't even know about. Which, ya know, might be the
reason why Max wasn't talking with her about it...

So…that was it, then, huh? That was where they were at: Max was trading other people’s pain to
keep their little bubble of safety in tact. How long had this been a thing, even? How many times had
this happened in recent weeks? Years? Had this been going on since they’d left Arcadia? It had to be
why Max was slipping back, regressing...either way. So, hopefully just a more recent thing, at least?

What the hell had happened, anyway? For years, everything had been fine, hadn’t it? Mostly?
They’d had that huge hurdle in the first year or so after the Storm, they’d gone to therapy, they’d
sorted their lives out...Max went off to college, Chloe dove into the work force. Hadn’t been easy,
especially when Max had slipped backwards, but they’d totally worked through it.

And suddenly, in a span of a week or...two? Maybe three? It was like all of that progress had been
undone.

At least it made sense of Max’s…recent strangeness. The girl was screwing around with time again.
But why? To protect them? To protect Chloe, right?

It had been a half hour, maybe an hour, since they’d witnessed the car accident. Right down the road
from their apartment. The incredibly short distance home felt like a couple of miles with how slowly
Chloe was driving, and how tense she was.

And Max hadn't said a single goddamn word the whole time...Just sat in the car, from when the
accident happened, right through to Chloe finally getting back in and driving them the last stubby leg
to home.

Silent, all the while.

It was unsettling.

“Talk to me, Max,” Chloe said with some urgency, now that they were finally back together in
private.

Chloe swallowed nervously. Trying to keep her eyes on the road. Trying to keep her hands steady.

Trying to keep herself from flipping the hell out because what the sh*t Max this was not cool.

There was no reply, so Chloe stole the quickest of glances. Max looked, just…out of it. Like she was
on some trip or something. Almost like a high, but, like…also having a hangover at the same time?

Chloe rounded the corner to the street their apartment was on.

“Max,” Chloe snapped, her stress bleeding through.

“What?” Max suddenly growled. Or…more like gurgled?

“You with me, Maxie? You OK?”

“HAHAHAHA NOPE.” Manic eyes. “Nope...” An drawn out, amused sigh.

Max was typing some rapid-fire text messages. She'd pause for a few seconds to read, then go back
at it. Maybe...maybe telling her friends what had just...-? That they'd almost gotten into a wreck,
or...-?
Max grumbled quietly – angrily, manically – “She wants to keep doing it? Then I'm gonna keep...” “Max?” “Ha. Knew it, he's so easy to please...Just gotta...” “Can you hear me, Max?”

At this, Chloe's partner rolled her eyes, sucked in quite a childish breath, and sighed loudly. Continuing to send her text messages, she hissed out a reply.

“Max isn't fucking home right now, bitch.”

Well.

Then.

Chloe had stumbled into some 80’s supernatural thriller, and her fiancé was…possessed.

So that was cool. No big deal. Frightening as hell. Was Max’s head gonna start spinning in circles and spraying vomit like a water sprinkler? When Chloe opened their apartment door, was a tidal wave of blood going to sweep over them?

“Uh,” Chloe was at a loss for words. “W-well, she...will be home in a sec. 'Cuz home is...is right around the corner, and so-...So, hang tight. Uh...Buddo.”

“Heh. Hard to hang tight on when there’s nothing to hang on to, Buddo…” Max shook her head spitefully, putting her phone away. “That should do it, though...Fershur.”

What the hell kind of answer was that? Urgh.

Whatever, Chloe needed to get the friggin' car parked. As she set their car up against the familiar curb, Max was bending over, checking beneath her seat. She chuckled softly to herself in this weird...creepy way.

Max murmured, “Same spot, always the same fucking spot, Max...Always, always, always...”

What was so fucking funny about the filthy carpet of their car?

As soon as she switched the engine off, Chloe skipped pleasantries, jumping right into this heart of weirdness.

“OK, seriously, what happened just now? What is with you?”

Max's eyes flickered wide, like being woken from nap, and she ignored whatever was so fascinating about their filthy car's carpeting.

Max replied in a daze, “She – I? – we Rewound again.”

“I figured that out already, I mean...why? And what is going on with you?”

Wait, ‘we?’

Why had she said ‘we?’

“You know why, Chloe. You've always known why, haven't you?” Max was sneering in this snotty way that made Chloe feel slightly sick. Flailing her hands around her own body with impatience, Max trailed off with, “N now I'm stuck driving this...stupid thing until...”

Also, Chloe was driving? Not Max. What...?
Fuck. No, not this, not right now, not again. Come the fuck on…

Chloe thought Max was better now…Had forcing her to see the shrink somehow made things worse?

“Apparently,” Max grumbled, “the Universe is getting mad at us again. Can’t let us have too much happiness, right? Pff. Because we’ve just been soooo hunky-dorey lately...I told her this would happen. Fucking told her, but does she ever listen to me?”

Chloe rolled her eyes, caught herself, facepalmed, dug her fingertips into the wrinkles of her forehead, took a deep breath...and opened the car door.

“L-look, Babe, let's just get you back in the house, and...”

Chloe didn't know what the next step was. What to do with this. Call the shrink? Emergency meeting? Nah. For all Chloe knew that's what had brought this all coming back up.

Tea? Sure.

Some damned tea. That was a thing Chloe was – probably – physically capable of doing. Right after that. Right during...this. Whatever this was.

It was a bit of a struggle, getting Max out of the car, dragging her along to their duplex door – she'd tried going in the other door at first, she was so out of it – but Chloe managed to nudge her fiancé into their apartment. For as eager as the girl's mouth was all of a sudden, her motor skills were shit.

As Chloe went about making tea, however, Max went for the bottle of vodka atop the fridge.

Well, damn. Chloe couldn't blame the woman. She had half a mind to indulge, too, but...something told her Max needed a coherent Chloe around that evening.

After setting the kettle on, Chloe went to get a pair of coffee mugs. Max had retrieved a shot glass, filled it, and gulped it down.

Chloe had never seen Max drink a straight shot of vodka like that. Or a straight shot of...anything. Not at home, anyway. Maybe a couple times out at the Gangplank Galleon with friends...Brooke seemed to like getting the lot of them to have a round of shots out of the gate when they drank socially.

Chloe was so stunned by the sight of Max swallowing a straight shot, she'd almost forgotten what she was fishing around the cabinet for. Getting back on task without a word, she got a pair of mugs out and went for the teabags. They had a few options – lemon seemed like a good choice for that evening.

Aaaaand...Max had just swallowed a second shot, and was coughing a bit. She made a sound like the beginnings of throwing up. Ugh. Fantastic...

“Dude,” Chloe sighed, setting the teabags into the mugs. Slowly, carefully, she approached Max from behind, sliding her palms around Max's waist. With a forlorn breath against Max's neck, she whispered, “What is going on with you right now?”

A pause.

Max's tummy was so warm.
“Huh?” Chloe prodded gently.

Max took another shot.

Max's stomach jerked and jostled as she sputtered another tight cough.

“...pulled this shit on me again,” Max was grumbling under her breath. “Sick of her fuckin’-...Can’t leave well enough alone, can ya? Just...-”

“Max?” Chloe said softly, warily, giving Max's abdomen a light jostle.

Max was unfazed. Kept muttering to herself.

“-...always about you. It's always fuckin’-...how it _all_ revolves around you, huh? You'll see...-”

“Max.” Chloe's hands were quivering with fear as she shook Max a little more roughly.

“Eh?” Max grunted, sharply inhaling a breath. “Oh, it's _you_,” she muttered over her shoulder, seemingly...confused?

Confused that Chloe was holding her? What...-?

_Yea, it's fucking me_, Max, _been here all evening...Jesus, what _happened_ to you back there?_ What makes you think everything revolves around _me_, anyway? _What the hell? I'm the one looking after your crazy ass lately..._"

Without warning, Max squirmed herself around and pressed her chest against Chloe's. Max clawed her fingers at Chloe's scalp, and inhaled Chloe's breath like a vampire trying to prolong its own life.

Which, actually...all felt pretty amazing on Chloe's end.

And then, chewing at Chloe's neck like said vampire, Max sent her hand wandering between Chloe's legs with quite a purpose.

Chloe was too enamored by the sudden physical overload to do much of anything besides enjoy the moment.

A minute, maybe two passed, and Chloe was left with a vodka aftertaste in her lips, a harsh tingling in her thighs, and a pounding heart in her chest.

“Damn,” Chloe breathed out with some surprise. “I-I dunno what your deal is tonight, but...no complaints about _that_...”

After wiping saliva from her mouth, Max smirked with narrow eyes and laughed through her nostrils.

“Thought you'd appreciate that,” Max mumbled smugly. “Easy to please...At least we figured _that_ out...”

The kettle was starting to whistle out steam.

The makey-outy mood was slightly soured by Max's weird attitude, bringing Chloe back to a state of confusion. She turned the stove off, and as she poured tea, she realized Max had gone back to the vodka.

“Uh, hey, Babe, why don't you...-?” Chloe was pouring tea, trying to concentrate and not burn
herself. Max ingested another shot, spewed another satisfied cough. “P-pretty hardcore with the
booze tonight, huh?”

Max glanced over with a mischievous glint. The red streaks of dye in her hair dancing across her
shoulders left Chloe a bit hypnotized for a few seconds.

“Yea. Yea,” Chloe muttered nervously, setting the kettle back on the stove. “Erh, guess that after the
day you've had, I...I don't really blame you for...”

Chloe trailed off as Max crossed the distance between them with a dulled, eager glow in her eyes.
Like Chloe was staring into embers behind glass.

Max grabbed Chloe's jacket, yanked it off Chloe's abdomen, and dropped it to the kitchen floor.
Then she did the same with Chloe's shirt. And then the same with her own. And then went the pants,
and...-

Quicker than Chloe could say 'wowser,' the pair of them were fooling around on the cold tile floor of
their kitchen, and Chloe's bare back was chilled, her chest was on fire...-

Soooo, apparently there were upsides to whatever was going on with Max. Chloe hadn't seen too
much of this side of her. It was wild, it was exciting...

Until, that is, Max barfed a little past Chloe's shoulder, drizzling some watery puke onto the kitchen
floor.

The fun was over right about then.

With a tired sigh, Chloe went for the paper towels. Max's mane was sticky at the edges from her own
vomit, and as Chloe went about cleaning her little mess, she noticed there was some yummy red goo
mixed in. A quick glance at Max's dazed face confirmed there was a slight nosebleed.

Chloe hadn't felt...that time-sickness thing, though. So, Max...hadn't used her Rewind, right?

So...what the...?-

Well, whatever. Things needed cleaning up. Max needed to sober up. She sure as hell wasn't in a
state to explain herself, either way.

But goddamn, that nose-bleeding sure needed to stop, or...-

Chloe cleaned herself up, re-dressed herself, wiped Max's face dry...Blood and spit and-...Jesus.
Augh, and Max's hands were all sticky with, well...Oh, and also some vodka vomit mixed in there,
too. Good times. Chloe yanked Max's rings off and ran them under the sink before setting them by
their mugs of tea. She cleaned Max's hands and arms, made sure the dork hadn't gotten any grossness
anywhere else, and-...

Whew.

Cleaning up Max's messes that evening was...proving to be pretty fucking exhausting.

As Chloe knelt down beside her nauseated lover, she had to remind herself that it was all worth it.
That Max was worth it. Max was slipping into some kinda whacky whatever, but she was always
worth it, and Chloe would bear the weight, just like Max had born...bore? Erh, carried her weight
for years.
“Hey, you good?” Chloe checked quietly as she shoved Max's shirt over her abdomen – pants, though, good friggin' luck. Girl couldn't even stand on her own two feet.

Max's head bobbed and sagged a bit. Her eyes were open...sort of. She murmured something inaudible, weakly flopping her arm a bit before settling it into her lap.

Chloe couldn't help but drop another frustrated sigh, but...Max had on a goofy smile while in her dream-like trance.

Welp. No straight shots for Maxie anymore. Lesson learned.

Still hunched over her darling, Chloe brushed Max's curled bangs aside and planted a kiss on her head.

“Let's, uh...get you sobered up,” Chloe decided, reaching for their mugs of tea. Still warm enough, but if they didn't drink it soon, it'd get lukewarm and gross. Chloe brought the mugs to the living room, setting them on the coffee table. She didn't know where the coasters had gone off to. Screw it. Like Max was gonna throw a tizzy about it right then, anyway.

When Chloe re-entered the kitchen, there Max still was, sitting against the stove in nothing but her boxers and a t-shirt. Still half-asleep. Chloe had to practically carry the woman to the couch in the next room.

Chloe scratched an itch on her ass, fidgeted her underwear back into place, drank a swig of her barely warm tea...and took a deep freaking breath.

"Where...-?!" Max panted out, her eyes squinted shut. She was grasping around at her own hands.

Chloe suddenly remember how fixated Max had been about her rings lately...

Perplexed and concerned, Chloe gulped more of her tea as she retrieved Max's rings from the kitchen.

“I gotcha, I gotcha,” Chloe assured as she returned, trying to give the rings back to her lover.

But...Max was back to being unresponsive...

“Maxie?”

Nada.

Swallowing a lump in her throat, Chloe set the rings down on the table along with her tea and sat down beside Max. She gave Max a slight shake. Ran her hand across Max's face, twisted her wrist to check Max's temperature: forehead felt like a furnace.

Please please please don't make me have to take her to the hospital, I can't deal with that shit right now and I don't know if-

Max stirred, coughing and rubbing at her chest with a pained, confused look. But her eyes were opening back up, so that was...good!

Chloe sighed out shakily, feebly reaching for her tea in an attempt to look calm.

“Still with me in the land of the living?” Chloe posited.

“Huh...?” Max croaked, rubbing her hands together in a weird way.
“I made that tea for ya to sober yourself up,” Chloe breathed out with some relief. “It's gettin' cold, gurl. Drink up.”

“Grughh...” Max shoved her palms against her head. Damn. Looked painful. Alcohol did not solve all problems, it seemed.

“Erh, should I...?” Chloe started to ask. But Max wasn't listening. Lost in her own brain again. Fuckin’ eh. If she hadn’t had so much to drink…-

Sipping more tea, Chloe waited awkwardly for a couple moments as Max...worked out whatever it was she was working out. Just as Max seemed to be coming to, Chloe jumped at the chance to check in.

“Are you back to normal yet?”

“Haha, nooooo,” Max groaned out earnestly, still rubbing at her aching temples.

Something about her reply seemed more like...'normal,' anyway.

Chloe started to work her tired fingers against Max's back, massaging her in hopes to calm things down.

OK. Max seemed...better. Kind of.

Time to get to the bottom of this.

“Look. I know you don’t wanna talk about what happened back there, but...I know you used your Rewind.”

“Mm.”

“You’ve gotta cut that shit out, Max. I’m tellin’ ya.”

“We got into an accident. You were...-”

No shit, Max!

“Was I dead?” Chloe demanded.

This was important. Because if what had happened to those other people would’ve happened to them? Well, Chloe would’ve been on a stretcher. But she’d be alive. She could deal with that.

She could not deal with Max losing her goddamn mind over every instance of possible pain.

“Wh-?” Max was instantly irritated. “No, I saved you, so-”

“Did the accident kill me?”

“No, because I fixed it.”

“Wh-whatever, look, I mean, when the accident happened, was I-”

“I fixed it, damnit, don’t worry about it.”

Max was angry now. Water starting to form at the edges of her narrowed eyes, pouty, trembling lips, whole shebang.

Chloe just stared right back, brows low, lips tight with doubt.

Oh, yea, Maxie? If it’s so goddamn 'fixed' then what the shit is going on with you?!
But you won't tell me the real story, so why I am even bothering?

“Uh...Sure,” Chloe eased, backing off of Max.

“Agh, Chloe, I-I'm sorry, I didn't...I don't...-”

“-wanna talk about it, you never wanna fucking talk about it.”

Chloe felt her cheeks burning up with embarrassed frustration.

She couldn't handle this crap right now. Max was her *everything,* the *one* person who'd stuck around through thick and thin, always eating the Chloe Price oatmeal even on the worst of days: at its chunkiest and driest, at its runniest and goopiest, Max *always* ate the Chloe Price oatmeal.

And even *that* person, that *only* single fucking person that Chloe needed to not disappoint her was – of course – *still* disappointing her.

Chloe wandered away from the couch. After cleaning up all of this crap that Max had 'fixed,' Chloe found herself wondering what the point even was if Max wouldn't stop.

“Just *freak* on me with *no* damn warning,” Chloe grumbled as she left. “Act all *strange,* scare the *shit* outta me, and then ya never fuckin'-...Grrghh...I can't *deal* with this right now...”

Chloe sought shelter in the bathroom to try and recollect herself.

Max slept on the couch that night. Chloe asked her to come sleep in bed, but she refused.

Chloe's mind traveled to distant shores again in her sleep...

——

The sweet scent o' salt were tainted by wet mutt n' bean breath. The air were cold and desolate. Not a bird in the sky, nor any fins from the waves. Windy, though. The sort which rattled at yer bones. 'Twas grand, though, after hours o' bein' stuck becalmed.

Brownbeard Frank and his mangy mongrel pet had given the Cap'n and Chlo a might bit o' trouble after a failed interrogation. Hells, Chlo had swiped the damn fool's ankle. He'd been limpin' somethin' fierce since, not in any kind o' condition to be runnin' any which way.

After, eh, *acquirin'* Brownbeard's map, though, Chlo had taken heed that it were in some indecipherable code o' sorts. Old hermit Frank, mad man he was, seemed insistent that if it were Sunlace's treasure they were after, he'd throw his hat in the race and ally up.

Runnin' out of time as they were, the Cap'n had saw fit to commandeer the mongrel for their journey, along with his dumb dog.

“How much longer 'til we *reach* this forsaken place?” Chlo whined impatiently. “*Grumph.* If Sunlace were 'ere, she'd have maneuvered us straight n' true.”

The Cap'n took offense at the remark and gave her First Mate a look dark as a black spot.

“As it is,” Maximus growled, “yer Queen ain't *here,* n' I'm missing one eye, so if ye wanna take the helm in my stead...”

“N-nah, Cap'n,” Chlo ushered her apology, feelin' quite the damn fool. “Just...gettin' cabin fever is all, don't take nothin' by it.”
“I’d take less by it if ye’d stop admirin’ the long-gone Queen when it’s ’er Crown what we’re after.”

“Bah!” scoffed Brownbeard with a rough cough. “Sea ain’t no place for wenches like ye. Drop o’ blood in the water n’ it’s pirahnas, the lot o’ yeh. N’ if it weren’t enough...Blubberin’ away ’bout what’s past n’ gone...Waste o’ time, that.”

“That Crown be in our future,” stated the Cap’n sternly. “The past? T’ain’t no worry on my mind...” She sniffed, wiping sea spray from her mustache.


Hand on the wheel, the Cap’n haughtily reminded, “Landlubbers who nearly fed ye to the fishes...”

“Aye,” Chloe agreed, hook and hand crossed round her bosom. “What’re landlubbers to a dirty, lone scallywag?”

With a huff, Frank grumbled, “We can toss name’s ’til the moon’s up, lass, but nothin' can change what ye’ve done.”

“Ye tryin’ ta hornswaggle us over, eh?” Chlo retorted. “Get us to come about and head back to shore, so ye can take the treasure fer yerself? Feh. Underestimatin’ us like always, ye ol’ son of a biscuit eater.”


The Cap’n decreed, “Chasin’ her treasure sure beats witherin’ away in the corner o’ some pub wit' nothin' but a sad, sad beast for company.”

“I had the best o’ company, ’fore she were taken from me...”

“Truth, is it?” said Chlo with skepticism.

“Ray Sunlace were a bloody angel -- she were -- but ’tis high past time to-”

“Mention ’er by name again,” Chlo threatened, grabbin’ him by his scruff, “’n that cock o’ yers is goin’ o'erboard...”

“I'll mention ’er how I please,” said Frank darkly, shoving her off and nearly stumbling from his ankle injury. “She were a light, true as ’er name, ’n I miss her so.”

Chloe scoffed, “Miss her so that ye whimper in dark corners, stealin' that light from who e'er comes ’round...”

“Like yer so diff’rent. She’d be ‘ere wit’ us, ‘tweren’t for ye.”

“Wit' age don't come wisdom in yer case, ya mad hermit!”

Mangy mutt o’ Franks went soundin’ off wit’ his disapproval of their bickering.

Chlo added, “’N tell yer beast to shut ‘is trap!”

“Still sour o'er how it went, aren't ye?” taunted Frank, his dog yelpin’ all the while. “That she cast me as First Mate n’ not you...”
“Scupper that!” Chlo roared o’er the mutt. “Lies, ya bilge rat!”
“Cut the chatter!” Maximus bellowed. “Or I’ll cut yer tongues.”

Settlin’ his critter down, Brownbeard glared through Chlo’s scowl. At that, Chlo just hung the jib s’more, shook her head fiercely, and stared off to sea.

Brownbeard, sayin’ she were jealous?
She’d strike colors at that...

“All this teasin’, Brownbeard,” Maximus grunted. “Makin’ plans to run a rig? Won’t stand fer that ’ere.”

“None o’ the sort!” Frank protested. “Ye can take that cursed Crown. All’s I want is justice done, n’ answers given.”

“Justice fer what?” Chlo demanded.

“For whate’er put an end to ’er!” Brownbeard bellowed.

“Blimey,” Chlo cried, slappin’ her own cheek with confused disgust. “Ye truly think she’s sleepin’ wit’ Davy Jones, do ya?” Chlo turned to her Cap’n. “Ye believe what this buffoon’s prattlin’?”

Maximus was stoic, not a trace o’ sound from those parched, pretty lips. She fidgeted wit’ her eyepatch a bit wit’out reply.

Chlo turned back to Brownbeard.

“So convinced, are ye?” Chlo said to Frank. “Then explain the scourge o’ the seas what’s been tossin’ the Carribbean sideways. Eh? Who’s she, then?”

There’d been tall tales of a lady pirate, dark n’ mysterious, runnin’ amok wit’ a growing crew. Was Arcadians what had started the clan, were the rumor – survivors from the Storm what had raged the coast those years ago, when the Queen had gone missin’. This new lass who’d shown up sounded terrifyin’ and strong. Carried a crown o’ pure gold, crafted into a pair o’ antlers. Sounded mighty like Sunlace’s Crown. Had to be Sunlace, far as Chlo could guess. Not a woman upon the sea what could turn heads like Ray could.

They’d find that Crown, she were sure o’ that.

“Whoe’er that blackened soul be,” Frank remarked on the rumored captain, “she’s not Ray. Not my Ray...”

“She ne’er were your Ray,” Chlo hissed.

“So ye say, Morpho. So ye say...”

Maximus peeled her eyepatch from its socket. There, where an eye ought be, were a hole, black as midnight. Chlo Morpho had stared deep into that hole, ne’er to see where it ended. But from the ot’er side, Maximus saw stuffs unseen.

“Gettin’ closer,” Maximus announced. “Half a day’s trip away. See a fleet guardin’ ’er shore, though...”

Frank stumbled his way forth on limping steps, straining his eyes toward the sea.
Nothin' but empty waves and a splinter o' land, far, far off.

“A fleet?” Brownbeard barked. “Where be a fleet out 'ere?!”

“The Cap'n can see things,” Chlo bragged, rubbing her hand up n' down the Cap'n's coat. “Things the human eye weren't built fer seein’...”

“So I can,” Maximus sighed, rubbing a trickle o' red from her lip. “And from what this 'ere Black Eye can see? Best be battenign down the damned hatches...”

(Stella) – (Yep, just take a right at the end of that block.)
(We're by the deli waiting for you.)
(This is gonna be so cool!)

(Chloe) – (cool cool cool)
(u rly think this will cheer her up?)

(Stella) – (I think it'll cheer you BOTH up.)
(Besides, you two seriously need a night out to relax.)
(Especially before going back up to the bay this weekend.)
(Also? This was Max's idea, Brooke just gave us the venue.)

(Chloe) – (Wut's this joint like tho?)
(Is it all kids?)

(Stella) – (Dude, no. It's a club club. 20-somethings for days.)

(Chloe) – (So the theme is like a lie?)

(Stella) – (No? It's retro. Retro stuff doesn't have to mean kid-friendly.)

(Chloe) – (I dunno dude. Idea just sounds...lame.)

(Stella) – (Brooke swears it's actually pretty neat.)

(Chloe) – (Yah well Brooke also swears tequila tastes great and Pokémon is for adults.)

(Stella) – (Fair enough. :P )
(But why can't it be for adults <(^ u ^<) )
( AND be fun? (>^ u ^>) )
(Why not both? \_/\_/\_/\_/)

(Chloe) – (NO EMOJI)

(Stella) – (YES EMOJI :D )
(Anyway, I had Brooke tell me all about it, but...)
(This'll be my first time there, too!)
(We gon' get RIGGETY RIGGETY WREKT SON!!!)

(Chloe) – (And I thought I was bad with the memetastic lingo.)
(TBH tho not sure I wanna get wrekt so much tonite.)

(Stella) – (Don't be a pussy, Morty. >:^O )
“Are we close?” Max sighed, rubbing at her eyes.

It had only been a day since...whatever yesterday had been. But Max had been, like...normal. As normal as she was in recent times, at least.

Chloe, prying her gaze from her phone, squeezed her hand around Max's forearm, their elbows linked.

“Yea, just around the corner up here, I guess.”

Chloe made note of the street signs – Max second-guessed her navigation for a moment and they quibbled over whether or not the street they were on was the street they thought they were on.

Before long, though, they had finally found their way to the designated address...A small deli nearby, and, sure enough, there was a little bit of a line leaning into some alley. Not a ridiculous line? It actually looked...way too short to be a club.

Oh.

Because the entrance was a stairwell that burrowed down beneath the sidewalk, leading into some underground...-

Ha. PFF.

OK. Chloe suddenly was able to appreciate the theme already.

“Yo!” came Stells, heading their way.

“Hey,” said Max with a tired kind of courtesy. Stella gave Max a quick hug, and then dolloped another Chloe's way. Brooke fussed with her hoodie a bit, nodding her chin up toward them.

The group was dressed supacaz that evening ('super casual,' which Chloe was trying to short-hand, butcha know, it didn't seem to be catching on for some reason!). Chloe was sporting an unzipped denim jacket with the sleeves torn off and a tight purple sweatshirt beneath that strategically cut a bit high to give her pudgy tummy some breathing room (and to show off her belly-button piercing). Some semi-ripped jeans and tall black boots pulled things together, along with her usual assortment of various piercings.

Max was in a simple v-neck of red and black stripes with a black denim pencilneck skirt that Chloe was fond of, and a pair of tall cowgirl boots she was borrowing from Chloe. Max had her hair done up in a ponytail – Chloe had noticed that she'd been wearing the ponytail a lot recently. Max was also borrowing Chloe's pair of skull earrings, but a close eye could tell the two apart as representations of Chloe's favorite 'Skelebros' from Undertale, which Chloe had finally made Max finish playing a couple months back.

Stella was dressed in a baggy hoodie of purple and black, printed with a pattern that made it look like some kind of magician's robes (something about 'Robin' from some Nintendo game, if Chloe
recalled). Her hair hung over her shoulders, but she had, like, her bangs pulled back over top to form like, a high...ponytail thing? Half-up ponytail? 'Warrior's wolf-tail,' almost? Whatever it was called, it looked sharp on her. Stella also had a small red stud piercing on her nose, a couple of glow bracelets on her right arm, but was curiously missing earrings. Maroon corduroys and good ol' converse sneakers completed Stells' look, along with her sleek violet glasses.

Brooke, meanwhile, had her own gaming-printed hoodie, which Chloe more readily recognized as a design based on the heroine of the sci-fi *Metroid* games. Heh, the right sleeve was even printed to look like an arm cannon. Brook's black hair was in a long ponytail, dyed with three bright streaks — green, red, and blue. Her earrings looked like...Was that the little round robot from the newer *Star Wars* movies? She also had a bullring piercing — was that new? Well, seemed fitting, given how the girl loved to pick her nerd-fights so much. A pair of round, green glasses added an extra bit of 'geek' charm to Brooke's appearance, while her ripped denim shorts and fishnet tights mixed a bit of 'goth' into things.

So. Yea.

They were all lookin' supacaz.

“You two took your time,” Brooke greeted flatly.

* Took our time, aheh. Hehhhh...If only... *

“Yep, yep-urrh,” grunted Chloe, nodding to herself as the lot of them approached the back of the line. “Place was a little hard to find.”

“They don't exactly announce their presence to the public,” Brooke defended, assuming the lead position in their spot in line.

“Prolly 'cuz they'd get their asses sued?” Max theorized.

“Probably,” Stella agreed. “But in this day and age, everyone's doing something with someone else's ideas, right?”

Max cited, “This is a little different than AMV's on YouTube and...fandom stuff on Tumblr.”

“Thank god,” Chloe sighed. She bitterly grumbled to herself, “Fuckin' Tumblr bullshit...Eternally stuck in hipster high-school.”

“Agreed,” Brooke sighed under her breath. “The Internet is a terrible place.”

As they reached the base of the stairs, there was a dude sitting in a foldable chair. He was a chubby little fella, wearing a red beanie with white polka dots. Had on a blue, unbuttoned vest, no undershirt, and white sweatpants. Total stoner, but he seemed sober enough — he was taking cash for entry, checking ID's, and doling out bracelets from the metal bucket to his side. Thing had a red 'W' spray-painted on it all sloppy like, for some reason.

“But, anyway,” Brooke went on, “I don't question this joint's existence. As long as this place doesn't get too big, I don't see the harm.”

“They're making money off of copyrighted shit,” Max pointed out.

“So do people on YouTube,” Brooke defended testily. “So do people at fucking...Comic Con, selling prints or cosplay or...whatever.”
Chloe could feel the muscles in Max's arm tighten a bit. Max let Brooke ruffle her feathers way too often.

The line had moved up a few spaces by now, leaving Chloe to wonder where the backdoor exit was. Maybe led out into some alleyway…?

By that point they had descended down the stairs and faced the mouth of a dimly lit hallway of thin pipes. Like a tunnel of sorts. Chloe noticed they were painted different colors: green, blue, yellow, red…all bright primary colors, but in the dim lighting they looked almost sinister in a weird way.

One by one, they each displayed their ID cards to the hippie in the chair, paid their entry fee, strapped on their brightly colored bracelets, and were ushered through a sturdy door and into the entry hall, moving up the line. Seemed to be going at a good click, so they must've gotten there early enough...

“Well,” Max finally picked the topic back up. “Just because a few people sell prints doesn't mean it's OK to do it…”

Brooke ranted on, “Patreon? Bandcamp? Redbubble? A hundred parody t-shirt websites? Need me to go on? People make money off of crap they don't own, even when they're making something new with it.”

“She's got a point,” Stella added with a shrug. Stells was leaning up on her tip-toes, glancing forward and backward in a distracted way.

“It's still illegal,” Max grumbled, seeming…way more intent on this than Chloe would have figured.

“…Right,” Stella agreed grimly, pulling her attention back to her company. “Also…a good point.”

“Technically speaking,” Brooke snipped, “it's illegal to so much as draw fan art. OK? Not even sell it, just…draw it. Did you know that? Fan art is illegal. Period. Hell, those photos you took at that costume party the other month? Some of those are probably illegal. And-slash-or some of the costumes themselves are illegal.”

“Soooo,” Stella dubiously pondered, “My 'Stuckie' lemon sci-fi AU one-shot is...-?”

“Illegal,” Brooke dryly confirmed. She sarcastically added, “And yet, fancy that – it still exists! Out there for...whoever the hell wants to read it.”

“Even though I'm not making money off of it,” Stella clarified, slightly bruised by Brooke’s judgmental sigh.

“Still illegal,” said Brooke. Glaring at Max with raised eyebrows, she squeezed in, “Technically speaking.” Max frowned with some disinterest at Brooke’s sass.

“So why hasn't anyone sued me yet?” Stella raised the question.

Max, knowingly, rubbed her palm against her forehead.

“Because,” Max stepped in begrudgingly, “Well, actually, like...a few reasons, prolly. Mainly because it's small potatoes. You're not worth suing.”

“Ouch, Max,” Stella jested, clutching her chest with melodrama. “Ouch. My feelings…”

“Also,” Max continued, smirking a bit at Stella's mock offense. “Fan art, fan fic, I mean...most
fandom shit is a good thing – brand awareness, long-term fan engagement, all of that...But this place? Sounds way more shady.”

They were getting toward the entry doors – dark red metal double doors with gray spots painted along the edges to look like bolts. A pair of bouncers stood in front of said doors, dressed in matching outfits with dark green tanktops, with...white and green hockey helmets They each casually had a sledgehammer resting against their respective sides. They were big dudes, too, nice sets of biceps on one, sweet jawline on the other.

Oh. Heh. Chloe got the reference after she finished processing the sight in. Some ghetto cosplay, but Chloe kind of dug the vibes.

“Mm, it does look a little dark,” Stells expressed with some wariness.

“Oh, yea,” Chloe finally chimed in, “It's a nightclub, not a brightly-lit-club. I mean, like...crunk, dank, dirty, place like this? Don't, erh, seem like the positive, family-friendly entertainment you expect from the happy-go-lucky world of Nintendo.”

The ceiling above them, Chloe realized, was painted with a string of...squares. Mostly squares made to look like they were made of bricks, but a few yellow ones with question-marks drawn inside. But they seemed...kind of warped somehow. Like someone was literally on mushrooms when they were painted.

“That's the appeal,” Brooke pointed out, flicking up an impatient wrist. “Childhood fantasy, flipped sideways. A dark underbelly exposed beneath the saccharine fiction...We're culturally fascinated by seeing the gritty reality of the fantasies we consume. Why do you think comic book crap took off the way it did with the MCU or Nolan's Batman films back in the day?”

Max complained, “Maybe everybody needs to chill out with the 'dark, gritty' reboots already, then...”

“I actually kind of like my stories to be dark,” Stella weakly found middle-ground.

Max teased, “Big surprise from the girl who lived in Room 217 and wrote 'Redrum' on her door board...”

“Hey, you still remember that?” Stells sheepishly mumbled, scratching at her ear.

“Y-yea, I mean...that was kinda funny, if a bit morbid...I think that was what made me think we might get along in the first place.”

“Aww,” Stella cooed bashfully, giving Max a playful nudge. “That’s adorable, Max. I didn’t know that...”

Max just laughed awkwardly, fussing with her bangs. Chloe couldn’t help but smile. This week kept bringing up all these reminders about how happy it made her that Max had found a dependable friend like that.

“So dark,” Brooke smugly taunted. “So edgy, Stella.”

“Well, ya know!” Stells snickered back. “As long as there's...ya know...still bright spots to balance it all out.”

Brooke shrugged at that, and Max nodded a little.

“Well,” figured Chloe, “Maybe this place has bright spots...?”
“It does,” Brooke said simply.

“Are the drinks themed after powerups, though?” Chloe solemnly wondered on the side to Stells.

“They are,” Stells confirmed with a giddy grin, clamping an excitable hand on Chloe’s shoulder. “Their entire menu is gaming-themed.”

“This whole place just seems wrong,” Max grunted. “I thought maybe, like...they just played remixed music or something, not...-” She trailed off with another one of her sighs.

“Corporations make millions off of shit they basically strong-arm from creators,” Brooke huffed. “They guard the gates, they hold the keys. *Fuck* the suits. Nobody here’s going to get confused over branding or whatever bullshit, and I wouldn't be surprised if this actually *helps* them sell their over-priced retro software by reminding people of their childhood, and the ‘Golden Age’ of the NES and blabla...-”

OK, well...Chloe was actually starting to like where Brooke was going with this, against all odds.

Chloe frankly didn’t care about this whole topic. She was kinda more with Brooke on this one: big companies made so much as it was. If fans put in some fuckin’ effort and didn’t lie or steal about it, what was the problem with making a bit of scratch on the side? Clearly, Max had different feelings about it, though…Made sense: she was an artist.

“Um,” Stella sheepishly threw another two-cents in, “Regardless, fans are going to pay tribute one way or another. Zeal, right? That's the creed of the fan – short for fanatic? Yea? Fans are crazy by nature. I mean, that...That's literally being a fan is, you're a fanatic, you're crazy for it. Going after your own fans for creating things in tribute to your own series is...is like the church excommunicating its highest-paying patrons? Donors? It's like shooting yourself in the foot.”

“At this point?” Brooke bemoaned. “Nintendo's feet might as well be goddamn Swiss cheese.”

Leaning over toward Max, Stella teased, “She's still butthurt they started making games for cellphones...”

Brooke huffed, tossing up her arms.

“I don't care if it's ‘not a bad game,’ the fact that Super Mario Run even *exists* is a travesty to gaming.”

Stella shrugged, quietly slipping to Max and Chloe, “I thought it was good, and I still play Pokémon GO here and there...”

“Sure,” Max sighed, pushing the chat forward. “Whatever, I don't care what piece of plastic a game is on, I care how good it is. And when fans make things, I don't care what it is, but if they're making money off of it...Just...Fans don't make a fucking profit off of it, that defeats the point! A nightclub that exploits a brand: that's making a profit off of something that's not yours! It-is-illegal.”

“W-well, OK,” Stella defended, “I do have to admit that step is maybe a bit too far...”

“Pretty weird,” said Brooke dully, “how the girl addicted to marijuana is lecturing us on legalities...”

“I *got* my medical license,” Max was quick to point out, to which Chloe nodded in confirmation.

“Heh, well,” Brooke raised a brow. “*Not* having one didn't exactly *stop* you for...how many years? Two? Three?”
Max rolled her eyes and shook her head, and they moved further up the line.

“Looks like you made her mad,” Chloe whispered teasingly into Max's ear.

“Just the word 'Nintendo' does that, though,” Max whispered back grumpily.

“If you're so pissed off about this shit,” Chloe said, raising her voice back up, “why the hell are we going to a Nintendo-themed club?”

“For one,” said Brooke, “whoever owns this place gave it a subtle name. And for another, just because I have issues with the current state of its inspiration doesn't mean I can't appreciate its retro charms and origins.”

Brooke pointed out the understated metal plaque wedged onto the stone wall to their right.

[ ? ] ( I ) {District 7-6} ( I ) [ ? ]

Dafuq kinda name was that for a nightclub? Made it sound like a sci-fi government lab.

“District 7-6...?” Chloe murmured in narrow-eyed confusion.

“Yes, I bet that one sails right over your head,” Brooke said with a smug, soft chuckle.

_Ooohhhhkay. You're heading back toward the negatives, Brooksie. Chill._

Brooke went on, “It's a little more subtle than some bullshit like 'The Warp Zone' or whatever cliché you'd expect.”

Max sighed but smirked a little.

“Fill us in, Oh Enlightened One.”

“Gladly,” Brooke said, matching Max's smirk. Shuffling her glasses for effect, she prattled matter-of-factly: “It’s a reference to _Super Mario Bros. 3_, circa 1988. World Seven, Pipe Land – Level 6. So...Seven-Six. Set underground, it's a cylindrical level in conceptual design where if the player reaches one edge of the screen, they show up on the other side, thus running in circles, progressing in a never-ending loop. The goal is to keep ascending in what equates to an upward spiral. Said spiral never ends unless the player ascends, reaches the exit. Otherwise, they just keep running in a loop, disappearing off one edge of the screen only to reappear on the opposite side. It's a mechanic that only exists in this specific, single level of the game.”

Brooke's explanation caught the attention of the pair of dorks in line in front of her, and Chloe could tell at least one of them had just gotten a case of 'insta-horny'. Yeesh. If that damn girl stopped being so salty over not getting whatever one specific person she wanted at any point in time, she'd have her pick of the nerd litter.

And to be clear, the nerd litter was Chloe's favorite one.

“How...-?” Max balked, confused at Brooke's burst of knowledge.

They moved up the line a few more spaces.

“How did you figure _that_ crap out?” Max demanded in a baffled murmur.

Brooke shrugged pretentiously, her head offering the slightest of dismissive shakes.
She then cocked her brow and flatly explained, “I asked one of the barkeeps about the name, they told me what game it was about, and I Googled the rest. Coming across as ‘smart’ to people is really more about just having done your homework and presenting it with confidence. You know, Max, knowledge is fifty-percent memorization and fifty-percent hindsight. Basically.”

Max’s eyes popped wide for a moment and she smiled awkwardly. Chloe knew exactly why – on multiple occasions, Max had used the Rewind to ‘learn’ things she...didn't know.

“Yea,” Max agreed, all low-key. “It's, uh...all about doing your research more than anything, huh?”

“And retaining it,” Brooke amended. “Research is useless if it's not recorded, memorized...You have to be able to retrieve the data at a later point, or else what purpose does it serve, right?”

By then, they’d reached the intimidating entryway doors. Chloe found it kind of odd but cool that they’d open and close the doors each time they let a group through, instead of leaving the things open. Maybe to keep noise garbage lower? Maybe for the effect – dramatic metal double door entrances were sweet.

After having their wristbands checked for validity and their ID’s double-checked, in the lot of them went, instantly soaking in a dank wash of pounding music, flashing lights, and BO.

The densely packed crowd before them was pulsing with energy as their ears were bombarded with loud, thumping music that trickled some retro chip-tune-y goodness into the mix. Chloe felt like she'd just received a direct injection of enthusiasm to her veins just from the atmosphere of a nightclub alone – it had been ages since she’d gone to one.

The walls were a bizarre tapestry: brightly colored boiler pipes, sheet metal and wooden planks made to look like blocks and scenery from the 80's era of gaming, with clouds and hills with beady eyes painted as the backdrop. To the left of the club was the bar, full of neon-colored beverages, and the tenders were dressed in full-on princess cosplay. Well, cosplay on a budget, but, still. The DJ duo at the front and center of things were even dressed to look like approximations of the Mario Bros.

So. It was...literally a Mario-themed nightclub?

*Something's gone wrong in the happy-go-lucky world of Nintendo...*

Taking a deep breath as she attempted to absorb and maintain the sensory overload of it all, Chloe was tugged toward her left by Max, their arms still locked – Max was being prodded by Stella, who was following Brooke. It was a little weird if not refreshing to not be the one ‘in charge’ of their social outing. Chloe tended to avoid hanging out with Brooke for a number of reasons but had been slowly opening to Stells over the years. Thing was, Max and Stells always looked to Chloe to decide on things. It got a bit draining, and was yet another factor in why Chloe had become more of a homebody outside of work.

Aaaaand before Chloe could process the loud, dimly lit oddly colorful environment, they were at the bar. Brooke got a drink menu from the brunette waitress – Chloe blanked on the princess' name; she was Luigi's girl, though, she knew that much. Yellow dress, the bad-ass one who was always your go-to gal in those sports spin-offs...

“A Blue Bomber for me!” Brooke quickly decided, handing off the menu to Stella.

Ah, yes. Clubbing. Which entailed all conversation be elevated to shouting, more or less.

Chloe couldn't help but feel a bit gross at her own sensation of feeling a bit...'old?' All of this noise and crap, she'd used to *love* this scene, but...it was instantly turning her off a little, here.
“Oh-oh-oh!” Stells cried to herself, taking the small, single laminate sheet and flipping to the backside. She was talking to herself, but whatever was said was swallowed up by the energy of the club.

As they waited for Stella, Chloe noticed Max kind of zoning out, glancing upward at the ceiling. More weird paintings of brown squares with black swirly lines on them, and all sorts of other bizarre Mario shit. Mushrooms for days, and all that. Chloe worked her head against Max's neck, nudging through some hair with her nose until she reached the woman's ear and spoke beneath the music.

“Holdin' up OK, Maximus?”

Max nodded uncertainly, her head tilted slightly to the side and one shoulder popping up a bit. The lady needed some alcohol, was the issue. Too much stress, too much noise. Max needed that energy, that intensity, but the poor chick totally needed to take the edge off a bit to survive it all. Liquid courage to whether the storm and come out sturdier on the other end.

Just, uh...ya know, not too much. All at once. No shots for her tonight. Didn't need a repeat of the previous evening.

Stella placed her order: “Can I get a Millennial Fair?!”

Dafuq kinda drink is that? Sounds like some kinda iced tea bullcrap. Oh, Stella. You quaint gal.

The drink menu found its way to Max, who didn't seem to know what to do with it. Focusing through the cloud of music, colored lights, and weird smells, Chloe saw Max's eyes glaze over at the menu. Like she was staring through it. Like the hella noise and overload around her didn't exist.

Welp. Time to rope 'er back to reality, here...

Looking over Max's shoulder, Chloe couldn't help but find one name that caught her eye.

“Dude, Max!” She flicked the back of her wrist against her partner's chest, pointing one option out. She ahad to suppress a chuckle as she read it out. “They got one called the Ocarina of Lime!”

Pause for effect.

No dice.

Try rollin' 'em again.

“Eh? Ocarina of...Lime?!” Chloe's chuckle spilled out.

Drum-to-cymbal snare.

Nothin'.

Shit. Time...joke. Goddamnit. Chloe still couldn't help it, even when it wasn't even about 'time' in the first place.

“Hehhhh...” Chloe breathed out nervously. Was it hot in there, or was it just the couple hundred or so idiots clubbing together in a cramped space?

Ehr, maybe...keep pointing cute-sounding dork drinks out until she...picks one?

“Oh, dude, a Fireflower?! It's got Fireball Whiskey in it – dude, that's so perf! Oh, man, ha! Check
this one – Bombchu?! It – pff! It's like a Jaegerbomb, so it-...You've gotta 'chase' it down and drink it fast before it-...! Hah! Shit, that's...that's clever! That's-...”

Max nodded impatiently and flipped the menu over to Chloe.

“Just...pick one for me, then!” she growled, apparently off-put. “Since you're so into it!”

Friggin' eh, what was her deal? She'd wanted to come here, right?

A bit disgruntled with herself and with Max's swingset mood, Chloe tried to focus on the menu for a moment. Brooke received her neon blue beverage and regrouped with the couple as Stells awaited her own drink.

“What's that?!” Chloe asked, cutting her question through the commotion. She tipped up her chin while staring at Brooke's cocktail. It was a cool shade of blue, really intense.

Brooke took a sip and answered, “Blue curaçao, sake, and some energy drink! A Blue Bomber!”

Chloe paused.

“That sounds gross as fuck!”

“That's half the fun!” Brooke replied simply, taking another, larger gulp out of spite.

Max dryly said through the music, “And I bet you're gonna tell us about whatever intricate, complex, rando backstory there is behind that name, too, right?!”

“Sss, yea, sure, Max! Ever heard of Mega Man?!”

The truth was, Chloe knew full well who Mega Man was, and she knew he was known as Rock Man in the land of the rising sun, where he was created. She knew Mega Man was in Smash Bros., and she sucked playing as him in it. And Chloe had played through the entire retro series in the span of a week one time two summers ago on one of those 'HD Collection' dealies she'd rented. Max had helped her out by Googling some of the boss weaknesses.

But Brooke didn't need to know that Chloe had come to know those kinds of things...because she sure as hell did not want to get dragged into Brooke's nerd-fights. Chloe had been a nerd when she was little, left it behind during high school, and had thrust herself headlong into punk, metal, goth, all the teenage grungy phases. She'd built up a rep for finding nerds sexy but not actually being one herself. Just because Max had been pulling her back in didn't mean Chloe was ready to have to deal with other nerds treating her like one of their own.

Not Brooke, anyway.

So, Chloe replied casually, feigning a lack of confidence, “That lil'...chibi robo-kid with the, uh...the gun for an arm?!” (had using the word 'chibi' in and of itself been too much?)

“That's the guy!” Brooke said conclusively, swigging some more down.

“So-...” Max stared expectantly. “What about him?!”

“That's his nickname. The Blue Bomber!”

“Oh-huh,” Max wriggled her wrist in a circle. “And the meaning behind that?!”

“Max,” Chloe said teasingly. “Dude, c'mon...Let it go.”
“You know I'm not a 'dude,’” Max huffed in Chloe's ear.

Chloe huffed back likewise, “And you know I meant it, like...regardless of...”
“Fine, whatever. Dude.”
“This dude abides, man.”
“Sure, man,” huffed Max, unimpressed with the references.

“Max!” Brooke said, pushing past their inner-circle bickering. “Sometimes a blue drink is just blue.”

“And sometimes,” came someone else, butting into their conversation, “a nightclub is a fucking elementary schoolyard playground that some stoners crammed into a boiler room because who thought this was a good idea?! Literally no one!”

Oh, fuck no.

“Vickie!!” Max greeted, as taken aback as Chloe was.

“What?!” Chloe snarled in disbelief.

“Yo!” Brooke said with much less...chalance. “You made it!”

‘Made' it!!” Victoria gave Brooke a weirdly affectionate slap on the shoulder. “Bitch, I have been here waiting on all of your asses for, like, twenty minutes! Save me from this depravity, I am so absolutely done with all of these neckbeard chodes! Does anyone here know the meaning of the word 'deodorant?!’

Uh-huh. Yea, all class and wit, this one.

“How'd you end up here?!” Max asked, her tone losing a bit of its sharpness.

Victoria approached the Max/Chloe unit, swapped awkward glances with Chloe, and responded.

“Same way you did, Catcher in the Rye: I was invited?! Although,” she gave Chloe a wrinkly, stupid little smirk, “if I'd known they let pets in here, I might've gotten my rabies shot on the way over!”

With unamused eyes squinted and brows furrowed, Chloe shrugged off a bitter, 'Yea, yea, whatever, bitch' sort of expression in Victoria's unsightly direction.

“Hey, Vic!” came Stella, quickly asserting herself inbetween Max and Victoria's bodies, her drink in tow. “You're...early!”

“Of course I'm early!” Victoria blathered. “When am I not early?!”

Jesus, this idiot's voice was annoying enough at normal sound levels. Having to listen to her yell through the club noise was even more annoying if only because Chloe had to actively focus to hear her.

“R-right!” Stella nodded warily. “W-well, thanks for showing up!”

“No need to thank me, Hill! I showed up because I said I would – if I hadn't planned on coming, I wouldn't have said so in the first place!”

“Anyway!” Stella cried out through the pulsing beats flooding the lot of them. “You're all here! Awesome! This...is awesome!”

So, wait, was this all some kind of set up? Some kinda...Real Housewives of Arcadia Bay bullshit?
Were there cameras hidden somewhere? Chloe literally could not remember the last time all of them had gathered in one spot.

“Why are we all here?!” Chloe asked.

“Why are we all here?!” Of-friggin’-course Ms. CHASE would repeat the same goddamn question with a more annoying tone.

Stella rubbed at her eyes a bit, shoving her glasses with her wrist and keeping her...orange, cloudy drink at the ready.

“Didn't tell them, didja?!” Brooke realized, unamused but uncaring.

Stella grunted, working the junk from her eye, taking a breath, sipping from her drink...

Aaaaaaany sec now, gurl. Explanation. You can do it.

“OK-OK-OK, look: It's been five years!” Stella said. The way she had to raise her voice because of the music seemed to...not gel so well with whatever potentially sentimental crap she was about to shill at them. “Five years, guys! This weekend, they're commemorating that crazy shit we all made it out of! That storm we all survived! That town we all love!”

“Speak for yourself, Stells, ya poor sap.”

“Five years, guys! This weekend, they’re commemorating that crazy shit we all made it out of! That storm we all survived! That town we all love!”

“We all went through a ton of disturbing shit together back in a high school sorority – ooh-fucking-rah – now let’s get hammered and dance ‘til we fall over!”

With this, Victoria brought her emptied glass to the counter and got a refill.

“Right, I understand!” Max insisted, her tone attempting to be soft, but sharpened in order to cut through all of the noise surrounding them. Max gave Stella a supportive rub on the arm, and Stella nodded with some relief. “We’ve gotta look out for each other!” Max agreed. She turned to Chloe for approval, but Chloe couldn't prevent a shrug from slipping out. She tried to nod half-heartedly, play along, but...-

“So are we gonna drink, or dance, or...-?!?” Brooke was almost done with her bizarro blue bevery (‘bevery' stands for 'beverage').

“Let everybody get something!” Stella eased, glancing Max and Chloe's way.

Victoria was back with a blue, brown, and orange...something.

“Is that...-?” Stella was frozen with confused humor. She stifled a laugh. “Vic, did you order a Mudkip?!”

“Bupkis?!”

“Mudkip!”

“Blood drip?!”

“MUD! KIP!”
A pause.

“What?!” Victoria looked offended and confused in equal measure. Waving her drink around a little, she ranted, “I don't know what this is, I tried to order a Sex in the Driveway, but the tender had no idea what that was! Everything they serve here is named by a fucking five-year-old, so I picked the closest thing I could find!”


Chloe knew why this was hilarious, and was grinning. Victoria's ignorance to memeology made it all the sweeter.

“Mudkip!” Chloe laughed.

“What does that even mean?!” Victoria demanded, looking down at her glass as her cheeks turned pink. “Why is that funny?!”


Even Max was smiling, covering her mouth to contain her giggle.

“You gonna say it?!” Chloe asked her. “Someone's gotta say it...”

Max shook her head, exchanging a glint of warmth with Victoria's abashed confusion.

Choe couldn't restrain herself. Untying her elbow from Max's, she squeezed her way round Stella to Victoria, whose expression was already baffled and irate.

Clamping her hand down tightly on Victoria's shoulder, Chloe proclaimed, “So!...I herd u liek mudkips!”

Rolling her eyes, Victoria jerked Chloe's hand off of her oh-so-precious cashmere whatever-the-hell.

“What was the drink you were trying to order?!” Brooke checked, clearly egging things on.

“I told you: a Sex in the Driveway, I don't fucking get what-!”

“In the driveway?! With the Mudkip?!” Stella practically wheezed out through more laughter. The lot of them were snickering morons, and Victoria was unimpressed.

“Look, whatever fourth-grade bullshit you're all laughing about?! I came here out of respect for what happened to us up in Arcadia, not...whatever this is.” She sucked down half of her drink as the mood shifted. “I cannot believe I assumed this was going to be a good time,” she coughed out through her drink's aftertaste.

...PFF.

Mudkip aftertaste, oh-my- god, just...-!

“Come on, come on!” Stells dissuaded. “We're-...We're just trying to have a good time! You like to tease us, so take a joke! For real.”

“There's no joke to take!” Victoria roared. “You're all making literally no sense to me! How is that not a joke at my expense?!!

“It's-...It's just a stupid meme!” eased Stella warily. “Don't...-”
The hue of Victoria's cheeks was redder still, but her expression had turned bitter and stoic. She shrugged with her usual dismissal.

“Get over it!” Chloe butted in. “It's a joke!”

“So, of course Ms. Price over here finds it hilarious – her entire brand of humor is...fucking 'memes!' Just...taking tweenage Internet nonsense and 'copy-pasta-ing' it over her life! Because in her reality?! There's nothing substantial to draw from! Her life is so devoid of anything remotely interesting she cuts-and-pastes all of her jokes from the Internet!”

“And there it is!” Chloe laughed, her stomach stinging with frustration beneath her haughty mask. “Good ol' Vickie and Chloe, such...such great friends, here, goin' at each other's throats before the drinks are even all out!” Chloe popped up her shoulders at Max, wanting some kind of backup and knowing she'd get none. “With friends like these, right?!”

“It was just a stupid joke, guys!” Stella cooed, drumming her nails nervously against her cocktail's glass.

“Stella,” said Max, “Have you ever seen these two get along?!”

THANK YOU.

“There's a first time for everything!” Stella defended – her voice loud but the effect weak. “I thought with...what's coming up this weekend, we could all...-!”

“Cool your jets, folks!” Brooke interjected. “Jesus. You want to know why we're all here?! Stella wanted to invite all of you to go with us to Arcadia Bay this weekend! For the memorial?! She thought it'd be therapeutic if we went as, like...a support group!”

“What, like, together?!” said Chloe, flabbergasted. “Uh, I 'literally' would never ride in the same car as this stick-in-the-Mudkip!”

Victoria piped in, “Yes, 'Dude,' that is, 'like', something we agree upon, you Four-Chan skank!”

Oh. Oh, yea, real great comeback, there. So laugh. Much funny. Wow.

Wait, did I just-?

GODDAMNIT she's right...

Victoria and Chloe fired shots off with their peepers for a moment, before Chloe turned to Max.

“C'mon,” Max sighed. “I think Stella's on to something. We've all got history with that place, I think...it's a good idea!”

No way. Chloe could just...she could tell, she could see it in Max's face. Max and Stella had schemed this stupid idea together. Visiting Arcadia Bay once a year, that was...their thing. Their anniversary, the Storm's anniversary, it was a shitty fucking combination with all of the self-directed guilt-tripping, turned into a literal guilt-trip to the Bay, but it was theirs. Not...Victoria Chase's. Not Stella's, not Brooke's. Their moms hadn't been barbecued, their best friends hadn't been killed by...-

W-well, whatever, that wasn't the goddamn point!

Sure, they could all go to Arcadia that weekend.
Not together! Not in...the same car, not...

Just, no.

“In case it's not obvious at this point?!” Chloe tiredly stated to the lot of them, clamping her thumb and middle finger against her temples. “It's not a good idea! Spoiler alert: The Bitches of Blackwell argue for ten hours straight in a hot car and there's no warm fuzzies involved except for whatever Victoria's shirt looks like after it's in a humid, sweaty car all day, and in the end we learn jack-shit except even more ways we get on each other's nerves! Cue the F.R.I.E.N.D.S. Theme Song, ya'll!”

Chloe bumped shoulders with Stella as she brushed inbetween Hill and Chase, making sure her expression communicated to Stells her disapproval of this, and her disapproval of bringing them to this weird-ass club as some way to....what? 'Bond?'

“Wh-?! Chloe, I didn't-!”

“Just let her go!” Max quelled Stella. “Give her a minute.”

Victoria sniped some snarky thing or another behind her back but Chloe couldn't make it out beneath the DJ set.

As Chloe approached the bar counter and waited her turn, her brain thirsted for an ethanol escape.

How in the hell had Stells in any way figured that inviting that stuck up whore to this thing or on some road trip was a good idea in any universe whatsoever?

Shit, Chloe was halfway tempted to ask Max to...friggin' check. Check some alternate worldlines, check and see if literally any of them had a version of Victoria who was a decent goddamn human being, instead of a sneaky little spider woman trying to weave everyone around her into a goddamn web of snotty tones and expensive clothes and fancy art gallery hipster culture bullshit.

While she was at it, maybe if Max was so fucking interested in keeping that bitch in their lives...like some threesome shit? If it wasn't 'Vickie,' it was Stella who Max was so interested in being around. The two of them seemed to be scheming, huh? Or maybe it was with Stella, maybe she was just waiting to come out, so they could--...Urgh. If Max was so into that idea all of a sudden, maybe she could find a worldline where Rachel was...

Fuckin' eh.

Nope. Stop. You cut that shit out right this second.

Not allowed to be weird in the head right now, Price.

Max already has the Lion King's share of that these days.
Don't go to that dark, shadowy place, my son – that's where stuck-up pricks like Chase hung about.

That's not even...How is that even a joke? Why...-?

Goddamnit, Victoria.

“Yep?” grunted the barmaid to Chloe.

“Yea, erh...-!”

Chloe's brain fizzled like a bomb fuse as she made a decision based on what she'd scoped out earlier.

“Can I get an...Angel Island?! And...-” For Max?
“Somethin' else?” the bartender read.

“Yep, gimme a Zelda's Lullaby, too!”

“Lullaby and an Angel Island?!” the tender made sure.

“You got it!”

Chloe’s mind was elsewhere as she waited for the drinks and paid for them. She'd...kind of unloaded on them back there. Damn, kind of...more on Stells than anyone else, huh? It was *almost* like Chloe was bitter that Stella had actually invited Victoria here, *knowing*, specifically, that Max and Chloe would *also* be there, and she *specifically* did not tell either party involved.

Chloe had come to think that Stells was smarter than that. This left Chloe feeling, well...disappointed.

Disappointed? With a fellow human being? *NEVER.*

Ah, but booze? Booze could never disappoint you, because it served a singular purpose, and it only failed at that if *you* failed at using it somehow. The cause of – and solution to – most of life's problems, right? (crap, wasn't *that* a meme, too?)

Chloe was halfway through her Angel Island when the Zelda's Lullaby was finished. Max and Stella showed up behind Chloe.

Max wriggled her arms around Chloe's waist, leaning into Chloe's back without a word.

Stella set her empty glass down on the counter to Chloe's right. Meanwhile, Chloe slid the Max's drink to her left, watching her fiancé cautiously palm it.

“What...-?” Max started up.

“Just try it! It's, uh-!...It's called a ‘Zelda's Lullaby!’”

Max's expression melted with a bit of warmth, which brought out a kindled spark from within Chloe's soured mood.

“Thanks,” said Max. “That's...actually really cute!”

“Yup. *I* know! I gothcoo, sistah!”

Chloe stared at her own drink, stole a glance at Stella's profile, then avoided eye contact when Stells turned to reciprocate the look. The urban-princess barmaid took Stella's next order (“Can I get a Magus, please?!”) and processed the payment.

Chloe tried to glance over her shoulder toward the rest of their company – Brooke was chilling not too far away, being obviously hit on by some lanky dude she was clearly not feeling. Victoria was bobbing to the music not too far away, alone with her drink. *Rrrright* where she belonged, far as Chloe was concerned...

“You OK?” Stells asked, leaning in toward Chloe.

Chloe flapped her wrist with casual dismissal, her head shaking just a little.

“I'll deal,” she replied. “Not gonna lie, though: *kinda* pissed you invited *her* here!”
“Hey, cut her a break!” said Max inbetween sips.

“Sure,” said Chloe, her chest bubbling with frustration. “I'll just do that – once you both stop trying to force me and that Abercrombie flunky to get along! ’Cuz we never will! Cats and dogs, man!”

Neither Max nor Stella had anything to say. Stella's drink arrived: a purple, smokey looking thing, served in a tumbler glass on the rocks. Chloe couldn't help but admire the dark violet hue. Something about it drew her in.

“You wanna try?!” Stella offered, noting Chloe's stare.

Chloe's expression wrinkled sheepishly and she shook her head, but Stells nudged her glass toward her.

Stella insisted, “Go on, take a sip!”

Chloe ruminated on Stella's offer. Fact was, she was pretty pissed at the girl. And Stells totally knew that, and was trying to, like...make amends? With booze?

Well, she knew the way to calming Chloe's mood, anyway.

“What's this one called?!”

“A Magus!”

“A Magus!” Chloe repeated, befuddled. “Some Lord of the Rings crap?!”

“Ha! Nope, like from Chrono Trigger!”

“Huh?”

“Chrono Trigger?! I thought you guys were big into time travel stories. That one's a classic!”

“Ohhhhh, dude!” Chloe's brain could picture the pixelated graphics. Had she ever finished it? She definitely borrowed it from someone back in school, eons back. Well, Brooke...wasn't allowed to see her 'nerd' side, but...Stells was cool enough. She could. “That one with the BAMF frog with the sword, and the DBZ-lookin' dude...with the sword? And the robot who plants the forest?! OH OH and the top hat man waiting at the edge of the fuckin' universe?!”

Why did Chloe specifically remember that part? The robot...planting a whole forest of trees... Why'd she remember a man in a top hat, for that matter? What was it about some old dude standing by an old-timey lamppost that seemed...awesome? Chloe couldn't really recall.

“You guys talking about Chrono Trigger?!” Max checked, partway through her Lullaby.

“Dude, yea, you ever play it?” Stella asked.

Chloe saw a lump form in Max's throat as she coughed on a hearty gulp of her cocktail.

“Uh, y-yea, I think?! Would've been middle school, though.” Max smacked her lips a bit, wiping some booze from her chin. “Good game!”

“Right?!” Stella agreed. “You remember Magus?!” Stella asked through the noise clutter – and through Chloe.
Max shrugged. “Wizard vampire guy?!” she vaguely guessed.

“Yea, exactly! This drink?! Named after ‘im!”

Chloe shrugged and took the tumbler glass in hand, reluctantly sniffing at it. She took a quick swig. Curacao, some sake, maybe? Like Brooke's drink. Ah, Lychee stuff. Stella liked the Lychee shit, huh?

With an ominous rasp that sent a shiver down Chloe's spine, Stella said into Chloe's ear: “The black wind begins to blow...”

Simultaneously, something turned in Chloe's stomach. She couldn't put her finger on it. It was almost like...time-sickness, but...different?

Off-put by this sensation, Chloe set the glass back down, pushed it Stella's way, and gave the little weirdo an offended glance.

“You are a bonafide nerd, Stells!”

“You are!” Max agreed with a bit of cheer. The swingset was heading back in the other direction. “You totally are!”

At this, Stella giggled a bit – Chloe couldn't hear the actual laugh too well, but the expression was adorable enough. Stella rubbed at her eyes a bit, shoving her glasses up and about before readjusting them.

“Takes one to know one!” Stella proclaimed, giving Chloe a bump on the back.

“I hear that!” Max chimed in, assaulting the other half of Chloe's back with a much softer hand gesture. Max proceeded to initiate a toast, and the other two obliged.

Max finished off her drink, as did Chloe, but Stella was taking her sweet-ass time with her purply concoction.

“Y'know,” Max declared, shoving herself up off the table. “Uhmm...Vic...loria's looking kinda...lost?! Out there? Right?!”

“Oh, yeal!” Stells insisted. A bit too...quickly. “Brooke doesn't know what to do with her. Maybe you can, like...pull her back into the circle?!”

“Y-yeah, I can try that!”

Jesus. Make it more obvious, why doncha? Maxie, you're a terrible actress...

“I'll watch your girl while you're gone!” Stella joked, tapping the back of her wrist against Chloe's.

Max pushed hair back over her shoulder, bent over, and kissed Chloe on the neck, scratching her fingers against Chloe's back. Chloe sighed, a gesture deafened by the club's pounding rhythm, but gave Max a little farewell-for-now peck on the lips.

By the time Max was out of earshot – which was, like, six feet in this dump – Stells scooted herself a bit closer.

“Brooke'll keep an eye on them, don't worry,” she assured.
“Yea,” Chloe shrugged off the concern. Brooke wasn’t the person whose judgment she was worrying about.

Rationally, with the thinky-thinky part of her brain, Chloe knew Max would never choose fucking…”Vickie”…over her. She knew this. Logically.

But this wasn’t about logic. That was the whole goddamn point of jealousy. It didn’t have to make sense, but it sure as hell had to make you feel like garbage. And Victoria Chase already did that well enough, but the fact that Max was bending over backwards to accommodate to that…-! That…-!

“Yo!” Stella was tapping her wrist against Chloe’s shoulder, trying to pull Chloe out of her own brain through the haze of noise.

And...this was the part where she’d been set up, and Stella was gonna try to convince her about this whole ’road-trip-back-to-the-bay' crap.

“Wanna go take a smoke break with me?!” Stella asked, having finished up her drink pretty quickly.

Chloe tried to read the woman in the dimly lit, increasingly tiring mess of shouting and noise and bass and...-

“We should talk!” Stells added, pushing up her glasses a bit and fussing her hair behind her shoulders. “Like, somewhere with normal speaking decibel levels!” She stuck a couple of dollar bills beneath her empty glass for the tender.

Chloe paused with hesitation. Was she really in the mood for that kind of ’talk' right then? The serious kind? The kind where someone would try to convince her of some shit?

“C'mon!” Stella insisted, starting to leave the bar with a flick of her head.

Chloe huffed, shook her head begrudgingly, and dug up a fiver to tip the tender for her and Max's drinks.

Trying to move, and through the crowd, at that, made Chloe realize how warm her face was. She followed Stella, who patiently checked over her shoulder every few seconds to make sure Chloe was still there. They found their way to some back door – a chunky dude wearing a yellow cap with a...mustache...-? Nah, it was just makeup. Like he was supposed to look all grungy on purpose. Well, pudgy guy in yellow and purple was checking bracelets, letting peeps in and out the backdoor. Chloe and Stella maneuvered by, making their exit. A dark concrete hallway with a stairwell leading outside met them – by the time they got to the top and beneath the yellowed street lamp meeting them in the parking lot, Chloe realized by the peak of the stairs that the stairwell was painted to look like a warp pipe. Rad.

The parking lot was actually kind of crowded with cars, but not many right near their specific corner. There was a small group having at a bong across the way, a couple of duded makin' out hardcore against one of the lamp posts...Ah, and – of course – a trio playing hackey-sack a ways off.

Real classy place Stella picked to 'have a serious talk.'

The pair found a comfy if unclean wall close to the back door. The pounding music felt more like gentle nudging from within the brick and mortar.

Stella's phone 'Ticka-Ticka-Tick'-ed as she sent a text. Chloe was close enough – and curious enough – to notice that it was just telling Brooke where they'd gone off to. Prolly smart, given the whole...environment.
Chloe realized it was maybe a good idea to text Max, as well.

(Chloe) – (yo babe me and stells are getting some air out back)
(make good peer to teen life choices)

The familiar flick of a lighter had an almost Pavlovian effect on Chloe's mouth as Stella lit up a cigarette.

Stella settled against the wall, then extended her pack of cigs Chloe's way.

“No, thanks,” Chloe dismissed the offer with a casual toss of her hand. “Quit those a while back.”

“Ohh, right,” Stella breathed out with self-directed frustration. “I should...I should know that already, sorry. Lame move, my bad. I just, um...’Cuz with the mary jane, ya know?”

“Pffff. You can call it 'weed,' gurl.”

“R-right, figured you were...um...”

“Nope. Different kinds of smokes, Stells.”

“Gotcha. Anyway, sorry.”

Chloe shook her head slightly, insisting it was fine. She could tell the girl didn't know what to do with her already lit cigarette now.

“It's cool, I'm good,” she assured. “Go for it.”

Stella glanced with a guilty look of ‘You sure?’ and Chloe just nodded back with an amused smirk.

Stells took a drag. Chloe watched that intense orange glow swell at the tip, the thin stream of smoke that Stells slid from her lips...The satisfying way the smoke dissipated into the chilled evening air. Shuffling her hands a bit in their hoodie pockets, Chloe adjusted her position against the brick wall. She took in a deep breath, the whiff of nearby cigarette smoke alluring in the worst of ways.

Stella froze up for a second after her phone buzzed.

“No...No,” she grunted with some desperation.

“What?” Chloe wondered. “Sup?”

“It's my...” Stella's nose twitched and wrinkled. “...fucking brother, he...”

“The, uh...the brother brother?” Chloe warily poked.

Stella looked—...Yikes. Pretty goddamn livid.

_Yea, the brother brother_, Chloe figured.

“You mean the asshole brother?” Stella hissed under her breath, feverishly typing away a text message. “The brother-who-tore-my-family-apart brother? Yea, that brother...”

“What's up with that dick-bag now?”

Chloe honestly didn't really want to know. But...she'd just gone off the handle at Stells back in the club, and the chick didn't really deserve it, so...-

Sooo, yea. Stella's brother brother. The older one. The asshole one.

The one who'd fucking done unmentionable shit to her during their childhood, which, on top of all the other crap that guy had been up to, had caused a marital rift in the Hill household once it had all come to light. Near as Chloe had heard from Max, Stella's 'big bro' was a person Stells did her best to keep away from with a twenty-foot pole duct-taped to another twenty-foot pole, but couldn't outright excommunicate from her life lest she sever her relationship with her own mom.

Family politics. And to think that Chloe had used to think hers were so horrible...

There was always someone who had it worse off.

“Oh, my god,” grunted Stells, locking her phone and shoving it fiercely into her hoodie. “Just...-! Douchebag. Thinks he can bum a place at my house? Nuh-uh. Not happening, Kam...”

“That sucks, dude,” Chloe weakly tried to sympathize. “Sorry...”

“He fucking...-” Stella was started to tear up, sucking courage from her cigarette, which was shaking in her hand. She shook her head with disgust. “Says he wants to meet my roommate! Can you believe that shit? 'See you soon?!' That's what he just texted me. 'See you soon!' Uhhh, how about no? Urgh.”

Chloe shook her head disparagingly, her chest tight and her stomach filled with butterflies from just seeing Stella so shaken up. Chick stamped out her quickly-consumed cigarette and lit another one right up.

“Man, forget that ass-clown,” Chloe blew the matter off. “He shows his face? You call me. Swear to fuck, I will drive over and deck him, square in the jaw.”

“Heh.” Hella nervous laugh. “Y-yea, now, that I wanna see...I will hold you to it.”

“Seriously,” Chloe pressed. “I mean it.”

Stella's face quivered at Chloe's earnest expression and she nodded after a moment, shifting her hair around a bit and taking a long drag.

“Thanks,” said Stella solemnly.

She worked her way through a few more puffs of smoke as someone re-entered the club. A noisy group exited, laughing and slapping each other's backs as they made their way across the parking lot.

All right, Chloe. Suck it up.

Anyway,” Chloe started up with a grunt. “Yea, so...“ She scratched an itch at the base of her neck. “Sorry for...-“ She bobbed her head toward the basement behind them. “-goin’ all Freakazoid back in there.”

Taking another puff, Stella nodded thoughtfully, her eyes glazed with curiosity as she continued to listen to Chloe’s words. She was calmed down by that point, at least.

“Just wish you'd uh, ya know...-” Chloe sighed, slicking her half head of hair through her fingers.
“Wish you’d thought to maybe mention that was gonna make a cameo appearance in tonight’s episode.”

“Mm,” Stella hummed contemplatively. “If you’d known, though...would you have come?”

Her hand still in her hair, Chloe’s lips opened, but she caught herself before speaking. A disgruntled huff spilled out of her fluttering lips as she let her arm fall into her thigh.

“Prolly not,” Chloe confessed in a mumble.

“Yea, see?” remarked Stells, pointing her orange-tipped cigarette in Chloe’s direction. “Chloe…” She inhaled another breath of nictoine through her lips and exhaled smoke through her nostrils. “You can’t just...pretend like she doesn’t exist,” Stells expressed warily.

“Pff,” scoffed Chloe with raised brows. “Been workin' out for a long-ass time.”

“Has it?” Stells proposed with a kind of forced doubt that rubbed Chloe’s skin weird. “Sure doesn’t seem like it’s been ‘working out.’ I’ve been thinking, Chloe, and...Now, hear me out on this.” A defensive flash of her hands, a thin trail of smoke left from the gesture. “What Vickie did back in the summer was totally out of line. You have every right to be angry with her. But...-” She leaned back against the wall with another drag. “And, like, this is just a thought, but...if you had actually been spending time with her, with Max, I dunno...If you were friends with her, too, I just...I guess I figure nothing like that would’ve built up between them, is all.”

“You for real?” Chloe quietly, skeptically shut down the notion. “This is my fault?”

“No-no-no,” came a hasty course-correct. “That was...I’m tryin’ to open your mind a bit, is all.” Stella swallowed down one last puff, sighing out the vapors as she dropped the remains to the tarmac and stamped them out with her boot. Having re-positioned herself in front of Chloe, she elaborated. “I’m saying you don’t live in a vacuum, even if you pretend you do. I know you like your alone time and – shit, this whole little ‘group’ of ours? We all do. But you, like...you take it to this extra level where it’s not just introversion, it’s like you...want to be lonely?”

Chloe’s stomach churned. This conversation was quickly making her uncomfortable.

Chloe added, “And it just, well, it kinda...makes it hard for people to like you, Chloe. I mean, on the surface level, sure, everyone 'likes' you, thinks you're 'cool,' but...Whenever someone tries to work their way in, you just shove ‘em back out?”

“I don’t do ‘BFFs’, Stells,” Chloe cited plainly and with as convincing a shrug as she could manage. “I’ve got Max, and...that's all I need. Not gonna stop her from being a social butterfly n’ shit, but...I just ain’t gettin’ dragged along for the ride. The very cramped, smelly, awkward ride of…adulting-social-life. It's a stupid road trip where the big destination is, like...the world’s biggest rubber band ball or whatever crap.”

“…What?”

“’N everyone pretends to be impressed like it was worth the three day long drive when it’s all just bullshit.”

“Uh...”

“So, like, that kinda road trip is stupid enough when it’s just two people. But five? And one of them’s Victoria? Psh. Yea, good fucking times...And then, yea, so, the metaphorical version, where life’s a crappy road trip, same thing. Crowded enough with two people in the damned car...And like,
I mean, I like driving by myself here and there, thank you. Put what I want on the radio, go where I wanna go, take what roads I wanna take, ’cuz sometimes the highway traffic is ridiculous..."

“Chloe, babe, buddy, pal.” Stells grabbed Chloe by the shoulder and squeezed roughly. Pinched a little. Was she riffing on the ‘Max/Maxie/Maximil’ bit? “We all like you, but ya gotta stop pushing us all away. If not for you, I mean...fuck. Do it for Max, at least.”

“The hell does my social life have to do with her? It doesn’t have to be her problem if I don’t make it. And her drama shouldn’t have to become mine, either.”

“Dude, you’re getting married. Two lives become one, all that jazz?”

“All that jazz n’ sax…”
All that jizz n’ sex...
Jazz.

“Look.” Stella took a deep breath. “I didn’t wanna bring this up—” Sure, which is why you’re specifically saying that right before you bring it up? “-I mean, I don’t know the details and all, but—…Whatever is going on with you and Max? I can tell it’s bad. I haven’t forgotten how things ended up last time. And we both know you can’t help Max through this all by yourself.”

Stella had a point that was so sharp but so tiny and easy to ignore, like a bee stinger.

“I can take care of Max,” said Chloe with defense. “Been doin’ it for a few years now.”

“And it’s wearin’ you down,” Stella observed bluntly. “Don’t tell me it isn’t. You’ve got people who are here, who can help you, who can be there for the long haul. But you’ve gotta open the door.”

Chloe finally gave Stells the decency of a glance. Her eyes glinted with sincerity, to which Chloe had no reply.

“Ya gotta let us in,” Stella insisted.

Chloe raised her brow, a smirk setting up shop on her face.

“Know who else says that?” Chloe goaded. “Let me in, let me in.”

Stella smirked back, shrugging her head around and knowing a punchline was coming.

“Vampires, dude,” Chloe stated, referring to that old-fashioned bit of vampiric lore.

“Pff, but seriously.” Stella moved things along. “No one can open that door but you. Max has opened the gates for us, we’ve welcomed her in, she’s helped us, and we’ve helped her. And it’s not easy to hear this, I know it isn’t, but...that includes Vickie. She’s more like you than you give her credit for: you both care about Max, for one, and for another, you both put on this tough act and keep people at a distance.”

Chloe could feel her eyes getting damp at the edges, and she didn’t really know why. Emotions. Bleagh. Ulgh.

“Gah.” Stella ran her palm across her face, shoving her glasses around before resetting their position. “I’m not trying to get on your case. I mean...Whatever’s up with Max right now, that’s not my business maybe. I get that, I appreciate that. But it’s clearly something fucked up based on what I’ve seen and what you’ve told me. She needs help. But so do you. Max needs her social life to be stable..."
right now. And if you were more a part of that, I think – really, honest-to-shit, I think it would help both of you. That’s why we’re here tonight. That’s why I invited both of you, it’s why I invited Vickie and Brooke, even though I know maybe you don’t all get along – because Max needs this. She needs us. We need each other. You know?”

“Ulterior motives behind the social planning?” Chloe teased half-heartedly. She murmured with an accent, “Sneaky, cheeky, lil’ bligh’er.”

“Fff,” puffed Stella in what amounted to a shaky laugh. “With the Arcadia memorial thing on the horizon, I just…figured we could all use a night out. Have some fun. Clean our palettes beforehand. Remind ourselves that we all got through that crap. That we’re all here on the other side, and we’re better people for it.”

“God damn,” Chloe chuckled, rubbing the gunk from her eyes before it had a chance to grow. “No wonder it’s been so hard for me to shake that childish, happy-go-lucky shit from Max: she’s been hanging out with you so much.”

“Be careful, Chlo,” Stells taunted back, nudging Chloe’s elbow with her own. “This ‘hope and optimism’ mushy stuff? It might be contagious.”

“Kill me now,” Chloe grunted flatly.

Stella shook her head playfully, then wiped fog from her glasses on her hoodie sleeve.

She joked, “Think I'll leave that up to Victoria, huh?”

“Jesus,” sighed Chloe. “Yea. If we're seriously gonna be stuck in the same car for that long...I wouldn't put it past her.”

“Uh-huhhh...” Stells waggled her eyebrows. “Is that your way of saying you're up for that sucky road-trip, after all?”

Chloe smiled, rolled her eyes for good measure, and shrugged up one shoulder.

“For Max's sake?” Chloe checked.

“For all of our sake. But yea. Especially hers.”

“...Fair enough.”

“If history is to change, let it change.
If the world is to be destroyed, so be it.
If my fate is to die, I must simply laugh.”

~ Magus, Chrono Trigger

Re-entering the club after their little break of fresh (stoner-scented) air, it took Chloe and Stells another five to ten minutes (and multiple text messages) to track down the other ladies.

Victoria was grinding her inebriated ass all around, making a new 'friend' on the dance floor (though Chloe couldn't condemn Vickie's taste in sharply dressed chicks), while Brooke was content with some...green drink with whole strawberries floating around in it.
And Max was...erhh...?

Um...

**Where the hell was Max?**

Chloe could feel her cheeks get pale, her stomach curdle unpleasantly with an emptiness.

Max was *not* in a place to be by herself in a shady dive like this...

Stella managed to pry Victoria from the woman she'd started locking lips with, while Chloe remained by Brooke's side.

“*I thought she went outside to find you two!*” Brooke explained.

“*Was no one keeping an eye on her?!*” Stella puffed with some exasperation as she dragged Victoria back over. Chloe was kind of, like...endeared? Was that the word, maybe? With the way Stella looked so worried. So concerned. She was pushing her fingers through her hair with fret, gazing around the crowded club. “*Did you at least think to keep track of what direction she went in?!*”

At least Stells had her shit together. Chloe was just...too confused, too dazed, too *disappointed* with herself to do much in that instant.

“She’s *not* a *toddler!*” Victoria snipped, wiping lipstick from her cheek. “*Calm your tits! She’s a grown woman! She’ll be fine!*” As she finished her thought, she was raising an index finger to her new 'pal' out on the dance floor.

“Dude!” Chloe huffed, rubbing her palms against her forehead with some impatience. “She’s not in her right *mind* right now! We need to be...*f*uckin’...working *together!* Looking out for her! *I mean-*

…*Urgh! Shit...!*”

“Oh!” Victoria balked in her holier-than-thou way. “*Oh, I see, so it’s our responsibility to look after your fiancé!* Suddenly. Because, I mean, here I assumed – heavens me, *assuming*, I know! – that *maybe*, perhaps, banding rings across your fingers was a symbol of *commitment* and *responsibility* to one another, primarily and exclusively!”

“Vickie!” Stella snarled. Chloe had seen the girl’s eyes roll during Victoria’s rant.

“What?!” Victoria balked. “*Don't look at me like that! Maybe we could be looking-for-her instead of fucking bickering!*”

And with that, Victoria went...right back to her 'acquaintance' – what the actual *shit?*

“She's right!” Brooke agreed, giving Chloe a rough slap on the back. “I'll check the bathroom!”

Chloe noticed Victoria tugging along her new potential fuck-buddy with some disgruntled determination.

“We're going to ask around at the bar!” Victoria informed them. “Make sure no one pulled any shit on her!”

Well...goddamnit. Stells was certainly right about that one bit: Victoria looked pretty scared and worried about Max, like Chloe was.

“Chloe, let's go scope out the dance floor!” Stella commanded, tugging Chloe along by the forearm.
Chloe’s heart was battering at her ribcage; the strobe lights scratched at her eyes; the pounding music rattled her skull; her stomach churned with each thump of the bass.

The undulating crowd threatened to swallow her at any second as her anxiety started to spill from the edges of her eyes, but she kept following Stells, sifting through the crowd. Max wasn’t anywhere in sight – or if she was, she was doing a damned good job of hiding.

Maybe that was what worried Chloe the most: that irking fear that some part of Max wanted to get lost and never be found.

Chloe was clutching her phone all this time like a lifeline, so when it vibrated, her heart skipped a beat, and she checked it instantly.

(Brooke) – (Found her)
(By the bathrooms)
(Tell Stella to hang back.)

Stella took note that Chloe was checking her phone.

“That her?!” Stells asked.

“Brooke found ’er near the bathroom!” Chloe explained amidst the chaos. Ignoring Brooke’s vague warning, she nodded for Stella to follow her. ‘Hang back?’ The hell was that supposed to mean? No way, Stells was coming. If Max had gotten into one of her...weird-ass mood-swings, Chloe needed some backup.

There she was! Oh, thank fuck.

She was in the back corner of the dank, crusty hallway where the bathrooms were – she looked perfectly fine, except for the fact that she was pissed as hell, yelling at some guy in a biker jacket. Chloe would nail the sucker in the face in he tried anything funny. Brooke was standing awkwardly beside them, typing away at her phone. Prolly trying to reach the rest of them, still.

Brooke seemed all gung-ho for picking fights when they were just with words over geek crap. Not so much into actual, direct, serious fights.

But yea, like...aside from flushed cheeks and a scowl on her face, Max looked all right.

_Sweet sweet zombie jesus michael scott christ she's OK!

Chloe made sure to point out the trio Stella, and the two of them exchanged relieved expressions as they wriggled and pushed their way around the bathroom line.

Brooke, Max, and whoever this other dude were all noticed them approaching.

That was when Stella froze dead in her tracks, and Chloe, going full throttle for her Max, stumbled right into poor Stella’s back, nearly sending them both to the floor.

“Shit!” Stella hissed under her breath when her glasses fell off. She scrambled to scoop them back on, and before Chloe could even apologize, Stella was stomping right toward Max and this stranger.

“Hey!” greeted the clean-cut guy who’d been arguing with Max. He was actually kind of good-looking, Chloe had to admit. Nice trim on his little beard, too.

“Kamat?!!” Stella roared at him.
Stells gave him quite a violent shove when she reached him. He was barely fazed by Stella's meek show of force, though. Girl's arms weren't so beefy. Now, if Chloe gave it a go...-

“St-Stella!” Max started. She looked white as a ghost. “I-I don't know why he's...-!”

“What are you doing here?!” Stella demanded at the stranger, rolling right by Max's feeble words.

As Stella glared at the guy, Brooke yanked Max away, shooting Chloe a dagger look as she did so.

“I told you I'd come see you!” insisted the guy.

Soooo...They knew each other?

Ah. So that was why Brooke had said the bit about 'Stella should hang back,' or whatever.

Well, how the hell was Chloe supposed to have known what was going on?

She still didn't know what was going on...

“You stay the fuck away from my friends!” Stella lashed out.

“Yo,” the guy protested with offense. “Your friend invited me here!”

“No, I didn't!” Max cried with desperation. “Stella, I would never-”

“Stop trying to bullshit me!” said Stella to the guy. “Who the hell do you think you are, just...just Waltzing back into my-”

“I'm your fucking family, Stella, but if you still wanna-”

“Life like you still have a place here. I told you I never wanted to-”

“-clinging to the past, be my guest. I promised Mom I'd-”

“-ever fucking see your face again, so don't play dumb with-”

“-say 'hi,' she insisted, you know how she gets, so get off my case n'-”

While this episode of Maury Povich bled out along with the piss stains on the dusty basement floor, Chloe tactfully wormed her way around it and nearly choked a dumb-struck, teary-eyed Max Caulfield into her chest.

“Fuckin' eh,” Chloe breathed into Max's hair.

“I-I don't know why he's here,” Max whimpered, clutching at Chloe's hips. “I didn't...-!”

“It's OK,” Chloe steamrolled past whatever was going on. “He hurt you?”

“No,” Max insisted. “He was just...I don't get what's happening, Chloe, I...-!”

“Shhh, calm down, c'mon,” Chloe cooed, running her hand along Max's ponytail. “I gotcha. I'm here.”

“Oh, yea?” Stella said snippily to her 'family' member. “Empty your pockets.” She was sticking out a threatening finger toward the dark, concrete floor.

“What?!” squawked the guy Chloe had just figured out must've been Stella's big brother.

“Show me what's in your pockets!” Stella insisted.

“Stella!” cried Brooke, “Let's just go, he's not worth it!”
Stella shoved her palm up at her roommate, growling, “This douchebag was trying to push his nasty shit on Max! I am not just walking away from this, this is not OK!”

“Stella!” he huffed.

“Kamat!” she sassed right now.

“Don't call me that, yo!”

“I don't care what you wanna be called 'cause you keep fucking lying right to my face!”

“I'm clean now, ask Mom!”

“Just because you have her fooled doesn't mean it's gonna work on me.”

“Seriously!”

“Prove it!”

Stella was scraping her arms out at her brother's jacket, trying to unzip it. He tried to get her off, but she was a stubborn little scrapper, slapping her hands out at him with a manic fury. He struggled to keep her at bay, and Brooke stepped in to break them apart – but not before Stella managed to grab a little ziplock baggie from her brother's pocket. A second one dropped to the floor despite the idiot's efforts to keep the stuff hidden.

Ah. Looked like some pills.

“Dude, that stuff's harmless,” Kamat insisted, trying to claw it back from his little sis.

It'd been a ways since Chloe had dealt with anything like what this guy had packing, but...she knew 'harmless' was pretty goddamn incorrect.

Stella irately threw the baggie she'd found to the floor, trying to stamp on it with her sneaker.

“What the hell?!” Kamat growled, clearly trying to be discreet but also struggling to get Stella to stop crushing his merchandise. Brooke yanked her off of it, hissing something into her ear beneath the racket of the club. “This stuff's not easy to get, ya fuckin' moron!” grumbled the guy, scooping the plastic bags back up and stuffing them into his pocket.

“You think I don't know that?!” Stella balked. Gesturing her hands furiously, she ranted at him, “You wanna talk to me about 'clinging to the past?' Look at you, Kamat. All this time, same bullshit. I left that behind, I am not letting you pull my friends in!”

“I told you, she asked me to come here!”

“Max doesn't want shit you're selling, she's not into that, so stop lying!”

Chloe could feel Max's fingernails digging into her shirt a little. She could sense Max's stomach expanding and contracting in tight breaths, feel the woman's heartbeat quicken.

With Max's head on Chloe's shoulder, Chloe could hear Max whispering incoherently.

Whispering to herself again.

“-...what you want, just shut-up-shut-up-shut-up...-”

Chloe's heartbeat felt shallow. This messed up side of Max was...getting hella scary.

Stella's brother was shoving his cell phone in Stella's face. She ignored it, but he was insistent. So desperate that he even went to Brooke, who begrudgingly took it just to get him to stop freaking out. As Stella kept yelling at him, Brooke checked the phone.
Butterflies were spiraling in Chloe's stomach like a tornado.

“What in Plato's Republic is going on back here?!” came the voice of one Victoria-friggin'-Chase, right into Chloe's ear, nearly scaring her sideways. Her voice was like cat nails on a chalkboard. Only in the middle of a nightclub, and the cat was trying really hard to you on top of every other goddamn thing.

“Jeez,” Chloe snapped at her, still coddling a panicking, incoherent Max.

“What happened?!” demanded 'Vickie.'

Victoria placed a consoling palm against Max's back, staring at Chloe with furrowed brows.

“She take something?” Victoria darkly asked.

Chloe shook her head fervently. Then second-guessed herself and shrugged. Victoria's eyeballs practically rolled through the back of her head, and she glared at the family feud going on behind her.

“Did she take something?!” Victoria barked at them.

“No!” Kamat insisted in an irritable shout, tossing up his arms. “She fuckin'...texted me last night! Told me to meet her here, wanted to...get a little pick-me-up! But when I show up with what she asked for, she freaks out, acts like she doesn't know what I'm doing here when she's the one who-”

“That's enough!” Victoria snapped, shooing her hand out at him. “Didn't ask for your life story, fucko. Take your back-alley prescriptions and piss off!”

Brooke, meanwhile, was showing Stella the guy's phone. The look of disbelief on Stella's face when she turned to Max's back sent a chill up Chloe's spine. Just like...-

Cold tiles, kitchen floor, mischievous smile, eager hands...

'Easy to please.'

Stella and Chloe exchanged baffled, worried, scared looks.

“Max,” Chloe asked into Max's ear, “Did...Did you...invite this asshole here?”

“No,” Max choked desperately. “I didn't! I think...I think she did,” Max winced, sobbing into Chloe's sleeve.

“Wh...-?” Chloe's voice cracked. “What, like...somebody took your phone, or...-?”

Guy had said 'last night.' Nobody had been with Max last night except Chloe. And Chloe felt pretty damn sure that at least she hadn't somehow texted some douchebag she didn't know.

So, what was Max doing texting him? And why would she lie about it?

She wouldn't lie about it. Period. Not to Chloe, that was for damn sure.

But...if she didn't know what happened, then it wasn't technically lying, huh?

As the group before them squabbled with each other, Chloe tuned them out, trying to focus on Maxine in the middle of everything.

Max nudged herself up from Chloe's collarbone. Her brows wriggled, her eyes flickered with
confused frustration, her fingers grasped irritably at the air by her temple, like she was trying to will the right words from her mind.

“Max,” Chloe huffed, starting to want some answers to all of this. “Did you invite him here?”

“No,” Max struggled to explain. “It-... We, it's this-... this Other one, she- she's, like-... I-I don't know, it's-... Augh, I can't-...!”

The words coming from Max's mouth were, like... crazy mumbling. She just kept talking, her words dissolving into something not directed at Chloe, just... kind of quiet rambling. Chloe couldn't even hear it anymore as it got engulfed in the nebulous ocean of nightclub noise.

And yet, what she'd made out... made sense to Chloe in this weird way. The pieces of this, er, strange side of Max that had been showing up lately... they were fitting together. Kinda. Whatever was wrong with Max, that was the after-effect, huh? She started acting strange? Possessed, almost?

Chloe's mind couldn't help but dash through loop-de-loops like Sonic the Paradoxical Hedgehog, trying to figure out what crazy time-travel junk could be causing this problem. The fact that Max seemed, like, physically incapable of explaining this shit was, ya know, only slightly terrifying as all get-out.

What if...-?

Shit.

Or maybe it's like...-

Goddamn. Damnit. Fuck.

Too many crazy theories. Possibilities. Sci-Fi/Fantasy plots that had unanswerable questions, unsolvable problems. After all, when this whole mess had started, it hadn't really made sense in the first place. Tornadoes didn't just magically appear because someone rang a fire alarm in a high school bathroom. That wasn't how 'Chaos Theory' worked. But it had happened, apparently.

So, what good was trying to figure it out when Chloe felt powerless about any reason, any rationale, behind any of it? All the same, she figured there had to be something she was missing. Some piece of the puzzle. If she could just-

“Chloe!”

Stella had popped the warped bubble of thought Chloe had lost herself in. All of the ruckus they were drifting in came coughing up out of Chloe's lungs as she came up for air.

Max was still clinging to Chloe, in whatever kind of half-asleep stupor she'd kept falling into.

“Come on, we're leaving!” Stella snapped. She had a... whole other tone about her.

But not, like... fully condemning? Angry, yea. Fershur.

But also hella worried, concerned.

“What about...-?” Chloe started up, taking note of Kamat, who was arguing with Brooke.

“Huh?!” Stella grunted at Chloe's murmuring, pushing at them to get a move on.

Victoria was on her phone, barking away irritably as she started shoving her way off toward the
“We-are-leaving!” Stella reiterated, tugging at Chloe's elbow with dire impatience.

“Ey!” Kamat roared, noticing them starting their escape. “I can't just go back to my guys without...!"

Stella was intent on giving the prick the cold shoulder, and he was not happy about it. Brushing Brooke aside, he marched right toward them. Instead of blowing by Chloe and Max, however, the fucker grabbed Max by the shoulder, ripping her from Chloe's grasp.

What ensued in the seconds after that was a lot of cursing and yelling and accusing, but before it could go any further, Chloe sucker-punched the guy in the jaw. He went reeling back a couple steps, stumbling against the wall and tripping over a recycling bin. Cans and bottles spilled across the floor, but the noise was negligible.

Chloe, feeling really satisfied with herself, shook her knuckle loose and flexed her bicep a little. Sure, her stomach was getting a bit pudgy but goddamn did her arms make up for the slack. All that work she'd been doing had its uses off the clock.

“What the fuck, Chloe?!” shrieked Stella from behind.

But Chloe wasn't done. This creepo wanted to roll up on her friend's life, uninvited, stir shit around, and try pulling her fiancé into said shit? That wasn't gonna fly, not at all.

The moron was fumbling his way up out of a puddle of recyclables, and Chloe stepped toward him, pulling her boot back, ready to kick him in the ribs. Or maybe the stomach, if she got squeamish at the last moment.

“Chloe!” Max cried raggedly, restraining her partner from behind.

Chloe caught herself in this reflexive lapse of rage and tried to calm down.

All that could hit her brain for a stunned moment was Victoria's snarky little 'Attack Dog' nickname.

Chloe glared down at Kamat's stunned fury, and she warned him, “Don't ever touch her again, fuck-face! Or else I'll...!” She jerked her arms out of Max's hands. “Just...! Stay away from us!”

With that said, Chloe whirled round, took Max's hand with a tight grip, and nodded solemnly to Stella, whose expression was even more pissed than it had been.

“Damn,” Brooke remarked as she caught up with them.

Funny part was, barely anyone seemed to notice their little spat between the commotion of the club. Still, best to make a speedy getaway. Chloe tried to check with Max, but her partner was bitter and unresponsive on the trek toward the exit.

Shortly thereafter and group of them had 'warped' out the back and into that parking lot.

Victoria was already there, standing alone. She was all in a huff, clawing grumpily at her own hair as she glared at her phone.

“Thanks for the good time, ladies,” Vic spat, shaking her head with disbelief. “My hook-up bailed on me because of your drama.”
“Shut up,” Chloe sneered, so done with this whole thing. “You don't wanna be there when it hits the fan? No one's makin' you stay. I sure didn't ask you to come.”

“Yea,” Stells added, cruising right across the lot with her fists jammed in her hoodie. “You can take off with your new stripper buddy whenever you want to, Victoria, don't have your whole evening ruined on my account, or anything...”

“She's...-!” Victoria was getting left behind by the whole group, and puffed an exasperated sigh as she caught up to them. “She's not a 'stripper,' she's a secretary, first off. And secondly-”

“She says she's a 'secretary,'” Max seethed doubt.

“Who asked you, Caulfield? Anyway, secondly, I got invited to party, not help wash your dirty laundry, so—”

“Then back off!” Stella groaned, tossing out her arm to her side, shooing Victoria away.

Chloe wanted to take satisfaction in seeing Vickie get discarded so justly, but...she didn't have it in her to feel good about any of this shit, 'side from getting to pop that prick in the face.

“Yea,” Chloe added, trying to stay on Stella's side with this. “We didn't plan on this, either, but we stick around when things get rough, so—”

Stella protested, “Random violence is not gonna help this! Jeez, Chloe, what the hell is wrong with you?! You're not a bouncer!”

“I literally told you, like, fifteen minutes ago, I would deck that asshole for you. Did I not?”

“Sh--...Sure, but that was-”

“I ain't playin' when I say that shit!”

“Y-yea, clearly, you-”

“You said you’d 'like to see that,' that you'd 'take me up on it,' so when shit got real, I—”

“OK! Whatever!”

Stella's pace quickened as they reached the parking lot's edge, where her car was. She leaned against the driver-side door, mashed her palms against her face, pushing her glasses over her head, and started sobbing.

“St-Stella, I...—” Max gently broke off from Chloe, trying to comfort her friend.

“Don't,” Stella cut her off, biting at her bottom lip. Yikes. Just the tone in Stells' voice ran cold as a blizzard. “I cannot believe you would-...How did you even-...? What made you think it was a good idea to bring him here?”

“I-I didn't!” Max insisted, starting to choke up on her own voice again. “Stella...Pl-...Please, believe me, I—”

“I saw the texts, Max!” Stella winced, pushing Max away from her. “Why is everyone fucking lying to me tonight-...?”

“Hey,” said Brooke squeamishly. “Stella...Maybe...there's more to it than-—”

“You saw his phone, too,” Stella snapped, scraping her nails against her scalp. “They've been texting all week, we double-checked the number—” Stella paused, sighing at Max and sticking a tired hand toward her friend. “It's her.”

Stella, nostrils flared and eyes wide and wet, scowled at Max. Both women's faces were quivering messes of hurt and confusion.

“I can't believe you guys,” Stella whimpered at the lot of them. “Victoria: worried about making
connections for yourself instead of what's going on in our lives. Chloe: not even thinking before acting? And Max: I don't even get what is going on with you, I want to help you, but this is past the fucking line for me.”

“Stella,” Max panted out in a panic as she watched their friend slam her car door on them. “Stella! I'm sorry! I swear, I didn't mean for...-! S-something's wrong here, I would never-...!”

Stella started up the engine.

Brooke walked around the back, shaking her head with stoic disappointment.

“Uh...I'll...” Brooke grimaced awkwardly at them. “Call you tomorrow...” She shrugged sheepishly, dropping herself into the passenger side door.

Chloe tried to give Max a comforting rub on the arm as she strolled up to Stella's car window, rattling it with her knuckle.

“Yo! Dude, don't just leave, Stells!”

Muffled by her car, Stella shouted, “Everyone just...leave me the fuck alone for the rest of the night! OK? Can something just go the way I ask it to? Just fucking once would be great...”

Chloe and Stella swapped tense expressions, and there it was again: that really odd feeling in Chloe's stomach, like motion sickness. And Chloe knew somehow that if she just...backed off, that it'd be better. Hell, Chloe knew that better than the rest of them: that some space was what Stella needed right then.

“Wait!” Max cried, thrusting up her palm. The engine revved. “Wait!” Max huffed forcefully, her fingers tightening, writhing at the air.

Chloe felt a bit sickened at the sight – she knew what Max was trying to do. Maybe it was a good thing that it wasn't working...

Stella beeped her horn, startling Chloe and Max back and away from the car. Max's eyelids flickered, her legs wobbled, and Chloe secured her within her grip before the poor idiot fell over.

As Stella and Brooke pulled out of the parking lot and drove off, Max wiped her sleeve against her nose, and Chloe bit at her lip, helping her partner re-steady her balance.

Then Victoria had to speak.

“Rude...”

“Vickie,” Max puffed, hand clamped on her forehead. “She's...got some serious shit she's dealing with, all right?”

“Doesn't mean she should drag us into it!”

“She didn't!” Max argued.

“Right,” snipped Victoria, tapping a dainty yet sharp fingernail toward Max. “You dragged us into it when you invited that creeper.”

Max choked out a weird, whimpering sound of disbelief.

“Man, whatever, Victoria...I didn't...” Max scrunched her nails through waves of brown and red
hair. “I...I haven't been in my right mind lately, and...”

“I’ve heard,” Vickie sneered. “So, I don’t get why taking a fucking road trip back to that hellhole town is going to help any of us out, especially you.”

“Vic,” Chloe grunted, feeling Max's abdomen quiver. “Step off.”

Just as Chloe and 'Vickie's' eyes sent out sparks, Max cut them off.

“Not now, you two.” She broke free from Chloe's grip, storming off across the lot. “Not right now... Can hardly cope with myself tonight, I can’t... Augh...”

The cat and the dog, so to speak, tucked their tails between their legs and started to follow Max, who kept a bit of distance from them as she quickly started making her way back toward the main street.

“You take her to the shrink yet?” Vickie suddenly asked in a hushed voice.

Wh-...?

For realsies, huh? Victoria was gonna act like they were allies, here?

“Yea, she saw her doc,” Chloe said through stifled syllables. “Whadda you care?”

“Don't be dense. I might not know how to act around your guys' weird little clique, but that doesn't mean I don't care.”

“Coulda fooled me...”

“Oh-my-god,” Vic seethed in a whisper. “This is exactly what I told Brooke: you turn every interaction with me into...this.”

“I do, huh?” Chloe retorted softly, frigidly.

“Fine, fine, we both do,” hushed Vic. “Whatever, just-... Fill me in on what is wrong with her so I can help. Jesus. You’re so stubborn...”

Chloe’s knuckles were rubbing against each other within her jacket pockets from her frustration.

So, first off: Max was hiding something from her. Seriously? After everything they’d been through?

Secondly: it actually was really bothering her that Stells was mad with them. Illogically, unreasonably bothering her. Stells was a stand-up gal, she didn’t deserve having to put up with... all of this.

Thirdly: it was also really annoying that she couldn’t even be mad at Vic guilt-free like she was used to; Vic had honest-to-shit dropped her evening for Max’s sake, gotten all in a tizzy over Max's sake, was checking and questioning and looking out for her...

... And... damn, friggin’ fourthly: What was up with good people like Max n’ Stells having all of this garbage just... just continually dumped on them over and over like this? Argh.

“How about you let me deal with my fiancé?” Chloe whispered with harsh defense. “Huh?”
Max grumbled from up ahead, “How about you both stop talking about me behind my back?”

Chloe’s heart jittered fretfully at Max’s irritation. Crap...

Victoria huffed and tossed her eyes up, shaking her head as she moved away from Chloe's side and toward Max's.

“Maybe we’ll do that,” Victoria growled, “when you start explaining what your goddamn issue is, Caulfield!”

“It’s none of your business!” Max snapped back, shooting Vic a wide-eyed shrug.

“Do you know even where you’re going?” Chloe interjected, worried that they'd get themselves lost on their way to the subway station. They’d opted to park their car at a BART station on the bay, rather than pushing across bridge traffic to and from SF, but...Chloe was starting to wonder if that had been a good choice.

“Yes, I know where we're going,” Max groaned with a facepalm.

“Don't change the subject,” quipped Victoria relentlessly. “What the fuck are you doing, inviting Stella’s asshole brother to that club?”

Chloe sighed, “I could ask the same about Stells inviting you...”

“Give it a fucking rest,” Vic huffed. “I am so over cat-fighting with you right now.”

Chloe scowled at the back of Vic's head, shoving her fists into her denim vest's pockets and continuing to trail behind them.

“Max,” Vic said sharply. “I asked you a question.”

“I don't have an answer,” Max grunted, checking her phone. “If...If I invited Kamat, I don't remember doing it, and there’s...no evidence on my phone that...-” She trailed off, shaking her head to herself. “She's so...fucking...-!”

“Stella and Brooke don't just take he-said-she-said bullshit for fact,” Vic reminded. “I've heard about your blackouts lately, Caulfield, don't lie to me – we want to help you.”

Chloe swallowed the uncertainty in her throat. She felt too chicken-shit to step in because Vic was right, and Chloe...hadn't been able to figure out what was going on, much less help or fix it. Maybe it'd be worth a shot, letting Vickie pry something out of Max.

“Who would've told you about that?” Max mumbled with a touch of pain in her tone.

“Doesn't matter,” Vic blew it off.

“That's...not your business,” Max breathed shakily. “Who told you?”

“Someone who's worried about you, numbskull.”

“Brooke?”

“I'm not...-”

“Fucking...Brooke...” Max ground her teeth together, shoving her hand across her scalp.

“Look, Max,” Vic redirected. “You can keep trying to deflect this all you want – a skill I'm sure your fucking fiancé has taught you well –” Yep, screw you, too, Vickie. “--but the longer you both keep ignoring this, the worse it's going to get.”

“Since when do you care?” Max winced, starting to choke up a bit.
Chloe’s stomach was churning with bitterness and fear. As they rounded a corner, she strode up to Max's side and tried to take her partner's hand in her own. Max resisted at first, but Chloe tried a second time, which took.

“How long have we known each other?” Vic retorted. “Five years. And you know what? I don't know when I started caring, but I do – even about you, Price – but this shit is really testing my patience. I already lost someone I...cared about to...this kind of bullshit, OK? You need fucking help, Caulfield. Get it.”

Victoria took a deep, frustrated breath, then glared at Chloe.

Chloe felt an awful hole rip through her chest as visions of Blackwell Academy punched their way out from inside.

“Well?!” Vic snapped. “Neither of you have anything to say to me?”

Chloe’s jaws were clenched. She had to force out something.

“Appreciate the concern, Vic,” Chloe managed to sigh out. “But this our problem. 'Kay?”

“No,” Vic replied curtly. “It was your problem, until it started affecting the rest of us.”

“Where is this coming from?” Max demanded. “You bitch about how you don't wanna get pulled into our drama, and five minutes later, now you're trying to push your way in! And-and...are you seriously comparing this to...-? No. Fuck no. Urgh. I don't get you!”

Victoria’s face boiled, her nose wrinkled, and her lips pouted. She crossed her arms and shook her head.

“Nevermind, then,” she spat out. Was that a sob starting to form? “I should’ve known you'd both pull this shit, you always do...Everything seems to revolve around you two, but when it comes time to step up and be accountable, you tuck your tails and run.”

“Don't be a diva,” said Chloe tiredly, trying to soften her words. “Ugh. Sorry. I don't mean, like...Ya know, I think we all just...need to cool our fuckin' jets for the night, reconvene in the morning.”

“Sure, fine,” Vic muttered with a toss of her wrist, slowing down behind them as she pulled out her phone.

Chloe slowed down in turn, and Max tugged at her to keep going.

“Chloe,” Max whispered irately. “Dude, just... let her cry in her corner, OK?”

“Max, hold up a sec,” Chloe requested, disconnecting her hand from Max's and holding up a gentle palm.

“Chloe,” Max panted desperately. “We need to be whole. We need-...” Max froze up, grasping at her chest. “-need to...-...home. We, um, we need to...be home.”

Friggin' eh.

“Just a minute, Max – damn.” Chloe puffed with some aggravation, pushing her hand through her half head of disheveled hair. It ached like a son of a bitch to see Max so...out of sorts, but...Chloe felt really off leaving things with everyone like this. She'd never felt so...physically messed up from social anxiety before. This was bizarre.
“Yo,” Chloe said to Victoria, strutting back toward her with as much stern swagger as she could muster. “How’re you getting home?”

“I'm calling an Uber,” Vic said dismissively. “You just said we should back off. I'm doing that.”

“Y-yea, I know, just-...” Chloe sighed, casting a look back over her shoulder at Max, who seemed lost in her own head again. Jesus fuck. She turned back to Victoria, but her throat caught. Her lips felt glued together.

“ What ?” Vic grunted, tilting her phone down.

Chloe dusted her damp eyes and shrugged.

“Just...thanks. I guess. For reals. I...I'm pickin' up what you're putting down, just...give us...-” Chloe caught herself. She could feel her eyes rolling back in her head and she pulled them to the side. Clearing her throat, she finished, “...give us some time, here. 'Kay?”

Victoria's nostrils tightened, her lower lip propped out – like some confused animal who'd stuck its nose too close to a pile of crap.

“Sure,” she snorted out, sticking out her hand. “You know, I meant it when I apologized.”

“Huh?”

“For-... You know.” Vic's eyes darted to the side with embarrassment.

“Oh...” NO NO NOPE WE ARE NOT TALKING ABOUT THAT RIGHT NOW “Y-yea, it's-...Yup. Uh...-”

“I swear to god, I'm past that, I am not trying to...home-wreck you, or...-”

“OK, OK,” Chloe grunted hurriedly, extremely uncomfortable with the topic. All of Chloe's experiences indicated that Victoria Chase was not one to be trusted.

“Truce?” Victoria extended her hand begrudgingly.

Well, all of Chloe's experiences up until that evening, anyway.

She took Victoria's hand and clenched it tightly. Vic squeezed back with some force.

“Truce.”

With that settled, Chloe tried to get Vic to let them stick around as she hailed her Uber ride, but Vic seemed really pushy about them giving her space. And, once again, like with Stella, Chloe knew in her gut that it was the right call to leave as requested.

By the time Chloe got back to Max, her partner was sniveling and snot-nosed. Bleugh.

As Chloe embraced her weeping lover, she had to tune out the incoherent mumblings, the sobs, and try to find Max's warmth to keep her going long enough to get the two of them home.

Chloe felt physically ill from all of the stress the past two days had presented.

She knew exactly what awaited her: another cold evening, alone in her bed, without answers, without resolution, without the Maxine Caulfield she knew.

Another night, another mess, and with each new mess they got bigger and dirtier and more painful.
'Just a coupla landlubbers what's in o'er yer heads.'

'Best be battening down the damned hatches...'

—

“Who fixes broken people? Is it only other broken people, ones who've already been ruined? And do we need to be fixed? It was the messiness and hurt in our pasts that drove us, and that same hurt connected us at a subdermal level, the kind of scars written so deeply in your cells that you can't even see them anymore, only recognize them in someone else.”

~ Leah Raeder, 'Unteachable'

—

Chapter End Notes

A/N: The concept for District 7-6 was inspired by the free Overclocked Remix album, Super Cartography Bros.
The gaming drinks are taken from the community website The Drunken Moogle.
Masks

Life is Strange
All Wounds

Chapter 11 – Masks

“*How do I take off a mask when it stops being a mask? When it's as much a part of me as me?*”
~ Mr. Robot

- Rrrmmmmmmmm!

- Rrrmmmmmmmm!

“Rrughhh...?”

Max's phone was vibrating, jarring her from her sleep.
Max struggled to open her heavy eyelids. It was still...dark. Her eyes slid back closed.

Who the hell was calling her, anyway, and why?

With an irritable groan, Max stretched out her hand toward the sound of her vibrating phone. Her arm was like rubber – her hand was asleep.

She couldn't see or even feel it, but she could hear her numb hand knock something off of the table beside her. It landed with a *-thud- against the carpeted floor. Max suddenly remembered she'd slept on the couch again. Probably had just knocked over a glass. Hopefully an empty one.

At least she hadn't broken it.

*Like everything else.*

“God,” Max groaned, trying to roll herself round in such a way as her not-asleep arm could reach for the phone. Between her groggy, half-awake state and the darkness of the living room, it was an awkward affair just retrieving her phone from six feet away.
On top of the glass, she knocked over a box of tissues and a coaster in her finagling.
The phone rattled within her grasp as she strained to see who in the *fuck* was disrupting her morning.

(Calling. . .)
(Brooke)
What...-?

.-
.-
.-

-RRRMMRRRRRMM!

Part of Max very much wanted to just ignore the call. Go back to sleep.

*Don't you dare.*

*You answer that damned phone, Max Caulfield.*

OK, OK! Fine...

.-
.-
.-

-RRRMMRRRRRMM!

Max’s thumb had to try three times to get her phone to wake up.

“*Hhh-...?”* But Max could barely speak. She coughed on her own phlegm a bit.

(“Max?”) Brooke sounded pretty annoyed.

“*Buh-...”* was all Max could manage out at first.

(“Are you OK?”)

“*Brooke,”* Max finally wheezed out. She cleared her throat some more and tried to re-position her ass upright. “*What's-...?”* She was flicking her asleep arm around, trying to wake it back up.

(“Where *are* you guys?”) Brooke demanded. (“*We're going to be late. And Chloe's not answering my messages.””)

Huh...?

Late for...*what?* Weren't they all, like...not on speaking terms, or something? Given what had happened the night before? Max maybe couldn't remember all of the specifics, but...she knew for
sure she'd made everyone mad.

“Late...-?” yawned Max. “Late for...-?”

As Max scratched an itch beneath her left boob, Brooke growled a sigh.

(“Did your guys' alarm not go off, or what? You said you guys were coming.”)

“Come to...-” Another yawn, bigger this time. “-aughhh!...Coming to what?”

(“Max, just...get Chloe on the phone and go...get yourself some coffee, or...something.”)

Welp. Brooke had reached her 'I'm done with you right now' phase. It was an inevitability with her in any conversation when the other person wasn't clued in or 'up to speed' the way she wanted. Brooke had very little patience for ignorance, and...Max was pretty ignorant to whatever was going on. She was too busy trying to scratch that damn itch on her rib.

(“Max.”)

“OK, OK...”

After clawing up her chest in drowsy irritation, Max swayed her weight forth, hoisting herself onto her feet.

“Chloe...?!” she called out through the dark apartment, her voice still a bit hoarse. “Shit,” she grunted whilst accidentally tripping over the crap she'd knocked off the coffee table. “Chloe,” she croaked out with more force, but it was more like a dying breath than a call.

As Max fumbled her way past the kitchen and bathroom, she found herself feeling sick over everything from the night proper.

Max asked sleepily into her phone, “How's...Stella?”

(“Uhhh, even less of a morning person than you, on top of what happened last night, so...not too great. Thanks for…asking? I guess? The fact that we're going to be late, though? I doubt that's going to perk up her spirits.”)

“Oh...” was all Max was able to reply with. Her brain felt…so friggin' fried…

Max stubbed her toe on who-knew-what as she pushed herself through their dark, cluttered apartment. At least a tiny bit of sunlight was trickling into the bedroom over Chloe, who was snoring on their bed. Flipping on their bedroom light switch, Max was momentarily stunned with...warm fuzziness at the sight of Chloe spooning the pillow Max usually used.

Drooling into said pillow and snoring gently, Chloe looked...just, so cute.

(“Wait,”) Brooke suddenly grumbled. (“Why would you have to find Chloe, anyway? Don't you two...-?”)

Max let her phone-toting arm sag, setting the device down on Chloe's nightstand. Brooke's muted voice was ignored as Max planted her palms against either side of Chloe's head and bent over, planting a wet kiss on Chloe's cheek.

Chloe began to stir, her brows furrowed and eyes squinting from the bright light above.

“Chloe,” said Max, lifting herself up from the bed.
“What the crap, dude?” Chloe groaned groggily.

“Brooke's on the phone,” Max said drearily, rubbing at her aching eyeballs. “Says she...” A big yawn again, this time with stretched arms and all. “-...hAAughhh...-!”

Chloe quickly brushed sand from her eyelashes and took to Max's phone without difficulty. Over the years, Max had become grateful that one of them was a morning person, at least.

“Whaddup?” said Chloe with surprising clarity.

Relieved that her long quest was finally over, the hero laid down her sword and took a knee. Or, well, an ass. On the edge of the bed. And let her head sag, her eyes close...

“-...Yea, but what time...?- Agh, fucking...fuck! My alarm didn’t-...N-No, it's cool, we...we'll make up for lost...time, just, uhh...-”

Chloe began to slap Max on the shoulder, which was rather jarring in her half-asleep state, causing her heart to flutter awkwardly.

“Dude,” Chloe whispered, but Max just whimpered like a grumpy puppy. “Get dressed, come on...Wait, what?” she raised her voice back up. “Y-yea, totally. We're-...I-I mean, if...if Stells is still down with it, like...I dunno if...if sleeping on it made her-...'Kay. Yea, yea. Got it. I just-...Ya know, I don't want her to like-...Rrrright! Yea. To...llly...rr...t on...n... .. af .. ...lt .. ...”

While Chloe was talking, Max was slipping back to sleep to the sound of Chloe's voice.

Her feet were cold.

Her cheeks were wet and cold.

Her fingers were numb and wet and cold.

Her lips were shivering and numb and wet and cold.

Wind whistled, rain slammed against her!

LIGHTNING flashed and cracked through her hazed vision.

THUNDER BOOMED through her skull!

As Max's eyes snapped open from the shock, her chest burned from the way her heart had skipped.

I didn't like that any more than you, but you need to get our ass in gear.

Screw you! Asshole...

Look, are we doing this damned thing, or not?

WHAT THING?

...Goddamnit.

That was-...Last night? So, I guess... I told her that, didn't I...?

But I thought... you were...-
What the hell are you talking about?!

*What is going on with us?!
What is going on with us?!

“Maxiiiiine,” Chloe whined tiredly, catching their attention. She was sagging against their doorframe with a palm in her face. A suitcase and a packed duffle bag were dropped by her feet. “Whyyy are you not changed yet? Seriously?” She let her hand fall, slapping her own thigh with bridled impatience.

Max forced her eyes open, and realized she was already standing up.

“I-I'm sorry, Chloe,” Max choked out, wobbling on her bare feet across their bedroom. She realized she was...starting to cry. “I-I sorta spaced, and...and, I'm sorry...”

Sniffling and brushing her damp eyeballs, Max moaned out a pathetic sound.

“Wh-whoa, dude, it's...-It's OK! Be chill. I didn't mean...-” Chloe sounded exasperated.

“I'm not a dude,” Max sobbed, not even sure why that fucking mattered.

She just wanted to...rage for some reason.

“Max,” Chloe pleaded, “you know I say it like...-” A sigh spilled from Chloe's nose as she reached out to embrace Max.

But Max didn't want a hug.

She didn't know what she wanted.

To go back to sleep would've been friggin’ nice, though...

*Not happening.*

“Babe,” Chloe softly called as Max swam through their cramped closet. “What is with you? Huh? What-...What's wrong? How can I...-?”

“I don't...know,” Max seethed through clenched teeth.

Her skull felt like it could burst from some pressure swelling inside.

“I don't even...know where we're going at this ungodly hour in the fucking morning, so just...-”

“Wh...-?” Chloe panted with a kind of...pained tone.

Max was out of touch with whatever was going on around her, and she had been all night and...still was.

And Chloe could tell just how bad it was getting now. And that hurt her, of course. It hurt Chloe to see Max like this.

Which, of course, only made Max more angry, because she was hurting Chloe, after hurting her closest friends just hours earlier.

‘After five years, you're still Max Caulfield.’
Still stuck in a never-ending spiral of hurting everyone around you. Even when they're not dropping like flies, you're still snagging them in your web of lies.

*Not now. OK?*

*Please?*

...Yea, all right. Sorry.

*Wait... I'm the one who's supposed to say...-

Huh? Wait! Yea, why did I...?*

*What the fuck?*

*What the fuck?*

Max found herself, still standing in nothing but her undies and a t-shirt, holding a weathered black t-shirt with a gothic moth printed on it.

It was *that* shirt. The one she'd borrowed from Chloe. The one she'd wore the night she'd been kidnapped, five years ago.

She didn't...even know she still *owned* that shirt...She hadn't seen it in...-

Max dropped the shirt to the closet floor in disgust.

No. No, they weren't w...*She wasn't wearing that* to...-

Wait, where was she going?

*Arcadia Bay, YOU IDIOT.*

“Max?!” Chloe's voice was a furious whisper over Max's shoulder, causing Max to jolt with alarm. “Holy shit, you *still* aren't dressed? What in the ffffff...-?” Chloe was creasing her palms against her forehead so hard Max worried the scalp would slip off. “Rrrghh, they're gonna be here any minute, we gotta move dat ass.”

As Chloe shoved Max out of her way, Max realized her cheeks were damp. Or were they?

“Put this on,” Chloe huffed, shoving a striped sweatshirt at Max. “This, too.” A pair of white khaki pants. “We'll...shower n' shit when we get to my parents' place,” Chloe said dismissively, pushing Max out of the closet.

“Arcadia...-?” said Max dully. “Is that where...-?”

Chloe froze. Max stared at Chloe with narrow, suspicious eyes. Chloe reciprocated the gesture, then whirled around, facing their bedroom wall. Hands clamped against her temples, Chloe took a deep breath.

She was...*pissed*. Max could tell. And she was doing her damnedest to hide it.

“I'm sorry,” Max eked out, her throat catching. “Ch...Chloe, I'm so, so sorry, I...-” Friggin' sobbing was starting right back up. “I keep...spacing, and...-

Wiping her eyes with the clean clothes she'd just been given, Max realized that Chloe had planted her forehead against the wall, trying to shell herself in a moment of solitude.
Knowing better than to make things any worse than she already had, Max scrambled to get her clothes on. Chloe just...stood against the wall during this thankfully brisk process.

Banging her head. Banging her head.

_BANGING HER HEAD._

Blood dripping down the wall from the hole in her head.

No! No-no-no that wasn't supposed to...-

But

she was

Max was...starting to feel a little more awake!

A little more...in control!

She was in control.

_Everything was under control._

**Right?**

**Right?**

-Kachunk!-

The sound of plastic and metal slamming against itself popped Max back into reality.

Well..._this_ reality, at least.

Wait, she was...all dressed, all ready to go? She had on shoes, a jacket...her messenger bag was even between her ankles. But...just a few seconds ago, wasn't she upstairs in their closet?

Chloe was gripping Max's arm tightly. Brooke was in the driver's seat, and Stella was riding shotgun. Max was in the back in the middle, with Chloe occupying the right, and...-? Victoria? Victoria was on the left side? For real? All of them, in the same car?

Max could've sworn that Stella's road-trip idea was off the table after what had gone down.

The muffled sounds of the voices around her gradually poured into her brain.

“-let 'er rip, _heh._ All systems are go.” Chloe was trying to be playful to lighten the mood. “Houston, we...do _not_ have...a problem...”

It was _not_ working.

Victoria dryly said, “…_Yea._ So, like...you can stop talking now.”

“...Right,” Chloe conceded sheepishly as the car's engine started up.

They were in Stella's car. The car's internal light faded, casting the lot of them in shadow.

It was at this moment, as Brooke pulled the car off the curb, that Max realized the sun was just _barely_ peeking up over the mountainous hills across the water in the distance. She let her eyes adjust to that
light, and as she did so, Chloe nuzzled her face into Max's neck. Chloe's warm breath against Max's skin was soothing – her frazzled hair tickling at Max's ears – calming her from her chaotic awakening.

As Brooke asked Stella to bring up their GPS, Chloe breathed a quiet question into Max's ear.

“How you doin', Maxie?”

“I don't...feel right.”

“Mm,” Chloe hummed back with some sorrow. “I figured that out...”

Max didn’t even know how much time had passed since she'd woken up, but she knew she hadn't...been all there for all of it. Which wasn't anything new, given how the past few days had been going.

Had she finally done it? Had that last Rewind at the car crash been the straw that broke the cosmic camel's back?

Had Max broken time?
Well...broken it enough that it was starting to fall apart?

*You broke us, anyway...*

I'm trying to fix it...

*No. You're still focused on her.*

*It's always you and her, you and her, like nothing else matters.*

What else should matter if not her?

*That's exactly how we...-!*

*No.*

*You know what?*

*I'm not having this same fucking argument with you again.*

*Not right now.*

Good. I didn't ask for your opinion.

But then, I never do

*and I always give it anyway*

*even when no one asks for it*

*because I can never keep my mouth shut*

*even when it's literally shut*

*here I am*
yapping and yapping to myself
with myself
at myself
me, me, me...

And me, and me, and me, and me...
And me, and me, and me, and me...
And me, and me, and me, and me...

“-... re... d... whe. Is... -?”
“- is... after... the wh... -”
“...Really?”

“Wh...Shhhhere, I-I mean...maybe...?”

Max could hear their voices, faintly. Muffled. She couldn't...see anything. Like she was...stuck.

“Chloe, you know how she is,” whispered Stella. “She'll lie through her teeth about it.”

“...What?” Chloe sounded off-put.

“No, she's right,” Brooke agreed. “Totally.”

“Brooke. Max...isn't a liar,” Chloe was defensive.

“Not to you, maybe,” Brooke sassed back.

Max was starting to...feel...Her fingers, her lips, she could barely move them, but sensation was started to come back.

“Don't look at me,” Victoria hissed quietly. “She's been doing that shit since high school.”

“Doing what?” Chloe snapped in a whisper.

“Seriously?” Victoria sighed. “Max is a people pleaser. And she's nosey as fuck. Always sticking her face in other people's business, and then talking about it like she knows what's going on. Trying to get on everyone’s good side all the time...”

“Yea, well,” Chloe's claws were getting ready. “Ever occur to you that her being nosey is how we found out about that fucked up teacher of yours in the first place?”

“The idea passed my mind,” Victoria conceded, as closely as she ever did. “I'm not saying it like it's...inherently bad. I know how that game is played.”

“Yea. Because you sure as-”
“I do what's necessary, Price. Same as any of us.”

“You all think she's a liar. Seriously? Oh my god.” A disgruntled huff of disbelief.

“She's obviously covering something up, as usual,” Stella puffed out. “L-look, Chloe, I'm not-...I mean, I am mad at her, I'm-...I am trying to understand what is going on here. OK?”
And then a fierce cough erupted from Max's throat, burning at her chest.

Talking about us behind our back, huh?

Fuckers.

“Dude, Max. Chill.”

We are so chill, shut your...-

Wait. What?

“Clearly not.”

“We weren't talking behind your back, Max, we just...-”

“Wait, have you been awake this whole time?”

A warm, soft...thing. On her head. Not Chloe...

“Guys, leave her alone.”

“She's burning up over here...”

“Get your hand offa her.”

“Oh, please, don't be ridiculous. I'm checking to see if-”

“Off.”

“Fine, then do your job and take care of her.”

“The fuck ya think I'm doin', here?”

“A whole lot of nothing.”

“And you're a nurse, all of a sudden?”

“Look. Are you guys positive she didn't take anything last night?”

Like you give a rat's ass, Victoria...

“Tss! Excuse me for trying to help, then! Jesus.”

What? How...-?

“Max, are you...OK?”

I've...been better.

“I mean, ya look...pretty bad...”

“Max...?”

Y-yea, I'm here. Sorry, I just-

“Can she hear us?”

“Fuck.”

I can hear you! What's...-?

“Max. Hello?”

I could hear you the entire time you've been talking about me.

“See? I told you she wasn't asleep...”
Chloe, what the hell is going on?

“What is wrong with her?”

“I-I dunno, I tried-...I had her see her shrink the other day, but...but it just...-”

*It made it worse.*

“...Y-yea, exactly.”

Can they not hear me?

*Can they hear me?*

“Oh...can who hear you?”

Shit. Hello?

.

.

.

HELLO?!

“Max? Can who hear you?”

*Me? Is it me?*

“...Well. She's lost it.”

Lost what?

“I am telling you, she must have taken something.”

*A* *m* *I* *t* *h* *e* *o* *n* *e* *w* *h* *o* *'s...-?

*Ooooh.*

*Ugh. Ow.*

“Are you the one who's what?”

“Chloe, is she...-!? Is she *bleeding*?!”

“Fuck, gihh-...Gimme some tissues, some...-!”

*Oh. Wow. That... *hurts.*

“Maxie?!”

What hurts?!

What the fuck is happening?!

“Max, *talk to me. Max!*”
Hooo...-

Damn, this is...

Ow...

“Max, I-I got you, baby. OK? W-we're gonna...”

“Why is she bleeding so much?!”

“It's her nose, it...it just happens sometimes, she...”

“It just happens sometimes? What the shit, Price?! What have you been...?!?”

“Look, it's not...your business, OK?! Back off, she just-”

“She's bleeding on my fucking knee, I'd say it's become my business!”

“Stop bickering, both of you! Tilt her head back! Tilt it back!”

“What the fuck did she take?!?”

“Nothing! She didn't take anything! It's...”

“She obviously took something!”

Chloe!

CHLOE!

Get me...out of here!

“I'm telling you, she didn't take anything last night! She's...She's got a...a condition, OK?”

“A condition?!”

“What?”

“Condition?!”

Chloe...

Please...

I don't...feel right.

“Mm,” Chloe hummed back with some sorrow. “I figured that out...”

Whoa. Déjà vu.

Max felt air rush into her chest. She was yawning again. She felt nauseous.

Everyone was...quiet. Max could move her hands. The sudden stillness from out of that chaos was… unnerving.

Max was in control. For real this time.

Her nose...!

Wait...

It was fine?
No bleeding.

“Huh?” Chloe took note of Max's finger tips reaching for her dry upper lip. “What is it?”

“N-nothing, I just...thought...-”

Whew.
The fuck was that all about?

You didn't do that?
You weren't just messing with me?

Uh, no? That hurt like hell.
Wait, I thought you were the one who...-?

I don't like this. This is scaring me...

That makes two of us.
That makes two of us.

“Huh?” said Chloe quietly. “Messing with you?”

Max had thought that, not said that...right?

“Babe: who's messing with you?”

“N-no one, I just...-”

Chloe's eyes rolled, her nostrils flared, and she bit her lip with frustration as she turned her gaze to the window.

“Kamat?” Stella said with curiosity from the front passenger seat. “Is he still bothering you?”

“No, no,” Max quickly insisted. “Stella, I...I am...so sorry about that, I don't...-”

Max suddenly realized everyone had grown quiet. Everyone was staring at her. Even Brooke had shot her an intrigued glance through the rear-view mirror.

Center of attention, just the way you like it, huh?

Not so much.

Max tried to explain, “I'm...I'm having trouble remembering things from...the past few days, I...-”

“Did he give you anything?” Victoria inquired. “Did you watch the bartender mix your drink last night? Did you have anything else?”

“I don't...think so,” Max sighed, some frustration bleeding out. “I just said I'm not...remembering things, and...-”

“Waking up back at the apartment,” Chloe interjected. “When you took for-fucking-ever to get dressed. How much of that do you remember?”

And Max could see it in Chloe's eyes: that quiver of fear.

Max shook her head gently.
“Not...a lot,” she confessed squeamishly.

That quiver in Chloe's eyes rattled with intensity for a moment.

“Max,” Stella asserted. “When was the last time you saw a doctor? Medically. Like, a physical, medical physician?”

Max and Chloe exchanged awkward glances. Chloe shrugged up one shoulder.

“It-...it's been a while,” Max decided. She had no clue. Chloe didn't seem to, either.

“Did you-...Did you switch meds recently?” Stella tried to logic it out. “I mean, have there-...Have there been any weird side effects?”

Chloe huffed bitterly, “You mean besides the nosebleeds, and the puking, and fucking blacking out?”

_Fucking moron! Don’t tell them about that!

She's just...frustrated.

_Well, duh. I've been making sure of that...

What?

_Well, I mean...we both have.

This is her fault just as much as yours, I mean...-

“...Shit,” Brooke murmured awkwardly. “You, uh...might want to consider seeing someone if it's been a few days of that.”

“There could be some kind of chemical...problem,” Stella theorized vaguely.

Yea. 'Chemical' problem. OK.

Like you have any idea what is wrong with me.

_Could always tell her.

No way.

_You told Chloe. You told Warren. You almost told Stella that one time.

And after the mess you – well, I should take some credit – the mess we've made, I think she’s owed an explanation.

This was infuriating.

Everyone else was trying to figure out what was going on.

Like it made any goddamn sense.

Strange shit happened around Max, to Max, because of Max, it never made any sense.

That wasn't about to change. A doctor would either find nothing wrong with her, or...everything
wrong with her. And the latter, that possibility, that was terrifying. What if something was different with Max’s brain? Something that science would want to...investigate? She’d get taken away from Chloe.

Conspiracy crap, sure, but...when you could Rewind fucking time for as long as Max had, it begged a lot of questions.

Wait. Hold the fuck up.

What is it now?

Stella’s brother, last night. Why did you make us meet with him, anyway?

A girl has her reasons.

Cut the crap and explain it to me.

“Uh…I-I don’t…-” Stella sounded taken aback. “I can’t explain it, Max, I’m just…firing shots in the dark, here, I’m not…-”

Damnit, she’d…said that out loud?

“Max,” Chloe sighed, clamping her fingers down tight on Max’s shoulder. “Babe, none of us made you meet with him. You met with him on your own. Do you remember why?”

Max’s face felt hot. Her eyes were itchy and damp, and as she wiped her fingers against her face, she felt clammy. She couldn’t even think without risking things leaking out all over everyone around her.

“No,” Max replied breathily. “Guys, something is…wrong with me.”

“No,” Max replied breathily. “Guys, something is…wrong with me.”

“Clearly,” Victoria puffed.

Shut the fuck up, buttercup.

“N-no, sorry!” Max took it back. “Luh-…! Like that just now, I didn’t mean…-”

Victoria was wide-eyed and shrugged Max’s hand off of her arm.

“What?” Victoria grunted, baffled. “Just now?’ I agreed with you. Something is wrong with you.”

“Mmmmaybe we should…turn back,” Chloe said warily.

Maybe…

No.

Yes! Turn back!

We’re supposed to be in Arcadia Bay tomorrow.

We don’t have to go. We could head back home...

NO. We’re going, and that’s final.

“Um...” Chloe swallowed cautiously, running her fingers through her hair with a nervous, fidgeting gesture. “Buh-...Babe, you’re...-” Chloe trailed off, sighing out a...sort of sobbing breath. Max’s
cold, clammy hands were overcome with warmth as Chloe clutched them. She was trembling, rubbing her thumbs and squeezing.

Chloe was scared.

Had they – she? Had they SHE they said that or thought it or said it or thought it or-?

“Make up your mind, Max,” Brooke groaned, swiveling the car onto a curb at the side of a street. “Maybe, no, yes...What the hell is your deal today?”

“Brooke,” Stella delicately interjected. “Let’s…back off for a bit? Maybe…just give her some space?”

“She’s got so much space going on, she’s slipping out of orbit,” Victoria sighed. “I say we take her to a hospital.”

“No, please,” Max pleaded, her voice whimpering involuntarily. “I’m-...It won’t help, it’s just…-“ She tried to gesture her fingers toward her own skull, but quickly re-attached them to her partner’s grip. “It’s something in my head, it…it’s not medical, I-I don’t…-”

Max shut her eyes tight. Her teeth chattered and ground themselves against one another. She tried to calm herself – to let Chloe’s massaging fingers, warm palms settle her. She planted her face against Chloe’s neck.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” Max sobbed quietly against Chloe’s shoulder. “Muh-...Must be, like...a-anxiety, or...-”

“It-...Th-that’s OK, Maxie, we’ll-...We’re gonna figure this out, OK? Mm?” Chloe kissed Max’s cheek.

“Chloe,” Max moaned with desperation, trying to tense her finger muscles against Chloe’s.

Max wanted to never let go.

Never let go.

Let go.

Go.

.

.

.

.

.

“Where?”

Where…?

Go. Never.

Let never go.
“Max?”
Go, never let.

“Never.”

“What…?”
Wait, who…-?

“Never go…” Max was having trouble finding…words. Other words. It was all just…Other words.

“What’re you…-?” A boy? It was a boy.

Why was a boy talking to Max? Who was he?

Max couldn’t see straight. Her head was spinning. That same old fucking wash of brown and red, flooding her vision. That same burning in her skull, nausea in her gut.

“Are you OK?”

“Never…” Max sobbed. Her head was on fire. Her stomach felt so empty…

Everything felt so empty. And wrong.

Like she’d…let go?

“Jeez, I mean…-” Why was a boy so close to her? Right next to her. “That must’ve been…really hard to…watch, huh?”

Max started crying. She didn’t know why.

There was just this fierce…hollowness, swallowing her up from the inside.

TOUCHING HER

WHY WAS HE TOUCHING MAX?

“Let go,” Max whimpered, thrashing her rubbery arms and pushing him away.

“Oh! S-sorry, I just-…I thought-…You looked like you needed a hug, or…”

“Never.”

“Uh…-“

Max buried her face in her hands. She wiped at her eyes. She sniffled and coughed. Her hair, it…felt shorter than it should’ve.

She felt…smaller.

No. No no no no no.

Why? Why was this happening? She hadn’t even done anything this time.

“It's OK, Max. There was nothing you could have done. It's not your fault.”
She knew that voice...from somewhere. Deep down, far back...

“Warren...?”

“Yea?”

Max's senses were finally pulling themselves together. Each time she...leapt across realities, it got just a little bit harder for her senses to...recombine. What would happen if those...those pieces, if she couldn't fit them back together?

“What is it?” Warren's voice asked, coming from a vague shadow cast against a golden light beyond.

Was Max hallucinating some...afterlife, or...-

She could smell the sea. Hear the cawing of gulls above. The downtrodden sloshing of the ocean, licking reluctantly against a the shore far below.

“Never...let...go...” Max slowly pushed the words out. Her tongue was...untying itself, her scattered brain swiftly putting all of its pieces back in order.

“W-well, I mean,” Warren mumbled nervously, “seemed like whoever she was, you two were, uh...pretty close, huh? I don't think you should let go of those memories.”

And there he was, even more vivid than Max's memories could muster. No way this was some dream, he was...too clear, too detailed. She could see specifics to the folds of his skin, the tufts of his hair, things a camera could see – things the lens of her eyes could focus on – but things a hazy memory would never have recalled properly.

So Max was...back in time again? But where? And how? And...and fucking why?

More importantly, how the fuck could she get back?

How had she done it last time...? There was...a...a bag? Beneath a chair?

Wooden swords, and...and lemonade, and...-

Arghh. She couldn't remember.

Her Other half was the one who'd come up with the whole plan, and once again...poof, gone.

Like, just...half of her soul was missing, or...-

“Whoa, Max, you all right?”

TOUCHING HER.

It was jarring in this strange state of mind, to be touched. She didn't like it. Not at all.

But when Max tried to push Warren's hands off of her, she realized his intention had been to prevent her from falling over. Which she...promptly did. Following the initial pain of hitting thr ground, the dirt and grass was...oddly relaxing. From up here on this cliff, Max could see Arcadia Bay – complete, full, safe and sound...

Sprawled on her side in the dirt, Max realized she was wearing some kind of...dress? And it was all black, too. Doing a double-take on Warren, who loomed over her fretfully, she realized that he, too, was dressed in formal wear, some kind of black suit...
Max's head was suddenly overcome with pressure. Pressure from a door being *pounded* at from the inside, all of these foreign memories from this...this other existence, all trying to push themselves out. But she had to fight it. She couldn't let these...these *other* memories push out the *real* ones, the ones that made her...that made her *Max*, the, um...the *Max* that she was *supposed* to be, that...-

Or was it the other way around?

Was the life with Chloe all some dream she'd been...making up in her head, trying to...cope with...-

Shit.

Chloe had been shot. In the bathroom.

That memory, that awful fucking memory Max could never quite seem to get rid of, it felt...so much *fresher* in her mind right then. Fresher than it had been in a long time. She could feel her stomach curdle from how vivid the memory was.

“Jeez, Max,” Warren sighed with some frustration, unsure off how to help this girl he wasn’t supposed to touch. “I, erh-...D-do you need a hand, or...?”

“I got it,” Max croaked out, her voice weak, her throat dry. She tried to swallow her own spit, tried to rub the water from her eyes, and tried to get back on her feet. “Th-thanks, Warren,” Max sighed out as she regained her footing. Dusting crud off of her dress, she felt...*hella* strange being in front of...*him*. Dressed like *this*.

Max was...already dealing with enough as it was. But having to be reminded of something she'd put in the past – the way his dorky eyeballs were so fascinated by *her* dorky face – it made her pretty damned uncomfortable given everything else on her mind. She couldn't just...be a jerk to him, though.

After all...it was *her* fault he was dead, for a start. Well, *her* Warren being the dead one, that was. Ugh.

For another, Chloe was just as, if not *more* clingy and possessive with her as Warren had been – even back at Blackwell. They'd all been idiots, it was...high school, right? It was kind of unfair to hold that against one of them, and not the other...seeing as Max had never actually gotten around to properly rejecting the poor kid.

*Agh*, yikes, and then there was *that*. The poor *kid*.

Warren was a *kid*. Well, worse than that, he was a *teenager*.

Max was...an adult. In her...younger self's body...? Bleh.

Being a teenager was horrible enough, and the fact that Max was being forced to *re-live* being one was completely gross.

What would her Other half say?

Something about consequences, a *price-to-pay*, blabla...

Where *was* that...*Other* her, anyway? Why did she seem to keep disappearing when this crap went down?

Warren was suddenly *right there*, really close...-!
Max took a step back, startled.

“Whoa! Hey,” Warren eased, flashing up his palms. “Sorry, Max, you just...were spacing out on me. Did you even hear what I just said?”

“No,” Max replied flatly. She couldn't deal with this shit.

“Yea,” Warren sighed with some disappointment, rubbing the back of his neck. “I figured as much...You must be...pretty shaken up, huh?”

Just...seeing this boy's face, it was like having some horrible skeleton come tap dancing out of a closet in her basement. Max wanted all of those fucking skeletons to stay locked in that damn basement, because there were far too many of them at this point to fit in a mere closet.

Warren had been a good friend, and...part of Max ached over that ending sooner than it could have. It was so easy to let part of her just...blow him off, cut him out of her heart, act like he was some horrible person just for...being a dumb teenage boy with a dumb crush. But even without that Other part of her there, Max could still acknowledge that it didn't feel...like her...to just pretend like Warren hadn't had a positive influence on her, if only for the brief time they'd been friends. A time that had ended so soon.

Sooner than it should have...?
She wasn't sure.

Either way, it was...incredibly painful and nauseating to be confronted with this face, this voice, this human being, when Max had finally found it in herself to let it go some while back.

“Look, I mean,” Warren's head wobbled with uncertainty, left and right, his eyes avoiding hers. “I can't even imagine what you're dealing with right now. The closest thing I've ever lost was...my black goldfish when I was, like, eleven years old, I mean...-” Warren huffed out a breath when he saw Max's face.

Max realized she was frowning. She hadn't meant to frown at the guy, it was...more like she was trying to process just being in front of him. In front of this person she'd gotten close to, briefly, years ago.

That wasn't like riding a bike. She couldn't just...hop on and start peddling. Human beings were so much more complicated than that.

But Max Caulfield couldn't help but try riding their expectations, anyway.

“Warren, juh-...” Max felt a wave of dizziness hit her. Clamping one palm over her eye, Max took a deep breath. She continued. “Just listen to me for a sec. This is...going to sound stupid, but...why...are we dressed up?”

“Uh...-?” Now Warren was frowning.

Max Caulfield seemed to have been causing a lot of frowning with everyone she exposed herself lately...even if they lived in another fucking plane of existence.

“Tell me,” Max insisted, losing some of her patience. “Please.”

“Max, you-...”

“Whatever I did, I don't remember it, there's-...” Max twirled her finger around.
Spun her finger in a spiral.

“...there's something wrong with me, Warren,” Max concluded sullenly. Tiredly.

“What, like...some sort of physiological-”
“I don't know.”
“Post-traumatic stress?”
“Just please answer my fucking question,” Max panted out with some desperation.

The sooner she understood where she was, the sooner she could figure out a way to get back.

Warren was taken aback by Max's tone. She felt bad about it – she did. But the fact was, she just wanted to get home. She was so over this shit. She hadn't even meant to leap realities, she didn't understand why she was here, what the fucking point of it was.

If the Universe was trying to teach her another goddamned 'lesson', it needed to switch lecturers.

“OK,” Warren slowly breathed out, off-put by Max's attitude. Hands on his hips, he wandered in a tight circle as he explained, “We just came back from your friend's funeral, Max. You left before it was even over. Your Dad asked me to come keep an eye on you, and...I followed you here, but...you still won't talk to me, so I mean, let's...just go back, you can...be with your folks, and I'll...just get out of your hair, I didn't...-” Warren rubbed his palms down across his face. He was started to tear up. “I didn't mean to make you feel worse, I don't...know what I was thinking, I should've...known better than...-” He trailed off with a shrug.

Max sighed through the nose, shaking her head a bit.

“Warren, thanks for...trying, but...” Max spoke, trying to sound earnest. But how could she be? As far as she could be concerned, this was just...some other Warren from some other existence. What should she care how he felt? Soon enough, it wouldn't matter, because he wouldn't even exist. Or...maybe...he still would? But...Argh.

'You're doing it again.'

That's what she would say. If she were there.

And Max would ask,

Doing what again?

And she would answer with something like...

'Treating people around you like objects. Because of course you are.'

'And hey, why not, right? You're above them. You're outside of their existence.'

'Isn't that what being a God is supposed to feel like?'

'And that's what you think you are, isn't it?'

But, of course, like...Max didn't...think that.

Right?

Of course not. She'd just called into question the very idea. On her own, even. She didn't need that Other part of her to remind her that this was a human being in front of her, and deserved just as much
“But what?” Warren sighed, in response to her trailing off.

Max felt queasy. Like she should be...more sensitive about all of this. Most times when she slipped into a different reality, she...tried her best to play along. Hell, she'd lie through her teeth to convince herself, convince whoever she was around that everything was fine, that she really *did* care, that she really *was* mild-mannered Max Caulfield, totally *not* using them for information, totally *not* snooping into their personal lives so she could later *use* that knowledge to make herself look good in their eyes...

But that was the sort of girl Max had *used* to be.

Now?

She didn't give a rat's ass, when it came down to it.

She just wanted to get the hell home already.

She...wanted...

um

wh-?

Oh. Her head.

OUCH.

One marble, knocked harshly aside by another.

What the fuck?

*You*?!
It's you. You're here! How did you find me?

Wait, what?

It's me! And you! You're me!

Her heartbeat was escalating, she could feel it, even though she wasn't...all there.

I'm...you?

Yes! Remember?

Wait...We met...recently.

Huh?

The other day. The Nightmare. We met at...Two Whales...you tried to convince me that...-

Umm...No. That was you. I was the one who...-

“Max?!” Warren's voice was puncturing the static.

And then Max realized her eyes were opening. And her arms were moving. Probably?

But she wasn't controlling them.

How are you...-? I was just...-

Who are you? You're not...-

I...I'm you, I just...told you...

This is...weird.
This is...weird.

“You OK?” he asked.

No. I am so not OK right now.


“Black out again? Yea. You've been...doing that a lot today, Max.”

“I guess I...have, huh? S-sorry.”

“Uh, that's...probably a problem. Your folks should take you to get checked out.”
“Oh, n-no, it's fine, it's...it's just my, umm...”

**Wait, why are you the one talking to him? I was just...?**

**GO AWAY, what is this?**

I...I'm you, don't you...remember?

I remember you were an asshole to me in that awful Nightmare!

**N-no, I wouldn't...**

Whatever you are? Just leave me alone!

**But...Chloe. We need to...get back...**

She's fucking **dead**, OK?! Are you **happy** now?!

**Why would I...?**

**No. She's not dead.**

She is. For good. OK?
It's not like I could lie to you even if I wanted.
So back the hell off.

-**SNAP!**-
-**SNAP!**-

“Hey.” Warren was clicking his fingers together, right in Max's ear. His other hand was keeping her back straight, slowly nudging her forward. “Max, you're...really freaking me out, here. Should I, like...be calling a doctor, or...?”

**No. No, no, no.**

“M-maybe, I don't...feel so good.”

**Why are you the one talking?! I should be talking...**

**I need to get back home!**

Leave me the fuck alone! Jesus!

You got what you wanted, didn't you?

**I didn't want that! I never wanted that!**

**Why would I want that?**

“Uhh,” Warren cleared his throat. “What do you think happened that would've gotten you feeling so sick?”

“Whatever I did, I don't remember it, there's-...” Max twirled her finger around.

Spun her finger in a spiral.

“-...there's something wrong with me, Warren,” Max concluded sullenly. Tiredly.
Déjà vu.

Everything was dark.

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Max felt...so lost. What had just happened?
Like she'd been...yanked from the driver's seat of...herself.

Shoved into the passenger side.

Being driven on a road she didn't recognize, to who the hell knew where.

And she wanted out of this crazy car.

She'd...(jump off) if she had to.

If she had to.

She had to.

Had to.

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“Mm-...Max? Max Caulfield?”

It was a gentle voice that called her name. Timid. Worried. Caring.

Familiar.

“Stella Hill?”

Stella?! Is that you?!

“Y-yea, heh. Uhm, g-guess it's good that we, erh, remember each other's names...Huh?”

“Heh.” Max was speechlessly awkward.

Oh thank god. Oh thank hell. Thank...Vishnu, Cthulhu, whoever, please...-

What is your deal?! I thought you'd left already.

Wait. Had time...passed? Had Max, like...fallen asleep? While Another Max was...still, like...'behind the wheel'?

This was all pretty concerning.
But Max realized that Warren must have safely escorted her – them? – down the cliff, and...Damn, it was already night time, from the look of things. Where were they, even?

There were Max's parents. Sitting at a booth. Talking with...Joyce and David.

Joyce's face was...so beautiful, so clean...untouched by what had happened at...-

The Two Whales? Jeez.

They were in the Two Whales diner.

It looked...so much more vivid than Max remembered. Her memories really had gotten rusty. She could tinker with time, but...her human mind was still...what it was...

And what it was was crowded.

*Look, I didn't *ask* to end up here, OK? I just want to go back home...*

I have no idea what you mean, so, just...whatever. Be quiet for a second.

“Um...Y-yea, so...-” Stella was clutching a small black book tightly in both her hands. “I-I know you must be...going through so much right now.”

*You have no idea!*

I said to be quiet.

...

“A-and I didn't want to bother you, but I...-” Stella looked down at the book's cover fretfully.

Max felt her lips fall open, her jaw loosen, her eyes dampen.

They recognized that book.

It was their freaking *journal*.

'Their?"

That's *my* journal. What is she doing with *my* journal?!

*It's my journal, too!*  
*And why does she have it? She-...*

*Of course. Of course, of course!*

Stella Hill had her journal, Stella was going to be there for her *again*, to help get her back home. Even if she had *no idea* she was there when Max needed help most, there she was, somehow.

Stella finished her thought: “I found this...in class, y-you were in such a rush to leave that morning, and...and y-your name was...on it, I just--I don't know, I just had this feeling you needed it right now.”

*Fuck yes, Stella! You are so right and you don't even know it.*

Max forced her legs to move forward. Forced her arms to lift. Forced her eyes to pierce through Stella's glass lenses. Forced her trembling fingers to take hold of her journal.
Wait, how are you...doing that?

_I need that journal._

Jeez, OK! Calm down! I've got it.

_I need it...Please..._

I said 'OK!' Man...

_Please...tell her I said:_

“Th-thank you,” Max mumbled, gushing gratitude through soft syllables. “St-...You-...This means a _lot_, Stella, this...this really does, just-..._Thank you._”

“Oh, um...-” Stella fidgeted with her glasses. “Of course. Anything that can help you right now. You were...pretty close with her, huh? That girl, I mean...”

“Yea.” Max pored through the pages of her own journal. “I was, yea...”

“Mm-hm.” Stella nodded nervously. “Um, I, uh...-” She fussed her hands awkwardly through her hoodie pocket. “I heard that you could use, um...a, uh, a 'relaxant,' and I know...what that's like, to be in...w-well, the kind of situation you, um, y-you're in, and so...-”

'Relaxant?'

_Weed. She means a joint._

_Take it._

Why the _hell_ would I do that?

_Please. It'll help us calm down._

_It'll help time slow. So I can focus._

_So I can get back to where I'm supposed to be._

Mm...This...doesn't seem like a good idea.

_Trust me._

Why should I?

_Because I'm you._

_Because you're me._

Will it get you out of my head.

_Yes. I promise._

Fine. Let's do it.

“Uh...” Max's eyes shifted nervously off to her parents. They glanced at her quizzically. She nodded her head toward Stella, waving their way. Her dad nodded in approval, and her mom waved back her 'OK.' “Sh-sure, Stella, I'll...take you up on that,” Max decided. “I could..._really_ use some de-
“All right,” Stella said sheepishly, brushed hair strands over her ears. “Cool, yea, I, um...-” She headed for the front door of the diner. “Follow me. I know a spot nearby where we-...uh, yea...”

“Lead the way.”

I'll follow.

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“To the ends o' the earth, to the edges o' the sea, there n' back again? For real and for true?”

Chloe's question bounced through Max's skull. Said skull felt hot. Her eyesight was blurred – another time leap? – but the pain was lessened from what she'd gotten used to.

That said, she was still lost and confused.

“Huh...?”

“You said you'd follow,” Chloe reminded quietly, shoving up the black bandana on her head so she could scratch an itch. “Are you feeling OK?”

Max felt sick to her stomach, woozy to be...a teen again?

Blonde. Chloe was blonde. Long hair.


Right! Middle school! Pirate roleplay!

Whew. Back on track.

“Actually, I'm not,” Max said nervously, her voice catching on its squeaky, puberty-riddled self. “But, um...can you catch me up to speed? I-I've been...spacing out a bit...Sorry.”

“No worries! I, uh, I get like that too out here sometimes. It's really nice up here, right?”

Max nodded at Chloe, more enamored by her young, peppy optimism than anything else.

“Here.” Chloe rummaged through her backpack, leaned up against a pine tree nearby.

The countless needles above rustled as a seaside breeze stirred them, jostling the shadows all around them. Each needle an extension of a branch, which was an extension of a tree, which was an extension of this wide forest...

“Aha.” Chloe pulled out a water bottle. She cleared her throat.

After shoving her bandana back into place, Chloe extended her arm out to Max, the liquid in the bottle sloshing loudly, a couple of half-melted ice cubes keeping it cool.
“Argh,” Chloe grunted, putting on a voice. “Ye seem a bit parched from yer time on dry land, me hearty. Drink up, n’ yoho! N’ don’t forget ta spare me a sip or three!” She wriggled her wooden hook hand clumsily but with gusto.

Max couldn't help but giggle.

Chloe was so gosh damn adorable.

And it was so...uplifting...to be here, back in time, in this moment, with nary a pain, nary an ache.

No bleeding, no nausea, no...voices in her head, no Storm, no serial killers or drugs or kidnappers or adult life, just...this. This moment, this memory of beauty. Of...innocence.

Bleh. Aaaaaand she'd just sorta ruined the moment for herself...Gross.

Moving on.

Max took the water bottle, and she drank.

Cocking her head back to guzzle the ice water down, Max started to feel a little dizzy.

The pine trees, with their seemingly infinite needles swaying in the wind against a seemingly endless backdrop of blue and white...

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“... fr... ed w.. sh.. , when t. , ju . .. ckin’ eh.. .. . tucker ed out from the ride, and…—”


“We all are.” Stella’s voice. Soft. Quiet. Condoling. “I know…this is a tough time for it, but…the three of us need to talk about what’s going on here.”

“Yea. Yea, yep…I know.” Chloe was hesitant. Tired. She just sounded…so, so tired.

CHLOE. Oh, thank whatever god was responsible for bringing Max back to Chloe.

Max’s eyes felt dried out. Her lips were like sandpaper. Her throat was raw, her nose was plugged up. She felt pretty gross. She tried to start breathing as she stirred her body awake and ended up coughing and sputtering on her own mucus. There was a bit of a metallic tint to the aftertaste. That familiar, unsettling taste of her own blood.

RINGS.

Yes. Yes yes yesyesyesyes

There they were, on her finger, nice and cozy...

Max was back to where she was supposed to be.
“She waking up?”
“Max? Babe?”

Max realized that it was…dark?

She tried to remember. Car. With the girls. Riding up to Arcadia.

Hadn't it been dawn?

Had she just…blacked out the entire freaking day?

Lost in time, lost in memories...

*Being you for so long is fucking exhausting.*

*Or maybe that's just because of this mess we've gotten ourselves into.*

*That you've gotten ourselves into.*

You! You're still here!

Uhh...Yea?

You seem... **way too happy to see me.**

Which means I'm clearly doing something wrong here.

No! No, no, it's just...so good to know you're OK!

*Hate to break it to you?*

**We are not OK.**

**We are not OK.**

A violent fit of coughs was forced out from Max's chest. Her head stung with a sudden bout of sharp pain. She could feel Chloe's hand slapping her back a little, easing the garbage out of her lungs. It was sort of like coming up for air after swimming in the deep end of the pool for longer than she should've.

Temporal chlorine burned at her sinuses.

“You all right?” Brooke's dry, dull voice inquired.

Stella tiredly offered, “I've got some, like...cough drops up here...If you want.”

With Chloe's hand slowly running up and her back, and her own fingers trying to soothe her sinuses, Max nodded drearily.

The cough drop was...honey-flavored. Ech. Not really Max's favorite, she preferred minty sort of stuff for opening her passages up, and...-

*Seriously?*

*You're fussing over fucking cough drops right now?*
What else should I be doing?

*Maybe explaining where the hell you've been all day?*

*That would be nice.*

Look, can we not do this right now?

*Psh. What-fucking-ever. It's always about what you want, not me...*

N-no, I just...-

...

Hey, come on. *I do* care what you want.

...

Damnit. I'm sorry. For reals.

...

Max found herself momentarily confused – why was she apologizing...*to herself?*

Why would she not...want what she wanted...?

“-check in to our room, unpack everything, figure out our attire for tomorrow, and...meet up with you for dinner?”

Victoria was blathering on about plans, or something.

The car engine had died at some point since Max had arrived back in this...in her reality. They were parked in a lot.

“That work for you two?” Victoria prodded.

Max accidentally swallowed her cough drop way sooner than she'd wanted to, her throat catching on it painfully. She faked like she was fine.

“Huh?” Chloe said, her voice gentle against Max's neck. Her hair was tickling at Max's ear.

Victoria sighed.

“It works for us,” Max assured, despite not being entirely sure what had been discussed. “Um, we're...just...uhh...” She shrugged up her shoulder, nudging Chloe to sit upright.

Chloe took in a waking breath through her nose and yawned, clawing at her scalp lazily.

“*Yep. Gonna pay the folks a visit...*” She opened the car door. “I'll call my dad, have him come pick us up.”

Max couldn't help but smile a little. It was sweet of Chloe to refer to David as 'her dad.' Max knew it was more like a formality than a reflection of their relationship, but...still. Progress. That was what mattered. And it was a lot further progressed than...'step-douche.'

Brooke and Stella were retrieving bags and such from the trunk while Chloe took out her phone.
Victoria and Max remained in the car for a moment.

“Max,” Victoria said quietly. Sternly. “Swear to god, if you took something, and you're not telling us...”

“I didn't,” Max breathed out, struggling to keep her cool.

“Then what is going on with you? You've been...weird all day.”

“ Weird...how?” Max tentatively asked, though she had an inkling.

“I-...” Victoria puffed air through her nose, shaking her head slightly. Even in the dimly lit car, Max could see her friend's brows furrow, her eyes flash with concern. “I don't know, like...pissy? Whiny? Grumpy...Like, we leave in the morning and you're totally spacing on us, and then...all of a sudden, you're this grumbling grouch, spewing shit that's not like you. And then you get all zonked out on us, and now you're back to your...orbit-drifting hippie daze.”

Max nodded, rubbing at her eyes.

“Y-yea, you're right...I, um...”

Victoria cut in with a critical whisper, “Are you and Chloe doing all right?”

“...What?”

“You two are usually all snuggles and cuddles and it makes me wanna gag, but that sure beats the attitude you were giving each other today.”

“...Oh.”

Attitude?

*She rubbed me the wrong way.*

*I don't know, it's like she can tell when it's 'me' now.*

“You two get into some kind of cat fight last night?” Vickie double-checked.

Max...didn't quite remember.

*Yup. Sure did. Why do you think we woke up on the couch?*

“Y-yea,” Max murmured warily. “Something...like that...”

Victoria's fierce glance pierced past Max's shoulders and to Chloe, whose muffled phone call sounded a bit strained.

Victoria quietly, cautiously posited, “Do you need me to talk with her?”

“N-no, that's...fine,” Max was quick to shake that idea away. She was honestly a little petrified of the 'attitudes' that might burst out if such a conversation were to transpire. “I, um...-” Max opened the car door and tried to shove her dizzy self out. “I appreciate that,” she said over her shoulder. “Seriously. But it's fine...”

Victoria looked skeptical but shrugged and nodded as Max exited the car.
“-yea, the Motel 6...” Chloe was talking with David still, pacing a little bit.

Out in the autumnal evening air, Max felt a sudden chill. Woof, it was friggin' cold out there that night. She looked down at herself – she must’ve taken her jacket off during the ride. Now she could see the shirt she'd worn: black, with a gray, skull-faced moth patterned into it.

*Heh, sorry. You left getting changed to me, remember? Guess I was feeling sentimental...*

Shaking her head in spite of her completely out-of-control reality, Max tried to take in the present moment.

The sloshing of ocean waves on the nearby coastline, the gentle revving of a distant semi truck parking down the road, the rustling of pine needles in the brisk breeze...

This sure was Arcadia Bay, all right.

“Here.” Stella's calming voice was behind her as she felt the familiar warmth of her own jacket get swathed across her back. “You need another cough drop?”

Max was...perplexed by this girl. Stella sauntered past, tightening her purple backpack's straps over her arms before stopping in front of Max, holding her bag of honey cough-drops aloft.

Stella's action was kind. Her words were soft.

But her eyes were cold and avoidant. Her lips tight, her expression conflicted.

Stella was definitely still upset with her. No two ways about it. Max ached at the pain her friend had gone through the night before. She...couldn't even imagine.

Why was she still...being so caring? Doting? Despite that frustration?

“No, thanks,” Max replied tiredly, twisting her arms around to get her jacket on.

“Here, just...take a few,” Stella insisted awkwardly, grabbing a handful from the bag she had. “For when you need-ooop!” A couple fell between her fingers, hitting the pavement.

The two of them stood in awkward silence for a moment, both staring down at the pair of cough drops sitting in the black expanse between their feet.

Stirring herself back into the moment, Max took the clump of cough drops Stella still offered, caught them in both her palms, and shoved them into her jacket pocket.

“Thanks, it's...really OK,” Max mumbled. She watched Stella pluck the two drops from the ground. “Um, listen, I was...wondering if-”

But she was interrupted by Brooke, who slung Max's messenger bag across her shoulder.

As Max breathed out a surprised, “Oof-!” Brooke chuckled mischievously.

“Don’t make us all carry your crap,” Brooke teased with a smarmy eyebrow, giving Max a taunting elbow jab to throw her off balance.

“Right,” Max grunted, adjusting the bag strap and regaining her footing. Thing was kind of heavy. “Thanks...”

“And tell your girlfriend to get her trash out of the trunk,” Brooke said as she walked by, wheeling
an upright suitcase.

Max nodded and hummed, watching Brooke hand Stella's car keys over.

Victoria's heels clacked against the twilight soaked tarmac as she brushed by.

“Can we get our shit sorted, already?” she bemoaned. “I want to be in and out, I'm starving.”

Stella smiled weakly, rising up from the ground with her two cough drops. She stared at them for a moment, almost caught in some kind of trance, before unwrapping one and popping it in her mouth, dropping the other back in the bag. As she shoved the crinkly plastic bag back into her backpack, Max tuned in to the chatter still going on nearby.

“-grab some dinner, and...then we'll just crash in the living room.” Chloe was still talking. “N-no, seriously, the air mattress is fine, don't-...I'm not. I just don't wanna put you out...Yea...It's been a long-...Exactly.”

“Whoa.”

Stella's voice drew Max back over to her. She was wiping her glasses with her sleeve. Putting her glasses back on, she pointed past Max.

“What is it?” Max wondered, turning around and trying to follow Stella's gaze.

The sunset was almost over. There was a flock of seagulls overhead. Past the road in front of them, the land shifted to a shallow shoreline, and the bay's expanse went on from there. Golden strands tickled the bobbing sea’s ever warping surface. It was a peaceful evening.

Max was...missing something. She checked back to Stella.

Stella looked awestruck, dizzy, confused. Her arms had dropped to her sides, and she was staring with widened eyes to the sky. Upward.

So Max looked again, this time studying the twilight up above.

Her heart skipped a beat.

 Barely peaking themselves out through the edges of dusk, there they were:

 Two full moons.

 They were kind of...blurring around each other in quite a strange way. A way that didn't line up with the clouds or stars around them.

 Max did a double take, rubbing at her already tired eyes and checked again.

 Yup. Still there.

 **Both of them.**

 **Both of them.**

 “You see it, too, right?” Stella said quietly. “I'm not-...I mean, it's not my glasses, is it?”

 “Uhhh...-” Max's voice cracked a bit.

 “Dude.” Chloe was walking up toward them. “The hell is...-?” She trailed off, slack-jawed.
Max coughed again, but suppressed it, trying to make sense of what they were all looking at.

“You ever *seen* shit like this before?” Chloe whispered.

Max nodded, her coughing not letting up. Covering her mouth as she got it out of her system, she felt droplets stick to her palms.

Damnit.

Drops of blood.

Not a lot, but...

“What would *cause* that?” Stella asked in a hushed voice. “Some kind of...trick of light from...the ocean? Or...-?”

“Look at the *waves*, man,” Chloe said eagerly, flicking her hand out at the water.

Max discreetly wiped her blood off on her pants, and tried to follow along.

“Only one reflection,” Max noticed.

“Right?” Chloe panted with perplexation.

The sky had two moons. The ocean's reflection only had one.

“The *fuck*...-?” Chloe scratched at her ear.

“Hell-*oh*!?” Victoria's impatient growl echoed across the dead parking lot. “Hill, let's go.”

“Victoria!” Stella called back. “Come check this out! This is so weird!”

“I am *hungry,*” Victoria huffed, marching across the pavement with great impatience. “I am *tired.* It is *late.*”

-Clack-Clack-Clack-

“What are you nitwits *gawking* at?”

-Clack-Clack-Clack-

“Vic,” said Chloe, lifting her hand. “Check the moon.”

-Clack-Clack-Clack-

“What *about* it?!?

-Clack-Clack-Clack-

“There's *two* of it,” Stella cited with intrigue.

“What?” Victoria halted. “Two of it?! What is 'it'?”

“The *moon*, man,” said Chloe.

Max glanced over her shoulder – Victoria didn't seem to see it.

Stella took a few steps back, her eyes popping up to double-check. She shuffled her glasses a bit, and
stepped back a bit more, lining herself up with Victoria. Squinting across Victoria's shoulder, she pointed it out.

"See?" Stella insisted.

Victoria's mouth was agape, but with irritation, not wonder.

"Look," she huffed, shaking her hand and giving Stella a tug on the arm. "You all want to smoke-’em-peace-pipe? Do it on your own time. We need you to check us in, Hill."

"You don't see it?" Stella remarked, being nudged along by a very cranky Victoria.

"No, I'm not-...!" Victoria groaned. "Whatever Price just gave you, save a toke for me, but-..."

"Hunh? N-no, we didn't-..."

"You do realize I don't judge your recreational activities, yes?"

"Vic, we weren't-..."

"Just check us in, Hill. While we're young?"

Their conversation withered off into the distance, Victoria's hungraghhh apparent all the while.

_Jeez, I'd hate to see her on a diet._

She's probably already on one...

_Oh. Pff. Yea, no wonder..._

"Hey."

Chloe's hand was grasping Max's. But her eyes...beautiful damn eyes, wide with wonder – trembling with fear – speckled with reflections of the dusk sky.

"Max...What did you do?"

Max sniffed on impulse, worried her nose was bleeding again. Because at this point, these crazy things seemed to be happening even when she wasn't Rewinding time.

"Huh?" Chloe prodded, finally prying her eyes from the weird sight above and to her partner. Her thumb slid up and down Max's wrist with concern. "What happened to you today? Where did you go?"

Max's lips opened. Her throat tried to push out words.

"You...-?" Max started, but was unable to form a coherent thought.

"I know sure as hell something loopy happened, Maxine," Chloe stated quietly and with some firm frustration. "It's like...you leave, and this...Other Max takes your place. Fuckin' freakin' me out, all right? This...this 'Bizarro Max'? I don't like her so much. I miss 'Super Max.'"

Max fluttered her lips at Chloe's weird comic reference, gazing back up at the double moon.

"It's-..." Max sighed, rubbing at her tired eyes.

"Who is she?" Chloe pressed.

"What?"
“Who. Is. She?” Chloe had stepped in front of Max, palming her partner's arms with some desperate curiosity.

*She's me.*
“I'm her.”

“Wh-? Y-yea, sure, but I mean, like...*Why? You're not* the same...person when you're...”
“I have it under control, OK? I'm feeling better.”
“*Fff*! Sure, maybe right *now,* but not all goddamn *day* today. Not yesterday! Not...”
“We're working on it.”
“We? What is this 'we' shit?”
Max's heart skipped again.

“*M-me! I-*”
“Is there, like...*multiple-personality disorder* going on?”
“Chloe...” Max rolled her head upward with discouragement.
“I-I mean, for...for *real,* if...if something's *wrong* with you...”
“Come on, don't...” Max shook her head, twisting herself away from her partner.
“If something is *wrong* with you,” Chloe repeated fervently, “I want to help.”
“Whatever's wrong, you're *already* helping by just...being...*you.* *OK?*”
“Sh-sure, that's...great, but...*What* is going on?”
“Chloe, I don't fucking know. *OK?* Can we please-”
“That's *fine,* I'm not...saying you *should* know, but...where *were* you today?"

“You really want to know?”

Chloe's eyes narrowed fiercely at Max's rhetoric, and the answer was plain.

Max's eyes, in turn, lulled upward with uncertainty, and she shrugged.

“I-I'm not sure *what* the fuck is happening with me,” Max confessed, feeling her eyes starting to water. “It's like I'm...drifting between...timelines, or...”

*Realities.*

“...or realities, or something...”

“Why would you be doing that?” Chloe pushed, intent on an explanation. “How much Rewinding have you been-”
“The car accident,” Max spat impatiently. “That was the last time I did it. To *protect us.*”
“*Fine,* I...I get it, but...this crap's been happening *since* then.”
“I know.”
“Well? *Why?*” Chloe's voice was trembling, her voice raising with fear.

Max shrugged again, brows arcing with defense.

“I don't *know!* I'm not...I didn't...”

“So you're saying you...you *what,* you're...” Chloe's eyes were flickering to and fro, her brain whirring to churn out some SyFy explanation. “...you're pinballing across realities, or something?”

“*Fff*...Sure, Chloe. Whatever. I don't know.”

“Fucking *A,* Max. *This is* because of what happened on the highway, isn't it?”
“Nnnn...! No, Chloe, I don’t-...” Max latched her hand uncertainly against her arm, paused, then confessed in a murmur. “I’m not sure.”

“Why the _fuck_ are there two moons up there?” Chloe winced, pointing a fearful finger skyward. “And _why_ does it feel like I’ve seen it before?”

“Five years ago.”

Chloe paused at Max's simple explanation. She took a deep breath, her eyes snapping shut. Max could practically see the gears of memory grinding in Chloe's head.

Then, the memory clicked. And Chloe's eyes opened.

“The night the Storm happened,” Chloe huffed with a knowing nod.

“Yea. You didn't seem to give a shit back then...” Max's words were coated with bitterness that she instantly regretted.

Chloe grumbled defensively, “Well, _I might've_ been a little preoccupied with a goddamn serial killer, ya know?” She sighed with exhaustion. “Sorry. I just-...I'm-...”

“OK, OK,” Max eased, frightened at how Chloe's mood was getting all erratic. She seemed scared. Well, that made sense.

Chloe scratched at her half-head of hair frantically. “Is this-...Do _not_ tell me another Storm is...”

“I-I don't think so,” Max tried to assuage.

“How do you know? Huh?”

“I didn't-...I haven't had any kind of...of _visions_ like that, I-...”

But Chloe had broken off, pacing aimlessly with her palms pressed into her temples.

“Why the _fuck_ are there two moons?” she whimpered. “Why couldn't _she_ seem them, anyway?”


“Yea, I-I mean...We're not hallucinating, right? You see it?”

Max nodded. “I see it,” Chloe stated, giving them another wary glare. “Stells saw it, too. We're _not_ crazy.”

_Heh. She's not, maybe..._

Did you do this?

_Honestly? I might've._

Seriously?

_Hell if I know..._

Jesus...Are you kidding me?

_For once, no._

“-make any goddamn _sense,_” Chloe was grumbling under her breath. She paused, and took a deep
breath, rubbing her hands up and down her face. “Nah, see, nope. We don’t... It's not gonna make sense. We don't get an explanation, right? We're never gonna know, and-and we just gotta accept that, and...f-figure out how to keep rollin' with the punches, and...then-then we'll...”

Max grabbed Chloe's waist from behind in an exhausted hug, aiming to soothe and calm her troubled fiancé down. Seemed to work well enough.

“I'm sorry, Chloe,” Max whispered before kissing Chloe on the back of the neck.

“Hooo,” Chloe sighed loudly, her voice shaky. “I love you, Buddo.”

“I love you, too,” Max chuckled weakly.

“It's... We're gonna be OK. Ya know? We are.”

“We are,” Max repeated in a calming tone, clutching Chloe tight.

“We're gonna make it through this, just...just like everything else.”

**We are.**

**We are.**

“Just... Just gotta, like... 'Stay Determined,' right?” Chloe laughed a timid, hopeful laugh, and Max's heart shed a bit of weight.

“Heh. Y-yea...”

“Well,” Chloe cleared her throat, wriggling her hands around Max's, which her pressed over her waistline. “Whatever's going on... I'm rootin' for ya, kid.”

“Pff...” Max was a little too out of sorts to fully relax in the wake of Chloe's silly Undertale references, but... that bit of light-heartedness in the face of... all this nonsense? It was appreciated.

The two held onto one another in the chilly parking lot for a few minutes as they waited to be picked up by David. The moon – and a mirage moon – lingered overhead all the while, the land gradually losing its golden glow and being bathed in the pale lunar light.

—

“Killer shake, right?”

“Huh?”

Thick red, slowly sliding, dripping...

Pooling together along the concrete.

Widening.

“Milkshake?” said Chloe. She leaned over and took a sip on Max's straw. “Mmffh-!” She nodded with zest. Licking her chops, she kept bobbing her head approvingly. “Now 'at? Fuckin' tasty shake, right there...”

They screamed. So much screaming. Below her, behind her...

They were screaming to stop.
Just please fucking stop what is wrong with you why are you

“They're OK,” Victoria conceded begrudgingly. She licked cream from her pillowy lips. “But I have
to admit, this lemon meringue is far richer than it deserves to be.”

They stared at her with wide-eyed horror.

Red, everywhere, vapors of warmth rising from the mess below.

“The meat was entirely too pink, I mean, I could practically hear it moo-ing.”

“Fff!” Chloe scoffed at Victoria's melodramatic complaint. “You asked for ‘rare’.”

“Yes. Yes, I did. Rare, not...fucking raw, OK?”

“OK, Chef Ramsey,” teased Brooke.

-clink-clink-

Metal colliding with stone.

Deafening.

Hands, trembling. Soaked. Heavy.

So much red everywhere...

**SCRATCHING**
**CLAWING AT**

Oh. Chloe.

It was Chloe's fingers, scratching up and down Max's thigh.

Up and down.
Back and forth.

Not in circles or waves.

Max looked at Chloe. Max's eyes were...soaked. Heavy.

Chloe's eyebrows were twisted with sympathy and concern. Chloe's lips moved, but...Max couldn't hear what she said. She glanced across the room. Brooke was...saying something? Making fun of Victoria, from the look of it. But Max couldn't...hear anything.

Max faced Chloe again. She could feel her heart getting erratic and jittery.

She tried to keep calm. She leaned over to take another sip of her pink milkshake.

It smelled not sweet nor syrupy, but...metallic.

It tasted...of nothing.
Sobbing.

Everyone around her *looked* happy. Tired, but content. Jolly.

But all Max's ears could hear was...panicked sobbing.

“…. . . . .?” said Chloe, raising her brow.

Max nodded blankly, the gulp of shake like a rock as it slid through her throat wrong, aching all the way down.

All the way down.

Alllllllll the way downnnnnnnn. . .

Why was this happening? What was it *this* damned time?

…

*Hey. Don’t….! It’s not me, all right?*

*I take credit for the crap we pull, OK?*

*Seriously. I’m as freaked out as you are, why do you think I haven’t been saying anything?*

Hm.

It wasn’t like she was...skipping realities, more like...phasing between them? It was screwing with her senses. Feeling, smelling, seeing, hearing things all wrong.

Like everything was displaced.

*Dude.*

*Everything’s not ‘displaced’, moron.*

**You are.**

*We are. We are.*

Well...fuck.

Max shakily took another sip of her milkshake. Thankfully, it...tasted a bit like strawberry, at least.

The sobbing in the background was gone, too. Replacing it was Stella prattling about some adorable dorky thing...

“-no matter what I say, she still won’t try it. And I mean, I *seriously* think she’d like it if she just gave it a shot.”

“But I refuse,” Brooke grunted playfully...some kind of meme she’d use here and there.

“I’m scared I’d *break* the damn thing,” Chloe lamented jokingly, her hand still softly rubbing at Max’s leg. “Like it’d...slip out, or...-”

“It doesn’t...work like that,” Stella chuckled with a teasing eye roll.
“Meh, it’s the Nvidia Shield all over again,” Brooke grumbled.

“But with Nintendo games on it?” Stella breathed out excitedly. “Nintendo sensibilities in its design? Kind of a big deal.”

“Kind of,” Brooke scoffed, her change of tone sparring against Stella’s enthusiasm. “Sorry, girl. We went over this yesterday: they lost my trust already, we are not on speaking terms.”

Max found herself gulping her shake through the straw, suddenly hungry for the liquid confection.

“Hey, man,” said Chloe in defense, “I’m just happy the damn thing uses good ol’ buttons. Ya know?”

“Hey, man,” Victoria puffed. “Can we keep all your Big Bang Theory chatter to a minimum tonight? Please? I have a headache as it is...” She was daintily pressing her fingertips against her forehead, ‘poor thing’...

Max sighed tiredly through her nose as she took a breath between sips. She had to admit, she was lost enough as it was, but even so, it didn't settle right in her gut for them to be talking about video games right then.

“What do you want to talk about, then?” Stella asked, squeamishly staring at her uneaten curly fries.

“Anything but more of this nerd shit,” Victoria mumbled with exasperation, shrugging up her shoulder as she continued to play out her oh-so-painful headache.

Drama queen over here has no idea what a real headache is like...

Leave her alone, OK?

Pff. You would defend her...

Yea! I would! She's our friend.

So you say...

So I know.

“Just...!” Victoria grunted. “You know, sitting here, listening to all of your childish crap is not why I'm here.”

Stella looked a little dejected by Victoria’s remark. It stung at Max's chest.

“Why are you here...?” asked Max quietly. Tiredly.

Now Vickie the was one looking a little dejected. She dusted her eyelashes a bit and shrugged.

“I was invited,” Vickie mumbled, gesturing her wrist toward Stella.

“Because we're all friends,” Stella insisted, her tone revealing how exhausted she was with trying to keep everyone getting along all day.

“Sure,” Victoria puffed, flicking up a shrugging wrist. “Days like today? Like last night? I just...” Her eyes wandered with doubt. “I wonder how I got myself into this 'clique' of yours in the first place. I barely have anything in common with you.”
"Vickie," Stella assured with sympathy, "friends aren't about what we talk about, what our hobbies are."

"Yes, yes, yes," Victoria skipped Stella's impending gushy talk. "For once, I'd just like to have some sway over the conversation.

"Then give us something else to talk about," Max spat quietly, some irritation leaking through.

Everyone glanced her way, and she ignored them, going to finish her milkshake.

Max couldn't tell which...part of her had meant to say that. Both?

"Why don't you, Max?" countered Vickie, the tip of her tongue sharp. "You want to hassle me for being tired? You've been bitchy all day, OK?"

"Vic, don't-" but Stella was cut off.

"Did someone shit in your cereal this morning? Did you forget your meds? Or are you on new ones? I don't get what your deal is, but do not give me a hard time for being tired when it is one in the goddamn morning."

By the time Victoria had finished, Max had met her gaze. Victoria hadn't yelled, but her words had been steel-laced and cold. Frustrated. Impatient.

The emotion oozing from Victoria's voice, from her eyes, it was making Max feel tense. Disoriented. Stressed as hell. She could barely open her mouth, but a response would not come.

"We're all tired," said Stella, easing the situation. "Listen, um..." She blinked rapidly a few times, processing what to do, gazing about at their plates. "Vickie, why don't we...call it a night? Huh? I'll drop you guys off at the motel, and...then I'll swing Chloe and Max back to their place...we can all sleep in, and...-"

"Fine," Victoria agreed, rising from her seat, flicking her wrists up with defeat. "Why bother doing what I want when we can just keep-"

"We are doing what you want," said Brooke with some disbelief, sliding out of the booth behind her.

"Yea, sure, but I meant...-"

"It's late," said Stella, the third one out. "Let's all...get to bed. We've got a long day tomorrow..."

Victoria closed her eyes for a moment, as if containing her frustration and locking it away.

She opened her eyes, and through tight lips conceded, "Fine. Sure."

"Gotta piss first," said Chloe, eagerly scooting herself up.

Max chuckled softly, confused.

"It's, like, a five minute drive back," Max cited.

Drumming her fingers against the table's edge, Chloe kissed Max on the forehead.

"It has been too long since I've indulged in a proper trucker diner bathroom."

"You're going to graffiti the stall," Max dryly realized. "Aren't you?"

Chloe flicked up her wrist over her mouth in a vague shushing gesture as she excitedly made her way over. Max stared at her giddy fiance with some nostalgic warmth as she watched Chloe weave
her way through the trucker diner and into the bathroom.

“You're getting married to that one,” Victoria teased, chin in her wrist as she observed Max's rosey-eyed stare.

“That...is a thing that's going to happen,” Max acknowledged with a slow nod, the last one out of their booth.

Their bill having already been paid alongside dessert, the lot of them made their way for the diner's entrance.

“Any plans yet?” wondered Brooke, zipping up her armor-patterned hoodie. “Feels like you two have been engaged for a long time.”

“We have,” Max grunted defensively, reaching the door first and shoving it open with her shoulder. “Just...things...haven't been lining up, and...”

She trailed off as they all exited the brightly lit diner. The scents of coffee and breakfast foods were swapped for salty sea air and diesel fuel. They all lingered beneath the bright white light of the entrance double doors, staying close to each other as vapors drizzled from their faces in the chilly night.

“You still haven't set a date yet?” pondered Stella with some concern, draping her hood over her head.

“Well,” said Victoria, “at least Price put a ring on it.”

“Hey,” Max chuckled softly, “I put a 'ring on it,' too, ya know.”

“So you did,” Victoria said with a sultry smirk. “I'd forgotten...”

“Yea,” Max insisted, setting her hands in fists within her jacket sleeves to keep them warm. “No, yea, I mean, we-...It's still the plan, just...not a set...time...on it...” She sighed a nice big cloud of heat through her nose. Like a long held dream dissolving into the bitter cold air of this cursed seaside town.

“Trouble in paradise, huh?” Brooke stated. Like an assumption.

“What?” Max snapped herself back from her wistful posing. “Why...would you think that? We're fine. Things are going fine.”

Max watched Brooke and Stella swap wary looks, and in turn felt her stomach shrivel from this blatant lie she'd just told.

Stella scratched her nose a bit, glancing down at her plate sheepishly. She opened her mouth, but...didn't speak. Instead, Brooke did.

“You two were...bickering all the way here.”

Oh. Right. Vickie had said something similar.

*Because that's what happened.*

Why?

*I told you – she could tell we weren't all there. Set me on edge, I dunno.*
“Max,” Stella put out, “I get that...there's, like, some kind of personal...issue...happening with you two. And that might not be our business and whatever, but...if you two are going to keep all of this to yourselves, would you mind, like...keeping it to yourselves?”

“It makes things pretty awkward for the rest of us,” Brooke stated flatly. “You won't explain what's up, but you let us get exposed to the fallout. Doesn't feel good.”

Max's numbed cheeks were burning up from embarrassment. She felt like a real tool, fumbling around with excuses to assure everyone that everything would be OK, when she didn't know shit about what was even happening – only that it was swiftly becoming a problem for everyone close to her, rather than just a single, contained thing she could control.

“Sorry,” was all Max could think to say.

“If you really are,” said Brooke, “you could try to make more of an effort to show some self-control.”

“Brooke,” Stella scolded in a murmur.

Brooke shrugged wildly.

“If no one else is going to call her out on her shit, I will step up...”

“She's right here,” Victoria grumbled with her prissy little tone.

“Uh-huh,” Brooke whispered back testily. “Right now she's here. And tomorrow? When we're at a goddamn memorial service? Where will she be then?”

“It's not her fault,” Stella eased, going so far as to grasp Brooke's shoulder to quell here.

Hearing her friends talk about her like that – and in the third person – was a bit alarming.

Y-yea, urh, suffice it to say, we had a bumpy ride up the coast today.

You sound kind of a sorry about it...

Meh.

“-- fancy myself more of a Picasso than a...Mick-el-angelo,” Chloe bragged with a snorting laugh, waving around a permanent marker. She must've slipped out of the diner while Max had...ugh.

Max smiled at Chloe's childish pride. Nodding and rolling her eyes through the humor, she reached out her arm and took the marker from Chloe.

“Yo-! Wh-? Hey,” Chloe lashed out playfully, scrambling her arms around for the item that had been taken.

“Nope,” Max denied, sticking out her tongue as she hid the thing inside her jacket. She headed off for Stella's car, and Chloe gave chase. “Gone. Revoked. Confiscated.” She was giggling a bit, speeding up as she got close, and Chloe caught her in both arms, pinning her against Stella's vehicle.

“Hoho, who's arresting who?” Chloe whispered in Max's ear.

Max could hear her friends jokingly protesting their PDA from behind her. Max kind of didn't care. She'd steal any moment like this with Chloe she could get. She wriggled herself around, still up against the passenger side doors, Chloe's body pressed upon her.
“Assaulting an officer?” Max jested, letting her jaw hang loose with faux shock. “That's a serious offense, Ma'am.”

“I didn't see no badge,” Chloe countered, biting her lower lip through a mischievous smile.

Max peeled back her sleeve, revealing her spiral tattoo. Chloe's brows raised at that. Mouth still agape, Max nodded at Chloe, and Chloe nodded back.

“Oh, yea?”
“Yeh.”

“Max Caulfield: *Time Cop*. Protecting public restrooms from graffiti and gunfire since twenty-thirteen.”

*Heh. Lean forward. Right up to her face.*

*Yea-yea-yea, just like that. Now: kiss.*

*Yeaaaaa-hahah. 'Atta girl. Ooh. Mm.*

*OK, now say:*

“I'm gonna need to have you come with me, Ma'am.”

“Gosh-diddly-arn, Officer, I dunno what I darn done, but...Ah sure will help ya howe'er ah can...”

Their noses rubbing together, they broke into snickering.

“Wh-?” Max struggled to speak through the laughter. “When did you-? You, like, transformed into a Southern Belle.”

“I do duh-clare.”

“Stop...” Max was shaking her head and straightening her hair, trying to suppress her own chuckles as the car doors on the opposite side slammed shut.

She realized Stella and Vickie had ignored them and gotten in, but they were...kind of in Brooke's way.

“Seriously, guys?” Brooke said with an irate yawn.

Max and Chloe readied themselves for another bout of proper public behavior. Chloe opened the backseat door and let Max in, all courteous-like – then gave Max's right buttcheek a fierce pinch on her way in.

Max missed those moments.

She wished she could...bottle them up. Save them. Preserve them.

What use was time travel when she couldn't even revisit the silly, happy moments like this?

—

Stella had dumped Vic and Brooke back at the motel just down the road from the diner, and promptly delivered Max and Chloe to Joyce and David's place.
The front light to the house was left on for them, at least. It was nice, having been welcomed in with open arms. Max intended to try spending some quality time with Chloe's parents while they were in the area.

But as they exited the car, and Stella got out to give them their good-bye hugs...Stella took note of the clear night sky once again.

“Wow, it...it's still...there.”

“Huh?” Chloe gawked around aimlessly for a sec before realizing what was up.

Yea. Still...two moons up in the sky.

“So bizarre,” Stella mumbled. “Brooke couldn't seem to see it, either.”

Chloe attempted to...'explain.' “M-must be some kinda...weird...way that, like, the sun's rays reflect off...the moon rocks, maybe how the orbits are aligned, or...-”

“Maybe we're so tired we're just seeing double,” Stella sighed. “So weird, though...”

“Eh,” Chloe dismissed, unlocking the front door. “Trick of the light, stress, whatever it is, it's...pretty damned late. Time to turn in.”

Not yet.

“A-actually, Chloe, could I, um...talk with Stella...for a minute?”

Chloe and Stella were both startled by this request. They tried to read each other for a moment, ultimately concluding with mutual shrugs that this would be OK.

“Shhhhuurrrre,” Chloe slowly decided through furrowed brows. “What, about...like, last night?”

Max nodded, feeling proud Chloe had grown intuitive enough to figure those sorts of things out.

“Max,” Stella said sheepishly, “we don't...really need to go over that right now...Do we?”

Max shook her head, flicking her bangs out of her eyes.

“No, we...we do,” Max said darkly. “I just, I know you're still mad at me, you...you have every right to be, and...I just wanna get it off both our chests before tomorrow.”

“Oh.” Stella seemed concerned. Fair enough.

“You, uh...?” Chloe was flashing Max a curious brow. “Is everything...OK?”

Max nodded, tight-lipped. She was scared she might not even be able to get her entire thought out before...who knew what? She tripped into some other goddamn reality, and woke up the next morning? Jeez.

When Chloe lingered uncertainly, Max moved a step toward her, planted a gentle kiss against her lips, and offered as solemn a nod as she could.

“Kay,” Chloe said with some relief. “Just, uhh...” Chloe lifted a finger thoughtfully, scanned both of their expressions, closed her finger back up, and let her arm drop. “Yea,” she grunted awkwardly after the lack of words. “G'night, Stells.”
“Night,” Stella sighed, giving Chloe a timid, tired nod.

Chloe, hands on her hips, nodded slowly. Twice. She then swung herself around, back into the doorway, and quietly closed it behind her.

Max felt a shiver crawl up her spine. Could she actually go through with this?

“Stella...” Max took a deep breath. Her eyes were already getting damp. “Wh-...” And she was already having trouble speaking. “Why...did you invite me – us – to come with you today?”

Stella's contemplative expression dulled a bit. The sharp sting of her critical stare gave way to concern.

“Max, you're...one of my best friends, I-...” Stella's gaze remained locked on Max's. “This is a big deal, this trip. I didn't want to let...some drama...mess that up.”

Max laughed weakly, knowingly. She brushed at her eyes.

Max replied, “It's just...you're...y-you're so brave, and...strong, and you're so much better than all of my stupid, crazy...-” Max trailed off, shaking her head in spite of herself.

“Huh?” Stella took a step closer, straining to hear.

Max avoided her curious eyes, and tried to find a concise way of putting it.

“St-Stella, I don't...I guess sometimes I'm just...bewildered.”

“Bewildered?” Stella came back quietly, amused.

“Bewildered,” Max repeated with warmth, and a smirk to match. “Just...completely confused as to how you've been...through so much, and you just...keep giving people second chances.”

Stella's eyes widened for a second. Then they narrowed, and she rubbed at her nose, fidgeting her glasses. That second where her eyes narrowed, Max could see – because she'd seen it so many times before in Chloe, in Victoria, and in Stella alike – there was that brief sting of memory. Of regret. Of pain.

That bitter sting of ’It's not easy to keep trying.’

“Max...-” Stella began.

But Max wasn't finished.

“I was...out of my mind last night,” Max confessed.

_Literally._

No thanks to you.

_Eh, what can I say? I did my job._
Max swallowed to whet her dried throat, then continued.

“And...and I am...so sorry...for what I did, I...”

“H-hey, look, seriously. It was a whole emotional mess. We don't...need to get into this right—”

“We do,” Max insisted.

Stella's lips hung open at the interruption.

Max bit at her own lip, glancing away momentarily as she tried to decide how to proceed.

*Heh.*

*So, this is it, huh?*

*We're really doing this?*

I think so.

*In a driveway, huh?*

Stop.

*What is it with you and these places, anyway?*

*Parking lots, bathrooms driveways...All the sexy hot spots.*

Let me focus.

“And...Are you sure you want to...get into this? Here? Now?”

Max nodded fervently.

If she didn't do this now, while she was there, who knew when she'd get a better chance?
It's about time.

It is.

Get it? 'Cuz-
Got it....ugh.

“Do you want the short version?” Max sighed, running her hand across her forehead tiredly. “Or the long version?

Stella took a moment to process the decision.

“It's late,” she stated. “We're both...tired. I am tired. Of thinking on all of this.”

“Short version, then,” Max deduced.

With an uncertain curl to her lips, Stella shrugged and nodded.

“Sh-Sure, Max, yea...”

Dusting pre-emptive tears from her eyelashes, Max inhaled a long, deep breath.

You got this.

She exhaled.

We got this.
We got this.

“I-I don't...know how else to say it,” Max mumbled, her heart-rate starting to quicken. With her hands latched awkwardly around her waist, she shrugged and sighed, “So I'll just...”

Stella nodded expectantly, brows lowered with worry.

Max peeled back her sleeve, revealing her wrist tattoo – that purple spiral.

“You know how me and Chloe are...big into time travel stories?” Max posed.

Stella nodded silently.

“Well,” said Max, still holding her wrist aloft. “There's a reason for that. One I'm...” She fluttered her lips warily, rolling her sleeve back up.
No. Nope. This is dumb, I can't do this.

She won't believe me.

It'll just look crazy.

_Seriously?_

_You're worried about 'looking crazy'?_

_After all the shit that's happened lately?_

_Just suck it up and tell her._

“_A reason?”_ Stella repeated, letting a consoling hand latch itself to Max's elbow.

Max nodded, her lips quivering with doubt. With fear.

If she went through with this, there was no going back.

Well...she could always Rewind, right?

But that was the whole fucking problem.

She had to get back into a habit of making decisions and letting them stick.

If she kept hiding from that aspect of reality...-

If she kept hiding from consequence, from genuine choice...-

_Was she really living in reality?_

“_Stella, this'll...be hard to take in, but...but I swear to you, it's...the truth. Th-the truth, at least, um...as far as...I can..._”

Her head was starting to hurt.

Well, more like...this _pressure_ was pushing against it. From the inside.

“_Just tell me, Max. At this point, _anything_ is going to make more sense to me than...you actually wanting to make shady backdoor deals with that _asshole_ brother of mine..._”

_Just say it._

“I can travel through time,” Max spit through clenched teeth, struggling to hide her sudden bout of dizziness.
“...Um...” Stella was, naturally, taken aback.

“The twin moons in the sky tonight?” Max drew their attention to them, still there, still glaring down like cosmic, judgmental eyes. “That's my fault. I know it is.”

Stella was quiet. Eerily quiet. Arms crossed and eyes keen with critique, she hung on Max's every word.

So Max spoke.

“Juh-...Jefferson? Back at Blackwell? Me and Chloe didn't just do research. I leapt through time. That's how I knew what he was doing. That's how I helped save Victoria – because I knew he was going to kidnap her. Because I'd already seen it happen.”

Stella's brows were slowly arcing, twisting into an expression didn't know what to make of.

So Max kept going.

“When Kate Marsh killed herself? I was in class. Right in front of you. Y-you probably don't remember, but trust me, I will...never forget that day. Ever. How do you think I got to the roof before anyone else did? How could I have physically gotten there before people who were already there?”

Stella's face contorted, one brow lifting over the other. One of her hands had raised, and a hooked finger was planted on her chin as she processed what Max was saying.

So Max continued.

“My nose bleeds? The headaches? The...sickness? It's because of...this...-...this power. This 'gift.' Not that it's done anyone much good...”

Stella's stoic look held fast.

So Max went on.

“That Storm? Five years ago?” Max pointed a frustrated hand off to the distance. In the general direction of the bay's ocean waters. “How no predicted it? How no one saw it coming? That's because it wasn't a natural tornado, Stella. It was me. I somehow...-”

“You made a tornado appear out of thin air?” Stella posed, her tone dubious but...curious.

“I-I didn't mean to,” Max stressed with some desperation. “It just-...”

“If you can travel through time,” Stella posed, as Max was expecting, “why didn't you warn everyone about the Storm?”

“I...-” Aaaaand there were the tears. “I was...-”

Stella's head cocked at an inquisitive angle.

Go ahead.
Give her one of your excuses.

No one would've believed me.
I didn't know for sure it was coming.
I couldn't control my powers.
I was too busy trying to stop Jefferson.
I was too busy trying to find Rachel Amber.

Give her the real answer.

“I had to save Chloe.”
“...Chloe?”
Max put on her steeliest expression, wiping tears from her cheeks with her sleeve.
“Five years ago, Chloe...was supposed to get shot. By Nathan Prescott.”
Stella's hand was still attached to her chin. She tapped her finger against her nose a few times, her lips pursed with thought.
“But I stopped it,” Max concluded. “And...somehow, I guess...that made the Storm...happen.”
“Happen?”
“I-I don't know, kuh-...!” Max was starting to have trouble speaking. “Chaos Theory. I...I stopped one event ffff-...from happening, I-...It changes h-history. And...and it had a duh-...a domino effect, and...-”
Max brushed forming tears from her face, her cheeks red hot and her knees weak.
Stella dropped her hand, shoving her fists against her hips and shaking her head a bit.
Max felt her gut sink a bit.
“How in the hell would stopping a shooting...make a tornado magically appear out of nowhere?”
“I don't know,” Max panted with exhaustion. “I have spent so long trying to-...”
“That's not how Chaos Theory works, Max.”
“It-It's what Warren told me, I don't...-”
“Warren?”
Max felt her throat catch. She knew Stella had taken it hard when she found out Warren had passed. And Max’s trips to other realities had only solidified the notion that Stella had carried some kind of a
flame for the poor kid back in the day.

“I tried...explaining this all to Warren at one point, buh-...before he...-”

“And he said...Chaos Theory? For real?” Stella sounded befuddled.

Max popped up one shoulder, tapped her fingertips against her forehead, flicked them off dismissively, and sighed.

“It-...It was a...tense situation, I was...I was in the middle of...figuring out what Jefferson was up to, he, um...he just-...It was just an idea Warren had.”

“A hypothesis.”

“Sh-sure, yea, I don't...”

“It's wrong.”

“Stella, look, that's...-” Max's eyes squinted shut. That pressure had lifted, but now she was just feeling...afraid. Scared, petrified that Stella wouldn’t believe her. “It doesn't add up, OK? I know it doesn't. That's not the point. The point of all this is that I...I can travel through time, and...and like the Storm, it...has-”

“I was wrong, this is worse than you just wanting to buy drugs from my brother.”

“I didn't want that, Stella!”

“Then why did you do it?”

“It-...It's complicated, there's this...this Other-”

“Convenient that you have this whole fucking fantasy story made up, and...-”

“I swear, Stella. Why would I lie to you?”

“The same reason you lie to everyone,” Stella hissed quietly. “You just tell people what they want to hear.”

“Stella...-” Max's vision was clouded by tears. “No...Please...”

“If you could time travel – fucking time travel? – how the hell could you have let Kate...-?!?”

Stella's voice had degraded to an offended whisper. Max rubbed her sleeves against her face.

“My powers, they didn't...work, I-I was...still learning how to...use them, and...and I overdid it, and...-”

Now Stella was the one with her eyes closed, with her hands on her temples.

“Max,” she said, glaring at her friend dead on. “I know you feel bad about everything that happened here way back when, but...it's not your fault.”

What?

Pff. She thinks you're a nutcake.

Guess I was wrong.

“Stella. It was all my fault.”
“Chloe was right,” Stella said, almost to herself, with a shake of her head. “You really are regressing.”

“What?”

Chloe had...said that?

“You're slipping, Max. You keep...spacing out, losing touch with reality. That's what this is, isn't it?”

“That's exactly what I'm trying to tell you, I-I...am losing it, be-because all of this...time travel, it's...messing with...with my perception of things, and...and so...”

Stella shrugged off Max's grip, leaving Max's hands to tighten into fists at her hips.

“Max, believe me, part of me...wants to believe you.”

Max nodded, droplets slipping down her cheeks.

“Please,” she begged. “Please believe me...I need you to understand, this is...why I've been acting...-”

“Strange?” snapped Stella.

“Yes.”

Stella took a second to try and process everything.

That was fine.

Max couldn't expect her to just...blindly believe her. With Chloe, Max had been upfront about it.

With Stella? She'd been hiding it for years. The longer people got used to seeing you wearing a mask, the less familiar they were with your actual face.

Max bobbed her leg on her toe sheepishly, hands hooked behind her back. She watched Stella pace across Joyce's lawn in the dark for a minute or so.

Max was going to have to prove it, of course. Like she had with Chloe.

It was easy to forget, but...Chloe had made her prove she had powers in different ways.

And Stella was a much more cynical person than Chloe, right?

So she paid attention.

A dog barked down the street.

Stella's ring tone went off and she checked her phone.

“Wh-...” Max's throat was too dry, so she swallowed, coughed and tried again. “Who is it?” she asked.

“Ech,” Stella puffed at her phone, the tiny screen illuminating her irritation across the distance. “It's
Brooke, checking in on me.”

“What...did she say? Sp-...Specifically?”

Stella looked up to Max with some disbelief.

“What?” Stella said skeptically. “Are you going to...-” She flicked her phone up in the air. “-...go back in time? Tell me what she said before she says it?”

Max nodded, unsure of...how to confess this in spoken word.

Stella approached her, rolling her eyes and shoving her phone out.

Max was wary to take her friend's phone in her own hands, instead committing the text to memory.

(Brooke) – (Yo. You OK? What's taking you so long?)

Max nodded again when she had gotten it into her head.

_Need me to hold onto that for ya?_

_Ya know, before ya friggin' drop it and break it?_

I think I've got this.

_OK...If you say so..._

“You know what?” Stella decided, shaking her head as she shoved her phone in her pocket. “We need a password.”

Max tilted her head quizzically.

Stella bobbed her head up and down to herself, her lower jaw propped out impatiently.

“You know what?” Stella decided, shaking her head as she shoved her phone in her pocket. “We need a password.”

Max tilted her head quizzically.

Stella bobbed her head up and down to herself, her lower jaw propped out impatiently.

“Yup. A password. Tell me what it is.”

“I...-” Max's chest tightened. “St-Stella, you...have to tell it to me first.”

“Kay,” Stella said lightly, almost aggressively. “So you haven't tried it yet.”

“Rewinding?”

“Rewinding? Is that-...What, is that your...nickname for it?”

“Y-yea...”

“Oh. That's-...That's kind of cute, actually...” Stella smirked with a sympathetic curve to her brows.

“Th-thanks...Um, so...The password?” Max checked.

“Right.” Stella pounded the side of her fist into her opposing palm. Staring Max dead in the eyes, she stated, “What I want most right now is my own personal fork. I already have my own personal spoon.”

“Um...-?”

_Dafuq?

“That's the password,” Stella made clear.

“The whole thing?” Max checked dubiously. She was having enough trouble keeping track of her own place in time, much less remembering a whole quote.


“It's...kind of long.”

Wait, don't we know that from somewhere?

_That tsundere chick._

That anime she showed me: Steins;Gate.

_Right._

“You recognize it?” Stella posed.

“Yea.”

“Good.” Stella scratched at her eyes a bit and yawned. “Now. Do it.”

“Right now?” Max was being put on the spot. Her knees felt weak. Brushing bangs out of her eyes, she muttered, “Y-you want me to...Rewind time for you?”

Stella was looking up at the sky.

Two moons reflected in each of her glasses.

“Yea,” Stella confirmed in an awestruck whisper.

“O-OK, I'll...-” Max swallowed, rubbed sweat from her cheeks, dried her hands on her lifted her
She twisted the strings of time around her fingers. She flexed her hand, tightening the web, straining her her bones, wrapping reality’s little ropes around her fingers so tightly, it felt like the flesh would be torn off.

Stella had become familiar with the mask Max had been wearing for so long. The mask she only took off for Chloe.

But at this point, the thing was so worn, so cracked, and Stella knew it so well, the woman was seeing the cracks, the paint peeling off, the chips slipping away.

It was time to take off the mask.

Please work please work pleaseworkpleaseworkpleaseworkplease

“Strange?” snapped Stella.

Max's vision blurred, the edges of her sight that familiar bleeding haze.

Stella was in front of her, staring her down, just like before.

Stella was also pacing back and forth across the lawn, sort of...flickering, like an apparition.

Shit.
There were two Stella Hills.

“Max?” said Stella – the one right in front of her.

“Y-yea,” Max replied, shaken.
“Huh?” asked the opaque Stella over on the lawn.

Oh, jeez...

*Damnit.*

“What's wrong?”
“*What's up?”*

Both voices were Stella's, slightly out of sync.

“Uh...! Um, I-, uhh...!”

Max's heart was racing. Her chest felt hollow. Fuck, she could *not* afford to pass out right now.

She couldn't deal with whatever the *hell* could happen if she did.

Clutching her chest, Max tried to take slow, deep breaths, and...sat herself down, right on the cement walkway in front of Joyce and David's house.

“Max, you OK?” Stella approached her slowly, calmly.
“*Max? What's happening?” Stella approached her quickly, fretfully.*

Stella stopped briefly, right before reaching Max. She clutched her stomach.

*Stella's pace slowed to a stop for a moment as she grabbed her gut.*

“Wh-whoa...” Stella moaned groggily, dazed for a second.

“*Ulgh, what...?" Stella murmured, momentarily stunned.*

'Time sickness...?’

That thing that happened to Chloe when Max Rewound time...
“Huh-...?” said Stella, brows squinted with confusion.
“Sickness-...?” eked Stella, eyes wide with fright.

Yea. Time sickness.
Sure as hell looked like what was happening to her.

Them?

Max had to focus.

“Duh-...Dog barking-...-” Max lifted a heavy hand off toward the direction the sound had come from.

“What?” said Stella.

“Oh...What?” scoffed Stella.

The sound of the dog barking played out just like before. One dog's bark, or two? Max couldn't tell for sure.

Stella's eyes narrowed as she glanced off toward the mutt's echoing cries.

Stella's expression was sour with disbelief as she looked down the road where the noise had come from.

“Tuh-...” Max was having trouble breathing. She coughed. She could feel the droplets of blood hit her palm.

The mask was off. She had to ensure Stella saw the face that was beneath.

“Text-...” Max managed.

“Text?”

“Text?”

“From...Brooke. Text message...”
Stella's phone vibrated. Her eyes widened with disbelief.

“Stella's phone vibrated. Her eyes widened with disbelief.”

“She's...-” Max's sight was going dark, her senses fogging up on her.

Fuck no NO not right now

She's checking to see if you're OK. Wondering what's taking you so long.

“Wh-...? She is?” Stella stared at Max, but slowly pulled her phone out.

“How would you know that?” Stella asked, though she knew the answer.

“I just-...I know...” Max's sight came back. Mostly.

Stella's hands shook as she checked her phone.

Stella could barely hold her phone as she checked it.

Stella's nostrils tightened. Her brows furrowed. She glared at Max.

Stella's nostrils widened. Her brows lifted. She gawked at Max.

“You...-” Max cleared her throat, wiping her blood drops on her pant leg. “What you...need most right now is your...own personal fork.”

You already have your own personal spoon.

Stella sucked in air through her nostrils, her eyes sparking.

Stella took a sharp, quiet gasp through her lips, her eyes quivering.

“You were...about to tell me that password,” Max explained with a sniff.
Stella's eyes flickered like warm embers, a small smile appearing.

_Rubbing her forehead, she whispered in a bemused way, “Damn my future self...”_

Max's head was pounded with a sudden shot of pain, causing her to squint and grasp at her skull.

It was a brief, sharp pain. Like...a tape deck being slammed shut.

_Side A, Side B._

When Max opened her eyes...there was only one Stella.

She was in a heap on the gravel parking lot, curled into a ball, clutching her head. She looked like she was in...so much pain.

“Stella...!” Max breathed out, coughing in a phlegm-filled daze as she crawled to her stunned friend. “Are you OK?” said Max in a quiet, panicked whisper.

“Another..._me_,” Stella choked through her sobbing, still grabbing her ache-laden skull. “What-...?”

“I don't know,” Max confessed. “That...that's never...happened before.” Max's teeth were chattering, her hands were trembling, her breathing shallow and her heart quick.

“Max...-” Stella's teeth were clenched, her glasses fallen off her face in her writing. She was wincing in pain.

Max worked her arms around Stella's head, cradling it in her grasp – in her shaky, weak arms. She looked up at the sky: only one moon now. That was...good, at least. Right?

“I believe you,” Stella sniffled, her eyes slammed shut. “Just...just _please_, make it stop...”

“Stella,” Max panted with a horrified regret. “N-no, I'm not-...I'm not doing it, I...-”

Stella suddenly inhaled a sharp breath, like waking from slumber – her eyes flashed open.

“_Gugh-! Haugh-! Ulgh...-_” The noises that she choked out were worrisome.

“Are you OK?” Max desperately asked.

Tears were streaming down Stella's cheeks as she nodded, her eyes straining to focus on Max's face. Her hands had moved from her head to her stomach.

“Why did she do it?” Stella coughed. “Why-...? I didn't-...”

Max was puzzled, and was too busy being scared out of her mind to say anything.
“Hoh god,” Stella sobbed. “Oh, it hurts... Aghh...! She... Why would she do it, Max?”

“Why would...-?” Max was now bawling her eyes out, too. “Who? Who did what?”

“Chloe,” Stella struggled to say through grit teeth, clawing at some pain in her gut. “She... I can't...!”

“Ihhh- It's OK, it's all right,” said Max hastily, trying to run her head across Stella's head, soothe the poor girl any way she could. “You're OK. You're safe. Chloe's safe. We're all safe, all right?”

The front door to the house behind them suddenly peeled open. Max turned her to head around to see Chloe, still in her jeans and t-shirt, staring at them with alarm.

What...?

Chloe closed the door calmly behind her. In her socks, she carefully trekked across the gravel driveway to the pair of them.

“Why did you...-?” Stella whispered in shock.

“Stells...” Chloe said apologetically. “What did I do, Bud...?”

Stella was gripping her stomach – if this was time sickness, it was easily the worst Max had seen yet.

“Chloe,” Max coughed out, rubbing snot out of her nostrils with her sleeve. “She...-”

“You told her,” Chloe said with a defeated shrug. “I, uh... I kinda of... overheard the last part of it...”

Chloe was spying on her?

To be fair? I've... kinda given her reason to.

I cannot believe you.

H-hey, this... double-vision shit? Not me. OK? Not doing it.

Then what the fuck is happening?

Not sure.

But... maybe it could do us some good...

If we let it.

Before Max had realized it, she'd helped Chloe carry Stella into the house. They'd set the poor, quivering girl onto the couch, and Chloe had already prepared their sleeping quarters: an air mattress on the floor, right next to said couch.

Stella had passed out in the transition.

Fff. Fuckin' figures, right?
You try to do good by your friend... and you hurt her, too.
No, screw that.
I didn't hurt her. How the hell could I have known?

Exactly.

You didn't know.

So maybe stop fucking with shit you still don't understand.

After going to the bathroom in a state of shock, Max returned to see Chloe kneeling over the couch, her eyes glazed with concern for their friend, poor thing. At least Stella seemed to be at peace, her face finally calm, her slumbering breaths gentle and quiet.

Max went back outside to retrieve Stella's glasses. The gravel pricked at her bare feet, the moonlight guiding her. Upon retrieving Stella's glasses, Max couldn't help but be mesmerized by their unbroken, smooth, reflective surface.

The sight of the full moon above mirrored across each of the two glass pieces in Max's hands.

“Maxine?” It was Chloe, calling in a soft, sorrowful murmur.

Chloe had followed her outside, it seemed. Max just gave her a ghostly, dead look, and Chloe crossed their distance, enveloping her in her arms.

“Babe...” said Chloe fretfully. “What did you do?”

“I-I just...Chloe, I was...trying to tell her about...-”
“I heard,” Chloe said with a bitter grunt. “You didn't tell me you were gonna...”
“Ihh-It was a spur of the moment...thing, I...-”
“So what happened?” Chloe insisted with a tired sigh.

Max twisted her body around. She sniffed, wiped her palms at her wet eyes, hung her arms across Chloe's shoulders, pressed her chest against hers, and planted her forehead against her partner's.

“I told her,” Max explained, her eyes closed as she tried to stay calm. “About my Rewind. She...wanted me to prove it, and so...-”
“But she...looked like you hurt her...”
“I don't know,” Max whimpered. “I...I tried to Rewind, and...and then there were two of her...”
“Two of her?”
“Of Stella.”
“...The fuck?”
“Right?”
“She's not...still like that, is she?”
“N-no, they...went back to one, and...-”

At Max's words, Chloe tilted her head up to confirm the state of the moon.

“Just one now,” she observed.

“Mm-hm,” hummed Max into Chloe's collarbone. She kissed at her fiance's upturned neck, and their faced found their way into an eskimo kiss as they realigned.

“Jesus,” said Chloe in quiet amazement. Well, like...being in awe, but in a bad way.

So, um...petrified, huh?
“Guh...Guess we're...back in Arcadia Bay,” Max struggled to joke, her voice catching before the end. “Same shit...different year.”

Chloe scratched the back of Max's neck gently, and kissed her on the mouth a couple times to calm her.

“Maxine. Baby. Buddo. You...gotta figure out what's wrong, here, OK?”

“I know...I will, Chloe.”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

—

“People always told me growing up that it's never about the destination – it's about the journey.
But what if the destination...is you?”
~ Mr. Robot
A/N: Chapter 13 is already like halfway done, so the wait until the next chapter will be much short.

Please check out Riley Hawke on YouTube -- her new song 'Overexposed' was one she made for this story project, and the video she made for it was incredibly creative and in line with All Wounds' overall story, from beginning to end.

Life stuff update, so if you don't care and just wanna read the story, have at it.

This project's been taking a lot longer than I planned. I've been holding off on doing too much work on the visual novel as I'd really prefer the whole story to be written before I do – that way, I can build the VN knowing exactly where the story is going, and make edits and changes to enhance things.

Personal end of things?
I'm dating @mollifiable now and she's coming to visit soon, but I'm broke af for a number of reasons, struggling to figure out how I'll get to spend time with her but also pay my bills that month, coping with physical health aftereffects of stress and anxiety (even though I'm technically feeling a lot better lately?), absolutely fucking lost in terms of trying to find a new job that isn't so stressful and drain so much out of me, not really in a place to be able to afford artwork commissions like I used to, aaaaaand oh right, I'm trying to transition my gender and because of current work/finances, I can't...really do that properly yet.

This is all to say, this is a non-profit project – though other fandom creators are able to profit from their work, it isn't really the case with writers, unfortunately. That said, I feel compelled to ask for charitable donations from anyone willing – even if it's going to go directly to an artist to make art for this project, that would still help immensely. But things like taking care of @mollifiable while she's here, things I can use in my gender transition, aide in those would also greatly help. I'm even willing to do one-shot commissions on the side for anyone interested. And any recommendations on job leads for a writer and multimedia editor in the SF Bay Area, also good. You can message me here, you can e-mail me at D3stiny dot Sm4sher at gmail, or you can straight up PayPal at eddy dot fettig09 at houghton dot edu (though if you do, please leave a note indicating how the donation should be used). I don't really expect much from this, but every bit helps.

Also, my main sprite artist, Shannon, has had quite a stressful year, and I'm not sure if she's going to be able to fully commit to this entire project – if anyone has any suggestions for an artist passionate about LiS who might be interested in collaborating on sprites for the later portion of the story (after the time skip), I'm all ears. Just be forewarned that I'll probably be fairly picky.

Sooooo, yea. All of the shit, a bit too much going on these days, and yet my life is still basically spinning its wheels in mud as I wait for change I can't seem to make happen.

Thanks for continuing to stick with the story.
“You know, through pain, you learn a lot about yourself -- things you thought you never knew you wanted to learn. And it's kind of like those animals that regrow a part of their body -- like a starfish. You might not feel it. You might not even want to grow, but you will. You'll grow that part that broke off, and that growing -- that blooming -- cannot happen without the pain.”

~ Kelle Hampton

The sea were oddly quiet that morn, still dark wit' stars n' moon above. The sloshing of waves, the creaking of wooden hulls o'er each crest of the still ocean...t'were unsettling.

Passing through hell's kitchen, they were. An entire fleet. Shadowed faces in the distance stared clear through their souls whilst they passed, their ghostly features unclear in the dark.

Brownbeard's mangy beast were yipping like mad...'tweren't an aide to their circumstances. The poor lad, his leg still bandaged and bloody, were set down upon the deck, trying to quell his creature's fright.

Chlo Morpho were acting in kind toward her own 'beast,' as it were...Not quite petting a dog, but her lone hand were running lengthwise through the Cap'n's mane, helping brace them both for the Chaos soon to come...

The stillness of everything 'round them turned oppressive the longer they drifted through the fleet.

Chlo found herself shaken by the Cap'n's trembling. This were Maximus Hawkmoth. The Cap'n Maximus. Afraid. Petrified. 'Twere discomforting.

A swell of relief o' some sort seeped into them as they approached the ship at the end o' the fleet -- a glorious ship in its own right. Nary a canon perched upon it, but a well-tended vessel, for true. Only two crewman, side by side, upon deck: a short, round one, and a tall, broad-shouldered one. Shrouded in fog and dark, they were.

And there it was, high atop the crow’s nest -- a glint in the full moon's pale light -- the horned, golden Crown of Captain Sunlace. A tangle of metal, shaped into antlers to form a headpiece which nigh glowed even in this dead o’ night.

But glowing 'neath 'er crown weren't the angel's features o' Sunlace, but...rather...some pair o' devil’s eyes. Beast eyes. A Monster, gussied up to play pirate, eyepatch n' all. Her long ponytail o' red flick'd in the cold, salty wind, 'n her fin-like ears twitched wit' anticipation.

As Maximus lulled their puny vessel to a stop before this ship and its inhuman captain, the Beast bared a chilling grin. Teeth like white knives -- a piranha’s smile.
A voice like an icicle snarled from the spaces between the Beast's teeth.

"The Human they call 'Maximus.'"

Chlo's insides twisted and tangled like a squid caught in a net. She felt the Cap'n's shoulders quiver a bit.

"Ye've arrived!" declared the Beast, thrusting up a scaled, slimy palm skyward.

"So I have," the Cap'n called back with much perplexation. "What's it matter to ye?! Why're ya blockin' our way?!"

"Aye, we all owe ye a lot, so we do!" bellowed the Monster, whirling about with a rough flick o' her coattails, squaring them down from 'er perch. "'Twas you what brought us together, aft'r all!" She flicked her fishy limbs out to her fleet, n’ they cheered in reply. "‘Tis true," she jeered to her cohorts. "Ain’t it, me hearties?!"

"NGAAAAAAHHHHHHH!" boomed the very air round them, so full o' voices from cursed souls. Their anger-spiked sorrow made the dank air heavy. Oppressin', as much as voices could be.

Brownbeard's mutt weren't pleased with the development, but 'is measly yelps were snuffed outright by the rabid cheers o' the Beast's massive crew. The sounds were swallowing the lot o' them.

'Twas in this moment that Chlo Morpho realized the sailors manning the fleet surrounding them were...skeletons. Whole lot o’ them. Undead atrocities in pirate's clothing. She’d ‘eard the rumors o’ Arcadia’s lost souls runnin’ with this fearful captain, but…The survivors o’ the Arcadia Storm...'weren't survivors o’ the sort she'd imagined. 'N they seemed a might bit foul-tempered at the presence of the ones who'd wrought their seaside town asunder. On the deck o’ the Beast's ship, those crewman…were a strikingly familiar pair of bags o' bones. Their skeletal smiles, eerie in their joyous expressions, eyes glowin' cold, caught Chlo's heart in 'er chest. Their child-like grins tugged at 'er own Human Soul with a might discomfort. This all 'tweren't right.

"A band o' thieves!" taunted the blue-skinned Beast. “Like all Humans are -- snoopin’ 'round our waters, tryin’ to plunder what li’l we ‘ave left! Lookin' fer this, were ye?!” She pointed a fishy finger to the antler-twine crown upon 'er head. It glistened in the moonlight, it did, and the sight shook Chlo Morpho to 'er core.

"Where'd ye steal that from?!” Chlo demanded, pointing 'er hooked hand with a building fury.

"NGAH!" huffed the Monster, all offended like. “Ne'er stole it! Ain't stoopin' to depths ye Humans drag yerselves down to...Not anymore.”

Chlo pressed with ferocity, “What 'ave ye done with Queen Sunlace, ye cursed wench?!”

The Monster Captain were confused for a brief time, yellowed eyes narrowing like an ominous sunset.

“...Oh. So ye 'aven't forgot 'bout her, eh? Well, shiver me damn timbers. Ye had us all fooled…!”

Chlo weren't sure what that could've meant. But the Beast's expression turned from ice to fire as she towered threateningly.

Chlo swapped afeared looks with 'er Cap'n in search of retort.
“Course not, ye cursed creature!” Chlo cried with a swing of her hook hand. “We'd ne'er forget Sunlace!”

The Monster's smile turned south, 'er eye flashed a bright blue, an' her scaled hand unraveled. With a ghostly flash, somethin' o' the magical sort formed in 'er fingers: a Spear of cerulean light turned solid.

With fist clenched, the Monster prattled impatiently.

“While ye've been frolickin' about with yer crooked Cap'n, we've been sufferin'! Slavin' away to seek salvation of our Queen.” She pointed the spear right at Chlo Morpho in a rage. “Of your Queen!”

“Sunlace ain't our Queen!” came Cap'n Maximus with a gruff snort. Chlo were a bit startled by the retort, herself.

The Beast surely did not like this answer, either. She leapt, high n' true, landing square on her fin-ankled boots, right upon Maximus' vessel wif' such force, the ship swayed. Her gold earrings, fashioned to skull shapes, swayed and sparkled in the pale light o' the full moon. She set the brunt of 'er Spear against the rickety wood beneath 'er.

“One,” said the Monster, her words akin to a midnight's breeze o'er gentle waves. “One Time-Touched Human Soul...and Ray Sunlace can be our prop'r Queen once again...Understand?” Her yellow eyes shifted from Chlo to Maximus, alight with a real hunger which rattled Morpho's bones. “Maximus Hawkmoth. Yer a Time-Touched Human, so ya are. Yer Soul be broken, 'tis, but this Crown, y'see...” She removed the gold antlered headpiece with care. “This Crown can mend it.”

Cap'n Maximus's good eye were glazed over, the moon cast upon it like 'twere a mirror to another place. Chlo's head went dizzy, 'er guts spun in a whirlpool.

“And wit' yer Soul,” insisted the menacing Monster, her voice rising like the tide, “the world'll be transformed! Ye know it will! Ye've done it before!”

There were an ominous ...laugh, if it could be called such, from one o' the Beast's crew from upon her ship, back in the shadows.

“. . .heh heh heh. . .!”

The skull's teeth chattered out words, low and lazy-like, echoing 'cross the slow waves.

“. . .she's time-touched, fer true. been busy, she 'as...”

His hollow eyehole glowed somethin' wrong, just like the Monster's had when she pulled 'er magic Spear from nothin'. Chlo’s mighty Cap’n were oddly shaken by the skeleton, 'is wide, Cheshire grin afoul with an unspoken fury. Left the poor Cap’n quiverin’ an’ shook, this all did. The way Maximus’ fingers trembl’d, way 'er jaw clenched, way her one eye turned wet wit’ fear...-

Were this bag o’ bones the one what stole the Cap’n’s left eye? His glowin’ blue eyehole were mesmerizin’ in a way only Maximus were to Chlo. Made her endeared yet afeared all at once.

“. . .these two'r in fer another bad time, from the look of it. . .heh heh heh. . .”

Chlo were a might unsettled.

“Ye’ve meddling with the workin’s o’ this world, Human!” The Monster Cap'n, almost in a plea,
brought the Crown closer n’ closer. “‘N now ye'll do it again…Fer y'see, Ray Sunlace needs ye…”

Chlo squeezed her arm ’round Maximus’ own. Maximus took a step, nigh spellbound by the Crown.

“The Queen’s story,” whispered the Beast, going to place the Crown upon Maximus’ skull. “I’ll regale it to ye…”

“Cap’n,” Chlo growled, yanking on her beloved’s arm. “Cap’n!”

The Cap’n’s distant eye went wide in a start, and she snapped to the present moment.

Maximus snatched the Crown from the Monster’s hands. The Beast shrieked with rage, producing ‘er Spear, and Chlo gave ‘er a harsh tackle before she could use it.

The clattering and rattling of so many bones was deafening as the platoon o’ skeletons took up arms. In retort, Brownbeard groaned with irritation, drawing his dagger. ‘Is hound bore its teeth and rumbled low, unsettled. A battle were ‘bout to start, and a one-sided one, at that.

Pinned to the deck by Chlo, the Beast hissed betwixt ‘er razor teeth: “You know what?” Her voice were...different, somehow.

Chlo were so distracted, her quarry got the upper hand, seized her arms, n’ cast her aside.

“SCREW IT!” roared the Monster Captain, scrambling to her feet in fury. Stomping fer Maximus, Spear dragging ’cross the wooden deck, she howled, “WHY SHOULD I PLAY ALONG WITH THIS STUPID STORY WHEN YOU’RE ABOUT TO DIE!?!?”

Maximus, Crown in palm, were frozen, afeared of the Monster's irregularity.

Brownbeard's mangy canine showed his own ferocious jaws, and made to maul the Monster.

The Monster, howe’er, stuck her Spear clean through the mutt's skull in reply. The tamed dog’s final whimper were deafening in Chlo’s mind. Chlo fumbled to her feet, nearly slipping on her peg leg.

Brownbeard had gone mad with a thirst for bloody revenge, charging the Beast. The blue-faced Captain all but ignored 'im, though, reaching out her arm for Cap'n Maximus' throat. Seeing her beloved hoisted by the throat, and seeing the Crown clatter to the deck, Chlo had no time.

She drew her flintlock musket, hands trembling, and fired her sidearm in a flash.

She missed.

The shot had struck not the Monster, but Brownbeard, who'd been wrestling with her.

Chlo had shot 'im, right in the chest. Poor bastard.

Everything slowed to a stop.

Everything turned black.

Then everything turned bright. Sunny.

Sand. Seagulls. The sound of waves hitting a shore. The scents of rotting whales, salty sea air, and liquid metal.

There he lay, sprawled against concrete, at her feet. Pompidou was just as quiet, just as still, beside
Pools of dark red were forming beneath them.

Everything was dead silent – but the sound of the gunshots still rung in Chloe's ears.

She looked down at the gun she'd just fired. Her wrist was still sore from the kickback.

Chloe gawked at her hand, dumbfounded. Confused.

This was all a dream, right? It had...just been...-

“Oh no...” came Max's petrified whisper. “Chloe...”

If Chloe was still dreaming...why did this feel so different from any dream she'd ever experienced?

The words tumbled out from her mouth, involuntarily, acknowledging her understanding of what had just happened.

“I just shot a man...and his dog...”

The two girls gaped at the corpses before them, stunned and shocked.

Her stomach turning from the smell of the fresh blood, Chloe just couldn't...stop staring.

“I killed Frank Bowers...”

“You saved my life, Chloe. Ih-...It was self-defense for both of us.”

Chloe kept...staring.

Is this...real? This didn't happen...

It-...It sure as fuck looks like it happened...

I killed them.

This is...just some fucked up nightmare...

I'd never do that. Not really.

I just did do that. Really.

If this was a bad dream, Chloe...wasn't waking up. And her body had a mind of its own.

“Max...” Chloe uttered shakily. “Frank is really dead...”

“I know,” Max sighed with fret. “But we can't stop now.” Chloe, in a stupor, followed Max to the crumpled heap that used to be Frank. “We have to find that code. Fast.”

It was like Chloe was in some hypnotic state, groping and patting at the fresh body's pantlegs as if not in control of herself.

She sputtered in a daze, “Before the cuh...cops...come...”

But the sheet of folded paper from Frank’s jacket was...weird. Felt more like parchment. Chloe unfolded it.
It was…a treasure map?

Rachel's lipstick marked the spot.

The fuck?

–

Chloe choked and coughed, her chest feeling that sharp pound of fear when the brain has to remind
the heart that what it's dealing with isn't real.

She awoke from her sleep in that stinging, startled state, feeling pretty stupid and frustrated for
having let her brain dwell on any of it seriously. She tried to lift up her hand, flex her fingers…

The grip of a pistol, the aching from its fierce kickback still felt…tangible. Fucking real. Like she’d
just lived it. Could dreams even do that to the body? It was like…a memory, but one Chloe knew
was impossible – Max had made her toss her gun aside that day.

Chloe's eyelids were wide open, but her vision blurred for a moment, hazy and maroon at the edges.
Her head pounded briefly, but intensely, and the world around her put itself in place. Like a hand
washing blood off of a fresh tattoo, revealing the image proper. Thankfully, the pain in her hand had
by then subsided.

The living room – the unfamiliar one that Joyce and David now had – was washed with the white
light of a cloudy midday, pouring in through the wide glass sliding doors. Heh. They'd made a point
to keep that feature around, anyway. And through the window, from her position on the floor, Chloe
could see a squirrel scurrying in the backyard, its cheek puffed.

There was a sudden pressure against Chloe's stomach from above, and she realized this was the
reason she'd coughed awake. Startled, she quickly realized it was her mother, poking at her with her
foot as she carried a pair of coffee mugs.

“Rise an' shine, Chloe,” Joyce said, her voice a bit scratchy and dulled from all of her therapy, but
still glowing with that old warmth. There was a glimmer to her scarred face that touched Chloe right
against her sternum, a sudden and strong shot of...something, which she couldn't describe, that
always swelled at the sight of her mom, and made her fret that tears would form. Gratitude? Maybe?
Sympathy? Some mixture of too many complicated things, but things which Chloe was glad she'd
found herself receptive to feel.

“Hey,” Chloe eked out, rubbing at her eyes and pushing her half bush of hair behind her right
shoulder. “Didn't wake you last night, right? I know it...bugs the shit outta David.”

“Nah, the Darlin' slept like a log through the night,” Joyce assured, placing the two mugs on a tin
tray on the coffee table. Joyce then took note of the snoring woman sprawled out on the couch in a
rather uncomfy-looking fashion. “Yer friend musta been pretty tuckered out...Hasn't stirred at all this
whole mornin'.”

Oh, shit. Stella.

Chloe suddenly remembered...all of the weirdness from the night prior. Max had...done something to
Stells. Something that made the poor chick pass out after mumbling crazy talk for a couple minutes.

What if whatever Max had done had...somehow caused Chloe's bizarro dream, too? It had felt so
different from her other dreams at the end, there.
It was...almost like some of Max's 'Crazy' was...leaking out to people around her.

Was that why Chloe and Stells could see Max's 'double-moon’ the night before, but Victoria couldn't?

Chloe scrambled to her knees, the slightly deflated air mattress she was on bobbing her around and creating a lot of difficulty for her attempt at rising.

“She OK?” Chloe asked quietly, hesitantly.

“Seems to have quite a snore,” Joyce chuckled softly, smiling down at the young woman. “Poor thing's had a couple coughin' fits across the mornin'. But otherwise, seems well enough to me. Didn’ know I was meant to be nursin’ over her. What’d ya’ll do last night? Why’d she end up crashin’ here?”

“Juh...Just got dinner at the truck-stop by the edge of town, um...Sh-she was just super wiped and...didn’t feel good letting her drive out so late, I-I dunno. Sorry I didn’t ask. Didn’t wanna wake you guys.”

Chloe, fumbling on her knees against the living room carpet, realized that she could, in fact, hear Stella's snores. Whew. OK. So, uh...alive. That was, ya know...kinda good. Stella had some musty kind of blanket draped over her – the kind parents always seemed to have stashed over the edge of a couch. This one had ranch-esque patterns with wolves on them.

When Chloe was an older person, she'd get similar blankets, but they'd have, like...Pokemon and Adventure Time shit on 'em, or something.

“No need to apologize, Chloe,” Joyce assured, giving her daughter a firm squeeze on the shoulder with one hand, and sliding her a coffee mug across the table with the other. “I know ya’ll are close, an’...from what I’ve heard, yer friend could use some family comforts now and again. It’s not a bother.”

Chloe was treated to a warm smile from her mother's ragged face. It was calming. She'd forgotten how calming it could be.

“Thanks, Mom,” Chloe sighed out, mustering a smile in return.

“Now you drink up. Best wake your friend soon, before her coffee gets cold. We've got a...difficult day ahead.”

“Mm...” Chloe took a sip – strong, black, with some sugar. Nice pick-me-up. She savored the scented vapors slowly rising from the mug for a moment, then checked her phone.

[12:41 PM]

Yikes. Afternoon already?

And anyway...where was her Max?

Chloe scanned the living room. Max was gone. She felt a brief sting of panic just on sheer instinct, given the past week.

“Yer fiancé went with David to go pick up groceries,” Joyce called from the kitchen island, having noticed Chloe's confusion. The way she'd started the sentence carried a nice little...sense of pride to it. Joyce had seemed happier than anyone when she'd heard the news of their engagement. That was
a good sign, right? Even David had seemed pleased, though Chloe had never gathered the courage to ask why he’d changed his mind on things.

Chloe gavè herself a few moments to drink up her coffee. The previous day? It had been long.

That day? It would also be long, but in very different ways.

Chloe went to take another sip of her coffee – but was taken aback when it smelt of...rotting fish. Confused, she reeled her head back. The sounds of the beach were...strangely loud, all of a sudden. But the windows were closed.

Chloe felt a sting of fear prick at her heart. The way her dream had ended...and whatever this was – whatever had happened to Stella – was it what Max had been dealing with? Weird...creepy shit where reality wasn’t, like...functioning properly? Had things gotten so bad that timespace was, like...falling apart, or...-?

“Gwwoooff...”

Chloe was yanked from her sci-fi thrilled meandering at the sound of Stella groaning with half-awake pain.

“Stells.” Chloe’s whole form practically perked up like a dog.

“Chloe...?” Stella was rubbing at her eyes with one hand, groping the other around for her glasses.

Eager to alleviate her friend’s problems, Chloe fumbled her way to the coffee table, dinging her knee on its corner (“Fффfуuck-!”) as she grabbed Stella’s narrow glasses and passed them over.

With a yawn and a cough, Stella shoved her long bangs up and swooped them back over her head, tying them back drearily. Pushing errant strands out of her sight, she whimpered tiredly, staring at Chloe with a strange expression.

Stella’s nose started to bleed.

Before Chloe could so much as say a word...-

Chloe’s nose started to bleed, too.

Her heartbeat escalated sharply, her stomach went empty – butterflies spun around in her gut – and she quickly yanked tissues from out of the box on the table. She was in such a panic she knocked the box over.

She shoved one tissue into her leaking nostril and gave the other to Stella, who was pretty confused and zoned out – Chloe asserted the damn tissue into Stells’ bloody hole, plugging it up.

Stella coughed through her confusion, then gawked at her trembling hand.

Droplets of blood.

Fucking...фуck.

What the hell was going on? What had Max done? That had to be it, right? The two moons, Stella passing out...whatever Chloe had just experienced in her damn sleep, even...

It had to do with the Rewind, Chloe just...didn’t understand how, or...or why.
Chloe and Stella were both dopily staring at each other, a mutual fright in their faces.

Joyce stepped into the room, causing Chloe to hastily pull the tissue out of her nose and clean her upper lip with her own saliva-dampened thumb.

“Chloe, I could use your help with th...-”

Joyce trailed off at the sight of her daughter and houseguest finagling with bloody tissues. There was a heavy silence as Chloe shakily got up on her feet and scrambled to clean up the reddened tissues. As Chloe snuck by her mother to the kitchen, eager to dispose the waste, Joyce gave her a stern glare, which could be felt burning into the back of Chloe’s skull.

“There somethin’ ya’ll need to tell me about last night?” And there was the good ol’ judgmental tone Chloe knew so well. “Swear to God, Chloe, there better not have been any crack in my house, or I will-”

“No, Mom, juh...Fuck, jesus, what do you...-?”

Chloe was hurt at the accusation. Maybe a little warranted given some of her fuck-ups over the years, but still. She couldn't even recall the last time she'd even looked at cocaine.

“It's my allergies, Ma'am,” Stella plainly cited, lying through her teeth. Her voice sounded a little raspy. “The air up here, it's...messing with me, I don't...” She shook her head warily. “Y-you know, air pressure and all that. Chloe was just helping keep me from...spilling my insides all over your couch...”

Chloe took a deep breath and steadied herself, tossing the dirtied tissues into the plastic wastebin in the kitchen.

“...Ah,” Joyce eked out with a bit of remorse. “Ya poor thing, no wonder ya been coughin' up a storm.”

“Yea,” Stella chuckled warily, clearing her throat up. “Sucks pretty bad...Sorry to...make a mess...”

Shoving her half-mane of disheveled bed-head over her shoulder, Chloe slunk back toward the living room, her head shrinking into her shoulders.

“Chloe,” Joyce sighed out irritably. “You could at least clean yer hands after what ya been touchin'...”

Chloe skidded to a stop, her socks sliding along the waxed wooden floor.

“Right,” Chloe grumbled bitterly, sulking to the sink. Running hands through a gentle stream of cold water, she sarcastically groaned, “Wouldn't wanna leave any traces of crack on my fingers, huh?”

“Aw, Chloe,” Joyce sighed out, trying to reach an arm out. “I-I'm sorry, Hun, I didn't-...”

Drying her hands off, Chloe's gut instinct was to jerk the contact away, blow Mom off, use the unnecessary accusation as a social power play to get Joyce off her back for fucking once.

But her Mom's hand against her shoulder was dry, soft, and warm. Chloe stopped herself. She looked up to her mother's scarred face. The veiny wrinkles and warped skin was always a pain in Chloe’s chest to confront, but they'd healed up decently enough over time. And Joyce's eyes, her smile, that loving concern could shine through any scar.

“It's OK,” Chloe assured her remorseful parent, giving her Mother a hug. “I know it's...a tough day,
and us just...dropping in on you so late with a plus-one, and...”

“I never see you,” Joyce whispered longingly, easing Chloe's head down upon her shoulder. “It...It's difficult to...remember you ain't a little girl anymore.”

“I know I sure don't help that,” Chloe joked with a soft chuckle, which was reciprocated. “Just seems ya'll been gettin' mixed up with some dicey folks lately,” Joyce explained as their hug broke.

“...Huh?” Chloe was puzzled by Joyce assuming such a thing.

“Wh...” Joyce paused, her brows furrowing a bit as she contemplated. “Well, Max was...tellin' me 'bout yer...altercation last night.”

“What?” Chloe sighed with some frustration, rubbing her palm up against her forehead. What was Max's fucking deal, yapping about crap like that? Joyce had her own problems, and Chloe was well-equipped to deal with hers and Max's. The two did not need to mix. “Mom, we...handled it. Just because...some prick was harassing us, doesn't mean we're gonna up n'...start doing drugs overnight.”

From the coffee table, Stella sipped at the mug Joyce had left her.

“My brother's difficult to deal with, and he's...maybe lost his way a bit,” Stella cited, keeping things rational and calm with a dose of white-lying on the side. “But I promise you, Ma'am, I would never let Chloe or Max get involved with that sort of shit. Er, stuff.”

Joyce smirked a bit and took a deep, steadying breath.

“We're all adults here, it ain't like I never heard a cuss before.” She ran her hand against Chloe's scalp, straightening out her daughter's bed-tangled hair a bit. “Specially not with this terror havin' been under my roof.”

Chloe absorbed the affection from Joyce like a sponge, but managed to not let it show. Mom never...did little intimate gestures like that. Chloe had never known she'd appreciate them. Or maybe she wouldn't have back in her teen 'terror', but...it was kinda fuckin' nice these days.

“Now, then,” said Joyce, heading for their stairwell. “Best ya'll drink up. I'll fix ya breakfast after a hop in the shower. David n' Max oughtta be back soon with groceries.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Chloe called up toward the stairs as Joyce vanished over them.

Still feeling a little light-headed, Chloe plopped herself down on the couch beside Stella, who'd curled her legs crossed and shoved her blanket into a clump over her lap.

The pair drank at their coffee a little in awkward silence for a few moments until they could hear the shower start upstairs.

“...Is this for real?” Stella murmured solemnly.

Chloe's throat stung as she swallowed a little too much in one gulp. She let her eyes carefully glance over, and Stella looked pretty dead-serious.

Chloe nodded simply, sullenly, intuiting what Stella was referring to.

“So I'm not hallucinating?” Stella confirmed.
“Wish ya were,” Chloe breathed out tiredly, scratching at her ear. “Wish I could write off all this crazy shit as 'hallucinations.' But...” She shook her head bitterly.

“The moon last night...and our nose bleeds just now – all of Max's fucking nose bleeds all the time...It's all connected. Isn’t it?”

Chloe shrugged up one shoulder, taking another sip of her dark, sugary coffee. “Seems like it.”

“How?”

In reply, Chloe shook her head slightly, eyes glazed over with doubt as a tired sigh seeped from her nostrils.

“And last night...” Stella planted her palm against her forehead and sighed, staring down at her mug. “That—...What did Max do?”

Chloe paused, then cast her gaze sideways.

“Yea, I don't...actually know?” Chloe admitted, scratching at her ear. “To be honest, pretty sure even Maxie doesn't know, so...yea. Good luck figurin' that shit out.”

“But you felt it, too, right?” Stells insisted, flicking up her wrist and looking back up. “In your dreams?”

Chloe’s stomach wrinkled unpleasantly.

“Felt...what?” she mumbled, masking her fear with more coffee.

“Like you were somewhere you weren’t...supposed to be, some place you never have been, only...only it felt real, felt like you totally had been there...and...” Stella's words were getting hasty and excitable in a manic whisper. And Chloe was pretty damned uncomfortable that it sounded accurate to what she'd just experienced in her sleep. “And then boom, there she was, keeping us together, saving us from ourselves...”

“...Uh...you holdin' back the edibles on me, Buddo? 'Cuz I am all about that shit, but today ain't the day for it.”

“You don’t remember?” Stella puffed out impatiently. “It...it felt so...”

“Strange?” posed Chloe darkly.

Stella nodded emphatically.

“Yes,” Chloe dismissed with raised brows and a slight shake of her head. “Dreams are like that, my dude.”

“So your dreams felt normal last night?” Stella cynically said, giving Chloe a critical glare. “And when you woke up, you didn't feel weird?”

Chloe really disliked the supernatural conspiracy theory direction this was going in. She loved her some sci-fi-fantasy theoreticals as much as the next Trekkie, but...this was so bizarre coming from Stells. She was the voice of reason of their little band of punk-nerds. Well, OK, Brooke was maybe more strict on technicalities. Whatever. Stella was definitely more on the side of science than magic, though. But here she was, seemingly convinced – and oh so quickly. Max had...done a number on her somehow, huh?
"You did," Stella decided, based on the awkward glint in Chloe's eye with her stoic silence. “Didn't you?"

“I don't think it's Max's fault that crazy bullshit is going on...”

“Is whatever the fuck happened to me last night 'not Max's fault', either?”

“She didn't...mean to...do whatever...-”

“What even happened to me? Like-...Like, physically?”

“Dude, I dunno, ya just...freaked out. Mumbled crazy-talk, n'...passed out.”

“Oh.” Stells' brows furrowed harshly. “That's-...” She trailed off, lost in her own head space.

“You had some kind of trippy dream?” Chloe asked, trying to guide the convo along.

“That's the thing, it was...more like this...-” Stella grunted with frustration, mashing her hands around some invisible tangle of...something. “W-well, like-...A memory, but also something happening in real-time. And it...it dragged on and on, like...forever, only...not forever...and...-”

“...Mm.” Chloe shirked at the notion of admitting her own dreams, but...-

“And you were there, too,” Stells pointed out, her tone taking a dark turn. She shook it off. “You even, like...you realized you were there. And Max, too. She helped me get...-” Stella slowed when she noted Chloe's puzzled skepticism.

“Um...Oookay, Wendy, ya clicked yer ruby slippers n' showed back up here. But back in the Land of Oz, 'Dream Me' was self-aware?”

Stella nodded at Chloe's wide eyes skepticism. Chloe replied dully and sarcastically.

“Dreams, projecting self-awareness? Ain't seen that shit before...”

“I-...” Stells scanned Chloe's eyes with a deep, focused expression. It made Chloe feel weird. “Hm,” she dismissed her own rambling. “N-nevermind, I just...What did Max do? To cause this?”

“I thought she used her Rewind...”

“OK, but...but, I mean, after that, she...-! Wh-when we were asleep, she...-”

“What, you think Max messed with our dreams, or some shit?”

“What, you think Max messed with our dreams, or some shit?”

“Can she do that?” Stella panted out with some exasperation. “I-I mean, what if she doesn't even know she can? Isn't that...?-? That's how superpowers work, isn't it? They grow. They evolve.”

“Wh-? No, Stells, she can't...fucking...-”

“Oh, but she can Rewind time?”

“She's not part of the goddamn X-Men.”

“But she can Rewind fucking time.”

“...Ech. Yea. She can.”

“Thanks, by the way.” Oh. Pissy Stella. “For letting me know?”

“It ain't exactly the sorta crap ya just blab to anyone.”

“After how long we've known each other, you don't trust me?”

“Dude, it's not my power – not my call.”

“Oh, OK. So it's Max who doesn't trust me. I feel so much better.”
“N-no, Stells, she does trust you, she just...-”
“Then why has she kept this all a secret?”
“I-I don't know, she didn't want-”
“How many times has Max lied to me about this?”
“Dude...Stells...”
“I thought I was her best friend, and she's been lying, hiding this from me...”
“Don't...hold it against her, I mean, what would you-?”

“But it's not a surprise, right? Max lies all the fucking time, so...”
“Stells...”
“And now she has me wrapped in this – you think I like lying to your mom?”
“No...”

“She can time travel, and she's losing her goddamn mind, this is just...-”

“Stella, there's stuff going on you don't-”
“Maybe if you two fucking clued-me-in, I might-”

Joyce's steps creaked from the stairwell behind them, causing their intense if hushed conversation to come crashing to a halt.

“Sorry, sorry...” Stella was taking a deep breath, closing her eyes, and steadying herself. She mashed her fingertips beneath her glasses, rubbing at her blood-shot eyes with teeth grit.

Chloe decided to give the gal a second to let her brain play catch-up with everything.

“Everythin' all right?” Joyce inquired during her descent. Her head was wrapped in a towel, and she was in her bathing robe. She added in a quieter, concerned tone, “Sounded like ya'll were arguin’...”

Well. Couldn't get anything past Mom. Chloe used to...really hate that, but...more recently, it'd become something she respected.

“Uh, we...-” Chloe's jaw went agape. Her normal quick wit was...less than sharp that morning.

“I'm pissed at Max,” Stella said with a startling bluntness. She sighed out a frustrated breath, whipping her blanket off and getting up from the couch.

“Mm,” Joyce hummed knowingly, heading for the kitchen. “That girl has been actin' odd lately, ain't she?”

Chloe's stomach lurched. 'Actin' odd?' The hell did Max do now? The idea of...Max not being all there, and that ’Other’ personality...being around her Mom? It made Chloe’s skin crawl.

Stella meandered to the kitchen, and Chloe fumbled her way toward them. Said kitchen was suddenly quite crowded.

“What d'you mean?” Chloe asked cautiously, staring at her mother's back as the woman switched the stove on.

“Well, like what transpired the other night when ya'll went out partyin','” Joyce reminded. She said as an aside to Stella, who was poking in the fridge, “Would ya mind gettin' out the eggs for me, Hon?”
“Sure thing, Ma'am,” Stella mumbled, fulfilling the request.

“Thank ya kindly.”

“Mm-hm.”

Stella resumed her fridge search, grabbing coffee creamer and heading back to the living room with it.

“Now, Stella,” Joyce cited across rooms, cracking eggs as she spoke. “I know Max has her mood swings n' all, an' you've been a kind friend to see to her when she's gone awry, but it's OK to let yerself be upset now n' again.”

“Mom, it's not Max's fault,” Chloe grumbled – more like whimpered in defense.

“I didn't say it was,” Joyce assured with a tender sigh, hoping to alleviate Chloe's temper before it ignited. She knew her daughter well – Max had probably helped teach the woman a thing or two about keeping Chloe from going off the rails too early in a conversation. Girl had enough experience at it by then...

“Then...-” Chloe trailed off uncertainly.

“I been married to David for how long now?” Joyce reminded. She finished cracking eggs and started stirring them about. “Everyone's got their dings n' their dents, their cracks n' their scrapes. Longer ya live, the more ya get.” Stella re-entered with a creamed half-mug of coffee, and set the small jug back into the fridge door. Joyce went on. “Now, I know there's things ya'll ladies deal with that ya might never tell me. That's part of being yer own person, n' I can respect that. I ain't a fool – I know somethin's amiss with ya'll. Seems it ain't my business to be knowin' more, or else I'd know.” Stella swapped wary looks with Chloe inbetween sips of her coffee. Chloe fidgeted with some split ends. “But I'll tell ya this: me n' David, we have our spats, same as anyone. Hell, we've almost cut ties more n' once. But I love that man, and I know I do, 'cause I've seen him at his worst, and at his best – and at the end of the day, I’m happy with that. When he's at his worst, I ain't afraid to call him out on it. Can't fix somethin' ya don't wanna admit is broke. When yer car starts leakin', ya best fix it, or you'll get stranded. It ain't fun, it might cost a pretty penny, but if you wanna get places? You're gonna get that car looked at. Get it fixed. Back on the road. Ya don't gotta enjoy it. Might get yerself all slick with oil. Ya might even be without a car for a few days...N' that's OK. That's parta livin'.”

Chloe's half-awake brain was having a hard time following Mom's meandering metaphor. Analogy? One of those...

“What are you saying?” Chloe asked, creasing her greasy forehead with a yawn.

“She's saying Max needs to see a doctor,” Stella murmured with a bitter sigh, staring into her coffee and avoiding Chloe's eyes.

“She already did,” Chloe puffed with exasperation. “That made it worse.”

“Agh, I'm sorry, ladies,” Joyce bemoaned, scrambling the sizzling eggs before her. “I fear I fell off track with what I was sayin', mighta lost ya'll halfway. What I'm tryin' to get at is that it sounds like somethin' with Max's gone n' broke itself. That feelin' of frustration?” She glanced at Stella, shuffling the eggs around. “Don't run from that, Hon. Yer feelin' that 'cause you love your friend, and she's hurt you. Let that feeling happen, 'cause Darlin', it's gonna get you to do somethin' about the problem. That fire in ya don't come from nowhere, it comes from love – that's why it burns so hot. I'd be surprised if you ain't seen this daughter o' mine get herself steamed up over what she cares about.
And I can tell ya, David is the same way. It's all about lettin' that passion change things for the better. Sometimes, ya just gotta take a minute n' sort out how, before ya do somethin’ ya regret. Now, git me a plate, please, would ya?”

Chloe obliged, and as she did so, the front door came cracking open, followed by the rustling of groceries.

“Ya sure?” David was grunting behind him.

“Y-yea,” Max huffed back, her arms laden with bags. She was pretty adorable, struggling to bring in too much for a single load.

Chloe set down a plate for her Mom before making way to aide in the grocery effort.

As bags were set down on the kitchen floor, David took a deep breath and took a load off for a brief moment to receive a kiss from Joyce.

“Just in the nick of time,” Joyce said with a warmth reserved for her husband.

“He has a knack for that,” grunted Max slyly, trying to unsling her bags from her shoulders. The kitchen was already too crowded, so she tried to lean them against the entrance hall's wall, but-

“Oop....!”

One of her bags tipped over, dropping out a bag of grapes. A single grape popped off the stem, rolling off along the floor, apart from the rest.

Max was weirdly transfixed by it, frozen in place.

Chloe, having set down her own bags, balanced the fallen produce back into place. A nice, fat bunch of grapes. Slightly different shapes, slightly different skins, slightly different hues, each one its own individual fruit, but all...still grapes, and...all...connected to the same...stem.

“Uh...-”

Stella, who had rounded her way into the living room, had picked up the separated grape, and was gawking at it, confused.

The three girls all paused, exchanging odd glances as Stella cautious walked over to Chloe, and handed the dirtied grape to her. But they all paused yet again, transfixed.

Why the fuck had all their brains went adrift at the same time, over the same...inanimate object?

Maybe Stells was right – maybe something batshit strange was going on because of Max...

“Everything kosher out here?” David wondered, apparently concerned by the silence.

“Juh-...Just a sour grape, heh,” Chloe mumbled, reclaiming her autonomy from their mutual brain freeze.

“Frrrrom the floor,” Max specified awkwardly, taking the grape from Chloe and dunking it in the kitchen's trash bin. “It was-...Uh-...I dropped it. Sorry.”

David gave pause at Max's reaction. He swapped dubious looks with Chloe, who smiled sheepishly and shrugged.

“Mrs. Madsen,” said Stella, who'd already wormed her way back into the kitchen. “Should I help put
“Nah, I think Chloe can handle that,” Joyce said, slapping some bacon on the pan. The sizzle was delightful. “But I surely wouldn't turn down help making toast.”

“Right,” said Stella with an adorable sort of determination. “Just tell me what to do, Ma'am.”

David peeled off his boots and set them by the front door, then trudged into the kitchen as Chloe went about unpacking the load he'd retrieved.

“There's, uh, some fresh coffee in the pot,” Chloe pointed out with a tip of her head. Poor guy looked like he needed caffeine for the day ahead.

“Mm,” David hummed and nodded his thanks, wiping his palm across his wrinkled forehead as he found his way around.

Chloe was ready to put things away, but...there...was no way to get at the cupboards, or the fridge.

“I got it,” Stella offered, taking the milk and orange juice off the floor and squeezing them into the refrigerator.

Joyce was cooking, Stella was opening a loaf of bread, and David was trying to get coffee into a mug.

“I'll, ough, give you guys a minute, there,” Chloe announced, awkwardly whisking herself away.

Where was Max?

An irrational fear latched onto Chloe's heart in that instant.

What if Max was off doing something stupid again? Making a phone call she shouldn't be making, being nosy and poking around private things...What if Max wasn't...her Max, right then?

Chloe scanned the living room. Nope. Hallway, no, backyard, no – door upstairs closing! Ah.

Chloe scampered in pursuit, taking note that the bathroom door was closed.

She knocked twice.

“Occup-”

Then entered.

“-ied!”

The look on Max's face was priceless.

Or, you know...Price...full. Because...Chloe had entered, and so...-

“Chloe, jesus...-!” sputtered Max as Chloe oh-so-stealthily closed the door behind her. Max was covering her under-regions with her arms, hunched over with a grouchy look, cheeks red like a stoplight.

“Dude,” Chloe whispered with offense. “Not like I ain't seen it all before.” She paused, then added even more quietly (and smugly), “Or, ya know, had my tongue all up in it...”

“Aaaand good morning to you, too,” Max breathed out through a soft chuckle of aghast amusement.
Max’s eyes rolled so far back, Chloe knew this Max was the ‘real deal’.

*Her Max.*

“Mm-hm,” Chloe hummed softly, brushing up brown and red bangs and planting a specifically delicate kiss on Max’s forehead. She let her fingertips linger, sliding their way down Max’s cheek. “How ya doin’, Bebb?”

“...Not with *that* again,” Max whimpered quietly, jokingly.

“Let’s see – ya got ‘Bebb,’ ‘Babe,’ ‘Buddo,’ or...whatever variant, pun, and-slash-or pop-culture reference with your name in it you’re in the mood for. I was thinkin’...maybe something from the 80’s?”

“Chloe...” Max leaned her face into Chloe's palm with an aching sort of longing.

“*Or*...” Chloe dribbled out words with a playful disappointment. “I could...just...stick with ’Max’ for today...”

Max twisted her head just enough to kiss Chloe's hand before going back to nuzzling it some more. Chloe let this tender moment have its way before getting on topic, setting a gentle tone to her question.

“So...we gonna, like...talk? About last night? At all?”

Max, whose eyes were already closed, scrunched up her face with dissatisfaction.

“Something happened,” Chloe noted plainly. “Something *different*.”

“Yea,” Max agreed.

“Stella knows,” Chloe advised.

“That was the goal...”

“We're...both kinda worried about you...”

“Me, too...”

“Like, *worried* worried.”

“Also me.”

“And, um...There’s...*also*...” Chloe fidgeted with her fingers behind her back.

“What?” Max wasn’t ready to hear about recent...developments, huh?

“M-maybe we can dish later, when you're...not as...-”

“Out of it?”

“Well...yea...”

“I don't...think this is just gonna go away, Chloe...Something's broken.”

“Right.”

“It needs to be fixed. We – ... I need to be fixed...”
“Ideas...?” Chloe tentatively asked through nervously clenched jaws.

“None.”

“Plan of attack?” Chloe shrugged.

“None,” Max whispered, her voice cracking into a sob. Her hand found its way up to her face. Chloe stroked Max's hair as she let her fiance cry a little. She desperately longed for words, something to say that would help Max feel...OK about this whole mess.

But the fact was, Chloe was not OK with this. She had no words.

-knock, knock, knock-

“Hey,” came Stella's voice from the other side. “Everything...all right in there?”

“Yea,” said Chloe, appreciating their friend's disconnected presence.

Even when Stella wasn't there, it was like she was...still there.

“It's, uhh...-” Stella cleared her throat nervously. “It's not like last time, is it?”

Huh?

Ah, yea...In Stella's bathroom, at their apartment. A few days ago. When Max was all throwing up and bleeding, and...-

“I'm OK,” Max sighed. She grunted a bit.

-plunk-

“Poopin' like a champ,” Chloe joked weakly, giving Max a humble back pat.

Max sighed, shaking her head with a facepalm.

“Are you OK?” Max checked with Stells, lifting up her head and opening her eyes.

“I'm...-” Stella hesitated. “I'm not sure. Am I OK?”

That skeptical bitterness revisited Stella's tone – like, as soon as she knew Max was OK, she wasn't going to let her off the hook. Chloe had been on both ends of that crap. Tricky line to walk, and she'd yet to see Stells walk it.

“I'm sorry,” Max eked out pathetically.

“I know,” Stella replied warily.

“I meant to...tell you, I just...-”

“Don't,” Stella pleaded. “I don't want to hear it. You kept a secret, and now it’s out.”

“I never wanted to hurt you,” Max insisted. “Please believe me...”


“Ladies?” Ah, great. Mom was ascending. “Breakfast is almost ready...More like brunch at this rate.”
“OK,” Max called.

“Sounds good,” said Stella, her politeness having waned off. “We'll, um...be down in a minute.”

“Now, what is goin' on with ya'll?” Joyce grumbled, having reached the second floor. “Where's Chloe?”

“In here, Mom.”

“Chloe,” Joyce sighed. “You could at least give the poor woman some space to herself in the restroom, for chrissake.”

“Ih-It's fine, Joyce, I'm...I'm not feeling so well, and...”

“Awh, yer still feelin' lousy with the bug from yesterday?”

“I guess,” Max moaned in reply, feeling her own forehead as if to test for temperature.

“Ya'll are worryin' the crap outta me,” said Joyce with a disgruntled puff of hot air. Right up by the door now, she advised, “Darlin', if you're ill, ya need liquids and rest, not an audience.”

“Sorry, Joyce,” said Max with some self-deprecation.

“And Chloe, git yer ass outta the restroom and put away the groceries – please? They're gonna spoil.”

Chloe had so much bigger things to be dealing with than fucking groceries...

Grumbling to herself, she exited the bathroom.

“Frozen veggies ain't gonna melt after, like, two minutes, dude.”

“I am you mother, not your 'dude,' and please don't start a fight with me on today of all days, Chloe.”

“OK, OK, sorry,” Chloe conceded, the self-awareness practically leaking out of her ears as she apologized. “I'm sorry,” she added more authentically as she trotted down the stairs. She caught Stella smiling sympathetically out of the corner of her eye.

Joyce gave Chloe another small hug and pair of them sighed into each other's ears.

“Uhm,” Stella cleared her throat. “Whhh...Uh, is there anything else I can do to help?”

“A-actually,” came Max from the other side of the door. “Stella, could you, like...just sorta...hang out for a few minutes? I'm gonna...grab a shower, but...just in case something...happens, um...”

Stella and Chloe's worried eyes connected for a moment.

“Sure,” said Stella to Max, whilst staring at Chloe, who nodded slightly.

Joyce checked, “You sure yer still gonna be feelin' up to going?”

“Y-yea,” Max insisted. “Even if...Chloe has to carry me...we're still going.”

A small smile formed on Joyce's face, which found its way to Chloe's glance.

“Sounds like you've been volunteered,” Joyce teased, easing Chloe along toward the stairs.
“She knows I can do it,” Chloe bragged casually, flexing her bicep a bit. She might not've been happy with her beer belly, but at least she'd been able to beef her arms up a little.

As the mother and daughter duo trekked down the stairs, Chloe could hear the kitchen sink running – David was cleaning up some plates and mugs for their impending brunch. The scent of Joyce's breakfast food was music to her nose.

“Chloe,” Joyce whispered, “a word?”

She led them to the backyard, sliding the glass door behind them. The weathered wooden porch was rough against Chloe's bare feet, and she worried about getting splinters.

“What is goin' on with ya'll?” Joyce asked discreetly, sincerely. “I believe you, Hon, that you ain't on somethin' ya shouldn't be – but I've caught you in too many lies to not know when somethin's amiss. Now, what in God's green earth is goin' on with Max? Huh?”

Chloe was paralyzed her Mom's frigid resolve in this matter.

“I'm...I'm not lying, we're...She's not on anything, it...”

“Chloe, I ain't gonna bitecha. Just shoot straight with me.”

Chloe couldn't help but smirk.

The joke seeped out through a childish grin: “Uh, sorry, Mom, I'm...not exactly good at shooting straight...” She flashed her engagement ring with a teasing shrug.

Joyce smirked with half her lip – the more scarred half – and shook her head slightly.

“Cute,” she murmured. “But I ain't a fool, child.” She clamped her hand against the base of Chloe's neck, pressing her forehead against her daughter's. “Now, I can't help if I'm left in the dark, here...”

Chloe bit her bottom lip, squinted her eyes shut, and sighed remorsefully.

“I know,” she whimpered, gripping her Mom's hand and squeezing. “I'm not...trying to hide anything from you, it's...It's just...There's not anything you can do about it, really, it's...something me n' Max gotta figure out on our own. Like...OK, so, like, stuff David had to work through? That-...There wasn't anything I could do to help that, ya know? This is...like that. Sorta. Basically. I don't...” Chloe trailed off, shaking her head with doubt as her eyes welled up with tears.

“I understand, Darlin','” Joyce assured. “Just promise me that you're gonna look after yourself in all this, too. I love Max like my own, but...you are my own. She needs you, and that's beautiful of you to be helpin' her out, just-...Remember you ain't alone, here.”

Chloe fed on her mother's tender contact for a couple moments, receiving a supportive kiss on the forehead, and more scratching against her neck.

There was a surreal pain throbbing in Chloe's chest for a moment as she absorbed the sight of her Mother's scarred features – knowing that, in some way or another, they could've been prevented, but hadn't been, for her sake.

But then...Max seemed to have been pretty scarred, too, for Chloe's sake. Just in ways that hadn't been so plainly visible until recently.

Joyce's face would never fully heal, but...her Mother had never been more beautiful in her eyes than
she had in recent months – in that very moment. It was weird how Chloe had never gotten along with her Mother growing up – and yet she was closer to her now than she'd ever been while living in the same roof.

Families were weird. And hers was only gonna get bigger and weirder as the Caulfields and the Madsens merged in the months to come.

“I know Max's been a good influence on you, Chloe, but don't think for a minute I ain't proud of who you're becomin' – who you are. No matter what anyone else says or does, you make the choice yerself to step up, be a woman, and I've adored seeing it happen. And I know – oh, I know – David ain't the best at showin' it, but...he's said as much himself, too.”

“Really?” Chloe believed her. It was just...weird to think on that idea. At least she and David weren't at each other's throats anymore.

Joyce nodded, letting their moment dissolve into the midday autumn air, carried away on a chilly, rain-scented breeze.

“Now, c'mon,” Joyce said softly, giving Chloe's back a brisk and encouraging rub. “I know that bacon's been taunting ya since you walked downstairs.”

“You know it.”

The plaque was cold to the touch, its metal surface reflecting a cirrus sky, with a bronze-glazed ocean as its backdrop. The rock the plaque was embedded into was damp and smooth, sturdy and strong against the salty wind. All those names etched into its metal surface...

Names Chloe had never heard.

Names she recognized.

Names that sounded familiar, but...had no faces in her mind.

The Arcadia Bay Memorial was always sobering to look at. Each and every time. This was the fifth time.

It rested at the cliff's edge, beside the ruins of the old lighthouse, which had deteriorated over time. Recovery funds had been invested into more important assets for the town, and so the old lighthouse had been left to ruin and wither.

Right there, where that memorial stood – it was more or less the same spot Max and Chloe had stood.

Stood and watched as the Storm took all of those listed lives.

Chloe removed her hand from the plaque, and somberly watched Max run her fingertips up and down its surface – grazing each and every name, her lips mouthing syllables silently.

Chloe wondered – had Max committed them all to memory?

It had been sprinkling a bit, but...then it started to rain.

Of course it started to rain...
Chloe pulled up her black umbrella and shielded herself and her woman from the pattering droplets. The sounds of so many umbrellas casting themselves up was humbling.

There'd been a bigger crowd gathered than Chloe had figured would show up. Bigger turnout than any other time they'd come to this. People always...made a bigger fuss with annual divisions of 'five,' didn't they?

Max's hand trembled in Chloe's as they reconnected, moving on from the memorial and letting Joyce and David pay their respects next. They met up with Victoria, Brooke, and Stells, but no words were spoken between them. Just quiet, wary nods and gestures.

As the pair carefully worked their way toward the gathered crowd, Chloe let herself drink in Max's appearance.

She had her red and brown hair tied into a bun, accented by an elegant little woman's hat. Her nose stud was on, with a pair of understated red earrings. She had a light black vest...shawl? Well, it was cute. And so was her dress.

Chloe's dress felt...less elegant. Maybe her pudgy stomach bulging out wasn't helping...She was happy with her hat, though – she'd stuck a bright blue feather in it, in remembrance of Rachel. Just because black was the color of the day didn't mean everything had to be black.

By the cliff's bench – which had been replaced recently with a new one – a man was giving a speech.

The bench was being dedicated to the memory of Kate Marsh, from what Chloe had been told.

She couldn't bring herself to fully tune in to the man's words, but she assumed it was Kate's father. Max would probably have a fit if she knew Chloe didn't recognize him. She'd never had a chat with the man, how would she remember him? Fuck, there were probably people there she'd attended Blackwell with that she couldn't plant names on.

Names – even ones etched into a memorial – didn't really mean much to Chloe.

Names meant reminders. Reminders meant pain.

Maybe that was why she was prone on exchanging names for false ones all the time.

Even with Maxine Caulfield.

Losing herself in these bitter thoughts, Chloe realized she was totally zoning out on what the man before them was saying about Kate Marsh. What a good, sweet, 'godly' girl she had been...

It was the usual sort of thing you'd expect: depressing. Saddening. Sobering.

And a cold reminder of Chloe's own part in Kate's self destruction.

Chloe closed her eyes and let Max lean into her. She could hear Max's breathing get irregular from sniffles, feel her body shiver from the cold. Smell coffee, and bacon, and eggs, and...-

Wait – what?

Mixed with the rain, she could...hear the clattering of forks and spoons, like...-

“OK, Supergirl, let's go to my secret place!”
Chloe had just heard a voice, cutting through the rain, through the melancholic dedication speech.

A phone vibrated against Chloe's ears.

The voice – it was her voice?

“Don't even answer! We have places to go, and...people-to-do...Come on, before mom starts some more shit. Let's bail!”

The fuck was...-?

“It's...Kate Marsh, from Blackwell.”

Chloe opened her eyes.

She was in the Two Whales. Staring at Max – a younger Max – gazing at her phone with a wary expression.

Chloe's mouth moved again, without her consent.

Each syllable stung. Burned with regret.

“Big whoop. You don't call me once in five years and now you're all over some beeatch you see every day at school? I see how you roll. So go ahead, chat up Kate Marsh from Blackwell. I've got other other people to hang out with, too.”

Was this...a memory?

This was like her dream, only...she remembered this one.

Why was she dipping into La-La Land like this? There was Day-Dreaming, but this was like...unreal.

Chloe Price had experienced a nice trip or two in her time, but...this shit was unlike any of it.

She could feel the cold and clammy rain, even though the diner was dry and warm.

She could hear the drizzling rainfall with a speech, tired and sorrowful, but also trucker chatter.

She could smell fresh water and ocean salt, and hash browns and ketchup.

Chloe closed her eyes.

She felt sick to her stomach.

When she opened them again, she was still standing, still in the rain, Max clutching to her arm, leaned against her.

Chloe felt a little dazed. She was used to getting a nice buzz, a nice high, but this was different. Whatever this was.

“Chloe! Now, where are ya'll sneakin' off to this time?”

Mom? She sounded angry.
“Dude, I haven't hung with Max in forever, just let me have some fun for once!”

Chloe’s heart was starting to escalate in her chest, her vision blurring a little.

That motion sickness was really hitting her in the gut. Like when Max Rewound time, except...that sensation was usually fast and hard, this was...a slow burn nausea.

“Fun’ like gettin’ high?”

“ Fucking A, mom, David's fulla shit, it was just a cigarette.”

This...argument with her mom...What was this?

It felt wrong. It felt just like her dream – something that had never happened, but...a memory, at the same time.

“Stop lyin’, Chloe. And don’t you go dragging poor Max down with you.”

“What are you talking about? We’re just gonna go chill somewhere...”

“Unlike you, Max is growin’ up. She has classes, responsibilities. Don't hold her back.”

“You worry too fucking much – jesus, can you get off my back for one goddamn day?”

“I am not gettin' into this with you at work, Chloe. Just go.”

“ Fucking finally.”

“And stay outta trouble. For once?”

“Sure thing, Joyce...”

Chloe’s chest swelled in a sharp breath as she regained her vision.

Max had shaken her, like stirring her from dozing off.

“Chloe...?” Max whispered into her ear. “You OK?”

Chloe blinked, rubbed her eyes, and rehooked her arm around Max’s. The rain had intensified a bit. Now someone else was talking in front of the crowd, raising their voice to try and speak through the tumbling droplets.

“Hey.” Max gave Chloe another nudge with another quiet quip.

“Mm,” Chloe grunted beneath the rainfall, regaining her balance.

Soooo...

Was this the kinda shit Max had been dealing with?

Chloe could see how it could be a little...hard to stay focused, with this kinda bullshit going on.

“-- in the face of such sudden losses, but here, from this very spot, we can cast our gaze upon this town. We can see the greater picture. We can see that despite such loss, there is still a plan. There is still an Arcadia Bay. My daughter wasn't...” The man paused, wiping rain from his face. “She wasn't able to see that greater picture. We failed to show it to her. We let her down. I can...only hope
that this memorial site can help others see the beauty of Arcadia Bay, while reminding us of how much loss it has suffered for it. Because th...wh...if... . . . . . . . . 

“Why does everybody in my life let me down?”

Chloe's eyes had slid closed again.

She could hear herself – another memory, but so vivid, so detailed.

Frank Bowers' RV.

“My dad gets killed, you bail on me for years, my mother gloms onto step-fucker...Now Rachel betrays me...”

“Chloe, Rachel is missing. Nobody betrayed you.”

“Bullshit! Who hasn't?! Fuck everybody!”

“Chloe?”

Jangling of keys.

Pelting of rain.

Revving of an engine.

Barking of a dog.

Ocean waves.

Sobbing.

So much sobbing.

Then Max's voice.

“Chloe, you can't keep blaming me and everybody for everything wrong in your life. It's so not fair.”

“I gotta blame somebody. Otherwise, it's all my fault. Fuck that.”

“Grow up. And I'm not trying to be mean, but you're not the only one in Arcadia Bay with problems. Kate Marsh killed herself, you know.”

“Yes, Kate Marsh killed herself. She's dead. Such sad, OK? That doesn't make me feel better about my fucked-up life – get it?”

“So, who do you most want to blame?”

“My fucking dad, of course! Hello?”

A sharp sting of pain.

Chloe tried to open her eyes. She couldn't...move.

She could barely breathe.
Smoke. Heat. Burnt rubber, concrete...

Suffocating...She was suffocating.

Another pounding at her chest, another rush of nausea...

And Chloe was back on the cliffside, in the rain.

But the crowds had left. A trail of black umbrellas was filtering its way down the hill.

Wait, huh? Hold the fuck up.

Seconds ago, Mr. Marsh or whoever had just been...-

Chloe turned to Max, who was still attached to her hip.

“Wh-...?” Chloe uttered, baffled. “Max, is something...-?”

Max wasn't moving. Her grip on Chloe's arm wasn't...intimate, it was...constraining. Her eyes were glazed over, her lips slightly agape.

Chloe blinked.

And the instant she did, Max wasn't at her side.

And she wasn't on the cliff.

She was holding a gun.

In the junkyard.

She couldn't move, and yet...she was moving all the same.

Like sitting in the passenger seat, trying to step on the brake pedal, but...nothing was happening.

“Well, Max?”

Max gawked at the junkyard in a strange stupor. Her eyes were glazed over, her lips slightly agape.

“OK, you're too busy to help, so I'm gonna kill the car bumper.”

-bang!-

The moment she pulled the trigger, Chloe's chest was slammed with a hefty force, knocking the wind right the fuck out of her. She felt...numb. Regaining her footing, everything seemed to move in slow motion.

She could...move again.

The driver had bailed out the door, and she'd...scrambled to take over the steering wheel. Slam the brakes. Steer sideways. Nothing did much of anything.

Then the pain hit. Her chest ignited with a searing pain unlike any she'd known, coming in frantic waves with each beat of her heart, pushing blood out of her.

Clutching at the hole in her torso, Chloe shrieked with startled shock.
“Jesus, I shot myself! Ungh, I shot myself!” Her legs buckled and she sunk to her knees, trying to process how the hell this could've happened, and what to do.

Max could undo it. Duh.

If she wasn't just staring blankly at Chloe.

“Back up, back up!” Chloe cried in a panic, suddenly nauseous.

Not Rewind nauseous, more like...holy-shit-I'm-bleeding-out-I'm-fucking-dying-GODDAMNIT-MAX-DO-SOMETHING.

“Stupid gun!” Max spat out. “Hold on, Chloe.” And she stuck out her hand, reaching at the fabric of Everything, tugging it backward.

Chloe's nausea intensified, her head spinning in a daze. Her own grip on her chest was numbing.. She could barely hold up her arm, much less apply pressure to her wound.

But...nothing was changing. Wait, but then...if Chloe had experienced this, then...had Max actually Rewound it? Was this...? R-right, she was just dreaming. Like before. She was in Arcadia Bay, at a memorial, in the rain. Not back here.

But shit, did this dream hurt.

Coughing on her own blood, watching it turn brown as it oxidized in the dirt before her, Chloe tried to plead with Max. But Max was knelt down, knees bent, balanced on her toes. She was just...staring. Not even at Chloe, more like...through her. And Max's nose was bleeding...

There was a chilling twinkle of curiosity in Max's eyes. It was dishearteningly familiar.

It was that Other Max. The one that remained when actual Max was elsewhere.

Max grabbed Chloe's chin, keeping her head upright with a dark, cynical stare.

“Fucking moron,” Max uttered in an amused whisper, shaking her head. “Bullets and bottles of booze...The hell'd you expect, ya dumb bitch?”

She dropped Chloe's head, and Chloe fell.

She fell through the dirt. She fell through herself. She fell through Everything.

Stay down. Go to sleep. Good. Sleep.

That’s it. Let it all out.

You know, I picked this moment. Just for you.

Do you like it?

You made this moment happen, after all.

Me? I didn't do anything. You did this to yourself.

So, then.
Look at this. Look at what you bring upon yourself.

Now? Think about what you’ve brought to others.

What do you think would happen if I let you live here, huh?

You’d just bring destruction to everyone around you.

Including me.

Including US.

including us

INCLUDING us

INCLUDING US

including us

At least now this Max can live the rest of her life in peace.

This Arcadia Bay can rest in peace.

And so can this Chloe Price.

Like she was supposed to.

Speaking of ‘supposed to’...

You know, I’ve been thinking on it a lot lately, and…-

Well.

This is all your fault, isn’t it?

You’re the reason all of this has happened.

If it weren’t for you, we wouldn’t be broken.

YOU BROKE US, CHLOE PRICE.

yOu BrOkE uS

BROKE us

fucking broke us!

chloe price broke us

BROKEN...

But.

Lucky for us – Max, that is – we have a way to fix things, right?

And I think I’ve figured out a way out of this shit.

Think about it: it’d be better if we’d never met in the first place.

No Chloe: no Rewind.

No Rewind: no bad choices.

No bad choices?
We get to be whole again.

WHOLE AGAIN

aGaIn wHoLe
please...!
make us whole again

It'd be good for you, too, you know.

Maybe your dad would still be alive.

You'd never need Rachel – so you wouldn't have that pain.

I know you have these assumptions about me, but...

I don't like seeing you in pain.

I don't like being in pain.

I don't like her being in pain.

Any of her

us

MAX.

I'm tired. We all are.

But pain is necessary to fix things.

necessary
FIX THIS
iT hUrTs

So.

If we never met, never became friends...

Maybe then we’d both be safe.

Both be happy.

Or at least not in so much pain.

Maybe then Max Caulfield would be whole again.

No Storm, no guns, no drugs, no death, no heartache, just...-

Oh.

Oh, you don’t seem to like this idea, do you?

It's written all over your face.

Or maybe that's just you dying from an excruciating, self-inflicted gunshot wound. Hah.
Well, either way, don’t worry.

Even if I find a way to prevent us from ever meeting...

It’s not like you’d be able to tell, anyway.

_Ignorance is bliss._

Am I right?

_I learned that from you, after you._

Max's lips curled into an excited smirk.

And Chloe woke up.

“Chloe!” Max whimpered, tapping her damp palm against Chloe's cheek. “Chloe...”

Max was crying.

She was wiping blood from her nose.

Fuck.

_Chloe's_ nose was bleeding, too.

“Mmm-...” Chloe coughed, phlegm and blood dribbling out of her throat and into the mud at their feet.

Max was shuddering and heaving sobs, trying to rub Chloe's back whilst protecting them with their umbrella.

“Max,” Chloe croaked in confusion, her throat burning. Her vision was blurred, her guts felt tangled in a tight knot...she could barely breathe. She tried to speak, but what came out was pathetic and squeaky. “It hurt, Max, why did...-?”

The pair of them clutched each other, bent down in the rain, shielded from the storm, but bleeding and coughing and choking...

“We need to be whole, Chloe,” Max was sniveling into Chloe's shoulder. “_I-I'm sorry, I'm not_-...I can't...-”

Chloe, not at all prepared to even _try_ to figure out what the _shit_ was going on, pushed herself back up on her two feet. She had to drag Max up with her.

They were both off balance, bloody-lipped, teary-eyed, gripping each other to stand up straight in the mud and rain.

It was kind of scary, seeing and now _feeling_ that whatever was wrong with Max, it was no longer just Max's problem.

“Mm-...Maxie?” Chloe winced, clearing her throat through the bitter wetness of everything around them.

“What happened, Chloe? What-...What did she _do_ to do?”
Chloe swallowed a lump in her throat, sniffled, and nodded, wiping her wrist over her face to clear it up.

“She, um...” Chloe coughed, trying to stand still and regain her bearings. Max, hands wrapped around Chloe’s umbrella arm, was staring at her with dread. “I think she's...doing to me what-...what she's been doing to you...”

Max's eyes stung with fear. She sniffed, rubbed at her nose, and nodded sullenly.

Chloe added, “And it's happening to Stella, too, I-...I think.”

Max's lips parted with confusion, her brows sinking critically.

“Wh-?...No, she can't just...-”

“Some serious Twilight Zone shit is going on with Stells – and if it's anything like what I just went through? Just now?” Chloe bit her lip and shook her head. “This is bad, Max...”

Max ran her palm up her face, taking a deep breath.

The rainfall hadn't let up at all. There were no signs it was going to anytime soon.

“So-...Well...” Max shook her head, puffing out air in frustration and staring off at the ocean. She looked back to Chloe. “Can you describe it?”

“I-I dunno, dude, like...phasing...between two realities? I'm assuming?”

Max nodded bitterly, wiping her eyes.

“Shit,” Max winced.

“Yea,” agreed Chloe. “And...you know this...'Other' you? She, uh-...Do you know what she wants?”

Max, fingers digging into her forehead, groaned through her teeth in this frustrated way.

“No, she won't fucking-...It's like she doesn't even-...Urgh.”

The tone in Max's huff, the way she flung her arms done with rage, it was...disconcerting.

“Max,” Chloe said shakily. Her hand trembling against the umbrella handle, she contemplated whether what she'd seen, heard, experienced was...even credible. Even if Max's persona had somehow...cracked in half, why should she even believe the Other one?

“What did she show you?” Max asked hastily, suddenly, clawing at Chloe's wrists. “Did she try to scare you? Did she try...-?”

“Did I kihh-...” Chloe's voice caught.

Max's face contorted with confusion. Her grip on Chloe's wrists tightened. It hurt a bit.

“Max, back when-...Th-the day before the Storm? When we...whhen we needed Frank's logbook, remember? Sid I-..-?”

“Frank? What the fuck does Frank have to do with any of this?!”

“Did I kill him?” Chloe forced out the words.

Max's clammy cheeks turned a shade paler, and Chloe put one and on together.
“Chl-...? No, no,” Max breathed with assurance. “The Storm wasn't...your fault, it was mine, I mean, I-”

“No, the fucking Storm, dude,” Chloe pressed. “When we needed his book. On the beach. Did I shoot Frank and his dog?”

Max was trying to dodge the question.

Just like Stella had been complaining about. It was true – Max had a habit of saying what she thought the other person wanted to hear.

But Chloe had figured by that point in their relationship, Max would never do that to her.

“Chloe...” But she could see it in Max's eyes, clear as day. “No, we...talked with him, I-I mean, he was...upset, but we...got him to see reason, he-...Why are you bringing this up? What did she try and trick you into thinking?”

Max was lying.

“I did,” Chloe concluded, baffled and in shock all over again. Palm over her mouth, she took a step away from Max, whose eyes began to quiver and water up.

“Chloe, n-no, you didn't, I'm tr-...She's trying to fuck with your head, she-...I've been doing-...Argh.” Max sought shelter back under the umbrella, rubbing water from her hair with impatience. “She's been pulling this shit with me forever, don't...let her do this to us.”

“I fucking killed a man and his dog,” Chloe stated.

“You didn't!” Max pleaded.

“Because you went back to the fucking future on my ass,” Chloe growled, shoving the umbrella into Max's hand and spinning around. She felt like she would choke on the tension, the stress of being confronted with this side of Max she thought had gone away. She nearly bumped into the guard rail at the cliff's edge.

Quite a drop, if she slipped.

Victoria, Brooke, Stella, all trying to tell her about Max lying to them, and she wouldn't believe them. She'd worked through her shit, she'd grown up, why the fuck was Max still pulling this high-school crap?

Max Caulfield was a people pleaser.

She'd bend the truth to make people happy.

Hell, she'd even bend fucking reality itself.

But it hurt more than anything else that had happened that day that Max doubted her – doubted them, doubted their love – to try bending things in an effort to keep things together between them.

Didn't Max know better?

Why was she so desperate?

Oh.

Well, duh.
Maybe because there was another her trying to break them up? Apparently?

Chloe leaned against the guardrail, her head light and spinning a bit. The rain was hammering down on her, weighing the right side of her head down with water-soaked hair. Her chest felt so tight, so tense.

She couldn't breathe steadily.

She could only watch the storm battered waves, so far below, pushing and pulling.

Max swooped over with their flimsy protection, struggling to keep it aloft. It would hold them through the rain, but they were getting drenched, anyway.

“Chloe,” Max begged, tugging at Chloe's tattooed arm, trying to get her away from the cliff.

Chloe wanted to yank her arm out of Max's grasp. But she didn't.

Max squeaked, “You're gonna fall,” tugging at her to back away from the edge.

Away from the enormous drop.

“What does it matter?” Chloe snapped. “So what if I fucking fall? Huh? You'll just...wave your magic hand – bam – all better. Right?”

“Don't...”

“'N then you'll keep me in the dark about it.”

“I-I just...don't see why it matters if it...didn't really happen, why are y-?”

“Maybe that's the whole fucking problem right now,” Chloe barked, spitting out drenched hair strands from her mouth and shoving the slick mess of blue and purple out of her face. “It doesn't matter to you if it's not 'real,' right? So what happens when 'real' stops being easy to figure out?”

Max pressed herself against Chloe's back. There was that familiar, alluring sensation, heating her guts like embers when everything on the outside was cold.

“I-I'm sorry, Chloe,” Max shuddered, her cheek against Chloe's shoulder. “I'm so sorry, I...didn't want to hurt you, O-OK? Please...”

The tightness in Chloe's chest was now gone, replaced with...an ache.

“You just want me gone,” Chloe stated somberly, pushing them up from the guard rail.

“...What? The fuck? No. Chloe. No, why would I-”

“That's what the Other you told me.”

Max blinked with narrowed eyes, her nose wrinkled as she tried to process Chloe's relayed message.

“She...told you that?”

Chloe turned herself around, pushing her body against Max's.

“She said if we'd never met, none of this would've happened...”

Max rubbed her hands across her face some more, distraught by the notion.

“Yea,” Chloe spit out irritably. “So that's a reassuring thought.”
“But...I can't control-...She can't control my power. How would she even...-?”

“How?! Max, how the fuck is she...-?!?” Chloe clawed her hand at her own face, writhing it around in frustration. “-..doing whatever she's doing to me? To Stells? Huh? Whoever – whatever she is, seems she's capable of more than you think, and it's creeping the goddamn fuck out of me, Max. I can't deal with this, not on top of everything else. I'm already scared shitless that you're losing it, now I gotta worry that I'm losing it, too?! Maybe you...really do need to see someone. Like, in a hospital.”

There was a sploshing of footsteps, back tracking up the hill toward them. Probably David or something, coming to ask them what was taking so long...

“Ch-Chloe, please, we-...” Max sunk her face into Chloe's. “We'll work this out, I can't...go to a place like that, it wuh-...It won't help. We have to-...We need to stay together. I can-...I'll figure out how to keep her back. I-I mean, she can't do something like this – I won't let something like that happen to you. You're...the most important-...Please...”

Chloe sighed, embracing her fiance through the cloud of fear enveloping them.

She wanted to believe Max.

But over the prior five years, Chloe Price had gradually seen what power Max Caulfield was capable of. And even there, where they were, after everything, Max was still unsure of herself, of her own capability.

That day, Chloe had experienced first-hand just how much those powers had evolved since the days of Rewinding to land trick-shots on beer bottles.

Having your consciousness ripped out of your place in time, flung around like a dog shredding a teddy bear, then being spit back out into the present...

It was kinda terrifying.

“Guys!”

At the shout, Chloe's hands instinctively clenched around Max's body, then relaxed.

It was Stella. Her eyeglasses were all fogged up, and she tried to wipe them on her jacket sleeve.

She was out of breath, and looked desperate.

“Wh-What's up, Stells?” Chloe asked, her heart quickening with doubt.

Stella's nose was dripping out blood.

“I-I don't know, what did you do?” she panted and puffed, completely soaked without her own umbrella. Chloe eased Max along, who was still sniffling into her shoulder. Stella huddled alongside them.

“I didn't...mean to,” Max was wincing. “I didn't mean to. I didn't mean to...”

She kept repeating it, over and over, under her breath.

“Did you...-?” Chloe started up with concern for Stella.

“It was fucking unreal, Chloe, did you...-?”
Chloe nodded hastily.

“How do we stop this shit?” Stella whimpered, flicking her wrists with rushed desperation.

“...I didn't mean to I didn't mean to I didn't mean to I didn't mean to I didn't mean to I didn't mean to...”

Max...clearly did not have answer.

Neither did Chloe.

--

“When I was younger I could remember anything, whether it had happened or not;

But soon I shall be so I cannot remember any but the things that never happened.”

~ Mark Twain
“This must be what a parallel universe is like’, I thought. Everything looked the same, but I suddenly felt like it wasn't. Like everything had been taken apart, brick by brick, flower bed by flower bed, and put back together in the wrong order. Just like me.”
~ Jordanna Fraiberg

The sound of the wall clock above her was enveloping her senses.

She opened her eyes, looking down at her desk. What she saw was strange. Bizarre.

Maybe a little crazy.

**Spirals.**

So many spirals.

Her notebook's page was...just covered in scribbles of spirals. Big ones, little ones, with dots and X’s planted on their lines...It was almost like...a graph of sorts, plotted out in spiral shapes.

They all ran counter clockwise.
And if you squinted at the whole page, the general shape *almost* looked like a pair of butterfly’s wings.

Looked at as a bigger picture, it all seemed like the scrawling of a crazy person, either way.

“Alfred Hitchcock famously called film 'little pieces of time'—”

A voice. There was a voice speaking, she suddenly realized. Her ears hadn’t been awake enough, but the fog was lifting. It sounded like a lecture.

“—but he *could* be talking about photography, as he likely was.”

And then it hit her: she realized that she’d drawn this foreign image, this…this *chart*? If it could be called that. She had *just* finished drawing a spiral at that very moment of…waking? In this place?

Pausing her drawing, she wiggled her writing utensil a bit, balancing it back and forth precariously along her fingers like a metronome, in (time) with the wall clock. A common (tic) of hers.

-Tick-

-Tick-

-Tick-

-Tick-

Wait, where *was* she, anyway?

“These 'pieces of time' can frame us in our glory and our sorrow—”

In that moment of alarm, she dropped her silver pencil to the floor.

Dazed and confused, she bent over to pick it up. Somehow, it felt like...the *hundredth* time she’d had to pick it up.

“--from light to shadow--”

This felt...*too* familiar.

So familiar, she knew what would happen next.

“--from color to chiaroscuro.”

She looked up, and sure enough, the classroom hummed with the same events she anticipated.

Behind the teacher’s back, Taylor threw a wad of paper across the room at Kate’s face.

Victoria’s phone vibrated on her desk, which went ignored.

Professor Jefferson asked the class a question.

“Now, can you give me an example of a photographer who perfectly captured the human condition in black and white?”

The silence that followed as he awaited an answer was...*so* unsettling to her.

“Anyone?”
What am I doing here again?

“...Bueller?”

Why do I know this dumb lecture inside and out?

“Diane Arbus,” came Victoria's snooty, teacher's pet answer.

“There you go, Victoria! Why Arbus?”

She could feel her (face) getting pale and (hopeless), sweat forming at her brow, her fingers trembling.

“Because of her images of hopeless faces.”

She looked at the girl sitting in the back of the room, fidgeting with her old Polaroid camera...

That girl, she looked really gloomy about her camera...So (sad). Like she was being (haunted) by some ghost in the machine.

“You feel, like, totally haunted by the eyes of those sad mothers and children.”

Something...about that girl staring at her camera, it just...pulled at her. Tugged at her from the inside. Like some invisible thread. She hated seeing that girl look so (tortured).

Jefferson added, “She saw humanity as tortured, right? And frankly, it's bullshit.”

Hushed whispers of amusement.

But she didn't find it so entertaining for some reason.

“Shh-shh-shh, keep that to yourself...”

He would want to (keep them) silent, wouldn't he?

But why did she think that? Where was this (dark) cynicism coming from? Why did being in this classroom fill her with dread and (desperation)?

“Seriously, though,” Jefferson went on, “I could frame any one of you in a dark corner, and capture you in a moment of desperation.”

Victoria leaned forward in her seat, (captured) by his words.

“And any one of you could do that to me.”

The girl fidgeting with her camera was (shooting) Jefferson quite the stink eye.

“But isn't that too easy? Too obvious?”

Something that about that girl at the back of the class was...so familiar...

What was her name, again?
“What if Arbus chose to capture people at the height of their beauty and innocence?”

Jefferson took a few steps toward (innocent) Kate, who seemed to shrink at his figure looming over her.

“She had a brilliant eye, so she could have taken another approach...”

The girl with the retro camera had shifted the old device into her lap. She stuck her middle finger down at her lens and stuck out her tongue.

“I have to admit-” Victoria began.

-Click!-
-Vrrrrr....-

The girl at the back of the room had (shot) a photo of (herself).

“-I'm not a big fan of her work, I prefer-”
“Shh-shh,” Mr. Jefferson shushed Victoria, much to her dismay. “I believe Chloe has just taken what you kids call a 'selfie.'”

Chloe awkwardly set her camera back on her table, placing her fresh photograph beside it before stubbornly crossing her arms.

“A dumb word for a wonderful photographic tradition. Although, I’d say Chloe's talents are put to better use on environmental pieces rather than head shots...”

Chloe’s lips tightened as a scowl crept across her face at the professor's remark. Victoria was glaring at Chloe, too, clearly offended by getting interrupted.

Wait. Chloe. That name...-

She knew that name, she (knew) that girl…

“Of course, as you all know, the photo portrait has been popular since the early 1800's. Your generation was not the first to use images for...'selfie-expression.'”

Not even crickets.

Sitting at her desk in a quiet daze, she (couldn't resist) staring back down at her notebook of spirals, looping and looping.

“Sorry – I couldn't resist.”

The drawings, looping and looping and looping… It felt (vital) somehow, despite appearing insane.

(For as long) as she'd been here, she still couldn't figure out why she was here. Being (around) this man, though, it was…creeping her out. Which was weird, since she’d always had a thing for Professor Jefferson…It was why she could never say ‘no’ to the oddjobs he’d ask her to do for the school.

“The point remains that portraiture has always been a vital aspect of art – and photography – for as long as it's been around.”

Chloe was in some kind of text (conversation) on her phone in the back of the room.
“Now, Chloe—” The Professor made Chloe freeze up like a (doe) in headlights. “—since you've captured our interest and clearly was to join in on the conversation—“ Chloe's jaw went agape as she rolled her eyes. “—can you please tell us the name of the process that gave birth to the first...self...portraits?”

Chloe shook her head dismissively and looked back down in her lap, to her phone.

From her own desk, though, across the room, there was a...a vibration in her lap. She pried her eyes away from Chloe and pulled her phone out of her hoodie discreetly.

(Chloe) – (deal still going down?)

She was...confused. Deal?

Deal...deal, deal...

**What deal?**

**In the bathroom.**

“Chloe,” Jefferson said sharply.

“Dude,” Chloe sighed at the teacher, shoving her phone -- and her fist -- into her vest pocket. “Why are you asking me...?”

“You either know this--” Jefferson slammed his palm against the table in a brief but intense burst. “--or not, Chloe. Is there anybody here who knows their stuff?”

*I know!*

*I know this one!*

Why did she know this one...?

And why did she know a 'deal' was going down with Chloe in the bathroom...?

But she raised her hand anyway.

“Yes?” acknowledged the teacher.

“Dah...Daguerreotypes?”

“Aha,” said Jefferson, tilting his head to glance her way. “So you *are* still with us today, Stella.”

Stella's stomach felt like a toilet bowl, swirling so much shit around in a (vortex). Almost like there was some…Other her, watching her. Like looking through a (mirror).

“Th-the Daguerrian Process,” Stella asserted, “brought out...detail in people's faces with...” Stella couldn’t help but glance over to Victoria for some reason. “----a mirror-like, uhm...r-reflective...style...”

“Very good, Stella. Yes!”

Mr. Jefferson was pleased. Victoria was *not.*

Jefferson concluded, “Those traits made the Daguerrian Process extremely popular from the 1800's
The first American Daguerreotype self-portrait was done by Robert Cornelius.

Stella rubbed her hoodie sleeve against her sweaty forehead. She felt...so gross. Like she was ill.

She knew (all about) Jefferson...but she couldn't remember it.

“You can find out all about him...in your textbook.”

In the bathroom.

Why the fuck was Stella feeling so compelled to go to the damned bathroom?

She realized Chloe was giving her this expectant, wide-eyed stare from across the class. Stella shrugged back, then eked out a nod in reply to Chloe's text.

“Or even...online.”

Thank gawwwdd, that was their cue.

-brrRRRRRRINNNNGGGG!-

Class was freaking dismissed. Finally.

Again.

Stella was so ready to (fly out) of this...haunted-ass classroom of forever.

Jefferson was raising his voice to squeeze his one last word to the class as everyone scattered.

“And guys, don't forget the deadline to submit a photo for the 'Everyday Heroes' contest. I'll fly out with the winner to San Francisco where you'll be feted by the art world.”

(San Francisco...!)

“It's great exposure, and it can kick start a career in photography.”

San Francisco, that's...-!

I'm supposed to be there...-!

“So Stella, and Alyssa, get it...together.”

Stella felt a chill run down her spine when Mark called her name. She was frozen in her seat.

“Taylor – don't hide, I'm still waiting for your entry, too.”

Stella closed her notebook, hiding away the deluge of spiral scribbles.

“And yes, Chloe, I see you pretending not to see me.”

The shuffling of chairs and books and bags felt almost alien. Wrong.

Left to stare at the cover of her notebook, Stella realized that this notebook wasn’t…hers?

What the hell? It had random stickers, eclectic hipster stuff, all over the cover.

A deer wearing a fucking monocle, what…-?
Who was M.C.? And why did Stella have their book?

Stella was tempted to look through its pages, but not here. Not with (him) looming around.

The sound of Mark Jefferson’s voice somehow…made Stella feel uncomfortable. But she couldn’t place her finger on why. She loved his work, she was inherently drawn to him, she was proud of him being a professor at this school. Screw the east coast elite!

But even reiterating these concepts to herself, and Stella still could not shake this uncomfortable feeling about the man.

This was all too familiar. Stella didn’t like it.

San Francisco, I'm supposed to be there, not here, what...-?

Stella had never even been to San Francisco before, right? So why did she feel so insistent in her gut that it was where she was supposed to be?

Her peers were all leaving without her. Best to get her ass in gear and get going to…-

Where…was she supposed to go to, again?

In the bathroom.

Deal with Chloe.

Goosebumps running across her neck, Stella shakily shoved materials into her backpack, still feeling uneasy about that notebook. It was right then that she realized there were...things...in baggies...in her backpack. Tucked in the back bottom. Some weed? Maybe some...-

Wait, didn’t I...-?

Stella couldn’t remember putting those there. But...she also could. At the same time...?

Her brain hurt, like…physically…for a split second as she tried recollecting two conflicting memories.

She tried to zip up her backpack in a hurry, but not, like, in too much...a hurry, she didn't want to...-

A hand slapped itself down on the table in front of her, jesus! Her heart skipped a beat.

She looked up, and there was Chloe. Off across the room, behind Chloe, Kate Marsh was sulking over her notes. Aside from the three of them, Victoria was the only other student in the room, trying to...fucking schmooze up Mark Jefferson.

“Yo,” Chloe whispered down at Stella.

In this instant, Stella tried to study Chloe's appearance: pixie cut, spiky-gelled hair dyed purple and red…A low cut Muse shirt, some torn denim shorts and knee-high converse sneakers…

Chloe Price.

Stella knew Chloe Price…didn’t she?
Yea, yea…That punky nerd who was always chilling with the skater group, but was occasionally ‘uncool’ enough to hang with Stella, Warren, Brooke, and their crew. Now and again, anyway. Like she was a closet nerd in punk’s clothing.

Chloe was popping up her eyebrows with expectation, jerking her head with impatience.

“Well?” Chloe hissed quietly. “We doin' this thing, or not?”

Stella felt that invisible thread tugging her toward this girl again. She couldn't say 'no.'

“Uh,” Stella stammered out under her breath, “Y-yea, sure. Bathroom, right?” She felt her glasses slipping along her own sweat, so she re-positioned them.

Nodding, Chloe gave Stella a quizzical glare. It was like they were both trying to read some unspoken expression from each other.

“You're acting so fuckin' weird, man,” Chloe grunted as she pushed herself off the desk, heading for the hallway door with a slight shaking of her head. “Be chill.”

Stella then observed Victoria across the room, still trying to make some moves on the professor… Stella felt another tingle of déjà vu creep across her neck.

Stella Hill had been here before. She knew she had. Why was that? What about this seemingly innocuous day at Blackwell Academy made her feel sick and…strange? Like she’d experienced it so many times before…

She knew deep in her gut that she was supposed to be in San Francisco. Not here.

Was she dreaming, maybe? Yea…could be that.

Had to be that. Right? At least that made sense.


She was just…dreaming about being back in high school.

Wait – back in high school? As in, previously?

RIGHT!

She wasn't in high school anymore! She knew she wasn't! She was—–She’d gotten a Bachelor’s Degree already! Whew. So, yea, then...for sure this was a dream, right?

It was strange, then, this whole…this. It seemed like it was a dream, but didn't really feel like one. She felt too...coherent. Awake. There were too many fine details to things. Like some kind of…hyper dream, pff. Something bizarre as hell.

“Chloe Price,” came Mark’s voice from the head of the room. Stella saw the Chloe freeze up just before exiting the room. “Don’t think I’ve forgotten about that little outburst, ma’am. I believe you owe someone an apology…?”

Stella’s legs felt oddly shaky as she strapped her backpack on. It felt…lighter than she expected it to, and yet her body felt heavy. She was momentarily dazed, caught up in a lucid moment where time itself seemed to slow.

The way the light trickled in from the windows to her right, washing against Jefferson’s back, casting
his face in shadow; lighting up half of Victoria’s porcelain face.

The way Chloe hid on the left, shrouded in the shade of the doorway, her fist clenched around the doorknob, caught midstep, unable to leave.
Unable to escape.


“Ugh, whatever,” grunted Chloe Price from the doorway, making a bit of a fuss as she spun around.
She begrudgingly stomped over to where Victoria and Jeff were standing.

But while Chloe had been yanked over toward Jefferson and Victoria, that invisible thread, it...was still pulling at Stella.

**In the bathroom.**

Stella let herself get tugged by it.

She overheard a bit of conversation behind her as she awkwardly exited the room.

“All right, you two,” said Jefferson with a sigh. “This is the third time in a row that you've caused a disruption during my class. Now, I don't know what it is that's going on between you – and frankly, I don’t want to – but if this continues to-

“Dude, this is bullshit! I didn't-

“Mr. Jefferson? I'm not the one-

The bickering voices washed away as the door closed behind Stella.

From one river of noise into another.

Stella's legs still felt weak, and her head felt light. She steadied herself against a wall for a moment and tried to catch her breath. Her head felt...hot, her stomach queasy, and her chest hollow. She worried she was coming down with...a fever. Or, like...it was whiplash? Like this awful motion sickness...

**In the bathroom.**

Stella remembered she still had to go there. Quickly.

But she couldn't for the life of her remember why, what this deal with Chloe was, even though she knew she'd experienced this before.

That perverse feeling tugged at the back of her mind, the thread pulling and pulling.

*I'm not supposed to be here.*

**San Francisco...?**

*NO.*

**In the bathroom.**

Maybe whatever was in the bathroom would answer her questions.

Or maybe it would just confuse her (all) the more.
Stella stumbled her way through the hall as quickly as she could without tripping on her own shoelaces. A haze of chattering and familiar faces from fuzzy memories brushed by. The faces were clear as day – but the names, the situations…she knew them, but it was all weirdly clouded.

The sea of tiles and lockers and squeaking sneakers surrounded her.

A slam, a shudder, a whimper, a grunt…and those gross chuckles.

Poor Daniel was being rammed against the lockers to Stella’s left. His eyes reached out to hers in desperation as she timidly passed by. She felt emboldened for the briefest of moments to do something for once, to stand up and change-

NO.

In the bathroom.

But she had to keep going if she was going to make it on time.

As she reached a pair of metal double doors at the end of the locker hall, a missing person's poster caused Stella to stop dead in her tracks.

{MISSING:} 
{MAXINE CAULFIELD}

That poor girl...Stella had this weirdly distinct idea of who she was.

Maxine Caulfield had been missing for months. There'd been so many rumors swirling around Arcadia Bay about that girl that Stella didn't know what to believe anymore. Maxine had been a classmate of Stella's in Photography, and she'd...

That old camera. The one Chloe had.

This missing girl, she'd...she'd always been taking pictures with that old...camera...

Chloe Price. Chloe and her had been damned inseparable, Stella remembered.

Chloe was the one who'd been putting up all of these missing person posters. Right?

Why did Stella know that?

And why did she feel like there was so much more to Maxine Caulfield than everyone thought there was?

Even despite all of the rumors...-

Maxine Caulfield had been one of Stella's drug mule partners for a while, working under Frank Bowers, but they'd never gotten along as well as Stella would’ve liked. Maybe because Maxine was too busy sleeping around – Stella knew for a fact that Maxine had slept with Mark Jefferson (she had a very...reliable source) – but with how close Maxine seemed to be with Chloe, Stella wondered if...-

IN THE FUCKING BATHROOM.

Whatever was compelling her about this...mysterious (missing) girl, Stella wasn't supposed to be (captured) by it, standing around.

Stella Hill was supposed to be in the bathroom.
“Hey,” called out a voice, jarring Stella. It was Brooke. “You heard from Warren?”

“Huh...?” Stella was out of the loop.

Brooke Scott. Stella felt…Damnit, it was just like Chloe Price. Just like Maxine Caulfield.

This tugging, guttural familiarity, but no...concrete memory to back it up.

“About...tonight?” Brooke checked. “SAW movie binge...? You, me, Warren?”

“Um...Wh...?”

Brooke looked concerned at Stella's confusion.

“Stella, it was your idea, wasn't it? I thought Warren was just the one setting everything up.”

“I-I'm not...sure...” Stella panted out, her head hot and sweaty.

Brooke gave Stella a quick rub on the arm.

“Jeez, Stella. Listen,” Brooke sighed. She scratched her nose, then explained, “I didn't know you liked him when he asked me out. I would've checked with you first, OK?” Stella's heart was pounding. She felt like she could fall over at any moment. But Brooke kept talking. “You've gotta stop...being so salty about it. We're all friends, here, I mean, what if...-”

**IN THE BATHROOM.**

**GET YOUR ASS IN FUCKING GEAR RIGHT NOW.**

Augh, ow...-!

Goddamnit, did her head hurt all of sudden!

“-...we just talked it out and...-” Brooke slowed to a worried stop.

“...No...!” Stella gasped out through clenched teeth. “Please, not...right now...”

Gripping her head as it was swept with pain, Stella bumped into some football jock as she scrambled to escape.

“Stella...-?” Brooke's cry quickly faded away.

Stella's head was going to explode if she didn't...get...to where she was supposed to be...

Stella's body, pumping adrenaline like mad, managed to force its way into that fucking bathroom at last.

Stella was relieved to find the place empty. She looked up at herself in the mirror through some goofy graffiti of a mustache and glasses. She could feel it: the universe was, like...taunting her, or something. Nothing made sense.

**She was not supposed to be here.**

*She was supposed to be here.*

Her backpack suddenly felt...so heavy. So damned heavy, just like that. Slumping her way as far back as she could, Stella dropped her backpack beneath the furthest sink and leaned against the
porcelain, ready to puke at any second.

Her blood felt cold as ice when she noticed a small, fluttering set of tiny blue wings drift into the room from a window tucked in the corner.

Stella realized it was a butterfly. A blue one. Morpho breed. Its gentle, soft dance of flickering blue ended with a graceful pose as it perched itself upon the edge of a metal pail in the back corner of the room.

Stella felt…this *insane* compulsion to…*draw* it.

She cautiously clawed at her backpack on the floor, whipping out the stranger’s notebook.

Wait.

*{Property of}*
*{__M._C.__}*  

*{MISSING:}*  
*{MAXINE CAULFIELD}*

What the *fuck? Why…-?*

Why did Stella have Max Caulfield’s notebook?

Maxine. *Maxine* Caulfield’s notebook.

Why did she have it? Why was she drawing in it?

**BUTTERFLY.**

**IN THE BATHROOM.**

That invisible thread, it was…pulling at her, like some kind of marionette, almost.

She was supposed to draw a doodle of this butterfly on this pail.

So that’s what Stella did.

Her hands almost took a life of their own, like some freakish muscle memory. She didn’t even need to look at the butterfly. She just…*knew*…what to draw.

The butterfly's blue wings were practically glowing. Stella could almost feel the air moving around her. The butterfly felt...almost like a spirit.

And before she knew it, there it was. A quick doodle of a butterfly, resting on a pail.

As Stella’s hand drew the final line of her drawing – the butterfly’s antennae – her fingers couldn’t help but…*swirl* the graphite around into a spiral.

She drew an *{X}* at the end of it. But…she didn’t know why she was compelled to do so.
Was she...going crazy?

The cold aura Stella felt herself encased in dried, cracked, and molten away as the butterfly got antsy and took off. But as Stella went to watch its ascent, the bathroom door opened.

And Chloe Price walked in.

The air around Stella got...even colder, somehow.

Chloe eyes pierced through Stella's as the bathroom door swung closed.

“So...-” Stella cleared her throat, stumbling up from her crouched doodling position. “What do you...want?” She tucked the notebook against her waist.

Chloe's eyes rolled as she began flipping open the door to each stall, one by one, making her way over to Stella.

“Hope you…'checked the perimeter’, as my step-dad would say…”

Stella swallowed what little saliva there was to whet her throat. Her grip on the notebook in her hands tightened on instinct.

“Now,” Chloe said, having finally reached her. “Let's talk bidness.”

Stella's lips were shaking as she opened them, trying to speak, but unable to figure out what words were supposed to be said.

Like blanking on a line in a stage play she’d already been in way too many times.

“Well?” Chloe snarled, her patience clearly thinned by Professor Jefferson and Victoria. “What have you got for me?”

“I...I don't know...-” Stella's shoulders jerked themselves up, and she shook her head. “I, um...-”

'I got nothin’ for you.’

Wait. That wasn't right.

'Dude.” Chloe's eyes lit up like lighthouse beacons in a storm. “Hold up. Where did you get that journal?!” she demanded, taking a step toward Stella.

An angry, desperate step.

And Stella shrunk backwards in reply, her heart pounding with fear.

Chloe was leaning, craning her neck, struggling to peek at the book.

“I-I'm not...exactly sure where...-”

“That's Maxine's journal!” Chloe called out. “Why the fuck are you holding her journal?!”

Oh, damn. She was pissed.

Stella had no idea what she'd gotten herself into, why she was here, what any of this was supposed to mean.

But this girl looked desperate. Desperate enough to hurt someone.
So when Chloe's arms got grabby, Stella flung the notebook away from her body, to the cold ceramic floor.

“What the shit, man?!” Chloe growled, giving Stella a rough shove before scooping the book from the grimy tiles.

And then the bathroom door opened again. And as the door closed, the girl who'd entered asked Chloe a question.

“So, you decided to show up this time, huh?”

The girl who'd posed this question was giving Chloe quite a bad look, one hand latched against her hip, the other hanging with swagger at her side. With an elegant gesture of her neck, she flicked some strands of long, golden hair behind her shoulder, sighing with a one-armed shrug. This revealed an earring: a radiant blue feather.

“I was worried you'd forget about me, Chloe.” Her eyelids narrowed. “Again.”

Stella definitely remembered this girl. She was, like...the most popular person on campus.

“Fuck you, Rachel,” Chloe huffed with a dry sniff, rubbing her jacket's sleeve against her face.

But all of that anger that had been boiling out of Chloe's face before had dissolved into...fear.

“Already at it with the cursing, and the yelling...” Rachel taunted with a raised brow and a tired sigh. “And here I'd thought you'd grown up a bit. I miss the old Chloe.”

“I'm not here to fucking...reminisce, you psycho,” seethed Chloe, marching right to the blonde girl and waving Maxine's notebook up at her. “I want answers, bitch.” Chloe slapped the notebook against Rachel's arm. “Where is she?”

“Like I would know,” Rachel dismissed the notion with a hint of offense.

Rachel delicately brushed Chloe's book off of her bare shoulder, realigned her tanktop strap, and took a cautious step around Chloe, eying the girl's haircut – she wrinkled her nose at the hair dye.

“Red, Chloe? Seriously? And purple? With that do? Frolicking around in the ladies’ room with an unsuspecting girl...Why don't you just...wear a rainbow on your shirt and be done with it? Get to the point quicker that way...”

Chloe's eyes couldn't roll further back in their sockets as she thrust her head up, arms dropping to her eyes with bridled fury.

She then cast her gaze past Rachel and toward Stella.

Snapping her fingers at Stella, Chloe commanded, “Give her the shit, man.”

Stella was confused.

What...was 'the shit?' Man?

Chloe's eyes were downcast.

Oh. The backpack? Was it the stash of 'goodies' Stella had?

“You did bring it, right?” Chloe huffed with exasperation.
“Mm,” Stella hummed, nodding her head quickly and with some fright. She pulled out one of the bags, which contained a uniform set of unmarked pills. “It's, uh, it's...here,” Stella 'assured' with a wary shrug.

“There, see?” said Chloe to Rachel. “We’ve got your trash. Now, spill it.”

Rachel, however, was ignoring Chloe's impatient words.

“...Stella, right?” Rachel recanted, squinting her eyes. “Biology? Last semester.” She nodded to herself, her lips pursed. Stella nodded as well, though she...wasn't sure why she agreed. “Frank's said good things about you. Says you're trustworthy.” A small smirk edged at Rachel’s lips. “Says you know how to keep a secret. So. Look,” Rachel said, flashing up one palm. “I don't...know how you got mixed up with...-” She tilted her head toward Chloe, eyes wide. “-...this one? But believe me: she's nothing but trouble.”

“This isn't about me, fucker, so stop-” Rachel cut Chloe off with a simple raised palm.

Stella was...surprised that even had worked. It was like this girl...almost had some kind of power over Chloe.

“She will grab you,” Rachel stated, and darkly. “She will hold you down until you can't move. She will sink her teeth into you. And she will bleed you dry until there is nothing left. Until you are so weak you'll do anything to survive. And you'll like it, too – or you’ll think you do. That’s the worst part, really.”

Stella was quite intimated by the golden-haired girl and her scathing words.

Chloe, meanwhile, looked on the verge of tears.

But Rachel wasn't done.

“So if I were you, Stella? Dear? I wouldn't give her so much as a speck of that stuff until she shows you the cash you're owed for it.”

Rachel whirled her head back around toward a disgruntled, watery-eyed Chloe.

“Although,” she continued her thought, arms crossed at Chloe. “if she had cash to give you, I would have to wonder where she got it from, because Frank seems to be missing some...”

Rachel took a step toward Chloe, the clacking of her heels echoing throughout the room, shuddering Stella's spine.

“You accusing me of something?” Chloe quietly – defiantly – asked Rachel, standing her ground, while her quivering eyes and trembling voice gave her away. “Always were good at that...especially when you have no fucking evidence because nothing happened and you're a paranoid nutjob...!”

Rachel quietly countered, “And you've always been good at taking what isn't yours and running off with it – never taking anyone else’s problems into account...Because you, Dear, are a sociopathic nutjob...”

“Dude, I brought what you asked for,” Chloe pleaded, her will shaken. “Just-”

“No, Chloe,” Rachel snapped, giving the girl a shove on the shoulders. “You didn't bring what I asked for – she did.”
And now all eyes were back on Stella.

And this was...-

Well, this was just awkward.

Stella opted to stay put, where she was, far away from these furious ladies, and...nudge her backpack along the floor. She tried to speak up.

“I-I'm not...looking for any problems, here...g-guys. I'm just...”

“Stella, Dear, listen up,” Rachel said frigidly with a snap of the finger. “You've got two choices, Honey: you can give that merchandise back to me, and Frank will see to it that you get back what you paid for it. You have my word. Or? You can do what you signed up for, finish what you started, and sell it like you told him you would. Mm'kay?”

“Sh-she's selling it to me,” said Chloe desperately, “I've got the cash for it, swear I do, and then I...-

“You've got some serious lady balls on you, Chloe,” Rachel sighed, practically pushing Chloe against the tile wall without lifting a finger. “I mean, I get it, I do. Your right hand girl goes missing, not so much as a good-bye. But maybe, if you could pull your cotton-candy head out of your own ass? Stop pointing fingers at everyone in Arcadia? You might realize that she left you, because you're a walking train wreck.”

“She would never do that,” Chloe insisted, though her eyes gave her doubt away. Mm. Maybe not doubt so much as fear.

“You seriously think she wanted to be with you?” Rachel balked. She sucked in a slow breath through her teeth. “Chloe, Chloe, Chloe...” She leaned into Chloe, pressed her forearm against Chloe’s neck. “Maxine is a people pleaser. She gives people what they want, so she can get what she wants. Trust me – I know a thing or two about how to play that game...”

Chloe shook her head, biting at her quivering lower lip.

“She wouldn’t do that to me,” Chloe whimpered, her arms weakly trying to push back at Rachel, but lacking the willpower to take action. “Step off,” she said through a sob, her jaws locked.

“Face it, Chloe,” Rachel whispered. “You’re broken. You’re desperate. You’re clingy, and possessive. And now that you can’t be a parasite on Maxine – now that she’s free from you -- you're trying to drag everyone else down, too.” As Rachel spoke, Stella slowly approached. Chloe looked...in so much pain. Her eyes were watering, her teeth chattering a bit, her whole body shaking beneath Rachel's cold words and physical force. But Rachel wasn't done. “Maybe you hid it from Maxine for a while? But she's a smart one. Eventually, she saw through you – just like I did. And she left. Juhhhhhs like I did. I envy her, really. She had the courage to leave you before the damage was done...”

“Duh---Damage, huh?” Chloe choked out, her hands wrapped around her waist as she trembled. She hissed through her trembling, “You wanna see how much damage I can really do?”

Stella could feel the air in the room turn ice-cold as Rachel gasped, quickly withdrawing her hands from off of Chloe. But Chloe grasped her left hand at one of Rachel's wrists, keeping the two of them close.

“The fuck, Chloe?!” Rachel winced, her entire tone having been flipped upside down.
“Stop squirming,” Chloe hissed through her teeth. “Shut up. I said stop.”

Rachel was trembling and shaking, suddenly starting to weep.

“How...?” was the best Stella could make out from Rachel's lips.

Taking a step closer, Stella then realized that with Chloe's right hand, she had drawn a gun, and was pressing it against Rachel's stomach. Stella’s spine tingled with an ivy shiver. Somehow, she’d known this would happen.

“Let-!” hissed Rachel with desperation, trying to pull herself away.

But Chloe huffed through her teeth, tugging and yanking at Rachel’s arm.

“How’s it feel, huh?” she seethed through cold, quiet syllables as they struggled their wrists around.

“She was my Angel. She was my everything. Something happened to her, and I know it’s your fault.”

Stella took another step closer. If she just…did the right thing this time…it wouldn’t happen like before.

“Chlugh-...Chloe, I know what it...looks like, but I-”

“You took her from me.” Chloe pressed the gun deeper into Rachel’s waist.

“I wasn’t...trying to-”

“She lied right to my fucking face. For what? For you?!”

“I can’t believe you, after all I...”

“Chloe...! Please, you don’t...”

Stella took another step closer.

**I can change things.**

_You can’t change anything._

“Juh-...Just put the gun down, before...”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

“...you do something you...you’ll regret...”

“What about what you regret? Huh?!”

Stella took another step closer.

Clutching Maxine’s journal against her waist, she held up her other hand, palm outstretched. Her head was starting to pound as time seemed to slow, her vision blurring in a bloody haze.

“Chloe,” said Stella.

Stella could…_feel_ that invisible thread in her outreached palm. She tugged at it.

Chloe’s eyes went blank and hollow, confused. Rachel took the opportunity to try and break free, pushing the gun’s tip aside.
Time itself seemed to freeze. Or slow. Or maybe flip sideways?

Stella knew what had happened, even as the world around her blinked and flickered.

Blood was spilling from her stomach.

She peeled back the journal she’d been holding against her waist – it was sticky and warm with her own fluids, a hole punctured clean through it from the bullet.

Stella’s fingers felt numb and weak, and the journal slipped from her grasp and onto the tile flooring. As soon as it hit the ground, it was like time snapped awake with chaos.

Rachel was emitting some kind of horrified shrieking, clamping her hands to her own head and crouching, clearly fearful for her life.

Stella’s legs wobbled as her chest fluttered, her breathing went erratic…

Chloe, wide-eyed, dropped the gun to the floor, tearing her hands through her hair as tears began to spill.

Stella’s balance disappeared, and she found herself slipping against a stall door, faintly flailing her arms to try and hold herself up. She slid down on her side, trying to speak, but unable to.

“I’m sorry,” Chloe moaned shakily, covering her face. “I’m so sorry…How did I…-? Not again…Not again…No-no-no…” She fell against the wall behind her, sobbing. “What the fuck?” she moaned into her palms. “What the fuhhh-huhhh-huhhh…?! Why is this shit happening to us…?!?” Chloe’s sobs of despair rattled in Stella’s skull, vibrated at her ribcage, swallowed her.

“Ku-oh…” Stella choked, feeling spit and blood dribble down her chin as everything started turning numb. She tried to reach her arm out. She could…feel it. That invisible string. That invisible thread, tying her to Chloe. The look in Chloe’s eyes – it was different. There was a certain spark there that wasn’t there before. Chloe could see the invisible thread, too.

“I didn’t mean to,” Chloe whimpered, hand over her mouth. “Stells – you gotta believe me, I didn’t…”

**Stells.**

Chloe called her that –her Chloe, somewhere else Chloe.

They weren’t supposed to be here.

*I know. But here you fucking are, anyway, right?*

Max’s voice.

*Max Caulfield*, that was this pervasive voice in her head, the one pulling the invisible thread. She recognized it now.

There was a harsh clacking of heels, and a loud clatter of metal as Chloe’s gun was kicked across the
floor by Rachel, who was seething panicked and angry hysterics.

“You shot her!” Rachel hissed with a horrible crack in her voice as she slapped Chloe in the face. “You psychotic fuck!” She kneed Chloe in the ribs.

Coughing, sobbing, whimpering, screaming…Stella couldn’t really…see anymore. But she could still hear. She struggled to hear. It was all she could do to cling to consciousness.

“R-Rachel! No! Please…Not like this…Th-that wasn’t me, I didn’t…Gulgh-!”

“Get away from me, you psycho! Don’t touch me!”

“Rachel…”

“If you’d just listened, Chloe, you fucking lunatic…-!”

“This isn’t real…You’re not her…”

“You never listen! And now she’s going to die.”

“This-…N-no, this shit's not real, we’ll...wake up, and...we’ll...-”

“Shut up! Just-…! Y-yes, hello? Th-there's been a shooting.”

“Why aren't we waking up...?”

“Bluh-...Blackwell A-Academy, sh-...Fuck, she's...bleeding so much, it...-”

“Max...Oh, god, Max...please...get us out of here...”

Chloe and Rachel's hysterics had been fading gradually, and Stella's senses finally dissolved.

She fell through herself.

She fell through everything.

When she came to, she was in a dark, hollow place. Oddly familiar.

Stella found herself alone on a patch of cobblestone road.

A lonely street lamp was the only light to guide her back into existence. She could barely make out her surroundings...Everything was...vague. Not difficult to distinguish, exactly, but...vague in its existence?

Ornate metal fences enclosed her in this road to nowhere. There was a door off to the right, but no discernible room on the other side. A bridge – or a path of some sort – off to the left, leading to some...pillars of blue light...?

Stella turned around.

Nothing.

Beyond the metal fences, there was just...fucking nothing.

When Stella turned back to the lamp post, she was no longer alone.

Standing before her was...

another her.

The Other Stella looked...just as baffled as Stella was.

She had her hair done differently, she was in different clothes, something was...off about her.

But she was definitely her, all the same. Well, her from...high school?

Wait. No.
She wasn’t in high school anymore.

And it all rushed back into their heads. Her head.


Max Caulfield did something to her – them.

“Max, you OK?” Stella approached her slowly, calmly.  
“Max? What's happening?” Stella approached her quickly, fretfully.

Stella stopped briefly, right before reaching Max. She clutched her stomach.  

Stella's pace slowed to a stop for a moment as she grabbed her gut.

“Wh-whoa...” Stella moaned groggily, dazed for a second.

“Ulgh, what...-?” Stella murmured, momentarily stunned.

'Time sickness...?'

That thing that happened to Chloe when Max Rewound time...

“Huh-...?” said Stella, brows squinted with confusion.

“Sickness...-?” eked Stella, eyes wide with fright.

“Stella...!” Max breathed out, coughing in a phlegm-filled daze as she crawled to her stunned friend.  
“Are you OK?” said Max in a quiet, panicked whisper.

Stella felt Max's trembling arms cradle her stunned head. Everything was a blurred haze. Her head in Max's frightened grasp, Stella glanced across the gravel driveway.

She could see...herself. Bawling in Max's lap.

Different.
But the same.
The Other Stella looked at her.

They saw each other.

“Another...me,” Stella choked through her sobbing, still grabbing her ache-laden skull. “What...?”

Everything just...hurt so much. Stella couldn't see herself any longer. Her eyes squinted shut, her skull pounding.

“I don't know,” Max confessed, her lips stuttering, her teeth chattering. “That...that's never...happened before.”

“Max...” Stella's teeth were clenched, her glasses had fallen off her face in her writhing. She was wincing in pain.

“I believe you,” Stella sniffled, her eyes slammed shut, just wanting the pounding to end. “Just...just please, make it stop...”

“Stella,” Max panted with a horrified regret. “N-no, I'm not-...I'm not doing it, I...”

- bang -

Time itself seemed to freeze. Or slow. Or maybe flip sideways?

Stella knew what had happened, even as the world around her blinked and flickered.

Blood was spilling from her stomach.

Blood was spilling into the driveway, pattering against the gravel like droplets against a cold tile floor. Each drop echoing in bathroom acoustics out in a moonlit yard of dew-covered grass.
And there Chloe was, gawking at her deed with a curious smirk.

“Are you OK?” Max desperately asked.

Tears were streaming down Stella's cheeks as she nodded, her eyes straining to focus on Max's face. Her hands had moved from her head to her stomach.


Stella could feel herself slipping away again.

Rachel just stared, wide-eyed with horror, Stella's head cradled in her arms.

Blonde hair gave way to brown and red. Rachel's cheerleader features melted into Max's freckled angles.

Stella could still smell the gunpowder. Could still smell the musty dampness of a bathroom floor. Could still smell the metallic scent of her own blood oxidizing in air she wasn't even breathing.

Chloe Price had shot her.

“Hoh god,” Stella sobbed. “Oh, it hurts...Aghh...! She...Why would she do it, Max?”

“Why would...-?” Max was now bawling her eyes out, too. “Who? Who did what?”

“Chloe,” Stella struggled to say through grit teeth, clawing at some pain in her gut. “She...I can't...-!”

“Hhhh-It's OK, it's all right,” said Max hastily, trying to run her head across Stella's head, soothe the poor girl any way she could. “You're OK. You're safe. Chloe's safe. We're all safe, all right?”
Right.

Max Caulfield had done this. Somehow.

It was like Stella Hill had been...broken into pieces. And she was putting herself back together.

Stella, they – she – realized in that moment, she had...conflicting memories of what she'd just been through.

I was shot in a bathroom.
I hit the fire alarm, scaring them off.

Wait, what? How did I not...think of that?
How did I...get shot?

“When a door closes, a window opens,” said Max. “Or...Something like that.”

Oh.

Max Caulfield. There she was, standing beside both Stella's. Leaning against the lamp post in this cobblestone street leading to and coming from nowhere. Nothingness, all around.

“Ahhh,” Max sighed tiredly, scratching at her head. “More guests...”

Max, they – she? She...had her hair in a ponytail, and her hair was...all red. Stella was having trouble remembering what Max Caulfield looked like, but...something about the person standing in front of her was...off.

Sort of like the Other Stella at her side, actually.

“What do you mean, 'guest'?…” asked Stella.
“And,” the Other Stella huffed, “WHERE are we?”

Max smiled a childish smile.

“Why, this is the End of Time, of course!” she chuckled. Her laughter dissolved into a sigh. Her childish whimsy fizzled into a bitter grumble. “All lost travelers in time wind up here...” She snickered a bit, shaking her head and drizzling out an amused sigh.

Stella and her Other self both glanced at each other with raised brows.

This...was from a video game. This place. Stella knew this place well.

A memory struck her, right in the heartstrings, creating a dissonant chord.

A cramped college dormitory room.
* A tidy college dorm room.

Max Caulfield, her hands wrapped around a dusty Super Nintendo controller.
* Stella Hill, her palms sweaty, clicking at an SNES controller.

Stella Hill, watching and backseat gaming beside Max.
* Max Caulfield, curious and attentive beside Stella.

Back in college...Stella had shared this game with Max.

But...why did she not remember doing that?

She hadn’t. That hadn’t happened. Stella hadn’t played that game in so long.

Yet...she had memories of playing it just a couple of years ago? Maybe not even that long.

That game...
* Chrono Trigger.
This place – the End of Time – it was...a location from that game.

It wasn't real.

So this was a dream, then.

But...this place felt so...vague. Moments ago, Stella was in a bathroom. Her senses had been so clear and vivid, compared to this...vagueness.

Maybe I'm hallucinating?
Maybe I'm dreaming?

“Oh, this is a dream,” said Max. “In a sense, at least. This is my dream. Erh...Sort of.”

I don't give a shit what or how or what I just want to get-
If this is your dream, how are we self-aware? That's not-

“Jesus, settle down...” Max flicked her wrists at them dismissively, impatiently. She crossed her arms, furrowed her brows, and just glared at them for a few seconds. Her glance moved from one Stella to the Other. “Well? Feel anything yet...?” She loosely gestured her hands toward one another.

Feel anything? No, everything's just...numb, what are we supposed-
What the hell does that mean, 'feel anything?' I just want to-

“God damnit.” Max slapped herself in the face, dragging her palm downward with a ragged groan.
“Every fucking time...Maybe my approach is wrong...”

Wh-? ‘Every time?’ What the actual fuck, Max?! Have I -- been looping-?! Your ‘approach?’ You’re doing this to us – to me?! After everything else th-?!

“FUCK could you just SERIOUSLY like calm down oh my god you can’t even comprehend what I...-”
After her little outburst, Max stopped herself. Chewing at her lips, she took in a deep breath, pausing. She untied her ponytail, then exhaled with fluttering lips, letting a mess of hair fall over her shoulders.

Where before her hair was bright red…now it was a natural brown.

Where before her shirt had been white with a deer on it, now it was black with a moth on it.

“Stella,” said Max solemnly, her brows arched with sympathy. “I know that…none of this makes sense, but…”

You’re goddamn right it doesn’t make sense! What the fuck is going on, Max?! That’s putting it mildly. You can time travel, Max?! You’ve been hiding this?

I mean, now it all makes sense, all this crazy shit going on with you, lately, I finally-like there’s more than one of me, but this has been happening with you for how long?

As Stella and herself vented her frustrated questions, she noticed Max’s expression wither, so she stopped.

“I’m just…“ Max sniffled, her whole body shaking. “I need you to understand. I need her to understand. I need to…figure out how to…fix this. I need to keep her safe.”

Max was starting to cry, her head hang with shame, her eyes flicker with remorse and…pain.

There was a lot of pain there, in those blue eyes of hers…

Blue eyes. Sharp. Angry.

They were Chloe’s eyes now.

There were two Chloe’s.
There were two Stella’s.

And there was one Max – or was it-?

No, no.

There was one Max in the middle, between them.

Her hair was red again.

“Speak of the devil,” Max said dryly. Coldly.

The two Chloe’s looked…pretty out of sorts. They were both watery-eyed and shaky.

Red hair. These Chloe’s had red hair. Styled a little differently…slightly different clothes…But one of them was definitely the same one Stella had…gotten shot by.

“Stells,” said the Chloe that Stella had...just been in a bathroom with. She tried to speak, but a stifled, “Guh...-!” was what came out instead as her traumatized sobs overtook her.

The Other Chloe looked...awkward. With a raised brow, she tilted herself over a bit to inspect...herself.

“Uh...” said this Chloe. She took a quick assessment of everything around them. “Fuck,” she sighed, palming her own face. “Max, what the shit is happening this time? What did you do?” She posed the question as casually as scolding a pet.

“She's...-” choked out the first Chloe. “She's fucking with us.” Glaring at the red-haired Max, Chloe demanded desperately, “What is your deal?! What's wrong with you? With us?”

A disjointed chorus out off-key fragments sang in chaos. It felt…painful. Like a migraine.

“Yea, what is going on? Why're you goin' all Groundhog Day on us?”

“Now it's not just you who's broken, Max, it's fuckin' us, too! Do someth-!”
Get us back home, Max, why are we here? Why can't you just send-?

Whatever you're doing to us, it's fucking cruel and wrong, please get us-!

“Pff,” scoffed Max, rolling her eyes with a slight headshake. Somehow, this simple motion...overpowered all of them. “You two barely have any idea what it’s been like for me. You have a damned break down — pff, literally — from dealing with a single moment, a single choice. Imagine going through this shit for five years...”

Wh-? That would...drive a person insane.

You'd go...crazy.

“I'd lose my goddamn marbles.”

“I'm goin' fucking nuts here...”

Max nodded simply, shrugging up her shoulders in a sharp gesture of defense.

“Welcome to my fucking world, ladies,” said Max.

“And...gents,” the Other Chloe grumbled.

“What?” Max snipped, baffled.

“Nevermind,” Chloe huffed, tossing out her arms and approaching Max. “Look-look-look.” She tried to grab Max's shoulders, but...was suddenly right back beside herself, instead. After realizing this, and working through the awkward pause, Chloe continued. “Max. What is this place? Is this...real?”

“Am I real?” the Other Chloe asked from across the way, having wandered off to a corner where the fencing met itself.

Y-yea, wait, how could this be...real?

How are we experiencing this if it's clearly not real?

Max's jaw hung agape, stiffened with impatience. Her head twitched a little in what must've been a headshake, her eyes glazing over toward the Other Chloe in the corner.
“I don’t know what to tell you, guys,” Max growled, crossing her arms stubbornly. “Is my fucking **Rewind** real? Are my memories of other goddamn **timelines** ‘real?’ The fuck even is ‘real’ anymore when you’re...-?!” Max paused, her eyes narrowed at the Other Chloe in the corner.

“**Dude!**” called out the Chloe in question.

-dunk!-

“What's up with this fuckin' **bucket** over here, man?!”

Sure enough, there...was an old metal pail, sitting on the cobblestone floor. It was filled with...something. Something that sparkled and glowed a sickly green. Something dangerous.

“**Don't touch** that,” Max snarled, snapping her finger angrily.

And both Chloe's were beside each other again. They...seemed to have a knack for separating and aimlessly wandering off...while Stella had stuck right by herself this whole time. Somehow, this...wasn't surprising.

“Are you using your Rewind on us?” Chloe asked, clearly flustered by this whole situation. “Huh? You fucking Rewinding to keep us stuck here? I haven't forgot what you said you're trying to do – I know you're not really **her**, dude, so cut the shit and just...just tell us why we're here...” She devolved into a trembling whisper by the end. Yea, Chloe was...a lot more shaken up by all this than Stella.

The longer she was immersed in this...whatever this was...the more Stella was just kind of...fascinated.

“I am just as much **her** as you and...-” Max wriggled her hand at the Other Chloe. “...she are...fucking Chloe Price. OK? You’re both Chloe, I'm Max, too, stop fucking acting like I'm not, that-...**Urgh.**”

Max seemed...pretty unstable at the suggestion that she wasn't...herself?

Which...made a little sense to Stella, given her own...current state. States.
“Look, what-fucking-ever,” Chloe pleaded, “you're Max, but you're different. From my Max. I just...I want to get back to her, please just-...I want my Max back. Why are you fucking doing this to us? Why can't you leave us alone, you crazy...-?”

Chloe coughed and sputtered on her own words, trailing off.

Max had started to cry.

She tried to brush the tears away, but they kept trickling out.

“I knew it,” Max uttered under her breath. “I knew it, I fucking knew you couldn't understand. How could you, anyway, right? Just-...You're right. Whatever. I'll get you back to where you're supposed to be, and then we can just...-”

Max had turned around, leveling herself against the lamp post with one elbow, wiping her tears away with the Other arm.

“Real talk? I was...kind of hoping to have gotten you idiots back by now, anyway, but...-”

Then just do it, and we'll...be out of your hair.
Send us back already, this is...like some weird torture.
“The fuck...-? Why are you...getting all damned weepy on us, I-”
“There something...I should know about, Maxie?”

Max tried to reply, her words shaky, her eyes wide and wet, running her fingers through her hair fretfully.

“You haven't...unbroken yourselves yet!” Max groaned, whirling back to face them again. “I-I...I broke you, like us – me. Kind of. Slightly. Just...just a little, you know? I...I thought maybe, hey, maybe if I...see someone else fix themselves, I could-...I could figure out...-” She trailed off at their lack of comprehension.

Maybe Max really was going crazy.
At least it would explain how weird she'd been acting.

Max undid her ponytail. Her hair was brown again.

“It was selfish,” Max confessed softly, wiping her index finger against her cheekbone. “Ihhhh wasn't even, like...a conscious decision. It was like...a leak. Something leaked. My...my power, like, it's...It's fueled by the people I, like...care about, right? Mmm-maybe I'm so...so broken now, it's...bleeding out...I don't...”

“What, like...radiation, or...-?”
“Duuuude, does this mean we'll get superpowers?”
“I call dibs on invisibility.”
“X-ray vision, man!”
“Uh, you know you can't see through clothes with that, right?”
“Not that skeletons can't be sexy.”
“Skeletons can totally be sexy, too. Right, Stells?”
“She knows what we're talkin' 'bout!”

Aaand now Chloe was off somewhere else...? Both of her.

Sadly, Stella actually...probably got what joke Chloe was making. Gross. Rule 34 of the Internet, and all that...

And this was...totally not the time or place to...-

Erh.

Wait.

What time was this?
Was this even a...place?

“H-Here's the thing,” Max sighed, running her fingers through her bangs. “I can't...just...wave my hand, and...send you back. You need to...remember it. Feel it.”
“A ship needs a port to dock on,” Chloe spat out.
“A ship needs an anchor to dock!”

So is Max’s power...the wind in our sails?
*Or is your power the ship itself?*

Is this even time travel anymore?
*Whatever this crap is, it...feels like something more.*

“Wwwhh...” Max’s throat caught. Her hair was red now. “*Well, yea. This isn't just fucking with time. It's bending space, too. Ever since I got these powers, it's not just time, it's space-time.*”

The Chloe's chimed in their remembrance.

“Oohhhh, yea, like teleporting through doors!”
“Duuuuude, that's right, keepin' shit in yer pockets across realities...!”

Stella...wasn't quite aware of these anecdotes but it sounded like Chloe had seen this element at work.

Still. Max was certainly screwing around with something more than just the passage of time, when people's consciousnesses were...splitting apart and being...warped around through...existence? Or...-

“-to get us back,” Chloe was rambling. “*Uhhhh, like, maybe imagine a Tardis with your space-time shenanigans, we all hop in, n' boom, back to the land of the living, fractured but whole.*”
The Other Chloe snorted out. “*Pffff fractured butt hole*...”

“*Chloe...*” Max sighed, facepalming herself at both of her fiancés. “*C-can we try to...be serious?*”
She ran her hand fretfully through her brown hair. “*I-...I need you all to focus, or...this won't work.*”

You keep making it sound like we're the ones moving ourselves, here.
*Aren't you the one in control of all of this time-travel bullcrap?*

“*Look, I-I'm just...a lighthouse, here. The sea, that's time. I don't know what...what the wind in your*
sails is, what...the dock is you need to arrive at...” She longingly glanced at both Chloe's, her eyes hazed over. “I mean, I know...wh-what that is for me, but...”

Max, you're not...making any fucking sense.  
Was that supposed to mean something?

Chloe and herself had their own reactions.

“Max, Maxie, Maximillian.”
“Duuuude, is it me? Am I the thing?”
“Am I the wind in your sails?”
“Am I the dock you arrive on?”

Max chuckled softly, nodding and fiddling with her hair all the more as her cheeks turned red in a surreal way, like watching watercolor paint bleed over her skin during a sunset. In this brief moment, her hands fussing sheepishly with her hair, the tone of the strands was neither brown nor red, but...both. Simultaneously.

“Awwww, duuuuude~” Chloe cooed.
“I fuckin' love you, too, Max~!”

Well, this was cute and all. And goddamn weird. They really needed to get back to where they were supposed to be.

Max was back to her red hair again, rolling her eyes and crossing her arms, but still blushing in a supernatural way.

Max. Please.
Get us home already.

“I keep trying to tell you, 'Dear,' it's not all on me.”

You've been tossing us through...time. Through realities.
The hell do you mean, 'not all on you?' You did this!
“Nah, see – I can't just snap my fuckin' finger, and warp you wherever the fuck I want. I'm the battery, sure, but...you're the flashlight.”

“Max, the metaphors, Bebb, they're hurting.”
“Nothing makes sense and everything feels good.”

“Guys,” Max huffed. “How do you think you ended up here in the first place?”

Trying to fix things.
Over and over and over.
Reliving that same seemingly innocuous day of high school.

Over and over again...all at once.

And it kept happening.

“Rachel dies.”
“Rachel...”

Try again.
Try again.

“Kept trying and trying until...”
“....something changed.”

“Dude.”
“Strange attractors...”

Strange attractors!
Huh. How do you know about that, Chloe?

“Fff. Because I started dating a chick with superpowers.”
“I remember we spend an entire night losing sleep trying to research this shit...”
Max rolled her eyes, hands latched on her shoulders, which shrugged up, then fell down.

“Enough. Both of you. Let’s just…fucking get you all back…OK?” Max pushed herself off of the lamppost with an audible huff.

She approached the rest of them, extended her hands outward, palms up. She flicked her fingers inward, gesturing the others to hold her hands.

Stella and Chloe – and their corresponding selves – all exchanged nervous looks. Met with Max’s oddly cold, narrow-eyed impatience, they all connected hands, forming a circle.

Stella, herself, Chloe, and herself all seemed to come to the same realization, all at once.

Somehow, they were tied together with Max. That invisible thread that Max could pull with her hand?

It was wound tight around their own hands now, too.
And they could pull it, too.

So, how do we get back, Max?
We need to go back.

“Great-fucking-Scott, yes,” Chloe moaned out through an impatient breath.
“Back to the future, to the past, wherever we were before you dragged us here.”
“Yea, get us outta this merry-go-round of bullshit.”
“For real. I’m so over this weird-ass cryptic Groundhog Day crap.”


Chloe furrowed her brows at Max’s deadpan expression.
The Other Chloe was wide-eyed and offended.

“The real Max wouldn’t be so stuck up about my jokes.”
“She’d lob dumb puns back at me.”

Stella watched Max's nose wrinkle with disdain.

And then, Max's grip on her hand tightened – sharply, swiftly.

Everything went black.

Stella...didn't know for how long. It felt like taking a nap. Standing up.

Stella dreamed of herself. Of the memorial, on the cliff, by the torn-down lighthouse. She dreamed of when that lighthouse had seen better days. Of when Arcadia Bay had seen better days. Of when so many of her friends had seen better days.

She dreamed of the night Max saved her from her brother.
She dreamed of smoking a cigarette with Chloe out behind District 7-6.
She dreamed of breakfast at midnight in a truck stop diner.

She dreamed of Max Rewinding time.

When Stella came back to, Chloe and herself were...gone.

But the lamppost was still there. The metal gates, the cobblestone...it was still there.

In a sense that anything could be there.

And Max remained. Dull-eyed, red-haired, arms crossed.

Max was there, and not there.

“Jesus fuck,” Max grumbled. “She's cute as hell when she's spacing out, but holy crap does it take forever to get her on track.”

What?
Chloe?
"I helped get her back. For now. I need to talk with you first."

Huh? Talk with me?

What's to talk about?
Send me back!
I'm sick of this shit!

"To be frank, I have no idea how the hell this is happening, but...I'm not going to let opportunity pass us by."

Opportunity?
Passing us...

"I need to ask a favor from you, Stella Hill."

I want to help you.
You need fucking help.

“When a door closes, a window opens.
Or...something like that.”

Stella's stomach felt like it'd been twisted inside-out. She tried to cough, clear her throat, open her eyes. Everything was hidden in a fog of rugged gray, her vision burning. She was...on a couch...? There was a coffee table to her right. Trying to see was...painful.

She closed her eyes to try and relieve the headache.

“Stells.”

Chloe. She sounded relieved. Like Stella was.

Was Stella...back?

Back to where she was supposed to be?

When she was supposed to be...

Stella felt...whole.

Like her usual self. It was relieving. Like...cuddling up next to a hot fire in a warm cottage after wandering in a blizzard all day. Including all of the soreness that would come from that.

Except she couldn't see a damned thing...

“Chloe...?” Stella uttered hoarsely, rubbing at her stinging eyes with one hand whilst grasping
cautiously at the coffee table. The gray, scratchy fog was clearing, but things were still blurred without her glasses.

-dink!-
“Ffffuck-!”

Chloe had hurt herself on her way to Stella's side, nearly tripping over herself. Stella, taken aback at first, was calmed when Chloe's arm extended toward her with a pair of familiar glasses.

With a grumpy yawn and a painful cough, Stella shoved her glasses on her eyes. She retrieved a hair tie around her wrist, shoved her long bangs up and swooped them back over her head, tying her hair out of her face. Grouchily fussing odd strands of hair from her eyes, she whimpered as another pang of aching chilled her head.

Stella tried to read Chloe's face.

Did Chloe just...experience the same thing she did? Had that really been...what it had felt like?

Then, Stella’s nose started to bleed.

Before Chloe could so much as say a word…-

Chloe’s nose started to bleed, too.

And Stella knew that, somehow, Chloe had some idea of what freaky shit was going on.

While Stella was far too scattered to act, so taken aback from her exhausting night's sleep, Chloe sprung into action. Swiping tissues haphazardly from the box on the coffee table, Chloe panicked a bit, knocking the box over before shoving a tissue into her bloody nose.

Stella's body felt like jelly and molasses mixed together. The world felt so...alive. Complete. Full. It was a stark contrast to how her dream had felt.

Stella was startled when Chloe jammed a wad of tissue into Stella's nose.

Coughing through her confusion, Stella's head rattled with a sharp sting of pain. She felt that same feeling she'd felt in her dream – warm, wet liquid on her hand.

Droplets of blood.

Had she...taken something? Stella had been avoiding anything like that for a good while. It was strictly legal substances for her these days. So, why did she feel so incredibly messed up?

Max had really done a number on her. But it had all felt so vivid. So real. Stella was frustrated and angry, scared and confused, all at once.

“Chloe, I could use your help with th...”

A voice – Chloe's mom – cut through Stella's mental meandering.

There was a heavy silence as Chloe shakily got up on her feet and scrambled to clean up the reddened tissues. Chloe snuck through the living room and into the kitchen, but Mrs. Madsen suspected something was up. And something was most certainly up – but Chloe's mom would never believe it. Nor should she. And further, she did not need to be worrying about such things.
“There somethin' ya'll need to tell me about last night?” Mrs. Madsen cast a suspicious glance at Stella, who shrugged and shook her head nervously. She glared back to her daughter. “Swear to God, Chloe, there better not have been any crack in my house, or I will-”
“No, Mom, juh-...Fuck, jesus, what do you...-?”

Stella simultaneously felt pity and sorrow for both mother and daughter.

This was...kind of all Max's fault, it seemed. But this secret was too...psychotic. Too strange. And now Stella was wrapped in it. She wouldn't leave Chloe out to dry.

“It's my allergies, Ma'am,” Stella plainly cited, her voice hoarse, her throat burning. Adding insult to injury, she felt awful lying straight to Mrs. Madsen's face. “The air up here, it's...messing with me, I don't-...” She shook her head warily. “Y-you know, air pressure and all that. Chloe was just helping keep me from...spilling my insides all over your couch...”

“...Ah,” Joyce eeked out with a bit of remorse. “Ya poor thing, no wonder ya been coughin' up a storm.”

“Yea,” Stella chuckled warily, clearing her throat up. “Sucks pretty bad...Sorry to...make a mess...”

Chloe and her mother went about a tense, quiet interaction with one another that settled in a warmer place than it began.

As this unfolded before her, Stella realized that...everything seemed normal. Ish.

Time felt...normal. Space felt normal. Things seemed to be happening around her in a way that...made sense. She couldn't predict what would happen next. She didn't feel like she was in multiple places at the same time.

This was the day of the memorial in Arcadia Bay.

Stella was back to where she was supposed to be.

- - -

“-living in their own bubble, locking us out. I mean, seriously, that was a fucking memorial and it was like they were somewhere else. It's rude and disrespectful. I don't know what their issue is but they clearly don't want us to help. We've been waiting here for like, ten minutes. What are they doing? I vote we ditch them."

Victoria was going on a rant as the trio stood along the muddy cliff side trail, the rain continuing to drizzle around them. They cautiously rearranged themselves to allow an elderly couple to pass them by.

“Seriously,” Victoria groaned, “what is taking them so long?”

Brooke gave Stella a nudge, stirring her back into the conversation.

Brooke teased, “Sounds like someone's jealous.”


“Yea,” Brooke snidely replied.

Victoria rolled her eyes, sputtered an unpleasant sound through her lips, and frowned.
Changing subjects, Vickie grumbled, “This rain is \textit{ruining} these shoes...”

Stella was...not so keen on dropping the matter, however.

Changing the grip on her umbrella, Stella made a statement.

“Vickie, cut them some slack, OK? They're...dealing with personal...stuff.”

“Which they \textit{refuse} to let us in on,” Victoria immediately rebutted. “I mean, \textit{how} the hell do they expect us to help them when they lock us \textit{out}?!”

Brooke tried to ease her down a bit.

“I don't think the finer points of Max's health condition are our business.”

Victoria, naturally, countered: “Maybe they \textit{are} when they get us involved! Like I said: their own fucking bubble. If that's how it's going to be,” Victoria ranted, flicking a wrist at Stella, “They should \textit{keep} it that way, instead of...fucking \textit{calling} your creeper brother up for \textit{recreational} purposes.”

“Actually,” Brooke mumbled, “she's got a point, Stella. You seem...suddenly OK with what went down at the club...”

Now two suspicious pairs of eyes were on Stella.

She nodded, sullenly, wiped fog from her glasses, and shrugged.

“W-well, \textit{now} I...have a better idea of...what was going on. It-...It's not entirely Max's fault, I don't think, there's...things beyond her control going on.”

“You know what that sounds like to me?” Victoria hissed, putting her face up in Stella's. “It \textit{sounds} an awful lot like the \textit{exact} shit I kept saying to people when \textit{Nathan} was still with us. And how did \textit{that} turn out? Huh?”

Stella's heart was pounding from the intensity in Victoria's eyes, the bitterness in her syllables, the spiky tip of her tongue.

“Vih-...Victoria, that's-...” Stella took a step back, avoiding the woman's piercing gaze. “Max isn't...\textit{doing} anything like that.”

“She \textit{fucking just did} the other night, Stella!” Victoria snarled with frustration, thrusting up an irate wrist. “And what about yesterday? Huh? The way she was treating her own girlfriend? Fucking rude. \textit{Why} are you acting like what she's doing is \textit{OK}?!’”

“Vic, hey,” Brooke sighed, grabbing Victoria's shoulder with caution. “Calm down.”

“No, I will \textit{not} 'calm down.' I \textit{already} have to live with feeling like an asshole for \textit{not} doing something when I could have. I got myself involved in some dark shit, and Max and her girlfriend \textit{helped} me get out of it. I am not gonna just sit back, and watch \textit{another} friend fucking...\textit{slip} into a psychotic state.”

Stella asked, “Then why the hell are you acting so pissed about it? Why tell them to take a hike if you want to help them?”

Victoria's eyes sparkled against Stella's for a moment of silent tension.

Stella's nose was getting runny. She sniffled, wiping her sleeve against her upper lip, breaking their
glaring contest.

“I'm in a bitchy mood, OK?” Victoria sighed, flicking her hand some more in a dismissive way. “I don't know, I'm...infuriated by this whole situation. I'm used to acting on what I want, not fucking waiting around. I can't do anything about any of this bullshit, no matter how I...” Victoria trailed off, rubbing at her eyes.

Well, damn. Maybe all of Vickie's pissiness was coming from a good place, at least/

“Your...time will come, Vickie,” Stella assured.

“I don't get it,” Victoria miserably growled. “Why would she tell you what's going on, and not me? I thought I was part of Max's 'in-crowd.'”

“Mmmaybe when you tried to make a move on her,” Brooke skeptically reminded, “you got yourself pushed out of that 'in-crowd.'”

“What. Ever.” Victoria rubbed her palm against her face, trying to clear away rainwater. “What do you all want from me, here? What do they want from me? I am trying to help.”

Brooke rolled her eyes at Victoria's shift to self-pity and shrugged.

“We know,” Stella insisted. “Just...calm down.”

“Something is seriously fucked up with Max,” Victoria whimpered out, losing her ice-cold cool as quickly as she'd put it on. “I keep trying and trying, over and over, again and again...and nothing changes.”

Now she was...covering up her face and sobbing. Aw, jeez...

She ranted on.

“I don't even know why the fuck I care! Like any of you do? You all judge me. Make fun of me behind my back – I know you do, I've been around people who do it, and I've done it myself. Why do you even keep me around? I tried to make Max cheat on her fiance, and I'm still here, that makes zero fucking sense, I should've been catapulted out of this circle the instant I fucked up, but...I'm still here, for some reason, but I'm still completely left out, at the same time!”

Brooke grimaced a little, glancing up the trail, desperate for Max and Chloe to show up and relieve them from this awkward conversation. She looked to Stella with a subtle plea in her eyes. Stella, eyes half open, smiled warily, then approached Victoria.

Keeping her umbrella aloft, she extended her other arm around Victoria's shoulder, drawing her in for a hug.

Victoria resisted at first, but ultimately reciprocated.

Stella's eyelids felt heavy. She let them close.

A voice echoed in the back of her head:

“Even if you don't believe, a simple act of faith can still go a long way.”

The sensation of Victoria's cold, damp coat against her palms was briefly replaced with the feeling of sun-soaked wool. Victoria's pungent perfume blended with the smell of dried grass and salty sea air. That voice – morose and gentle, sweet and familiar...
“She's hurting. And she needs us. I understand if you're unsure. Skeptical, even. We don't believe in
the same things – I know that. To be honest, I suspect Max doesn't keep the faith anymore, either.
But still...faith isn't just about believing in what you can't see. Sometimes? It's about believing there's
more to what you can see – looking beyond what the eyes see in a person. You know?

Max was there for me when I needed her. I want to be there for her, too.”

“Max was there for me when I needed her. I want to be there for her, too.”

The voice from another place melted together with Victoria's sobbing whisper, and Stella's strange
visions blurred away again.

“Vickie,” Stella murmured into her friend's ear. “Believe me – it's a good thing to not know what's
going on, here. Trust me. But Max still needs you, all right? Chloe, too. And...I mean, honestly? I
don't...think Max could really explain what's wrong with her right now if she wanted to. It's...all a mess. Now, c'mon, why don't you...get back to the motel, clean up, clear your head, and...we can
meet up with them for dinner. OK?”

Victoria nodded, sniffled some more, and their hug gently broke.

With her head hung with embarrassment, Victoria moped her way along, taking a deep breath and
exhaling a cloud of steam into the rainy air.

“Um,” Stella said quietly to her roommate. “W-would you mind maybe...-?” She jerked her head in
Vickie's direction.

“Why am I babysitting her?” Brooke whined I her nasally tone. “You're the one getting all touchy-
feely. And what about me, anyway? You going to clue me in on this crap?”

“I...can't,” Stella winced, her face wrinkling sheepishly.

“Of course,” Brooke grunted.

“I'm sorry,” Stella pleaded. “Look, I didn't...ask for all this, either, all right?”

“I know,” puffed Brooke through a tired sigh. “I'm still pretty miffed with what Max did at the club.
It feels like you're being taken advantage of.”

“And I appreciate that...protectiveness...?” Stella paused. “Is that...what that is?”

Brooke smirked and shrugged up one shoulder, replying, “Sure. I agree with you on the whole thing
– we have to look out for each other. Blackwell rejects unite, and all that. I may not like how things
are going, but I'll have your back, Stella, whatever happens. But if that means Chloe and Max put
you in danger again? I'm not going to sit on the sidelines next time.”

Stella suddenly felt a wave of dizziness. Her nose was running again.

Not wanting to worry Brooke, she nodded and tried to keep herself steady.

“W-well, hopefully there won't be a next time, so...yea.”

“Yea.”

Stella rubbed her jacket sleeve over her nostrils. She was pretty sure her nose was bleeding a little bit
again.

The sound of rainfall stopped for a few seconds. Completely. Her skin suddenly felt dry and hot.
“I'm...guessing you're going to check in on them,” Brooke deduced. “Aren't you?”

Stella, dipped her head down a bit at an angle to hide her bloody nose, hummed affirmatively.

“Well...Guess we'll see you back at the room.”

“Y-yea,” Stella assured, her legs feeling weak, her head floating in her own skull. “I'll, um...” She started to walk past Brooke, her fingers loose against her umbrella. “I'll call you if...something serious comes up.”

With this, Stella began her hike up the muddy hill, the lighthouse looming overhead – pristine and restored, glowing in the morning sun from the east.

As Stella made her way up the hill, her heart raced, her lungs burned...and that voice spoke to her again.

But this time, Stella had pieced together who it was. The shape of her face, the texture of her hair, the somber flicker in her eyes...

Kate Marsh.

“When night falls...that's when they turn the light up there on. But when morning comes, the sun rises, and in the sun's gaze, there's no need for man-made beams of light to show us the path. We find it ourselves. It's plain. It's obvious. It's simple. But, no matter what you believe about this world and how it came to be, night always comes, Stella. And once in a while, we are trapped outside when the sun falls. And then, it's not plain. It's not obvious, and it's not simple. And without a source of light – and there are many kinds of sources – but without one? We can get very lost, very quickly. I think that's what Max has been going through: a very long night. Her sun is about to rise – she just needs us to be there for her. To show her that it can be simple again.”

The rainfall washed back over Stella's senses as her umbrella was ripped from her grasp, stolen by the wind due to her own lack of presence in the...present.

Everything changed in an instant – sun and warmth to bitter cold and wet.

Stella knew they were up there, though. Max and Chloe. She could feel it.

Her hair quickly getting soaked, and her arms clutched at her sides, Stella reached the top of the hill where Max was, embracing Chloe.

“Guys!” Stella called to them, barely able to eke out the word between gasps of air.

Her eyeglasses were all fogged up, and she tried to wipe them on her jacket sleeve as she slowed to a stop.

“Wh-What's up, Stells?” Chloe asked over the trickling of rain.

Stella's nose was dripping out blood and she was struggling to breathe.

“I-I don't know, what did you do?” she panted and puffed, drenched from her trek.

This...blurring sensation, hearing Kate's voice, feeling the world around her conflict with itself...She was definitely awake now. It wasn't a dream. Even when she'd been asleep, it hadn't...quite been a dream. She felt sure of that now.

Chloe eased Max, who was still sniffling into her shoulder. Stella huddled alongside them.
“I didn't...mean to,” Max was wincing. “I didn't mean to. I didn't mean to...”

She kept repeating it, over and over, under her breath.

“Did you...-?” Chloe started up with concern for Stella.

“It was fucking unreal, Chloe, did you...-?”

Chloe nodded hastily.

“How do we stop this shit?” Stella whimpered, flicking her wrists with rushed desperation.

“...I didn't mean to I didn't mean to I didn't mean to I didn't mean to I didn't mean to I didn't mean to...”

–

“Maybe each human being lives in a unique world, a private world different from those inhabited and experienced by all other humans. . . If reality differs from person to person, can we speak of reality singular, or shouldn't we really be talking about plural realities? And if there are plural realities, are some more true (more real) than others? What about the world of a schizophrenic? Maybe it's as real as our world. Maybe we cannot say that we are in touch with reality and he is not, but should instead say, His reality is so different from ours that he can't explain his to us, and we can't explain ours to him. The problem, then, is that if subjective worlds are experienced too differently, there occurs a breakdown in communication ... and there is the real illness.”

~ Philip K. Dick
Overexposed

A/N:

Sorry for the long wait between chapters. I needed to give myself a bit of a break; Zelda and Horizon: Zero Dawn, and then my girlfriend @mollifiable visited for a couple of a weeks and I wanted to give that my full attention. But here it is, at last!

Big thank-you to folks who have sent us support.

–

Life is Strange

All Wounds

Chapter 14 – Overexposed

–

“It's one thing to question your mind. It's another to question your eyes and ears. But then again, isn't it all the same? Our senses just mediocre inputs for our brain? Sure, we rely on them, trust they accurately portray the real world around us. But what if the haunting truth is they can't? That what we perceive isn't the real world at all, but just our mind's best guess? That all we really have is a garbled reality, a fuzzy picture we will never truly make out?”

~ Mr. Robot

–

“Listen, Max. My respiratory system is failing, and...and it's only getting worse. I've heard the doctors talking about it when they thought I was zonked out. So, I know I'm just putting off the inevitable, while my parents suffer along...and I will, too.”

Chloe's eyes were firm and decisive against Max's fretful gaze.

“This isn't how I want things to end,” Chloe concluded.

Chloe's quivering eyes and trembling voice in those moments were the most painful thing Max had ever seen.

“What?” Max's heart was fluttering with fear. “What are you saying?”
"I'm saying that being with you again has been so special. I just wanted to feel like when we were kids running around Arcadia Bay...and everything was possible. And you made me feel that way today."

This wasn't her Chloe. It was...a different Chloe.
And yet, all the same...it totally was still Chloe Price...

“I want this time with you...to be my last memory...Do you understand?”

A different Chloe. Still suffering, still in pain...
So it was...probably for the best to give her what she asked for...wasn't it?

A merciful good-bye – and then Max could reverse it. All of it.

It would all be undone in an instant.

Wouldn't it?

“Max?”

Max coughed a dry cough, a wave of pain spiking at her temples as she found herself back to where she was supposed to be.

“Do you understand?” Chloe repeated, her tone a sharper sort of iron than it had been in the memory Max had found herself re-living.

“Um...-” Max had no idea what Chloe had just said.

Chloe could tell.

With a huff and a tilt of her head, Chloe bit her lip and breathed out hot air through her nostrils.

“I'm sorry,” Max murmured weakly.

“I know you're sorry,” Chloe grumbled, clawing at her hair, shoving it behind her shoulder. "'N I'm not, like, even saying it's your fault, OK? But how the hell can we sort this shit out when you keep spacing on me? Jesus, this is so...-” Chloe stopped. Closed her eyes. Clenched her fists, tightened her jaw, and took a second to just breathe. “-...impossible.”

She loosened up, and when her eyes re-opened, there was that sorrow. That pain. It was like an echo of the pain in the paraplegic Chloe's eyes, across realities. Still Chloe Price, still in pain.

And then Chloe glazed over everything with another shot of Bailey’s. Max realized she had her own drinks to match – a shot of...something, as well as a bottle of hard raspberry cider. The ambiance of the bar around them quickly filled the cracks in Max's senses where only Chloe had existed a moment before. It was a pretty...divey place. The more Max took it in, the...more grossed-out by the locale she became. Max sipped at her cider – actually, pretty good – before watching Chloe drown her frustration in a bath of Shocktop beer.

Between gulps, Chloe grumbled, “I don't get how we can do fuck-all about any of this when you're not technically around half the time...”

“Well, I’m here right now,” Max pointed out glumly, watching Chloe’s navel undulate as she chugged two thirds of her bottle down. “So...maybe we can start over again?”
Between chugs, Chloe puffed bitterly through her nose, then took a breath and set her bottle down.

“Ya know, Max, you don’t get to have a do-over on everything…”

Well. Damn. Someone wasn’t in a good mood…

I try.

What the hell did you say to her this time?

*She was whining about how we’re pissing our lives away, blabla… I reminded her that if she doesn’t like the life she’s living, I could always help her find a new one. I suggested maybe one where her dad was still alive… You know, it’s funny – she didn’t seem to like that idea for some reason.

What do you think, hm? Why do you have to be so fucking…-?

“Yea, nothing to say to that, right?” Chloe growled, drumming her painted nails against her bottle. “Lemme guess: talking to yourself again?”

“I was…just-”

“Because the goddamn voice in your head is more interesting to talk to than I am…”

“Wh-? No. Chloe, I-”

“It’s funny how she keeps showing up more and more, giving me such a hard time, when-”

“I’m not wanting this to-”

“.you keep denying that maybe you’re not happy. And maybe-”

“keep happening. I’m not denying anything! I-”

“-instead of just telling me like it is, you conveniently have this fucking alter or whatever to blame-”

“St-stop thinking like that, you know I love you, I would-”

“every time you do stupid shit. I know you love me, dude, I love you, too, I just can’t-”

“-never want to see you get hurt, she is not me, I don’t know-”

“-fucking deal with this Twilight-Zone-X-Files bullshit in my life right now, so-”

“how to explain it, but I promise we’ll figure this out, you are the most important-”

“-maybe you need to-…No, see, *that* is the fucking problem, Max.”

“thing….Wait, what is?”

“I’m the most important thing here? Well, I just seem to be pissing you off more.”

“Y-you’re not, we’re just having a spat, it…happens, it-”

“Not just right now, I mean-…”

Chloe, suddenly self-aware of the escalating volume of their whisper-fight, flicked her wrist out sullenly, staring at the bizarre wall grafitti beside their stools, precariously at the edge of the bar counter, as far from the door as they could be.

Chloe then clarified with frustration, “I mean this Other you, it’s like nothing I do makes her happy.”

“Y-yea, I um-…I know the feeling,” Max murmured nervously, scratching her nose before finally gulping down her shot – which, as it turned out, was tequila. It burned like a bitch on the way down and left her sputtering for air afterward.

*Heh, this drink makes me happy, at least.*

Ohhhhhfff course it does…
Max watched Chloe gesture the bartender for a refill on her bourbon. Letting herself sulk in the warmth of alcohol, she watched with some bitterness as Chloe swallowed her drink whole, practically diving into a bath of booze. Maybe Max was preoccupied with herself, but...fff, at least she wasn't becoming an alcoholic.

And the bitterness sets in. Isn’t Chloe supposed to be the one who projects the blame?

“So...what?” Max posed with some spice to her tone. “You think you don't make me happy somehow?”

Chloe shrugged, shaking her head slightly before sipping at her beer some more.

“Well,” Max grunted, “You do. You know?”

Chloe nodded half-heartedly. Another sip.

Max followed up, “Seems like fucking booze makes you happier than I do lately.”

“Makes me less stressed, anyways,” Chloe blurted, her brows furrowing defensively. “And you know,” Chloe sniped, “I'd rather be addicted to...beer than...” She flung her wrist haphazardly, muttering out, “...fucking...warping reality. Screwing up time. And-...And at least I haven't hurt anyone with drinking. Keep my vices to my goddamn self. When I drink a whiskey, it doesn't cause the people around me to fucking...start getting second-hand balls-to-the-wall drunk instantaneously. Or start bleeding their brains out...”

Hoo-hooooo, not pullin' punches tonight.

She's stressed. It's the alcohol talking.

More like her pent up pissy-ness letting itself out a bit. No inhibition, all that.

Whatever. I've been saying dumb crap, too – we're both dealing with too much.

It's almost like when shit hits the fan, you both fall apart and devolve into children.

We're allowed to have a bad day. It's not like we argue like this all of the time.

Ha, bad day?

We have been arguing like this all of the time. All week.

That's because of you.

Because of me?

Bitch, I am you.

You're just my...fucking...weaknesses. Doubts. Fears. Whatever. Once I figure out how to shut you up, make you go away, this will all be over.

Pff. Yea. OK. That's how you wanna play this, huh?

Back to that shit?

Thanks.
But you know this isn't that simple.

How the hell do you think I keep this ship afloat when you're gone?

I know I'm fucked up. I know something's wrong. I need to...fix it.

“Yea, no shit, Max, so what do we do about it?”

What? Damnit...

“Gah, just...” Chloe's eyes had squinted shut in a snap reaction at her own blurting. “I didn't...mean it like that, I...”

“No, I want to hear that, Chloe.”

“What, me bitching like a brat?”

“Y-yea, I guess? I don't know, like...This is hella messed up.”

“Uh-huh.”

“A rational person would be super upset. For real.”

“Yea...”

“You don't need to pretend with me. Like, let yourself be mad, or something.”

“Heh, yea, don't worry about that...” Chloe's eyes burned up as she stared at her nearly empty bottle.

“So you are mad,” Max deduced.

“Yea, I'm fucking mad,” Chloe puffed under her breath. “At this whole shit-show of supernatural nonsense. Aren’t you mad?”

“Yea, I am. And I can tell you're mad at me. Which is fine. So am I.”

“Dude, why does it matter? I love you.”

“It's not good to keep it all bottled up if you're angry.”

“Pft, maybe take your own advice, counselor...”

“Why the hell do you keep thinking I have a problem with you?”

“Gee, Max, I dunno, maybe because you've been saying as much the past few days? Over and over?”

“You know that's not me talking, right? It's someone else?”

At that, Chloe's eyes squinted a bit, her cheeks flushed from alcohol and emotion.

She then muttered, “I know it's not you, Max, but...it's not someone else, either...”

Chloe didn't...quite seem to believe her.

That...was a problem.

Why are you the only one around here who doesn't fucking get it?

We need to be whole.

We need to be whole.

I know I know I know I know I know I know STOP SAYING THAT stop making me say that fucking god rrrghh

It's the truth. Not that the truth seems to matter to you much anymore...

Ugh. Just...-

It doesn't give you the right to be telling Chloe crap like...like we hate her, or...-
Dude, I have not been saying that. I’ve never been saying that, I don’t…
Don’t ever fucking question our feelings about her like that.
I’m you. I love her, too.
You’ve got a messed up way of showing it.

Look.

I’ve just been telling her what she needs to hear. Same as you.
Truth hurts, blabla…you know the deal…

Whatever.

Getting pretty sick of your judgmental attitude, by the way.

“Oh. Oh, really?” Chloe grunted, smacking her empty bottle against the counter. “One second you’re saying how you want me to…to let myself be pissed off, and the next second you’re getting all huffy at me when I do. Just…! Rgh…-.!” Chloe’s face was wrinkling with impatience, redder by the second as she bottled up all of her frustrations to save face in public.

Godamnit, why did you have to say that out loud to her?!

I didn’t mean to!
You keep pulling this shit!

I said I didn’t mean to! Fuck!

Then shut up for a while, would you?!

I’m trying to help.

You’re making things worse! Go back to being…fucking silent.

“Th-that wasn’t me, Chloe, it was her, I-”
“Maybe you need to get her under control, then.”
“That’s…exactly what I’ve been trying to tell you.”
“Tell me ten more times, see if that fixes anything.”
“I’m trying to…explain it to you, so you can-”
“Well, stop. I’m sick of the explaining. None of it even makes sense.”
“So how the actual fuck, Chloe – how do you expect me to act on this?”
“I. Don’t. Know.”
“Oh, good, so you do understand. You also. Don’t. Know.”
“I also don’t get what you expect me to do at this point.”
“Help me figure this out, maybe? Like we always have.”
“Like we always have? This crap has never made sense. We’ve never figured out shit.”
“But we’ve always worked through it. Way back from when it first started.”
“Way back …” Chloe sighed, her eyelids sliding down with a cynical twist of her lip.

Max felt a knot tighten in her stomach at the coldness Chloe’s expression took, felt a lump form in her throat. Chloe turned her head, letting her loose right end of hair tumble over one shoulder, veiling her face from Max’s fretful gaze. She looked back to her drink and took a sip, continuing to avoid eye contact. Max, knowing not what else to do, drank more of her cider.
Sullenly, beneath the bar chatter, Chloe confessed, “Maybe I’m tired of all this work, Max. Tired of dealing with this...whatever it is that’s going on with you. With us.”

Max swallowed that lump in her throat, and it only made her knotted stomach tighter.

“I-…I am, too,” Max said shakily, her hands quivering a bit.

“What if we can’t...fix this in time?”

“In time for...what?”

Chloe glared at her with pouted lips of impatience.

“Before we fucking lose it.”

“We will fix this. Chloe.” She didn't seem so convinced. “Chloe. We will.”


“…What if I can’t take it anymore?”

Max felt her heart flutter in the worst way at the sight of Chloe like this – at the sound of her breathy words, shaking with fear.

“We-…I-I’ll figure...it out, we just...-”

Chloe closed her eyes, brushed her forming tears dry, and shook her head slightly.

“I've...been thinking about it, Max. Maybe we need some...time away.”

Max’s neck went ice cold at Chloe’s words. She fumbled in a panic to decipher meaning. Any kind of meaning beside what Chloe's eyes were saying.

“Yuh-…Yea, we, um-...” Max drank a bit more, trying to make sense of what Chloe meant. “We should maybe, like...take a...a vacation. Like to somewhere that’s not-”

“I didn’t mean a vacation, Max.”

Chloe’s eyes were getting red, damp. Her cheeks were pink, her nostrils were flared.

“What...do you mean, then?” Max asked in a quiet, disbelieving hiss.

Chloe’s deadened eyes shot toward her, lacking just a little focus from her intoxication. But still sharp, still frustrated.

“I think you know what I mean,” Chloe replied frigidly.

Max noted how Chloe's hand gripped her bottle, her nails slightly rattling at the glass from her fingers' quivering.

“No,” Max denied the thought, instantly. “No, that's not what we need.”

“I think it is,” Chloe insisted.

“Well, I know it isn't.”

“So, you want me to get tortured, too, then? And Stella?”
“...Wh...-?”

“Because that's what you fucking did to us last night. You, some Other you, whichever, whatever. The hell you put us through was...” Chloe's eyes wrinkled with disgust. “And you probably don't even remember it. But me and Stells? We sure as hell do...”

*Heh.*

The dreams? I thought...you were just trying to take advantage of that...weird...accident that...-

*Oh, I was. Not my fault her brain took her to the most painful place.*

Most painful place...?

“There you go again,” Chloe nearly whimpered, shaking her head with pursed lips, eyes bulging with full tear ducts. “Lost in your own goddamned skull when I'm right here.”

“Chloe...what...she did, that wasn't all her fault, it...-”

“You mean, what you did.”

“What she did.”

“You can't control her anymore. *Can* you?”

“...I don’t...think so.”

“Which puts us in danger just being *near* you until you sort your shit.”

“What...? Chloe, where is this crap coming from?”

Chloe grit her teeth. Syllables hung on the tips of her lips. She pursed said lips, instead, growling under her breath with frustration.

“Stella talked with me today,” Chloe admitted. “She...helped convince me that this – *this* is what we need right now. Some time apart.”

Max pressed, “We're supposed to be in this together. Forever?”

“Forever?” Chloe hissed. “Forever was fucking last night. Living the same goddamn day, over and over and over, but forgetting every single time. Seeing Rachel, over and over – she hated me. I... fucking killed her in some of those...-” She trailed off with a trembling sigh, rubbing her fingers haphazardly against her sweating forehead.

“You...killed...-?”

Max was confused. She knew something weird had happened the night prior. She could remember...them all being lost. She had tried to...explain it. Her Other self had set the whole thing up. Max had been too...confused, too tired, too hurt, she couldn't...-

“This shit isn’t just your problem anymore, Max,” Chloe reminded, jamming her index finger against the table. “You know that. You know I can't fix this for you.”

“I don’t,” Max persisted. “I need you, Chloe.”

“Not on this – I'm just making it worse. You can see that, can't you?”
“Why-?” Max was still hung up on the night before. On why Stella – why the hell – would she have convinced Chloe that this was the way to go? “Why the hell would Stella go behind my back, trying to...get us to...split up? I thought she was looking out for us.”

Chloe's eyes narrowed.

“She is looking out for us. Max. I don't...get why you're so fuckin' hung up on this. Stella said this was your idea.”

Max felt her lungs freeze.

You.

Yea. So?

What in the FUCK?

This is how it needs to be.

NO.

You let me take over when it's convenient for you, but when it's my turn to make the big decisions, you still try to lock me back up...Fucking... Urgh.

“You don't remember, do you?” Chloe noted. “Huh? Trying to...figure it out. Right now. With her. Aren't you?”

Max shook her head, her jaw agape. Even then, she couldn't just...be honest. Why? It was like a snap reaction at that point.

“A-anyway, we're not splitting up, Max,” Chloe sighed, her eyes darting up and around. “This...Just...It's temporary. OK? We need some goddamn space from each other. To sort our shit out. We've been...” She sighed, her eyes squinting for a second. “We're too...caught up in each other,” she grumbled, wriggling her wrists in a circle around one another. “So...we can't, like...help ourselves? I think?”

“You think? What...What, is that what Stella told you?”

Chloe popped up one shoulder, looking away.

“She explained it better than I can, but...it's not like you can explain anything right now. You can barely fucking remember what we were doing an hour ago.”

“And you think us being apart is going to make that better?”

“It's not like it even has to be that long, Max, just-...” She sucked in air through clenched jaws, pressing her fingers into her temples. “I am tired. OK? I'm so fucking...tired. I need some time off from...managing your mess.”

“My mess? How about our mess?”

“Our mess,” Chloe moaned through her palms. “We're taking time off from...'us.' That’s all.”

“God-fucking-...Chloe, you're making this sound like some soap opera.”

“Oh-...Oh, you mean the ones with evil twins and fucking amnesia?”
Heh. She's got a good point, there.

Sure, **now** you don't mind being labeled my 'bad side.'

**If being an asshole is what it takes to get this shit fixed?**

**If you're too much of a coward to let go for just a cosmic minute?**

Then yea. I'll take up the fucking 'evil twin' mantle, if that's what will move this forward.

“When we get back home,” Chloe explained, “you're staying with Stells and Brooke. Few days. A week. That’s all. She said she’ll...help you.”

“How the fuck's she going to help?”

“Dude, give her some credit. For starters, she actually knows what's going on, unlike everyone else. And she totally cares. Also kind of a plus, you know? So let her help you, since I clearly can’t.”

“No,” Max protested between grit teeth. “No, that's *not* what we're doing. After how many times I've almost lost you? What if...? What if something *happens* to you while I'm gone?”

Chloe snorted a hot breath through her nostrils.

She countered with a sharp shrug, “What if you're the reason shit keeps happening to me?”

It felt like a damned knife being jammed right into h-

**KNIFE**

**TWISTING**

**BLOOD**

**COLD**

**WARM**

Spacing out again on us? **DUDE. Get your ass back here.**

“I-I meant, like...like this *Other* you,” Chloe quickly amended, having realized how she'd just sounded. “Sorry, I didn't...I mean more like...yourrrr...powers, not...not you. Or-or maybe this...*Other* you, she...I mean, we've said it ourselves: I seem to be the source of your...power, right? It...”

“We don't *know* how they work,” Max firmly recited. “We don't *know*. How is...us taking...fucking *space* from each other going to...?”

“This *Other* you, Max? She’s messed up. So. I dunno. If she’s living in your brain? If she’s been there this whole time? Then no wonder you’ve got fucking problems...Problems I can’t help you with. Problems that you – her, whatever – are passing onto me. Onto Stella. And who knows who else if you don't learn how to fucking control it.”

“I can't believe you, Chloe. This is...such bullshit.”

“I told you: this was your idea. And you're right.”
“This was not my idea.”

“And I suppose you haven’t been bitchy all weekend to me, either, huh?”

“Wh-? No.”

“Right. She has. Huh?”

Yes.

“Yes.”

“And this was her idea.”

Yea.

“Yea. You know how she is with you.”

“Then maybe it’s her you need to be talking with, because I sure as hell am sick of talking with her.”

What in the hell have you been saying to her, anyway?

Heh. When I've got my hand down her pants it’s all fun and games, but a few crass words...

“Look, Max: just give it a few days. That’s all I’m asking for.”

“Sounds more like you’re telling than asking.”

Chloe grunted a frustrated sigh. She flashed up the back of her hand at Max, pointing to her engagement ring. The ring Max had given to her.

“Maxie. Remember what you said when you gave this to me?”

. ..

…

....

Um...

Don’t look at me.

I...-

Seriously. I wasn't there.

Are you lying?

I’m you. You’d know if I was lying.

Then...how do I not...-?

“Well?” Chloe puffed, her stern expression getting sharper at Max’s dawdling.

Max didn’t remember.
Chloe had told her about it – the evening they proposed to each other.

But the truth was that Max Caulfield had no memory of that evening. No memory of that conversation.

Whenever she tried to remember it, all she could draw was either a complete blank, or a complete mess of contradicting phrases, images, sounds...

Chloe's eyes went from sharp and impatient to confused. Hurt.

She asked breathily, “What...song was playing?”

“Um...-”

“When you fucking proposed to me, Max. What song did you have playing? Where were we? Huh?”

Max felt frozen alive.

And Chloe could see.

“You don't remember. Do you?”

Max's face squirmed into a frightened grimace.

She did not remember. At all.

Chloe's jaw dropped slightly. Her eyes went wide, narrowed, then wide again, her mind swimming in a pond of pain and frustration.

“Un-fucking-believeable,” Chloe winced under her breath. Her lips quivering, a tear slipping down her cheek.

“Chloe. N-no, it's not that I don't...-”

“You need to figure your shit out, Max, because I can't take any more o’ this.”

Chloe's words of dismissal burned a hole clear through Max's skull like a bullet.

Chloe tore open her wallet, slapped a bill onto the counter, and shoved herself up from her seat.

Chloe left the bar.

Chloe left.

Chloe...-!!

Don't.

Don't you fucking do it.

I'm not letting her do this.

I'm not letting you do this to us.

This isn't all my fault. It's yours, too.

When will you understand that?
This is for our own good. Even Chloe's.

You hypocritical bitch.

You'll take back those words soon enough.

Not before I take back that conversation.

Don't...!!

The door closed behind Chloe on her way out.

Max raised her hand.

She pulled Chloe back through that door.

She pulled Chloe back to her chair.

She pulled Chloe back through their argument.

She pulled Chloe...

“Way back …” Chloe sighed, her eyelids sliding down with a cynical twist of her lip.

Max felt a knot tighten in her stomach at the coldness Chloe’s expression took, felt a lump form in her throat. Chloe turned her head, letting her loose right end of hair tumble over one shoulder, veiling her face from Max’s fretful gaze. She looked back to her drink and took a sip, continuing to avoid eye contact.

Max couldn't remember what she had said. She made up something new.

A new choice. Steer the conversation in a whole other direction.

“H-how can I get us...back to where we were?”

That’s not where we’re supposed to be.

You keep doing this -- it's just making it worse.

For all of us.

Fuck you.

Chloe raised a brow at Max’s question.

Chloe paused. Like she was frozen. Her brows furrowed, and she clutched at her stomach.

A small dribble of blood slid down Chloe’s nose.

And Max's lungs were devoid of air again.

Chloe's sixth sense. Her 'time-sickness.'

Fuck.

“Muh-” Chloe coughed, rubbing her blood with her sleeve. Her narrowed eyes widened, her nostrils flared. “You just fucking Rewound on me. Didn't you?”

Max's teeth chattered with fret at her lack of control over where this was going.
“You Rewound on me,” Chloe repeated in disbelief.

Rewinding time was supposed to give her another chance.

Not make things worse.

**BITCH WHAT HAVE I BEEN TELLING YOU??**

“Chl-Chloe, I just...”

“We argued,” Chloe cited, her eyes squinting as she read Max’s sweating face. “You didn't like what I had to say, so you fucking...-!” She sucked in a deep breath through her nose, then steamed it out.

“I-I just couldn't handle the idea of...”

“To me, Max. To me? You're so goddamn out of your mind you're trying to manipulate me, now?”

“No, I wasn't! I just needed...another chance to make you see th-”

“Blame this shit on that Other Max all you want, but...either way? This isn't Max Caulfield. Not the one I proposed to.”

“Chloe, calm down, just...let me explain.”

“I already have. And you clearly didn't do a good enough job, because you had to fucking Rewind the conversation on me. Jesus-fuck, urghh...”

“Chloe...”

“Un-fucking-believeable,” Chloe winced under her breath. Her lips quivering, a tear slipping down her cheek. “You need to figure your shit out, Max, because I can’t take any more o' this.”

Another burning bullet, right through Max's skull. It was the kind of puncture that was numb at first, and burned and hurt more and more the longer it had time for the realization to set in.

Chloe tore open her wallet, slapped a bill onto the counter, and shoved herself up from her seat.

Chloe went to leave the bar, just like before.

Max got up and grabbed Chloe's arm in desperation. On instinct.

She couldn't let Chloe just leave.

She couldn't deal with this – with herself – by herself.

She just...couldn't.

Chloe huffed at Max's act, shoving her arm around.

The beer bottle Chloe had been drinking from was knocked aside by their brief struggle.

As the glass shattered against the bar's tile floor, Max was...paralyzed by the sight.

By the brown, reflective shards in a pool of liquid.

It all reflected the neon lights from the walls above.

Before Max knew it...the bar was empty.
She was alone.

A tornado of pain tossed Max around. It hurt so much that her vision burned white. Then the brownish red started pooling at the edges of her vision, like usual.

As Max regained her bearings, she realized she was leaning against a cold metal wall. Its surface was scratched to hell and covered with...graffiti. Max couldn’t make left or right of it, though, because her vision was blurred to crap.

Max was sitting on a toilet. In a public stall. Her pants were down. Her abdomen ached. The bowl beneath her was a nice little soup of menstrual leftovers. Yum. But Max’s period wasn’t supposed to kick back in for another couple weeks.

A toilet flushed nearby, sending Max’s heart for a loop as her rubbery arms tried to push her body upright. A shot of pain cracked through Max’s mind, and she clutched her temple in agony, paralyzed as the ache rushed over her.

And then Max noticed that her hair was...gone?

Max felt her heart skip. Fuck.

Her head was totally buzzcut. What the actual hell?

And hold up: Max’s shoes. Max’s shoes were unrecognizable.

Chucks – Max had been wearing friggin’ Chucks just moments before, but these...? The hell were these atrocities...?! Wait, heels? Why the hell was she in heels?!

And her pants, they were, like, fucking white dress pants, Max didn’t...!

And why was she on her period already?!

WHERE WAS SHE WHAT WAS-

..

...

......

Right. Time travel. Reality jumping...She’d...almost forgotten about all of that for a sec.

She’d been flung across time again. Across realities, maybe.

Wait, by her! She’d done this to Max!

That...whoever she was.

Who was she again?

Anyway, where the fuck was Max now?

When was she? The hell had just happened?

Think back. Five minutes ago.
What were you just doing?

Agh, yes.

That stupid, selfish… *prick*! Her Other self, just… just pushing her out like that!

It was all rushing back into Max’s head in another headache.

The bar. She argued with Chloe, they—

No. Chloe wouldn’t have…-

But, then, Max wouldn’t have, either, and…-

*Urgh.* That frustrating idiot… *self*!

How was she even doing this?
She was Max. Max was her. Right?

So how could she do this, and Max couldn’t?
Messing with people’s dreams, pulling her *friends* across realities?
How?

Either way, the answer couldn’t change the fact that Max was undeniably not where she was supposed to be. If she could just… find Chloe, she could—

RINGs.

She wasn't wearing her rings.

No, no, no.

No no no nonononono-

Chloe.

Chloe Chloe Chloe Chloe no no no no

Fucking no why what did she how did why did this

Not Chloe. She couldn’t not have Chloe. At all. Not again. Not after their last talk.

OK. All right. Calm down.

In another reality. Remember. You can get back.

But…

What if she *couldn’t* get back this time? Would that Other her just... take over? Was that the endgame, here? Why the hell would she want control, anyway, after all this time? If she could do this, why hadn’t she before now?

Max had to calm down again before she lost herself in questions.

Before she lost herself within herself again.

Max scrambled to clean herself up. And by the way, why did she have a purse? Like, a fucking
purse purse. Didn’t even make. . .-

Argh. Whatever. Fucking. . .tampons, where-?

There. Got it.

After plugging up the leaking ship, Max swiftly finished up her business in the stall. She felt weak. She felt, just, like. . .lighter than usual. Her movements were wobbly, each step uncertain.

Exiting the stall forced her to realize that whatever reality she was in, it was...parallel to the one she was used to. She wasn't a teenager here, definitely…older. Felt about the same age as she…had been, just…skinnier? Scrawnier? Meh.

How messed up was that? Trying to figure out what age she fucking was…

In the bathroom mirror, there she was – head shaved nearly bald, a stitch on her forehead, the remnants of a black eye recovering. . .and to contrast these rough details, she was dressed in some frilled black blouse and white khakis. A purse and high-heels on top of it. Gross.

Why was she dressed like this? Why did it look like she’d been in a fight recently?

Where the hell was she? What was different about this reality, and how the fuck could she get back to where she’d come from?

The fact that she’d nearly forgotten where she’d been seconds before she’d landed there was disconcerting. All of the memory-messing, time-warping, reality-skipping crap was causing the connections in her brain to loosen.

Max didn’t like it.

The bathroom door swung open, and Max fumbled with herself as she tried to apply soap to her hands and wash up. Nearly tripping on her damn heels again, she awkwardly wobbled her way out of the bathroom.

She had to track down Stella Hill. That was her way back, right? Stella would help calm her down, help her focus on her memories with Chloe in a way that let her Rewind back to her own reality...

Maybe...she could call Stella? Say it was an emergency? What if this Max wasn’t even friends with Stella? What would she do then? She had to try calling, at least. What could she lose?

After drying her hands on the obnoxiously loud air dryer, Max scrounged through her purse in a panic.

No cell phone.

What. The hell.

Was this Max someone who was against using technology or some bullcrap? She'd fancied now and then the idea of living a humbler life and all that – going vegetarian could be just the start of a green life style – but no way, she'd never have the guts to go through with it.

Well, did she have a car; at least?

More shuffling through her purse – and quite a paltry one, at that. Why’d she even have a damned purse if there was nothing in it? And Max confirmed that no, she did not have keys. At all. Not even a house key? What…?
Her teeth grit with fear, Max decided her best bet was to just exit this bathroom, see what she'd gotten herself into...Hopefully someone she knew was here, right? She wouldn't be in some public restroom without a phone, without a car, all by herself, would she?

Max carefully, slowly left the bathroom, each step a small struggle.

Her time-sickness should've...worn off by now. But then again, maybe this frequency of reality warping was having its after effects. Or...maybe this version of Max had gotten plastered the night before?

A pang of ache hit her in the temples, and she burped a little through her nose. *Blegh.* Certainly felt like a hangover, anyway...

Max, wobbling with each tiny step, found herself a bit disoriented in the bustle of the Starbucks she emerged into. Where was she? She didn’t recognize this store. For all she knew, this Max Caulfield was in a different part of the country altogether...

No phone. No car. No keys.

No idea of where the hell she was.

She was doin’ just great.

But at least her memory could retain two things from her home reality: Chloe Price, and Stella Hill.

Chloe was the reason she needed to find her way back home.

Stella was the key to helping her get there.

The wind in her sails, and the anchor to land. Right?

With any luck, Stella would be in that shop somewhere for her. But Max wasn’t finding her anywhere...Shit.

"MAXINE?"

Max’s heart felt like it would leap from her chest at the sound of her name being shouted through the claustrophobia-inducing swell of the busy shop.

She flicked her head on instinct in the direction of the voice – a stranger. Some barista setting down a cup of coffee with her name on it. Max was petrified of it at first.

Frozen in place.

Some strange place.

Frozen in time.

Some other time.

And then, something unexpected happened.

Someone else showed up at the counter and delicately picked up Max’s coffee cup.

Someone Max didn’t recognize.
She was wearing a tacky, patterned blouse: beige with autumnal leaves falling across it. An off-white dress and dark, shiny little shoes, thin gold loops for earrings...Her hair taught into a bushy bun held by pencils. A layer of lip gloss over top lipstick that was barely noticeable in color with hints of some blush on her softened, pale cheeks. Her eyelashes were thickened with product, and her brows were neatly plucked. And those eyes—...

They noticed Max.

And she smiled a meek little smile, and with her head shrunken into her neck, she bashfully brought Max her coffee.

“Hey,” she greeted warmly, yet awkwardly. “I...thought you were still in the restroom...”

Those eyes were so close. It felt like staring up at a gray blue sky during a rainstorm.

Rainstorm.

Definitely rain. Definitely a gray, clouded sky...

Why was Max’s brain going there off of this woman’s face? Like an image burned into her brain...

“Here, Maxine,” she said, extending her arm and offering the cup of coffee.

Max gawked at the steam gently trickling up from the cup. At the rosy-edged, thin fingers holding it.

“You all right?” she asked Max with a worried curve to her eyebrows.

Max felt her head get light, her chest go hollow. She took the coffee cup, her fingers gripped against it a little too tightly. Her hands were uncomfortably hot, and breathing was suddenly very difficult.

Max couldn’t pry her eyes away from the woman’s face, whom she now recognized. She probably looked like a lunatic, just gawking and trembling, wordless.

“H-here,” gestured the woman, easing Max with a soft and delicate touch on the shoulder. “Let’s... sit you down.”

“Th-thanks,” Max uttered out, still staring at the woman’s features as they swerved their way around some customers toward a well lit window-side table. Max was having difficulty believing who she was with. Her mind’s eye had replayed those final moments over and over, so many times over the years...

When they reached the table, Max nearly tripped over her heels again. The woman guiding her caught her, and daintily set Max’s cup on the table before. Max was once again enraptured, motionless -- this time by the way the midday sun trickled through the gleaming windows, casting the coffee steam in its glow.

“You, um...” The woman laughed through her nose as she took her seat across from Max. “You didn’t have to dress up. I know it’s...been a while since you’ve worn things like that. Are you comfortable?”

Max caught herself staring again.

“Oh, yughh...” Max took a deep breath, wiping her palm across her forehead. “Yea, I...wanted to look nice, I...I guess.” From her current angle, elevated above her coffee mate, her eyes were drawn to the woman’s neck, and the thin gold chain that dangled down into her blouse.
Max figured she knew what object hung at the end of the chain. But her brain – already stewing in a mess as it was – was finding it baffling to comprehend who she was sitting in front of.

“Well,” the woman before her laughed softly, lifting her wrist to her lip and shaking her head slightly. “I appreciate the effort, at least. It has been a while since we’ve been able to meet up like this. What…five years, I think? Ever since that Storm hit Arcadia...Seemed like nearly everyone lost touch after that…”

Max nodded and shrugged, her throat caught as she was baffled at the coincidental timing. Like she had any clue how things had gone down in this reality.

Given how these things worked, it had to be more than coincidence, though…

Max cleared her throat, avoided those rainy sky eyes, and fussed her hands between her thighs, fidgeting like mad.

“I...-” Max pushed the words out, her eyes on the verge of leaking. “I've missed you, Kate.”

“I've missed you, too, Maxine.”

“Um...-” Max took a moment to absorb those cloudy-day eyes, the worried tilt to Kate's brows, the concern oozing from every pore. Clearing her throat, Max eked out, “Wh-...Why did you want to meet me?”

Shakily taking a sip of her coffee – fretful to burn her tongue – Max's eyes were glued to Kate.

“Oh,” Kate uttered meekly, then shrugged. “You asked me to.”

“I've...heard that since they let you out, you've been having trouble...remembering things,” Kate cautiously cited. She didn't seem too keen on her own drink. “Did you, uhm...forget what you wanted to talk with me about today?”

Max was at least relieved she didn't need to pretend. Although...did that mean the...her...in this reality was dealing with...similar things she was in her own neck of the temporal woods? Or were Maxes in different realities just...getting screwed over somehow? Was it her fault?

Always worrying about herself, whether it was her fault, whether she was morally in the clear.

If she was present, that’s what she would’ve criticized…

After considering this, Max shrugged up one shoulder, stalling for more...time...as she took another sip of coffee.

“It's OK,” Kate assured with a pitying smile. “No one can understand what you've been through, but...I can still try to.”

It was hella awkward, being on the opposite end of this, when all of Max's memories of Kate were...so damned pervasive in their tone – pitying Kate Marsh. Now Max was the one being pitied. She hated it.

And that Other voice wasn't there to make any comments, so she knew that hate was...100% original.

“Maxine,” said Kate, pulling things back on track. She extended a hand across the table, inviting
Max's palm to connect to hers. Max hesitated, then obliged. Kate's hand was cold but soft. “I need you to...try to remember.” Max found herself lost in cloudy skies again. “What you said to me on the phone the other day. When they were getting ready to let you out.”

“...Out?” Max murmured.

Out of...where?

Max's brain ached as she struggled to recall this Max's memories.

Her head throbbing a bit, Max clutched her skull – reminding herself of her shaved head.

Had this Max...been in jail?

For what? What in the hell could Maxine Caulfield have done to...-?

And there were raindrops of pity again in those gray skies.

“I, um...” Max fumbled, trying to keep herself collected. She wiped her nose, noticing a small trace of blood that she wiped on a napkin as casually as she could. “Y-yea, it...It's good to be out. Finally.”

Lying lying lying

“...Is it?” Kate posed, confused. “The...way you said it on the phone, you seemed...scared of leaving the facility.”

Max was wide-eyed and slack-jawed for a moment, scrambling to come up with an answer.

“It's...I-I mean, I'm better now.” She went to tuck hair behind her ear, only to realize there was none to nervously fiddle with. “It's OK.”

Lying lying lying

“You're...sure?” Kate checked, narrow-eyed as she squeezed Max's hand, still within her own. “Because...you really gave me a scare, there. I mean...-” Kate glanced across the cafe, then leaned in, whispered, “Max, you sounded ready to kill yourself when we last talked. Do you...recall?”

Max's chest suddenly felt tight.

“I...”

lie lie lie some more
push it away keep it back
ANYTHING
say anything

“...umm...I did?”

fffffffuck

Kate interjected with concern, “You told me, just the other day, you were...going to do it. You sounded serious...I...I argued with you for twenty minutes until I convinced you to meet with me today.”
“That's...why we're here?” Max mumbled, aghast.

What in the hell had gone wrong in this fucking reality?

“Maxine, you...took someone's life, that...-” Kate's hand was starting to tremble, but...Max squeezed it in place. “I mean, that's...not something that's going to ever go away, but it's doesn't mean you need to take your own. I don't...at all support what you did, Maxine – but I understand why you did it. More than you know. Your friend was suffering, and...she wanted relief from that pain. It's tempting to leave this life, seeking the next, but...none of us should leave before our time.”

OFF THAT ROOF

“Nn-...! No, I'm...-” Breathing was starting to become difficult. “I don't...want that, I'm just...glad you're here, Kate, I feel so...lost, I...” Max buried her face in her bare arms as a shiver went up her spine. She maintained her grip on Kate's hand, but her face started to leak tears onto the table.

“It's all right,” Kate cooed, planting her head against the bristled edges of Max's shaved head.

Max was clawing through this brain she was inhabiting. Locked door after locked door, it felt like. But down a dark corridor of this mind, one door was familiar. She peeked inside, and sure enough...something familiar.

“I want this time with you...to be my last memory...Do you understand?”

“I want to help you, Chloe, but I think my help is hurting.”

“At least you have a choice. When you want to make a decision, you can just...do it. Look at me. I'm at the mercy of...everybody. For once, I want to make my own choice – the most important one of my life. Please...help me, Max.”

Maxine Caulfield had euthanized Chloe Price.

And then she'd run away from this reality, back to her own.

In and out, completely fucking everything up in her wake.

Like a Storm.

But it hadn't all magically disappeared, or undone itself, had it?

And now Max's heart was starting to race as she found herself wondering: What about every other timeline? What about the rest of the...herselves?

What about all the Maxes she'd...jumped into the driver's seat for? Only to crank up the gas, open the door, and jump out...leaving them in the passenger seat as the car got totaled off the side of the road, while she tucked-and-rolled back to her 'better' reality?

it hurts

A voice? Her own voice? Again?

Not hers, at the same time.
please
take me with you
What?
don't
leave me again
I didn't...know I was...-
again
again
can't
Why...-?
Where have you...-?
hurts
can't
whole
“Maxine?”
The black fog cleared. The voice from Another Max faded back to the bottom of Max's consciousness.
The white fog filled the empty spaces. The voice of Kate Marsh faded back to the front.
“I know it might not seem like it right now, but...everything is going to work out. OK?’
Max sniffled, sucking in snot back into her throat and groaning a tired groan as she opened her eyes.
Readjusting to the sights and sounds of the cafe – an atmosphere she’d grown to detest from her day job – Max could not see how 'everything was going to work out.’
“Yea,” Max whimpered through her recovering sniffles, reaching for a napkin. She blew her nose. “I know,” she lied. “It'll all work out...somehow.”
“Right.” Kate nodded her timid, supportive nod.
“It's...been one thing after another,” Max groggily explained, reaching for another napkin to wipe at her nose. “Just...have to keep...going.”
going??
we're going???
please!!
N-no, I'm not...-
can't stay
I'm sorry, I don't...-
I can't. I'm sorry...

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds; because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.”

Huh? Was Kate, like...quoting the Bible at her now?

Bleh. That was...kind of the last thing Max needed right then.

“Kate...” Max sighed, her lips fluttering grumpily as she felt a pang of pain wash against the inside of her skull.

“Max, I know you don't...share the same beliefs I do. We never got along back in school – you were always with the Vortex kids...but I always saw good in you. Somehow, I knew it – in my gut, in my heart – that someday you'd need my help. And I always had faith you'd ask me when you needed it.”

Max wasn't sure where this was coming from. She wasn't a fan of that pity rearing itself around again.

“But Maxine, you need to have faith in yourself. Faith that your life has meaning.”

Max shrugged half-heartedly.

“Sorry, Kate. I'm not...so sure I believe in that sort of thing anymore...”

Kate bit her lip thoughtfully, her eyes darting to one side as she considered a thought.

“I don't think it's a coincidence that you came to me with this.”

“With...what?”

“With your...-” Kate's eyes hit Max's with a solemn darkness. “-...intentions.”

“Oh.” Max's throat felt dry.

“I haven't...talked with anyone about this in years, but...I know what you're going through. And I also know that nothing I do or say can make your pain go away. It's not in my power – it's not my choice – to help you out of this situation you're in. At the end of the day, when the sun sets...I can light the path for you, but...you're the only one who can walk it.”

Kate's hand finally let go of her own.

And she slipped away.

Off that roof.

Disappearing into the cloudy, rainy, gray sky.

The concrete roof against Max's feet melted beneath the Storm.

The wind and rain pelted against her, knocking her over.

Dead birds pelted against her.
She fell through the ceiling.
She fell with the whales.
She fell into static.
She fell through herself again.

Max struggled to open her eyes. Her head was wracked with pain, every beat of her heart stinging at her skull. Her body felt like lead, and her neck didn't seem able to support the weight of her head. Her hands trembled, her arms wavered as she fought to push herself up from the cold wooden floor.

By the time Max had finally gotten her head leveled, she began to...recognize certain things. She was in some kind of apartment. It felt familiar, and yet she knew she'd never been there before. Another trick of her mind? Another blending of her own memories with...

Fuck.

She wasn't back home, this was...some place else? Damnit.

Tiredly, Max checked her hands for what she knew she wouldn't find: no rings.

Wait.

RING??

OH YES THANK YOU THANK—

.

..

...

not my ring
not chloe
not my ring
NOT MY RING.

WHOSE

WHAT

WHY

She had a diamond ring. Fucking *diamond* ring on her finger! What the *hell*?!

That wasn't Chloe's ring.

Her vision was blurred, bubbling red at the edges. She could feel blood trickling down her lips.

Same shit, different reality...*Urgh.*
Max lifted her hand to press against her agonized temple. Her stomach felt queasy, the pulses of pain washing over her head were nauseating. As Max grasped at her skull in desperation, she tried to remember.

The first image that struck her: a dreamcatcher.

“*feted by the art world. It's great EXPOSURE and it kickstart a career in photography.*”

“*Here's MY PHOTO for the 'Everyday Heroes' contest.*”

“Oh, uh...That was easy.”

“No. It wasn't easy at all.”

“I hope you TAKE ADVANTAGE of your status and talk to as many influential people here as possible.”

“Now you have to start acting like the photographer YOU WANT to be.”

“Now, I know the whole 'ironic selfie' thing is kind of played out, but there's something...timeless about YOUR IMAGES.”

Through the pain of more memories cramming themselves into her bursting brain, Max dug her fingertips into her scalp, trying to figure it out as a sinking feeling came over her. Her hair was short. Pixie short.

So...longer than it had just been. But not nearly as long as it was supposed to be.

God damnit.

Max pushed herself up onto her hip. Jesus, trying to stand up felt way too hard right then. This was more than time-sickness, this was...a fucking hangover. Like, still-drunk-the-next-morning levels of hangover.

“Still recovering from your little bender last night, Darling?”

Max's chest burst into flames at the startling sound of Victoria's voice – then froze over.

“Vuh...-?” she choked out, coughing on her own spit.

“Jesus,” Victoria sighed, kneeling down over Max and dabbing at her face with a rag. “Max, I told you not to overdo it. Now look at you.” Max let Victoria's cold, smooth fingers run circles around her face, cleaning her cheeks, straightening her hair. “You're going to look awful for the showcase tonight. You know, you can't expect me to continue cleaning your messes. You keep trying to put off this conversation, but we're going to have to have it soon. Actually have it. You're supposed to be a professional now. Maybe it's time to start acting like it?”

Victoria spit-shined Max's face a bit, which Max...didn't...mind? She felt guilty for not minding.

But the way Victoria fixed her palms against Max's temples – the way her typically cold, sharp eyes stared with a softness that enveloped Max's mind...-

Max found herself realizing where the diamond ring had come from.

The same kind of sigh Chloe – her Chloe, from her reality – had been sighing lately. A very tired sigh.

“I am,” Max mumbled, her half-asleep arm wobbling its way to her lips as she thumbed away her own saliva. “Sorry, I'm... having a rough... week.”

“Eeyeah, no shit. More like rough month.”

Victoria’s hands, still against the sides of Max’s head, slowly, firmly wiped themselves back, against the base of Max’s skull. It was soothing in the face of the persistent headache she was experiencing.

“Whoever that guy was – whatever he gave you? Promise me you're never going to take shit like that again.”

“... Huh?” Max was confused.

Victoria’s eyes rolled a bit at Max’s reaction. She shook her head a bit.

“Don't...fucking play dumb with me, Caulfield,” she grumbled, letting go of Max's skull. “I know you met with that grimy cretin again yesterday, and I know you bought something from him. You could've at least asked me before dropping cash on that kind of shit. I understand you're going through a lot lately. It's the anniversary of... Well.” Victoria’s eyes cautiously slid away.

“Chloe, where are you?”

“I'm so fucking scared! I'm... by the beach, I'm stuck in the... -” Lost in static.

Lost.

“Chloe! Can you hear me?! Hello? Hello?!"

THE TORNADO WAS REAL.

I DIDN'T FIX SHIT.

Victoria was silent and sullen, rubbing Max’s arms with a melancholic sigh. She continued.

“And I'm sorry the therapy's not helping. I swear, once we get this showcase out of the way, we will find you a better therapist. My parents know someone in Portland who specializes in... cases like yours. We’ll... -”

Victoria trailed off at the way Max was staring at her, wide-eyed and jaw agape.

When Max was self-aware, she nodded, rubbed at her eyes, and swallowed nervously.

“Of course, yea. I'm... W-We'll work it out, I'm... sorry, I'm... a fucking mess, I...”

Max's chest tightened as Victoria's lips pressed against her forehead.

“Yes, well, you're my mess, Max,” Victoria said with a weird... warmth. She scooped up the rag she'd just been using to clean Max's face and got up from the floor. “I signed up for this when I gave you that ring, didn’t I? That being, I do wish that perhaps you'd, I don't know, given me some fair warning that you had... issues such as these. N-not to say I can't handle them, of course – obviously, I can – simply that... I might've prepared myself better for them. If I’d known earlier?” She'd gone off
into some other room, and was elevating her voice to echo across the apartment. Max just...continued to sit on the floor.

“If you’d...known? Earlier?” Max probed. Had this version of herself...told Victoria...-?

“About your...delicate...condition,” Victoria indirectly mumbled, looking embarrassed. Flicking her slender fingers, she muttered, “The memory loss? The hemorrhaging?”

“Oh.”

“It’s not easy, you know, putting my own creative endeavors on hold to help yours along. To keep you on your feet. I hope you realize I would never simply bend over like this for anyone, Caulfield. Much as I hate to admit it, you're special, your work is special, it warrants eyes and attention, and I am committed to that, but...-” She returned to the living room, noting Max's form still slumped on the floor. “...you need to start pulling yourself together. I can't fix all of these problems for you, Darling.”

Victoria's concerned rambling was...bizarre. That usual bite, that usual sting, that usual...iciness...it was missing. Even the remarks that would normally be, like, scathing from her, it was more like...facetious teasing.

It was like a whole different...Victoria.

OK, well, obviously. This was...some other reality.

But this Victoria seemed, like...less grouchy? Than usual? Wasn't that part of who Victoria Chase was? Never happy?

And yet, as Victoria was scolding Max – knees bent over precariously balanced toes, hands criss-crossed over bent knees, eyes somber and forlorn – there was a sort of...glimmer to her. A drive, of sorts. It reminded her of that ember-eyed look when the Victoria she knew – from her reality – would talk with her about...Nathan Prescott.

And there was a strange glow to that seemingly melancholic state.

“Come,” Victoria said, reaching out an arm, standing back upright. “Up.” She gestured her fingertips inward. “We have two hours before we have to be at the gallery. If anyone makes any remarks on your...being out-of-sorts, we can simply...remind them how painful this whole ordeal has been. It wasn't easy going back through those photos, I'm sure the attendees will cut you some slack. Plenty of them will probably be Arcadians, anyway. But I'll not have us going to the gallery looking like hookers, so...time to clean up.”

“Gallery? Att-...Attendees?” Max murmured, dizzy as her body was lifted onto its feet. She caught herself and spit out, “O-Oh, right, yea, that's...today...”

As if she had any fucking clue what was going on.

“Yes, that is today,” Victoria sighed, sifting at her bangs as she eased Max down the hallway she'd just reemerged from. “Why do you think I was on your case last night? And did you listen? Nooooo, but...I suppose that's why I'm here. Every rock star needs its manager to help clean up after them...”

“I-I'm no rock star,” Max protested in her half-assed mumbling, being shooed along.

They reached a bathroom. An immaculately clean and fashionable bathroom.
“Not with an attitude like that, you're not,” Victoria grumbled with a sort of confusion. “I'll get your clothes – you shower. Sober up. Whatever's wrong with you right now? I'm sorry, I am -- but we need to work through it for right now. We can't afford to fuck this one up, Darling.”

“I-...I'm fine. I'll be fine, just...gimme a bit to...-”

Before Max could muster a coherent sentence, she realized Victoria was already gone.

The shower was already running.

Max was already...naked?

She didn't even remember...undressing, how....-?

Clean.
She had to clean up.
Clean it all up.
Wash it all away.
Prickling drops, pelting her skin.
Feathers. Feathers and blood.
Everything being washed away.
Swept by the tide of so many moons, Max found herself washed up ashore.
Beached with dead whales.
-
That shore was...strangely fuzzy. And purple.
It was a carpet. And an eccentric one at that.
The smell was...so familiar.
Max knew this smell, this...person.
It was weird. She was so used to Chloe's smell, not...this...

“Pff. How was your nap? Have a nice Trip?”

Stella. It was Stella's voice.

Max pushed herself up from the weird, hairy, purple rug. It was cozy and...gave her this downright strange sense of nostalgia. Max was distracted by the sight of her own drool trickling down from her lip, plopping into the rug.

“I told you to take it easy with that stuff.” Stella sighed with a nervous kind of snort-giggle. “Strong shit, am I right? Gotta be careful.”

A burst of fuzzy white noise rattled Max's ears, but she realized it was the sound of Stella sitting into a bean bag. As soon as Max relaxed from that, a horrifying -CLICK!-
But when Max turned, she realized it was just...Stella turning on a Super Nintendo.

Jesus, the smallest things were so...goddamn distracting lately.

That sort of happened when you found yourself slipping across dimensions at the drop of said smallest things.

-TICK-tick-
-TICK-tick-
-TICK-tick-

A gentle piano, trickling and serene, slowly building...

The TV screen portrayed a pixelated pendulum.

-tick-tick-
-tick-tick-
-tick-tick-

The archaic MIDI instrumentation swelled as the title revealed itself:

**CHRONO TRIGGER**

“You seem sorta out of it,” Stella casually commented, “so I was thinking tonight we'd just...run through some side-questy stuff? Maybe check out more alternate endings? My paper's not due until Monday, and I just have the last couple of pages to BS, so...”

She clicked at her retro controller, yellowed from the passage of time. A fuzzy garbled rant from Brooke about why electronic devices from the 90's got yellow like that danced on the edge of Max's spine.

Max had pulled herself up to a cross-legged sitting position, trying to send that shiver from another reality off.

She tried to find memories from *this* timeline – *this* reality.

But all she could find was...empty space.

Vague in its existence?

Max scanned Stella.

The girl was...decidedly more...punk-ish in her attire than Max was used to. Not too much so, but noticeably so. She had a nose ring, a pixelart tattoo on her bicep – were those the 'Skelebros?' – and she was even wearing a beanie slouch. With *studs* on it. Her hair had some...blue highlights in it, too.

Aghast and disconcerted, Max studied the room.

College. Max was back in *college*. Definitely the same dorm layout, but...*not* Stella's room...? Some artifacts were familiar...and others were completely different.

On the inside of the wooden door was a poster:
That was...Max's poster. She remembered that poster. She'd bought it within the first month of Overwatch's release. She always felt kind of...obligated to play Tracer a lot – the time-traveling mascot on the game's box art – but the British heroine's peppy and cheery demeanor just...wasn't who Max was. Not anymore. For someone who'd gotten lost in time herself, Lena Oxton sure seemed...to be dealing with it all a lot happier and healthier than Maxine Caulfield was. Then again, Lena had been saved. Un-stuck. Un-lost. Tracer was in control of her own time now.

But in Max's reality, control was...just an illusion.

The world could always use more heroes...

Because Max sure as fuck wasn't one...

“You there, Max?” Stella checked, loading up her save file. “Need me to get you some water, or...?”

Max tried to speak, but her throat was all gunked up. She tried to clear it.

As she recovered, Stella kicked a box of tissues across the floor toward her.

“Trash can's behind you,” Stella indicated. “Try not to get any on the rug this time, would ya? It took ages to clean it out...”

Max was confused. Dazed, aching, sore...

And then her nose started to bleed.

She cleaned her face up with a nearby tissue, groaning irritably all the while.

As Stella went about her playing her game – like nothing was wrong – Max's insides felt hollow.

Max licked her thumb to help wipe dried blood residue from her upper lip.

“So, anyway, come on. Tell me. Did it work?” Stella asked.

“...Huh?”

Of course that was Max's first word in this reality.

“Your Trip,” Stella specified, navigating her game characters through a room comprised of nothing but cobblestone, metal fencing, and a street lamp. She began fidgeting with menu screens. “I mean, were you able to do it?”

“Do...what?”

Stella paused. She set the controller down in her lap suddenly, studying Max's face cautiously.

“OK, wait.” With narrowed eyes, Stella inquired, “Max: what's the password?”

“The...The password?”
At Max's confusion, Stella's expression grew wary.

But Max had a flash of memory. The night before – in, well, her proper timeline – when she'd shown Stella her Rewind. Somehow, Max could...remember the entire phrase, clear as day.

“What you...want most right now is...is your own personal fork. You, um-...Uh, you already have your own personal...spoon.”

Stella's face went from stern to soft, then worried.

“That's right,” she confirmed. “Holy shit, Max, that one did a number on you, huh?”

“Y-yea,” Max played along.

Because of course she did.

Max added, “I'm, erh, pretty fuzzy, actually...I probably won't know...right from left for...a while.”

“I told you that shit was strong,” Stella cited, picking her game back up and sighing to herself. “Kam knows how to get his hands on the good stuff. Only reason I put up with him anymore...”

Something about the way Stella said this made Max feel like she wasn't just referring to...whatever drug this version of Max had taken. But based on the aftereffects, Max was...assuming it was marijuana. Of the edible sort.

Stella navigated her party members to a small bucket in the corner of the sixteen-bit room.

Text scrolled on the screen:

[Go to “Day of Lavos”]
[1999 A.D.??]
[– Yes.]
[ No.]

Max felt quite queasy and dizzy. Like she could throw up at any moment, but also super hungry at the same time. And...also like every action she performed was in slow motion somehow, but
everything around her was moving just a hair too fast. She tried to push her own bangs out of her face, only to realize that the strands were dyed red, which off-put her.

She probably looked like a total buffoon, gawking at her own hair like that, wiping drool from her face.

“Damn,” Stella observed, “you really did knock the wind outta yourself, didn'tcha?”

Max nodded, grasping at her uneasy stomach as the world began to blur again.

Stella nervously decided, “Maybe we should...lower the dose next time you decide to take a Trip.”

Stella clicked her button to confirm her choice in the game.

“Take a trip to...where?” Max asked.

Slowly, quietly, Stella said to Max, “Uh...through time?”

The TV screen lit up with waves of blue and purple, undulating and swirling.

Max lost herself in the hypnotic glow.

--

The glow of neon storefronts held Max captive for a few minutes as she slowly found herself waking up again.

It was...uneventful, this transition. No headaches. No fuzzy-edged vision. No nose-bleeds.

Max was too tired to speak. To move.

For a moment, she dwelt upon her environment. A car. Nighttime. Downtown.

She was self-aware of her own breathing. Slow. Relaxed. Her heart was pounding a bit, but...-

Everything was so...quiet, still. Calming.
She mustered the energy to grasp one hand around the other.

rings
my rings, are they…-?

they are.

thank god

thank gawwwddd

God? Hah. I thought we’d given up on thanking that asshole for anything a long time ago.

Oh, great. You’re still here.

Oh, great, you’re still in a bitchy mood.

Thought you’d at least be relieved to be back.

Fucking peachy.

Been keeping your seat warm. All goddamn day. The whole way back.

Whole way back?

Look around.

So Max did. And she recognized the sights around her, the bright neon lights of downtown Berkeley’s main street.

They were all the back home?

Yea. Fucking however-many-hour road trip?

I got the pleasure of sitting through that. Again.

I wasn’t even trying to pick any fights this time with her, and it still happened.

Chloe…-!

The backseat opposite Max was starkly empty.

Max’s eyes darted to the front. In the rear-view mirror up top, she noticed Stella’s stern eyes glaring at her. Brooke was riding shotgun. They were quiet. Eerily quiet.

Max went to speak, but coughed a bit instead, her throat dried out. Like she’d been...yelling.

“Where’s...Chloe?” Max managed out. “And...and Victoria?”

Silence.

A red light.

“Max,” said Stella just before Max went to speak again. “Do you...honestly not know?”

Brooke had rotated around in her seat to cast a studious stare at Max. She shrunk at Brooke’s gawking.
“I-..N-no, I don't-..Chloe said you..made her-..um-..”

“Max,” Brooke interjected, “do you know where we're going?”

Max blinked at the window beside her. A pair of grungy men were shoving at each other in the plaza beside them. For a moment, Max assumed they were crazy homeless people.

And then she realized how much she could currently relate with them, if that was in fact the case.

“Max?” Brooke pressed.

“I don't-..” Max shrugged, continuing to avoid eye contact.

“Do you remember what you said to Chloe?” Brooke inquired.

“Could you maybe stop fucking grilling me?” Max spat, her stomach on fire. “I don't remember! OK? I know you all think I've lost my mind. Maybe I have! All right?! What's it fucking matter where we're going, anyway? It's not like I have any choice.”

Brooke's brows furrowed, her eyes snapped wide open, and she shook her head slightly, facing frontward again.

Green light.

“Oooohhhkayyy,” Brooke sighed. “Well, if it helps, Max, we're doing what you asked us to.”

“What you said to Chloe was pretty uncalled for, though,” Stella cited with disappointment.

“Heh, I might've...went a little overboard. But it got the job done.”

“Oh, was it?!” Max growled at Stella. “I wouldn't know, because I wasn't here for it. Which you obviously know, Stella, so why are you giving me shit for it now?”

“Max, jesus, chill out,” Brooke grunted. “We're trying to help you.”

“Thanks, I feel...so helped.” Max bumped the side of her head against the window.

“You're welcome.

Fuck you. I don't know what your game is, but...-

'Game,' huh? Pff. You have no idea.

Seems to be the whole point.

For the moment? Yea.

“Are you sure we should be doing this?” Brooke asked Stella.

Stella took them around a turn, screeching to a halt to prevent them from running into pedestrians who were crossing later than they should've been.

“Frickin' Berkeley,” Stella mumbled.

“Hey,” Brooke prodded.

Stella huffed and shrugged.
“You heard her,” Stella cited. “This is what she wants.”

“An hour ago, maybe,” Brooke countered. “And what if she changes her mind again?”

_I know I'm causing hell for everyone, but this is what I need._

No. It's not!

“If you say so, Max,” Brooke conceded dubiously. “But if you ask me, you should take Victoria's offer.”

Offer? What offer?!

_I'll...think on it. Seriously, I just need a couple days to myself._

“Right,” Stella agreed. “I get it. Just...try to calm down, OK? We'll...schedule a meeting with your doctor ASAP, maybe she can...get some meds to help in the short term?”

What? NO. I can't see her again! I'll just make everything worse.

_Yea. Good. Fine. Whatever you think will help..._

NO. NOT FINE.

I NEED CHLOE.

“See?” Stella said quietly. “See what I was talking about?”

Brooke nodded.

“Yea. Kinda...scary.”

I'M RIGHT HERE!

Sorry.

“N-no, Max, fuck – we're sorry,” Stella insisted. “We should've been helping you guys with this shit sooner.”

I don't need your damned 'help!' I need CHLOE.

“How long has this been going on?” asked Brooke to Stella.

“Not sure. Max, do you remember when this started?

_I don't know. But it's...gotten pretty bad._

_S-sorry I keep...flipping out like that, it's...-

I can't really control it.

YOU BITCH, what's with the 'calm' act all of a sudden?!

Stop pretending to be ME. YOU'RE the angry one! You're...-

_I...probably sound pretty batshit, huh?_
“It's all right, Max. Just...take it easy. You hungry?”

SHE'S NOT MAX.

I'M MAX.

A-actually, yea. I guess. I-I mean, I could...eat.

“You think...your brother had something to do with this?”

“Um, n-no,” Stella quelled Brooke's worry. “This is...something else.”

FUCKING LET ME OUT!!!

LET ME OUT

“But, so...” Stella paused. “This is the sort of shit Chloe's been dealing with.”

I-I want to get better...

I feel...horrible...for what I'm putting her through...

What I'm putting **myself** through.

I feel...so **lost**.

Tears. TEARS?!

CRYING?!

ARE YOU FAKING THIS?!

“Wh-whoa, hey, it...it's OK. It's fine! We'll get through this.”

“Uhhh, yea, sorry, Max. I know I'm not...good with this crap, but...we're all here for you.”

**Thuh-**...Thank you, Brooke.

“Seriously,” said Stella, “I'm...sorry if we're, like...saying, or...or doing anything that upsets you, I'm just...We want to understand. We want to help you.”

**I know. Y-**you're...**doing really great, Stella.**

**Seriously.**

**I know you won't let me down.**

**I trust you.**

“Heh.” Stella smiled a warm smile back at them. “I-I hope we can...help you get through this.”

Max felt this...bizarre swelling in her chest. In her stomach.

She wanted to cry for some reason.

She did.
Stella added, “You helped me at the...worst point in my life. It, um-...It means a lot to me that you're letting me return the favor. I promise – I'm going to help you work through this.”

I know.
Thank you.
I just...

I need to be whole again.
I need to be whole again.

—

“They all think it's me. They all think I'm the ringleader. The one in charge.

And I have no idea what it is.”

~ Mr. Robot

—

“How can I put this? There's a kind of gap between what I think is real and what's really real. I get this feeling like some kind of little something-or-other is there, somewhere inside me... like a burglar is in the house, hiding in a wardrobe... and it comes out every once in a while and messes up whatever order or logic I've established for myself. The way a magnet can make a machine go crazy.”

~ Haruki Murakami; The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle

—

She gave me something else to focus on
I'm scared that I can't be alone for long
My brain’s been in a wreck
And I don’t know what is left
Of me

I'm still living in a trance
Of injured heroes and desperate romance
If not for her then I'd be dead
Maybe I owe my life instead
But what if I can't take it anymore?

~ Overexposed; Riley Hawke
Discord

Chapter Summary

'There is chaos within you.'
'There is disquiet in your soul.'
'You are your own worst enemy.'

Life is Strange
All Wounds

Chapter 15 – Discord

--

"People are afraid of themselves, of their own reality; their feelings most of all. People talk about how great love is, but that’s bullshit. Love hurts. Feelings are disturbing. People are taught that pain is evil and dangerous. How can they deal with love if they’re afraid to feel? Pain is meant to wake us up. People try to hide their pain. But they’re wrong. Pain is something to carry, like a radio. You feel your strength in the experience of pain. It’s all in how you carry it. That’s what matters. Pain is a feeling.

Your feelings are a part of you. Your own reality.

If you feel ashamed of them, and hide them, you’re letting society destroy your reality.

You should stand up for your right to feel your pain."

~ Jim Morrison

--

Quiet.
Empty.
Chloe should’ve felt unsettled by coming home to that, right?
She should’ve felt uncomfortable, disturbed, and upset by the silence.
But she wasn’t.
She was fucking relieved.
Silence, calm, quiet, rest.
Chloe needed rest.

She'd unzipped her boots and dropped them in a heap with their luggage, right inside the apartment door. Using her cellphone's flashlight, she tiredly fumbled through their apartment. She nearly tripped as she neared the bedroom – a pile of clothes from when Max had been spacing out in their rush to get ready to leave. An unused duffel bag. OW – shit, she and her bad luck with walking, she’d banged her toes against the foot of her bed. If she’d only shone her light on where she was walking instead of where she was headed…Gah.

Reaching their mess of a bed, Chloe tore off her shirt, her pants, then threw herself into bed.

The quiet was...so goddamn calming.

But despite the beautiful silence...she couldn't sleep.

She was too friggin' awake. Every little thing bothered. She couldn’t breathe through one nostril. Her bra pinched. One boob was getting a little too squished by her own weight. Her other arm was falling asleep from – again – her own weight. It was too goddamn hot. She tried to reposition herself. Open a window. Turn on a fan. For each remedy, something else became a problem.

When she’d finally managed to get comfortable – twenty minutes later – just as she was lulling off to sleep, the worst of it struck.

Those painful moments, a bucket of needles over the course of that long weekend, it was as if they’d all been dumped onto her pillow, and she was sinking her head into needles instead of feathers.

Chloe didn't have Max that evening.

Max didn't want to be there with her.

And you know what? Fine. Fuck it.

Maybe Chloe didn't want Max to be there, either.

Because being around Max, acting the way she had been, all hot and cold, good-cop-bad-cop, and with the trippy-ass crap happening at the same time?

Chloe couldn't deal with it.

She needed a goddamn break from it.

As much as Max didn’t like that word, it was what Chloe needed.

And now that she had sweet silence – now that Max's hateful, upset, contradictory words were in the past – Chloe couldn't stay in the quiet present. It was like her bed-sheets were soaked in bad memories. Surreal memories from events that…couldn’t exist, but…somehow did. Straight memories from discussions she knew she’d had recently. All mixed around in a gross mess around her, like a cold and mucky blanket.

“But maybe, if you could pull your cotton-candy head out of your own ass?” Rachel's voice from another reality. “Stop pointing fingers at everyone in Arcadia? You might realize that she left you, because you’re a walking train wreck.”
"After everything I’ve given up – everything I’ve taken – just to be with you..." Max, from their road trip back home. They’d argued beside a gas station while Stells and Brooke had gone inside. “And you just blow me off like that? Abandon me, back at that bar. Thanks. That kinda behavior totally helps when I’m in this kind of place.”

“I just...I didn't know how to deal with that. When you Rewound on me? That really fucking hurt, Max, I was-”

“If you'd just listened to what I asked for in the first place, instead of trying to sneak around behind my back...Trying to get part of me to turn against myself? Real helpful. Just because you think you know what I’m trying to do, it doesn’t mean you can just ditch me all of a sudden. How about how much that ‘really fucking hurts,’ huh?”

“Isn’t that what you want, though? Me to ditch you? What about that shit you said -- trying to make us never meet in the first place? Huh? Yea, I ain’t forgot about that.”

“Don’t talk about what you don’t understand…”
“Tell ya what I do understand – you’re not really Max.”
“Oh, nice. Yea, because that makes sense...I’m standing right in front of you.”
“You are. But my Max isn’t.”
“Man, just...Fuck you.”
“Excuse me?”
“Ironic – your name is ‘Price,’ but you don’t comprehend the cost of things…”

A teary-eyed huff and a dismissive flick of her wrist, and she was storming off.

The tone in her voice – the shade in her expression – it was a bit chilling to see Max so...angry, with that fury bottled up, threatening to burst out at any moment. So Chloe was silent, and let the topic drop from there as Max stomped off for the car. Seeing this side of Max, knowing what she was capable of, how out of control she was of her own actions, it was hella scary. Made Chloe all kinds of paranoid.

Chloe tried to shuffle her position in the bed. She tried to grab the pillow Max normally would use and spooned it. The voices, each sentence a needle, shifted against her with each fuss of her sleeping position. From other places, other times, a mishmash of what should’ve been the past 24 hours but felt more like a fucking month.

Rachel: “You seriously think she wanted to be with you?”
Stella: “Think about it, Chloe: what's the source of it? Of this power she has?”

Rachel: “Maxine is a people pleaser. She gives people what they want, so she can get what she wants.

Trust me – I know a thing or two about how to play that game…”

Max: “What if...? What if something happens to you while I'm gone?”

Stella: “How can we know if we don't give it a try? I mean, it's what she wants, anyway.”

Rachel: “Face it, Chloe: you're broken. You're desperate. You're clingy, and possessive. And now that you can't be a parasite on Maxine – now that she’s free from you -- you're trying to drag everyone else down, too.”

Max – or maybe not Max?: “I am just as much her as you and...she are...fucking Chloe Price. OK? You're both Chloe, I'm Max, too, stop fucking acting like I'm not, that... Urgh. ”

The tears. Why had she cried? Was that Max's tears, or...was it the Other Max who'd been crying? Why would the Other Max be crying? This was all her fault, the fuck did she have to cry about?

Stella: “How can you both be like this? Just giving up on trying to figure this out? What the hell?”

“Yea, it doesn’t exactly lend itself to research, dude. Everything we’ve got to work with is fiction.”

Stella: “Then work with that. If fiction is all you have, then fucking work with fiction. ‘It doesn't make sense, it doesn’t make sense, blablabla, life is just weird sometimes, ohhhh, we’ll just never understand this mystical crap,' fucking... Augh, that attitude is just bullshit! Chloe. For real, look…. Look at me. Something had to have started this. This kind of shit doesn’t happen without a cause, a reason.”

“This kind of shit? Like time-travel has happened to someone else before?”

Stella: “For all we know! Fine, let’s assume it hasn’t. Let’s assume there is no explanation for where Max’s powers came from. So what? It doesn’t change the situation we’re stuck in. Even if there’s no scientific crap to explain how Max got these powers, there is a reason why she’s still using them. Max isn’t a mystical, abstract thing. She’s a person. Max is still a human being. There are reasons for how she’s acting. And even if we can never figure out what those reasons are – even if Max herself doesn’t know, and even if none of this can make sense -- we can at least figure out how to end this. We have to try.”

“Stells. Appreciate the enthusiasm, but bein’ frank, here? I don’t have it in me at this point.”

Stella: “As it turns out, Chloe? You’re not the only one who’s been caught up in this. Let me help you.”
"I'm...not sure I can be helped. You should be focusing on Max. She's the one that needs it."

**Stella:** “You both deserve support! Just because your problems aren't supernatural doesn't make them less valid!”

**Rachel:** “Maybe you hid it from Maxine for a while? But she's a smart one. Eventually, she saw through you – just like I did. And she left. Juhhhhst like I did. I envy her, really. She had the courage to leave you before the damage was done...”

**That Other Max:** “Is that what she told you about me? Pff. She's such a fucking hypocrite...Spending too much time around you, if she's letting your tendencies rub off on her like that. I'm not something to be forgotten, to be run away from, to be cast aside. Not anymore.”

**Stella:** “You look like you're going to pass out, Chloe. Take a breath. I heard you two arguing back there on our way to the car. This crap is getting to you – how could it not? Just take my advice and let me help you already. Take a load off for a few days.”

**That Fucking Frustrating Max:** “You're like a drug to me, Chloe. I love you, but...I'm done being an addict. Whether you want to or not – whether she wants to or not – this is how it's supposed to happen. You’re in our way. You’re in your own way. You always have been.”

**Rachel:** “If you'd just listened, Chloe, you fucking lunatic ...-! You never listen!”

And now she’s going to die .”

-BANG-

And now Rachel's going to die.

-BANG-

And now Frank's going to die.

-BANG-

And now Stella's going to die.

-BANG-

And now CHLOE’S going to die.

-BANG-

You shot them all.

Fuckin' A.

The past would not shut up. She would not shut up. And it wasn't even her, just...goddamn echoes and whispers.

“Fucking moron. Bullets and bottles of booze...The hell'd you expect, ya dumb bitch?”
At least Chloe had some kind of idea as to what Max was dealing with now. Having voices in your head that wouldn’t leave you alone was pretty goddamn painful. So were the headaches. Fucking headaches, argh…

“Me? I didn't do anything. You did this to yourself.”

There was, of course, one easy solution.

“Look at this. Look at what you bring upon yourself.”

Upon lifting herself from bed, Chloe could feel…snot? Nope. Really? Ught.

She’d bled through her nose all over her pillow. God…cocking…fuck.

“You'd just bring destruction to everyone around you.”

She’d deal with that later.

“Including me.”

Chloe fumbled for the kitchen, shuffling through the cabinets until she found a remedy she knew she could rely on in a pinch. Dr. Jack Daniel was always up for a house call, no matter what hour.

“This is all your fault, isn't it?”

Anything to shut it all up.

“You're the reason all of this has happened.”

She needed it all to shut up.

“If it weren't for you, we wouldn't be broken.”

She’d SHUT IT THE HELL UP, ALREADY.

YOU BROKE US, CHLOE PRICE.
 Shut up.

YoU BrOKE uS

Chloe's shaking hands couldn't grip the glass she'd grabbed. The static, the NOISE, it shook her.

BROKE us
fucking broke us!

The glass shattered to the floor, leaving her mesmerized at its reflective pieces – so many little pieces from one single source, now hopelessly separated and useless on their own.

chloE pricE broKe us
BROKEN...

Fuck it, she didn't even need a damned glass. She'd drink it straight from the bottle.

In short order, Chloe sent her reality spinning.

–

Round n' round, quicker n' quicker, the very wind itself bein' made weaponry.

Just like last time the pair had been sailin' down such dire straits, the Cap'n had worked 'er mysterious magic. Her curse brought fortune in the face o' defeat.

By takin' hold o' Chlo's hand, a bright glow shone betwixt star-crossed palms, flashin' in rhythm with the mighty thunder 'round them all.

Liftin' her eyepatch to reveal the cursed hole in 'er skull, Maximus had summoned a riotous Storm to decimate their foes – again. From the galaxial vortex within 'er empty eye socket had been born a vicious calamity, all o'er again.

The Beast's army were cast aside with ease in the face o' the Storm. And Brownbeard wit' 'em. Chlo feared he would quick enough join their skeletal ranks. The thought were unpleasant. As bones an' their vengeful spirits were knocked aside, plunged 'long with planks to the ravaging seas, Chlo were paralyzed. How many o' these lost souls had she known? Shared mead with? Bled blood with?

The Beast clawed her finned fingers 'gainst her deteriorating vessel as it 'twere all swallowed up.

A wrathful 'NGAH!' waile long toward the heavens, where such a Beast ne'er could tread. She were put back to the Under, 'neath the waves, where she'd been afore, where she'd remain.

Dust back unto dust.

Where she belonged.
With 'er mystic abilities, wond'rous and arcane, Cap'n Maximus transported the pair up and away from the Beast an' her failing fleet. Planks o' wood, torn asunder. Arcadian bones, scattered to the sea.

All their problems were vanished away with the mighty winds. Just as it had been a time ago.

When Chlo came back to, she were swathed in 'er Cap'n's cold bosom, encased in cold arms, shivering upon a cold shore. Their ship were washed upon the beach, its boards beaten and broken. The anchor had been cast out into the sand, keepin' the ol' girl tied to land should the tides rise back up.

The Storm had lifted them n' theirs cross the sea, back to this familiar shore, but not wit'out some destruction afore.

Takin' a moment or three to ingest these harrowing happenings, Chlo pondered their place in the plane of existence: were they squarely planted in reality, or somewhere far, far north o' such?

Maximus' lips, like the side of a steel blade, touched Chlo's head, like appointin' 'er Knight.

“I'll not 'ave us be separated again,” said the Cap'n quietly. “Specially not by her.”

“Do ye know her?” Chlo contemplated.

Maximus, straightening out 'er fine hat back to its proper place, dropped a salty sigh.

The Cap'n posed a perplexed pondery: “Do ye not?”

“...Aye, no, ah don't,” Chlo grumbled.

The Cap'n shrugged, straightening out her mangled mane.

“Better not to pay 'er heed, then. T'ain't no matter of our concern. Not at this juncture, least.”

“Reckon that's fair...”

Chlo were discombobulated by this set of events what they'd put in motion once again. She'd gone n' thought t'were all behind them.

“Cap'n,” said Chlo cautiously. “Seein' all those ghoulish faces again—'Tweren't easy.”

“Never is.”

“Supposin' it ain't, but—” Chlo let loose a wary breath. “Was it on account o' me? All those walkin' corpses...”

“Ne'er twere on account o' you, Chlo. Just what they'd be wantin' ye to think.”

“That...Monster, though. She were oddly familiar.”

“I'd told ye: don't go mindin' 'er, Mate. She ain't Human.”

Chlo were caught in a moment of mesmerizing pause, lost in the galaxy o' lights contained within 'er Cap'n's missing eye.

Chlo carefully wondered, “Are ye sure...we're Human? Wit' what we're capable of? Wit' what we've gone n' done?”
Maximus' good eye gave 'er First Mate a good, hard stare, then wandered to other planes o' thought.

"O' course we're Human, Morpho." Setting 'er eye-patch taut again o'er her infernal gash, the Cap'n scoffed. "Ain't no creeturrs alive what possess the Determination our sort does..."

Acceptin' this answer as a piece o' tiny truth were easy in these moments after their little maelstrom had found its peace. 'Twere the days, weeks, n' months what came after which gave Chlo a fright.

Guided by 'er hooked hand, Chlo were pulled down the dock and back to that good ol’ pub: the Two Whales.

Upon settlin' in fer a drink, Chlo an' her Cap'n rest their weary souls at the bar. Tori the Chaser cast judgmental eyes upon the pair, straight away.

"That were a quick trip," she remarked. "Why d'ye look run so ragged? 'N where be yer scruffy companion? "

“Brownbeard?” Maximus clarified. “Lost at sea, he was. Quite a Storm...We barely made it to shore wit' our limbs attached...”

Bit of a lie, 'twas...But Chlo were too scared to correct it. Either which way, Brownbeard were gone...as were 'is mutt. Didn't leave a good sensation in Chlo's tangled up bowels. But a worse sensation were to be waitin' behind irons, so avoidin' that fate were the easy choice.

“Attacked by that Monster freebooter, we were,” Chlo confessed. “Rumors 'bout that creeturr were true.”

“Well, blimey,” Tori scoffed. “What in the Under's name are ye doin' 'ere after such ordeals? This yarn be one 'o truth, what yer spinnin'? Or 'nother one 'o yer flights o’ fancy?”

“Truth's a spot diff'cult to define in these times,” Maximus grumbled. “Rather be swimmin' in the 'truth' o' yer stiffest rum than what…'truth'…be waitin' fer us out there, 'neath the waves.”

“Waitin'?” Tori probed whilst fillin' two black jacks for the pair. “What be waitin'?"

“Oh, aye,” said Maximus darkly. “Wretched ghost of a cap'n...That Monster shows 'er face 'round here again, n' we'll be dancin' the hempen jig.”

Chlo shrugged at this notion, scratchin' an itch round the back o' her neck with 'er hook.

“Bein' a ghost, or Monster o' sorts,” propositioned the Chaser, “what use would be a hempen halter?”

Maximus scowled at this, shaking 'er head.

“Said that wit' a sort o' different meaning, I did. When a cutlass n' flintlock can't do the trick,” said the Cap'n, “there's a will and a way to sort the shark bait from the rest of us...” She scratched an itch 'neath 'er eyepatch, giving her First Mate a spry smirk what roused a great discomfort in Chlo's skull.

Relyin' on such Determined means o' resolution were makin' the Cap'n less Human, while convincin' 'erself she were more for it. A problem for all involved, for true.

But a problem what could gladly be postponed on account o' the pleasures to reap, aye.

Plenty o' rum later and three sheets to the wind, the Cap'n had roused much more than discomfort betwixt Chlo's nethers. Were lucky to have a Cap'n wit two hands, 'stead of one...but Maximus
couldn't heave ho the way Chlo knew she could...'Stead, the might Cap'n took a caulk wit' her hand inside...Blow Chlo down – or not, as 'twere.

Chlo, e'er the grog blossom 'erself, found 'er Cap'n's sudden need to nap a laughin' matter. But a cryin' one, at once.

Either which way the wind was singin', 'twere time fer Chlo to make her bladder gladder. Unload her burden.

Removin' Maximus' sleeping fingers from 'er trousers an’ settin’ the Cap’n down upon the table, Chlo shoved off – not before sippin' the last of 'er rum, 'o course.

Out on the docks, Chlo went about the sweet n’ somber relief of expelling that which were bringin' her pleasure that evening. Sad, how such delights passed right through 'er so quick.

'Twere so dark that night, n' the waves so raucous, Chlo hadn't noticed what 'ad swept itself upon her 'til she were cornered on the dock.

Still paintin’ the sea a spot o’ yellow, Chlo were aghast at what crawled up, right from the ocean, onto the water-worn wood to 'er side. Some sort o' shadow wit' ill intent 'ad caught Chlo with 'er pants down.

Unbending her knees and pullin’ up 'er breeches in a panic, Chlo reached for 'er cutlass as fear gripped her cold.

A pale sliver o' moonlight, off the waters beside, cast enough sight for Chlo to face her foe, but t'was a sparkling eyeball, spitting white light in a fervor, what gave Chloe pause.

T'was that wretched Monster Cap'n, still in tact, though worse for wear. In one finned hand, she carried that cursed Crown...and in the o' ter, that supernat’ral Spear...

“Sink me!” Chlo growled, castin’ her fear up like a white flag. “What in the Under keeps ye from feedin' fish, ya mad Beast?!”

“Yo...ho...ho,” hissed the Beast, gleaning her razor grin. “I am the Undying One. Thought a stupid little STORM could end ME, huh??”

Draggin' her glowing Spear 'gainst the dock, a horrid scraping sound cut at Chlo's ear. Closer n' closer she came.

-squetch!-

Clean through went the Beast's Spear, deliverin' a furious Justice to Morpho's gut. The Monster whisper’d in Chlo’s ear with a righteous glee.

“YOU're going have to try a little harder than THAT.”

–

The morning hit Chloe hard – waking up in a momentary panic that she'd pissed herself in bed. Coming to – and realizing she was clean and dry, but her insides were about to burst – Chloe reflected on how annoying that shit was. How her brain couldn't just wake up the rest of her, but had to go and play tricks on itself.

She checked her phone, just in case the Union had sorted out a new gig for her, but no such luck.
Then again, Chloe wasn't sure she was ready to start a new job right then, anyway. Dropping her phone back onto her nightstand, Chloe took in the morning for a morning, rubbing sand from her eyes, trying to figure out what to do with her day.

Well, she needed to take a leak pretty damn bad, so that was a good start.

Chloe rapidly escorted herself to the toilet, nearly tripping over that mess of Max’s clothes again.

Having forgotten her phone in her rush, Chloe was stuck taking her morning piss with nothing but her own thoughts – which was quite discomforting.

*Today, she thought to herself, is all about giving myself what I need for a change.*

After moments of waiting while her piss streamed out into the toilet bowl below, Chloe concluded that a grocery run was in order. A seconds later, and she was already impatient with her own body for how much goddamn liquid it had stored up. Jesus.

After finishing her business in the bathroom, Chloe quickly realized how hung-over she was. Trying to wash her hands proved to be a painful act with her insides suddenly squeamish from the sudden change of contents.

All the more reason to grab some grub, though, right? Get some…bananas. Those always seemed to help.

Chloe went to make herself some coffee, only to be disappointed to realize that the container was empty. Goddamnit. She’d…make up for it after she got back home.

There was a small helping of orange juice left in the fridge, so Chloe guzzled it straight from the jug as a quick pick-me-up. Rinsing the empty container out in the sink – which was unfortunately full of dirty dishes left unattended to – Chloe was mesmerized by the way the water spilled around. Droplets bounced off the jug’s lip, off its outside. Little trickles slid down the sides. A mass of water piled up inside, higher and higher, until it overflowed. Chloe was hypnotized by the sight for a moment. When she came to, she emptied some off the top, then gave the jug a good shaking, trying to wipe clean any traces of the container’s previously held liquid.

And then, ultimately, the faucet was shut off. The container rested in Chloe’s hand for a moment, full of churned, dirty water, only to be dumped empty, re-rinsed, and tossed in the recycling bin. Drying her hands on a musty rag nearby, Chloe took a deep breath as her mind wandered.

Chloe found herself wondering what would happen to Max if, like the jug, she overflowed.

Or was that exactly what they were dealing with?

It *felt* like that was what they’d been dealing with.

It *felt* like Chloe was the lid. Screwed on tight. So tight it had been pretty hard to *unscrew* off.

But necessary to be removed if some of that dirty water could be dumped out to make room for clean water. Or, uh…well, you could probably, like…make some Tang instead, or something.

Chloe was suddenly super thirsty for Tang. Actually, maybe Sunny D instead.

She reviewed the whiteboard on their fridge for a list of groceries.

What she found instead was a stick figure drawing – Max’s. A huge head, with beady little eyes and sad little eyebrows. It had its mouth open wide, sticking a finger toward itself.
{FEED ME}, it said in an orange tone, its dry-erase voice silent.

With a heavy sigh, Chloe took their magnetic marker, flipped its eraser side around, and started to delete the remnant Max had left behind. It would hurt too much to have to look at every time she'd be passing the fridge by.

After brushing this painful moment aside, Chloe realized she was without a grocery list.

Screw it, she'd just play it by ear. Hell, for once she wouldn't even have to worry about getting shit that was 'gluten-free' and could eat some nice, easy, unhealthy microwavable meat-things without any guilt. So...that was a plu?

Hm, probably better to eat something before going food-shopping, though, else her stomach would be deciding things instead of her brain. Bleh – though, with how sick she was feeling from her hangover, maybe that wasn't something to worry about, anyway. Still, Chloe knew she needed food in her. And probably some water.

Their water filter in the fridge was empty – too lazy and grouchy to wait on that, Chloe just chugged a glass of tap water down.

They were out of milk, so cereal was out of the question. To the freezer – which was basically empty.

A pair of hash brown patties were tucked in the corner, though, near the mostly empty ice cube tray. They would do.

Chloe popped the rectangular slices of processed potato into their crumb-riddled toaster. She tried to chug another glass of water, but found herself lacking in thirst after a couple sips.

Waiting on her breakfast, she went to check her e-mail on the ol' Lappy. Erh, their e-mail.

Spam account first.

[ Hello, PriceField InCrime ]

The trash from Amazon and RedBubble and all that crap was quickly tossed without a second glance.

[ Arcadia Chronicle] – [Commemorating those we lost five. . .]

Chloe decided it best to...mark that one as read, and just leave it be.

Nothing else to see there, really. On to the personal account.

[ Hello, PriceField InTime ]

[ Victoria C.] – [We Need to TALK]

Goddamnit.

Chloe's finger lingered over the touchpad for a moment, intending on ignoring the message.
Her curiosity got the better of her, though.

She was surprised at how brief the e-mail was, flying contrary to every other e-mail she'd ever seen Victoria send their way.

[Chloe Price,]
[Truce?]
[Call me ASAP.]

Weird. Unnerving. Chloe was thoroughly unnerved.

Her gut reaction was to be mad.

But she just didn't have it in her at that point. Being angry was exhausting. She'd just spent an entire weekend being angry – plus interest, given however the hell long she'd been stuck in whatever the hell episode of the Twilight Zone she'd inhabited with Stella...

All the same, though, 'ASAP' needed to be amended to 'ASAI'm-good-n-ready-don't-tell-me-what-to-do-homewrecker.'

The toaster went off. It hadn't been long enough...stupid thing.

Sure enough, the hash-browns were still floppy and squishy. Dumb toaster was too old, and the timer didn't seem to work. Crap either got overcooked or undercooked. They needed a new one, but Chloe was waiting on another contract job before splurging on anything not critical. With a sigh, Chloe set the toaster again.

A couple more sips of tap water, and Chloe trudged her way back to the bedroom to retrieve her phone. This time, instead of tripping over it again, she kicked all of Max's abandoned laundry back into the closet, leaving it in a mess on the floor. In retrospect, she found it weird just how long Max had lingered on picking a friggin' shirt that morning, making them late.

Actually...If Chloe's hunch was right, it had been that Other Max who had taken so long. Was deciding on her wardrobe her critical weakness? Because that was definitely not the Max she knew.

Hell, the shirt she'd ended up picking in the end was...-

Wait.

Hadin't it been one of those trashy old shirts that Rachel had used to own?

Why...would she have picked one of those?

Why did they even still have any of those?

Momentarily distracted by this thought, Chloe rummaged through the laundry on the floor.

Sure enough...a few of Rachel's old shirts. Chloe hadn't seen them in so long, she'd assumed they'd been lost, or thrown out, or...-

Why did Max still have these? Why'd she have them at all? How'd-?!
Ah – they hadn't visited Max's dorm the night of the Storm, way back then. Too risky. They'd just packed up a bunch of clothes from Chloe's closet. So...OK, sure, that's why Max had them in the first place, whatever, but...

Why the *fuck* did she have these *now*?! After all that time? She didn't even *wear* them! What was the point?!

And yet, Max was probably wearing one of them right that moment, as Chloe pondered it.

That thought...kind of pissed Chloe off, but she couldn't pinpoint why.

She felt violated, in some way, by the presence of these articles in her home after all this time.

Her fist clenched from the frustration, the stress. She clenched her fist so hard, her nails dug into her skin.

Why did Max still have these?

Sentimental value? Maybe? This one shirt: **Red.** A cow skull with little lightning bolts...it was the shirt Max had been wearing when they'd faced that Storm, up at the lighthouse...

It had been so damned *cold* that night...So cold, and so warm at the same time.

Like right then. The cold, salty air beneath the golden glow of the setting sun...

Chloe suddenly realized that her balled up fist had gotten super hot all of a sudden, so she opened it, letting the calming ocean breeze cool it down.

A ringtone blasted Chloe's ears.

By the time she realized it *was* a ringtone...she realized it wasn't *hers.*

She realized she wasn't in her apartment anymore, either.

But that shirt was still there.

Cow skull with little lightning bolts...flexing, moving, ever so slightly fluttering in the wind.

Golden strands in golden light, fluttering the wind.

"-obviously, yes. Of course. But you didn't hear it from me..." A sneaky giggle. A mischievous grin.

Chloe's chest froze. Her breathing stopped, her lungs frozen.

There she was – **her.** On the phone. Right in front of Chloe. *There she was.*

The golden sky behind her, a warm, glowing campfire in front of her, gabbing away on her phone, like nothing was wrong: Rachel Amber.

The shape of her nose, the contours of her chin, the weight of her hair, the scent of her perfume mixed the smell of burning marijuana, the-

Chloe rubbed at her eyes, assuming she was hallucinating.

She should've known better, though, right?
What she was seeing – hearing, smelling, sensing – was far too acute. Too detailed.

This was the kind of shit Max was dealing with. And now, so was Chloe.

She couldn't deal. She'd freak.

At least, that's what she thought.

“What? Noooooo, no-no-no. He's an idiot.”

But she thought wrong.

“Tssh, like I'm gonna tell you...Nope...Nuh-uh.”

All she could do was sit. Listen. Stare.

“Just...Ha. Listen. Courtney? Dear? You're not getting an answer to that...I am not dignifying that with an answer.”

Chloe tried to understand how or why this was happening. How or why she was here.

“Wh-?! Because! Every girl's gotta have her secrets...”

Had that Other Max somehow...sent her here? That didn’t make sense. She only seemed able to do that when they were dreaming, right?

Had...Chloe done this? Somehow?

Chloe felt sick.

It was a sudden sickness, right in her gut. Painful, briefly, then just nauseous. Sort of like time-sickness, but...way more intense.

The girl before her – Rachel Amber – was casually smoking a shoddily rolled-up joint.

If Chloe was remembering correctly, it was a shoddy job because, at this point in time, Chloe was still learning how to do it.

Rachel was teaching her. It was why they'd come up here, to their cliff side campfire getaway. Another one of Rachel's gracing 'lessons' in punkitude.

“I'm sure...” Still on the phone, Rachel rolled her eyes at Chloe, inciting a reaction from her as she flapped her fingers to imitate whoever she was listening to. “Yea, yea...Just tell Nathan to save some for the rest of us, yea? Gimme like, half an hour, I'll be there to pick you up.”

Chloe remembered this evening, if only vaguely.

It was a sharp, sudden sting of pain to go from barely recollecting such an evening...to vividly living it.

As vividly as she could, at least, with how drunk she was feeling. No mistaking that sensation. It was bizarrely poignant, though...

Oh. Right. This was...way at the start of Chloe's adventures into alcohol. Like, the frickin' pilot episode of that series of events. This was one of the first times she’d ever gotten drunk...
“Hey.” Rachel was suddenly all up in Chloe's face, bending over her tip-toes in a way that seemed to intentionally draw Chloe's eyes to her chest. Chloe immediately looked away where back then she would've snuck a few glances in. “You OK?”

Chloe went to speak, but ending up coughing instead. A bit of heartburn slipped up her throat, but she managed to keep it down.

“Hey,” Rachel repeated, more serious this time. She planted her palm against Chloe's cheek.

It felt heavenly, just like Chloe remembered it. That delicate stroke of Rachel's thumb against her jawline...The way she'd daintily toke up, then gently shotgun the smoke right into Chloe's mouth.

Chloe couldn't help but relive all of it, if...just for a moment. A moment wouldn't kill anybody. Just to confirm how real it was, right?

“Not getting sick on me, are ya?” Rachel taunted. “Lightweight?”

“Mm,” Chloe hummed dreamily, too caught up in the avalanche of pleasant sensations to make sense of any of it.

Rachel snickered, planting a kiss against Chloe's cheek. Then against her neck.

Chloe felt stuck in this moment.

A third and final kiss on her lips, and she couldn't help but reciprocate, like letting a dream take over.

She couldn't even remember the last time her dreams had taken her here, though. Much less feeling this...real. Was she still asleep? Had the whole wakeup routine just been a dream within a dream? Because if so, she was calling bullshit on that, and this Other Max was gonna get a piece of-

Rachel’s kissing had slithered its way down to Chloe’s chest, lighting it on fire.

If this was a dream, then goddamn.

With her hand still flush against Chloe's skin and her lips leaving saliva on Chloe’s collarbone, Rachel chuckled softly. Slyly.

Rachel quietly teased, “Enjoying ourselves, are we?”

The guilt set in immediately after that moment. Like waking from that dream.

That kind of contact, realizing how detailed it felt, brought everything reeling to a halt for her.

Max was the one who kissed her like this. The only one. That had been her reality for five years now.

Experiencing it from someone else, from that long ago, made the distinct unreality of the situation jarring as hell.

Chloe nudged the hand away, avoiding that sneaky glimmer in Rachel's eyes which she'd once found so alluring, so long ago.

This was messed up. All of it. But especially...that look in Rachel's eyes. Because now Chloe understood what it really was.

It wasn't love. At least, not the sort of love Chloe had been looking for back then, the kind Chloe had
been so desperate for. It was a different sort of desire in Rachel's eyes. A look Chloe had misread, time and again, as something deeper than it actually was. Like she'd been peering into a muddy puddle way back then, unable to decipher its depth, left in wonderment at how far it went. But now, in hindsight, the mud was dispersed, and she could see clear through it for what it was: a puddle.

Yet even now – whatever 'now' was for her, even – she was almost falling for that same trap, all over again.

No wonder Max was so goddamn cranky, if she was dealing with this kind of fucked up stuff every day.

“What's up with you all of a sudden?” Rachel pouted, her brow furrowing as she stood back up. “This isn't about... I thought this was what you wanted. The Pisces, getting the Cancer out of her old, rigid comfort zone? That's what you've been doing for me. I'm trying to play along.”

Chloe shrugged defensively, not sure how to counter...fucking astrology logic. And to think she'd used to study it back then, just to try and impress this person. Rachel was still going on.

“We're both water signs, Baby. We thrive on intuition. Our emotions are our bond. So we have to keep those emotions in check. And anyway, the more we talk about things, the more we rob the magic from it all. Intuition, Chlo.”

Intuition?

What had Rachel Amber intuited from Frank Bowers before she'd decided to screw Chloe over, ditch her to the side, and made plans to run away with him?

What had she intuited from Mark Jefferson’s intentions about her ‘future as a model?’

What had she intuited from Nathan Prescott before he'd fucking OD’d her to death?

For all this goddamn intuition Rachel talked about, her radar seemed broken at the most critical times.

To be fair, though, Chloe had been flying even blinder back in those days. Hell, still was, huh?

Being stuck in this inbetween of bitterness at the past while simultaneously being literally in the past was really messing with Chloe's brain. But here was an opportunity for clarity. Hindsight was supposed to be 20/20, but with Rachel, it had been fuzzy. It couldn’t hurt to try to unfuzz it a bit.

“Do yah...-” Chloe choked on her own drunken words. Talking was hard. “D'you have...fffffeelings for me?” Chloe asked, straight up, trying to focus her eyes hard enough to convey her seriousness.

She knew she'd asked Rachel that question a few times. Maybe three or four.

Aside from the very last time she'd asked, Chloe had always gotten the same answer. She got that answer again that time, too.

“Chloe.” A pitying smile. One Chloe had used to read as sympathy and understanding. “We agreed to not make this more of a thing than it is... And what did I just say about not ruining the magic?”

“Yes ’r no,” Chloe pressed, feeling a rush of adrenaline at this entire situation she was in.

When it Rome – or, when in the goddamn past...-

“Chlo-eee...” Rachel timidly laughed, masking her nervousness as she leaned back into Chloe. She hummed a pacifying sound as she kissed Chloe on the neck again, swarming Chloe's senses with
heat all over again.

“Need-ah breathe,” Chloe finally managed out, skidding herself backwards on her ass. She could feel the warmth of the fire pit to her side, a decidedly more manageable kind of heat to deal with.

“Wh-whoa, OK, OK,” Rachel eased, taking a step backward herself. “Take a minute. Breathe, then.” After a bitter breeze swept over them, she buttoned her plaid overshirt back over that t-shirt. “Breathe, it’s all right. Seriously, though. Chloe. Dear. If you start feeling sick, let me know. Mm’kay?”

Chloe nodded hastily, scrambling up to her feet and nearly slipping backward. She'd taken her shoes off at some point prior to ’arriving’ here. Too scared and scatter-brained to find her footwear in that instant, Chloe walked off, away from the fire pit.

Her mind was spinning with possibilities, and her balance was just plain...spinning.

If she was really in the past...could she change the future?

Or was her being here something that had already happened the way it had happened?

A tree caught Chloe's attention – it had an engraving cut into it. She had to focus through the hazy mists of drunkenness to read it out.

{Turn this way now or}
{Face the lonely autumn tree}
{And never look back}

A haiku.

One that seemed to summarize Chloe's current predicament.

“One of my friends says they know the kid who did that one,” Rachel cited, noting Chloe's sudden fixation on the haiku. “They won't tell me who. Makes me figure it's them, you know? Now, this one, though...”

Chloe could hear Rachel kicking her steel-toed boot against the base of a different tree. She whirled back around, almost stepping sideways in her daze.

With her blunt wedged in her teeth, Rachel nonchalantly cited, “I know this was you, Chlo.”

She pulled the joint from her mouth and puffed a slow stream of smoke out. Chloe's attention was drawn to where Rachel's resided. Another tree engraving. Messy, large cursive.

{Max + Chloe}
{BFF Pirates}
{2008}

“So.” Rachel's head twisted to Chloe as a giddy smile glowed from her, eyes narrowed with suspicion. “When am I gonna get the story behind this one, huh?”

Chloe sheepishly shook her head, scratching her hand through her hair, which felt dry as straw. Right – all of that color experimentation, all of that hair dying. Bleached, purple, then blue, back to back...

“Come on, Chlo, you've gotta give me something,” Rachel playfully pleaded, running her finger
across Max's name, tracing the outline.

“Yeh,” Chloe grunted out, scratching at her collarbone crankily. “Mm. Was me. Ah...I wrote that.”

“Well. Who was he? This 'Max' kid. Your first flame? Heh.” She raised a sly eyebrow toward Chloe, her lips curling with mischief. “Was he your First...Mate?”

“Um...” Chloe felt...angry. Hearing Rachel talk about Max like that? In such indirect, callous terms. How else could she, though? This was before Rachel knew who Max was. And it wasn't like she'd ever learned that much about Max, as Chloe had been so eager to try and forget.

Leave her behind.

“Damn, though.” Rachel had rolled by Chloe's silence, opting to linger on the carving. “2008...That's...” She took a hit, bobbing her head left and right as she counted backwards. She exhaled, coughing a bit as she laughed. “You would've been – what – like, twelve?”

“Yes,” Chloe confirmed, carefully walking across the dirt. A leaf stuck to her left foot, while a twig poked at the other. “Middle school. Wuhhhh...We were...” Chloe took a breath, rubbing at her neck tiredly. “We were bess friends.”

“Just friends?” Rachel goaded.

“Duuuuude, we were twelve,” Chloe sighed, running her palm over her face.

“Hey, I don't judge,” Rachel eased, flicking up one palm in defense. “With the tales you've heard from me, you should know that by now...”

Rachel took one last toke before flicking the joint off the cliff's edge, but held the smoke in for a long time.

Chloe was...really not in the mood to be suddenly pushed into dealing with this side of Rachel. All the teasing, and taunting. In a way, it was Rachel who'd influenced Chloe into...doing all of that with people. And yet, here she was, re-living it, finding herself kind of disenchanted by it, where before she had been absolutely captivated by it.

Rachel had come right upon her, trying to shotgun more second-hand smoke at her. Chloe gave a slight shake of her head, and Rachel puffed it all out in her face, anyway.

Why couldn't Chloe have fucking time-traveled to some other day back then? Some day when Rachel wasn't smoking out, or getting Chloe drunk? This wasn't how she wanted to remember Rachel Amber.

Rachel had been her angel.

But, in retrospect, she'd also been Chloe's devil, too.

Before Rachel, Chloe Price had been, well...a nerd. A long-haired, blonde, bright-eyed, chirpy-voiced geek. One eager to change, always pushing people around her to break out of their shells. Try things they hadn't before. Rachel redefined that for her. Sure, Chloe had been heading down that path herself, trying to learn how to skateboard and sneaking in cigarettes, but always bumbling, always unconfident, always lacking conviction.

Rachel had shown her the ways. Rachel had helped her find her identity. Helped her find herself. Given her the tools, the directions, the means to accomplish what she'd always wanted to: be
different.

She’d needed that – to feel different. Because the person she’d been before Rachel had clearly been too boring. Not worth staying in contact with. Not worth her mom staying single for, paying more attention to – an unfair, completely bullshit idea, but how her teenage self had seen things. Not worth attending a normal school – she couldn’t stand out there, she was too samey. She needed to be put in a special school, where even then she could never find popularity.

But Chloe Price the punk was way more interesting than Chloe Price the geek.

Rachel had gotten her there.

Yet, as Chloe breathed in that second-hand vapor, she found herself realizing that being different – haircuts, clothes, attitude, tatts, piercings – still couldn’t fix the underlying problem.

No one could be bothered to stay by her side.

No one could be bothered to stay honest with her.

Not even Rachel, her angel.

Not even Max, her soon-to-be wife.

They’d both lied to her.

Because everyone lied. No exceptions.

Chloe lied, too. Maybe most often to herself.

She had to come to terms with reality – past, present, and future – that nothing, no one, could be 100% infallible. It had taken years, but Chloe was finally at a place where that truth could sink in and she could be OK with it.

But the past still hurt like a bitch.

“All right,” Rachel sighed, reacting to Chloe's bitter silence. “I mean, like – damn. I pegged you for a sad drunk, but...” She chuckled sheepishly, trying to incite a smile. She didn't get one. “I, uh-...I've got to go pick up some stuff from our florist. Nice bouquet for the dance tonight, if ya know what I mean.” She did a little show-offy jig, twisting herself around a little before pushing her hair back behind her shoulders. “Chloe,” she spat, giving the time-displaced woman a playful shove. “Smile a little, gurl. Relax. Soak in nature. And, uh, put out the fire when you're done. I'll be back in, like, forty minutes – with company. Then we'll really get things rolling around here...”

Chloe couldn't...speak.

She was too consumed with anger. Disappointment.

If this 'dance' was what she suspected, it was the start of...involvement with the Vortex Club kids. Which inevitably led to Rachel's end.

And yet, even then, Chloe couldn't...say anything. Do anything. She was too petrified of fucking something up. Messing up reality any more than Max already had.

She let Rachel head off down the hill's path. She sat back down by the campfire, which was beginning to wane away without fuel.
She just wanted to go back home. She wanted to be with Max. She’d settle for being alone with her goddamn Playstation, a hot pizza, and a cold beer. Being drunk was too stressful here. Home drunk would be...a lot better.

The only company she did have, however, was a dying campfire and a nearly empty cooler of IPA drifting in mostly melted ice. It would have to do. Sitting behind the cooler, up against the sizable rock that kept their fire pit company, Chloe noticed a spray can, left abandoned. She picked it up, gave it a shake – still a little juice left.

Heh, she'd have to vandalize something. That couldn't fuck up any kind of reality, right? She’d just leave a nice mark somewhere. A warning for the teens of Arcadia Bay. Hell, for her past self.

Cracking open another bottle on her key chain, Chloe tossed the bottle cap into the flame. Watching it slightly bend and warp as its environment deformed its shape, Chloe savored the quiet.

The moment of peace and quiet she found herself in again.

But that sense of peace, like the bottle cap, was bent and warped by pain.

All of this goddamn pain she'd left behind. Back in this time. Back in this place.

After everything she'd put up with in this fuckwad town, she'd leave a message behind for whoever cared to read it.

With her nearly empty spray can, Chloe forced herself through her intoxication to etch a phrase into the rock beside her.

{TRUST}
{ NO ONE}

After chucking the spray can off the cliff, Chloe drank herself into a nap, letting everything about this out-of-time experience wash away.

A jarring text alert jingle snapped her back awake.

Coming to, she realized her face was buried in musty laundry. On the floor of her apartment.

Back where she was supposed to be.

It begged the question, of course: 'was it all a dream?' She doubted it.

At this point, did it really matter, though? Either way?

Dream or not, reality or not, past or present, the end result was the same: unease. Frustration. Regret.

Pain and pressure.

Chloe grumpily shoved the laundry into a heap in the corner of the closet's floor, but not before grabbing the few shirts she recognized. Rachel's old clothes didn't have a place in this home. They belonged in the past, and they should've stayed there.

Stomping herself to the kitchen in a bleary-eyed stupor, Chloe could feel her insides squirming with discomfort with a headache to match. She chucked the t-shirts into the trash bin, then noticed the toaster smelt of burnt potato. Sighing impatiently, she went to pluck the blackened hash browns up from the faulty appliance – shit, too hot still. Damnit all to hell.
In her lack of cool, Chloe unplugged the toaster and tossed that into the trash, as well, hash browns and all.

The voices, the visions, the other-worldly sensations, it had all dissolved away.

But the aching had not.

Feeling right and ready to continue chucking useless things into the garbage, Chloe ransacked their fridge and freezer, disposing of anything that was questionable. With this catharsis helping a little, Chloe escorted the now full trash bag to its rightful dumpster in the apartment complex’s parking lot.

She bumped into a pair of neighbors whose names she couldn't be bothered to remember. They gave her friendly enough nods and waves, but she was far too groggy, hungover, and cranky to reciprocate. Like it even mattered.

Like any of this mattered.

Groceries, appliances, e-mails, laundry...none of it fucking mattered. She could try and go about having a nice, normal, slow, calming day to herself, but it wouldn't matter.

The love of Chloe's life was a broken mess, and now, so was she.

No. No, she had always been a broken mess.

She was just self-aware of it now, because that brokenness had been passed on to the one person in her life who least deserved it.

Arriving back at her apartment, she decided to take a shower, clear her head, clean up. It didn't help much.

As she was brushing her damp hair out, her phone went off again. She ignored it. She'd neglecting it all morning – it was still back on her night stand. Whoever was trying to call her was pretty dead-set, though. Instead of leaving a voicemail, they called her right back again. Brush still in hand, Chloe growled to herself and marched to the bedroom.

Was it Max? The Other Max, maybe? Calling to rub in her face how fucking good she was at twisting with time, shoving people around with her weird-ass powers, instead of-


Nope-in' right the hell outta that conversation.

Chloe was not in the mood.

When Chloe didn't pick up a second time, resuming her self-tidying, she heard her text alert go off. Ol' Sticky Vickie could wait. Chloe had errands to run. They were out of food.

But Chloe was too friggin' curious to not at least read. You know, just in case.

(Victoria) – (Where are you???)
Oh, an angry emoji, too. Nice.

(Chloe) – (goin out for a food run.)
(this an emergency or..?)

Gearing up for her grocery run, Chloe...couldn't help but opt to grab a hat from their 'beanie bowl.'
The yarn-knit Kirby hat caught her eye. She was in a particularly hungry mood. What better way to adult than buying groceries dressed in whimsical swag?

On her way out of their apartment complex, she got a reply.

(Victoria) – (This whole week’s an ‘emergency.’)
(Would you please stop avoiding me and TALK?)

(Chloe) – (dude.)
(can this wait like an hour?)

(Victoria) – (Fine.)

Yep. Real pleasant.

But as Chloe started up her car...-

(Victoria) – (Sorry.)
(I really do want to call a truce.)
(Everything going on w/Max has me scared.)

Her engine running as she read this, Chloe found herself a bit glued in place. Victoria had no idea what was actually going on. At least Stella had a clue. But Vic was totally in the dark. It wasn’t Chloe’s place to clear that up – and honestly, it would probably be better to just leave everyone else out of this, anyway, at that point – but after seeing the way Victoria had honestly been trying to help recently...Chloe couldn’t help but feel a little guilty for all the cold-shouldering.

(Chloe) – (yea me too.)

(Victoria) – (Can I meet you at your place in a couple hours?)

Chloe inhaled a sharp breath at this question. She really needed space from all of this drama, instead of indulging it. At the same time, Victoria...seemed to mean well. Stells did seem to be helping, to the point of even taking care of Max for a bit. For better *and* for worse, Vickie obviously...cared.

Fuck.

(Chloe) – (yea all right.)

—

Grabbing a cart and getting to work, Chloe found herself starting off in the produce aisle. Produce was always frustrating to buy. Felt like a damn gamble – went bad so fast that if you didn’t eat it within a couple days it’d fall under the ‘questionable content’ category. Produce was big for Max – no vegan diet, no vegan powers, n’ all that. Er, not that Max was vegan. Anyway. *What* was she looking for, again?

Bananas, some pre-mixed salad would probably be nice.

Hm. Where was…? Oh, right. There.

Fuckin’ *produce*. Took them a few months, but they’d smartened up – Max started to freeze some of it, mix it into a healthy smoothie.

Adulting was full of so many details like this. Learning all of these stupid ins and outs of pinching pennies and compensating for your body getting older and crankier, and—*ugh.*
As Chloe cruised on out of the produce aisle, she was feeling immediately exhausted from all of the social contact around her. So much noise. She wanted it all to be blocked out. Grocery shopping was the goddamn worst.

She pulled out her phone, snatching her earbuds from her pocket, and queued up a song.

Finishing up in the produce aisle, Chloe was surprised to get a text she hadn't at all been expecting.

(Justin) – (yoooooo did yall skip town already or wut??)

Damn, Chloe had...honestly forgotten all about the dude, with everything going on.

(Chloe) – (yea, sorry, man.)
(somethin came up.)

Hm. Spaghetti? Or macaroni noodles? Or maybe just canned stuff, instead...?

(Justin) – (hung wit brook and stella for a bit when u were here)
(sounded like some shits going down??)

Chili? Or pork n' beans...

(Chloe) – (look whatever they told you just don't worry about it? K?)

_Gugh_, but if Chloe got chili, she really oughtta get some sour cream to lighten it up a bit, else her intestines would hate her later.

Hell, they were prolly gonna hate her, anyway. But it tasted better.

(Justin) – (lol no worries bro u know me.)
(dont worrying is like my profession man.)

Eggs? Did Chloe need eggs? She felt like she'd forget about them and they'd go bad...

(Chloe) – (what are you even up to these days?)

Bread. Definitely needed that. Hm, pick up a second loaf, freeze it for later? Or don't bother?
Potato bread. MM. Prolly less healthy, though...?

(Justin) – (uber driver yo. livin the dreaaaamm.)

Chloe smirked at that. Setting his own hours, doing it his own way, seemed...like him.

(Chloe) – (you? driving responsibly?)
(is that even possible?)

Chips, chips.
Chiilaaaaappss.

Never content with plain potato chips (though willing in a snack emergency), Chloe couldn't decide between salt n' vinegar or sour cream. Oh. Wait. Nachos and salsa sounded way better.

(Justin) – (lol apparently! don't even know how I do it.)
(totally baked half the time it's amazing man.)

Aha! Tang. Nice. Some tea was probably a good idea, too – seemed to help when her cranky, stupid
stomach was acting up.

(Chloe) – (how does THAT work?)

Gahhhhhhhhh sure, she'd break and get some Mountain Dew. She barely drank the stuff anymore, but had a real craving to indulge in comfort foods that afternoon.

(Justin) – (relaxed as fuck. obviously.)
(no stress no mess.)

Aaaaand at last, the alcohol aisle. Just the sight of it all was making her hangover stomachache act up. Might need to lay off for a couple days before getting back on that horse.

Still.

Wouldn't hurt to have some waiting in the wings for when she was ready...

(Chloe) – (well I shouldn't really talk, i'm a fucking alcoholic now)
(so)

Feeling a little bitter at her own indulgence, Chloe reached the frozen goods. She stocked up on some Hot Pockets and easy-peasy microwavable junk.

(Justin) – (we all got our vicious dude)
(*vices)
(?)

Chloe found herself feeling a bit dizzy, and took a moment. Her head felt super hot all of a sudden, so she yanked off her yarn Kirby hat and used it to wipe her own sweat. Then she felt cold, so she callously jammed it back on.

She realized she was holding up a woman and her kid, and shifted herself out of the way, muttering an apology she couldn't even hear through her blaring earbuds.

(Chloe) – (ha. Yea vices is the word.)
(guess it comes down to how we use and abuse.)

And then – the wait.

The goddamn wait.

The worst part about grocery shopping.

(Justin) – (hey long as your not hurting anybody what's the prob rite?)

Chloe felt her pudgy stomach gurgle and growl in an unpleasant way – she couldn't tell if it was because she was hungry, or thirsty, or just because she was hungover.

She lamented on the obvious rhetoric: even if she wasn't hurting anyone else...-?

Like, was it out of line for her to be calling out Max on the Rewind shit when she had her own 'vicious?'

(Chloe) – (yea good point.)

The line moved up a person.
(Chloe) – (I worry sometimes I'm hurting MYSELF tho)
(you know?)
(shit maybe that makes no sense)

(nvmd i'm hung)

Chloe stopped herself. She revised the text before sending.

(Chloe) – (nvmd i'm tired)

(Justin) – (whatever your dealin with it sounds rowdy)
(you do you)
(treat yo self!!)

(Chloe) – (lol right. ok dude. I'll try.)

The line moved forward another spot. Still two more ahead of her.

(Chloe) – (thanks for checking in btw)
(sorry i'm a bad friend)
(should've texted you while I was in town.)

(Justin) – (duuuude)
(try some dont worrying for yourself ya?)
(it is alllll gooood in our hood)
(not like it was a happy occasion to visit anyways)
(sides I think takin care of your wife is more important than my pothead ass)

(Chloe) – (ha. She's not my wife yet. Fiance.)
(but what about you? How's the gf?)

(Justin) – (still on active duty)
(real bummer, she was supposed to be back by now)
(i blame trump)

(Chloe) – (lol yea we're all fuckd cuz of that assclown.)
(damn tho. It's been a long time?)
(long distance is a bitch.)
(but if you two got a good thing it'll be worth the wait.)

(Justin) – (I hear that!!)

The line marched forward another dreary, mind-numbing spot.

Waiting in line at the grocery store was miserable. It always made Chloe wonder things. Not just about herself or whatever, but, like, existential shit.

Did her conversation with Justin even friggin' matter? Like, really? For all she knew, she was never gonna see the dude ever again. She could've not seen him since leaving Arcadia, and what would that change? In the grand scheme of things? Nothing.

Say she indulged Icky Vickie's 'truce' and had some forced heart-to-heart, or decided to tell her to cram it up her clamshell? What would it matter?

What was the point of trying to carefully sail along the river of time when you could crash on a
stupid rock you couldn't see around the bend, no matter how good your steering was? Why even bother when the river would keep moving, either way? Too strong a current paddle back, unless your raft had fucking balloons attached to it like Max did. Being able to cheat at life like that, it was no surprise Max seemed to be losing herself…

That old black lady in front of her? What was her story? How'd she end up the type who went all the way to the grocery store just to buy a box of Pepsi and three bags of Doritos? What would she change about things if she could Rewind time?

That hispanic chick behind her – she looked like a high schooler. Why was she there by herself, picking up a whole cart of stuff? Were the diapers and baby formula for a younger sibling? A nephew or niece? Or for her own child?

And those bearded asian dudes in the leather in the next row – they looked rather chummy, were they a couple? Cute gay biker-dude couple? Did that even matter? Was it better to encourage gays being gay out in public? Or was it worse to draw attention to it, and better instead to just act like it didn't matter either way?

Every single goddamn person in this dull, tiring stream of humanity had a story. Had made choices that had led them to where they were. But it didn't “change” anything. It just led everyone right to where they would be, anyway. Right to where they were supposed to be.

'No snowflake ever falls in the wrong place.'

Fortune cookie wisdom from a robotic, air-bending monk. Stella was right – taking knowledge from fiction was better than just giving up and not taking anything. Chloe would rather seek understanding from fucking Overwatch than from the world around her, because said world only reinforced what she'd already known from adolescence: nothing made sense, everyone was horrible, everything led to pain.

Chloe could try to make small-talk, like she did with Justin. She couldn't believe she was going to give Victoria the time of day. But at the end of things? It just...hurt, it suffocated, to be put in such a position as to try and focus and take into account everything about everyone around her, when nothing could be changed, because things were going to be the way they were, regardless.

'If you do not change direction, you may end up where you are headed.'

Still, Chloe wasn't the sort of person to just not wonder, not be curious, not pay attention. Was that something she would've developed even without Max, or was it specifically because of Max?

If it hadn't been for Rachel making the choices she'd made – heading where she'd headed – Chloe would never have reconnected with Max, would she? So what was the fucking point in rubbing that in her face? Throwing her back in that moment with Rachel?

'Death is whimsical today.'

Chloe leaned against the front handle of her shopping cart, burying her face into her arms for a moment, just to escape the over-stimulation.

Chloe’s phone, playing music on shuffle, filled her ears with acoustic guitar, and she lost herself in the music for a moment. It was a song she was intimately familiar with – one she’d heard dozens of incarnations of. It was a song simply titled 'Home,' but itself was a callback, or arrangement of, the primary theme of Chloe’s favorite indie game: Undertale. Since being introduced to the game through Stella a while back, Chloe had found herself forced to swallow her pride. She'd initially
found the irksomely abundant fan culture around the game to be well-founded, if overly pervasive. The game was by no means perfect, but had spoken to her in the strangest of ways and left a lasting impression. It was a game where what the player chose mattered, and literally changed the world within the game. Not drawing attention to that fact with some 'your choices MATTER and will CHANGE the story!' tagline, but just by...being itself. And the meta commentary, weaved into the narrative? AND you go on a date with a fucking goofy skeleton?? Forget it, she was all over that shit, Stells had been 100% A-OK correcto-mundo.

It had taken months of Chloe pestering Max (with some aid from Stells) to get her to finally give it a try, but when Max had finished the damn thing, it had been felt like a loop being closed, connected.

All of Chloe's dumb skeleton puns and references about spaghetti that made no sense, Max finally understood. All of the multitudes of fan remixes Chloe listened to, Max finally had context for. All of the warm fuzzy feelings of one playthrough, and all of the creepypasta elements of another playthrough, Max finally understood why Chloe loved it all so much.

But that one track – the main theme of the game, but specifically that form of the song, with the guitar – was something the two had bonded over long before Max had played it. Not unlike a certain Steven Universe song before Chloe had allowed herself to be taken on that journey.

There was just something about the right song that, even without the complete context, an affinity could be built upon. A connection.

'Free your mind.'

Upon settling on such a pleasant thought, Chloe realized that the shopping cart she was leaned up against was...suddenly very warm. And soft. And breathing.

Groggily waking from her standing meditation, Chloe realized she was actually sitting. In bed. Against Max?

'Embrace tranquility.'

Very keen on this time-jumping bullshit, Chloe quickly surveyed her surroundings and put pieces together. The plaid bedspread, the cramped, studio apartment...the Christmas lights strung around the single window, the walls completely covered with posters, the wooden spool table covered in beer bottles and cigarettes...

Chloe was in her apartment, maybe three or four years back...? The apartment she'd rented while Max had been in college. Back when Max's hair was shorter – as was Chloe's. Back before things had been so complicated.

Coughing on the stinging in her throat, Chloe sensed that past-herself had been vaping. The damn pen was still in her lap. The pleasant warmth and haze of being just a little bit high was at least less gross-feeling than being hungover, or overly drunk. But if she was going to be skipping across time, could Max's stupid powers at least bring her somewhere over the influence, instead of always under? Or was there a connection there?

“What's wrong?” came Max’s quiet, beautiful murmuring.

The music stopped.

With her arms folded against Max's back, Chloe realized that the guitar she'd been listening to had been Max playing 'Home'. Years before Max had even played the game it was from, because she knew Chloe was partial to the song – and the song was so goddamn well known on the Internet, it’d
probably been a cinch to look up the tabs.

“Nothing’s wrong.” Chloe sighed peacefully.

“Chloe? Can I take-?” Max was twisting around, reaching her lanky arm toward Chloe’s lap. “Oh, doy. There it is.”

Max sounded so...different.

Care-free. Happy.

This had been before Max had been actually living with Chloe.

Max casually grabbed the weed pen in Chloe's lap and took a long drag on it. Holding her breath to absorb it in, she gave the device back to Chloe, but noticed her partner's befuddled expression.

The notion struck a painful chord. What if living together, making the whole 'them' thing a real thing, had been what had pushed Max into a bad way? Having to deal with Chloe on a day-to-day basis, instead of just this nice, pleasant, in-between semesters visit?

Breathing out the vapors in a satisfied sigh that Chloe couldn't help but be aroused by, Max scratched at her forehead, tilting her head curiously as she noticed that Chloe was still...discontent.

“Wowser,” Max murmured with concern, setting her guitar down in her lap. Max cooed, “You look so sad...” Twisting around, Max lifted her hand to Chloe's face. “Tell me: what's wrong?”

Another delicate set of fingers, stroking her jawline, just as Rachel had before her.

An uncomfortable shiver ran up Chloe’s spine.

As Max’s dry lips melded against Chloe's, that same shiver ran back down.

Chloe felt a sudden urge to start crying, but choked on it, instead.

“Oh. Yea. It was scary,” Max acknowledged. “You know, you don't have to put up this 'tough punk' act all the time...I know you've got a soft center.”

Chloe uttered out a sheepish laugh from a place she couldn't identify, wiping forming tears from her eyes.

Max kissed Chloe on the cheek, then reached at Chloe's chest – the bullet necklace. Max timidly lifted it up and over Chloe's head, draping it across her own neck. She was adorned in underwear and a 'Blackwell Academy' t-shirt, and with her dorky, unassuming smile, she was cute as hell.

Max explained mischievously, “You should let me be the 'punk' one now and again. I am supposed to be the one protecting you, after all...like I did back there.” She winked and chuckled softly, picking her guitar back up.

Arms wrapped around her own abdomen with discomfort, Chloe tried to figure out what she was even talking about. If she wasn't careful, she might, like...fuck up...reality, or something? That was how that worked, wasn't it?

Every human being in that stream of miserable grocery shopping lines, each one led to that specific place and time by specific sequence of events. If Chloe did one wrong thing, she could screw everything up, right?
Was that what the Other Max wanted her to do? Huh? Trying to break up their team?

Well, Chloe wasn't falling for it, fuck you very much.

Hear that? Not taking the bait.

Chloe let her cheek sink into Max's shoulder blade, let her ears drink in Max's breathing. Max tuned her guitar a little.

Tip-toeing around her phrasing, Chloe said, “I...have a feeling my ass just got mega saved by Super Max once again. And I didn’t even notice.”

Max quietly let out a “Hee,” giving her guitar a strum. “Maybe,” she teased.

“Well, now you've got a gurl wanting the details...the deets. Gimme the deets. Thuhhhh deets. Thuhhhh deets.”

“Wh-?” Max puffed out a disbelieving laugh. “Are you making a...?”

*Steven Universe* reference. Fuck. I haven't... seen that yet...back here. Damnit.

“Meme,” Chloe spat. “It's...a meme I saw. From that...one show you like. With the rock lesbians.”

Max raised an amused brow.

“Trying to impress me with approximate knowledge of many things?” Max coyly raised a brow with a warm little smile. What she'd just said was itself a silly cartoon reference. Chloe's influence had already seeped its way into Max by this point, not unlike how quickly Rachel's personality had leaked into her own.

It was a concerning thought: how much of Max – the Max from where Chloe was supposed to be – how much of her was still her? How much of her was...Rachel, condensed and filtered through Chloe?

Max started playing 'Home' again.

Chloe pointed out, “Isn't that what you're doing with yer little song playing, here? Getting on my good side by referencing shit you haven't experienced yet?”

Max shrugged, propping out her lower lip. “Good point,” she conceded.

“Well,” said Chloe, “guess we'll just have to educate each other on these things some time.”

Chloe wormed her arms around Max's abdomen, breathing out some of her melancholy into the past.

“Psh, yea, in some theoretical future when we can actually live together...” She sighed, shifting gears and re-tweaking her guitar. “I have a feeling you'll find the musical episodes dumb, though...But, um, I'm lame and am a total sucker for that shit...”

“Eh, ya never know,” murmured Chloe with a longing breath.

As if by some weird little wrinkle of fate, Max began humming and playing chords from another song past-Chloe didn't know yet.

But a song current-Chloe knew well.
It was one she'd really gotten attached to – one about the red rock and the blue rock joining forces. Being better for being together than they had been separated. Weirdly enough, the *Undertale* fandom had taken said song and asserted its own meanings onto it. In Chloe's current point of reference – back in the future – the song had been *given* weird, different layers of context, depending on whether one was in the *Steven Universe* fandom, or the *Undertale* fandom. Chloe had actually become familiar with the song through a much darker, less pleasant context than where it had originally come from – what it was originally about.

Even across fandoms, or realities, or timelines, or whatever the fuck, the fact was, the song still had the same melody. One context or another, one interpretation or another, one universe or another, that song was still *that* song, even when given completely different lyrics – even when given a completely different context it was never intended to go along with.

*Chloe liked to think her connection with Max was the same way.*

This made it all the more painful to remind herself that, back in the present – or future, or whatever the hell – that connection, the specific one she had in *this* context of the goddamn universe, it felt at risk. It was being threatened, and by something Chloe couldn’t comprehend. Something she felt obligated to understand.

Chloe realized that none of this this technically mattered in that moment, because she was in the past. Before any of that bullshit had seeped its way into things. Back when things were easier, and when Max was happier. Healthier.

Where had they gone wrong? They were supposed to have taken on the fucking world together.

'*Overconfidence is a flimsy shield.*'

It couldn't just be that adult life inherently *did* this to a person.

Right?

Max was playing her music, enrapturing Chloe without even understanding quite how deeply a simple melody from a cartoon show could affect her.

Chloe desperately wanted to hum along. Hell, play duet – but this was before Chloe even had her own guitar, much less before she was supposed to know how to play the song.

But...Max had gone through the short melody a couple times already.

Chloe could probably get away with humming it.

'*Walk in harmony.*'

So she did. And Max changed gears with a warm smile, picking up the harmony.

So there Chloe Price was, humming a song for the first time – chronologically – her eyes ready to burst into tears from layers of meaning and context over years of time together with this person, when in fact this very well could've been the first time she'd technically *heard* the damn song, according to the timeline of her life. And any moment, she'd leap back to her present, and her past self would wake up from a nap, having no recollection or understanding of this moment she'd shared with Max. And Max *would* have this moment...and now current-Chloe had it, yet...hadn't...back then, and...-

'*Be one with the universe.*'
Time travel was fucking weird.

But! Coping with 'weird' was easier with the right medication.

So Chloe refilled her lungs with marijuana vapors and let her worries melt into Maxine's flesh.

Savoring the serenity of the moment, Chloe let her breath relax, let her heart beat against Max's back as her love practiced chords.

The hum of the melody echoed through Max's whole body, massaging Chloe back to sleep.

'I dreamt I was a butterfly.'

Everything might have been fucked up in the future, but...this?

This was all right.

And then a new song – a much less gentle one – rocked Chloe back into the present, where she nearly slipped behind her shopping cart.

It was her turn at the checkout.

And everything came rushing back at her in an instant – her present, her reality.

A river of terrible decisions. An ocean of doubt. A tornado of fear.

'There is chaos within you.'

'There is disquiet in your soul.'

'You are your own worst enemy.'

Without Max at her side, it was like everything fell apart, descended into fucking stupid self-inflicted pain.

Max was supposed to be the 'harmony' to her 'discord.' Over time, Chloe had learned how to take up the other side of that balance, and let Max do vice versa as needed.

But lately, they were both in discord.

If that Other Max wasn't forcing Chloe through these painful memories of the past, these reminders of how she'd fucked up, failed the people she cared for, was it, like...herself doing this? Some 'part' of her, wanting to visit these reminders?

But why?

What was the damned point?

'Life is more than a series of ones and zeroes.'

'Adversity is an opportunity for change.'

'Pain is an excellent teacher.'

As Chloe finished cramming her groceries into the backseat – buying for one instead of two was
easier, anyway – she found herself a bit wary about starting the car up.

What would happen if she spaced out like this behind the wheel? Was this a thing she had any control over, even?

It had felt different than the weird shit from the other night, with Stella...That had felt like being tugged and tossed and pulled and pushed, whereas whatever was happening that day felt more like...drifting.

Chloe's phone went off.

It was Brooke.

Hm.

The question presented itself again: did it even matter if Chloe chose to have the conversation?

What was the point? Chloe knew whatever Brooke had to say, it would only bring the same thing every goddamn human being – herself included – had to offer: disconnection, discontent, discord.

She declined the call.

She shoved herself into the driver's seat, synced her phone up to the sound system, and started 'er up.

Time to get her ass home, deal with Vickie, and then have some actual peace with a pair of Hot Pockets and a tall glass of Mountain Dew, paired with an evening of Netflix and video games.

Brooke called again before Chloe had even left the parking lot.

Chloe's insides twisted some, and not from her hangover. Well, not just from her hangover.

If some shit went down with Max, and she wasn't there...-

Shit.

There was a point.

A conversation with Brooke couldn't happen if Chloe didn't actively make the choice for it to happen. Her life was more complicated than a binary [FIGHT] or [MERCY], but all the same...even when the choice seemed inevitable...she still had to make it to move things forward.

Whether that choice was as seemingly insignificant as taking a phone call from someone she wasn't even sure could be called a 'friend' or just an 'acquaintance,' it was still a choice.

'The outcome is not preordained.'

Chloe chose to accept the call.

“Yo.”

[“There you are.”]

“...Uh...Here I am...?”

Static-laced breathing.
“Need something?”
[“-gh, sorry, just-...Distracted.”]

“Yea, so am I – by traffic.”
[“Where are you?”]

“Driving?”
[“I thought you needed a day at home...”]

Yup.

Chloe was already annoyed.

“Yea, well, I need to eat, it's not like I live on Max alone, so-...”
[“Jeez, chill out. What's gotten into you?”]

“I'm ff-...” Chloe caught herself, ready to swing off the handle as a traffic light turned green. She hit the gas with her foot, and hit the brakes with her mouth.

[“...Hello?”]

“Still here.”
[“Oh.”]

“Look, is this important? I ain't in the best mood today.”
[“Yea, I could tell.”]

MUST BE your fuckin' superior intellect.

“What is it? Why are you calling me? Is something wrong with Max?”
[“Hah, uhh, that seems like a question you already know the answer to.”]

Aaaaaaand that's strike two.

“Is this an emergency?” Chloe had to slow for a pedestrian to cross a street.
[“Hopefully not, I'm not even at the house.”]

“Where...are you, then?”
[“Lunch break. At work.”]

“And you...decided to waste it on me? Why, what-...Hey!”

Chloe honked her horn, skipping her breaks a little as she passed through an intersection. Some idiot didn't comprehend the concept of 'right-of-way.'

[“Mmmmaybe I should let you go...”]

“No-no, just-...Let's just get this outta the way. Stells put you up to this?”
“Nope. Calling of my own accord.”

“Great, we can...dish about Big Bang Theory, because that's how we'll bond.”

“That show is just a cliched re-skin of the same boring sitcom tropes that wore out their welcome back with How I Met Your Mother, trying to cash in on-”

“Yea, it's shit, I wasn't-...It was a joke, I didn't...”

[“Right....Yyyyyea. Well. Anyway.”]

I am one awkward 'uh' from hanging up.

Turning onto the highway, Chloe made her impatience clear.

“Was there a reason you called 'of your own accord?' You gonna wax your concern about Max and me and how I'm supposed to go about this whole mess?”

[“Actually, no, that's...your deal. This is about Stella.”]

“...What about Stella? She all right?”

[“Would there be a reason for her to not be?”]

“W-Well, like, Max is goin' all Norman Bates on us, soooo, that...can't be a good-”

[“What? She's your...fiance, and you're cracking wise about-”]

“I make stupid, politically-incorrect jokes when I'm stressed,” Chloe growled.

[“Noooo kidding.”]

“Moving on! What's up with Stella?”

[“That's what I'm asking you about. I wanted to talk with you in private.”]

Oooh. Yikes. That...didn't sound good. For the love of hell, Chloe hoped she wouldn't be forced to try and dance around supernatural shit with Brooke.

She shifted gears on the highway, opting to switch lanes in order to pass a slower-moving car in front of her.

“She acting weird?” Chloe wondered, regarding Stella.

[“She’s been-...I think she’s been in contact with her brother.”]

“Who, that prick from the other night?”

[“Yea. That-...Wait, do you not...?”]

“That’s the, uh-...The guy. Right? The douchebag who caused a whole ruckus a while back. The guy from the club the other night.”

Chloe could recall a weird, scary night in SF years back on their way home from a night out – Stella's brother had shown up, Max had gotten him to back off...A lot of that evening was a blank. It was a ways back, anyway, a few years.

[“Chloe, I thought you knew who he was. Do you not even know his name?”]

“I don’t know, and I don’t wanna know, guy’s a total dick.”

[“...Wow. Well, you’re not wrong, but Kamat's not someone you should dismiss so easily...”]
Having passed that slower car, Chloe was unnerved as it passed right by her. As if the highway was a goddamned competition.

“I thought Stells wanted nothing to do with him, what’s the deal?”

Trying to move the focus off how Chloe couldn’t be bothered to have committed Stella’s tragic terrible secret past to friggin’ memory, so sue her.

[“I got texts from him today – like he's been in touch with her recently.”]

“Did he say he was?”

[“He might as well have.”]

Chloe let the speed-mongering idiot pass her by. She got back into a slower lane.

“Why're you coming to me with this instead of her?”

[“I did come to her with it, she said she had no idea what he was on about...”]

“Uh...OK. So? Case closed, guy's a dickhead, he's lying.”

[“That's just it – I think she's lying.”]

Chloe tried to focus on the street signs above, but all she could picture was Max, seemingly possessed, acting outside herself.

“Mmph.”

And there was that nice pit in Chloe's stomach that she’d been ignoring all day.

[“And I'm pretty sure whatever the reason is, it has to do with Max.”]

“...Y-yea, sure, I guess, but...”

Why should Chloe give a crap about this, anyway?

Stella's complicated family business was hers, Chloe didn't need to...

Ehr.

Well, like...Stells wanted to...jump in with the whole, helping-Max-and-Chloe-with-their-personal-issues bit, and so...

“What does this have to do with me?”

[“Max is your fiance. I don't want to see Stella putting herself in a bad situation because you don't know what to do with your own girlfriend losing her shit.”]

“Max is a fucking adult, she can make her own choices...”

Like any of our choices seem to make a goddam difference, anyway.

[“You know, I recall back at Blackwell, when you were a stoner drop-out dealing shit with Prescott, Bowers, and whatever else you were up to, Max took responsibility for that with you.”]

“Max doesn't even want me around right now!”
“You didn’t want her around back then,”] Brooke huffed. [“But you couldn’t escape that situation on your own.”]

“The fuck do you know about my teenage life, huh? And ya know-?! The hell do you get off telling me what to do?”

[“Just because you and Max try to run away and cover up all the crap you got mixed up in doesn’t mean it’s been forgotten.”]

“And what does that mean?”

Chloe was not liking this tone with Brooke.

[“Argh, it-...I’m not letting Stella get pulled back into that world again. She’s been through enough.”]

“So has Max.”

[“Exactly!”]

Chloe took a moment to consider Brooke's angle. Brooke was too straight-forward and blunt to really mean much else than what she was saying, right?

Chloe lost herself for a moment in the mesmerizing pattern of the dots painted against the highway, bleeding together into one solid line from the speed she was passing over them.

“What the shit do you expect me to do about any of this? Huh?”

[“Pay them a visit. Just-...I don't know, make sure they're not doing anything shady.”]

“Spy on them.”

[“No, like, go see them, check in on them.”]

“Sounds like you want me to spy on them.”

[“Whatever you need to tell yourself to do it, sure.”]

“I already promised Vic I’d meet her for lunch.”

[“That's fine, whatever, but when you do visit them, if something's off, shoot me a text.”]

There was Chloe's exit, coming up next.

“Yes, Ma'am.”

Brooke groaned.

“What? I said I’d do it.”

[“Gah, sorry, I got mustard on my shirt.”]

“Oh...”

[“Sorry I'm being so pushy here. I know you hate drama as much as I do.”]

“Yup.”
“Much as I hate to get mushy, Stella was right the other night.”

Chloe shifted lanes, taking the exit ramp to her home town.

“About what?”

[“About how us Arcadia survivors should look out for each other. Even from ourselves.”]

“Mm...”

[“I know you were really laissez-faire about what went down with Kamat way back, but what you and Max did for Stella back then – you helped save her from herself, you know? I think that's why Stella's being so stubborn about this. She feels like she owes you guys.”]

Chloe reached a stoplight at the edge of town.

“Eh, karma is a bitch, but she's also fair, right?”

[“Huh?”]

“I-I mean, like, what goes around, comes around.”

[“...Rrrright.”]

“Why're you being so snippy with me about this crap, anyway?”

[“Because I can tell that on my own, I won't be able to figure this all out. And I know that you are going to regret it if something happens to Max and you could've prevented it.”]

“Sure, but...we need some time apart. I actually get that now. I need it.”

[“That's fine, but I don't think taking a break on the terms you both left things is a good idea. It's better to make sure you're leaving things in a stable state, rather than one that could explode at any moment.”]

“Counselor Scott, droppin' the psyche eval...”

[“Just...check on them.”]

“Sure, yea. 'Bout to get home, here, have an...enlightening chat with fucking Victoria, wish me luck. But I'll look into the other two after that.”

[“Thanks. Keep me posted. And, erh, good...luck? I guess?”]

“Yep.”

--

Chloe was confused as she pulled into her apartment complex’s parking lot.

Victoria was standing at the entrance, checking things on her phone.

Waiting. She was early – she'd said a couple hours, it had only been, like, an hour and a half since then.

Having barely had any downtime from fucking human beings, Chloe cursed under her breath, pulling in to the lot. She fortunately had few enough groceries to carry the lot with two arms – albeit,
with a couple bags hanging from her shoulders and biceps. But her arms were chunkier than they’d used to be, so she could handle it.

She waited for Victoria to spot her on her way to the entrance.

There was an awkward, wordless exchange of utterances and grunts between them as Victoria gestured to help, which Chloe accepted, handing off a few bags to her. She was a bit amused when the sudden change of weight almost caused Vickie to lose her balance on her high-heeled sandals. Did Victoria did lift?

Sharing not a syllable of dialogue, nor eye contact, the disgruntled pair made their way upstairs and toward the apartment. When they reached Chloe and Max’s floor, Victoria finally broke the ice, her question echoing down the hallway.

“So – having a good day off?”

Shuffling through her pocket for her doorkey whilst leveraging grocery bags, Chloe grunted a reply.

“House-cleaning, grocery-shopping, and not getting a damned minute of peace to myself – yep, real relaxing shit, with everything else going on.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Victoria give her a dull scowl with an irate puff of air through bullish nostrils.

Victoria grumbled, “Should I come back another time, then?”

Unlocking her door and kicking it open, Chloe sighed tiredly.

“Nah, now’s fine, I’m just-…” She trailed off, shaking her head.

“You’ve got a lot going on,” Vickie stated plainly, seeing herself in. She winced a bit from what Chloe presumed was the strain of actual weight on her puny arms. Dropping the grocery bags on the kitchen floor beside Chloe, she followed up, “And I’m not here to start anything – just laying that out there right now.”

Starting to unload her groceries, Chloe noted flatly, “Consider it…’laid out there,’ I guess.”

After a moment of bottles and cans and boxes being set out of their bags, Victoria paused, giving Chloe a hard look.

“I feel like I owe you an explanation,” Vickie said.

“…Oooookay?” Chloe replied with a thick layer of disinterest.

Just because they were calling a ‘truce’ didn’t mean Chloe had to be happy about it.

As Chloe buried herself in their barren fridge to put items away, Victoria recanted her little ‘explanation.’

“What happened in the summer – I’m not trying to pass the blame, what I did was selfish – but I was picking up signals from Max. Otherwise I wouldn’t have even bothered.”

“Seems like your radar must be broken, then,” Chloe scoffed, trying to keep her tone as flat and edgeless as she could.

“I don’t think my radar has anything to do with Max straight-up telling me she was going to leave
you…”

Now, a comment like *that* would’ve been met with flat-out denial and dismissal a month or so back.
But with the week Chloe was having?
She had cause to believe Victoria.
The refrigerator humming in her ear, Chloe fluttered a sigh through her lips, wiping her palm against her face.

“She said that?” Chloe sought clarification, still hiding in the chilled air, pretending to organize produce.

“Mm,” Victoria hummed contemplatively. “And at the *time*, I…believed her. She said you two weren’t working out – that you were a bad influence on each other. Things like that.”

“Yea. Well.” Chloe had nothing else to say to that right then and there. She closed the crisper drawers and moved onto the milk and juice.

“She told me she was getting ready to leave you – she told me that part of her wished she’d never even *met* you.”

Chloe bit her lip with frustration at this.

“That doesn’t really *sound* like her,” Chloe observed with some frustration, knowing full well what ‘part of her’ had said this shit to Vic.

“*Exactly.* It doesn't, does it?” Victoria puffed, flicking out her finely polished fingers. “I *thought* I was…seeing a different side to her, like she was…really opening up to me, but looking back, after how she’s been acting out lately…”

Chloe nodded, tilting her head thoughtfully.

Chloe mumbled, “Getting to know that ‘different side’ of Max isn’t…quite like it is with most folks.”

“No. And I let myself get caught up in it, instead of exercising caution like I should have.”

“Max can…be pretty persuasive when she wants to be,” Chloe sighed.

“I’m *not* saying this justifies what I did,” Victoria added. “And I *am* sorry about that. Seriously. I don’t… I’m not sure what else to tell you about it, I mean, you obviously understand how special she is. We all do, it’s why we’re fucking trying to help. She’s *different* from most people, she’s…like a magnet – even when she’s not trying, it’s like you just get…drawn to her somehow. Like she…can bring out the best in you, just by *existing*, you just…” Victoria sighed and shrugged, exchanging a wary expression with Chloe, who nodded knowingly.

“Yea. I know.”

That concept was *much* easier for Chloe to process and respond to.

“If what I did,” said Vic, “if making that mistake, doing that *stupid* thing – if that has *anything* to do with causing this rift between you two, I *swear*, I… I will do what I *have* to in order to make things right between us, between *you* two. I didn’t want…”

A trembling breath. Then the tiniest of sobs.
Wrapping up with the fridge goods, Chloe moved onto the freezer, but caught a glance of Victoria’s distraught facepalm first.

“This isn’t your fault, Vic.”

Chloe shoved a bag of tater tots into the back corner.

Chloe added, “No single person is completely at fault for any of this. We all make decisions, we all have played a part in this, whether we meant to or not.”

“Well, I want to play a part in making it better.”

“Don’t we all?” grunted Chloe in quiet lamentation.

“Back when…-” Victoria caught herself getting worked up and took a second to chill down. “Look. I know someone, up in Portland – my parents have connections – they helped someone I knew who was…struggling with the kinds of problems Max is.”

“Nathan. I know who you’re talking about. You don’t have to…dance around that shit with me. Max is nothing like him, her problems are nothing like his.”

“Well, she’s fucking alive, so, yes, that is something that they don’t share in common, isn’t it?”

_Yeesh_, Chloe really…needed to dial herself back, because that seemed like a delicate landmine.

“Sorry,” Chloe diffused.

“So am I,” Victoria huffed. “He needed fucking help, and I wasn’t brave enough to do something until it was too late. I won’t pretend like I understand the intricacies of what Max is going through, but she is not well. Neither was Nathan. It wasn’t his fault, what condition he was in, and when he needed help, everyone he trusted let him down. **Including me.**”

“Look, you can babble about that tragedy all you want. I ain’t a person you should be talking with about that guy, so…-”

“He killed someone you loved,” Victoria stated bluntly. “I’m not saying you should forgive him, he’s not-…It’s not like it even matters at this point. I already know you think he deserved what happened to him.”

“Like how you think Rachel deserved what happened to her?”

“I never said that.”

“And I never said that about Nathan, either.”

Chloe and Victoria's defensive, prickly glares ran ice against each other.

'A closed mind is already defeated.'

Chloe tried to redirect things forward.

“Whether we still feel that way or not, what does it matter? They’re both fucking dead. It’s been _five years_. I’m so damned sick of letting that fucking town still have its stupid _tendrils_ all wrapped around our lives. Can’t we move the _hell on_ already?”
Now that Victoria had Chloe’s full attention, eye contact was…a bit intense.

Victoria closed hers for a second, bit her lip, took a breath, and held up her palms defensively.

Chloe added bitterly, “What happened happened, we both failed someone we loved, they died, we didn’t, let’s just…” She didn’t even know where she was going with all this, she just…needed it to move away from Arcadia Bay.

“We did fail them, Chloe,” Vickie agreed sternly. “And we get to carry that. And fine, you’re right, we don’t need to talk about that shit, it is in the past. I get it. But right now, Max is alive, and we could at least stop butting heads long enough to not fail her, too. We need to stop flying off the fucking handle at each other so easily. For her sake, if anyone’s.”

Chloe’s grocery tidying slowed to a stop.

‘A warrior's greatest weapon... is patience.’

“Now, see, Vickie….that is something I can agree with you on.”

“It’s a start, at least,” sighed Victoria.

After a silence fell over the two of them, Chloe decided she didn't like it.

“Uh...I've got an errand to run in a bit, but, I dunno, um-...Want something for lunch?”

“Oh, I already...ate, but...”

“Ah, gotcha, erh...” Chloe's stomach growled and gurgled a bit.

With a soft chuckle, Victoria mumbled, “You can eat while I'm here, it's fine.”

“Well, was gonna brew some coffee, too – want any of that?”

“Sure, that's...Yea.”

Some disgruntled breaths from both of them.

Chloe went about preparing coffee as Victoria took a tired seat at the cramped kitchen table.

This was the woman who had given Chloe grief for years. More than any other person – well, any living person, at least. She'd harbored this air about her like Chloe 'wasn't good enough' for Max.

The reason why this had been such a sharp needle in Chloe had become clear to her eventually.

Chloe agreed with her.

Chloe's facade had never worked on Victoria. Maybe because Vic herself knew a bullshitter when she saw one, since she was so good at playing that game. This rift between them had widened over the years, as Max's growing friendship with her exposed Chloe's insecurity – and Vic knew it. So, yea, at the first sign of dissent – the first indication that Max wasn't happy with Chloe – no wonder Vic had tried to jump on that. Hell knew she'd been waiting for that moment.

Chloe was grateful, then, that Victoria's motives seemed more earnest than petty romance drama.

Vickie had a heart – but she also wasn't afraid to go after what she wanted. Chloe could respect that, she just wished Vic would focus on other things she wanted. Because Vic couldn't have Max – not
like that, anyway. That didn't mean she couldn't have Max at all, though. Much as that would make life easier for Chloe, it would probably make life more difficult for Max.

“What is it?” asked Victoria, jostling Chloe from her thoughts.

Noticing the coffee pot slowly dripping in front of her, Chloe softly sighed through her nostrils and shrugged.

“Just thinking about shit,” Chloe mumbled her reply.

“Is Max going to get through this with herself still in tact?” Vickie asked, ironically oblivious to how good a question that was.

“She will,” Chloe replied plainly. “If she couldn't, we wouldn't have gotten this far.”

Chloe stared as one drop of black coffee descended from the filter, joining the pot.

And another. And another. And another.

Each drop a practically identical drop of coffee from the previous, from the next.

Victoria then posed, “What the hell can we do to help her when she doesn't want us around?”

Chloe's gaze adjusted from the black coffee pooling in its pot to her own reflection on its glass.

“Let you know when I figure that out.”

–

Chloe turned off her ignition.

She sat in her car for a few moments.

Parked in front of the apartment complex that Brooke and Stella lived in, Chloe was having second-thoughts.

Fucking spying on her fiance and one of her closest friends? Not exactly something she was proud of.

But if she got out of the car, went up to the apartment, it wouldn't be spying, would it? It'd be a visit. And that was fine, right?

So Chloe got out of her car. She made her way up to the apartment.

As she reached the door to the apartment, she could overhear...singing?

With a disgruntled sigh, Chloe knocked on the door.

She received no reply, so she entered – quietly, cautiously.

[“You won and she chose you
And she loved you and she's gone”]

Oh.

This song.
The TV was playing...that cartoon. *Steven Universe.*

[“It's over, isn't it? Why can't I move on?”]

Was it fate, then? 'Destiny'?

Why this song, right as Chloe walked in? The Universe rubbing everything in her face?

[“War and glory, reinvention”]

Stella was singing along from the couch.

[“Fusion, freedom, her attention”]

Max was singing from the kitchen.

[“Out in daylight my potential Bold, precise, experimental”]

Chloe didn't like this particular musical number.

It hit a little too close to home – in a few ways.

[“Who am I now in this world without her? Petty and dull with the nerve to doubt her”]

To Chloe's surprise, there was Max – or was it her? – staring right at Chloe.

Singing. Staring. Leaving her sandwich preparation behind.

[“What does it matter? It's already done Now I've got to be there for her son”]

Max approached Chloe, whose presence was unbeknownst to Stella beneath all the singing.

[“It's over, isn't it? Isn't it? Isn't it over?”]

That Max – not her Max, she could tell – reached Chloe, latching a hand on her hips and a deadlock glare of intense interest.

[“It's over isn't it? Isn't it? Isn't it over?”]

Caressing her hand against Chloe's cheek – just like Rachel had, back then – the Other Max before Chloe sang, eyes locked on Chloe's.

[“You won and she chose you And she loved you and she's gone”]

As that last word – 'gone' – took its sweet time to be sung, the Max before Chloe suctioned her lips around Chloe's mouth. One hand pinching at Chloe's behind, the other pressed against her chest, Max sucked the spirit from Chloe's being.
"It's over, isn't it? Why can't I move on?"

The kiss broke. And Chloe felt a bizarre sense of understanding – a longing. A regret.

She sang the last few words with this Other Max, letting herself get pinned against the wall.

"It's over, isn't it? Why can't I move on?"

Stella, from the couch, drummed her palms against her lap and squealed.

"So fuckin' goooood~!"

This Other Max's hands were running up and down Chloe's abdomen, her hips, her face. It was frustrating and alluring at the same time. Was she supposed to resist? Give in?

Either way...she knew this wasn't her Max. But she couldn't help but be carried away by those hungry eyes. By that sadistic smirk. By those frisky fingers. It was strange, how eager they were, when this Max seemed so set upon the whole 'Ya'll shouldn't have met in the first place' nonsense.

"Greg...! You were...awake."

"Nothing's gonna fix this...is it?"

Stella paused the stream she was watching, spinning round on the couch.

"Ugh, I feel like I'm gonna cry every time I watch... Chloe?!

"H-hey," Chloe called out, her face hot as a furnace, with Max's hands having found their way to her pant zipper. She really didn't mind this whole 'thirsty-as-hell' side of Max...even though she knew she should mind. "I, urhh, was just a little...worried, and...

"I took a sick day to look after Max, and..." Stella paused, noting the blatantly inappropriate beginnings of conduct before her. "...we were just taking it easy, and..."

The apartment door was still open, too. So that was...cool.

"What the hell?" Stella groaned. "You said you didn't want to see each other!"
Chloe went to utter some kind of half-hearted reply, but Max's fingers had found their way somewhere they shouldn't have been – not without some frickin' privacy. It was like she couldn't even control herself. And Chloe couldn't...deny her, either.

It was like a drug. Like Rachel's affection. Intoxicating and addictive, and while she was self-aware of the harm, she somehow couldn't remove herself from it. Stella's observational remarks melted away, like the rest of the world around her – except for this Max in front of her.

“heya,” said the Other Max, a whisper in Chloe's ear. “You've been busy, huh?”

“...Wh-?” Speech was hard when your nethers were on fire.

“...” The Other Max grinned like a child, teasing at Chloe's senses with one last tingling tickle.

Removing her hand from Chloe's pants and giving Chloe's groin an unsettlingly casual slap with the back of her wrist, the Other Max whispered into Chloe ear.

“so, i've got a question for ya.”

“...Huh?” choked Chloe, trying to gain her bearings.

“Do you think even the worst person can change?” The Max's voice rattled and rasped with a cynicism Chloe recognized. “That everyone can be a good person, if they just try?”

“Uh-...Y-yea, I mean...”

Chloe felt her insides freeze up as the Max's hands went from feeling hot as coals to ice cold against her shoulders, keeping her pinned against the wall.

“Heh heh heh heh. . .” the Max bobbed her head, pressing it into Chloe's chest. “all right.” She grasped her hands against Chloe's, pushing them against the wall.
Chloe's palms suddenly felt like they'd caught fucking fire from a sudden burning.

Feeling the world around her bubbling and fading, Chloe felt a magnetic, electric spark jolting at her palms, locked with Max's.

Max hissed into Chloe's ears, “Well, here's a better question.”

Chloe's reality went dark.

“What do you wanna have a bad time?”

'True self is without form.'

'Gaze into the Iris.'

~ Ella Frank; 'Veiled Innoncence'
On the Other Side (pt1)

Chapter Summary

“I’m the fury in your head
I’m the fury in your bed
I’m the ghost in the back of your head”

Chapter Notes

Whew.
This chapter is a monster. It's taken over a year of planting ideas, watering them, giving them sunlight, watching them grow...
And it's finally harvesting time.

This chapter is massive, as a head's up. Since I expect most folks won't want to read it all in one fell swoop, I'm uploading it in two parts for easier consumption.

There's no way it could ever live up to everything I've planned/hoped/imagined over the past 15-odd months, but I hope it answers enough, explains enough, satisfies enough, given everything it's taken to get here. I'm sure there's still some kind of inconsistencies somewhere I might have missed from a year and change ago, so do feel free to point those out (I want to iron out everything I can when I adapt this to VN format). I also try out some weird experimental shit, and of course there's a lot of my own typical experimental shit, but I wrote this chapter first and foremost for myself. All Wounds is going to my last big fandom project after 15 years of fandom work, so...I just really want to get some things out of my system, I guess.

All Wounds will be 20 chapters long, so there's 4 more left after this one -- but this is basically the 'moment' where everything is meant to "click," and from here on out, all of the cards will be on the table. It'll be about seeing how they get played. If All Wounds was a TV show continuation of LiS, chapters 1-7 would be like the last chunk of the first season, the rest of the story would be Season 2...and this chapter would be the big two-part 'event' episode?

I'd like to take a moment to thank those of you helped beta-read this chapter: Danniella Wilkie, princevolker2788, and derula's extensive notes and extra support. And, of course, my amazing girlfriend mollifiable, my gratitude for whom cannot be expressed properly.

I have lost so much sleep, put so many personal and complicated aspects of myself as a human being into this damn thing, and have never slaved so much on a single, self-contained chapter of anything I've ever written this much. Just...I don't even know what else to say at this point, I just hope you all enjoy it, and thank your for you continued support.
“Life is Strange
All Wounds

Chapter 16 – On the Other Side

(part 1)

“What was the start of all this?
When did the cogs of fate begin to turn?
Perhaps it is impossible to grasp that answer now,
From deep within the flow of time.

But for a certainty, back then
We loved so many yet hated so much
We hurt others and were hurt ourselves.

Yet even then we ran like the wind
Whilst our laughter echoed
Under cerulean skies....”

~ Chrono Cross

-bang-

-thud-

-clak-atat-takk-

The confused gurgles and groans of agony.
The last sounds she'd ever utter: pure pain.

Bleeding out on a bathroom floor, without answers, without justice, without memories of them.

She died alone. And all Max could do was listen.

The hysterics – the whimpering apologies, the remorseful sobbing.

He was alone, too. And all Max could do was listen.
And Max, knees tucked against her cheeks, stifled her trembling breath as best she could.

Now, she was alone with them. She could do nothing.

“-...The fuck?” he whispered, his manic pacing slowing to a stop beside her.

As Nathan's tear-ridden eyes met her own, Max knew there was no use hiding any longer.

She let her grief pour out in a shambling mess of choking coughs and aching utterances.

“Y-you were here the whole time...?” Nathan breathed out, perplexed. “Max fucking Caulfield?! Wh-?” He flicked his wrist down at her in disbelief, the other hand clutching his own forehead. “I-I was--...Why didn't you stop me?! Why didn't...-?!”

Nathan approached her.

Max's entire body froze up, clenched, as he grabbed her shoulder and shook her.

“I-I didn't mean to,” Nathan murmured. “She pushed me, she-...Everybody is always pushing me.”

Max squirmed and struggled to break free as Nathan lifted her to her feet.

His cheeks slick with tears, Nathan whispered his words to Max, pinning her against the wall.

“My life is hell. You understand? I didn't want to hurt anybody. Everybody...used me.”

Max was scared shitless by the force of his hands – but another part of her felt pity. Anger, even, at what this boy's father and fucking Jefferson had done to him.

“Let-...!” Max tried to break free, but was in barely any condition to stand, much less self-defend. Her messenger bag was torn from her shoulder, its contents spilling to the floor. She could hear her camera break against the tiles. Nathan's grip remained. “Let go of me...!” Max gasped through her own tears.

“Sorry...I'm so sorry,” Nathan winced as he glanced at what remained of Chloe. As if finding a moment of peace through the situation he was in, Nathan bobbed his head and sighed, “At least...all this shit'll be over soon...” Nathan's eyes squinted shut for a moment as he sniffed a deep breath. He opened his eyes, stared right into Max's, and warned her: “Watch out, Max. He wants to hurt you next...”

Max's heart skipped a beat at this déjà vu. Her stomach squirmed at the torment in Nathan's eyes, like he was at war with himself, keeping someone else chained up inside him, petrified at the thought of them breaking free.

“Who?” Max winced – though she knew the answer.

Nathan finally let go, his palm grasping at his mouth as he gaped at the corpse on the floor beside them.

“Sorry,” he eked out. “I can’t...-! This is so fucked. I am so dead...”

Ignoring her spilled notebooks and broken camera on the floor, Max left her messenger bag where it was and desperately sought what she knew would be her last moment with Chloe – even if Chloe wasn’t...really there.
The sight of Chloe in such a state made Max feel sick to her stomach in a way nothing she had ever seen in her life had.

This was the person she'd fallen for.

This was the person she thought she was supposed to be with, forever.

And that person was gone.

Out of her life, popped back in, then sucked right back away as soon as she’d appreciated them.

Fuck the universe.

As Max choked on the stench of fresh blood, tears starting to run down her face, she reached out a hand toward Chloe's paling cheek.

She murmured Chloe's name a few times, as if she could be heard.

The halls outside echoed with panic. The gunshot had probably just sent the school into chaos.

With the unsettling sound of Nathan pacing in a panic behind her, and the sickening sight of Chloe in a pool of her own blood, Max's chest was stricken with a pang of desperation.

'And Max Caulfield? Don't you forget about me.'

She needed something to remember Chloe by. A keepsake. She needed something, the desire tugging at her chest like a force she’d never known. This could be her only chance to have something physical, something unquestionably real, and she probably only had a few seconds.

Sprawled on her side, Chloe's arms had shielded her necklace from the oozing red pool.

Without a second thought, Max reached for it with a trembling hand.

“The fuck're you doing, Max?” Nathan moaned, more in despair than anger. “She’s not gonna wake up…They never wake up when I…” He clenched his fists and flung his wrists into her forehead.

“I...” Max coughed on her own phlegm, her body having trouble functioning. “I knew her, guh-growing up, sh...she was my best friend. We...”

Max's jaws were glued together as she lifted Chloe's skull from the floor to remove the necklace. She whispered a 'sorry' as she did so, and planted a shaking, small kiss against Chloe's forehead – disturbingly warm.

“You...knew her?” Nathan winced in shock. Max nodded nervously, backing away from Chloe. Nathan hissed, “Were you in on this shit?”

“N-no,” Max spat out defensively. “I wasn’t.” Her heart was put on ice all over again at the rage boiling through Nathan’s eyes. She shook her head frantically to dissuade it.

Max could hear the familiar growling voice of David Madsen from the hallway beyond, barking orders at students. At least now, she could appreciate his intention – and part of her heart was already breaking for him, and for Joyce.

Her heart racing, Max stuffed the necklace into her pocket and backed away from Chloe's...-

Her corpse. Fuck.
She was really gone.

The bathroom door blasted open, and there was Madsen, a gun clicking at them.

There was shouting – so much shouting – and Max planted her hands against her head, fell to her knees, and let the security officer do his job. She could feel the act of Nathan getting pinned to the floor, getting handcuffed, getting recited his Miranda Rights, it was like everything moved in slow motion around her.

It was such a discombobulating feeling, having tears pouring down her face, seeing tears pouring down David's face, seeing tears pouring down Nathan's face...

So many tears, all for different reasons entirely.

Max couldn't help but stare at what remained of Chloe Price.

She couldn't help but wonder 'what if...?'

But she'd made her choice.

And she'd have to live with it.

—

"Remembering something that no one else can is a painful thing. You can't talk to anyone about it. No one will understand you. You'll be alone."

~ Steins;Gate

—

Max vomited into the toilet. Again.

No blood this time, at least. That was good. Right?

Then…why did everything feel bad? Wrong? Utterly horrible? Completely incorrect?

Her trembling hands pushed hair behind her ears as she felt another wave of nausea come on.

She heaved, dryly, twice. Nothing came out.

Nothing good had come out of this.

Nothing.

Max had been an idiot. She’d cracked under the weight of it all. She’d given up the one thing that truly mattered.

All for the ‘greater good.’

And that was fine for everyone else.

But now she was fucked for it.

And so was Chloe.

It had been a few days since that terrible moment which she’d had to relive, knowing now that it would be the end of things.
And the more time she’d had within time to just…dwell on it…the more angry she’d become.

Sure, no one else had deserved to be caught in a damn tornado, right?

Chloe hadn’t deserved to be shot in the fucking stomach. Have her life cut so short.

Rachel Amber hadn’t deserved to be overdosed and ditched in a junkyard. Have her life cut so short.

Max hadn’t deserved to be put through the temporal ringer. Have her life upended and distorted with so much pain.

So why were they the ones to get punished? Because the fucking universe was supposed to just punish someone? And they’d been dealt the unlucky Joker cards?

It was pretty unfair.

And Max could hear it already: ‘Life is unfair. Deal with it.’

That didn’t mean she had to be OK with it.

Had it been worth it, even?

Given the crappy hand she’d been dealt, had Max made the right choice?

Of course she had. She’d made the correct choice. The numerically moral choice.

Dozens – maybe hundreds – of lives were empirically more valuable than one.

How could she have made any other choice?

Oh. Right.

Because now everything was shit.

And Chloe was gone. Forever.

Maybe she should have chosen Chloe, instead...

The door behind Max rattled, startling her into a coughing fit.

“Max? Hon? Everythin’ all right?”

No.

Everything was not all right. Nothing would ever be ‘all right.’ Never again.

Not from where Max was standing.

Max flushed the toilet, stumbling to her feet, and nearly slipped on her heeled shoes against the grungy ceramic tiles below.

Her head whirling a bit, Max leaned into the stall’s graffiti-carved walls, trying to catch her breath, and coughing to clear her throat.

How could she face Joyce in this state? She could already tell the poor woman was perplexed by Max’s intense mood – a little disconcerted, even. The way Max seemed to carry this burden of guilt on her sleeve? Joyce could see it, she was a sharp woman. And yet, what Max was carrying was a
burden Joyce had no way of comprehending.

A burden no one had any way of comprehending.

The only person who could possibly understand was six feet under the ground now.

Gone.

No one could ever understand. She could never let someone in like that again…

“Max?”

“’M fine,” Max uttered out, her throat clogged with gunk.

There was a tense pause as Max used the stall's grungy walls as support, pushing her dizzy self out with shaky steps. Each clack of her high heels felt like a needle in her ears.

“If you're not—..not feelin' well,” Joyce cautiously offered, shaking a little. “Ah could have David give you a ride back to…Blackwell. In case you—” She rubbed at her temple, trailing off with a sigh.

Every syllable had rebounded off the ceramic walls, echoing back and pounding at Max's head.

“Mm-mm,” Max hummed in the negative, finding her balance and heading to the sink to wash her hands and face a bit.

Her own reflection kind of…creeped her out right then. Like what was on the other side was its own...entity. Staring back at her.

After all, just a while ago, she’d had a…sort of weird, out-of-body kind of thing going on.

Like her body had gone on auto-pilot, or something.

Well, more like a ghost had taken the wheel. A ghost of herself.

Something about it – about whatever that had been – it had given Max the heebie-jeebies, for real. She could hardly stand to look at herself.

Maybe she was just too tense. Too shaken up. Given all she’d just been through, it wasn’t too far fetched that she’d be hallucinating. Right?

She couldn't really remember half of her conversation with Warren on their walk. She hadn't even really wanted to go on said walk. Warren was trying to be supportive. He'd been a good friend to her. But with the past week she’d been through – and the week before that, in an alternate reality where Chloe had lived – it was all just a bit much. She just wanted humanity as a whole to fuck off. She wanted herself to just...disappear.

Was she losing it?

Hopefully not. She had to carry on with life, either way.

'I know. Lame it sounds, life has to go on.'

A shiver went up her spine.

Joyce's hand had found its way on her back. Max couldn't help it – irrational as it was, she needed a
hug from the woman.

“I'm sorry,” Max breathed warily into Joyce's shoulder. “I was...supposed to be there for her, and I just...”

“Mm-mm,” Joyce hummed in the negative. “I'm not lettin' you go n' say such things again. Hear me? This ain't on you. You were just tryin' to live your own life, and my...” Joyce choked on the next phrase: “My Chloe lost her way.” Sniffling a recovery, she added, “If anyone failed my baby, it's me.”

“Joyce – no, that...”

“Let's not go re-treadin' this talk today, hm?” Joyce’s hands flatly patted Max’s biceps, a stiff gesture as Joyce grasped for composure. “We're both too tired for that.”

“But...”

Joyce broke their contact, wiping her bloodshot eyes dry.

'Life won’t wait for you to play catch-up. You’re young, the world is yours, bla-bla-bla, right?’

Max’s empty stomach gurgled and groaned painfully.

“Aw, Honey,” Joyce sighed, clearing her throat. “Was the food not right? Those eggs not cooked well enough? Now, ah told Morty that he needs to—”

“N-no, they were fine, I just...I'm feeling sick.”

Joyce eased Max out of the bathroom.

“Is there anythin’ I can do to help you feel better?”

Max shook her head, shrugging up one shoulder.

There was nothing anyone could do.

Max wanted to...just escape everything and everyone.

Seal herself away, lock herself up, frozen in time.

Too bad her Rewind couldn’t do that...

“Joyce, thank you, I—...I really appreciate you checking on me, but can I...just have a minute?” Max shrunk out of Joyce's motherly grasp.

Over the past week, she couldn't help but pick up on Joyce doting after her – feeding her, talking with her, digging up Chloe's old belongings and giving them to her...It was nice, no question. Max was so grateful. But she couldn't shake that uneasy feeling like Joyce was trying to distract herself from her lost daughter by 'adopting' a new one. And Max couldn't deal with that.

“Of course you can, Max.”

Max took a breath and lingered by the far edge of the Two Whales. She tuned out all of the white noise for a moment and dwelt upon her own thoughts, as she often did.

A bitter sting bit at the corners of her mind. An anger.

Everything she’d been through – everything Chloe had been through with her, just to die, anyway...What was the fucking point?

Why bother making choices at all if there was no purpose, if nothing good came of them?
Max wished she could freeze time, run away from the world for a while, sleep, escape, just...anything but be around all of these faces she recognized.

'Max, don't wait too long. John Lennon once said that “Life is what happens while you're busy making other plans.’

Max's head stung, and her nose let loose a couple of drops of blood. She wiped them off on her thumb, licked it away, and sighed at the idea that these powers weren't gone. She shouldn't even try to use them. Never again. It wasn't worth it.

“Mm...Max? Max Caulfield?”

It was a gentle voice that called her name. Timid. Worried. Caring. Familiar.

“Stella Hill?”

Stella?! Is that you?!

That... voice. It had woken back up at the sound of this girl's words.

“Y-yea, heh. Uhm, g-guess it's good that we, erh, remember each other's names...Huh?”

“Heh.” Max was speechlessly awkward.

Oh thank god. Oh thank hell. Thank...Vishnu, Cthulhu, whoever, please...-

What is your deal?! I thought you'd left already.

An unsettling, conflicting wave of thought processes washed across Max.

Like...her memories weren’t lining up with reality. Like she didn’t...belong here?

But...No, well. Wait.

There were Max's parents. Sitting at a booth. Talking with...Joyce and David. Just like when Max had left to take a walk. Joyce's face was scarred

BURNED

MUTILATED

Wh-?

No. What the hell?

Joyce's face was...so beautiful, so clean...untouched by what had happened at...-

The Two Whales.

Which was where Max was.

There she’d gone, dwelling on things that had happened in some other timeline. But she’d left all of that behind. Joyce, Warren...Frank, and Pompidou, they were all safe and sound.

Max found herself strangely compelled to study her surroundings. As if she hadn’t seen the Two
Somehow, it all seemed so foreign for a moment.

Maybe she was just...feeling nostalgic? This weird presence in her mind, filling the wide cracks formed by the past week’s events...it was unnerving how pushy this sensation was.

She could tinker with time, but...her human mind was still...what it was...

And what it was was crowded.

Look, I didn’t ask to end up here, OK? I just want to go back home...

I have no idea what you mean, so, just...whatever. Be quiet for a second.

“Um...Y-ya, so...-” Stella was clutching a small black book tightly in both her hands. “I-I know you must be...going through so much right now.”

You have no idea!

I said to be quiet.

...

“A-and I didn't want to bother you, but I...-” Stella looked down at the book's cover fretfully.

Max felt her lips fall open, her jaw loosen, her eyes dampen.

They recognized that book.

It was their freaking journal.

'Their?'

That's my journal. What is she doing with my journal?!

It's my journal, too!

And why does she have it? She-...

Of course. Of course, of course!

Stella Hill had her journal, Stella was going to be there for her again, to help get her back home. Even if she had no idea she was there when Max needed help most, there she was, somehow.

Wait, what?

Why was part of Max so intent on Stella helping them?

She didn’t even know Stella. Not really.

Stella finished her thought: “I found this...in class, y-you were in such a rush to leave that morning, and...and y-your name was...on it, I just-...I don’t know, I just had this feeling you needed it right now.”

Fuck yes, Stella! You are so right and you don't even know it.

How is Stella ‘so right?’ What’re you...-?
Max’s...legs were...forced to move forward. Her arms were forced to lift. Her eyes were forced to pierce their gaze through Stella's glasses. Her trembling fingers tried to regain control of themselves, but...no. They were forced to grab that journal.

Wait, how are you...doing that?

**I need that journal.**

Jeez, OK! Calm down! I've got it.

*I need it...Please...*

I said 'OK!' Man...

*Please...tell her I said:*

“Th-thank you,” Max mumbled, gushing gratitude through soft syllables. “St-...You-...This means a lot, Stella, this...this really does, just-...Thank you.”

“Oh, um-...” Stella fidgeted with her glasses. “Of course. Anything that can help you right now. You were...pretty close with her, huh? That girl, I mean...”

“Yea.” Max pored through the pages of her own journal. “I was, yea...”

“Mm-hm.” Stella nodded nervously. “Um, I, uh...-” She fussed her hands awkwardly through her hoodie pocket. “I heard that you could use, um...a, uh, a 'relaxant,' and I know...what that's like, to be in...w-well, the kind of situation you, um, y-you're in, and so...-”

'Relaxant?'

*Weed. She means a joint.*

*Take it.*

Why the hell would I do that?

*Please. It'll help us calm down.*

*It'll help time slow. So I can focus.*

*So I can get back to where I'm supposed to be.*

Mm...This...doesn't seem like a good idea.

*Trust me.*

Why should I?

*Because I'm you.*

*Because you're me.*

Will it get you out of my head?

**Yes. I promise.**

Fine. Let's do it.
“Uh...” Max's eyes shifted nervously off to her parents. They glanced at her quizzically. She nodded her head toward Stella, waving their way. Her dad nodded in approval, and her mom waved back her 'OK.' “Sh-sure, Stella, I'll...take you up on that,” Max decided. “I could...really use some de-stressing right about now...”

“All right,” Stella said sheepishly, brushed hair strands over her ears. “Cool, yea, I, um...-” She headed for the front door of the diner. “Follow me. I know a spot nearby where we-...uh, yea...”

“Lead the way.”

_I'll follow._

The jangling door-chime brought some relief to the pressure in Max’s skull. That...presence, that voice, it quieted. Still there, but...quelled. Silent.

“Max? What’s going on?”

It was her Mom, swooping by. Checking in.

“Just...going out to get some air,” Max explained, halfway out the door.

“Didn’t you...just do that?” her Mom pointed out.

Stella chuckled softly.

“R-right,” Max muttered back. For some reason, her memory of walking up and down the cliff-side with Warren was...way too muddled and hazy. She could barely remember it...There was this big gap right in the middle, and...then she’d fallen down?

“Everything OK?” Mom pressed, lingering by the glass wall. “You look a little...-” She trailed off with a worrisome sigh, running her hand across her hair.

Max drummed her fingers nervously against her own journal, clutched abreast like a makeshift shield.

Glancing at Stella, who was a bit amused by the awkwardness, Max came up with a cover.

“Um, St-Stella found my...journal – I lost it, and – I wanted to...share some...memories about... Chl-...Chloe, and...-” Every single time that...name...came up through her throat now, it...got stuck. “I-I mean, she was my best friend growing up, and...I just...-” Max let spill a trembling breath, extending her arm to pass the journal to her Mom. “S-sorry, I don't...think I can look at this stuff right now, and...-

“Of course,” Mom murmured with concern, accepting the small book.

There was an awkward lull in things until Stella changed course.

“We...could use some privacy while we talk about these things. Max isn’t...feeling too well, and so...-”

Mom swapped looks with Stella. There was a bit of a glint there that Max knew well: the whole ‘My-baby-girl-needs-friends-so-I-should-encourage-her-to-make-some.’

Max’s Mom extended her arm. Stella accepted it.

“What was your name?” Mom asked.
“Stella Hill, Ma’am.”

A firm handshake.

Mom wondered, “Aaaand you’re a friend of Max’s?”

“She is,” Max spat, before Stella had any opportunity to convey the…lack of truth to that statement.

Stella seemed a bit puzzled, but nodded her compliance.

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, Stella,” said Mom. “It *is* getting dark out there, though, and we should probably be leaving soon, so…don’t go wandering too far.”

“I-I’ll be back in a few,” Max dismissed her Mom’s concern.

The gentle jangling of the door chime sent Max’s chest fluttering with relief again as they made their escape. Leading them around back, Stella guided Max behind Two Whales, toward its seedier side, down an alleyway.

“Jeez, I didn’t know you were such a rebel, Max.”

“…Huh?” Max was confused.

“You just lied to your mom’s face.” Stella seemed weirdly impressed.

“Oh…”

“So you could go smoke *out* with me.” Now she seemed…a bit mischievous.

“Y-ya, I guess that’s…” Max groaned under her breath with dissatisfaction.

“There must be more to Max Caulfield than meets the eye.”

“…Something like that.” Max softly chuckled with a sheepish uncertainty.

Max let her consciousness drift elsewhere as Stella led her around.

Lost in a mental vortex of deprecating thoughts, Max was more than ready to drown the white noise from her skull as Stella led her to this ‘meet up.’

Surprise, surprise – it was going down at Frank’s RV, tucked away in a side-lot, obscured by nearby buildings. Said RV was...just as gross as Max remembered it being, and she was overwhelmed with the pungent smell of marijuana the second they entered.

Inside, she was a bit surprised to see not just Frank and Pompidou, but also...Justin?

“Max? Ironic-selfie-hipster Max?”

“Hi to you, *too*, Justin,” Max grunted.

“Whoaaaaa, whoa, chill the train at the tracks, my dude, I’m just...surprised to see you here, still all dressed up, n’ junk.”

Max flatly grumbled, “I’m not your *dude*, and what I’m wearing *isn’t* your business.”

“Hey,” Stella panted, giving Max a stern elbow nudge. “Max, be cool, they're just...-”
Max shrugged herself away from Stella, crossing her arms and glowering at her...fucking heels. Why had she worn heels to the funeral? It was a disgrace to Chloe's name.

“The fuck is her problem?” Frank grumbled, to which Max was very close to snapping. Shooting Stella a hard eye, he growled, “Why'd you even bring her here? Thought you were comin' alone, just a quick exchange.”

“W-we don't have to stay,” Stella fumbled out, “I...Jeez, you don't need to glare at her like that. She's had a rough week, Frank – cut her some slack, she could use a break right now. We all could – that's why we're here, isn’t it?”

“You don't even know me,” Max added bitterly, quietly.

“No,” Frank spat, his predictable irritation flaring right up. “I don't know you. And I sure as shit don't know where you get the lady balls to show up at that funeral today, like you gave two fucks about that poor girl. You n' yer little poser buddies from that tight-ass school, acting like you cared after you all turned yer nose up at her.”

“I was there, too,” Justin pointed out, his face wrinkling with offense.

“Yea,” Frank conceded, “because you actually knew her. Cared about her. But this one?” He lifted his chin at Max, leveling an accusing finger her way. “I never saw her with Chloe.”

“I did know her, more than any of you ever did. Just because you didn't see it doesn't mean it didn't happen. And I...” Max’s throat was quivering, tears forming at her eyes, but she pushed the words out. “I did care. I do care.” Max could sense Stella and Justin both shrinking into the background as she and Frank locked stares like swords. The adrenaline got Max feeling a little courageous. “At least I wasn't hiding behind a tree like a coward,” Max managed to growl out, her heart pounding in her chest at the thought of what this man was capable of. “Waiting for everyone else to leave because you knew it'd draw suspicion to you, huh?”

“Excuse me?” Frank growled, leaning forward in his seat, and causing Max to flinch backward.

“I saw her with Chloe.”

“F-Frank,” Stella eased nervously, “she's just as upset as you are, she was, like...best friends with Chloe back in...”

“Ohh, so you and Chloe had tea parties back when you were toddlers – well, good for you, and real fuckin' good it did for her when you were cowering in a corner while she had a gun in her face.”

Max could feel her nostrils widening with rage. She had half a mind to do something horrible to him, then Rewind. But she just didn't have the willpower to back up the fury.

But she could still cheat a bit, and shove it in his grouchy, scruffy scowl.

“Maybe,” she seethed, “I wasn't there for her because I was too busy figuring out what happened to Rachel Amber instead of sitting on my ass selling drugs to kids.”
Frank rose from his seat, fists clenched at his sides, with a grizzly “The hell did you just say?”

Max's chest felt hollow, like she could pass out from the fear.

But she held her ground, cheeks boiling, eyes quivering, hands shaking, and all.

“Where were you when Rachel needed you, huh?”

“I will knock you on your bony ass if you don't leave right now.”

Frank took a step forward, reaching his hand into his pocket and producing his knife. Pompidou started barking, picking up on the tension.

Max fumbled backward in alarm, slipping up her balance on her high-heels, and tumbled backward against the RV's door.

“W-we'll leave,” Stella assured, raising her voice over the dog's yapping.

“This is on you, too, you know,” Max snarled, her heart ready to explode from the stress and the fear and the rage. Pointing a finger at Frank as she regained her shaky footing, she added, “If you and Rachel hadn't been sneaking around behind her back, she wouldn't have been so desperate to-”

Before Max could even finish thinking about where she would end that sentence, Frank's hand was crushing her throat, grunted out swears of disbelief, and his knife was pointed at her eye.

Max couldn't breathe. Her heart was beating so fast she felt like she'd pass out.

Everything around her seemed to slow. Stop. Her vision went hazy.

Her hand was burning, like it was dipped in lava. The pressure, the pain, she had to relieve it.

She had to self-preserve.

She had to **Rewind**.

So she did.

Or maybe her subconscious did it for her.

It had happened before. Multiple times. Her powers seeming to take over **just** before some kind of awful harm could happen. A natural instinct – or, really, an **unnatural** instinct – where even if she didn't consciously intend to Rewind, it was as if she had no choice. She **had to**.

Time flickered backwards, assaulting her senses in that awful way that gave her nausea at this point.

“We're *allll* hurtin' right now, let's be **good** to each other, yea?”

And Max was...backward in the conversation. Dazed, recovering from being choked by a hand that technically hadn't touched her.

In her adrenaline-fueled high, Max was...**thrilled** by this.

She still had her Rewind, for when she needed it.

Given how fucking mad she was feeling at the world, maybe this wasn't such a bad thing...

Coughing from her encounter and catching her breath, Max needed a moment.
“You OK?” Stella murmured as a distraught hand rubbed at Max's bare back.

Max nodded, sniffing in what she couldn't help but assume was a small dribble of blood. Thankfully, it didn't go any further than that.

“Jesus fuckin' Christ,” Frank sighed. “Yer friend here looks like she needs to hit her inhaler, not a joint.”

“I'm fine,” Max choked out, clearing her throat. She gave Frank a harsh glare, contemplating what she could do to him if she wanted.

And she did want to, in that moment.

“If you say so,” Frank skeptically retorted. Facing Stella, he said, “I got yer shit, so if you've got my money, we can do this so you and yer freaky pal can get a move on. Last thing I need right now is some weirdo givin' me the stink eye.”

Max could feel her expression contorting with anger, but she contained it, choosing to stare at her stupid heels rather than open her stupid mouth.

“R-right, yea,” Stella pulled some bills from her pocket and set them on Frank's disgusting counter next to his seat.

Frank nodded his head toward a drawer, which Stella opened. She retrieved a ziplock bag of fuzzy, brownish-green stuff from the drawer. Weed, if Max were to guess.

“Pff,” Frank scoffed at Max's curiosity. “This your first time, girlie?”

“Yea,” Max uttered in a murmur that trembled more than she'd meant it to.

Max wanted to smack him across the goddamn face. All of the sympathy she'd mustered for him in her previous reality felt like it'd melted away in the heat of how mad she was at him for touching her like that – again. How mad she was at the part he'd played in Chloe's death.

“Well,” croaked Frank tiredly, “don't come to me if you need yer fix, 'cuz I don't need nosy freaks like you causing problems for my business.”

“Don't worry,” Max sighed, impatiently watching Stella examine the contents of the bag.

Frank wasn't done.

“You Blackwell pricks take everything too seriously...except for when it actually matters.”

Stella sighed softly through her nose and tucked the bag into her back pocket.

“Us 'Blackwell pricks' will...get out of your hair, then. Justin?”

“Huh?” Justin's attention seemed to snap awake from wherever he'd been on his phone.

Stella quietly wondered, “Can we borrow your pipe?”

Frank laughed with disbelief.

“Erhh...” Justin was confused.

Max couldn't help but pick up that Stella's intention had more to do with getting Justin away from
Frank than needing a smoking utensil.

“Why don't you come hang with us for a bit?” Stella clarified, nodding her head toward the RV door. “Give...uh...Frank here some space. Pompidou looks like he needs a walk.”

Pompidou made a whimpering noise, wagging his tail and nudging his nose against Stella's chin. Stella pet him a bit. They seemed like they knew each other well enough.

“*Engh,*” Frank sighed with a weird tone. “Probably could use one, myself...” Groggily getting up from his computer chair, Frank grabbed the cash Stella had left on the sink.

Max went to pet the dog, but he withdrew, bobbing his head and slipping away.

“Oh,” Max sighed in a pathetic whimper of rejection.

“See?” Frank grunted, zipping up his jacket. “Even my *dog* can tell there's somethin' *off* about you.”

“Frank,” Stella sighed, “Max is cool, just leave her be.”

Frank and Max met gazes again, and it was the same suspicious exchange they'd shared before.

“Oh, she's 'cool,' huh?” Frank grunted. Leashing his dog up, he added, “I know a sneak when I see one, kid.” He nodded his chin up at Max. “I wouldn't leave my back turned to *this* one. Now c'mon, everybody out.”

That pressure in Max's head was filling back up again – that weight, that...presence. Her urge to inhale strange new vapors seemed unnaturally salivated, and she couldn't shake the feeling it had to do with that voice from earlier. If she listened to it, then it'd hopefully go away, releasing that pressure from her cramped skull.

Outside in the chilly autumn dusk, the trio found a nice alleyway to hide up in for a few minutes. Max curiously watched Stella handle Justin's pipe, loading it with what she presumed was weed, and light it aflame, sucking in a breath. The way it burned and glowed orange in the dimly lit alley – brought to life by Stella's breath – left Max momentarily distracted. The wispy vapors, seeping out of Stella's lips...it felt weirdly familiar. She coughed a bit. The smells, the imagery, the *girl.* Déjà vu. Like she'd done this before, a bunch of times, when she knew that wasn't possible.

Passing the pipe back to Justin so he could take a hit, Stella said to Max, “For someone who doesn't know Frank, you seem to have it out for him.”

“*He* has it out for *me,*” Max pointed out.

Stella shrugged up a shoulder.

“Yea, he's...-” she trailed off uncertainly.

“Dude's got *baggage,* man,” said Justin, lighting his pipe up.

“We *all* do,” Stella cited, her eyes flickering with offense.

Justin nodded half-heartedly, taking smoke into his lungs. He held his breath for a second, passing the pipe and lighter to Max.

Max hesitated for a second, but that silent urge inside her pushed her forward.

It took a few tries to actually get it lit – to hold the pipe properly, to cover up the little hole just right,
to ignite it without burning her finger. Stella's dry hands guided Max's a bit, and the contact sent a shiver across her arms in the bitter sting of the salty evening air.

That burning sensation in her chest when she managed to inhale the vapor, though – it was invigorating. Uplifting. Exciting in its tinge of pain. She held it in too long, though, and ended up choking it out in half-coughs, half-laughs. Hurt like a *mother* fucker, like the back of her throat was coated in burning coal.

Stella and Justin both chuckled at Max's faux pas, and Max handed the pipe over to Stella.

“Pretty eager there, huh?” Stella teased, making it look easy. She handed things to Justin again, pouting her lips and slowly drizzling the gray fog out. “Don't wanna overdo it with this stuff.”

Hand against her prickly chest, Max nodded sheepishly and took a deep breath, coughing a little more on the way out. Stella's fingers brushed against her bare shoulder, which sent a shockwave of goosebumps across her chilled skin. The contact quickly shifted to full-palmed pat of encouragement.

Up until this evening, only physical contact Max had experienced all week since leaving Chloe on that floor had been purely paternal. Her parents, Chloe's parents. But now? After everything? It felt *unsettling* to be...*touched*. Her arm muscles still felt tight from Frank's grip against her throat.

*TAPE* against her wrists.

*CAMERA FLASHES*, white lights, hot lights, *latex gloves*, gunpowder and metal and blood, the stench of rotting-

“Whoa, you OK?” Stella murmured, catching Max by the back.

Max realized she'd lost her footing a bit, but she *hated* the touching. She shook Stella's grip off, stumbling a little on her...*fucking*...-

“Stupid *shoes*,” Max growled, kicking the things off. The bits of gravel digging into her soles weren't fun, but it relieved some of that pressure and pain all the same.

“Duuuuude,” Justin groaned quietly. “Just take it easy, 'kay? You gotta let the relaxant do its *thang*, y'know?”

Max felt her teeth grinding together, overcome with the desire to slap the stoner in his half-awake face.

“What's wrong?” Stella asked, extending her palms out.

“Nothing,” Max lied, her shoulders popping up in defense as she took a step backward, bumping into the brick wall behind her. “*Everything*,” she whimpered. “I don't *know*, I juh---*Hughh.*” She buried her face into her palms and groaned, leaking herself out between her fingers.

With nothing else for her eyes to focus on, all she could see was Chloe, bleeding out on a tile floor, eyes vacant.

“D-do you need, like...a hug?” Stella timidly asked. “Or...-?”

“No, don't...touch...-” Max backed up with some alarm, flashing up her hands with distrust.

Max realized how freaking *loco* she probably looked with how she was acting and struggled to pull herself together. Rubbing tears from her cheeks with her wrists, Max was sniffling a bit and groggily
“No,” she replied quieter, wiping tear-stained hair strands from her face. “I just...” Catching her breath, she closed the distance to Justin and reached out her hands, gesturing for the pipe.

“Jeez-loo-eez, Max,” Justin mumbled, nervously passing it off. “Looks like you got some demons on your shoulder today.”

Taking the pipe in one hand and the lighter in the other, Max replied, “Yea, well...-” and grudgingly left it at that.

“Smokin' pot, solvin' crimes, actin' all weird,” Justin observed, scratching his sideburn. “There somethin' we should know about Max-Clark-Kent-Caulfield?”

Max clicked the lighter. It sparked, but no flame. She tried again, then a third time, and it finally lit.

Setting the bud aflame, Max darkly grumbled, “There's a lot you don't know about me.”

Watching Max take her second puff, Stella bit her lower lip thoughtfully.

“What’s really going on?” Stella asked.

With a sharp glare as she exhaled, Max countered, “Why do you care? Seriously?”

“Damn, Max,” Justin winced his disappointment. “Thought you came here to chill with us...”

Stella lifted her palm – low – toward Justin, easing him with a wary glance, but refocused on Max, who went right in for another toke. If she could just drown everything out – if this gross shit could make her forget, just for a few minutes...-

“Max, when I found your journal that day, it was...” Stella paused, waiting for Max to fumble with the lighter two, three times. “Everyone else had left the room to see what all of the...I-I don't know why, but it's like...part of me knew something awful had happened to you. I can't shake the feeling that you knew something was going down. And it seemed so strange that you'd left something so personal behind.”

Max's brows lifted indignantly as she nodded, breathing out and coughing a bit from that burning, which was quickly starting to feel good. Spiteful.

“At first,” Stella continued, “I was...scared to give it back to you. I was also scared I might...get too curious and read it.” When Max shot her a dark look, Stella quickly added, “I didn't. But...Look, I know we don't know each other, really, but if...after everything that's happened this week, with Nathan, and Jefferson, and the news about Rachel, and your friend, it's...I mean, I can't even imagine what you're dealing with right now, but I think it's important for you know you have people who care about you, even if we don't know you.”

Justin nodded in his slow, meandering way.

“Fershur,” was what he contributed. Max could tell he meant it at least. Kid was trying. “Chloe was...like...a super cool person in a super shit situation, y'know?”

“She was,” Max eeked out bitterly.

Justin rambled, “Bad hand, bad cards, wrong play...Sucks, man.”

“It does,” Max confirmed in the same tone as her previous sentence.
Max rubbed some sweat beads from her forehead, wobbling a little as she handed the pipe and lighter to Stella – she almost tripped on her own shoe. She could...maybe feel it starting to hit her? Or maybe she was just freaking dizzy from the stress.

“Do you need to talk about it?” Stella asked, foregoing her turn and giving it to Justin.

“What's there to talk about?” Max spat impatiently, finding herself immediately uncomfortable with this topic. Not out loud, never out loud, why out loud?

Stella huffed with a tint of frustration, wiped some dust from her glasses, and re-approached.

“I just get this feeling you're carrying something heavy,” Stella explained quietly. “I thought...maybe if you had a moment away from everyone, you could vent that out. We barely know you – there's nothing for us judge.”

Max's head was starting to throb with a headache, and she was feeling a tad woozy. Fucking wonderful.

“What does it matter to you?” Max lashed. “We barely speak all semester, and now...my beh...My friend gets fucking shot right in front of me, now you've taken an interest in me? Why? Huh?”

“Max,” Justin snapped, his tone surprisingly sharp. “Dang, man, what's with this raging from you?”

“No, she's right,” Stella burst out in a growl. Wide-eyed and trembling, Stella confessed to Max, “I feel guilty, OK?”

Everything went silent for a moment, aside from the tiny sizzling of burning weed.

“For...what?” Max demanded in a stern whisper.

“For...-!” Stella puffed, running her hand across her ponytail-slicked hair. “For my part in what happened.”

Max’s jaws went crooked and slack, and she crossed her arms as she awaited elaboration.

“I know th-...I-I mean, Nathan Prescott is the one who pulled the trigger, right? That's...I'm not saying he's not at fault, but...he was being...-”

“Jefferson used him,” Max cited, impatient with shit that was 'old news' in her time-skipping perspective.

“He did,” Stella admitted. “He took advantage of that poor guy. But me? I...let him use me.”

“Huh?” Justin seemed aback, but Max felt like she...somehow should've known this?

“L-look, I don't...You don't need to know the details,” Stella backpedaled a bit as Max took a curious step toward her. “I get...carry that with me, what I could've, should've done, but it's...-” She swallowed a lump in her throat, trying to stand her ground as Max's inquisition stare burned into her. Maybe it was the high starting to seep into her brain, maybe it was knowing what she was capable of with her Rewind, but Max felt a pang of delight from that feeling of power.

“D-dude,” Justin murmured, shaking his wrists and his head. “Past is past, gotta leave that stuff in the rear-view, man. It's...all good, it...-”

“What does this have to do with me?” Max demanded softly, darkly, sideling Justin's rambling.
Stella shook her head, shrugging wildly.

“I-I'm not sure, it's like this...sixth sense, this...guilt, it-...What happened to your friend? This pain you're going through? E-even if it's not...technically my fault, I still-...” Stella took a breath and steadied herself. “I feel responsible. I want-...Wh-whatever I can do to help you get through this, Max, I just...I want to. OK?” Stella made sure she had Max's full attention. She did. “I want to.”

Like a cold, refreshing breeze on a stuffy, humid twilight, that look in Stella's eyes pierced the flames in Max's bonfire of anger, if only just for a moment of clarity.

“I was seeing her,” Max blurted out, a half-lie, half-truth from her intestines, dredged up and pulled out of her mouth in a gross tangle. “Chloe Price. We were seeing each other.”

And there was another moment of tense silence, wherein Stella took the pipe from Justin.

“...Seeing each other?” Stella asked cautiously, bewildered. “As in-...?”

“I was falling in love with her,” Max specified in ragged syllables with a certain firm steel to her tongue. Like a bloodied blade, sharp and freshly used. “We grew up together, lost touch...W-we reconnected for-...It was only a fucking week, but it felt like-...” Max could feel the goddamn waterworks starting up, that persisting pressure and pain finally seeping out like burning vapor. “It was like something was there that hadn't been before. We were both...different. She-...I helped her...find the truth behind Rachel, and it-...” She sniffed snot, rubbed her hands at her nose, wiped the gunk onto the edge of her dress with a groan.

It felt...actually, like, really good to talk about this, even if she was dealing in half-truths. At least, it could convey some kind of sense behind her mood.

“Duuuuude,” Justin predictably uttered. “You n' Chloe? Ya'll were, like, a thing?” He parsed two fingertips together.

“Briefly,” Max choked out. “It's...It wasn't even, like-...I mean, we barely hooked up before-...”

Stella had been silent, processing it in, expelling a puff. She passed it to Max, who accepted, against her better judgment.

As Max inhaled, Stella made her observation.

“It makes sense of why you're-...I-I mean, how you're feeling, the way you're acting. I knew something was-...Agh, I had no idea, Max, that it was like...-” Stella scratched at her hairline awkwardly. “Shit, I don't-...I'm so sorry.”

Max coughed on the smoke, having taken in too deep a breath – again.

“It's...a secret,” Max murmured drearily, wiping droplets from the corners of her eyes as she recovered. “O-our parents don't even know. Please don't-...” She whimpered with a pang of regret. Had she even have said any of this? “Don't tell them. Don't tell anyone.”

“Safe with us,” Justin assured, crossing his finger over his chest in an 'X'. “Chloe was-...She was a good one, end of the day. 'S a fuckin' tragedy, what went down.”

Stella nodded, her face a bit pale.

“I-...Thank you, Max, for...sharing. It means a lot.”
Max nodded, muttering, “Yea, you, too.”

Max went to light the pipe again, but Stella carefully took it from her, ditching the ashes and blowing it clean. This scattered the ashes to the salty air before they landed on the stagnant tarmac below.

“Thanks,” she mumbled to Justin, handing his pipe back to him.

“Thank you,” Justin reciprocated, tipping the pipe up like he was toasting.

Stella extended her arms out to Max, offering a hug.

Max didn't like the idea. She shook her head sheepishly, avoiding the rejection in Stella's glance.

“We should...probably get back to your folks,” Stella decided. Max nodded, latching one hand on the opposing elbow with a gloomy pit in her stomach.

“Yeh,” Justin grunted, kicking himself off the wall he'd been leaning against and stuffing the pipe into his jacket. “Got a fuckin' paper I need to finish for Monday...Hard to focus on homework with all this gnarly shit goin' on, huh?”

Justin received a couple of bleary-eyed, somber nods from the other two.

Max bent down, scooping up her high-heels in her hung hand, and with that pressure released from her skull at last, she bid Justin good night and followed Stella back toward the diner. As the awkward silence hung over them, Max felt that creeping self-awareness scratching at her skull.

“Yea. So. Um...I'm sorry for blowing up like that,” said Max warily, rubbing damp residue from her cheeks. “There's...” She twirled a finger toward her temple. “I've got so much going on in my head, it...”

“I understand,” Stella assured. “It's OK. I can...tell how much it hurts, we don't need to dig any deeper.”

Max chewed her lip a bit, soaking in that concern and sympathy in Stella's eyes.

But...

'I want to.'

—

[From: Stella]
[I don't even know what to think. I'm scared, Max.]
[I came here to escape them. I can't go back there.]
[And this shit with Jefferson? I feel so stupid for spreading those rumors.]
[For being a part of it.]
[I should've done something about it. Told someone. Like you did.]
[I wish I was brave like you are, Max.]
[I'm trying not to worry about everything. Life needs to move on.]
[I know that.]
[But if you have the time, it would mean a lot if we could talk about this.]

[To: Stella]
I am sooo sorry you're dealing with all that.
I wish I had advice but I don't know what to say.
I am totally here for you tho. I mean it. Srsly.
Please. If there's anything I can do for you, if you need to talk
if you need money, a place to stay, whatever you need
pls pls pls let me know. I am serious.
I don't know all I can do but I will do whatever I can I swear.

[PS how is your arm?]

[. . . Sent!]

[From: Stella]
[That means so much to me, Max, thank you.]
[I really need a friend right now.]
[I know I have friends. Of course I do.]
[But I just can't let them get dragged into my drama.]
[They deserve better than that.]
[How far away are you?]  

[PS my arm? (confused emoji) ]

Reading Stella's text reply, Max found herself bewildered. Why had she asked about Stella's arms? What...had she been thinking?

Well, that it was broken.

But why had she thought that? Where the hell had her brain been?

[To: Stella]

[oh lol sorry wrong text convo. (sweatdrop emoji) ]
[I'm at the dorm.]
[Should I meet you somewhere?]

It had only been a few days since Chloe's funeral – and her intriguing encounter with the girl – but Stella had been actively staying in touch. And something bad seemed to have gone down in her family life. While Max had more than enough to deal with on her plate at the moment, something about Stella's understanding made her feel...like things could still turn out OK.

That Max could still turn out OK, somehow.

[From: Stella]
[It's cool, I'll be there in a few.]  

This was...too soon, wasn't it? Letting someone else into her life? Putting her trust in someone else?

Never again. She wasn't supposed to let anyone else in again.
After all:

*Everybody lies.*

*No exceptions.*

Then *why* the hell could Max not help it? Why was she already putting herself through this again, and so soon? She needed to *detach*, disconnect, focus on taking care of *herself* for a goddamn change, not try sorting out some relative stranger's familial bullshit. Hadn't the whole 'lesson' been to *not* try fixing anyone else's problems?

As Max scribbled at her Calculus homework, her mind wandered to angry places again.

It was all a chain. A chain of inconvenience and hardship. Someone always hurt, someone else always hurt worse. Everyone connected by the bullcrap, stuck together, hung up high, links in a fence, powerless to remove themselves from the web of repetitious, rigid metal pieces hooked together.

Grouchily typing into her graph calculator, Max found herself wondering if she could've lived with herself had she made the other choice on that oh-so-fateful evening. What would she have done with herself? She would've still been miserable, right? Probably stewing in the same shitty self-loathing.

So what had been the point? No matter what she'd decided, it would've left a scar on her life.

But if she'd made the *other* decision, it would've left a *lot* more scars on a *lot* more lives.

Why her, though?

Why Chloe?

*Why?*

It had been festering into quite a frustrating question. A web of questions, weaving more sub-threads between each other, a vortex of threads of questions...

*Why time travel?*
*Why her?*
*Why then?*
*Why in that bathroom?*
*Why Chloe?*
*Why her camera?*
*Why a tornado?*
*Why her fault?*
*Why Chloe's friend?*
*Why not someone else?*
*Why were the powers still there?*
*Why did she revel in still having them?*

Maybe, like with everything else, if Max could just...figure out what that other future would've held, she'd be more at peace with where this one was going.

*Bleh,* but knowing herself, Max also knew that if she could see how the other half lived, it'd just make her more uncertain of *either* future. Probably more mad, too.

She should use her Rewind to get ahead. Right? Might as fucking well, since the 'Universe' hadn't wised up and taken it away from her. Was it because the 'lesson' wasn't learned yet? Huh? Because if
not, then that was some shit, and she wasn't interested in whatever 'wisdom' lay in the pool of the next person's blood. If some cosmic entity hadn't bestowed this power for a reason, for a purpose, then she could just keep on using it without needing to learn anything. Why not? What could be lost? Another childhood friend she'd reconnect with? So what? Couldn't even blame herself at that point, she'd just know someone was just fucking with her, so she could-

-Knock, knock-

Max suddenly realized her graphic calculator had been filled with nonsense, displaying an erratic, random display of characters, symbols and mathematical phrases. With an indignant snort, Max slammed the calculator on her desk, jostling everything around. Each movement she made would jangle the pieces of her metallic necklace together – those three bullets sure liked colliding with each other.

“Max?” came Stella's door-muffled voice. “Everything OK?”

“You can-...You can come in,” Max called, running her fingers through her tap-water slick hair. Intently, this reply had dodged Stella's question. The door to Max's room cracked open, and Stella timidly poked her head in.

“How's it going?”

To Stella's inquiry, Max shook her head bitterly, rubbed her eyes, and moaned.

“Ah, sorry. You, um, you hungry?” Stella checked. “I skipped lunch but it's still two hours before dinner opens, me-stomach-no-like. I was gonna grab something from the vending machine downstairs.”

Max was perplexed, but certainly hungry, when she thought on it. Had she eaten lunch? She suddenly realized she didn't remember. Great...She really was losing it.

“Urhh, sure,” Max decided, after an awkward pause. “Yea, I could eat.”

Pff. She could make such a harsh decision with lives literally in the balance, without much deliberation, but...fucking getting a snack, that was what hung her up and got her all mentally tangled.

Max rose from her chair – the bullet necklace jingled loudly. She was chilly. There was one thing that she knew could help warm her up.

She grabbed that leather jacket from the hook on her door. It was a bit worn and tattered – it had taken a few washes to get all of Chloe's blood out of it. But she had been rather grateful that Joyce had let her keep it. Made her feel guilty for...kind of stealing that necklace.

Enveloped in what little remained of Chloe Price, Max felt just a little bit warmer.

She followed Stella out of the room.

The conversation Max had with Stella by the vending machine was hushed and distraught, their murmurings swimming in the sound of laundry machines running in the room down the hall.

Stella had confessed to helping Nathan and Jefferson obtain drugs for the Vortex Club parties. Max recalled seeing Stella that fated night, working the front counter. Stella was being really vague – had
Jefferson been using her to keep tabs on who showed up, or something?

At first, Max had been angry. But she let that anger melt into the molten core at her center – that core fueled by how shitty the world was. Stella was lost in the same way Max was: the world had been unfair to her, and she'd made some hard choices to try and survive its crappiness.

Watching how Stella poured herself out to Max once again, it was...cathartic.

“Y-yeah, no problem. So, um...-” Max scratched her neck and sifted some hair behind one ear. “What're you going to do now? What...does this stuff with Jefferson have to do with, uhh...-”

“Oh,” Stella said with a self-disparaging sigh. “My family drama?”

Max nodded sullenly, folding her hands in her lap.

Stella sucked in air through clenched teeth.

“You sure you want me to go into all that?” Stella wondered, popping open her snack bag of pretzels from the nearby machine. “I-I mean, I feel like I've...rambled into your ear long enough, you've...got more serious problems than me, I-”

“It's OK. I, urhm, I do want to listen.”

Max hesitated, then patted her hand against Stella's leg a bit – a sympathetic gesture. Right? Purely innocent, supportive, just, you know, just like she'd been doing to Max. That's what girls did for each other, and...-

“You know I come from a...poor family,” Stella mumbled sheepishly. “Right?”

Max nodded, playing with her pretzel before nibbling half of it off.

Stella paused, wiping the side of her finger against her lip – contemplating. Considering.

“Years back, my brother – Kamat – he got...involved with some, shall we say, shady business.” Stella's jaw went crooked as she gave Max a wary look.

“Like...-” Max tried to read her expression. “Like, Frank-Bowers' shady business?”

Stella swallowed.

“More like...Frank Bowers' boss shady business.”

“What?”

“Why do you think Frank puts up with me?”

“You call that 'putting up with you' back there?”

“Nicer than he is to most of us...”

“Pff. If you say so,” Max grunted dubiously.

“It's how I got involved with this...with that shit. My family needed the money – bad. I needed the money in order to afford this fucking school. The Prescotts get wrapped into all this because of their son – so they've got a reputation to manage...Money trades hands, all to keep that product going, keep everybody quiet. Basically, I end up getting paid off to cooperate and stay silent.”
“Paid you off for what?”

“W-well, that's how I landed here in the first place – Kamat was managing the Bay. That's how I discovered Blackwell. He knew if I was going to school here, I could be, like, an 'in' for him with the 'market' here. Blegh. I've...tried to keep my distance from what he does, but it's the sort of thing you can't just turn a blind eye to. Not when you're family. You know? So, I've had to...do things.”

“Things?” Max whispered with alarm.

“N-not violent things, not-...” Stella took a shaky breath, rubbing fog from her glasses. “Not directly, anyway. I never really knew what I was contributing to, always just a...a cog in the machine. Ignorance is...” She shook her head, deciding against finishing that sentence. “Point is, my brother's a...fucking piece of work. Ever since we were younger, he's always just...never been able to control himself. It tore our family apart, we never...” Stella panted out a weird sound, almost like she was holding back a sob, maybe?

Max ate the second half of her pretzel as an unease hung in her stomach. She wriggled Chloe's old jacket up over her neck a bit as a chill passed over her.

“It started when he hit my mom,” Stella mumbled, putting her glasses back on after wiping them down this whole time. “Dad tried to...I-I don't know what his plan was, but it didn’t work, it just made things worse, and then...” Stella shrugged. “Mom forgave him too quickly, no consequence – what’s one slap, right? One mistake. Everybody makes mistakes, she'd say. Yea. Well.” Stella's tone darkened a shade. “When you give a mouse a cookie...”

Max was wildly unsettled by the contrast of Stella's tone with the book she was referencing.

“Did he hurt you?” Max wondered gently, putting her hand over Stella's shoulder.

Stella nodded, her eyes getting wet. She sniffed, letting her jaw hang open as her tongue pressed against the roof of her mouth – a bitterness-embalmed shake of her head followed.

“I caught him dealing shit one time,” Stella began – and Max knew right then and there it hadn’t ended well. “This was – I-I mean, like, middle school for me – our parents had separated, neither of them were in town that weekend. Kamat was 'in charge.' I mean, he was an adult at that point, he could-...” Stella recollected her thoughts, wetting her lips a little and sniffing more. “I caught him and some...asshole doing business. I was too young to really, like...grasp all of it, but old enough to get a basic idea, you know? I could tell whatever it was, it was bad. Illegal. I was so...stupid, I should've just...done nothing, left it alone. But instead? I threatened to tell mom. Yea, that went over well.” Stella leaned over her knees, clutching at her abdomen as a stifled sob crawled out. “To be honest, I don't...really remember all of what he did, but it was...” Stella's eyes turned pale and cold as she oozed out this pain from the past. “He straight-up fucking molested me, Max. I can tell you that much.”

Max's future-seeing gut instinct quivered from the confirmation.

“Jesus,” Max whispered her sympathy. She clasped her hand against her chest – the bullets jingled together, jarring her memories around.

“Said if I ever spoke a word to mom about any of it, he'd do it again. And then he'd do it to my sister. And it'd be my fault. He gave me this...bullshit about how with dad gone, he was doing what was necessary to survive. But I knew. I knew he was just...gone. Like something was missing from him. I think mom saw it – probably always knew about it. I always figure it's why she's so fucking forgiving with him. Her poor baby boy, lost in a horrible world, that spiel. I never had the heart to tell
her what her favorite child did. Does. At least, not until yesterday.”

“Wh-whoa, you mean, you've...kept this a secret from them?”

“Psh, honestly, I don't even think my mom believes me, but...”

“M-maybe you should go to the police?”

“Oh, sure. Fucking...five year old domestic abuse case? No evidence? I don't even remember the specifics. Wouldn’t stick – mom would defend him, anyway, there’s no point.”

“Um, but...W-well, if he's dealing drugs with people like Frank, don't you think that's a problem?”

“Yea, no shit, Max. It is. That's why I told her – there's two dead girls in this town in a span of six months, directly connected to Nathan, to Frank, to Jefferson. Those drugs Jefferson was using to dose girls? Where do you think that shit came from? It doesn’t just grow on trees – you can’t just order it on fucking eBay. My brother hooked them up.”

“M-maybe now that Jefferson’s going to be put on trial, this is the time, Stella. You could help put him away – and your brother. You’re a witness.”

“Oh, sure,” Stella said with a spite-laced tongue. “Me? Testify? Then what? What do you think is covering my education, Max? Like I said – I've been paid off. I keep my mouth shut, don’t snitch, cooperate when asked…I get to keep my distance from my family. My Blackwell bills get paid. I get a shot at an actual life.”

Max took a minute to process all of this. They both drank a bit of their sodas. Chewed a bit on their snacks.

“We'll figure something out,” Max decided. She wasn’t going to pressure Stella into confessing to things, or taking it upon herself to accept responsibility for what prickish, creepy men had done. Poor girl had been through enough, from the sound of it. “I'm sorry you're dealing with all of this, that sounds tough.”

“It is,” Stella acknowledged plainly – tiredly – as she crinkled her chip bag into a wad. Chin in her palm, elbow on her knee, she considered her future. “If I do well this year, hopefully I can get a scholarship or something. Take out a loan for the rest, I guess? Ugh…”

Max ran her hand up and down Stella’s back a few times, avoiding the girl’s bra straps.

“Have you talked with anyone else about this?” Max asked.

“Some of it,” Stella recollected. “A few of my friends know the gist of my brother being an abusive asshole, at least. How he hurt me.”

“And the stuff with…Jefferson? The drugs?”

“Well, I guess now Justin sort of knows. To be honest, I suspect he’s already forgotten. He seemed really out there yesterday. He was more interested in what you had to share, anyway.”

“Yea…Um, I guess so.”

“I used to look up to him,” Stella cited.

“Your brother?”
“Hell no – Mr. Jefferson. Though, *pff*, which is worse? Right? But…Jefferson had a vision. A purpose. It was – I mean, it was *creepy*, and disturbing, but it was deliberate. Intentional. My brother’s more like…*lost*. And he doesn’t want to be found.”

“Mm.” Max didn’t quite know what to say to that. What came to mind was something she wasn’t comfortable expressing out loud.

“It’s weird, right?” Stella mumbled on. “We can get so…*enamored* by someone – like I was with Jefferson – we shade our vision in a hue that makes them look pleasant. Rose-tinted glasses, and all that.”

“Don’t beat yourself up,” Max sighed. “I…felt the same way about him two weeks ago. Fucking *gross*.”

“It’s crazy how much can change in such a short time.”

“Tell me about it.”

“You see a person’s *true* colors, you see that side of them they try to hide...-”

“That’s why I think it hurts so much,” Max blurted out, her heart skipping a little as a wave of emotion splashed over her.

“Mm?” Stella was silently intent on listening.

Max tried to steady herself, but her lips quivered as she let the idea slip out.

“I-I feel like, even though we only had...a week together? That's not that long. But...I felt like Chloe *showed* me her true colors. The good, the bad, *and* the ugly. And I was...-” She couldn't breathe for a moment, her eyes rapidly watering up. “It was all...beautiful. All of it. I-I mean, the...-” She sniffled, wiping her nose against her sleeve. “The ugly was still *ugly*, you know? But I...was fine with it. It didn't really...But then she...-”

Max's eyes shut closed, and she felt the warmth of Stella's hug against her, calming her jittery breaths, her trembling and her quivering.

“*Whew,*” Stella sighed out, wiping sweat and tears from her face. She caught her breath. “*Augh*, it, uhh...it just feels good to...to get this shit off our chests, huh?”

“Y-yea,” Max sputtered, trying not to make eye contact for too long. Her cheeks were hot and damp, and she was filled with embarrassment. “I'm, erh, I'm glad I could...be there for you. That *we* could be there for each other.”

“Us Blackwell-ians need to look out for our kind.”

“Right. Yea. S-sorry I...started making this about me, I-”

“*Don’t* apologize, Max, my shit is...old news, this is...I mean, your...Someone important to you was *taken* from you. Before she was supposed to.”

Max nodded, chewing her lip fretfully. Stella's words sunk in. And another log was added to that fire in her gut.

“She *was* taken from me,” Max uttered in a hushed fury. “Wasn't she...?”

She could *feel* her nose involuntarily wrinkling with disdain. Her fingers stiffening, her nails digging
into her own thighs.

“*Agh, jeez,*” Stella squeaked sheepishly, “I'm such an...idiot, you've got *way* more important things to be upset about, I don't even know why you'd waste time to listen to me, and...-”

Max's fingers uncurled, her jaws unclenched, her breathing resumed.

“Stella, *no.* You-...You've...you've been through *so* much Stella, I....”

Stella just nodded bitterly, contemplatively, still brushing her face down with one arm.

Max swallowed the lump in her throat.

She wrapped her palm around Stella’s dry, rough hand, applying pressure to remove that inkling of delicacy to the act.

It felt...strange?

But she still felt compelled to say it, anyway.

“I hope everything turns out your way in the end.”

“Aw...” Stella's voice trembled with gratitude as she wiped away her tears. “Thank you, Max. I...I really appreciate that...”

--

The cafeteria was gently humming with activity. Blackwell wasn't a *huge* school, so its tiny cafeteria never got too crowded. Max appreciated this, especially in the past month or so since...-

It was still hard to accept.

Had it all even been *real*?

Stella, sitting across from her, was rambling about...what, now?

“Doesn't seem like *you're* into him – like, does it bother you?”

“Whuff...-?” Max was totally lost, but somehow she'd gotten halfway through her cheap, flat square of pizza – her mouth was full of the stuff. She'd picked the pepperoni pieces off – there they were, next to her cup of sliced peaches – yet she had no memory of removing them.

“Warren,” Stella said in a hushed tone, leaning across the table. “You two used to hang out *all* the time, but now I *never* see you two together. Did he...-?” Stella paused, scanning Max's face for emotions that...weren't there. “Did he even ask you to the winter formal? Rumor was he was going to.”

Taking a bite of her cheese pizza, Max nearly choked.

“*Mm-mm,*” she hummed in a negative tone of disbelief. She'd been deliberately keeping her distance from Warren, and he'd seemed to have gotten the hint. It wasn't that she didn't appreciate his friendship, she just...couldn't *deal* with being around him. Not yet. Not when it was so painfully obvious how he felt about her.

“Really?” Stella gave pause, taking a sip from her glass of milk. “I'm...surprised, I thought he was *all* into you.”
Max swallowed, nodding hesitantly.

“M-maybe, I dunno,” she dismissed the concept, for what had to have been the fiftieth time that semester.

Stella followed up, “You two have, like, a falling out, or...?”

Max shook her head, chewing into her food some more. Maybe if she just...kept eating, Stella would drop it? Move on?

“Just not into him anymore, huh?” Stella decided, though Max did not approve of the word ‘anymore’ being inserted in there. Shrugging, lower lip propped out, Stella conceded, “I don't blame you, really. I mean, he’s a super nice guy, right? But...I don’t know. It’s like, I get this...vibe from him, like he needs to be ‘in charge.’ To be honest, that’s...kind of a turn on for me, for some reason?” Stella flashed a toothy, bashful smile, which Max found adorable. “But, eh, I-I’m not sure, I should probably be trying to move away from that sort of thing, huh?”

Max felt her throat tighten up at the question. All of this 'dating' talk was...quickly putting her on edge. She put her hand over her mouth, eyeing her intent to speak as she finished chewing.

“Y-yea, totally,” she spit out at last. “Warren’s a good guy, but he’s...still a teenage guy.”

“Right?” Stella burst out in instant understanding. “He can really be such a...boy, huh? I don't get what Brooke sees in him. I'm not interested in dating a boy.” Max felt her stomach churn with vicarious excitement. “I'm interested in dating a man.” Aaaaand it withered.

“Like Jefferson?” Max grunted with some disgust – both at Stella's notion, but also her own feelings, mere weeks past.

Stella paused at this, lips agape just slightly.

“N-no,” she spat out, her cheeks beginning to burn with frustration. “That-...Augh, you do realize how much of a twat I feel for telling you that shit, right?”

Max just lifted her brows cryptically, flat-faced about it.

“I'm just saying,” Max muttered with skepticism, “you never know when the right sort of person can pop into things. Don't...try to compartmentalize your ideal...date.”

Stella sucked in air through her nose, then huffed it out.

“I have a bad habit of...” Stella scratched an itch on the top of her head, fluttering her lips. “I don't make the best decisions with boys. I tend to fall for ones who aren't as mature as what I, like, logically know I should be pursuing – orrrr it's just fucking puppy love with celebrities or, like...whatever.”

“Mm.” With her arms crossed, Max pondered a piece of advice in reply. “I feel like it's better to just...not pursue that stuff until you meet the sort of person who...” She trailed off.

Lips connecting in the Storm.

Hands held over railroad tracks.

Water splashed in a pool above an ethereal glow.

Never again.
“I'm not a good judge of that stuff,” Stella lamented. Lifting her glasses up with her fingers, she pressed her palms over her eyes. She groaned out, “And I always get too shy and clam up and it never...goes anywhere.” She huffed, dropping her arms into her lap in defeat.

Why the hell was Stella even worrying about this shit? Boys? Dating? Her brother was dealing drugs, she was connected to a whole web of crime which had led to at least two murders, her future was up in the air, and she was fucking...fussing herself over whose dick to put in her pants? Seriously?

Stella added to her self-induced pity party, “I still haven't had an actual date to any of these damned dances in all of my time here. I always end up stuck working them, and I'm sick of it. I'm getting antsy, and I'm so with just working at them.”

“Then...fucking go, I don't know.”

Max took a salty sip of juice.

“What? Max, what the hell's your...?” And Stella's irritation bubbled and sputtered out, her eyes suddenly going wide. “Aahhhhh, shit,” she hissed to herself, her eyes hollowing with remorse. “I did it again.”

Max, her lips pursed thin, said not a word, but shrugged up one shoulder.

“I'm so sorry,” Stella grumbled out, wiping sweat from her face. “I'm trying not to get all gossipy on you, I-I don't know what to say.”

“You could...just not say things sometimes,” Max muttered flatly. Dryly. It had come out a bit wrong. She was in a bad mood. “Just, like, let...let the quiet hang some times. Is what I mean. Every second, it doesn't...need to be filled with...”

Howling winds, splintering rain drops, gunshots and sobs.

“-...noise.”

“Yea, you're right,” Stella decided with an affirming nod. “Yea. I should-...No, yea, I need to put some effort into thinking before I say stuff. Huh?”

Max blinked blankly back. What, was she supposed to agree? Or disagree?

Fuck that. Max was so done with telling people what they wanted to hear.

“Couldn't hurt,” she blurted out.

“Ha,” chuckled Stella weakly. “R-right, I'm...such a gabby...Kathy. Gabby Katie? Erm...”

“Liiiike maybe now,” Max teased with a smirk and lowered eyelids. “Now would be a good time to try, with the quiet thing?”

Stella offered a toothy, dorky grin that was charmingly embarrassed, and nodded in compliance.

And so it was that they finally enjoyed some peace and...

**WHITE NOISE**

Their food about finished, Stella stirred Max out of the sea of sounds.
“You know, Max, you're more of a straight-shooter than I took you for.”

Max shrugged again. She was going to let the remark pass, but her gut snarled its protest.

“I don't think I'm what anyone here takes me for.”

Turned out, she wasn't just done with telling people what they wanted. She was also done with letting people tell her what they thought she was.

Stella seemed intrigued and taken aback by this comment.

Fussing with her glasses a bit, as if she'd seen wrong rather than misheard, Stella cleared her throat.

“I believe that,” Stella concluded, with a tint of awe. “Yea. You know what? *Fuck* the boys, screw the Vortex troglodytes, let's just go—”

“Troglodytes?” Max picked. “Do actual people say that?”

Chuckling, Stella finished her thought. “*Let's just go* to the formal, stag-style.”

“Doesn't that mean going *alone*?”

“Without a date. We'll just go.”

“Mm...”

“No boys – no dates – rule, right now. I'll get some of the girls in on it. Huh?”

Max felt her intestines wriggle with alarm.

She wanted to agree, on the spot. Stella seemed smart, fun, observant, self-aware...the kind of friend she could really use in her life after...-

No. Not again.

Not even as a friend.

She couldn't do this to herself again. *Never* again.

“I'm...not sure that's such a good idea,” Max murmured hesitantly.

“*Dude,* I'm straight,” Stella casually spat out. “It wouldn't have to be awkward. Besides, I am *not* going to a party on this campus without backup – not after the shady shit that's happened this year.”

Noting Max's stiff, unbending stature, Stella egged on. “*Come on,* Max. *We've* been anti-social for too long. *We* deserve a night out.”

Max had to swallow the lump in her throat, but managed out a nod.

“Aw, yes, all right. Oh, *man,* oh, jeez, I-I haven't been *excited* to go to a dance in—...”

The way Stella planted her hand delicately against her exposed chest – the way she was wearing a low cut t-shirt – it caught Max's attention in ways it shouldn't have. Despite Max's raucous emotional and mental state recently, the eye candy didn't hurt things. The way Stella would fidget, how she'd stutter a little sometimes, the way her lips would seal and purse as she...

*Augh,* gross. Horrible. Bad Max. What was *wrong* with her?

Where was this stupid horny-ness coming from?

*I am hungry like the wolf!*

Maybe Chloe had rubbed off that 'hunger' on her – it was like she was starting to look at *all* women differently now, if only because she was *letting* herself. It was going from occasional moments of
puzzling curiosity to just straight up staring at someone at some point, every period. Sure, it was 'natural,' it was 'healthy,' she was a growing woman, blablabla.

But it was still bad. It was still wrong.

Chloe. Max's heart belonged to Chloe Price.

Never again.

Watching Stella excitedly tap away at her phone, Max's tongue nervously clicked at lunch residue between her teeth. Yum.

She was still mad, though.

"Wh...-?" Max went to speak.

"Mm?" Stella's eyes peeked up at her from behind a layer of glass.

"Why is this such a big deal to you?" Max forced out the question. "It's been barely a month since all of that drama. They haven't even put Jefferson on trial yet, the Prescotts are trying to buy their way out of-...And you're sitting here, not doing anything about it, worrying about a fucking dance? You have no idea what I went through to uncover all of this, what I had to-..."

Stella had lowered her phone, dropped her jaw, widened her eyes, and blinked out a tear at Max's frustration.

Stella started to cry, without a reply.

And Max felt horrible.

She wouldn't take back what she'd said. People needed to be called out on their shit. People needed to be held accountable for their actions. If the goddamn cosmic entity responsible for whatever the hell she'd been through was going to do it to her, she was going to do it to everyone else.

But it felt awful. The anger bubbling inside her was starting to feel less like fire and more like heartburn – steady, consistent, always there, always adding that pain.

White noise in the background of her existence.

Max closed her eyes, absorbed it in.

The click-clacks of forks, stirring of spoons against mugs, the smells of hot coffee, the scent of a soy-induced cafe drink, the aftertaste of a donut, the sight of Chloe Price, her voice hazy, her expression concerned.

A dream. Day-dreaming of an ordinary world, where she and Chloe could've just...existed. Together. Imagining what could've been, had Max been strong enough to take what she'd wanted. Truly wanted.

"I'm pathetic," Stella confessed between stifled sobs. And Max was back to the cafeteria. She wiped at her eyes with her shoulders, trying to not let on how broken up she'd become from Max's scolding.

The students around them hummed and buzzed, their drama irrelevant in the flow of things.

Max sighed bitterly at Stella's simple conclusion.
“I'm a coward, Max,” Stella explained quietly, setting her elbow onto the table, her hand planted into her palm. “I'm not...I'm not like you – I'm not brave, I'm not confident, I have no idea what I'm doing with my life.” Her breathing had calmed down at least, but she was still sniffly. “And I know I-...There's no way I can understand what you're going through. How could I?”

How could she?

“But, Max, what you're asking for...it's too much. I'm sorry, I just...can't. All I want is-...is just an ordinary life, I want to leave all of this shit behind me.”

Max certainly understood.

Max's head felt...that damned pressure again. And she heard Chloe's voice, bleeding through the white noise, like a breeze trying to cut through a fog.

“Then the past is staying in the past, so...let's stop fucking with it. Leave it alone. Ya know?”

“R-right,” Stella replied shakily, much to Max's surprise.

“What?” Max mumbled, clearing away that mental fog.

“The past is in the past, all I want to do is...move on. You sound like you get it.”

Max had trouble breathing for a moment. She kept swallowing, but her throat was dry.

“Look Max, I know I'm a loser,” Stella mumbled out, her enthusiasm shattered. “I'm sorry I've been putting all of this on your plate, gossiping up and down lately. You're just...a good listener, I don't know. I trust you somehow? But...But you're right, I need to get over myself. Please, though.” Stella extended her hand, palm up and open, across the table. “Please, Max. I really need someone I can count on right now. My life is about to get flipped upside down. Just, please go with me. I have a good feeling it'll be good for us.”

Max's head was still pounding, her eardrums out of whack, her heart heavy and its beats hollow.

EVERYONE LIES.

NO EXCEPTIONS.

NEVER AGAIN.

“Y-yea...” Max decided, limply setting her hand into Stella's. “Sure, wh-whatever will...help you right now, just keep-...Uhh, keep in mind what I said, and...”

“I will, I promise. Thank you.”

Stella tightened her grip around Max's.

For just a moment, Max's palm felt like it was on fire.

And through that brief sting of burning pain, Max felt like everything else had dissolved into a dark haze.

But the contact retracted just as quickly, and the haze lifted.
It was awful.

The fancy dresses, the suits, the ties, the shoes, the décor, the music...

What was Max doing here?

She was doing what someone else wanted from her, instead of what she wanted.

But what did she want anymore?

She had no fucking idea.

So there she was.

Most of the ladies present were dressed in white. Not Max.

Black, all the way. The same dress she'd worn to Chloe Price's funeral, with Chloe's bullet necklace for good measure. And no heels this time – good ol' converse sneakers with a dorky skull with sunglasses, like she normally wore.

To most of the world, this outfit said...nothing. Very little. Maybe, at most, it said, 'Max Caulfield is a hipster goth passive-aggressive rebel who wears black at a traditionally white dance.' Or something.

But what Max was trying to say was, 'Leave me the fuck alone.'

“Maaaaax~!”

Hell no, not this peppy shit – not now.

“Dana.”

“You look so GOOD!”

You barely even looked at me.

“Y-yea, you, too.”

Dana leaned in and – no, Max didn't-

NO DON'T FUCKING HUG ME THAT'S-

Dana's hug was...fine, nothing sinister about it, but shallow. So soft it barely pressed any weight. Without substance.

However, Dana did press her over-enthusiasm onto Max with “It's so great to see you out and about – that's why we're here, right? To discover ourselves?”

Already 'discovered myself,' didn't go over so well.

“Mm,” Max hummed back. When Dana broke their hug, eyeing her, Max forced a wavering nod.

Dana added, amused, “I thought we'd never get you out of that dorm room.”

Maybe there's a reason I stay there.

“I've, uh, been...been dealing with lot,” Max mumbled. “Homework, midterms, you know...-” Her voice probably too low under the goddamn white noise
But Dana nodded politely anyway, administering a sterile shoulder-touch of socially obligated sympathy.

Ever since Nathan Prescott had shot Chloe Price – and Max Caulfield had been there to witness it – most of her peers had been staying away with a ten foot pole. As if she carried some kind of ‘bad juju.’ Then again, maybe the grouchy demeanor and goth trappings weren't doing her favors.

She wanted everyone to back off, so she'd taken advantage of the stigma.

“It's been a rough semester for everyone,” Stella interjected, drawing Dana's attention off of Max. Her 'wing-gurl,' Stella had quickly built up a talent at getting folks to back off of Max, but with kindness rather than dickishness. “We all have different ways of coping with what happened.”

Dana nodded – Max could see it. That Dana cared, that is. Just...not deeply enough to get involved. Couldn't blame her. Dana was still probably dealing with her own problems, too. Hell, the less people cluttering Max's life at that point, the better.

“Right,” Dana agreed with Stella. “And that's exactly what school spirit is there for, isn't it? To help us band together. Max.” She refocused, much to Max's discomfort. “If you ever need to talk, my door is always open. OK?”

Max's breath stopped for a moment, her lips glued tight together, her eyes petrified by that spark of genuine concern in Dana's expression.

Max nodded slightly, hoping the interaction was over.

Trevor and Justin showed up with plastic cups of punch – or, at least, Max hoped that was all that was in them. They looked kind of out-of-sorts all dressed up. It was always weird seeing Justin without a cap. Trevor had two cups in hand, and passed one to his girlfriend. They kissed – on the lips.

It made Max bitter. It was stupid and selfish of her to feel that way.

But that was how it was.

“Have you seen Brooke?” Stella asked Justin.

“Uhhh, think I might've seen 'er back in the bleachers?” Justin bobbed his head off off to their side.

Stella took a glance and nodded.

“Thanks,” she replied. But just before she could whisk herself and Max off, Justin caught her.

“Yo,” he said, lowering his tone and leaning in. “We still, urh, on for study group when this is over?”

Max watched Stella's expression wither, the beads of sweat practically popping out as she shrugged.

“M-maybe,” Stella mumbled, glancing to Max. “We'll, um...We'll see if Max is up for it?”

The fuck? When was I going to find out about this?

“Yea, I'll come,” Max decided, flashing Stella a glance of confusion. “Midterms are kicking my ass. I could really use a cram session.”

“Mad moxie from Max, I like it.” Justin flashed her a pointer finger of approval. She flashed him back a middle finger. She wasn't coming for his company, she was coming to escape this fucking
pointless high school bullshit. Justin took her gesture as a snarky tease and chuckled nervously.

“Text me,” Stella dismissed the topic discreetly, having missed Max's rude little gesture.

“See ya'll,” Justin bid.

Stella nudged her head toward the bleachers, slapping Max's back to get her to follow. Up in the back left, there was Brooke – hair down, simple black skirt with a white vest covering a T-shirt with the Death Star on it. She was pretty made up, too. The orange lipstick and yellow painted nails were a nice touch with the hair down, helped compliment her highlights, give everything that ‘primary-spot-color’ look Brooke seemed to like.

Not unlike her half-hearted attempt at a formal look, however, Brooke was playing a video game on her phone. At a formal dance. As if she were waiting for something. Someone. Ugh.

“Hey, Brooke,” Stella greeted. “We lost track of you back there.”

“Yup,” was Brooke's response, snarky and dismissive.

I've got enough attitude tonight for the both of us.

“What's up with you?”

“You're one to talk,” Brooke sassed back.

Max shot Stella an offended, puzzled shrug.

“Hey, ladies, c'mon,” Stella sighed.

“Why are you two even here?” Brooke growled, still not looking up from her phone. “What's the point in coming to the dance if you aren't going to dance with anyone?”

“Wh-...” Stella was paralyzed by the question. She countered, “Pff, says the girl on her phone, sitting alone, up in the bleachers.”

“Maybe I'd be on the dance floor, dancing – you know, the entire purpose of this event – if the person I was going to ask wasn't too busy trying to track down someone else who clearly doesn't even want to be here.”

Max didn't need to be told who Brooke was referring to. All goddamn autumn, Brooke had been giving her attitude. And what was worse? The more Max tried to fucking push Warren away, get him to back off and give Brooke the goddamn 'opening' she wanted, the more Brooke seemed to hate her for it. All these goddamn teenagers and their...fucking drama, it...-

“Brooke,” Stella tried to console her friend. As Stella leaned over to murmur into Brooke's ear, Max was distracted.

The way Stella's sleek satin skirt of magenta hugged its owner's hips was...frustrating. The way her hair was all finely brushed and curled into this bad-ass, pretty ponytail, it-...Well, it was just cool, nothing more. The curves of Stella's exposed shoulders, it-...They were just fucking shoulders, why would that even be interesting to look at? Fuck's sake...Max was about ready to self-flagellate if these stupid thoughts didn't start leaving her alone. For all of the time she'd been spending alone in her room, maybe she ought to be setting some breaks aside for some...self-help with this problem?

“Max? What're y-”

“Guh-!”
Max's intestines did a goddamn *twist* at Warren's voice, cutting through such lewd, personal thoughts like a fork through Jello. She stumbled backward, nearly tripping over the bleacher.

Warren caught her by the arm, much to her dismay.

**GRIP**
**PINNED**
**CHOKED**
**DUCT TAPE**
**LATEX**
**WHITE LIGHTS**
**STARING**
always staring
they were always

"Wh-whoa, you OK?" Warren checked, tugging Max back upright.

Max, realizing she'd just been...fucking *saved?* Hell no. Screw that.

She immediately wrestled her arm out of his grip, sitting herself down beside Brooke with crossed arms – and almost tripping again in her embarrassed, angry haste.

"Uhh..." Warren was at a loss, rubbing the back of his neck. "You're welcome?"

"I *am*, apparently," Max snorted back. Her whole face had just, like, *melted*, her features sagging into a state of rage and offense. "And *no*, I don't want to fucking dance with you. OK?!"

Max watched as Warren's, Stella's, and Brooke's faces all turned white as sheets at her attitude.

"I...*didn't* ask you to," Warren clarified indignantly. "I've...-" He glanced to Stella, gesturing an awkward hand her way. "-...been looking for Stella, to...-"

Stella's jaw opened, like she was going to say something. She didn't.

And there was that *look* between them – between Warren and Stella – that same fucking look Max had *just* worn herself, staring at Stella's back, moments before. She *hated* seeing it on Warren's face. Even if it wasn't at her, it *was* at her – his goddamn eyeballs like peeping camera lenses.

**HER goddamn eyeballs were creepy horrible peeping camera lenses!**

'*Always take the shot.*'

"Just don't...You *touched* me!" Max snapped, trying to force this back to how he'd broken her personal bubble, and away from that *look* between them, away from her own self-inflicted frustration. "You *know* I don't like you touching me, and you just...You fucking *creep!* I *told* you to leave me alone, but you're *looking* for me?"

"*What? I didn't even know you were here, I was looking for Stella, she-*"

"And you know what? Leave *Stella* alone, too! She's got *enough* going on without having to deal with you *snooping* around her life."

Warren lifted up his arms, his expression clouded in irritated confusion.

"What's she talking about?" Warren demanded.

Teeth grit nervously, Stella shook her head at Warren, as if to deny what Max knew was true.
She was going to take his side? After all the time they'd been spending together?

“Max,” Brooke huffed, “What the hell's your problem? He was just—”

“Nope,” Max blurted, getting right back up. “It's not your business, Brooke, stay out of my shit. Why don't you ask him out, anyway? Since you've been on my fucking case about it all goddamn semester.” Storming off down the bleachers, Max called back, “You know what? You can all have your petty love triangle, leave me the fuck out of it.”

And then, with her back turned to them, the realization hit: her peers had overheard that little outburst. A whole...nice big chunk of 'em. The stares, the looks, the hushed gossipping and pitiable glances. Some freaking petulant 'oooo-ooooohhs' were echoing, ringing at Max's ears.

Her hand, it...was burning, it stung so sharply, like a million needles, tiny shards of glass, piercing her palm

WhItE nOiSe

silence

.

.

.

.

.

Everything was suddenly dead quiet.

Max had squinted her eyes shut from the sudden, intense pain in her hand. The pain had resided
quickly as it had come, and Max opened her eyes.

There was no sound. Her vision was blurred at the edges.

Time had stopped.

The whole gymnasium stood still. Everyone and everything.
Max couldn't move, her legs felt like iron.

And then a voice echoed through the warped haze, bouncing across the cement walls, the lacquered wood, the frozen wasteland of time-robbed bodies.

What?

Was that...Chloe? It was Chloe's voice.
Not some memory, literally Chloe's voice, Max had...no idea what she was rambling about.

Sure sounded like Chloe, but whatever she was on about made no sense, and Max had no memory of it. No, it was not a memory, it felt...distinctly different.
Max called out, desperately trying to communicate through all the

What the hell was this? It was unbearable. Everything hurt so much. She could...almost taste Chloe, right...there, right...within reach.

Max's hand was shaking, trembling this entire time, on fire, out of control.

She wanted it all to stop, just fucking stop, she wanted it all to end.

But part of her couldn't let that happen. Couldn't stop listening. The harder she strained, the less attention she put to her stinging hand, and the more focus she found in what was happening outside of her senses.
oh god fuck oh man ohhhhh it felt so good the scent of her sweat the warmth of her lap the glow of her hand in Chloe's, it was like second-hand smoke from the most amazing drug Max could imagine it was just sooooo mmmmmm she couldn't stop drinking it innnnnn
She forgot it. She needed to focus. She needed to

Max was too preoccupied to listen to them, trying to

The blood was being wiped from her face.

"What's going on?"

"Max, what's wrong?" Stella was whimpering, tapping her fingertips against Max's cheek.

"What's going on?"

"M-Ms. Grant! I'm not sure, I...Thank you."

The blood was being wiped from her face.

Max was too preoccupied to listen to them, trying to probe and pry and ask their questions.

She needed to focus. She needed to remember this, remember her, commit it all to memory before she forgot it.

Like being yanked out of the sea, Max's lungs burst open for breath. Her whole face was slick with sweat, her hand, it was so damned sore, she couldn't even move her fingers, it was so numb. She coughed and choked on her own blood, a nice little puddle of it smacking against the hardwood floor, the shining red liquid a sore spot upon the polished beige wood. She could hardly breathe through the blood, her nose was so full of the stuff.

"Jeez," Stella was wincing – right there at Max's side, her hands gently pressed against Max's shoulders.

Was it real? Had it been real, what she'd just seen? Or just some dream? It sure felt fucking real by the end, there. They'd been back home – at her house in Seattle. Chloe had never been there, it couldn't have been a memory...but it was way to fucking vivid too be a dream.

"Max, what's wrong?" Stella was whimpering, tapping her fingertips against Max's cheek.

"What's going on?"

"M-Ms. Grant! I'm not sure, I...Thank you."

The blood was being wiped from her face.
Max's legs still refused to move.

Her hand felt like used charcoal.

The noise has quieted.

"I can understand feeling like the world wasn't made for you. And so it's like: 'isn't anyone here? Isn't anyone paying attention? Can anyone see me? Am I actually crazy?' Trying so hard to reach people, latching onto someone that we think can see us only to have them look away when it gets too bright for their eyes."

~ Riley Hawke

Just a nosebleed.

Right?

That's what she'd convinced the nurse. A really bad nosebleed, she was dehydrated, allergies, dried out nasal passages, not eating well...

And of course, the nurse couldn't really find any evidence to the contrary. The nosebleed had stopped as quickly as it had started, too.

So Max had been let go, given a prescription for an iron supplement, advised to watch her diet, drink more water, try and replenish what she'd spilled onto the gym floor...Max's folks were probably going to get a call about it, and she'd probably end up being forced to see a doctor.

But a doctor couldn't fix what was wrong with her.

Escorted to the nurse's desk, Max was relieved to see Stella waiting patiently for her in a chair against the wall.

Max stood before her awkwardly. They avoided eye contact at first, but the wall quickly crumbled. Stella got up from her seat and gave Max a hug.

It was warm, and she didn't mind.

“You OK?” Stella whimpered, her voice cracking a bit.

Max was alarmed at the worry in Stella's tone. This was...No. It was too early for people to care this much. Too early for Max to want people to care. It had only been a couple months. She wasn't ready to let people back in.

Max nodded her chin against Stella's shoulder with an affirming hum of confirmation.

She hugged Stella back. In their dresses, this act felt...inappropriate. Max felt guilty.

But she couldn't let go, either.

The hug lingered longer than Max felt like it should have.

When Stella broke contact, Max noticed how reddened Stella's eyes were.
“Uh, let's...” Stella nodded them toward the office's front door. “You should eat.”

“Mm.” Max was feeling pretty complacent with that idea. Her stomach was aching from hunger.

The pair walked side by side down the quiet, dark halls. The music from the dance floor was muffled, echoing gently across the lockers and tiles, like a fog around them.

“Is it my fault?” Stella asked in a hushed tone.

_Damnit._

“What? Stella, no, no, it...”

“You seemed so...angry, I didn't...”

_Not at you, you're helping._

“I-I'm not mad at you, just...everything, it-...It's all complicated.”

Stella nodded, wiping her wrist against her nostril and sniffling her nose dry.

“I-I know, it-...I just want to help you, however I can.”

“Why?” Max winced, hurt and confused by this.

“I'm not sure,” Stella moaned under her breath. “It's like-...I get this sixth sense with some people. And I start looking at them for who I know they could be. Their potential. You know? And then I just...want to see that...possible, future person exist. And I try to help that happen.”

Max bitterly lingered on this concept. It was like...seeing a person through future-tinted glasses. In a way, wasn't that how Chloe had been seeing her, during that fateful week? Not for the wimpy, wishy-washy coward she was, but for the 'force of nature' she could become. Max had definitely been seeing all of Chloe’s pain, but when she’d stared _through_ it, she’d seen a beautiful person – the person Chloe could _become_.

“I'm being clingy,” Stella dismissed herself at Max’s heavy pause. “It must be...so annoying, I-I'm sorry, I don't-...don't do well with, like, b-being close to people, I, uh-...end up just scaring them off, and...” She was starting to fidget her hands together, fuss with her glasses, pick up speed in her syllables... “And then it just _feeds_ into itself, and it's this cycle, and...”

“Whoa, hey,” Max gripped her hand against Stella's shoulder briefly, rolling her to a stop. The contact was...too intense, she had to let go immediately after. “St-Stella, it's...OK. You're OK.”

Max gave Stella a hard look to make sure she understood. Stella hesitated, then nodded with a bashful little smile.

“I'm...sorry I've been lashing out at you,” Max sighed, fussing her hand through her hair. She'd been trying to start growing it out, and she'd gone and straightened it up for the formal, but the air was getting the better of it, and split ends were cropping up all over. So many fucking split-ends...

“You're not..._wrong_,” Stella conceded. “It's like, you have the guts to be straight with me when most people don't. Even Brooke, I _know_ there's things going on in her head she isn't telling me. She'd rather just avoid the drama, and she takes it out on you. I'm so sorry. I should be working harder to, like, make things right with you two. And with Warren. A-and, like, I wouldn't be _aware_ of these things if you weren't calling me out on it? So...”

They'd come to a stop and ended up leaning against the vending machines in the central lobby.
"A-at least my grouchiness is doing something good, then," Max lamented with a grunt, crossing her arms.

"Yea, what's-...I-I mean, if you're comfortable talking about it, I'm...worried about you, Max. What's going on?"

"N-nothing, just all of this bullshit from this autumn, it's like I can't leave it behind, but I can't take it with me, either."

"You're carrying something heavy," Stella observed. "Dragging it behind you. I can tell you are. Something you're scared of."

Max took in a deep breath, avoiding Stella's ever-studious gaze.

She shrugged her shoulders up, then dropped them back down.

This was the problem with letting her in. Stella was smart. Observant. She cared, too, and for all of her talk of being cowardly, she still acted on things when others were involved – just not for herself. Something Max understood all too well. It was all bad combination that wouldn't lead anywhere good, right? It sure as hell hadn't for Max Caulfield.

But Max was addicted to that fix of being the center of someone's attention. At the least, it drew her mind away from what was missing.

"If you need someone to keep a secret," Stella offered, "I swear I can. I've opened up to you about all of my shit, it's only fair for me to help you carry your burden, too. You know?"

Max at last met Stella's intent gaze. Chewing at her lip, she contemplated her course of action.

The past two months had been hellish. Max was drowning in her own problems, her own post-traumatic-stress. She was starting to lose it.

She wasn't strong enough on her own. She couldn't deal with what had happened in a world where no one else could understand what she'd been through. A world where Chloe had been put on a shrine in her heart, just to be sacrificed for fucking nothing.

Max had thought she could be strong enough on her own. But she was wrong.

Max needed an ally. She needed someone to help keep her afloat.

Never again?
Impossible.

Everyone lies?
Well, Max Caulfield sure fucking did.
But that hadn't stopped Stella from sticking around.

"All right," Max grunted, pushing herself off of the vending machine. "Let's, uh...go outside. And I'll tell you about what's really been going on. We'll see if you can handle it."

"Whatever it is, Max, I'm sure I can."

'...Max, start from the beginning. Tell me everything.'
Max took in a breath from her spot on the bottom bunk, surveying all that they had wrought that afternoon. Broken down cardboard boxes sat against the inside of the room's door. Upon the door were a pair of movie posters: *Looper* and *Bladerunner*. One chosen by each resident.

The bunk-bed was in the back right corner, and Max's bed was *so* not made. Nor would it be, she hypothesized, for quite some time to come – the blankets were shoved back against the wall, instead. The room had a single window in the back left corner. The drapes were pulled back, the shades pulled up, letting a full stream of bright afternoon light slide in so that when they woke up, they could turn on their side and drink it in.

In front of the bunk-bed, two desks were crammed side by side. One was neat and tidy, the other...not so much. One had a water bottle with the college logo on it. The other had a coffee mug with the phrase “*Praise the Sun!*” in a Gothic script font. One desk had a bunch of textbooks and young adult fiction lining its bookshelf. The other had oodles of books about time travel – fiction and otherwise – while respective textbooks were in a horizontal stack, shoved against the wall at the back of the desk. While both desks had laptops, one hosted a sketchpad, and the other a camera – digital, though.

The wall opposite these desks was where the mirror, closets, and dresser sat. The dresser hosted a Hawt Dawg Man figurine beside a small statue of an anime girl with dark, spiky hair, a light blue dress, and a hat to match: Mayuri Shiina. Max had received the statue as a gift, but...it always hurt to look at it. Maybe that was why she'd put it up on her desk, next to the Hawt Dawg. They both reminded her of the same person. The same pain she didn't want to forget. Masochism, to be sure, but that pain was just the confirmation of fires still burning. A goal to keep aiming for.

Threaded upon the only wall left – the wall where the room's door was – there was not a collage of photographs, but instead a small collection of 'nerd' posters, none bigger than a standard sheet of letter paper. Resting below it was a small entertainment center, complete with a couple of gaming consoles – didn't need a disc player when you had a Playstation, after all – and a bean bag chair for good measure.

All in all, it sure was a college dorm room. A bonafide, two-person dorm room, tricked out with all of the décor and daily necessities two geeky college gals might fill it with. And it had been more tiring to unbox it all than Max had anticipated. Each article a reminder of something, each object placed a needle into her shoulders.

“Home sweet home, yea?” Stella posed from above.

'*Home-shit-home.*' – Chloe's voice, a whisper in the back of Max's mind, a pinprick. She shook it off.

“Uh...Y-yea, home sweet home,” Max agreed hesitantly, nestling her head into her pillow. But as she watched Stella's feet dangle off the edge of the bed, her paisley printed socks swaying in the white light filtering in from the window, Max lost some of that hesitation.

This was a big moment for them. The cusp of their college career, and now as roommates rather than neighbors.

Ten months, now.

Ten months since the Storm that never happened.

Ten months since Max Caulfield had started to Rewind time.

Ten months since she'd let Chloe Price die...
She still carried it with her. All of it. One goddamn week, that was all it had been. Ten months later and she was still fucking possessed by it, felt like.

And the visions – the goddamn visions she kept having, like peeking into a window of what could've been...They'd become maddening. Like living with a spirit, a ghost, whispering at her at the most unexpected moments. She'd go a week, two weeks with full control of her powers...then fucking bam, she'd feel that control twisted and warped out of her grasp, her hand dipped in lava.

And she'd keep it there – her hand in that molten cosmic anomaly, submerge her entire self into that blistering heat, soak it all in. It was too addicting not to, Chloe was too special not to.

All of these visions had led Max to one idea: Chloe Price was alive, somehow, somewhere, in some other reality. The thought ached at her. Gnawed away at her from the inside.

As much as Max Caulfield tried to move on with her new life, tried to forget...it kept lingering. Could she find a way to visit her? Was there a way to save her, even – bring her back, somehow, to this reality Max was living in?

The questions – the possibilities – had become an obsession.

Max had found ways to deal with it, of course. And she wasn't the only one who had become obsessed with the potential of her time-travel abilities.

“So!” Stella burst out, landing nimbly on her feet from the top bunk. She sat down on Max's bunk, gripping Max's fist within her own. Waggling their arms around, she excitedly prattled, “How are we going to mark the occasion, huh? Back to the Future marathon? Re-watch Steins;Gate again? No-no, wait, we gotta save that, they're about to release the Dubbed version soon, the localization sounds really good, actually. Ummm, uhhh, we couuuullddd-”

That giddy fire in Stella’s eyes, her excitable tone, it…reminded Max of Chloe, way back then, trying to figure out how the Rewind worked.

“Stella,” Max chuckled softly, trying to cover up the opened cut in her mind. “Hit the brakes, Bud. My arms are tired from all of this unpacking.”

“We could conduct our first experiment here in the new 'lab,’” Stella teased, smiling with her top jaw biting at her bottom lip. Psh, she looked so excited, it was adorable.

'You can rewind time, Max! That's fucking insane! We have to play!’

Max whimpered like a puppy, covering her drowsy face with her palm.

“Don't you think it's a little early for that?” Max worried, keeping her tone gentle.

“Sorry, sorry-sorry, it's just--Augh, it's been all summer since we've been together, I've been dying to try some new things. I really think we were onto something with the spatial shit, there's so much untapped potential there.”

Max couldn't help but gawk a little. Stella was...so friggin' cute when she got riled up over this stuff. It reminded her of Chloe – needles against her chest.

“Please?” Stella squeaked, clasping her hands abreast with an exaggerated smile. “Just-...Just one teeny-tiny exercise?”

Stella pouted her lips and quivered her eyes on demand.
Damnit. Did she know at that point? Had she figured it out?

Most likely. She was a clever one. And as such, she was pretty tactical with how she used the knowledge.

After a prolonged stare, which Max wrung out for all of its droplets of tension, Max sighed, smiled, and rolled her eyes, shoving Stella playfully off of her bed.

“All right, all right...” Max groaned with faux grumpiness, a wrinkled grin about her as she got out of bed.

Stella was already up and about – she grabbed her sketchbook from her desk, handing it to Max.

“Kay!” she grunted, putting on a serious look. It broke apart instantly into childish glee. “Gotta make sure the controlled state is still stable – so!” She grabbed Max's stuffed Hawt Dawg Man from atop their shared dresser and held it behind her back. She winked at Max from across the room.

“What...-?” Max was puzzled but amused, and Stella was two steps ahead.

“Take it from me,” Stella dared, her lips curling back to reveal a mischievous smile. “Without me seeing you do it – without you moving from that spot.”

Max laughed through her nose, scratched her neck a bit, and rolled her arms around their sockets. She had been practicing all summer. Without Stella's help. This would be a cinch.

“O-OK, well, I dunno,” Max played sheepish, shrugging up her hands. “I might still be-”

BAM.

She froze time.

Legs heavy like lead, Max willed herself through the void without too much difficulty. Stella's face was frozen in her teasing smile. Max allowed herself a moment – did it even count as a moment, outside of time? – to ogle the girl's playful expression. But she knew she shouldn't push her luck, and she grabbed the plush, meat-stick man from Stella's grasp, sliding it out from her arms. She waded through frozen time back to where she'd been, and re-posed herself, Hawt Dawg Man now in tow.

BAM.

“-a bit rusty.”

Stella snickered maniacally, her eyes lighting up like fireworks.

'Amazeballs! I literally got chills all over my neck.'

Her reaction made Max's legs tingle, her cheeks boil, and her 'cool' demeanor melted right away as she held the plush against her waist with a goofy grin.

“Maxie McFly's still got it!” Stella cheered, closing the distance and giving Max a side-hug of excitement.
The reference – the gesture, the energy, it ached at Max’s stomach how familiar it felt.

“Ok-OK-OK!” Stella bubbled, unlocking her cell phone. She swiped and tapped at it in a fervor, leaning their bodies together all the while. “Now we have to tinker around with electronics, there’s possibilities here.”

“I can’t send texts through time, Christina,” Max bashfully reminded, worming in a reference of her own.

“Sure-sure-sure,” Stella dismissed, caught up in another one of her theories. “But if objects within your temporal field can be manipulated across time and space, just think of what we could do with that! We spent last semester on the time stuff, but there’s so much more we could be exploring.” Her eyes sparkled with energy, the light from her phone reflecting off of her glasses. Seeing Stella like this after summer break – that same hyper-activity, that same giddy glee – it filled Max with a similar drive. And it hurt like hell at the same time.

The summer had been easy, in a way. No complications. Preparing for college, working part-time at a library, none of this magic, or sci-fi, or women in her life. She found herself instead escaping into Netflix, into video games, into everything that wasn’t real, precisely to distract herself from her own unreality. Photography had been taking a back seat – photography was about capturing moments of reality, and freezing them in time. And Max was pretty fucking terrified of it. Of this reality.

But one thing seemed to be keeping her around, keeping her from drowning within herself.

Stella Hill.

Having Stella thrust back into things was exciting, sure, but the shock of it – the sudden hyperactivity to keep pushing the boundaries of Max’s powers – it reminded her of Chloe, back in that diner. Back in that junkyard. Their proclamations of ‘taking on the world together.’ It ached like needles. Each reminder a tiny stab. Not enough to throw her off. Not enough to send her spiraling into agony. But over, and over, and over…never completely going away. It was starting to make her feel numb. But feeling numb about Chloe Price was perhaps what she feared the most.

“There,” Stella grunted, putting her phone into her pocket. “I just sent you a text – tell me what it says without looking at your phone. Or, I guess, technically, without it appearing like you checked your phone.”

Max swallowed the gross lump in the back of her throat – it wouldn’t stay down – and opened her hand, igniting the spark that would light her time aflame.

‘Crazy shit is the new normal for me.’

–

Max felt slightly ill just looking at the gaudy thing.

But Stella was clearly in love. Unfortunately.

Straightening out the edges of the incredibly gross, hairy purple rug she’d recently acquired, Stella was grinning like the mad scientist she was turning into.

“Are we trying to turn this into a pimp den?” Max dryly remarked, making her distaste vocal.

“Pimp den?” Stella countered with a skeptic glance.
“Whatever,” Max scoffed, shaking her head a bit. “I'm—. See this look? On my face, here?” She pointed at her own face, opening her eyes wide but remaining otherwise expressionless. “This is disappointment.”

“Ohhhh, it's not that bad.”

“Disappointment, Ms. Hill. Utter and complete.”

Stella popped her shoes off, peeled off her socks, and dug her bare feet into its purple...ness, giggling a little. It tickled Max’s chest to hear that sound. It tickled even more when Stella coyly smirked at her, arms tucked behind her back as she wriggled her toes across the bizarre surface.

“Come on, try it,” Stella goaded, swerving her head 'come hither.'

Max could feel her face lighting up like a damn stop light, so she rubbed at her face, trying to play it off like she was...tired.

She was tired, come to think.

“Nnnnnnnooooo,” Max slowly dribbled out, amused and awkward. Aiming to dismiss the invitation like she was that disinclined by the rug, Max teased, “I'm afraid I'm gonna catch rabies from that thing.”

“Aww,” Stella chuckled. “You'll warm up to it, I'm sure. This weird little guy's here to stay.”

“We're calling it a 'him' now?” Max taunted, slipping off her socks.

“He's a fuzzy, friendly creature.”

“You are unbelievable,” Max said, covering her cheek to contain herself from the adorableness.

“What should we name him?”

“We are not naming your rug, Stella.” Max chuckled. She lingered at the edge of rug, her feet bare against the shallow brown carpet below.

“C'mon. C'mawwwnnnn...” Stella egged Max on, waddling toward her with grabby hands.

“Stella, no.”

“Stella, yes!”

Max was tickled a bit at her ribs, exposing an opening which Stella took advantage of, yanking her onto the purple abomination.

The two shared a giggle fit as the purple threads, a sea of tiny ropes, swayed beneath their mighty limbs. Stella, Max’s wrists pinched in her hands, pulled and twisted Max into a bit of swing-dancing. Max’s chest swelled, and she couldn’t stop snickering. Her eyes began to water – the pressure was building up.

The warmth of Stella’s hands, the way Max’s pulse pushed against Stella’s fingers, the swinging and swaying, that damned wonderful sparkle in her brown eyes.

'Yep, yep! I'm fucking insane in the brain! Let's dance! Shake that bony white ass!'

And with another swarm of incessant needles stabbing into her, Max couldn’t find it in her to
continue looking at those brown eyes.

Her mild-mannered 'attempt' at dancing grinded to a halt, which Stella took immediate note of.

“Did I...-?” Stella mumbled, her entire demeanor transforming in an instant. “Crap, did I do something wrong? Did you and...-”

“It’s fine,” Max dismissed, her eyelids flickering, her head shaking slightly as she walked off of the rug.

Stella walked up to her and, without a word, gave her a hug from behind.

The sensation against her back was maddening, and another wave of guilt coursed through her. She wasn’t supposed to be thinking these thoughts, feeling these feelings. It was wrong.

“I’m sorry,” Stella whispered into Max’s ear. “We will find a way to bring you two back together. OK? I know we will. Your power is...amazing. You can do this.”

Max, her face ignited with an uncomfortable mixture of conflicting sensations, just nodded her head and pressed her hands against Stella's, letting the warmth secure her.

“All right!” Stella proclaimed, pointing her pencil aloft like a knight upon Arthur’s round table. “Let us commence our brainstorming session!”

“C-could we maybe, like…-” Max shivered, her shoulders icy. “-...not call it that? M-maybe a… think-tank?”

“‘Think-tank’ makes me want to vomit,” Stella teased. “What are we, some Silicon Valley start-up?”

“I just-…” Max could feel her throat tightening, and it was suddenly hard to breathe – Stella's awkward attempt at a joke was adorable, which only made things worse. She took a drink from her cappuccino. “That phrase makes me really uncomfortable…is all.”


“Rrrright!” Stella squeaked with remorse. “Sorry, Max, I…”

“Forgot,” Max sighed. “It’s fine.”

And Brooke gave the pair a skeptical, irate glance before she sipped at her boba tea.

“Think-tank,” Stella confirmed with a solemnly adorable nod.

“Thanks,” Max mumbled back, tucking hair behind her ear.

Max’s hair was getting pretty shaggy and long, but she had yet to decide what to do with it. Ironic – she could make a life-and-death decision within three seconds, but what to do with her hair? It was taking her all year.

The cafe they were in was quaint enough, but constantly crowded. Annoying as hell. Max hated the constant stream of people, congesting and flooding and rughhh. Couldn't they find a smaller, less popular coffee spot?

“So what do you want from me?” Brooke mumbled half-heartedly. She didn't seem happy to be there.
“We need an external opinion,” Stella cited. “And you're our go-to gal with the brains to lay this out for us. So. I gave you the rundown. What do you think?”

Brooke glanced down at the sketched out page Stella had presented to her.

When it came to trying to suss out time-travel, trying to do it in earnest made you look like a crazy person. Stella had come up with a great idea: she and Max were ‘co-creating’ (wink-wink, though not as wink-wink as Max would’ve liked) a comic about a girl who could travel through time.

“Well,” Brooke began in her nasally, critical tone. “There's some interesting ideas here. I'm just wondering what the point is. Where the plot's supposed to go.”

Stella shrugged, slurping some iced coffee and glancing to Max.

“We're...trying to figure that out ourselves, actually,” Max admitted.

Sucking up a couple pearls from her straw, Brooke rambled a bit while she chewed on them.

“Mmm, ehh-...Most time travel stories boil down to one of two concepts: breaking a cycle, or repeating a cycle.”

“Ending a loop or creating it,” Stella rephrased, to which Brooke gave a nod.

“Exactly,” said Brooke, swallowing. “So, from a baseline, you should probably be considering what kind of story this is. Is it about inevitability? Or is it about escape?”

“Why can’t it be about both?” Max posed. She and Stella’s eyes met in the briefest of fiery flashes. “I-I mean, we’re not trying to make scientific sense here, right?”

“So this is science-fantasy,” Brooke clarified. “Not science-fiction.”

Max shrugged. Like she gave a fuck what label was used, like either category made any more goddamn sense to her.

“All right, then, back up a minute,” Brooke said, leaning back in her chair and chugging on more boba. Gesturing her hand about, she asked, “Where does her time-travel power come from?”

“We, uh-...” Stella began, unsure how to reply.

“Does it matter?” Max retorted. “We-...” She grunted impatiently. “We're not concerned with that, it isn't what the story is about, we're trying to decide what to do with it. Where it leads.”

“Still,” Brooke countered, “even if this fantasy, not science, it's going to make a difference if you build a through-line. In Sci-Fi, it's about making the impossible probable. Sci-Fantasy is making the improbably possible. The protagonist needs a motivator.”

“The girl,” Stella blurted.

Max's stomach quivered with nausea.

'Max...I'll always be with you.'

“OK.” Brooke accepted, “then what's the source of her power? What's the 'lifter'? The mechanism that pushes her consciousness into the event horizon? If it's not a device, you should consider still making it...something. That would give you room to tie things together by the end.”
Max's brain stung from Brooke's babbling.

“The...girl?” Stella guessed, shrugging up at Max.

Max nodded half-heartedly.

“Seems like the cliché choice,” Brooke mumbled, “buuuut, suuuure.”

But that didn't stick well with Max.

If Chloe was Max's...'lifter'? If Chloe was the 'device' powering the Rewind...then why could Max still do it when Chloe was dead?

“What if her lifter wasn’t a thing?” Stella reworked her concept. “What if it was...a, um, a-...A feeling? A type of connection?”

“Hm.” Brooke sat on this as she drank some more.

Max and Stella both seemed to hit the same brick wall of a conclusion.

Max thought back to her photographs she'd used to Rewind time. And sure, she'd...experimented a bit with that since. What if it wasn't just a memory she was bouncing back to when she used photos to time travel? What if she was using an emotion to do it? Some kind of combination of memory and feeling. Nostalgia, at its best, like when she went back to that fated day with William. Utter fear at its worst, when she went back in the Dark Room. And regret and remorse, when she went back to that photo with Warren. Or even self-loathing when she went back to tear her own photo. Intense emotional reactions.

“Yea, emotions,” Max blurted simply. “Intense emotional...connections. Like, replicating...how you were feeling?” She stared into Stella's eyes, which were sparking with that...damned care and concern. “A moment of powerful trust, of...love, of...-” She could feel her face gushing blood to her cheeks as she gawked at Stella's bewilderment. “Uh, n-not necessarily, like...romantic, feelings but...-”

“Again,” Brooke spat flatly, “kind of cliché, but if you combine it with other ideas...-”

“She would need a TARDIS, then,” Stella decided. “Like, not a...physical phone box. A metaphorical one? Something to channel those memories and emotions.”

Max knew this was Stella's attempt at scheming up a new experiment. She didn't like the idea.

“You know,” Stella cut in, “look back over my notes, Brooke – don't you think there's some potential with these powers to manipulate space, not just time? Maybe she could create a place to accomplish that. To act as her 'lifter.'”

“Ohhhh, goody,” Brooke dryly picked. “Your Mary Sue's a Time Lord who's gonna...build herself a TARDIS.”

“Mary Sue?” Max grunted, crossing her arms around her waist.

“Psh, Brooke, c'mon,” Stella lightly scolded, “Help us think of what it could be. The 'lifter'.”

Brooke, eyebrows popped up with doubt, shrugged.

“I don't know,” she slowly mumbled in defeat. “Not something physical, though.”
Stella, with a tight-lipped smile, nudged Max's shoulder with her elbow.

“'We'll come up with something.’” she concluded.

Max, coughed a bit, her throat tangled all over again, but she pushed out a nod of compliance.

“What if she-...” Max started, but cut her thought off.

“Huh?” Stella prodded.

From Stella's encouraging glance, Max followed through.

“What if her path is...already set?” Max wondered.

“Like Predestination?” Stella posed, referred to a rather intriguing movie they'd watched together.

Max nodded warily. The idea was horrifying. What if she was, herself, a paradox?

Max didn't like this thought. She tried to change gears.

“W-well, forget that. What if she got lost. Ih-...In time, I mean. How would she find her way back?”

“Hm.” Stella's eyes narrowed and she gave pause, taking the opportunity to suck down more iced coffee.

“You could always pull a LOST,” Brooke chuckled. “Give her a 'Constant.' That could work with the whole...emotions-memories thread idea.”

“Would it be the girl, again?” Stella pondered, but even as the words came out of her mouth, she knew that wasn't the solution.

Brooke knowingly shook her head, as did Max.

“You said the goal – the endgame – is the girl, right?’” Brooke waited matter-of-factly for them to agree with her. Bleh. “That means she can't be the Constant. Narratively, that would...just be sort of repetitious, anyway, but literally, how could that even work? You need a bridge across worldlines. Something that connects both of them. Something that exists in both...of them. It sounds like when she goes back in time, that's what she controls. What did you call it?”

“Rewinding time,” Max grumbled, trying to give Brooke's thoughts the light of day.

“Right. Rewinding. She can't just jump to the future, to the past, back and forth, wherever she wants. She's not omnipotent. The power has limits – but if she's using this 'lifter,' it can amplify things. Boost her really far back. Deep-diving through time. So, she'd need a tether in case she got lost – something to keep her grounded, connected to where she came from.”

“A Constant,” Stella put together – and there was that exciteable-ness again.

The way Stella's cheeks glowed, the way her eyes shook between twin veils of glass...It made Max's heart quiver.

Brooke was looking it up on her phone.

“Constant...Constant, Constant...here.” She cleared her throat, all too eager to impart her Wiki'd knowledge. “Daniel Faraday explains that when a consciousness travels back and forth through time, it needs a constant to latch on to. A constant is an object or person that exists in both periods of
time, that the traveler deeply cares about and could recognize. If a constant is not found, the oscillations between different times will become more frequent and chaotic until the individual dies from what appears to be a severe brain aneurysm.”

“Well, that...sounds dicey,” Stella concluded heavily, her enthusiasm having shifted to worry.

Max, however, found the prospect to make...sense. Enough sense, anyway, given this entire whacko mess she was swept up in.

“What's the point if the characters don't take risks?” Brooke reputed.

“True,” Stella conceded with a smirk and a twinkle in her eye.

“It's something to work with,” Max decided, watching another pair of boba pearls get sucked up Brooke's straw, pulled away from the rest of their kind.

“Honestly,” Brooke concluded tiredly, “I'm flattered you wanted my thoughts on this, guys, but...I think you should look into other time-travel stories for inspiration. If you're not trying to bind your rules in science, then focus on the 'fiction' angle. Everything old is new again – in new combinations. See what time-travel stories inspire you, and...mix things up that you haven't seen put together before.”

Stella pointed a passionate finger in Brooke's direction.

“I like your thinking, Brooke.”

“Most do,” Brooke scoffed with an amused shrug.

—

“Ohhhh man!” Stella squawked, smacking her palms together. “Max, you absolute mad woman, it's glorious!”

Max was...confused by Stella's reaction. What she had unboxed was a yellowing gray rectangle, circa 1991. A Super Nintendo Entertainment System – the very one she and Chloe would play in the Price family living room, back in high school. When she held the thin little controllers, Max's thumbs still instinctively knew how to pull off fireballs, spinning kicks, and uppercuts. She could still remember them, back in their puberty years, Chloe trying to pause the game at just the right spot to see Chun Li's underwear, and they'd have a giggle fit about it. She'd probably never forget that, if only for how embarrassing it was. Of course, now? It made a lot more sense.

Things made sense after the fact, right? In retrospect.

Not Chloe Price's death. Not the Storm that had sealed that fate. That shit did not make sense, even a year later.

Leading up to Thanksgiving break, Stella had concocted a plan. In their quest to pursue time travel stories, they'd quickly devoured TV shows and movies, gleaning inspiration as they could, and using it to fuel their experiments into new territories.

But Stella had become fixated on an idea: time travel video games. Her reasoning being that since they involved agency from the audience – the audience making choices, taking action – it could be something different from the passive, cinematic experiences they'd been consuming. Something they could explore actively, together.
And Max sure as hell couldn't say no to her.

“Where did you say you got this, again?” Stella whispered in awe, hooking up the device to their TV.

“It, um...” Max's heart fluttered unpleasantly. “It was Chluh-...” She had to clear her throat. Those needles were pressing against her skull again. “Chloe's, it was hers, and when she...died, her mom...-”

Aaaaand she'd lost it again, burying her face into her palms as dry sobs squeaked out.

Stella enveloped Max in a tight, warm hug over the hairy purple rug.

Over their first semester at college, as Max's visions ached all the more – and each reminder of Chloe even harder to shake off – Stella had gotten pretty sufficient at caring for Max's afflictions.

Stella calmed her unexpected breakdowns with safe, securing hugs.

She quelled the heartburn of Max's soul with encouraging words and gentle touches.

She plucked out those painful needles of regret with distractions of movies, and games, and stories with endings, instead of this cycle of pain.

“I'm sorry,” Stella whispered into Max's ear as they rocked back and forth together in a pond of purple fuzz.

“Why?” Max whimpered, sniffling into Stella's sweatshirt. “Why does it still...hurt so fucking much?”

“I don't know,” Stella gloomily replied. “But I've got you, Max. We're going to figure this shit out. We are going to get her back, OK?” Stella planted her hands against Max's cheeks. “OK?” she repeated, staring right into Max's eyes.

It hurt. It burned. All of it. Her stomach, her arms, her head, augh, fucking head, a thousand needles...-!

This was what Chloe Price had been dealing with, wasn't it?

Half a heart, clinging to a dead girl.

Half a heart, hesitant and afraid to love someone new.

Maybe, in a way, Chloe had brought some of it upon herself. Guns, drugs...

But Max hadn't asked for any of it!

Fuck, all she'd tried to do was help people, and all she'd gotten for it was bullshit!

And now she was relying on drugs, of all sorts – literal and metaphorical – just to survive.

**WHAT WAS THE POINT?**

“Max, buddy, c'mon,” Stella was cooing, running her thumbs against Max's temples. “Calm down, my dude.”

Stella's voice in her ears, Stella's hands on her face – Chloe's face in her eyes, Chloe's voice in her head.
Either which way, it helped soothe the headache. Bring her back from these deep-seated frustrations and back to the present – ironic, then, when her entire goal was to change the past.

Stella assured gently, “We just have to take it one step at a time. Not give up.”

Max, her sniffling ceased – as if by magic – tried to recover herself.

“Th-thank you, Stella...I-I really-...You're such a good friend to me, I don't...-”

Max couldn't find the right words, so she hugged Stella again.

“You are, too, Max. I'm glad we can be there for each other – that's all you really need, when push comes to shove, you know?”

“Yea,” Max murmured her agreement as she sniffed her nose dry, wiping it with her sleeve.

“Do you need to...calm down a bit before we do this?” Stella wondered. “I mean, I dunno about you, but...I could sure use a break from all this excitement.”

And Max knew what she was implying: smoking out.

It had become quite a sticky situation.

Stella hadn't come clean and testified during all of the trials going on. Neither had Frank, to their knowledge. Max had – she had no choice, after all – but with the Precott fortune at their back, it was looking likely that Nathan wasn't going to get locked away. Part of Max was relieved – Nathan was young, like she was, he was...unwell, he was being used, he needed help, not a cage.

But the other part of Max was rather disturbed at the notion of her love’s killer not facing a harsh judgment.

Stella could've helped put Nathan away. She could've helped put her asshole brother away.

But by keeping quiet, Stella could slink by with money she needed to pay her bills. Money she needed to acquire 'study materials,' which Max found herself more and more in need of.

The experiments they were doing with her Rewind, the social and academic stresses of college, the emotional hemorrhaging of being without Chloe over the past year, the way no one else could properly understand what she was going through...it had created a lot of cracks.

And the drugs of choice Max had gotten hooked on, both physical and metaphorical, had been needed to keep those cracks glued shut.

Seeing Stella slipping into those same addictions made Max wary. But it would be hypocritical – probably friendship-ending – if she tried to enforce that. And she simply couldn't be without Stella. She couldn't be alone.

“Yea,” Max decided. “Let's...go have a study break before we do this. I need to chill out.”

“You've had a tough day – we got a lot of work done. You deserve some rest.”

“I do.”

Max glanced down at the old plastic box, contemplating how magical it must have been in its
hayday, transporting people to other worlds they could poke at, interact with...without losing their minds, and bleeding their brains out of their nose...

As Stella got her weed vape pen out, Max asked, “So, like...what the heck are we playing on this thing, anyway?”

Stella picked up a chunky old cartridge and handed it to Max.

It portrayed a fantastic battle against some crazy beast. A spiky haired dude, some chick shooting fire from her hand, a fucking...frog? There was a frog man with a cape and a sword. Actually, kind of bad-ass.

The title:

[CHRONO TRIGGER]

After stating the title aloud, Stella followed up, “Only the mother of proper time travel video games!” She opened the window and oriented their floor fan to push air out. “That game changed my life.”

“...Oh?” Max was skeptical.

“Duuuude, fuck yes, don't give me that dubious eye!” She took a a brief puff on her pen to get it heated up, then passed it to Max, adding, “I've been saving this one. Chrono Trigger was the first game I ever played that, like...made me feel things.” Max took a drag on the pen – more burning, but a good burning this time. Stella was still rambling. “You know, more complicated feelings than 'aw yea, that's fun.' Like, it made me question things about life. It made me realize that video games weren't just, like, a toy, that they could be something more when people actually gave a damn and made them something more. Anyway...I want you to have it.”

“Have it?” Max did a double-take. “Isn't this thing valuable?”

“Sure,” Stella shrugged. “No eBays, you've gotta hold onto it. It'll be a memento of...all this.” She gestured her hands around their room. “Us, being a team, figuring this Rewind out. Besides, we're gonna play through it together. I just...It's something I want to share with you.”

“Wowser,” Max eked out, touched by the notion, yet paralyzed by the implication. A few needles into her back. “Uh, thanks, I...I'm sure it'll be a good time.”

“Course it will – any time shared with Max Caulfield is a good time. Heh. Get it?”

“Groan.”

“Because...”

“You dork.”

They snickered at each other with that...all-too-familiar spark. Needles into the back of her neck.

“How did you get into it?” Max asked, taking an extra puff while Stella was still all hyper, jamming the cartridge into the console on the floor. “ Seems a bit...retro.”

“Ah, I was poking around the attic one time, and found all this old gaming stuff boxed up after my...” She screeched to a halt, slowly getting up from her knees. “After my dad left. He, uh...never took this stuff with him, and...”

'I, uh, knew it was your birthday last month...'
A dozen more needles, right into Max's chest. And she could see those same kinds of pinpricks hitting Stella, right in the chest.

Max's expression wilted, and she handed the weed pen to Stella.

Shrouding their losses in a haze of smoke, the pair sighed, exchanging longing expressions.

“I know he's not...” Stella lingered for a moment, the gray wills of wisps lingering around her as she coughed. “It's not like what you've been through,” she choked out through her smoke. “My dad's not dead. He's fine. He's just...not there. He's a good man, he tried his best, but just...my family is a mess, and...” She shook her head with defeat, sitting herself down on her raucous rug, cross-legged. “I feel like I'm just never going to be able to connect with him again. He was big into gaming, and when I played this game? I understood...why. It's my way of feeling connected to him, when I can't...When I don't have the courage to do it in real life.”

Stella was holding back her tears somehow.

Max felt awful.

A dozen more needles, shot straight into her legs.

“It's dumb,” Stella blew off her own grief.

“It's not,” Max insisted, sitting down beside her. “No, Stella, don't, like...invalidate yourself like that. Just because what you've been through is different from me, doesn't make it matter any less.” She clamped a hand over Stella's arm, squeezing it gently, then letting go.

“Thank you, Max.”

“Looking out for each other, right?”

“Pff, maybe if we could, like...be emotionally stable for two whole minutes, we could start playing this...” She grunted, leaning forward to switch the console on. “...damned thing.”

-TICK-tick-

-TICK-tick-

-TICK-tick-

A gentle piano, trickling and serene, slowly building...

The TV screen portrayed a pixelated pendulum.

-tick-tick-

-tick-tick-

-tick-tick-

“A video game can be a beautiful thing. It surpasses 'just a game.' It's a kind of journey. Into whatever kind of person you prefer. So I think it's rather a magical thing. A thing of the
"imagination."
~ Kate Mulgrew, Bioware
On the Other Side (pt2)

Chapter Summary

“I’m the fury in your head
I’m the fury in your bed
I’m the ghost in the back of your head”

Chapter Notes

A/N:

PLEASE NOTE this is a two part chapter! Make sure you read the first part!

Life is Strange
All Wounds

Chapter 16 – On the Other Side

(part 2)

—

“Wait, what?”

“Yup! Twelve endings.”

“But...” Max was startled. Even modern games rarely had more than, like...two or three endings. “When did this game come out?”

“Ninety-Five!” Stella stated proudly.

They'd just finished Chrono Trigger together. Or, so Max had thought. With finals week right around the corner, Max was realizing the surprise Stella had been holding onto: they'd still be playing this game into next semester.

“Wait, but, like...how?” Max demanded, befuddled.

“Different conditions,” Stella explained. “Mainly, when you choose to initiate the End Boss. See, that's something that was so mind blowing to me about this game. Most video games, you have to work your way through a sequence of enemies, stages, obstacles, cutscenes, etcetera. You get to the end, you beat the final boss. But with this game? You can...fuckin' take him on basically whenever you want for a lot of the game.”

“Wouldn't you get your ass kicked?”

Stella shrugged. “If you weren't prepared. Sure. But that's what I love about it – it's up to you to
decide when you're ready. Most players are gonna wait until the story is told, right? But the choice is there, the whole time. Not, like, a binary yes-or-no, left-or-right, but just...there, always present, built right in.”

“The bucket?” Max recollected. “The bucket in the corner, right? Choosing to fight the big monster?”

Stella grinned, snapping her fingers.

“You got it. At the End of Time, that bucket in the corner – this seemingly innocent, unimportant thing – is a portal to fight Lavos for the...fuckin' fate of the world. I mean, there's some special conditions and exceptions for some of the endings, sure, but...yea.” Stella took in a pleasant breath, humming out a super-cute sigh, her hands folded in her lap. Glancing up warmly at Max, she concluded, “Just another reason I fell in love.”

And there were the goddamn needles again, this time hitting Max right between the legs.

“W-well, it was...nice,” Max mumbled out, getting up from the beanbag chair. “I-I'm so glad you've been sharing this with me.”

“Oh course. Me, too. We'll, uh, call it a night on gaming,” Stella decided, shutting things down. “We'll start New Game Plus tomorrow, start looking into the rest of the endings.”

“Sure,” Max agreed warily, taking a seat in the small field of purple fur.

“You feeling inspired?” Stella asked slyly, adjusting her position so the two were facing each other. Max rubbed residue from her sweat-tinted cheekbones and took a deep breath.

She nodded, palms planted against her crossed knees.

“Take a deep breath,” Stella advised. Max did as she was told. “Hold it.”

“...Mmph?” Cheeks puffed, Max shot Stella an odd look.

“You're taking a dive into the Lion's Mane.” Stella teased.

Max huffed out her held breath in a bewildered chuckle.

“Wait, what?”

Stella rubbed her hand across the hair purple rug beneath them.

“It's like Steven's Lion, right? I-I mean, purple instead of pink, but...-”

Ah. She was making a Steven Universe reference.

“...magic hairy portal to a different dimension.”

Max shook her head, amused.

“I'm...not Steven Universe,” she chuckled under her breath with a hint of disdain.

“You have more in common than I think you give yourself credit for.”

“Well,” Max was eager to leave this alone. “S-So, where am I traveling to tonight?”
“No, no, it's your turn. You tell me.”

Stella extended her palms upright. Max set her hands in Stella's.

“Um,” Max struggled to decide. “It'd...be pretty bomb to, like...go back to when me and Chloe used to play video games together. On Saturday mornings...”

“Kay, 'kay,” Stella took in, nodding eagerly. “You think you'll be able to, like, do anything this go around?”

“I-I'm not sure,” Max murmured with concern. “I think it'll be better to just...observe.”

“Max. Maaaax.” Stella gripped Max’s hands tightly. “We've been at this for a month. Sooner or later, you're going to have to start, like...reaching out. Taking control. OK? Buddy?” She shook Max's hands a bit.

Max swallowed the lump in her throat.

What if she fucked something up?

“Y-yea, I mean, maybe next time, I can-”

“This time,” Stella insisted. “Max, do you want to find her, or not?”

Max's chest quivered in an awful way.

Her hands began to burn like embers. She could feel herself getting ready to take a Trip through time.

Did she want to find Chloe? Actually find her?

Because if she did...what would that mean for Stella? For this, what they had together?

Wouldn't it be just like what had happened that fateful week with Chloe Price? All of those experiences...erased?

The anger was boiling again. The unfairness of it all. The fucking impossible-to-win situation.

Needles, dipped in lava, searing against her back in a torrent.

'Max Caulfield... Don't you forget about me.'

'Wherever I end up after this... in whatever reality... all those moments between us were real, and they'll always be ours.'

'Max, this is the only way.'

“Well?” Stella insisted. “Do you want to find her?”

Max nodded.

She took the Trip.

–

Gray vapors.

Cold. Damp.
Stone.
Cobblestone.
Metal fence, closing her in.
Beyond.
The Void.
Within.
The Fog.
No light to show the way.
“Mom...?”
An echo.
“Mom...!!”
Was that...-?
“Chloe?!?” she called back.
A pause.
“Max?!?”
No. Not Chloe.
“Max!”
It was Stella's voice.
There she was.
Stella Hill.
Her hair was...purple?
She had a ray gun. And a cape. And a helmet?
The helmet's shape was...vague.
“Max! Have you seen my Mom?”
“Wh...-?” Max was confused.
How had she gotten here?
And where was here? Nothing made sense.
“We need to save her!” Stella insisted.
It was as if her words moved in slow motion. But also too fast. At the same time?

Max had a sword.

Why did Max suddenly have a sword?

“Let’s go!” Stella decreed, pushing Max toward the edge.

She thrust her hand toward the metal bars. They opened ambiguously.

The Void.

Max followed Stella.

Followed Stella.

Followed.

Fall.

Pixels. Words in the black.

[ Good morning, Crono! ]

A cliff.

Snowy cliff, a single tree.

A dead tree.

Stella was in a robe. Purple robe, flowing over her appendages.

Her hair was long. Blue. Flowing over her appendages.

She was grasping a stone.

No, a flame.

No. It was both.

Flame and stone, red, sharp, jagged.

Like a ball of fire, frozen in time.

Max approached her.

Stella spoke.

“I know you can't forgive her, but...please don't hate Mother.”

Max tried to speak. No words came out.

Silence.

The cliff.

Lighthouse.
Autumn.
Arcadia Bay.

And the needles rained down.

Max and Stella flinched.

Painless needles. Sticking to everything but them.

The frozen flame in Stella's hands was...warm.

The glow it cast on her face made Max...warm.

“A person whose life changes yours so much,” Stella whispered. “Their very existence is the pen that writes your future.”

“What is this? Where are we?”

Stella's air of serenity withered for a moment.

“Where are we?” Stella repeated, her intonation altered. “We are nowhere.”

“Stella...” Max took a step back.

Stella took a step forward.

This didn't feel right.

Something felt wrong.

The needles kept falling.

None of this made any sense, what the hell was this? A dream?

“A person whose existence – or not – changes the world,” Stella murmured on. “If they live, if they die...” She stared into her fiery yet frozen artifact. “If they disappear...”

“Stella...!” Max was starting to lose it.

Stella came closer.

The needles were starting to hurt.

The flame was starting to burn.

Stella's voice got louder. Everything else. Silent.

“Each of us allows our feelings to be a trigger...
Letting them loose changes our world, time, and history!”

The needles stopped. But the rain continued. Water drops now.

The Lighthouse turned on.

Stella held the time-frozen fire before Max.
Gray wisps, vapors, ebbed from the flame, freezing time around it.

Chloe's voice.

'No matter what you choose, I know you'll make the right decision!'

Stella tilted her head. Confused. She heard the voice, too?

Max was suddenly crying. Shaking. Hoodie and jeans. Wet and damp. She spoke without her own permission.

“Chloe...I can't make this choice...!”

'No, Max. You're the only one who can.'

Stella nodded. She understood. But did not understand.

The flame. Frozen time.

It beckoned.

Max took it.

HER HANDS!

IT BURNED.

EVERYTHING BURNED.

-bang-

-thud-

-clak-atat-takk-

Bathroom.
Gunshot.

Not...Chloe?

Who was that? Such...a vivid face. But one Max didn't really...-

“Mom...!”

Stella winced out the word. Out loud. Physically.

Max's body jolted awake so hard she knocked her head on a wooden beam above, her knee against the wall, and her arm against the metal bunk-bed's corner pole.
In a dazed state of groggy pain, Max tried to realign herself with...reality.

Wait, right? Their dorm room.

A nightmare. It had just been a bad dream.

She could hear Stella's heavy breathing.

“Y-you OK?” Max checked, scrambling to rise to her feet.

Stella whimpered from her top bunk, covering her face with her hand.

“Just...a stupid fucking...nightmare.”

At this reply, Max's stomach churned.

“Uh?” she probed. But somehow...she knew.

“Yea, it was...Agh, didn't make any sense. Just...dumb shit, it...”

“On a cliff?” Max guessed.

“Huh?” Stella croaked, rolling onto her side. Her eyes squinted, their vision blurred as she reached for her bedside tray to grab her glasses.

“And I was there,” Max cited, nodding slowly to herself as she tried to recollect the strange things she'd seen. “Th-there was...fire?”

“The Frozen Flame,” Stella grumbled, rubbing at her eyes. She put her glasses on. “Wait, no, it was...”

Max had...no idea what that meant. Just like she hadn't recognized the woman who'd been shot...and yet that had clearly been her own memory, of Chloe...

It was like their two dreams had...been remixed together?

Max and Stella had dealt with enough bizarre things in their experiments. But this was new.

“I think we were sharing the same dream,” Max concluded, pacing in a tight circle and running her hand across her head.

Stella blinked blearily, still laying in her bed as Max wandered aimlessly, her hands fidgeting together. Stella went to say something, then stopped, then started again.

“A new...power?”

“I-I don't know, I don't...” Max was scared.

“Well, we've...” Stella sighed, scratching an itch below her boob. “We've already...” She yawned. “...established your powers aren't limited to just time...”

“So, what, I'm a fucking Sandman now?”

“Max...” Stella closed her eyes.

“Why in the hell would I? What good is this shit gonna do?”

“Max.”
“Yeaaa, I did such a great job with time travel, what's the fucking harm in this, too, right?”

“Calm down...” Stella moaned, covering her face with her forearm.

“I-I mean, what could possibly go wrong?”

“Hey...”

“Sticking my hands into the past wasn't good enough?”

“Rrrmmmph...” Stella scooted herself toward the bed's front edge.

“Now I get to stick my hands into people's brains. 'Cause that'll work out just fine.”

“Maaaaax...” Stella groaned weakly, climbing down the bunk ladder.

“My powers sure worked for fucking Chloe!”

“Max.” Stella grabbed Max by the wrists, careening her rant-pacing to a stop.

Max wasn't crying. But her heart was pounding. She was furious.

“This is bullshit,” Max hissed. “I didn't ask for this.”

“I know.” Stella wormed her hands around Max's.

Their fingers almost tangled together.

But they didn't.

Palms flat against each other, Max huffed bitterly.

“I finally start getting the hang of one power, and...now this shit?”

“I know,” Stella repeated, gentler this time.

“Why? What stupid hell is gonna happen now?”

“Max, it's just a dream. You need to calm down.”

“Sure, just a dream. Tomorrow? It'll be two dreams. Then three, and four...-”

“Please.” Stella pulled back in for a hug. She resisted.

“I have trouble enough trying to get a damned night's sleep, but now? I'm gonna be fucking scared to go to sleep.”

“It's OK, Max. If this-...If it's a new power? For real?” Stella pinched Max's chin, forcing their eyes to lock. “I will help you learn how to use it. Just like we have with the Rewind. OK?”

Max's wrinkled nostrils and pouted lips slowly sorted themselves back to normal.

“Stella...” Max sobbed dryly, leaning into her and returning the hug she'd just rejected. “Why are you...such a good friend to me?”

“Because you're Max Caulfield. And you're amazing.”

'And you're amazing.'

–

Months passed. The end of their freshman year loomed overhead.

The endings of Chrono Trigger remained out of their vision. They'd gotten a few. But more were
lying in wait. Their interests had moved on to other things. Other games, other shows, other movies. It was always some other thing. *Steven Universe* had become a consistent addiction for Max, though. Something about just...tugged at her.

Speaking of which, her connection to Chloe – those visions – had been fading in frequency and clarity. Like a radio losing its signal. This worried her. But maybe it was...for the best?

Max's Rewind powers had taken a backseat to this newfound ability – Dreamwalking. She'd yet to find a real purpose in it, but with Stella's guidance, she'd been able to be quite the snoop and even play pranks on people's dreams. Max found herself coming back to Victoria's night-cycles time and again, disrupting things with mischievous glee. If the Universe had thought it could give her some other power and expect her to even *try* to do any good with it, it had another think coming.

But the most fun she had was when she ended up melding minds with Stella. They'd always mix and mash their dreams with whatever it was they were obsessed with at the time. *Psh,* they'd even had some weird one where they'd become a Fusion, like in *Steven Universe.* That dream had...indeed been an 'experience.'

Since dreams were so fleeting, Stella had quickly advised Max early on to keep a 'dream journal,' and try to write down whatever she could remember. They'd hoped it would help guide them toward some pattern, some meaning, some purpose...

{Sorting hat. I'm Hufflepuff. Stella is Ravenclaw.}
{Junkyard. Chloe. Can't find Rachel.}
{Robot panda vs TV face robot?}
{Pirates. Shipwreck.}
{Junkyard again. Chloe is buried? Hair is brown??}
{Last of Us?? zombie something. Stella is bitten. Wake up before she dies.}
{Swimming pool. Blackwell...NSFW.}
{Strip poker game in the Dark Room?? ew!!}
{Internet stops working for everyone! Apocalypse lol}

There didn't seem to *be* a purpose, a point. And this became increasingly frustrating.

But was Max surprised? No.

Because nothing made any goddamn sense.

Nothing except her connection with Stella, and how it had been fostered so carefully all year. They'd had their spats, like any roommates could, but Stella was *so good* about communicating things before crap got out of hand. And the closer Max felt to Stella, the further Chloe was by proxy. And the guiltier Max became.

There was no “right” answer to this situation, and her bitterness at her circumstances grew like a cancer – slowly and seemingly permanently. Max began to start acting out a bit, taking her frustrations out on those around her, but sparing Stella from the wrath. She'd gotten a few write-ups for her behavior in class when she'd snap at a professor, and she was forced to see a counselor to get herself 'in-line.' Her photography had been ditched by the wayside, a mere technical task to be performed for a grade. Why bother freezing moments in artificial time when she could *literally freeze time its fucking self?* Why waste effort on fleetingly simple things when she was learning how to manipulate the fabric of existence? The best – or perhaps worst – part was that despite her attitude issues, her grades were getting better, not worse. She sure as hell wasn't going to refine time travel without using it to get ahead. The Universe had told her to 'fuck off' when she'd tried to be selfless, so *screw it,* right? She didn't have the motivation to waste her Rewind on actually *succeeding,*
though – just getting by. She wasn't popular, she wasn't a 4.0 student – just the knowledge that she could be if she willed it, without anyone realizing what she'd done was itself gratifying. At the end of the day, she couldn't care less what the world thought, because thoughts were malleable and bendable, and she could just warp them if she ever needed to.

And yet, the pleasure – the adrenaline rush of popping into and out of other realities, of cheating her way through things – never lasted long.

She could try to drown it out with marijuana, disconnecting herself from reality and escaping to another. She could try to forget it all by swimming in her best friend's dreams. She could manipulate whoever she wanted into liking her – and on occasion would sneak in one or two naughty acts to quench that thirst, only to undo its existence for anyone else, keeping that pleasure entirely to herself. She could consume and consume story after story, show after show, game after game, infusing pieces of them into her life like a patchwork quilt she wore at all times to deflect the harsh cold of being alone.

None of it could fix the hole inside her, however. Cover it up, perhaps, but never fill it.

The only things that seemed to keep her fire burning were Stella's lively spirit and earnest care, along with the prospect that somehow, some way, some day she could be with Chloe again. If only she could just be with Chloe again, everything would be better. Everything would be fixed and wonderful and made right.

Everything would be the way it was supposed to be, once she could figure out how to make it so.

–

The start of another school year. Time flew by when you know had literal control over how you perceived it and could bend and break it to your will.

A dull and dry summer without Stella had transpired. Max had picked up a job working at a PC repair shop, but it had rapidly waned her patience with humanity. Her power to Dreamweave didn't seem as functional without Stella nearby, which was at once relieving – yes, restful, empty sleep, reliably – and concerning. This power was connected to Stella? What had happened the last time she'd discovered a power that was connected to someone...?

“Hey, Buddy. You ready to do this?”

Stella pulled Max's mind out of itself. She had a pretty keen sense to tell when it was happening – when Max's thoughts were drifting toward disparaging countries.

Max was in the dorm's public bathroom with a small box in her hand.

Max stared at the box intently. Some smooth-skinned, perfectly proportioned face with a sultry expression, ready to kiss the camera.

She was starting to have doubts.

“...Red, though?” Max murmured. “I-I dunno, Stell...”

Stella ran her hand through Max's freshly washed hair.
“Red suits you,” Stella slyly decided. “You make your mind up yet?”

“Huh?”

“Highlights? Or full-on dye?”

Max's hand ached like it was sunburned. She'd really been pushing the Rewind that day. Interestingly, her nosebleeds seemed to have really calmed down, and she didn't really know why. Maybe her body had just...adjusted to it? Like a muscle – had to be torn to be built back up? And quite the muscle it had become.

Max flexed her arm.

She ignited her palm.

Stella ran her hand through Max's freshly washed hair.

Max leaned her head against Stella's palm, forcing the contact to linger longer this go-around. Stella chuckled softly – but with a slight tint of uncertainty.

“R-Red suits you,” Stella decided. “Um...Did you make your mind up yet?”

“All-out red,” Max said simply. “Full throttle. Go big or go home. Right?”

“O-oh, really?” In the mirror, Max could see Stella's eyes go wide. They sparked. “Aw, gosh, damn, you-...You're gonna look killer, champ!”

Max laughed through her nose.

“Yea.”


Lazy as you like. Max was comfy.


Stella. Striped shirt. Bandana on her head.

Talking with a skeleton. BIG SMILE. Blushing.

Skeletons can't blush...???
Why all the blush?? red faces, hands on faces, embarrassing no augh ewww stoppit

STELLA BLUSHING.

WHY STELLA BLUSHING?? NOT AT MAX.

max no like...!! rrrghhhh max is the important one max has the power
whyyyyyy is she staring at him like that???

OK.

OK...

Reign it in. Calm down, Max.

This is just a dream.

A very loud dream. With

no voices.

Obnoxious skeleton slapped his face. So much BLUSHING ew gross.

“WAS YOUR INTEREST IN ME. . .
PREDESTINED!???”

Stella. Grinning. Nodding at the loud skeleton.

“N-NOOO!!! YOUR DATING POWER. . .!!”

Max hated this.

So stupid.

_He's a fucking SKELETON STELLA this is messed up wake up_!

Max's words did not travel. They did not project.

She tried to take a step forward. FLIP FLOPS.

Took a shortcut by accident.

heh heh heh. . .

Water. Cold.

NAKED she was naked?? Hoodie, flip flops, drifting in light from beneath the water.

Chloe. Naked. Staring at her, just STARING with that look in her eyes hungry like the wolf.

'Your power is changing everything, Max. Especially you. I can already tell.'

'You're not so chickenshit anymore.'

“Thanks girlfriend.”
'You know what I mean. You're becoming like this force of nature.'

'More like luck of nature.'

Coin flip. Heads...or heads?

Red...or Brown?

Fingers. Interlocking. Wet. The fingers didn't quite fit. Not perfect. It was never perfect but

Red.

Coin landed in the water. Heads. Red.

Water was becoming red all around her. Leaking. From her nose.

Red red red red

SHORTCUT SHORTCUT LEAVE PLEASE IT HURTS IT BURNS

shortcut shortcut

Back to Stella.

Stella had a nosebleed, too. Her eyes glowed in a way Max hated because it WASN'T AT HER.

There was a plate of spaghetti. On the skeleton's head. Also he was dressed like a skater boi.

Wut

the

fuk

was this shit in Stella's head?

“HUMAN!!! IT'S TIME TO END THIS!! THERE'S NO WAY THIS CAN GO ANY FURTHER!”

* (Stella takes a small bite.)

On Max's chest. Lips wrap around.

* (Her face reflexively scrunches up.)

Max moans. Lips purse shut.

* (The taste is indescribable. . .)

Max can't breathe. Vacuum.

Max's legs part. Hole to another universe.

But Stella is just eating spaghetti.

“What a passionate expression. . .!!! You must really love my cooking! And by extension, me!!! Maybe even more than I do!!!”
Max's thighs are burning.
She's standing. In her underwear, still wet from the pool water. Soaked.
She can't take watching this dumb weird bullshit any longer.
Max has a knife. Wait, where did she...? *nevermind*

*END IT.*

“AUGH. . .!!!”

*AGAIN.*

“URRRGH!!!”

*AND AGAIN.*

“NOOOOOOOO!!!”

heh heh heh . .

Blue.

There's no much blue.

It's overflowing.

Skeletons can't bleed...???


Silently.

She is so silent. This whole time.

Not anymore.

She grabs Max. Max is...still in her underwear...???

“Human.” Stella speaks. “It's clear now.”

Max's face is a volcano.

Stella's expression is...vague.

Stella speaks.

“You're madly in love with me.”

Max's heart. Erratic. *Augh...-*

“Everything you do. Everything you say. It's all been for my sake.”

“St-Stella,” Max choked.

Stella can't know she can't SAY IT they can't SPEAK IT it's not
Heart beat heart beat quickly quickly can't breathe can't breathe drowning in the Lion's Mane

“N-no, Stella, I'm-”

“Human. I want you to be happy, too. It's time for me to express my feelings. It's time that I told you.”

drowning in purple
drowning

BREATHE BREATHE

YOU NEED AIR YOU DUMB FUCK

Max collided with the floor, her limbs tangled in her sheets.

She choked on her blanket, on the dusty, thin carpet.

RED SNAKE what-

Oh. It was her ponytail.

Her heart was a damned jackhammer, shit, that...

She could hear Stella coughing awake in the top bunk.

Max tried to speak. Tried to untangle herself from her bedsheets. She was a literal mess on the floor.

“Boy,” Stella panted. “Ihh-Is it hot in here...or is it just me?”

Max was starting to cry.

“Stella, I didn't...mean for...-”
“Ihhht was just a dream.”
“Stella.”
“Weird shit happens in dreams.”
“But you know...-?”
“W-we don't...We totally don't need to talk about...this...if you...-”
“Stella, this is...this is super sudden for me, I didn't...I wasn't...planning on...-”
“I know. All right? I do. It's OK. I've...known for a while.”
“...Mm.”

Max sniffled. God, fuck, she was getting snot all over her blanket...

She kicked, thrusted, shoved the sheets off. Pushed them under the bed with her feet. Curled on the floor in defeat, she tried to breathe.

Stella climbed down the ladder.

Stella pulled back to her feet.

She wasn't wearing her glasses.

She held Max's hands.
Blushing. There was a lot of blushing.

Max wriggled her fingers. Set them between Stella's. It wasn't a perfect fit.

But then, neither were Chloe's fingers.

It was never a perfect fit.

Max sniffled again, laughing pathetically as she craned her neck, wiping her nose on her T-shirt's sleeve.

“It's going to be OK, Max,” Stella insisted. Again. As she always did. “Let it out.”

If she insisted.

Max kissed her.

Stella pulled back at first – slightly, humming with alarm.

But that alarm dissolved. And the humming became pleasant.

And Max hummed a laugh of relief. It was echoed back at her.

The kiss broke. Then built again. Then broke.

“M-Max, I don't...” Stella pulled Max in. Set Max's head on her shoulder. Stroked Max's ponytail. “I'm...straight?”

Max's throat turned dry. She tried to absorb this sensation – standing in their underwear, hugging, chests pressed, heartbeats heavy.

She could've made that moment last longer than it was supposed to.

She didn't.

“Max...?” Stella checked shakily. Heads on shoulders, avoiding eye contact.

“S-so,” Max fumbled for words. She swallowed, her throat undulated against Stella's shoulder. “That was...You didn't like it?”

“I did,” Stella assured in a nervous squeak. “N-no, it was...good, I did like it...”

“Then...” Max's brows furrowed. “I'm confused.”

“So am I.”

“What...do we do?”

“Max, I can't...replace her.”

“I never wanted you to.”

“But doesn't this change things?”

Max's heart stung.

Needles.
“I still...have to find her,” Max whimpered. “I'm sorry, I just...”

“Max, I-I don't know...about, like, the physical...stuff? But I do love you.”

“I love you, too.”

“But you love her, also. Still. Don't you?”

Max sighed. She lifted up her shoulders.

One hand that couldn't let go of Chloe Price. One hand that couldn't let go of Stella Hill.

“She's...gone,” Max mumbled, her voice cracking. “I-I'm not sure if I can...”

“You can,” Stella insisted.

They were still locked in a hug. It was...incredible. Like letting so much steam out of the volcano.

“I want to,” Max whimpered. “But I want...to be here, with you, and...” She trailed off into a sob.

“Fuck, I hate this...This is so...unfair, I-I'm sorry...”

“I understand,” Stella sighed. “I get it. It's OK. M-maybe there's a way we can...both find her? Somehow?”

“How?”

“I-I'm not sure yet. But we will. Max, you can...manipulate time and space and even, like, people's consciousnesses. OK? I mean, jesus, think about that! We could fix all of this, Max. We just need to figure out a way.”

Max did, in fact, spend a few seconds thinking about that.

And the needles hit – the weird ones, the ones that bled through her senses in a bloody haze.

'I can't keep fixing everything if all I'm gonna do is just break it, over and over again! I know how this is gonna turn out, and...I'm afraid I'm fucking up all these alternate realities...' 

'Wait, alternate realities? What do you mean, Max? What did you do?'

“I...”

“Max?”

“Huh?”

“What do you mean?” said Stella. “You said you...knew how this was going to turn out?”

“I did...?”

Wait, hadn't that been Max remembering saying that? Were her senses really fucking with her that badly?

“And...fucking up other realities? Wh...?”

“Don't...N-no, Stella,” Max murmured, shaking her head and shaking Stella in turn, just a bit.

“Don't worry about it, I'm just...shaken up from that fucked up dream, I'm...spitting out gibberish.”
“You were just...talking with her, weren't you?” Stella noted, taking a cautionary step backward. “I could hear it. See it. It's like you're a different person when you're thinking about her.”

Max's throat caught on her own fear. She tried to swallow it.

“Stella, I think I...am?”

“You are...what?”

“A different person.”

Stella's head twitched positions.

“Uhh...-? Like, possessed?”

“I-I don't know, sort of? Like, whatever I just babbled, that was...my past self. But when I think about it...If I can...I mean, when I take a Time Trip, it's like my consciousness...leaps into the mind of an alternate...me. And then I jump back out and pop back here – the moment after I left. It doesn't leave any gaps.”

“OK. Yea. We've already gone over that.”

“But I must be...creating gaps. In consciousness. When I Leap, I mean. Or-or maybe I'm just filling them in?”

“All right...And?”

“These visions I keep having – they're from alternate timelines, right?”

Stella shrugged impatiently, wrapping her hands around her torso.

“Sure seems like that's the most likely possibility.”

“Do you think all of this...tugging and tearing at time – my own time, at least – maybe it's like, creating holes? Or something? And that's what I'm leaping into?”

Again, Stella shrugged, even more frustrated. She rotated her hand for Max to get to the point.

So Max tried to.

“That's it, then,” she concluded. “Stella – my powers can distort perception, consciousness. If I can move my own consciousness through time...across realities...” She gestured her head suggestively.

Stella's lips hung open.

“...you could move other consciousnesses around, too?”

Max nodded in reply to this conclusion.

“That's how we do it,” Max decided. “That's how everyone wins. I've already been able to cross into your mind, right? Now I just...have to figure out a way to...move it, like I do my own. Or maybe somehow help you do it. Like, if I can get into your head on such a subconscious level...what if I can somehow, like, share my Rewind with you?”

And there was that spark of excitement again.
“Ohhhhh, ho-hohohoh,” Stella chuckled maniacally, clutching Max's hand and trotting in place. “Your lab assistant is about to become a lab rat.”

“Psh, I don’t...think you should look at it that way.”

“For Science!” Stella bellowed, shoving a fresh shirt on. “I mean, I have an Architectural course in, like, half an hour, but...then. Science.”

Max was elated at this new concept. For once, some kind of development with all of this bullshit that could fix everything instead of just put them deeper under. Max had the power. She could do whatever she wanted – she just had to figure out how, like Stella had said.

Stella was scrambling to get changed.

And Max suddenly realized that all of their timey-wimey talk had...completely skipped over the fact that they had finally fucking kissed.

“W-wait, Stella.”

“Yeah-huh?” Stella was in her desk chair, popping on new socks.

“Are we going to...talk about what just happened?”

“You made a breakthrough hypothesis?”

Max’s heart was pricked.

“The kiss, Stella.”

“Oh.” Max could practically see Stella’s brain warping backwards in time, itself. “R-Right! That was...” She suddenly looked squeamish.

“It was awesome,” Max insisted. “We are awesome. I could never have done any of this without you.” She got down on her knee before Stella and grasped her hands. “Please. I...really like you, and I–...I’d like to give this a chance.”

Stella took in a deep breath, broke the hand contact, and stood up, to which Max followed suit.

“Max...-” Stella sighed uncertainly, fussing her disheveled morning hair back.

Nope. No room for uncertainty here. That tone Stella had used? That was fucking terrifying.

“My feelings about Chloe are complicated, I get that, but...she's not here. And you are. And you have been, and I don’t take it for granted.” She pinched her palms against Stella's biceps. “Please, can we just...try?”

Stella was captured by Max’s earnest plea. That sympathetic twinkle in her eyes, Max knew she understood. And if she didn't? Max would Rewind. And try again. And again, until she could convince her. This was what was best for both of them, they both needed this or they wouldn't have found themselves in this situation, it was just like what happened with her and Chloe, except she would do it right this time.

Max knew Stella cared, too, she fucking knew there were feelings coming from the other side. There had to be. All of this wouldn't make sense if there weren't.

Stella hesitated, but ultimately, that goddamn beautiful little smile wormed its way out of her face.
“Alright, Max. You're a force of nature. You keep finding ways to surprise me.”

Max smugly joked, “Hm, must be the way I can bend reality to my fucking will, or something.”

“Something like,” Stella nervously snickered back. “Uh, s-so I...” Stella turned around to her desk, gathering materials for class. “...should probably be getting on my way, and...”

“Wait! Wait-wait,” Max twisted her by the shoulder. “Does this mean we’re...a thing?”

Stella's head vaguely lulled around on its axis.

“Would...sticking that label on it maybe help you fell better?” Stella wondered.

Max nodded. Then she kissed Stella on the cheek.

“Th-then I guess that's settled,” concluded Stella. “Ah, yea, yea, we can...be a 'thing.'”

–

The semester flew by before Max knew it.

Stella had been wary about 'coming out' about their whole...‘them’ thing. This frustrated Max and lingered as a point of contention – but dating behind closed doors and having a way to release some of that pent up tension was a lot better than not having it at all.

The duo spent the majority of their spare time locked in their dorm room, continuing their binges. Clearing out more endings of Chrono Trigger, re-watching time-travel movies and shows and contemplating more theories about how to transport consciousnesses across realities.

Stella had forced Max to watch her playthrough a bizarre game called Undertale – a weird retro-looking RPG where...no one had to die? Stella had ranted on about how important choice was in the game, despite there being few and far between actual 'pick A or B' choices – and many of those not really seeming to matter. Stella was in love with the damn game, so much so she even got a tattoo of some of the characters. It took weeks, but Stella finally managed to convince Max to play it, herself.

A game about fighting monsters where no one had to die, but could.

So, when Max played through...she killed everyone. Just to see if things would really go all that differently. And damn, did they do differently. Oh, they did. And Max was rather disconcerted with the finale – it hit a bit too close to home – but she fought the damn final boss thirty fucking times out of spite until she won. And she was satisfied for having overcome it. An angry, spiteful victory against her own wimpy indecisive-...Er, victory against the final boss.

Stella seemed annoyed with Max's decisions to play the game this way, but Max had insisted that she needed to see it for herself. In the end, she couldn't decide if she regretted it or not – seeing things which couldn't be unseen, then turning the game off. Resetting the save. Starting over. Everything was all better, right? Everyone would be alive again. But, like in Undertale, when Max did this in her own reality, there were always traces, reminders, of her transgressions. Insidious needles to remind her of what she was becoming, of what she'd already become.

[* my brother'd really like to see a human...]
[* so, y'know, it'd really help me out...]
[* if you kept pretending to be one.]
pretending to be one

PRETENDING

a mask

she was just a mask on a hollow dummy, hollow hollow
cursed mask summoning the moon to destroy an entire fucking town
re-living the same few days over and over and over

[DAWN OF THE FINAL DAY]
[72 Hours Remain]

Augh, damnit. There she went...slipping again.

It was all just some sick act, wasn't it? She was an addict to fantasy. She couldn't handle reality. She couldn't handle HUMAN BEINGS.

That was all it was. All of it. Every time another fucking human being tried to engage with Max, she'd keep them all pushed back, at a distance. If they got too close, they'd be able TO TELL. They'd SEE.

And if they saw, they might talk.

And if they talked, Stella's blinded eyes would be opened.

And she might see.

And Max couldn't have that.

It was why she'd become paranoid with socializing with anyone other than Stella. Max had to undo so many missteps, so many dumb decisions, so many freak-outs and meltdowns, just for her peers to tolerate her existence...Facing any of them just became more needles.

Video games were so much easier and safer than flesh and blood. She could just keep cramming in references to fictional things, unreal characters, fantasy, just to buy more time away from reality. Time away from the pain and the confusion. Time away from a world without Chloe.

The fantasy, the stories, the references, it became her escape, her drug, to try and replace her addiction to Chloe Price.

When her Rewind couldn't allow her escape reality, a TV show could – and it didn't even put that burning strain on her body. She could just let her mind escape into these worlds of fiction, and in turn, the more time she spent disconnected from reality – high as a kite, tuned into some fictitious signal – the easier it became to Dreamweave what she wanted to. The easier it became to slip her consciousness out of one body and into another self.

The week of finals, just before Christmas break, Max experienced the breakthrough she'd been waiting for.

---

{KEEP}
{CALM}
{and}
Black rug. So familiar...

Max awoke in a seated position. She was...in her old dorm room. From Blackwell. From that week. This hasn't happened before. She could never seem to quite pinpoint a fixed spot in time from that week. And even when she did manage to land in a previous self from that fated semester, she could never seem to grasp control.

But here she was. In a vessel which had felt...so empty. There was no other presence here with her. It was just her. Door unlocked, keys still in the ignition, like an abandoned car in a parking lot.

This abandoned car was dressed in a chillingly familiar plaid overshirt, holding an old polaroid photo: Max and Chloe, years back, the day William died. No way she could forget that image.

Wait.

This previous self...had used the photo, hadn't she? She travel back to that day.

The gap. The missing gap in consciousness. Max had found one of them and managed to land right in it.

So...what the hell did she do now?

Max was at a loss. This hadn't happened before. Every other occurrence where she'd popped backwards in time, she'd never felt so...lost. So confused. There had always been a focus, a directive, an objective, a person to distract her...usually, it had been Chloe.

-rrrrmmmm!-

JESUS aughhhh shit.

Her own cell phone's vibration had rattled the crap out of her.

(Chloe) – (yo sherlock we gonna bust this case or wut?)

Max's hands trembled as she read the text. Contemplated that Chloe, the goal, the prize, the end of this fucking two year road of bullshit, was physically there, nearby, within reach.

And she was prepossessed with Rachel Amber, and solving that mystery.

Max couldn't just...dump that info. Hell, she didn't even remember where the Dark Room barn was, anyway. And if they didn't find it, and visit it, like she remembered...couldn't it fuck everything up? Things had to go down just as they had. Or, well...maybe this was just as they had gone down? But it had to lead to the same conclusion, right?

Time travel was such a mindfuck.

She hopped onto her computer to try and get her bearings on when she was, what she needed to remember to pass as her previous self.

What she found was a disturbing set of Google tabs regarding a search her previous self had run.

The snake that eats its own body.
[The Ouroboros is one of the oldest images on Earth, symbolizing Rebirth and Transformation.]

[Even if you killed and devoured all the world until there was nothing left but you and I standing together beneath a burning sky, then still I would love you.]

[ - The Ouroboros Cycle]

[OUROBOROS]

[The tail-eating snake is a familiar symbol of many ancient cultures, found in mythology as diverse as Nordic tales and in Hinduism. But, most famously, it was found on a shrine in the tomb of Tutankhamun. Metaphorically, an image of a snake eating its own tail represents the idea of infinity and of the creature's ability to sustain its own life – eating itself, while providing its own nourishment at the same time. It also represents the cyclical nature of the Universe, from creation to destruction. It is often tattooed in circular form, further emphasizing the notion of continuity.]

[The Egyptian Ouroboros represented both the existence of space and time, encapsulated by the unbounded realm of non-existence. In this regard, it represents both wholeness as well as infinity as it forms the figure eight symbol for infinity.]

So many images of dragons and snakes, eating their own tails.

Dragons. Cold-blooded. Fueled by a burning fire within.

-rrrmrmmm!-

God damnit, that...Urgh, that really shook her up.

(Chloe) – (b t dubs were in hella need of a snack run before we pull this all-nighter.)

Max sunk back onto her bed, setting the phone to her side and running her face through her hands as she tried to make sense of all of this.

Was she here to break the loop? Or complete it? It sure as hell was feeling like the latter. But then what? Back to whence she came?

-rrrmrmmm!-

(Chloe) – (and hey like)

-rrrmrmmm!-

(sorry I blew up at you in the truck.)

Huh? Oh. They'd...argued...That was why Max had even done a Leap back to save William. But Max couldn't remember what they'd fought about, exactly – it had been so long ago.

-rrrmrmmm!-

Chloe was following up with more texts.

(don't really wanna focus on my dad right now ok?)

-rrrmrmmm!-

(hes gone. but we can still find rachel.)

Fucking...arrghh.
The Universe was an asshole.

But it was Chloe, she was there, Max was so fucking close to that moment when she'd lost her. Closer than she'd ever been. She had to hold onto it, grasp it, squeeze it for all she could while she was here.

(Max) – (Yea I'm sorry I fought with you.)
(I know you've got a lot going on.)
(What should I do next?)

(Chloe) – (don't u got classes to worry bout today?)

(Max) – (Fuck that. You're more important.)

The delay until her next reply was...too long for Max's comfort. It was agonizing.

What if Chloe could tell? It would muck everything up.

After a minute or so of waiting, Max began to busy herself with tidying her room.

Her heart fluttered when the phone vibrated again.

(Chloe) – (srsly? U changed ur mind? Uh thx max that means a lot)

Max felt her chest swell. That flutter, that flicker, it had been so long but there it was again.

-rrrrmmm!

(turning you into a rebel mwahaha)
(you good for me to swoop u up in a few?)

(Max) – (More than good. Let's crack this case.)

–

Being with Chloe in the past hadn't been as mindblowing then as it had previously. By now, Max had taken so many damned Time Leaps that the novelty had worn off.

Still...this was different. This was special.

This was that magic fragment of time – the week they'd reconnected.

And unlike all of Max's other Leaps, she could feel that spark oozing out of Chloe, back at her. It was fucking embarrassing how obvious it felt now, compared to how uncertain it had been when she'd first lived that week.

Chloe was piling items from their basket onto the checkout counter of the corner store. The clerk looked irate.

Chloe set the emptied basket on the floor and dusted her hands on her pants.

There was an awkward lull. Max was too busy being enamored by how fucking cute Chloe was – the Chloe she remembered, the dorky punk with the blue hair and the beanie who-

“ID?” the clerk sighed.
Max's stomach lurched. Wait, what? Ah, shit. She'd been so busy just playing along she hadn't even noticed Chloe sneaking a case of beer into the mix.

“Dude,” Chloe sighed, rolling her head around her neck. “C'mon, man, Ellie's cool, she doesn't gimme shit.”

“Ellie's off today,” the clerk grumbled.

“Fine, fine, whatever...” Chloe shuffled her hand through pocket, produced an ID card, and slapped it on the table.

The clerk studied it.

“...Nikita?” he dully remarked – referring to the name on the fake ID.

“My mom's progressive,” Chloe smooth-talked with a spice of sarcasm. “C'mon, dude, I know I look young, but...” She kicked the hell of one leather boot against the other, letting her jacket slide off her shoulders with a certain kind of swagger. “...I'm older than I look.”

The clerk, unimpressed with Chloe, eyeballed Max with doubt. Even in her present-time – where she was visiting from – she wasn't quite old enough. Her 18 year-old self was too enamored by seeing Chloe in her prime that she probably looked pretty damn doe-eyed.

“You can get Ellie on the line,” Chloe huffed casually, “I'll do it myself, she'll tell you it's-”

“OK, OK, whatever,” the clerk grunted, ringing them up. “Don't get paid enough for this shit, I ain't the cops...”

“Thank you for your cooperation,” Chloe arrogantly-yet-politely beamed, swiping her card. “Give my regard to Big 'L,' yea?” She stuffed their 'research supplies' into a pair of bags, handed one to Max, and the two of them took their leave.

Damn, she was just as much a firecracker as Max remembered. This was...amazing.

Oh. They'd also just...broken the law. Ha. Fuck yes. Screw the world. Max and Chloe were back in action.

–

Had Max realized that 'back in action' was going to entail...visiting the library, gathering a bunch of copies of newspaper clippings, heading back to Chloe's house, dealing with another Joyce vs Chloe argument, listening to Joyce and David go at each other downstairs, and holing up in Chloe's room to pore over all of their evidence while their entire family was falling apart...-

Well, Max would've picked a much more pleasant point in time to pop back into.

But this was where she had landed. And she was adoring every second of it.

She realized she had her journal to help refresh her on recent events. Past her at least had exercised some foresight, there. It was a trip to read things she'd written back then. Remind herself of how excited she had once been, so long ago...

As the night wore on, though, that excitement waned. Chloe got more and more...antsy, eager, irritable. She was so fucking absorbed in her damned laptop. Trying to track down this girl who had left her for a washed up drug dealer when Max was right there.
Max would try and worm in some affectionate gestures, only for them to sail right over Chloe's head. She shared a beer with Chloe – who went on to consume the other four bottles on her own afterward, _jesus_ – and their research took them into the night.

Chloe had Max poring over all of those stupid newspaper clippings and other junk, while she did her own investigating online.

It was aggravating. Max wanted to just... _kiss_ her. Kiss her beautiful fucking face over and over. Tell her how much she missed her. Tell her how much she _loved_ her, still. Tell her how much she had endured just to _be_ there.

But she couldn't. For one, her willpower to do so had been dissolved in all of this excitement and the surrealism of everything. For another, she was _already_ in an alternate worldline as it was – the one she'd undone when she'd let Chloe get shot – and she feared that if she changed anything drastic, it could cut off what connection her consciousness had to where she'd come from. Because Stella Hill – _her_ Stella Hill – was still there, still waiting.

One hand that couldn't let go of Stella Hill.
One hand that couldn't let go of Chloe Price.

Something was going to have to give.

Unless Max could find a way out of it. She'd gotten that far, anyway.

There had to be a solution to this puzzle.

—

“No. _No way, I'm saving everyone, everyone is coming home with me, we're all getting out of here._”

“Courage is not always the way, dear.”

~ Oxenfree

—

Wrapped in a towel and fresh from her morning shower, Max slipped down the hallway and into Chloe’s room. Maybe...a little skin might catch Chloe's attention?

_AUGH._

She was...still completely possessed by her computer.

Completely possessed by Rachel.

“Hey,” Max greeted, desperate for a _look_, clinging to some kind of rouse.

“Mn-hm,” Chloe hummed, clicking frantically as her desktop printer whirred out pages, one at a time.

“Uhh...” Max's intestines wriggled uncomfortably as she closed the door behind her. “You got a...shirt I could borrow? Mine's...all gross.”

Heh, _that_ might get her attention, right?

“Uhhh, yea-” Chloe, still not looking her head, waved her hand behind her, toward the left. “Help yourself to anything in the closet.”
Disappointed, Max sulked her way over.

This all wasn't going according to plan. She was supposed to be, like...*connecting*. Bonding, swapping awkwardly tense looks and seeing Chloe try to tease things out of her.

Instead, she was just...sort of being used as an assistant to Chloe's investigation. And the more Max dwelt on that thought, the more she realized that Chloe kept referring to her Rewind as, like, some get-out-of-jail-free card. Nevermind what the hell Max had gone through in order to even *use* the damn power.

That glimmer Max had been holding onto for so long was evaporating with the wisps of cigarette smoke and beer-induced belches.

Max grumpily shuffled toward the closet. Rachel's old plaid shirt with the tattered, exposed shoulder – which Max had been wearing previously – was discarded on the floor from the night prior. Max bitterly kicked it beneath Chloe's bed in a petty little huff.

One shirt in particular caught her eye immediately – it was all black, which was exactly how she was feeling – and a creepy gray moth pattern was on it. Gray, inbetween white and black. Gray like the tips of ocean waves, sprayed between the dark sea and the salty air. A moth, a being transformed not from a chrysalis, but a cocoon. Not an elegant butterfly but a strange, furry bug that received nowhere near the respect despite coming from the same humble caterpillar beginnings.

A sort of human skull was where its moth face would've gone. It was unsettling, but it...spoke to her, somehow.

All of this misery. All of this death and frustration and how *unfair* everything fucking was...

Somehow, a single t-shirt seemed to express all of that for her.

“I'm-...I'm gonna change,” Max announced, grabbing the shirt and her other clothes, still in nothing but a towel.

“Kay,” Chloe said, her attention elsewhere.

Man, just...screw it, what did Chloe even care?

Max shoved the towel down so it hung round her waistline. She shoved on her bra bitterly. She put the shirt on after.

It fit like a charm. Or maybe more like a curse.

She slunk into her underwear and jeans – all the while hoping Chloe might 'accidentally' catch a glance. But not even a twitch of her head.

Had Max...been deluding herself? She and Chloe, they-...They had *kissed*, hadn't they? On that cliff? Over two years of memories had separated her from that moment, but *still*, she'd clung to it with such an iron grip. This had *meant* something to them – *both* of them. Yet here she fucking was, and Chloe couldn't even be bothered? Like, the *only* time it mattered was when their goddamn *lives* were on the line?

Max grumpily took her seat on the bed, shoving newspaper clippings aside. She went back through her texts as Chloe kept printing shit. She felt disgusted with herself for how fucking dainty and naive her past-self's texts had been. To think, she'd given Warren the time of day, *at all*, screw that fuccboi, what had he done for her, anyway? And why had she even *tried* to make friends with Victoria?
What a bitch, she hadn't gotten better at all, Max's gut instincts about her had been dead on. And poor Kate...Max had fallen out of touch with her. She felt too guilty – she couldn't save Kate in this alternate worldline...In her own, Kate was alive and...probably well, but...too many needles for Max to know what to do with.

There wasn't a single text from Stella. It was disheartening.

Chloe had come back into her life at this point in time because of her powers.

And Stella? Stella had become so close to her...because of her powers.

That was all she was fucking good for anymore, huh?

“Yo.”

Max gasped sharply at Chloe's casual but rough slap on the shoulder.

“This place is a pigsty. Gonna be hell to organize everything. C'mon, let's go get something to pin all of these deets to.”

Groggily and begrudgingly, Max went downstairs, following her blue-haired beacon – faded in the light of morning. It was still pretty early. David was fiddling in the kitchen.

The tension in the silence between everyone was so thick Max had trouble breathing as they walked through.

The worn, painted board against the back fence was...somber. Sobering. Melancholic. Its paint was chipping and dry, its surface warped and run ragged by the elements. The pirate-themed mural was still visible, but just barely.

Chloe commanded Max to grab one side, while she grabbed the other. They strained and struggled to bring it back into the house and get it upstairs.

Splinters gnawed at Max's hands like wooden needles.

Before she knew it, they were set up, and Chloe was pinning papers to the board.

Covering up their once-treasured pirate anthem with all of her drugs-gun-Rachel drama.

Chloe sighed with relief and sat back down on her computer.

“Hot damn, Max, we are so close to busting this thing wide open.”

busting

all your memories

skull

WIDE open

Max's grip on this reality was dissolving. Her heart was...slowing. She could feel herself getting dizzy.

She tried to turn to Chloe – who was mischievously typing on her phone – not looking at her.
Never looking at her.

She could feel herself being pushed out of...herself.

She didn't even care where she ended up. What would it matter?

It would all just be...fucking pain again.

—

“Chloe...You're alive, yes!”

“Whoa-ho, whoaaa...Down, Max. You get one kiss and now you're all over me?”

“I'm just...I'm just-I'm so glad you're here.”

“Yyyyyou sound high, but thanks for the morning grope. Since we were up all night playing 'CSI: Arcadia Bay,' I was still spaced out here, trying to put all this info together.”

—

“I think it's important to realize you can miss something, but not want it back.”

~ Paul Coelho

—

'Welcome back to the real world, Max.'

—

The Void welcomed Max with open arms.

Cold, damp cobblestone.

Darkness.

A glowing, unmoving flame held aloft.

A song, echoing in the background, that Max knew in and out.

Even with this lack of light, Max knew where she was: The End of Time.

Or...well, a dream of it, at least.

Stella leaned against its single, lonely lamp post – which remained unlit – holding that stone-like, lifeless flame in her hands.

“Another one,” said Stella. “Another one.”

“...-rrhhh?” Max's senses were garbled, she couldn't quite push words out.

“Don't worry,” Stella assured in a bizarrely soothing voice. “You're safe here.”

Max tried to clear her throat – even though she technically wasn't breathing here. She was breathing somewhere...right? Or, then again, if this was all happening outside of time, then...

“Aw, Max,” Stella cooed. “You're lost. But you're always lost – all of you – it's OK! Everything will
“What is this?” Max asked in a panic, trying to grasp at Stella. But Stella's existence here was...vague.

“Why, this is the End of Time, of course!” said Stella, her voice becoming like static. “All lost travels in time wind up here.”

“No, cut the stupid video game bullshit,” Max whimpered, her hands banging against the metal lamp post, right through Stella’s image. “I just want to go home...I give up. Chloe's gone. That's that.”

Stella grabbed Max's hand. She led her to the corner of this barren, empty cobblestone street. She spoke in a airy, wispy tone.

“...things we lose have a way of coming back to us in the end.” She shoved Max’s face into the bucket. “If not always in the way we expect.”

She was drowning. Drowning in the sunset-soaked tides.

She struggled, grasped, clawed her way up and out.

She woke up.

Back in her college dorm room.

Stella was coughing from the upper bunk.

Fucking...christ.

“What was that shit?” Max croaked, her own voice sore and hoarse.

“N-nothing, just another...weird-ass dream.”

“You-...Did you bring me back?” Max asked, trying to pull herself out of bed.

She noticed two small bloodstains on her pillow. And the sides of her head felt weird.

Ah, goddamnit. Her ears had bled a little. Fantastic.
“Back from where?” Stella wondered, climbing down her bunk ladder in a drowsy stupor.

“From the other worldline,” Max informed, using her own saliva to rub dried blood off of her earlobe, and hoping that Stella's morning-vision would keep this act stealthed.

“Huh? Max, did you...Time Leap again?”

“Didn't I?” Max insisted. She had not just 'dreamt' all of that. It had been too real. Too physical. It had actually made sense within itself, unlike the weird dream that came after.

“We...went to bed,” Stella advised. She shoved her bangs slick to one side, the streak of neon blue highlights running across her temple. “We had an argument, you went to sleep, and I stayed up to catch up on homework.”

“Oh...” Max was confused.

And with that sting of confusion, everything hit her again.

Chloe Price hadn't loved her. Not really. She'd been holding onto the past, holding onto Rachel, when Max had been the one striving for her happiness, working so hard, losing her goddamn humanity just to save her.

And Max – here, in her own reality – had been doing the same with Stella. And that was fucked up.

Stella, irritated and dismissive of Max's reflective state, had taken a seat at her desk and opened up her laptop. Max decided to give her a good-morning kiss. Stella accepted it. But it wasn't as warm as Max had hoped it to be.

–

Stella was pacing. Nervously. Fearfully. The hospital waiting room was mostly empty at this ungodly hour. And it was fuckin' cold.

Max had never seen Stella like this. Should she...try to Rewind?

No. Nah, nope. Stella specifically asked her not to. Not with this.
'If something happens to her, he's going to face fucking consequences,' is what she had said on the matter.

Stella's mother had been hospitalized. The doctors were citing some kind of drug overdose – but Max wasn't family, and Stella wasn't giving her specifics. It sounded like Ms. Hill was probably going to be OK – eventually. But...damn.

Stella received a text. Her nostrils flared, her lips wrinkled into quite an unpleasant shape.

“How is it?” she muttered under her breath.

“What is it?” Max asked.

“Fucking...Kamat,” Stella groaned, burying her face in her hand. “He wants to 'talk.'”

“I bet he does,” Max scoffed. “Don't give him the satisfaction. Don't let him control you.”

“Pff.” Stella shook her head, blowing off Max's words.

Maybe Max wasn't one to be giving her that kind of advice...

“It's...going to be OK,” Max tried to assure her.

Right? Those magic words that Stella wielded.

“No,” Stella winced, her eyes damp at the corners. “No, Max. It's not. Either way, this is not OK, it won't be OK, it can't be OK, not while he's...” She chewed at her lip, clamping her hands against her sides as a sob emerged. “I have to confront him.”

Max embraced her.

“Stella, no, we don't have to do this.”

“I do,” Stella insisted. “Whether you come or not.”

“I...Of course I'm coming,” Max whimpered. “I just...This is bad, you saw the way he stomped outta here, he's...Your brother's not in a good place.”

“You would know,” Stella huffed. “You're never in a good place.”

“...What?” Icy needles, scattered against her abdomen.

“How long have we been friends, Max? Best friends? And you're still not happy. Never. Not really. I thought – you know, it's fucking stupid – I actually thought, ya know, maybe if I was your girlfriend-...Maybe you just needed that one person, that kind of person.. But no. You're still obsessed with her – with the past.”

That familiar freezing sensation of losing her – losing everything that was keeping her afloat.

“Stella,” Max tried to hush their conversation. Her words came out in a sniveling manner. “I'm a fucking time traveler, y-you've been wanting me to visit the past.”

“I know, OK?” Stella whispered back in a fit. “That's not what I mean! I thought we were trying to travel to the past to have a new future. But it's like all you want to do is just...just keep re-living your childhood with her, keep re-living this...this fucking 'magic moment' you had, for, what? A week? I've been here for you for two years.”
“Stella.” Max wasn't sure she could bear to hear this.

Stella knew she could. And clutched her hands with a ferocity Max hadn't seen in her before.

“I know you've fucking internalized it where somehow you owe her, Max, but you don't. You fucking don't. People you love? Sometimes they make goddamn...shitty decisions for themselves? And that's not all on you. OK? You're accountable for you. You're responsible for you. You're accountable for your own choices. If Chloe chose to let her life fall to shit just because you two fell out of touch? That was her choice. Not yours. I didn't see your life fall to pieces, not until you tried to take on her problems.”

“Then...Wh-why do you need to talk to him, huh? Your...Yuhh-your brother?” Max's words were shaking as they drizzled out in a panic. “Nnn-not your choices. Y-your mom is...-”

“I'm not taking responsibility because she did make her own choices. But I'm not letting myself keep clinging onto who she used to be, either. I'm letting go. And I can't fucking do that if I know that this asshole is still going to looming over her. I'm going to do something about it. If she lives through this? She'll be rid of him. And if she dies? Then he's getting what he deserves for it.”

“Stella, wh-...How are you...-?”

But Stella was on her way to the stairwell.

Max chased her. She tried to talk her out of it. No good.

She tried to Rewind, have a second chance at the conversation. No good.

She manipulated things – froze time – to push Stella back from even heading to the stairwell.

NO. GOOD.

Max could control time and space.

She couldn't control another person's decisions.

So Stella left. And Max tried to follow.

Max was too out of breath. Too dizzy. Using her powers so much in quick succession...it had really taken the wind from her. Her heart felt slow, and she nearly passed out before giving herself time to take a break.

Luckily, by the time she reached the hospital's entrance, she could hear Stella's voice bouncing across the cement off to her left. She was yelling in the distance.

Max paced herself to catch up, dripping a bit of blood from her nose as she did so, and brushing it off with her hoodie sleeve.

Kamat and Stella were really laying into each other.

Their arguing was too painful. Too many needles.

Chloe and Max, arguing.

Joyce and David, arguing.

Nathan and Chloe, arguing.
Max and Victoria.

Victoria and...Chloe?

Max and...herself?

Max and Stella.

Stella and her brother.

Everyone Max cared about seemed to get caught up in this fucking arguing.

Max was so sick of the world not being able to keep its goddamn shit together.

Stella had been through enough. She didn't deserve this.

“You don't even know the cost of things, do you, Stella?”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“You think she's going to be able to pay for this?” Kamat hissed at her, gesturing back toward the hospital. “Huh? Who do you think that falls to? Me.” He pounded his chest with his palm.

“Then why'd you even put her at risk?” Stella growled right back, taking a bold step to approach him. “You knew this kind of shit wasn't safe for her to be taking.”

“It's not fuckin' safe at all, dumb-ass! She knew, she wanted in, how the fuck was I gonna say 'no,' huh? To my own mother?”

“The same way I did,” Stella coldly snapped. “She's our mom, she's not in control of our lives. You've been fucking enabling her when you should've been helping her.”

“So, that's my fault, now, eh? That's allll on me,” said the sarcastic bastard, spreading his arms.

“Yes! Yes, it is!” Stella snarled, giving him a shove while he was exposed. “When you know someone has a gambling problem, you don't fucking invite them to your casino!”

“Says the stoner with the stoner girlfriend!”

“Weed is harmless compared to what she's been taking.”

“Look, I didn't know she was using. I-”

“Fuck you, do not insult my intelligence, you asshole,” she pushed him again, “You knew.”

“Maybe if you hadn't been such a--” Kamat shoved her back, “--chickenshit, I wouldn't have needed her help in the first place.”

“If I wasn't a chickenshit,” Stella countered, “your ass would be behind bars right now. And it would've a long time ago.”

Kamat gave pause to this. Stella sniffed, wiping her sleeve against her nose.

Max's insides were like liquid.

Kamat pulled something out of his jacket pocket – it snapped awake.

A switchblade.
“That a threat?” he posed.

“That a threat?” he posed.

“Whoa, hey,” Max squawked in fright.

Max's chest was suddenly on ice. When it came to the rest of the world, they could fuck right off. But the prospect of something happening to Stella? It froze her dead in her tracks.

Stella sniffed again, her legs wobbling as she took a step forward.

“Stay out of this, Max,” Stella commanded fiercely.

Max swallowed, her knees weak. Stella glared her brother down.

“If she dies tonight?” said Stella between locked teeth. “That's it. You're done. I'll confess, I'll give them everything I know. And I'm not just talking about drugs.”

“Stay out of this, Max,” Stella commanded fiercely.

Max swallowed, her knees weak. Stella glared her brother down.

“If she dies tonight?” said Stella between locked teeth. “That's it. You're done. I'll confess, I'll give them everything I know. And I'm not just talking about drugs.”

“Oh?”

Kamat stuck his blade up toward her face. She flinched – but held steady. She leaned her head slightly forward – the knife's tapped against her eyeglass, scratching it.

“What're you going to do?” Stella taunted. “Stab me in a fucking street? Huh? With a witness, and everything?”

“I thought you were the smart one,” Kamat grunted, keeping the blade steady.

“I am,” Stella said with a grit to her that filled Max with admiration.

The knife gently rattled against her eyeglass until Kamat withdrew it in such a sudden movement that Stella flinched again.

And it dawned on Max – Stella knew Max could Rewind if something happened. But...wouldn't that still mean that...?

“Leave,” Stella seethed. “Stay the fuck away from our mom.”

“Are you kidding me?” Kamat balked. “I've been there for her. I've been taking care of her.”

“And you've done a real fucking bang-up job, brother. She could die because of you.”

“She doesn't even like you,” Kamat countered pathetically. “The hell do you care?”

“So what?” Stella rebutted, shrugging up her shoulders and taking yet another step, nearly leaning into him. “I don't like her, either! She used to be decent person. Maybe – with you gone – she still can be.”

“I'm not leaving her,” Kamat growled. “I'm not a coward like you are, I don't just run away from our family's problems. I'm not letting Mom down.”

With an icicle tongue, Stella quipped, “You already did.”

Everything...hurt all of a sudden. A flash of a migraine.

Stop him.

The words echoed across Max's brain.
STOP HIM.

What?

OW.

It was...a presence. Another her, but...in reverse? She was always the one jumping in on...-

Stella and Kamat were bumped up against each other with eyes like daggers – and a literal knife hovering nearby.

Neither side was backing down, both yapping into each other's ears like rabid dogs. And when an animal was backed into a corner...-

Max's limbs...felt...-

FUCKING OW, what?

He's going to...-!

RRGHH let me!

Max lost control of herself.

Some...other Max – herself, from...probably mere moments in the future? – was in control of her body.

And that body charged straight for them, shoving them apart.

There's only one way to break this goddamn cycle.

-shhnk-

It burned.

It burned hotter than anything Max had ever known, right in her gut.

She stumbled backward, nearly faltering. Her vision blurred.

Red.

So much red...

Knife. Slashed right across her chest.

Puh.

How...fitting.

Murder.

Bloody fucking

MURDER.

This was the Universe's idea of a sick joke. All of this, just to end up here...
Stella's shrieks of terror were muffled against her faded eardrums.

Max felt herself slipping away, and Stella caught her.

.reh thguac alletS dna ,yawa gnippils flesreh tlef xaM
.smurdrae dedaf reh tsniaga delffum erew fo skeirhs s'alletS
...ereh pu dne ot tsuj ,siht fo llA .ekoj kcis a fo aedi s'esrevinU eht saw sihT

.REDRUM

gnikcuf ydoolB
.redruM
gnittif...woH
.huP
tsehc reh ssorca thgir dehsalS .efinK
...der hcum oS
deR
tsehc reh ssorca thgir dehsalS .efinK
...der hcum oS
derrulb noisiv reH .gniretlaf ylraen ,drawkcab delbmuts ehS
tug reh ni thgir ,nwonk reve dah xaM gnihtyna naht rettoh denrub tI
denrub tI

-knhhs-

Wait...what? Max's Rewind hadn't-...It was supposed to have kicked in. Automatically, like an instinct.

“You already did.”

Stella's voice. Cold as ice.

Max was...back on her feet. Uninjured. She hadn't been in control just then – like...that presence, that other her, wanted to...?

No. They were...arguing again, and...whhooo.

Max was so dizzy. Nauseous. Like sea-sickness.

Stella's nose was bleeding. Her face full of fury, she faltered a bit. Stumbled back a step.

“You fucking hypocrite,” Kamat growled, lowering his blade as she fell to one knee. “Trying to lecture us on this, and you're still using, yourself!”

“N-no,” Stella coughed out.

Her nosebleed intensified.

“I-I'm not...” She devolved into coughing.

Max sunk to her knees in a daze and tried to crawl to her.

Kamat shook his head at her, sheathing his switchblade and shoving it back in his pocket.

“You think you're so important?” Kamat taunted. “She doesn't even care about you. You're a runaway brat. I'm the one who's been here. I'm the one who's kept her from losing her mind after all the drama you started. You always open your mouth too much, Stella. Gossipy little prick. Think you're so smart, but if you would just keep it to yourself, you-”
Stella was choking on her own blood.

Max's hands were *shuddering*, they were burning so badly.

Max tried to Rewind.

"-uoy flesruoy ot ti peek tsuj dluow uoy fi tub ,trans os er'uoy knihT .kcirp eltit ypissoG .alletS ,hcum oot htuom ruoy nepo syawla uoY .detrats uoy amard eht lla retfa dnim reh gnisol morf-"

*Augh,* Max couldn't...seem to push it...any further...-

"-from losing her mind after all the drama you started."

Stella was still choking on the sidewalk in her own blood.

“Max,” she panted out, shaking her head. “Y-you can't...-”

Max tried again.

*.niaga deirt xaM
"...t'nac uoy-Y“ .daeh reh gnikahs ,tuo detnap ehs ”,xaM“ .doolb nwo reh ni klawedis eht no gnikohc llits saw alletS ",detrats uoy amard eht lla retfa dnim reh gnisol morf-“
"...rehruf yna...ti hsup ot mees...t'ndluoc xaM ,hguA

SHIT, why wasn't it...going back any further?

"-from losing her mind after all the drama you started."

“Max,” Stella insisted in a whimper. A fierce cough, spattering a gob of blood onto the sidewalk.

“What the *hell*?” Kamat squeaked, flinching. “What is *wrong* with you?”

“Iff's nob...” Stella gurgled out. She tried to wipe blood from her lips and clear her throat. “It won't work...”

“Fucking *junkies*,” Kamat grimaced, taking careful steps away.

Max found enough strength to get onto her feet.

She could only Rewind back a few seconds?

That was plenty.

*.yawa spets luferac gnikat ,decamirg tamaK ”,seiknuj gnikcuF“
"...krow t'now tl“ .taohti reh raelc dna spil reh morf doolb epiw ot deirt ehS ,tuo delgrug alletS ”-...bon s'ff“
""?uoy htiw gnorw si tahW“ gnihcnif ,dekaeuqs tamaK ”?lleh eht tahW“

Pulling Kamat back toward her, through time, Max froze him in place.

“..Mmm-” Stella's voice was cutting through the fog. “*Max. Don't-...!*”
Max was so sick of this.

All of it.

Something had happened to Stella. Something bad. Because this asshole had hurt Max. And by proxy, hurt Stella.

He wasn't going to get away with it.

Actions had consequences.

ACTIONS.

HAD.

CONSEQUENCES.

And Max Caulfield was so goddamn sick

of always being the one to deal with everyone else's consequences.

Over and over and over

Of dealing with consequences for shit she supposedly caused, just by existing and trying to keep others alive and existing only for them to fucking die, anyway.

All of this power, and for what?

Well.

Now she knew one way to put it to -shhnk-

Like swimming through an ice cold pond when you'd been hiking through a blizzard, Max reached Kamat. She extended her hand. Just...urgh-!

She grabbed his knife.

“...Max!” Stella tried to scream through frozen time, her voice weak and hoarse. “What're you-...? Aughh...-” She choked and wheezed.

Max could feel the fuse fizzling out, the bomb that was her skull ready to explode from all of the heat and pressure.

She put the fuse out.

“What the hell?” Kamat squeaked, flinching. “What is wrong with yuhh-” -shhnk-

'I could frame any one of you in a dark corner,'
“Whuhhh...Dafuuhh-?”

'and capture you in a moment of desperation.'

-SHHNK-

“MAX!”

'And any one of you could do that to me.'

-SHHNK-

RED.

'Isn't that too easy ?'

-shhnk-
-shhnk-
-shhnk-

Too obvious ?'

“Max! What the FUCK?!”

-thumphh!-

All the way down.

Allllllllll the way downnnnnnnn. . .

Kamat had hit the sidewalk like a wet slice of Swiss cheese.

Stella was sobbing. Coughing. Moaning in agony in a pool of her own blood.

This was fine.

Max could just undo it.

Rewind it.

Clean it all right back up.

Max's hands, ha, stupid useless hands, felt like the flesh had been burned off from the burning.

The wet, warm red they were coated in...-

So much RED.

Her hands were weak, elbows drowsy, arms sleepy...-

She dropped the blood-soaked switchblade.

-clink-clink-
Metal colliding with stone.

Deafening.

Hands, trembling. Soaked. Heavy.

So much red everywhere...

Stella had crawled to her, leaving a trail of death and suffering behind her, smeared against the sidewalk.

Max couldn't help but admire the way the blood pooled together. Life leaving a body, filling in the cracks in the sidewalk, congealing together as one entity – one red entity, comprised of so many tiny drops.

“Max...!” Stella was whimpering, pleading, tugging at Max's pantleg. “Please, Max,” she begged through all the RED. “I...I don't know how, but... I Rewound time. To... To save you. Why did you...?”

Stella's head flicked to her brother's corpse. The steam of life leaking from the holes in him dissipated into the air.

“Y-you have to undo this!” Stella begged. “Th... This isn't you, I don't...”

Max extended her hand. Tiny rivulets of red trickled down her arm.

Ha. She had the power, she could undo it all.

The Universe had wanted her to learn her 'lesson', huh?

'Let go?'

Oh, she had let go, all right.

She Rewound time.

And she stabbed that mother fucker all over again.

But this time, Stella tried to stop her.

For a moment – or maybe a few, how could one really know? – Stella and Max had a tug-of-war with time.

Max was too tired. So fucking tired.

She gave up.

She let Stella take the reigns.
Stella Rewound everything back.

Back...

Back......

Back..........  

Stella's condition hadn't gotten better. Her face was pale. She was sitting in a new pool of blood – with a nice little trail of the stuff seeming to just evaporate from where it had been smeared along the concrete. As Stella Rewound time, Max admired her.

But Max couldn't save her.

What did it even matter anymore?

Stella had seen. Stella knew.

**Max wasn't Human anymore.**

And somehow, like her Dreamweaving bleeding into Stella's mind, her Rewind somehow had, too.

But Stella's body – her brain – didn't seem to be taking to it so kindly.

Maybe because Stella was a goddamn decent Human, not a fucking broken, shattered mess of consciousnesses loosely connected by shoestring and a wish.

Everything had just ended up the exact fucking same as before.

The person Max loved most was taken from her, just as she learned to truly appreciate them. Just as she was willing to do whatever it took to protect them.

Fuck. The. Universe.

“You don't even know the *cost* of things, d'yoo, Stelluh?” Kamat accused. He'd slurred at the end, queasy from what Max assumed was, like...having his repeatedly stabbed body ripped back through time and patched back together. At the sight of the two bloodied women, he let out a yelp of alarm.

“The *fuck* just...?”

Stella wheezed, her bloody grip on Max's shins loosening.

“This *is your fault,*” Max accused with smoldering contempt.

Kamat had no reply. Fucking moron didn't seem to handle the sight of blood too well.

He took off without a word, just panicked huffs of breath in his exit sprint.

Gone.

Everything that had just transpired collided together in Max's psyche like marbles being spilled.
And then the damned VISIONS struck at her brain like lighting bolts through thunder clouds.

"Max, you saved her."

"Nope, nope. Hell nope. Max didn't fucking save anyone."

"I hope she's alive."

"Maybe it doesn't always make a difference... but sometimes it's better than... not helping at all."

"Thanks, Max," Stella said with a timid smile. "You're so sweet."

"That's nice to say, Stella, but, hell no, you're the one... out there, helping everyone."

"Blackwell was my escape plan," Stella explained. Her tone had hardened. It was colder. "It was my way out, I was going to graduate, get..." She fussed with her busted glasses. "...get a scholarship, go to college... start a new life. A way from..."

He gave me this bullshit about how with him gone he was doing what was necessary to survive. But I knew. I knew he was just gone.

"Where the fuck else can I go?" Stella squeaked in desperation. "After what you done? I can't face it."

"It's weird, right?" Stella murmured on. "We can get... enamored by someone—like I was with Jefferson—we shade our vision in a hug that makes them look pleasant. And tinted glasses, and all that."

"Even though I know may be you don't all get tall enough—because Max needs this. He needs us. We need each other. You know?"
That means so much to me, Max, than you.

If I really need all that I ignore it now.

If I feel like you're the only one I have left from B.J. a few weeks.

How far away are you?

She was not supposed to be here.

She was supposed to be here.

Hope every thing turns our way in the end.

Aww. Than you, Max. I really appreciate that.

She found herself so lost in visions, she failed to realize that she wasn't...there anymore.

Not the right kind of 'there.'

Not the right kind of anything.

It was all the wrong kind.

She was wrong. Her existence was wrong.

This shouldn't have happened.

Was it supposed to happen? All of it?

Alone again.

Sick.

She felt sick.

Nauseating pulses through her core.

They quickly went numb.

She really wasn't human anymore.

She was...Nothing.
A fragment of a fucking person. A piece of who she had once been.

Broken.

What was her name, again?

That girl who'd gotten lost in the dark.

She was so alone.

So lost.

Who was she?

“Max.”

Stella's voice.

Max was on her knees. Stella's head was in her lap.

No more red.

No more sidewalk, no more street, no more...anything.

“Stella, are-...Are you OK?” Max managed to ask through the Void.

“Nnn...-” was what Stella managed out. “Hmmmmff...-”

Metal gates.

Cobblestone.

A metal...post, in the middle of it all.

It formed itself around them. The End of Time.

It was...there, in the sense that anything could be there.

So dark.

But in her hands, Stella held a faint light. A tiny glow. That time-frozen flame, but much smaller than it had ever been. It was shrinking.

“Stella...-” Max winced, knowing where this was headed.

“I'm dreaming,” Stella whispered serenely. She giggled a soft laugh. “One last dream...”

“No, n-no, I won't...-” Max was fucking losing it. She could feel herself sobbing, but the tears weren't moving. “I can't lose you, too...Not after all of this shit.”

“Kinda...-” Stella giggled again lucidly. “Kinda sucks I finally figure out how to borrow your power...just to...fuck it all up...Ha.”

“No, you...hella saved my life-”

NEEDLES.
“Listen, Max. Everything we've been through, it...It means so much to me that you tried. That's...all I really ever wanted from someone. To try. For me.”

'-and... you did nothing but show me your love and friendship.'

Stella hummed out a relaxed sigh before she continued.

“I was...maybe in denial for a while, but...it's pretty obvious now. You're so...focused on Chloe, because she's...who you're supposed to be with.”

'Maybe you've just been delaying my real destiny.'

“N-no, I don't-...That's bullshit, Stella, I...”

'It looks like even fate doesn't want us apart.'

“It could've been great, Max. Us? It could have. And in some other worldline? It probably was. But in this one? It wasn't.”

'And...you traveled through multiple realities just to...save my ungrateful ass over and over.'

“I'm so...sorry. So, so...sorry, ugh, I...fucking screwed everything up, like I always do. Like I...fucking always will.”

“No. See, you...predestine yourself. Stop. I don't really believe in 'destiny,'” Stella sighed longingly. “But...What...What do I know, I just became...a time traveler. I just want you to be happy, Max. You never...were really happy with me. With us. I tried so hard, and it...”

“Thank you! You did, you totally did, I could never...”

“That's just how it works. Happiness is what we make of it, right? Well. I made it with you.”

“I-I did, too, I just--I sucked at showing it, and...”

“You're special, Max. Not just because of these...powers. That's not what makes you Max Caulfield. What's special – it's something about you, as a person. As a Human Being. You lost it somewhere along the way. It made me sad. But you, the real you, at your core – you could bring this happiness to...just about anyone. You're so open-minded, so flexible to change, so willing to try. Please don't...lose that. People will try to tell you it makes you weak, but it doesn't. It just makes you strong in your own way. Strong in the real way.”

Max had no reply, just more stifled sobbing through a weak-hearted chuckle.

“I still want to...go with you,” Stella explained. “I guess through...all of our experiments, however we got here, it won't be...a complete 'me.' And it...Well, you don't seem like a complete 'you' anymore, either. But I still want to be there for you.”

“Why?”

“You were there for me. I love you. I don't know how else to explain it. It's...that simple. Love is...really that...fucking simple. You inspired me. You were there when no one else was – not in the real way. And it's not like I'm...able to go anywhere else at this point, right? This is it for me. This place, though, Max.”

Stella strained her neck to look up at the unlit lamp post. The cold, metal gates. Max noticed a wooden door she hadn't before. She noticed another room, off in the distance, empty.
“It's my last dream,” Stella explained. “I know it's...maybe silly, but...”

“It's not silly,” Max whimpered. “This is ours, this place. We made it together.”

“This could be it,” Stella said through a foggy smile. “This could be your...TARDIS.”

Max took a moment to soak that thought in.

“And you could be my Constant,” Max decided, to which Stella beamed a wispy smile.

“There's so many Maxes out there, right? Broken pieces of yourself...scattered like grains of sand from a broken hourglass. Maybe if you can...fix the hourglass...”

“I can put all the sand back in.”

“Please. Wherever you end up...promise me we'll still have this.”

'Max...I'll always be with you.'

“I-I mean, I guess if I'm able to follow you, Max-...There will be that part of me. And that part of you. So we can have part of this.”

Stella's voice was getting softer. Quieter. Max could barely hear but she strained for every last word. Stella's flame was so small.

“I just...want to see you with her, Max. I want to see you happy. It might not...have been in the way you wanted, or the way you needed, but...I do love you.”

“I love you, too,” Max eeked out. “I'm so sorry I couldn't...love you the way you deserved, or wanted, I don't-...I'm broken, Stella.”

'I know I've been selfish, but for once I think I should accept my fate...Our fate.'

The tears finally found their way out of Max's eyes.

“We are all broken,” Stella said with a wispy laugh. “You can't...ever change that.”

“Then what do I do?”

“You can't...always put the pieces all back,” Stella squeaked. “But you can still pick them up. You can save yourself. Maybe not...the way you expected, but...you can at least try to have a new start. A new life.”

“How...-?”

“Stay Determined, Max.”

Max dropped a sob at this, and the layers of meaning it had for her – for them.

“I don't know if I can,” she moaned.

“When a door closes...” said Stella.

“--a window opens,” said Max.

Stella's flame fizzled out.
And nothing burned anymore.

Stella's presence dissolved into a wisp.

'Max Caulfield... Don't you forget about me.'

That wisp drifted upward.

It fluttered toward the empty lamp post, filling it.

'Wherever I end up after this... in whatever reality... all those moments between us were real, and they'll always be ours.'

The lantern was now lit, dimly surveying the End of Time.

The bucket in the corner of the room shuddered with a flash.

'Max, this is the only way.'

Stella Hill – as Max had known her – was gone.

—

When you fly away,
Please recall what I say.
I believe in you
and all you'll do.
Don't say "goodbye,"
Say "We'll meet on the other side."

I knew this day would come.
I knew that our time here was so short.
But all that you taught me
all you believed I could be,
that will stay inside.
So please don't say "goodbye,"
Say, "We'll meet on the other side."

~ On the Other Side; Laura Shigihara & Yasunori Mitsuda, Chrono Trigger arrangement

—

Max remained in the dream for as long as she could. Dull-eyed, red-haired, arms crossed.

Max was there, and not there.
And without Stella – that one last thread, tying her to who she was – the anger boiled back.

Fuck the Universe.

'Let go,' huh? That's what the Universe had been telling her for over two years.

'Let go.'

FINE.

She would fucking LET GO.

Lost in the Void, Max tried to scream for help, for anyone, fucking ANYTHING to guide her.

[ * But nobody came. ]

–

The salty air was rough. Sharp. It bit at her skin, at her throat. She stood at the cliff beside the lighthouse, overlooking Arcadia Bay.

The warmth had passed. Things were...colder that afternoon.

Even the rays of the midday sun, seeping through her glazed vision, pressing against Max's cheeks...it wasn't warm enough. Chloe's old and tattered coat, encasing her, didn't seem to be helping her warm up, either – nor did the ominous t-shirt Stella had given her for her birthday. Fuzzy, wispy voices from a dream, from a different reality...all it was doing was irritating her. Clutched in one hand was an old necklace, with three rusted bullets. In the other hand, a faded game cartridge.

One hand that couldn’t let go of Chloe Price.
One hand that couldn’t let go of Stella Hill.

Maxine still felt cold.

Still felt the searing pain of a knife wound across her chest.

Warm, red liquid clinging to her fingers, to her skin, drying and cracking over her fingerprints.

Blood-soaked body on cement, heavy in her arms, light as air compared to the real weight.
Shadows and light, stomping around each other with reckless abandon.

**ABANDON.**

Voices shouting, screaming, yelling her name.

A name she wasn't sure how to respond to anymore.

Voices from different times, different lives, different planes of existence. Haunting whispers of what could have been. What should have been.

Maxine felt so cold...

The confused choking and sputtering of panic.
The last sounds Stella would ever utter – in Max’s mind, at least – were nostalgic and serene.
Bleeding out on a sidewalk, full of conviction, full of courage, full of memories and love.

She had died at Max’s side. In Max's arms. And all Max could do was listen.

A day and change since Stella Hill had passed away.

Max had awoken from their shared dream – their last dream – in a hospital bed.

Alone.

The staff had explained to her what had happened – *fuck* them, she knew what had happened more than any of them could. They’d blame it on…a brain aneurysm, or drug abuse, or…who knew what. It didn’t even matter. She was fucking gone.

And for what?

For Max to be alone again.

That wasn’t how things were going to be.

Not again.

**NEVER AGAIN.**

**NO EXCEPTIONS.**

So she left the hospital.

The staff had tried to stop her. Assure her that her parents were on their way.

Max couldn’t bear to have her parents see her – to see what she’d become. She couldn’t handle it. They’d already seen her deteriorate, why did they think she’d went to college outside of Seattle? To protect them from seeing her get worse.

Max had used her Rewind to slip right out of that hospital, with none the wiser.

She’d taken her car – technically, Stella’s car – and escaped, hospital gown and all.

She made her way back to campus in the early hours of the morning, speaking to not a soul all the while before collapsing into the top bunk – a different kind of hospital bed.
Her dreams were sullenly silent that night.

When she woke up that morning, however, her future became apparent. She found her direction. She realized who she was, in the great scheme of things, and what she needed to do.

She gathered the objects most important to her.

She got in that car and she headed for Arcadia Bay, all the while running everything in her head.

Where she had been, where she was heading.

She was the Dreamweaver. She was the Nightmare. That awful Nightmare, the night that she’d said good-bye to Chloe Price. She was its architect. That was why it had felt so real, so…outside of herself, like some other entity pulling the strings. It had been. She had been that other entity.

And now that she had seen this supernatural snake from its tail end all the way around to its wrathful head, she understood.

If this was a loop, she had to break it, didn’t she?

She had to convince herself to make the right decision. Part of Max Caulfield, choosing to let an entire town get destroyed? That choice had been so drastic, so conflicting, it had broken her consciousness – on top of the many fragments of herself left behind as it was.

Max needed to try to save those pieces of herself. All of those abandoned…Maxes. All of the visions haunting her – her developed powers had been tearing those holes through space-time, calling to her.

If her past self – back from the very start – had just let things be, none of this would’ve happened.

Right?

She should’ve kept Chloe in the past.

That was her ‘big lesson’ here, wasn’t it?

LET GO.

Eh? Universe?

FUCK YOU.

RRHGHHH how could she have been so fucking selfish? REALLY? Running off into the sunset with CHLOE PRICE, that immature, abusive, manipulative, selfish little…-!

Chloe had ruined everything.

Chloe had punched a hole clear through Max’s heart and left the Void unfilled, because Chloe was broken. Incapable of being what Max needed.

Chloe had made fucking stupid selfish choices that had consequences – consequences she’d shoved onto Max’s shoulders without a second thought.

And now Max was a broken mess of a person, too. That brokenness was a fucking disease and she’d carried it right on to poor Stella. Each piece of Max, desperate to fill that fucking VOID, only to be sucked into it. And while some other parts of her were off…prancing around with Chloe, ignorant in their bliss, there were so many smaller, fragmented pieces of Max, lost and in pain. Lost in that Void.
Struggling with shit like murder and suicide and euthanasia.

Even if she were *whole*, Max couldn't deal with these things.

But *broken*?

It was cruel. Crueler, still, that Max could... *sense* all of those stinging needles of pain from other Maxes in other realities. It was maddening. A constant, stinging static in the background of everything, pushing her past her edge.

So many grains of sand, scattered.

Stella and Max’s last dream – the End of Time – could be the hourglass to pull those grains of sand back into. Set them back in their proper places.

Put everything back the way it was supposed to be.

But to do that, Max had to...exist there. Stay there.

And she couldn’t do that while she was stuck *here*.

Max couldn’t carry forward as a being outside of the bounds of reality if she was still tethered *to* reality. This reality.

Max had to cut that tether.

And so she found herself perched at the cliff’s edge.

She'd already slipped off the edge some time ago.

Back on that sidewalk, in the dead of night, Max’s instinctive, self-preserving Rewind hadn’t kicked in. In the heat of the moment, Max had thought perhaps it was because something had blocked it. But in retrospect...she had *wanted* to die. She’d suppressed the Rewind’s instinct.

She could have died in peace. Finally doing something right. Protecting Stella.

**Actually saving someone.**

For fucking once.

But perhaps in pushing back her own power, her thread to Stella had leaked it over to her.

And so the reverse had happened.

She’d *murdered* someone instead.

Because she had *snapped*. Lost her goddamn mind.

Because of course she had.

Because Max Caulfield was broken, no longer a Human.

She couldn’t even stay mentally stable for more than a few minutes, much less get a self-sacrificing suicide right, and had flipped it into the most...fucked up thing she could have.
But this time, gravity would be on her side.

Gravity didn’t have feelings.

Gravity didn’t lie. It didn't deceive itself.

Gravity was steady and consistent, where nothing else was anymore. Nothing else now that Stella was gone.

Max’s Rewind could pull the entire world around her backward. It could pull gravity along with it, but it couldn’t break gravity. And, as Max had learned through all of her experimentation, her body didn’t Rewind. It stayed grounded in Earth’s gravity.

Max gazed into the waters below, colliding harshly against the jagged rocks.

Her concrete heart was heavy enough to weigh her down beneath those gray waves.

Wind lashed at her. But she saw no Storm.

This had been the place where she’d broken herself. The exact spot. The week leading to that single moment, tiny bits and shards had splintered off...But this single choice, this single moment, had changed everything. Her past self had been a goddamn idiot.

What if she could prevent it from happening?

She had nothing else to lose. Not anymore.
Just one more Leap.

That was all it would take.

With a rusted old necklace in one hand and a time-worn game cartridge in the other, Max took a moment to soak in the serenity of Arcadia Bay's cliffside.

She took the deep dive.

~ Lost in Thoughts (All Alone); *Fire Emblem: Fates*
Maxine Caulfield.

Broken.

She needed to be whole.

The End of Time – a dream, woven by frozen threads of space and time.

The Leap hadn't left her in tact. But then, what good was most of Max Caulfield, anymore?

All she needed was the part that had endured through death: the fury.

The drive to set things right.

The hatred at the world. The fucking Universe. Herself.

Sadness, happiness, none of that got shit done.

But anger sure did.

In order to get to this place – this dream – Max had lost most of what she had been. She could barely remember, but pieces she found of herself from that wretched point in time – that crossroad she’d come to loathe – helped fill in some of the pieces.

A hoodie. **Gray.** *What a fitting color.*

A doe. A reminder. Yet she couldn't remember what it was for. What it meant.

Brown hair. That was who Max Caulfield really was.

Max had scrounged up pieces of who she had been before she’d broken herself.

She needed to look familiar, or else those poor broken shards of Maxine might not recognize her.

And after struggling in the Void for so long, she no longer recognized herself, either, or where she’d come from.

But the fury remained. And that was all she needed to get shit done.

A burning shard of who she had once been – no longer Human – Max tried to visit her alternate selves.

It was always pain. It was always needles. It was always white noise.

Each piece of Max she found brought her closer and closer to her own personal event horizon.

Eventually, she arrived.

–

"Bitterness is like cancer. It eats upon the host. But anger is like fire. It burns it all clean."

~ Maya Angelou

–

“Okay. You've been through so much, I...I believe you, Max. After all, I'm still your faithful companion.”
“Yes. You are. So listen. In a few minutes, I won't know any of this happened...nothing. We absolutely have to stay in your room and do nothing. Then we explain everything to David, and we finally let him do his job. You'll have to tell me exactly what I did and said just now. Just...explain that I traveled through time using the photo.”

“Will you believe me?”

Max took Chloe's hand.

“I'll always believe you, Chloe.”

The cold had passed. Things were...warmer that evening.

A menacing monstrosity of wind and chaos – delicious but horrible chaos – was but a scent in the air around her. Distant enough that she felt out of harm’s way, yet close enough to excite and alarm her. She could practically taste the impending Storm, a paradoxical entity. Just like she was. The searing fingertips of Death were brushing against her own, time and again.

Time and again.

And again.

But she was still standing.

It was Chloe Price's fingers. Chloe Price's hands. Max could sense the sour smell of Death emanating from her.

But that...hand.

It was so warm.

It burned.

“Whoa-ho, heyyyy, hey,” Chloe eased when Max yanked her hand away. “What's-? Ah, shit. You just...left, didn't you?”

“What?” Max grunted, shaking her hand loose. It was asleep. She needed it to be awake. “What is this?”

“Damnit,” Chloe sighed, rolling her head around her shoulders. “Attack of the Max-Snatchers again, huh?”

Max shot Chloe an irritated glare. Seriously? What a...fucking insensitive joke, like Chloe had any comprehension of what Max was going through.

The thumping, muffled music of the End of the World party trickled across the dusk-laden tarmac around them.

“Argh,” Chloe huffed irritably. “You, uhhhh, you used 'the photo' to travel through time. Whatever that means. It's your trippy power, don't look at me.”

“I what?”

Max hadn't...used that archaic method in so long. She'd evolved beyond it.

Oh. Duh. This was her past self.
This was it. The night she'd been looking for. The night of the Storm.

But by her memory, it had been more than two years. She could barely remember shit about the
details, and she didn't exactly have time to whip out her journal and read-up, based on how ansty
Chloe was.

“Max, come on,” Chloe grumbled impatiently, tugging Max by the wrist.

Max resisted. She loathed Chloe trying to push her around. Not anymore.
Never again.

“Dude, what the ffffrrghhh...-” Chloe's sentence dissolved into a puff of air, a growl of
containment.

At the edge of the parking lot, right beside Chloe's dinged up old truck – what a piece of junk –
Chloe tore her hat off and clawed at her scalp.

“OK, OK, OK,” Chloe spat, collecting herself. “C'mon, let's just bail outta here before...whatever it
is you're worried is gonna happen...happens.”

“Where are you taking me?” Max demanded. “I don't remember what the hell is going on, Chloe.”

“I know, I know,” Chloe assured, whipping her wrist around. “You knew this was going to happen,
uhhh, shit, what was I...?-” She snapped her fingers. “You just told me, a minute ago, that we needed
to go to my house and do...nothing.”

Max gawked at Chloe incredulously. There was a fucking Tornado coming. And while she might
not have recalled the details, she did remember that Jefferson was still out there.

“Nothing?” Max scoffed. Her past self would want to do nothing, eh? Fucking coward... “No, we're
not doing nothing, isn't there a killer on the loose?”

Chloe's body perked up and she stared around them to see who had heard that. She approached Max
with cautious palms raised.

“Dude, do you want to invite Professor Creepo to stalk us? We'll...-” She grunted a conceding sigh,
then whispered, “We're gonna tell David about this shit, let him deal with it. That's what you said we
should do.”

She had grasped Max's shoulders in that...intimate way she had used to.

It made Max sick to her stomach. It was all...just an act, it was just Chloe trying to woo her over to
do what Choe needed.

Max puffed hot air, crossing her arms and begrudgingly climbing into the truck.

The ride back to Chloe's house was unsettlingly awkward.

Chloe Price seemed to have it in her head that Max was all fucking head-over-heels for her.

Well, fuck that.

This was all Chloe's fault.

And what aggravated Max the most was that she wanted to... kiss her god DAMNIT damnit
urghhhh.
She wasn't falling for that Stockholm Syndrome crap. Chloe was the problem. The source of all of these problems.

Chloe called David, who was unsurprisingly desperate to hear from the girl he'd fucking slapped around and spied on. Asshole. Of course her past self would trust him. Sympathize with him.

Max stewed in her own ideas, contemplating what she'd do.

But the...rest of her – this other Max, from the past, who'd been fucking everything up – wasn't back yet. From wherever she'd been. Where had she gone off to? Max couldn't even remember. Whatever. Irrelevant. She'd tried to muck with time to fix things, and had made everything worse.

Before she knew it, she was standing in Chloe's front yard, watching Chloe argue with David, who was none too happy to see Max – the girl who'd convinced Joyce to ditch him.

She realized that if she didn't step in, though, Chloe and David would get nowhere. And things needed to move forward for her to accomplish her goal. If Jefferson was still on the loose, she was still at risk, and so was whoever the hell else.

Chloe managed to convince David to come up to their room – check out their wall of fuckery, proof of what had been going on.

While this transpired, Max sat in the living room, preferring to be alone.

Deep in her gut, she knew someone was in danger. That something was wrong.

If she could just...remember...-

Victoria?
Augh, what-?

Mm. Victoria, Jefferson had snatched her, hadn't he...? That night...

YES. EW. GROSS.

Jefferson had kidnapped both of them on this very night. She'd tried to forget it, but it had been burned in the back of her brain.

Shivering from the traces of that disturbing memory, Max realized she had to warn her.

Max couldn't stand Vickie's guts, but goddamnit, she wasn't going to let her past self's laziness enable a girl to die.

When she went to check her phone, she noticed she had a voicemail...from Nathan Prescott. The fucker who had killed Chloe and set this all in motion. Screw him, for all she cared.

(To: Victoria) – (Watch out tonight. DON'T DRINK ANYTHING.)
(STAY AWAY FROM JEFFERSON.)

(Victoria) – (wtf?? who is this??)

(Max) – (Someone who's looking out for you. Listen to me.)
(Jefferson and Nathan are DANGEROUS.)
(STAY AWAY.)
Max didn't receive a reply. This...frustrated her.

People were so fucking...-

See what happened when she tried to do anything to fix or save or change anyone?

“Absolutely not!” David barked from the stairwell, stomping down with a thick folder wedged in his armpits.

“That's bullshit!” Chloe whined, like the goddamn child she was. “We solved this case! We need to be there when—”

“You need to be alive!” David roared. “You ever think about that, Chloe? No! You kids just...dive into this without making a battle plan.”

“We've earned this!” Chloe tried to argue. “Max!” she snarled toward the living room. “Back me up, here, man!”

“Let him do his fucking job,” Max called back from across the house. Under her breath, she grumbled, “I'm not your 'man.'”

“Your friend's finally thinking straight,” David grumbled, strapping his boots on. “There's people's lives at risk, and it'd be damned stupid to add yourself to that list. Stay home.”

Max had gotten up from the cough and was now lingering in the hallway, arms crossed.

“We have to see this through!” Chloe insisted, her voice cracking in a frenzy, looking to Max. “For...For Rachel, we owe her to—”

“She's gone, Chloe,” Max snapped coldly. Every fucking word about Rachel was like another slash across her chest. “It's too late for her, but the police could still save whoever Jefferson's after next.”

“And who would that be?” David asked, scooping up the folder of evidence.

“If I was willing to guess, Victoria Chase,” Max stated rigidly.

She hated it. She loathed the idea that fucking Victoria Chase would be the one goddamn person she could protect, she could save, in all of this. And she didn't even know why she cared, but...part of her did. The part that was sleeping.

“That snooty rich kid? Senior year?” David mumbled thoughtfully.

“She's been trying to get cozy with Jefferson all semester,” Max dryly advised. “There was a big party at the school tonight – he picked her as the winner of a contest. I'm telling you, she's the one you need to be looking out for.”

David huffed hot air through his nose, shaking his head.

“You'd damn well better not be pullin' my leg on this, Max.”

“I'm not,” Max groaned. “Believe me, I wish I was...”

“Understood,” David reluctantly sighed. He eyed Chloe fiercely. “Now you two are gonna stay put, here. That's an...” He caught himself. Max could practically see the word 'order' hanging on his tongue. His harsh expression softened – just a little. “Just...Stay out of this. You're in the deep end as it is.”

Chloe, jaws crooked with contempt, gave him a sharp and bitter salute.
“Roger-fucking-dodger...Oh, and THANKS, Chloe, for staying up all night and doing my job FOR me while I moped in some hotel.”

“Chloe,” David huffed, his fuse burnt out.

For once, Max could relate with the guy. What a child. What a terror to be trying to parent this insufferably immature brat. No wonder David was such a grouch – Max would be, too, in his shoes.

As David headed out and closed the door behind him, Max caught it with her hand, calling out to him.

“David!”

He turned around. She yelled to him.

“Be careful! The weather's gonna turn real nasty tonight!”

The second the door was closed, Chloe shot Max this bratty look of disbelief and tossed her arms up.

“Max and David, the dynamic duo! Thanks for backing me up back there.”

“Chloe, get over yourself.”

“You know, just because some theoretical, alternate reality David saved you, doesn't mean this one isn't an ass.”

Max rolled her eyes and shook her head, shoving right by Chloe and heading upstairs.

“I am so not having this argument with you right now, Chloe. There's more important things to be focusing on. There are lives in danger.”

“What is with you?” Chloe whimpered in frustration, following her up. “I thought we were partners. When's the real Max gonna show back up, huh? I don't like this in-between time-trips Max. Maybe you need a...Snickers bar, or something, you grouchy.”

Max's nails dug into the stair rail with a icy bitterness.

She couldn't stand it.

Even fucking Chloe Price, the most broken person Max knew, could see the mask for what it was. Chloe could see it.

Chloe knew.

Max wasn't Human.

And this..'real Max?' Her past self?

Max could...feel her, asleep, inside, trying to wake up.

But Max was going to keep her held back as long as she could. She couldn't let her previous, gluttonous self get all starry eyed over Chloe and ruin this night, ruin her chance to make things right.

–

“I avoid myself.
Why? I'm afraid.

Afraid of what?

Finding too much.

Too little.

Nothing at all.

Do I even exist?"

~ *Mr. Robot*

–

Red.


It seemed fitting. Max...liked it.

Red really *did* suit her.

Staying holed up in Chloe's room for a couple hours, Chloe had been trying to pore through the news. Traces of Rachel's killer getting caught. Traces of the Storm brewing. She complained with the impatience of a child waiting for Christmas morning to open her presents. These were people's lives.

Even if she was merely *part* of a person, Max could still appreciate that. Or maybe it was just...the rest of her, inside this new mind. She didn't know.

She would try to talk with Chloe about it – all of this batshit insane stuff she'd been through. But Chloe didn't care. Too busy focusing on *death* and *violence*. As per usual. Focused on everything except Max, the person who'd stayed up all night researching shit, who'd stolen David's 'surveillance,' who'd helped her dig up a corpse, who'd saved her *life* how many times? Like Chloe gave a shit.

Max was delusional. She had been this whole time.

*Chloe Price was the source of this entire mess.*

But in this new body, Max wasn't in control of her Rewind. She'd have to figure that out if she wanted to do what had to be done.

And in the meantime?

She had her *Other* power to put to use: her Dreamweaving.

A paradox. Her existence was a fucking paradox.

The snake that ate its own tail.

She didn't even *care*, she had a new *life* now – a new existence. In a cage, to be sure, but...she'd find a way to break it.
She already had with the last cage, after all.

–

That beautiful chorus of despair, guilt, rage, anger, condensed and frozen into the visage of the Two Whales diner, populated with all of the faces this other Max had hurt, or would hurt – even murder, all for Chloe Price.

Max wasn't going to sit by and let that happen.

All she had to do now was wait.

Project their voices. Project their pain. Project their anger.

Ah. At last. Her cue. She hadn't been holding back. She wasn't about to start to now.

Not until she could break free from this cage and fix what her idiot past self had broken. She had the wrath, the power, the will to do what had to be done.

**Determination.**

“Who-...Who *are* you?”

“Holy *shit*, are you cereal? I'm *you*, dumbass. Or I'm one of many *Maxes* you've left behind...”

–

“*I'm the fury in your head*

*I'm the fury in your bed*

*I'm the ghost in the back of your head*”

~ Foals; *Spanish Sahara*
Chapter Summary

"Control can sometimes be an illusion.
But sometimes, you need an illusion to gain control."

Chapter Notes

A/N: I'm not happy with how this chapter turned out, but after how big 16 was, I guess it was expected. The story just needs to move toward its conclusion.
I hope the first episode of Before the Storm turned out OK (I'll play soon). There's just inherent traits to it that'll prevent me from loving it as much as LiS1 but I hope it's still worthwhile.

Mollifiable is visiting for the autumn, and we'll be starting a video channel. You can follow our social media pages (@Destiny-Smasher and @mollifiable) for updates on that!

Thanks for your patience and support. We're on the home stretch, and the last few chapters should come together better than this one did.

—

“Control can sometimes be an illusion.
But sometimes, you need an illusion to gain control.
Fantasy's an easy way to give meaning to the world.
To cloak our harsh reality in escapist comfort.
After all, isn't that why we surround ourselves with so many screens?

So we can avoid seeing?

So we can avoid each other?

So we can avoid truth?”

~ Mr. Robot

—

What had Chloe just seen?
Flashes, bits and pieces of a life lived in parallel to her own.

A life where she didn’t have one anymore.

A life where Max had made the other fateful choice on that cliff – to let Chloe die.

And Max hadn’t ended up any better for it.

Max Caulfield hadn’t been given a happy ending, all because of Chloe.

Rachel Amber hadn’t found a happy ending, all because of Chloe.

William Price hadn’t found a happy ending, all because of Chloe.

Stella Hill – this alternate one, at least – hadn’t found a happy ending.

Because of Chloe. Indirectly, sure, but…-

This was why this Other Max hated her so much, wasn’t it?

Because, indirectly or directly – and there was definitely some ‘directly’ – Chloe Price was the source of all of this pain. Was that fair? Hell no, it wasn’t. But it wasn’t fair that all of this weight and power had been placed on the shoulders of one Max Caulfield in the first place – only to become more than one Max Caulfield.

The world wasn’t fair.

And that drove some into a certain madness.

Like a ship stranded at sea, without any wind in its sails.

Still water.

A wooden raft.

Adrift.

A child. A Beast.

Hoodie. Yellow hair.

Oh. Oh, how she wished for gold.

Golden hair, like a waterfall, careening around her, swallowing her.

Waterfall. Serene.

Elation. To be touched by the glorious, angelic light.

“. . .TOUCHED ME!
I'm never washing my face ever again!”

But the yellow fades.

A ghost.

Gray. All gray.
The child – the little Monster – before her.

All gray.

She reaches out toward the child.

It turns toward her.

Empty, white eyes.

It is her own face.

It speaks to her. In her own voice, but silently.

“Have you ever thought about a world where everything is exactly the same . . . Except you don’t exist? Everything functions perfectly without you . . . Ha, ha . . . The thought terrifies me.”

She tries to speak – to reply – but cannot form the words she wants to.

A neon light sprouts from the darkness beside them. It's a flower. A light blue, glowing flower.

It echoes her own voice back to her from a day long passed.

“And I screwed it up somehow. Like I screw everything up. Because...I'm a fucking screw-up.”

She reaches out to the talking flower. It withers and wilts away, into dust.

The child – the child is still there. Still gray.

The gray kid has turned its back to her again.

She reaches for its shoulder. Tries to offer the poor Monster a hug.

More silent speech.

“Please forget about me.”

She passes right through the child, falling into the water.

“Please don't think about this anymore.”

The waters swallow her up.

Buried beneath the black.

Cannot breathe.

–

You cannot give up just yet . . .

Chlo Morpho!
‘Twere a fierce chill what crept upon Chlo’s neck as she woke. Half ‘er face were sand-stuck, the other parched by a salty breeze. The tide were lickin’ at ‘er backside, a might frigid in t’ early morn, the shore still moon-kissed.

Her gut.

Were still in one piece.

Made no sort o’ sense.

Chlo’d been speared clean through by that…Beast.

Woke in a start, she clutched ‘er emptied stomach. In tact, for true.

Much as anything were true anymore.

Her hand, though – it burned somethin’ awful, hotter n’ a smithy’s furnace. The pain washed away with the waves huggin’ round her backside.

Chlo forced ’erself up, but the lump o’ lard what she called a body didn’t take kindly to the attempt. She sputtered out sand an’ saltwater from ‘er throat afire, usin’ her hook hand to push against the ground and rise.

A mystic noise shattered Chlo’s senses from the dried sands beyond. ‘Twere foreign but familiar at once. A pause, then it repeated, like some awful degenerate siren wailing ‘gainst the sounds o’ the shore. Over an’ over, singing its short, sad song.

Chlo approached the awful sound, ‘er ears ringing.

There, in t’sand, sat the strange tool, its stranger song whining for ‘er attention.

Chlo picked it up, its tiny tremors like some dark magic runestone ripplin’ ‘gainst her palm. Like a tiny treasure chest, she popped it open, and the cursed voice what’d been screeching for release spoke to ‘er like a ghost from within the stone.

[“...heya.”]

Chlo woulda flung t’awful thing to the sea had she not a sickening feel, nestled betwixt her nethers, that the voice would lead ‘er back to her Cap’n, one manner or t’other.

[“ so, guessin’ you found a little shortcut of your own. huh? ”]

‘Twere the groggy tones o’ one of that Beast’s skeleton crew. The one what had taken Maximus’ eye an’ cursed her.

“Where ’ave ye ditched me?!” Chlo roared at the mystical charm. “Where’s my Cap’n?!”

[“ heh. sorta ironic, right? Humans. . so much potential to change. so many reasons TO change. but ya never do. and that. .heh. waiting, hoping for you to change? well, that's the biggest joke. isn't it? it's hilarious. but. .who am i to talk, right? ”]
“What be ye prattlin’ on ’bout, ya mindless creetur?!” Chlo screeched, all patience she mighta
possessed flung downwind before she’d even woke in that wretchedly barren place. The smooth,
oddly shaped charm in ’er hand quivered wit’ each ghostly syllable what emerged from it.

[“ worth a shot, anyway. so. ya want your captain back, huh? ”]

“What be ye prattlin’ on ’bout, ya mindless creetur?!” Chlo screeched, all patience she mighta
possessed flung downwind before she’d even woke in that wretchedly barren place. The smooth,
oddly shaped charm in ’er hand quivered wit’ each ghostly syllable what emerged from it.

“Where is she?!”

[“ turns out, MY captain wants that treasure you’ve been looking for. ”]

Chlo’s soured guts rolled round.

“The Crown? She’s claimed it, ya bag o’ bones.”

[“ heh. always the small picture. never the big. ”]

“Did ye savages take my Cap’n? Is she even still breathin’?”

[“ yup. probably. i mean. aye-aye. heheh. ”]

“Gluttonous barnacles, crackin’ wise at me whilst ye leech off o’ the livin’...”

[“ says the pirate. ”]

“Says the Human, ya bottom-feedin’ monster.”

[“ is it really a Human you’re tryin’ to save, though. . .? ‘cuz. ya know. i wonder. ”]

“Ye’ll shut yer jaws, bilge-rat. Ye’ve disrespected my Cap’n enough, ya mangy creeturs.”

[“ . . .heh. well. only a Human can claim the treasure. only the treasure can save us. so. here we are.
bottom-feeding and all. ”]

“If I dig up yer bloody bounty, will ye deliver Maximus back to me?”

[“ seems to be the plan. ”]

“‘Tis a deal, then, soulless Beast.”

Morpho tossed the cursed charm back into the sand without a care. Sick o’ words, she were. So
much babblin’ about. Time fer action, right n’ proper. Brownbeard’s map were still tucked in ’er
trousers, what she’d picked from ’is fresh corpse earlier that night.

Exposin’ it to the chilly air, Chlo ran ’erself ragged figurin’ it out.
She’d been cast upon the isle where the treasure were buried. By chance?

She had the map to find it, in hand an’ in tact. By chance.

Time blurred round ’er and ’fore she knew it, that spot were upon her.

A crow’s pale caw stirred Chlo from ’er foggy mind.

And there she stood, at the very spot o’ the buried treasure.

By chance?
Nay.

Nothin’ about this here cursed isle, Queen Sunlace’s treasure, the Monsters, her Cap’n… None of it were by chance.

Chlo were losin’ faith, though. Had to grip reality by the bow and set things sailin’ on the winds of reality, aye? She’d rescue her Cap’n. Maximus ‘ad saved her aplenty. Were Morpho’s turn to pay dues.

Gone were the sands o’ the moonlit beach. ‘Stead, a yard of scrapped parts, metal, rusted and barnacle ridden.

A towering tree, lit aflame before her. A multi-headed serpent o’ orange and red and yellow, tongues hot as the sun, licking at her skin. Demandin’ blood.

Morpho checked ‘er spot on the map.

\{ X \}

Nary a spade to dig ‘er up.

So Chlo got on all fours like a mutt, and she dug wit’er bare hand an’ hook.

She dug. Faster n’ faster. Her heart poundin’ like a war drum.

War drum.

Gone to war, she ‘ad, for Queen Sunlace. For this treasure.

She’d go to war again.

The fucker who’d done this would pay.

There was no way she could be dead. No fucking way.

Rachel was too *good* to be dead.

Dirt beneath her nails.

The most awful stench rose from the ground.

**X marks the spot.**

“Oh, Rachel, no-no! Please *not* her!”

She couldn’t breathe.

The smell was overwhelming.

Insides spilling outside, a grizzled mess in the dirt.

In the dirt
in the dirt
in the dirt

Her chest was on fire. Her stomach wretched, her throat boiled in acids from within, her nose
plugged with snot and her eyes rapidly clouded with tears.

She couldn't breathe.

She could barely keep herself from collapsing.

Everything was collapsing.

Her entire life was collapsing AGAIN.

“Rachel...why?!”

Nothing mattered anymore, that was it, it was over, everything was over.

Rachel was gone.

Chloe's treasure had been taken from her again. This time, buried in the dirt.

“I'm sorry, Chloe. I'm so sorry...”

Max was there, Max had seen her here, to this moment, to this truth, to this end.

But Max wasn't enough.

Rachel was gone.

Dad was gone.

Max was gone.

Fetal position.

Protect herself from reality crumbling around her.

Everything was crumbling around her.

Into the dirt.

“I loved her so much...”

Crumbling.

“How can she be dead?”

Rumbling.

The sand were rumblin' fierce, givin' way to the sea.

“What kind of world does this?”

Buried 'neath the blue.

“Who does this?!”

Couldn't breathe.

Losin' Ray Sunlace...were like the sun bein' lost 'erself.
Were like losin' air.

–

Chloe came up for air.

That had been...a bit of a Trip.

She found herself in a groggy heap...on a couch?

Fuckin'...dark. Where the hell...-?

She tried to get up, but banged her shin on something hard. Coffee table, maybe? Damnit, thing musta been made outta metal...Definitely bruised herself on that one. Damnit.

Chloe tried to get her bearings – both literally and figuratively. What had she just witnessed? Some kind of vision? A dream? She felt like she’d been asleep for some time.

What had even…-?

Max had done this. Put her to sleep somehow. Not-…Not her Max, the Other Max. The Max from-…Wait.

Those visions she'd been shown.

She'd been shown them, they hadn't just been random. Not just dreams.

This Other Max had been showing Chloe where she'd come from.

But why?

Only to dump her back into these...weird-ass fucking dreams that didn't-

“How'd you sleep?”

_GAH shitballs_ -!

’Twere Max. _Ugh_. It _was_ Max. The Other one. Looming inquisitively over the couch, whispering in the dark in a way that Chloe found equally arousing and creepy.

“The _hell'd_ you do to me?” Chloe hissed.

“Shhhh, sh-sh-shh,” Max hushed, turning irate. “People are sleeping.”

“Like who?” Chloe growled, lowering her voice as requested.
“Stella and Brooke,” Max cited. “You, uh...” Chloe could make out an amused little smirk now that her eyes were adjusting to the dark. “Well. You passed out on us, there. I managed to convince Stella it was...Ah, what did I tell her? You’d drunken yourself into a stupor from the separation anxiety.” She shrugged, slinking around the couch. “I mean, if you haven’t done it already, you’re going to, right?” Chloe took a step back, her calf brushing against the corner of that...damned metal coffee table, rghhhh.

“Was it true?” Chloe asked, changing the subject as she regained her footing. “That shit you showed me. All of that stuff with you and Stells. That reality, that worldline – where you let me die. That was you, right? You wanted me to see all of that crazy crap.”

Max took a seat on the couch, patting her palm against the cushion beside her.

“Why?” Chloe asked her follow-up question, impatient with the silence.

“Sit,” Max demanded calmly.

“Was it true?” Chloe pressed, flipping back to her first question.

So many questions, and trying to stay all hush-hush, this was all infuriating.

“Is it true?” Max quietly quipped, a bite to her tone. “Like I’m fucking equipped to decide what’s truth anymore? As if I’m a worthy judge of what’s real, in the state I’m in?”

“Better than I am,” Chloe lashed, glaring down at this...off-brand Max.

“Puh-! Sit with me,” Max curtly commanded, crossing her arms and leaning backward into the couch’s plush back.

Chloe was at a loss. What if this was a trick? What if all of these visions, and whatever garbage she was dreaming up, what if it was all some twisted distraction? Right? Like...when she'd reveled in Chloe shooting herself? Yea, she hadn't forgotten about that fucked up little event. No, ma'am.

“Chloe,” Max pleaded, that bitter sting of disappointment eking out. “Please.”

Fuck.

Chloe couldn't...say no to her, not when she sounded so damned hurt. Friggin' A.

Other Max or no, she was still...Max Caulfield, either way.

Hands grudgingly hooked around her hips, Chloe plopped herself down next to Max, instinctively reaching for her hand.

Max accepted it, which caused an uncomfortable tightness in Chloe's arm when she realized whose hand she was actually holding: not her Max's.
“This is pretty fucked up,” Chloe bluntly grumbled. “You're trying to tell me that you literally broke in half, because of me?”

“Fff, more than 'half,' but...” Max trailed off grumpily with a shake of her head. “Yea, I-I guess that's...sorta what I was trying to show you.”

“If that all happened – you're a murderer,” Chloe whispered with some disgruntled disbelief.

“Oh, you mean like how I’m a mass murderer in this worldline?”

“No, that's...Max didn’t mean to—”
“Mean I didn’t mean—”
“You didn’t intend to kill anyone, but—”
“I still knew it was going to happen.”
“That’s...not th-”
“I let it happen.”
“It was outside of your control.”
“Oh. And I suppose you think what happened with Stella’s brother wasn’t?”
“Sure looked like you were in...”

Control.

But as Chloe recalled how...off Max had been in that reality, in that moment...-

Ya know. She wondered.

“Well,” Chloe puffed out through a disparaging sigh. “I see your point.”

“Didn't happen in this worldline, anyway,” Max specified primly.

“It still happened, though, didn't it?” Chloe countered.

“You mean like you, killing Frank? Killing yourself?” Max scoffed, staring off toward the gentle, tiny lights from beneath the entertainment setup before them. “Difference is, I remember what happens in other realities. You can't. Not unless I...project them at you through your dreams – which itself isn't really a reliable method for remembering anything, by the way. You've probably noticed.”
“The 'Dreamweaving' you two talked about,” Chloe recollected from the visions, which were, as Max had observed, somewhat hazy in her mind already. “So you can manipulate dreams, then.”

Max nodded, shrugging up a shoulder.

“Manipulate is the best word, probably,” she confessed. “I certainly can't control them, can't build them out of scratch. I mean, maybe I could if they were just mine, but even when it's with myself now, it's never... just mine, not just one me, and...” Another trailed off thought, accompanied by a bitter sigh through her nostrils. “I can't just build them out of nothing. The pieces, they come from somewhere. Somewhere else. I can bend time and space – I can bend reality. All I’m doing is just... bending someone else’s reality.”

That...place Chloe had been in. With herself. With the Stellas. And Max. After they'd gone through that merry-go-round day at Blackwell through...-
The dark place with the lantern post thingie.

That place was a dream. A dream that Max – this Other Max – had created with Stells. Erh, some other Stella.

The dreams Chloe had been experiencing recently – the bizarre pirate story her sleeping mind was trying to author, only to have some other pen scribbling its ink onto the parchment...Two stories merging into one mess.

“Have you been doing it to me?” Chloe demanded quietly and sternly. “This 'Dreamweave' crap. You have, haven't you?”

Max smirked. Seeing it from a profile side-view, it unsettled Chloe a bit, that glimmer to it.

“It's cute,” Max said with a flowery, soft-chuckle. “The way your subconscious longs for the days when we'd play pirates together. Back when we were 'innocent,' right?” Her words were soft but something about them sent Chloe's goosebumps shivering. “I could cite some childish garbage about how wherever there's light, it casts a shadow, and blabla...But it's more that reality is shades of gray, I think. White, black, mashing and mixing together in different shades. Our dreams have been doing the same thing. Like splashing two different buckets of paint on a wall and just...” She swiped and clawed her hands about. “...running your hands through it. Seriously, though – it's pretty adorable that you make me the 'Cap'n'. And the Beast, huh? You like what I've done with her? Seems awfully familiar, doesn’t she? In maybe more ways than one?”

Chloe's chest froze for a moment as she considered the implications of this.
Chloe could barely remember what had been happening in her dreams, only that...pirates were involved, and some other force had been invading on that. Corrupting it? Fusing with it?

It was Other Max's fiddling. The same way she'd been fiddling with Chloe's Max. Why was she doing this? What was she trying to prove?

Max really had lost it. But even if this was some Other Max from some other reality, she was still Max. Still came from the same source, the same core.

Max leaned into Chloe with an intimate sigh that Chloe wished she hadn't heard.

Whether this persona – this Other – was a physical manifestation of an alternate consciousness...or just an expression of that same possible outcome – Max losing her mind – she was still Max Caulfield. Deep down. Which meant she had to want to be with Chloe, right? It was why all of this weird shit was happening in the first place. In either or...probably all of these realities Max was referring to in vague terms.

Their hands remained attached.

Other Max sighed deeply.

She murmured tiredly, “Sharing my dream with yours...It's the only way this part of me can spend time with you lately without...-” She trailed off and shook her head slightly.

“The hell's your deal?” Chloe whispered in the dark with a grumpy exhalation. “Getting all sentimental on me...Thought you wished we never met.”

“I do,” Max admitted with some bitterness.

“...Why?”

“Because we...I love you.”
Chloe gave pause to this simple, sullen reply. That made no sense.

Flicking up her wrist in confusion, she puffed out her disbelief.

“Buh-...”

“Yea,” Max grunted with a sharp edge, disconnecting the handhold and nudging Chloe off of her. “That’s what I thought.”

Chloe’s throat caught. Her stomach twisted.
Chloe hadn’t brought herself to say ‘I love you, too.’
Because this wasn’t her Max.

Before she could form a reply, Max went on.

“You’d be better off without me,” she explained. Her tone turned cold. “And I’d be better off without you. We’d both be alive, healthy, happy, without any of this fucked up strange reality-altering mess screwing everything up.”

At this, Chloe was at a loss. Technically speaking, this was true. Maybe? That was the rub, though. It was all theoretical.

“Bullshit,” Chloe voiced her disagreement. “That’s crap, what makes you think that would make things any better?”

“Imagine it, Chloe,” Max pressed. “Think about how you ended up in that bathroom that day – with Nathan. I could lay all of the fucking dominoes for you if you want. End of the day? If we'd never met, everything in your life would’ve turned out differently. You wouldn't have been in debt, you wouldn't have owed anyone money, you wouldn't be heartbroken, you'd probably still have William, you-”
“I wouldn't be me,” Chloe huffed, shrugging Max off of her. “I thought the entire reason you chose what you did that day was to leave the past where it was.”

“I didn't choose that,” Max specified. “Not-...Urgh. Not this...part of me.”

“So you're 'Max' when it's convenient, and some Other person the rest of the time.”
“N-no, I am Max, even if I've lived a whole different-...I'm still me, even if some parts are different, the-...the core is the same, it's-...We're still-...Rrgh, there's no way you could begin to understand… Why do I even fucking bother, it’ll never…”

Max had shoved her hands against her head, slicking her matted hair back over her scalp with frustration.

“Look,” Chloe protested, “I don't want to understand this fucked up broken reality bullshit you keep sucking all of us into, it's-”

“Exactly,” Max growled her nostrils flared with impatience.

It scared Chloe a bit.

She insisted carefully, “Wh-what matters is that we-...We need to fix it. Fix you.”

Max’s eyes flickered with some disdain, but she cooled the embers again before speaking.

“What do you think I'm trying to do?” Max hissed, her voice cracking slightly. “You've had to let go of William, let go of Rachel, don't you understand how fucking difficult this is for me? To let go of you?”

“I didn't have a choice,” Chloe snipped, her nose wrinkling with some disgust. “And you – this-...Whatever you are, whatever this is, you chose to let go of me. Well, good for that. I never get to have a choice in any of this shit, and for once, I do. I'm not giving up on Max, I'm not letting go of her – of us. Whoever you are, whatever you think you are, you are not Max Caulfield. Not my Max Caulfield. You made your choices, just like she did, but my Max didn't try to...fucking...cheat at...existing, and-...” Her brain hurt even trying to comprehend what this Other Max was capable of. “You should go back to where you came from. Where you belong. And give my Max back to me.”

The Other Max just gawked at her, jaw agape. She shook her head, tossing it up and dribbling out an exasperated breath as she flung herself against the couch's arm.

“You don't get it,” Max whimpered. “I can't make you get it, but I can fix this, and you won't trust me, after all I've-”

“Where is she?” Chloe growled, her patience having worn out.

“Right here,” Max puffed irritably, slapping her palm against her chest. “I am right fucking here.”

“You know what I mean,” Chloe snapped.

The Other Max paused, her eyes narrowing as her palm slid down into her lap.

“But you don't know what I mean,” she seethed bitterly through her teeth.
“Bring her back,” Chloe demanded. “I don't care, we can fix this shit together, I'll put up with your crap, just...bring her back. Fucking A...” Her hands were trembling in balled fists against her knees.

“You have to let go,” said the Other Max, shaking her head scornfully. “Just like I did.”

Chloe felt an icy shock to her system at this.

“What did you do to her?” Chloe hissed.

“She's...” spit out this fucking imposter. Her lips pursed as she considered her words. Damn right, Chloe would...She'd...Fuck. “She's undergoing a...rehabilitation.”

Chloe could feel her eyelids twitch with frustration.

“The hell does that mean?”

The phantom in Max's form wiped her bangs to one side and shrugged.

“She...I needed to undergo...a process. So I am.”

“You did do something to her,” Chloe accused. If it wasn't Max's body, she'd...fucking wring this crazy girl's neck. “If she's hurt...”

“Oh, you're one to talk, like you've never hurt us. Me. Her...”

“Swear to fucking...If you don't bring her back, I'll-”

The door to their right opened, and a hush fell over them.

“...Guys?” croaked Stella groggily, rubbing at her eyes in the dark. “What are you doing? It's, like, two in the morning...”

Chloe saw an exit from this conversation.

“I was leaving,” Chloe announced, getting up.

Max clawed at her arm, and she shook it off.

“D-do you...need a ride back?” Stella offered hesitantly, following Chloe and clicking on the room's lighting. “Are you sober enough to...?”

“Yea,” Chloe blurted bluntly, reaching the door.

“Let her go,” Max huffed, whipping her wrist up over the couch's spine, her back to Chloe. It took Chloe a sec, but she realized the specific way Max had said it was, itself, some sarcastic little bite,
like she was being sore over being called out on, you know, being an imposter.

Chloe wanted her Max back.

And she was so terrified at the prospect of this Max having somehow done something with her, that she nearly walked right out before realizing she wasn't even wearing shoes.

Suddenly, she was self-aware of how much her hands were trembling, how weak her arms felt, how numb her fingers were, how hot her cheeks burned. It felt downright frightening to be exposed to this angry, bitter side of Max, even if it was some persona from another fucking dimension. It hurt like nothing else – to be spurned by the woman she loved, and to confront the idea that maybe this was just who Max was from now on.

But she wasn't going to give up. Her Max was still...somewhere. And this Other Max couldn't have succeeded, right? Because if she had, and Max and Chloe had never met, this reality, like, it wouldn't be able to exist, and so...

“Hey.”

Stella was right up on Chloe now, grabbing her shoulder with that warm concern.

It suddenly made Chloe feel hella awksauce now, after the visions she'd recently seen.

Which reminded her...-

“W-wait a sec,” Chloe grumbled, her mind racing. “Max came outta your room a few minutes ago...”

Her eyes squinted sleepily, Stella nodded and shrugged.

Chloe followed up crankily, “Where was she sleeping?”

“In...my bed?” Stella replied, perplexed.
Chloe’s eyes bulged open and she flung her hands out with an expectant glare.

“I was on the floor,” Stella sighed with a yawn. “You know I’d never do that to you guys,” she grumbled, rubbing her palms against her sleep-greased face. “Besides—” Another yawn. “—I’m straight, Chloe. Remember? Nothing like that could even happen between us.”

Chloe shot Max a hard look, only to receive an amused, mischievous smirk in return.

“Right, yea,” Chloe grunted, hands on her hips. “Silly me.” She leaned in to Stella, pulling her friend up close. She whispered in Stella’s ear, “She’s acting super weird right now, Stells, you should have her sleep out here.”

Stella rubbed at her eyes some more, scratched at her thigh, and sighed with a shrug.

“Yes—?”

“Remember what happened with Vic?” Chloe cited into Stella’s ear. “Max started that shit. Because—...Because of whatever is going on with her. It—...I can't deal with explaining this crap right now, just...have her sleep out on the couch. OK?”

“Yes something wrong?” Max posed testily from the couch.

Stella looked half-asleep and utterly baffled.

Chloe couldn't handle any more of this. In a flustered panic, she began searching for her boots. With Max like this, she was going to do whatever she wanted, anyway. It wasn't like Chloe could stop it. Even if she tried, Max could just...undo it anyway, right? Fucking Rewind...

Shit, what if Max did something to Stella and...undid it, and—...
Urgh. Like Chloe could even stop it. Maybe she was making it worse by bringing attention to it, fuck.

How do you threaten someone who has the power of a god?

“You'd better leave her alone,” Chloe grumbled, finding them by the coffee table now that the room was lit. Lowering her voice, as she strapped her boots on, she added in a hushed hiss, “After all she did for you, you’re gonna act like this is some game? If you really respected her, wanna honor her memory? You'll leave her alone.”

At that, the twinkle of mischief in Max’s face eroded into a quivering sting.
Max's superpower was time travel?

Well, Chloe's was being an asshole and making people feel bad. So. *There.*

One of those was more cosmic than the other, but both still had their uses.

Chloe was done pulling punches with this Other Max. Why in the hell she'd been shown those visions – why in the hell this Other Max was fucking with her head, with her dreams – she had no idea. Why *her* Max seemed to be missing, she didn't know.

How things had spiraled into this nutso David-Lynchian nonsense she was now living alongside, she couldn't comprehend.

But she was going to find a way out of it, with or without this Other Max's help. *Without,* preferably, if Plan A was 'erase-everything-we've-been-through.' Fuck that. They'd already faced that choice and had called it out on its crap.

Chloe would just need to come up with a Plan B.

Max was cracking like a goddamn walnut. She needed Chloe to save her, right?

Chloe would find a way.

Fuming as she stomped through the apartment building, Chloe's mind whizzed and whirred with possibilities. Stella was too far gone into this mess, she *knew* things now, and that *Other* Max was—...Come on, *her?* Stells was a stand up gal but *jesus,* Max could've maybe *waited* before—-

*She waited a few years.*

*I waited all of a few fucking days.*

It had *felt* like such a short time, being pinballed across that Max's memories.
But when Chloe tried to ponder things *within* the framework of time, instead of out of it, she found herself feeling a bit overwhelmed.

That Other Max had lived *years* without Chloe. Years of practicing with her powers.
Years of trying to get back to Chloe.

And it had all been for nothing, really.

No wonder she was so damned cranky all the time.

But... _No_, it didn't make what she was doing OK. It wasn't. No. Fuck that.

Everyone lies, **no exceptions**, that Max was probably...lying about **something**.

Hell, her **own** Max had been trying to keep all of this shit under wraps all this time, too, huh?

Chloe caught herself pacing across the apartment complex’s parking lot, and made her way to her vehicle.

She needed to talk with someone. She _wanted_ to talk with Max, _her_ fucking Max, but she couldn't. Stells was out. Brooke was...eh. Not exactly the best for anything to do with emotions. And Vickie? Nah. They'd literally just stuck their feet in a bowl of awksauce, better let that dry first before reapplying.

Well...

It would probably be a good idea to touch base with Mom, either way, huh?

_Fuck_, it was cold out. Chloe could see her own breath vaporizing before her eyes with each exhalation. She reached her car, fumbled her hands with the keys, and gained entry. Taking a moment to wedge her chilled hands between her legs (stupid, big, ugly things), Chloe suddenly realized how late it was.

She checked her phone – [ 2:18am ]

_Damnit. _She could already hear David complaining in the background. Poor guy was pulling extra hours, needed his sleep. Maybe she’d luck out and he’d be out on night-watch duty.

Poor _Mom_, though. She was faring all right but Chloe knew damn well she’d seen through Max’s veil during their trip. Hell, at that point, everyone had seemed to have seen through it. Max was in fucking _crazy town_, her goddamn consciousness split across planes of _existence_? Chloe just...had no idea what to do.
She just wanted Max back.

And in her self-pitying, she found her stomach lurching with longing for...her Mom's support.

[Calling. . .]
[Mom]

The dial-tone repeated a few times. It was nerve-wracking.

[“...Chloe?”]

“Mom. Hey.”

A pause.

“S-Sorry it's so late, I, uhm...—”

[“What's wrong, Hon?”]

“Oh, it's...—”

Chloe trailed off.

“I'm sorry,” Chloe whimpered out, her resolve dissolving in an instant. “I, uhm—” Wherever her sentence had been going, it derailed into a cough. Then a sniffle.

[“Oh, Chloe,”] Mom croaked with sympathy.

Chloe's eyes each dropped a tear. She rubbed them off her cheeks with her sleeve.

“You were right,” Chloe winced through grit teeth. “You told me if I didn'...didn't shape up, it-...Max would end up...—”

[“Chloe. Baby, you have been doin' just fine. What Max is dealin' with? It is beyond what any of us anticipated.”]

“Puh.” Chloe mumbled under breath. “Yea, that's putting it mildly...”

[“What happened?”]

“I'm not doing fine. Max is...fucking not doing fine! We're-...We're together, we're in love, the world's supposed to be our...fucking oyster, and it's just-...”

[“Did somethin' happen tonight, Darlin'? What is it?”]

Chloe buried her eyes in her forearm, against her steering wheel.

“I'm losing her, Mom. She's-...I-I don't know where she is. But she's not here. She-...It's like she's someone else, and I-...” Chloe's voice cracked desperately. “I fucking miss her, Mom. Ohhh, I miss her so much, I can't...-”

[“Aw, Hon, I-...”]

Chloe had devolved back into a sobbing fit – a dry one.

[“I'm sorry. I wish I was there.”]

“I wish you were...here, too,” Chloe breathed out, catching herself off guard. “Argh, I can't believe I-...It's the middle of the night, the hell am I doing?”

[“It's fine. D'ya...need me to come down there?”]

“Wh-? No, no-no, god, it's-...That's too much to ask, no. Th-thank you, I mean, that's-...”

[“Does Max need to...see someone?”]

“I-...”

Legitimate question. Would she, even? If Chloe tried to make her? Doubtful.

[“You do realize I'm serious, right, Hon? If you need me to come down...-”]

“I know,” Chloe blurted. She lifted her head from the steering wheel. Opened her eyes. “If it...comes to that, I'll let you know.”

[“Promise?”]
“I promise,” Chloe weakly chuckled, rubbing her eyes again. “It's...honestly looking like that's...a real possibility, just...not yet. I really need to try to figure this out on my own before we, like, get all hands on deck, I'm...scared that could make shit worse, and...-”

[“You said you miss her.”]

“Yea...”

[“Ya'll not...together?”]

“Oh, n-no, we...We're still together, like...Yea, I mean, we're still a thing, it's just...sideways. She's staying with Stells for...a bit, and I'm...” Chloe took a deep breath. She sighed out, “She's in a bad place, Mom. And I can't...fucking do anything. Like I said, she's acting so different from usual. Like this...other side to her I'm not used to. You know?”

Now Joyce was the one taking a somber breath.

[“I figure I've got some notion, Darlin'. How d'ya think I felt when I first caught you an'-...When I first caughtcha tokin' up? Huh? Or when ya went an' got yer whole arm tattooed? Or when ya showed up with a whole chunk o' yer hair blue? Chloe, when you got yerself expelled, I was scared. Far as I could see from where I was standin', my Baby Girl wasn't...herself anymore. Was runnin' with the wrong folks. Ruin' her damn future. That blond-haired, bright-eyed little sweet pea I used to know, felt like she was gone. I was bein' exposed to this...whole other Chloe, an' I didn't know what to do with her.”]

Chloe's chest was swelling with a strange sort of relief at hearing her mother talk about this. About, well, Chloe. It had been so long, it was easy for her forget that, well, yea...once upon a time, Chloe and Max had both been dorky little do-gooders.

Joyce continued.

[“So what did I do? I pushed her away. I rejected her. 'Ah, that ain't my Chloe,' I told myself. 'No daughter o' mine would be...sneakin' out to bars, stealin' money, druggin' up.'”]

“Pff, 'druggin' up,' huh?”

They shared a small, gentle chuckle.

[“Honestly, though, Chloe, you were a terror teen. Worst case scenario for a parent.”]

“Y-yea,” Chloe interjected, her stomach catching an awful squirming sensation. “Parent. Singular. I sure as shit didn't...make things easier for you.”

[“You were a kid, Chloe. An' I failed you. Just like everyone else d-”]

“No, no, don't...”

[“-like everyone else did. I ain't excusin' the ruckus you caused us but I was got so wrapped up tryin' to help David figure himself out, I...gave up on you. The last thing a parent should do.”]

“Mom, no, I'm the one who...rejected you, OK? Please don't do that, like, internalizing crap.”

[“Sometimes, Chloe, when certain people come into our lives, they change us. Wake up some part o' us we didn't know was there. I did that for David. And...I know it might be difficult to-”]
“Rachel did for me,” Chloe bitterly sighed. “Yea.”

[“And you did for Max. I know you did. I still remember sittin’ that woman down to breakfast that mornin’, way back when, and I could just see it in her eyes, Chloe.”]

“Yea...”

[“Now, I know none of us coulda seen this comin’ – what poor Max is goin' through. Gosh, I mean, I will never begin to understand what David went through while he was in service. Once in a while...I think I see that side of him – that part of him. And no, it's not pretty. And I don't like seein' it. But it is a part of who he is – what he's been through – and the more I resisted that, the worse I made everything. And I did the exact same thing with you – my Baby, my daughter.”]

“Mom, it's...fine, it was a long time ago, we both...fucked up.”

[“And see? Lookit that. You've got...tattoos, n' crazy hair, spikes on pieces o' clothes that don't...at all need spikes on 'em, by any measure. I don't even wanna know what kinda shenanigans you get yourself into these days. Because that side of your life? It doesn't change that you're my daughter, doesn't change that you've got a good heart. Deep down, you've got a soft heart, Darlin'. I know you do. That's a part o' you ain't never gon' change. N' that doesn't make the rest o' you unimportant.”]

Joyce yawned. And Chloe felt a pang of guilt. It was almost three in the friggin' morning.

“Yea,” Chloe said gently, her mind buzzing in a half-awake daze of trying to apply this to what was going on with Max.

[“That part o' you I don't understand, Chloe? I can still accept it, I can still love it, because it is a part of you.”]

“Mm...” Chloe's lower lip was quivering, her insides mushy with a heavy mixture of memories and emotions. “I love you, too.”

[“And you love her. An' I know it's tough, when she's...actin' different. Not like herself – not like the Max you're used to. And I'm not sayin' what she is dealin' with is the same as what David has – does. I mean, honestly, there's some things that never go away. My face – it ain't never gon' be what it once was. And whatever Max might be goin' through, she might never be the same girl you knew back in the old days. But neither will you. Just promise me that you're gonna close those wounds best ya can, live with those scars, instead o' makin' the mistake I made with you.”]

“Mom...”

[“I mean it, ya hear? Chloe Elizabeth Price, yer gonna promise me – you and Max aren't gonna just call it quits when it gets tough.”]

“I just...I don't know if I can make that promise, she-...”

[“Can't never could, Hon. Everyone's got their devils to deal with. Max helped you put yours behind ya – it's time to help her deal with her own.”]

“Y-yea, I know, I...”

[“You promise me, now.”]
“I promise,” Chloe eked out through a yawn.

[“Now, then. Best be gettin' yerself to bed, Darlin'.”]

“Mm-hm,” hummed Chloe drearily.

[“I'm glad you called me. You know you an' Max can always talk with me when you need to.”]

“Thanks, Mom.”

[“I love you.”]

“I love you, too.”

--


It gave Stella a most nostalgic feeling.

Standing here, in this strange place, drifting in the darkness...-
She'd been here before. A lifetime ago, felt like.
Some other life...

Glimmers of light kept them from being swallowed by the Void -- primarily, the yellowed, dim light from the ominous yet soothing lamp post in the center of this strange place.

Stella and Chloe – and their corresponding selves – all exchanged nervous looks. Met with Max's oddly cold, narrow-eyed impatience, they all connected hands, forming a circle.

Stella, herself, Chloe, and herself all seemed to come to the same realization, all at once.

Somehow, they were tied together with Max. That invisible thread that Max could pull with her hand?

It was wound tight around their own hands now, too.
And they could pull it, too.
So, how do we get back, Max?
*We need to go back.*

“Great-fucking-Scott, yes,” Chloe moaned out through an impatient breath. “Back to the future, to the past, wherever we were before you dragged us here.” “Yea, get us outta this merry-go-round of bullshit.” “For real. I'm so over this weird-ass cryptic *Groundhog Day* crap.”


Chloe furrowed her brows at Max's deadpan expression.

The Other Chloe was wide-eyed and offended.

“The real Max wouldn't be so stuck up about my jokes.” “She'd lob dumb puns back at me.”

Stella watched Max's nose wrinkle with disdain.

And then, Max's grip on her hand tightened – sharply, swiftly.

Everything went black.

Stella...didn't know for how long. It felt like taking a nap. Standing up.

Stella dreamed of herself. Of the memorial, on the cliff, by the torn-down lighthouse. She dreamed of when that lighthouse had seen better days. Of when Arcadia Bay had seen better days. Of when so many of her friends had seen better days.

She dreamed of the night Max saved her from her brother. She dreamed of smoking a cigarette with Chloe out behind District 7-6. She dreamed of breakfast at midnight in a truck stop diner.
She dreamed of Max Rewinding time.

When Stella came back to, Chloe and herself were...gone.

But the lamp post was still there. The metal gates, the cobblestone...it was still there. In a sense that anything could be there.

And Max remained. Dull-eyed, red-haired, arms crossed. Max was there, and not there.

Now that Chloe had disappeared, being here with Max was giving Stella déjà vu. Hardcore.

“Jesus fuck,” Max grumbled. “She’s cute as hell when she’s spacing out, but holy crap does it take forever to get her on track.”

What?
Chloe?

“I helped get her back. For now. I need to talk with you first.”

Huh? Talk with me?
What's to talk about?
Send me back!
I'm sick of this shit!

“To be frank, I have no idea how the hell this is happening, but...I'm not going to let opportunity pass us by.”

Opportunity?
Passing us...

“I need to ask a favor from you, Stella Hill.”

I want to help you.
You need fucking help.

“When a door closes, a window opens.”
Or...something like that.”

A door?
A window?

“A favor.”

A favor? What the…-?
Why not ask Chloe?

Max crossed her arms over her chest as she leaned against the lamp post. She flicked her head, tossing her bright red ponytail back over her shoulder.

“Chloe? Pff.” Max rolled her eyes, her jaw agape and crooked with disbelief. “Yea. I’m not really sure she’d listen to me on this one even if I asked her. Let’s just…say she doesn’t really trust me.”

The hell…-?
She’s your fiancé.

How could she not trust you?
You two are in love, aren’t you?

“DON’T-!” Max burst suddenly, her eyes flaring up with contempt before being snuffed back out. “Don’t tell me how we feel. Please. Just don’t.”

Stella was confused by the way her insides pinched at herselfs with empathy.

Like a thousand tiny needles poking their tips in a blanket across both of herselfs.

Max, what’s going on with you?
You’re acting strange.

“I haven’t been fully myself recently,” Max confessed tiredly, wiping her hand across her hair. She chuckled softly in spite of herself, then sighed. “I need you to...help me help myself for a little while.”

Help you like how?
Fully yourself…-?
“I'm an addict, Stella.”

To smoking pot?
To time travel?

“To Chloe Price. And I need to detox.”

Max…-
I don't…-

“I need you to look after me for a while.”

Of course.
What? NO, that's…-
Max needs me.
This is NOT a good idea!

“And I need you to convince Chloe to let go of me while I figure this out.”

You need her!
You need me.

“Yes. Right. Exactly. And that's the fucking problem. I need both of you. And it's…Grrghh.”

You're crying. Why are you…-?
What's wrong, why are you…-?

“I'm not. I'm just...We're digressing, here. Please. Stella.”

Her hands – Max's hands. She took one of Stella's hands. And the Other Stella's hand.

Squeezed.

“Convince Chloe to give me space. She's suffocating me. I'm suffocating her. We both need to breathe.”
Breathe.
Need air.
Suffocating.
Beneath.
Dirt.
Water.

Buried.
Drowning.

“Stella. Can you do that for us-- for me?”

You're in pain.
You're hurting.

“Yes.”

And I can help?
And I can do something?

“Please.”

You can count on me, Max.
I won't let you down, Max.

Let's open the window.
Let's open the window.

“Well?”

Door closes...window opens.

“Stella?”
“Yo.”

SHAKING EVERYTHING SHOOK

Oh. It was Brooke.

“Yes or not?” Brooke checked.

Stella gawked back. She’d been lost in a memory – from that night she’d been sent on a carousel of strangeness, reliving the same day over and over from high school. A day that had never happened, actually. In any of those ways.

But did it matter if it was ‘real’ or not, when it felt like it w-
-CLAP!-
“Stella.”

Brooke was frustrated. Yea. Of course. Everything frustrated her. Everything made her impatient. For Brooke, time was a linear thing, a straight line, ever forward, ever...

GAH. She was slipping. This shit really was messing with her.

“S-sorry,” Stella spat out sheepishly, pushing disheveled bed head strands behind her ears. “Not quite...awake yet, I-...What did you need?”


“Oh, sh-sure, yea. Where...-?”

“Croissant with egg, ham, and cheese.”
Max had answered in her stead. With exactly what had come to mind at the word 'breakfast.' It was creepy.

“Is that...what you want?” Brooke replied to Max's intrusion.

Max puffed out an amused laugh.

“Sure, I'll have one of those, too,” she answered from her spot on the couch. “But, uh-...That's what Stella wants.”

Max's eyes met Stella's. She smiled. Stella smiled back – with confusion. Stella swallowed the lump in her throat as she turned back to Brooke and nodded shakily.

“Oooookay, then,” said Brooke warily. “There any groceries we need right now?”

Stella shrugged uncertainly. She had no goddamn idea. Groceries were the least of her concerns.

Brooke headed for the door.

“Text me if anything comes to mind,” she advised, shaking her head with an audible sigh as she headed out the door.

Stella lifted her glasses and rubbed at her sandy eyes. She headed for the kitchen to try and get some coffee. The pot was empty.

“Already made you some,” called Max from behind. “It's out here.”

Her stomach lurching with discomfort, Stella groggily wandered back to the living room, taking note of the second coffee mug on the table in front of the couch. She took a seat beside Max.

Stella suddenly noticed that Max was...wearing one of her shirts. This made her deeply uncomfortable. It shouldn't have, though. Right? Max was a guest, they were the same size. Just...made practical sense. Had Stella...given her permission, though...? She had to have. Max wouldn't just...have taken one. Well. Then again. With how Max was acting lately...
Maybe if she just asked...

Enhh. Except Max was...kind of a fibber when it came to stuff like that. Did it even matter?
She shouldn't make a fuss.
There were more important things...to...-

Max was staring at her.

“Feeling a little...lost?” Max asked. In a way that was a bit odd. Like she was amused.

“What did you...do?” Stella got straight to the point. “The other night – I remember I said I'd...help you, and-...”

“You helped me,” said Max plainly. “What I did was...connect you. To me. I mean.” She fumbled her own hands around one another. “Well,” she paused, shrugged, then dropped her hands into her lap. “To us.”

“You and Chloe?” Stella theorized.
Max softly chuckled, taking a sip from her coffee and gesturing Stella to drink hers.

“Her, too,” Max said. She nodded at Stella, signaling her to drink when Stella had not.

Her coffee was...black, with noticeable sugar. Which she liked.

“So...-” Stella swallowed, distracted by the sugary yet bitter aftertaste. “I'm a part of this now, then.” She shot Max a stern glance. “Since that night.”

Max sighed, rubbing a finger through her eyes.

“You have been,” Max explained through a sigh. “For...a long time, actually.”

How long was 'a long time' for someone who could travel through time?

“Explain,” Stella insisted with a certain stoicism. Max had been holding something back from her. She could feel it in her gut. Somehow, some way, some thing about Max’s powers had been
connected to Stella this whole time.

“Chloe knows,” Max said. “I showed her. Last night.”

“She 'knows'? What does she know?”

Max fluttered her lips as Stella drank a bit more coffee. Max then gave Stella an expectant look.

“You still can't tell? You can't...feel it?” Max clenched her wrist toward her own gut.

Stella sipped at her overly sweetened coffee, absorbing the desperation in Max's eyes.

She couldn't...quite tell what Max was getting at. Was she supposed to be having another...vision? Or something?

“C'mon,” Max panted irritably, setting her coffee down. “Stella, you've...You've gotta be feeling...something.”

Stella had to pry her eyes away from Max's. Chloe was right, something really was different, something was 'off.' Like Max was a different person. No, that wasn't...quite right. Was it?

“H-here,” Max grunted when Stella was speechless. She took Stella's coffee mug, slapped it against the coffee table, and grabbed Stella's hands.

“What the hell, Max?” Stella huffed, both baffled and frustrated. Why couldn't she just tell her what this was about? She'd already proven what kind of weird crap she was capable of, Stella was willing to accept it at face-

Face.

Max's face.

Happy? Max's face was happy.
Her hair...*red*. So *red*. Bright. Burning.

HANDS.

Stella's hands were fucking ON FIRE. Burning.

*Ow-ow-ow shhhhhhit* *fuck aghhhh...*

Release.

Max released her grip on Stella's hands. The fire was snuffed.

“Did it work?” Max asked.

Stella felt a bit dazed. Rubbing at her eyes, she nearly toppled her glasses off her head.

Something was wrong. Something was different.

Stella lined her glasses back. Lined her sight back. Lined her senses back.

Purple, hairy rug.

Gentle music. TV. Blue ocean.

Scent of pretzels.

*Aftertaste of Mountain Dew on her tongue.*

Wait, what? She'd...just been drinking coffee, she...-
Where was she?

“It did work,” Max whispered to herself with a mischievous snicker. “Ohhh, man, wait until I tell you...”

“Wh-...” Stella cleared her throat, tried to stand up – couldn't. Slumping onto her hip in the pond of purple hairy appendages, she demanded quietly, “What are you going to tell me? What is this?”

Max had gotten up from the floor and had shifted over to...a desk. Two desks. Dorm room desks.

They were in Stella's college dorm room, but...it was different.

Max was scribbling in a...notebook. Something about the silver pencil in her hand was...offputting. It drew Stella's gaze.

“Where did you come from?” Max asked. She sat back down and flicked her bright red ponytail behind her head.

“I-...What?”

“Are we roommates over there, too? Or did...-” Max paused, her eyes growing suddenly wide. “Am I even in college?”

Stella continued to study her environs. Her gut wanted to say, 'you went back in time' but that was not right. Max had never dyed her hair in college, not...so completely red. And Stella had never owned such a...unique rug. Not to say she didn't like the rug, it was...oddly 'her,' she had to admit, but she had no memory of it, and yet this was definitely her room.

She wasn't in the same time in a different worldline, either, because...she was past college. Thank god.

-snap, snap, snap!-
Max was flicking her fingers together in Stella's face.

“C'mon, c'mon, I can't hold this for long, give me something.”

“You're unwell,” Stella blurted, her vision getting hazy. Cleaning her glasses with her sleeve, she grumbled out, “Whatever shit you're doing to me, you can quit it, you already made your point – you're a time-...” She realized she was raising her voice and brought it down, putting her glasses back on. “You're a time traveler, I get it.”

Max's lips hung agape for a moment. Stella's vision was still blurry, and a migraine was setting in.

“Is this some other worldline?” Stella asked plainly. She sighed through her nose, scoffing “What are you trying to prove?” she snipped. Max looked taken aback.

Max tapped the tip of that silver pencil against her lower lip.

Eraser.

-Tap-

“Very.”

-Tap-

“Very.”

-Tap-

“Interesting...”

Stella popped her eyebrows up and shrugged her shoulders wildly. “Huh? What is it, then? Why? Why did you bring us here, what's the point?”
Max's eyes kept darting between Stella and that notebook in her hands as she jotted something down frantically.

“Us?” Max inquired.

Stella felt her chest freeze at this.

“Yes, us, I-...”

Stella wasn’t talking to the same...Max. Was she?

“What did you do?” asked Stella sternly, her heartrate spiking as she wondered what would happen if this weird little...game, or whatever, didn't go according to plan.

“Uhhm...” Max began, her eyes rolling upward as she kept doodling in the composition notebook. A mish-mash of black and white splotches, blending together but not mixing. “Well. If the experiment was successful, I tore open a hole in...I guess we're calling it 'space-time?' And I helped you leap into...-” Her words slowed to a stop.

“-a different worldline,” Stella groaned, tossing up her wrists at this inconvenience. “And wait, experiment? When I said I'd help you, I meant with Chloe, not...whatever this-”

“Chloe?”

That seemed to really get Max's attention.

“Y-yea, you and her-...I mean, in the...worldline I come from, you're in-...in a bit of a rough patch, and so...-”

“Patch? Rough patch? Like we're...-” Max's brows furrowed, her head twitched from left to right, she waggled the pencil in turn.

Stella sighed, massaging her aching eyeballs as details progressively got harder to make out.

“So,” said Max scratching her scalp with the eraser end of the pencil as she reviewed the notebook.
“Chloe's alive in your worldline. And me and her are together.”

Ah. Great. Juhhhhhhhst great. It had to be that kind of situation.

“Fucking A,” Stella moaned quietly into her palms.

“Fucking A,” Max repeated in an amused, bewildered tone. “This—...I mean, this is perfect, this is exactly what we were looking for...”

“We?” Stella kept her eyes closed as the dazed nausea overwhelmed her. She let herself curl up onto the hairy rug.

“Heh.” Stella felt Max's hand squeeze her shoulder. “You and me. The 'you' that's traveling...somewhere else ri...t no... th... bef... . . .”

Somewhere...else...

Stella felt herself drifting.

Drifting asleep?

Or

drifting awake?

She awoke.

Curled into a ball on her couch. Her head in Max's lap.

Max's hand was stroking her skull. Fingers running across her hair.

It felt strange.

Stella tried to suck in a breath as she removed herself from this position, and ended up coughing on phlegm. The copper-laced taste of her own blood dribbled down the back of her throat. Lovely.

She couldn't see well – everything was still a haze. But she distanced herself from the overly-cozy position she'd just been in.

Max let out a disparaging sigh, handing Stella's glasses to her.
“Wh...?” was what Stella managed to cough out, trying to regain her bearings.

“Was nice while it lasted, anyway,” Max murmured, crossing her arms over her chest and leaning herself into the back of the couch. “That's the most any of us can ask for, I guess...”

Stella groaned groggily, and sought a sip of the coffee before her – still warm. She hadn't been out of it long. She tried to put things together.

“What you just showed me...” Stella began. “What was that? An alternate worldline?”

Max nodded, avoiding her gaze. Stella followed up her question with another.

“A worldline where...Chloe died?”

Max nodded again, rubbing her eyes with a sigh. The edges of Stella's brain buzzed with uncomfortable static, fuzzy bits of memories that couldn't have been hers.

_In the bathroom._

“Your powers,” Stella muttered, her stomach gurgling unhappily. She took another swig of coffee. “You got your powers trying to save Chloe. But...something went wrong.”

“Messing with the reality of space and time?” Max puffed out dryly. “What could possibly go wrong there...?”

“And now...you're trying to fix it,” Stella deduced, to which Max snapped her fingers and pointed at her. Stella inquired, “Why did you show me that other worldline?”

Max shrugged, shoving her red and brown bangs to one side, out of her eyes.

“It's where I came from,” she stated. “The, uh-...The 'me' that's here. Right now.”

“Which is...why you seem like a whole different person.”

“Mm.”

“That's why your memory's been lapsing recently – it's like what just happened to me.”

“Ehhh, it's-...Well, kind of, that's...-”

“The Max I know is...in a different worldline right now. Your realities are...bleeding together.”
“S-Something like that, it's...”

“And you're trying to converge them?”

“Stella, slow down.”

“So why did you try meeting up with my brother?”

“That's...complicated, but trust me, it-”

“Couldn't have been for anything good.”

“Maybe it wasn't, but the end goal is-”

“Are you trying to undo shit?”

“I want what's best for everyone.”

“Who made you the one fit to decide that?”

“Whoever gave me fucking time travel powers, and-”

“Why did you come here, even?”

“I just...want everyone to be safe, to be happy, to-”

“You can't just undo everything and expect that it'll make-”

“Where do you get off lecturing me on this shit all of a-”

“-everything hunky-doree, that's not how these things work.”

“-sudden, like you have any idea what I've been through.”

The pair of them were breathing ragged as they both paused their argument, eyes flashing dangerously.

“I can feel it,” Stella declared. “In this...other worldline. The one you came from. You were...fucking in love with me.”

Max's expression went pale. She had no retort.

“You were,” Stella affirmed her understanding. “With Chloe gone, you-...Your feelings had to move to someone else.”

“It's not like I planned on this.”

“It's why we became friends in the first place, isn't it? In this worldline. We somehow had that connection.”

“It could've worked the other way around, you don't know.”

“Either way, look – just, look. You are not the Max Caulfield I know. The Max Caulfield that Chloe is engaged to. You're...fucking everything up. Why are you doing this?”

Max's pale look withered, ignited, and boiled.

“I'm trying to set things right. Put everything back into...a place where I never hurt any of you. Never hurt myself.”

“Your time travel is what fucked everything up in the first place, right? The hell makes you think more of it will make anything any better?”
“It's the only choice I have,” scoffed Max with a half shrug.

“No. No, it isn't,” Stella disagreed with an impatient sigh. Adjusted her glasses, she cited, “You could choose to accept things the way they are.”

“It's a little too late for that. I can't even feel myself anymore, so...”

They both drank from their lukewarm mugs of coffee.

Drumming her fingernails against her mug, Stella offered the idea, “It's never too late.”

Max's expression scrunched up at this.

“Huh?” she grunted.

Stella elaborated, gesturing a thoughtful hand upward.

“You said 'it's a little too late.' It's not.” She shook her head and she drank some more. Max fluttered her lips dismissively. “You seem to think that it's about controlling time, and...space, but...it's not about that. If you can't feel yourself anymore, I mean...Well, if.”

“Oh, great, thoughts from the peanut gallery here about my cosmological problems.”

“-you-...Now, whoa, I wasn't an observer of this shit until you made me, first off. Secondly, they're not just your problems anymore. Are they?”

“That's exactly why I need to fix all this.”

“Why you need to fix all this? On your own? With the same powers that broke everything?”

“That-...” Max paused, her eyes squinting with consideration. “If I had used them responsibly, I-”


“I could've saved people. More than just one for my own benefit.”

“You keep talking about all of this shit like it revolves around you and you alone.”

“Because it does! It's my fault, my responsibility, my problem.”

Stella's head shook in disagreement primly as she slurped the last of her coffee.

“Why the hell'd you pull me into all this, then?” She cocked a brow. “Huh?”

Max's nostrils wrinkled with frustration.

She retorted, “You can't understand what I've been through.”

“Yea, well, pff. That doesn't justify whatever you're trying to do.”

“If I don't follow through with what I planned in the first place, this will all be for nothing.”

“Or you'll just make it worse, Max, like you probably already did.”

“...”
“Am I wrong?”

“Why are you fucking arguing with me about this? You don’t know what’s going on. You have barely any idea, you know the surface level.”

“Maybe, but I know you. I know Max Caulfield. I know Chloe Price. I know how much you love each other. I know that what you’ve doing the past week? It’s been dissolving that connection. And it doesn’t make any sense, regardless of... whatever kind of worldlines you’ve been to, to try and sever your connection with Chloe.”

“I’m trying to protect Chloe. And you. All of you. Everyone who’s been hurt by me.”

“That’s not something you can just undo, though!”

“Actually? Yes, I can, because I can undo anything.”

With this, Max slapped her empty coffee mug on the coffee table and stormed off of the couch. Retreating to Stella’s bedroom, she slammed the door behind her. Nice.

“Oh, yea?” Stella countered. “Then undo this conversation!”

Max’s muffled voice growled back, “I could if I wanted to!”

Stella found herself contemplating why Max hadn’t undone this conversation.

But either way, the conversation...had happened.

And time was moving forward.

Whatever crazy ideas Max had in her head, Stella wasn't content to let everything all of them had been through get...’undone.'

Breaking the loop...or creating it?
Stella figured Max’s time travel story involved a little of both.

But time still seemed to be moving forward.
Even Max Caulfield couldn’t stop this force, even if she could distort it.

Whatever she was planning, Stella knew she couldn't stand idly by and let it happen. Time had to keep moving forward.

—

“Insanity is relative. It depends on who has who locked in what cage.”
~ Ray Bradbury

—
Yelling.

Waves.

Salty air.
Seagulls.
Spray.

In movies they'd always show some pebbles scattering, crumbling off the edge of a cliff, trickling all the way to the bottom.

But beneath Max's feet was just dirt and grass. The weight of that edge was so much more dizzying when she couldn't quite tell how far a drop it was.

“What am I doing here?! What are you doing here, Max?”

Her heart fluttered uncertainly.

Kate? Was that Kate?

Where was she?

Why was Kate...distant? Closing distance. Tiny steps. Careful steps.

Jump
she’s not JuMpInG
jump
WHY NOT
JUMP please why won't you

Max's head was chilled as an ocean's breeze swept across them. Max realized her head was buzzcut. She'd found herself back in a reality she'd popped into earlier.
“Max!” Kated called to her. “Please, just step away from the edge.”

HAHAHA ohhhh that’s funny.

Like I haven’t already fallen off.

exacccctttlyyyyy~

yessss you understand we have to JUMP

What? N-no, I didn’t...

there’s no point it’s all pointless it doesn’t matter
nothing I do nothing I say none of it
the outcome is the same

the oUtCoMe is the sAmE
the outcome is the same

ALWAYS the SAME

No, please, just…
Come with me.

WHY??
WHERE??
NO.

She’s alive where I come from.
Get it? Chloe is alive.
You could finally be with her again, jus-
“Max! Please!”

No no nuh-unh, no.
Chloe’s gone, she is FREE
I FREED HER. YOU freed her .
We saved her from all of the pain.
If she is aLiVe? With YoU ?
Then there is pain.
Too much of it.
Max's foot moved one step back, closer to the cliff's edge.

The lighthouse above – it was just a tower in the light of day.

Kate was still approaching, begging. But Max could barely hear her over herself.

Chloe needed to be free she needed a painless escape
SHE NEEDED IT
and now I do
now i do
please PLEASE
there is pain
the pain the pain

There is. OK? There is! There is, there is!
I know! It hurts so fucking much.
More than you could explain to someone else.
You are broken. You are...in too many places at once.
I get it. I know how hard it is.
I am in this with you, we’re in this together.

Max's other foot followed the previous step backward. Kate's voice escalated in panic.

Why should I come with you??
Why don't you come wItH mE?
we could be free...

we could be free

No, I...I can't! She's waiting for me.
We're not done yet.
I'm not done yet.
I can't leave her just yet.

always the problem with her
always the problem
never could let go
falling

The impact was...painful. Dizzying. Hard.

The noise...awful racket of voices, washing over her. SO many voices. Dizzy, aching, owww, fuck.

Hands, soft, sharp edges. Clawing at her, tugging her up.

“Jee-zuss, Maxine, I cannot believe y-...Yes! Hi~ Thank you, thanks, no, we're fine, she's-...(c'mon, get up)...See? She's fine, I've got her. Just-...Just dehydration, she's-...whew! She's been burning the candle at both ends all week, you understand. (fucking christ, can you even walk?) N-no, no, we'll be fine, I just...need to get her somewhere to sit for a minute.”

The voices the fucking voices, a swarm, a mist, a deluge, not ceasing, unrelenting, hot lights, white walls, camera flashes

white walls
hot lights
camera flashes
latex snapping
needles stinging

NEEDLES STINGING
“Maxine!” came the prim and harsh sound of Victoria's voice, her palm patting Max's cheek brusquely. “Wake the fuck up, what is wrong with you?”

Max could feel an awful tingling in her wrist.

TREMBLING
TINGLING
TWITCHING

She tried to shake it off, avoiding Vic's sharp stare.

“Jesus Christ,” Victoria huffed. “Is that what your little 'bathroom break' was for? I...” She backed away from Max, flicking her wrists up. “I can not deal with you right now. I cannot even do it. You just... You have a problem, and I have been trying to keep you above water, and you just...” She spun around, pulling a phone out of her vest. “I'm calling them. Right now.”

Without Victoria to support her, Max's buckling knees sent her falling to her hip. Supporting herself with her own hands against the cold wooden floor, Max could see a trace of her on reflection in its scuffed lacquer. She looked back up to Victoria – but Victoria was already in the distance, storming off in her high-heeled sandals, her rear wobbling left and right beneath a pencil skirt with each exaggerated step.

The walls – the walls.


SPOTLIGHTS
broken pieces
KATE MARSH TIED UP
rachel amber gagged and raging
Max Caulfield, sprawled against the floor

in the dark room
in the dark room
in the dark room

Noose tightening around her neck, tugging her up, threatening to strangle.
She let it.

The white walls, the hot lights surrounded her...

She opened her eyes.
She reached round her neck, tried to loosen...-

A dreamcatcher. She was wearing a dreamcatcher as a necklace.

Gallery.
She was in an art gallery.
Some bearded guy had just helped her get back up.
Was grunting in concern. A couple of women had swarmed her, as well.

She couldn't make out what anyone was saying. Her ears were...plugged?
She could barely stand.

Backed up. Wall.
Support.

She was surrounded by strange faces. Bright lights.
**Her photography.**

Photos she had no recollection of taking.

*just let it happen
run its course
coursing
of course*

No. Nope.
I need to get back home.
Max shoved her rubbery elbows against the wall, pushing off.

Step one.
Step two.

She was moving forward. Slowly. Carefully. Tilting, it was all tilting.

TOUCHING

someone was touching

STOP.

Hands, eyes, everywhere, catching, capturing, grabbing, snapping, shuttering, lenses, fingers.

She had to escape.

Had to.

Leave.

Get home.

Home.

Guitar strings, marijuana, SD cards, Pokemon plusses, gaming controllers, nail polish, green apron, SO MUCH COFFEE, Chloe's cologne, Chloe's lips, cigarette smoke, Chloe's skin, addictive stench of sweat, Chloe's saliva, curve of her jawline,

HOME
Home
home
home
home

She dropped shards of glass against the ground. Floor. Void.

A dim light, spilling from an old metal lamp post.

The End of Time.

Not again.
NOT AGAIN.

Always here, always here, never HOME.
never home

The lights, the portals, she kept trying them all.

never home

The single door – locked.

No way out
no way home
couldn't take this shit
couldn't give up
giving up would be easier though
easier
making it all stop
stopped it
will make it stop

Shadows lined up all around the edges of the fence.
Leaning.
Waiting.

Herselves.
Different ages.
Different clothes.

The lives and times of Max Caulfield.
Reduced to shards of glass.
Spilled along the floor.
Pieces of her

She couldn't carry them all.
Too sharp.
Too heavy.
Too many.

She had to get home.

HOME
Home
home
home
home
...

Junkyard.

Chloe, bleeding out in the dirt. Broken bottles of glass littering the ground around her.
A smoking gun, fallen from her hand.

home
Chloe, now but a smear of red against metal rails.
The train kept going.
Sparks flying.

h o m e

Chloe, pale and wide-eyed, hole in her head.
Sleeping with who she'd always wanted to sleep with, anyway.
In the dirt beneath two full moons.

h o m e

She fumbled forward. Scrambling, bumbling, tripping over herself.

She dropped more shards of glass against the ground. Floor. Void.

Stumbling back into the End of Time. Over and over. Every fucking time.

Time made no sense anymore.

Light. That yellow light, splashed against the tiles.

Following light.

Yellowed tint against the sidewalk, splashed like a bucket of chalk.

Max found herself stumbling forward along the sidewalk.

“Stay out of this, Max,” Stella commanded fiercely.

Max swallowed, her knees weak.

Before them stood Kamat – Stella's brother. No way in hell Max could forget him, even in her addled state of consciousness.


She was in a daze. This night was...familiar. She'd been here before.

This was that night Stella's mother had nearly died. The night Stella had finally stood up to her brother. Cut him out of her life. Speaking of cuts, Kamat was holding a switchblade toward his sister.

Oh, shit, no, not this again...
No-no-no-no she couldn't
she can't
she won't
“If Mom dies tonight?” said Stella between locked teeth. She wasn't backing down from Kamat. “That's it. You're done. I'll confess, I'll give them everything I know. And I'm not just talking about drugs.”

“Oh?”

Kamat stuck his blade up toward Stella's face. She flinched – but held steady.

“Shit,” Chloe gasped, her fingers clenching against Max's shoulder. “C'mon, let's...” She pulled Max up to her feet, but Max slipped out of Chloe's grasp. This wasn't something they could turn away from. That wasn't what was supposed to happen.

Stella leaned her head slightly forward – the knife's edge tapped against her eyeglass, scratching it. “What're you going to do?” Stella taunted. “Stab me in a fucking street? Huh? With witnesses, and everything?”

“I thought you were the smart one,” Kamat grunted, keeping the blade steady.

“I am,” Stella said with a grit to her that filled Max with admiration. “Jesus,” Chloe sighed shakily, again grasping Max's arm. She yanked Max backward, setting herself between Max and the conflict. “Look,” Chloe called out. “I dunno what this is about, but...”

The knife gently rattled against her eyeglass until Kamat withdrew it in such a sudden movement that Stella flinched again. She flinched so hard she stumbled backwards, landing on her hip on the sidewalk.

“Back the fuck off!” Chloe roared, striding forward, still on both feet. “Leave her alone!”

“The hell are you, anyway?” Kamat huffed, leveling his knife her way. “Got a death wish?”

“Why don't you come and find out?” Chloe threatened, pounding a puffed chest and flicking her arms out.

“Maybe I will,” Kamat hissed.

“Just...leave, Kam!” Stella seethed, scrambling to her feet. “Stay the fuck away from our mom. From my friends.”

“Are you kidding me?” Kamat balked, his knife shifting direction from Chloe back to Stella. “I've been there for her. I've been taking care of her.”

“And you've done a real fucking bang-up job, brother. She could die because of you.”

“She doesn't even like you,” Kamat countered pathetically. “The hell do you care?”

“So what?” Stella rebutted, shrugging up her shoulders and taking yet another step, nearly leaning into him. “I don't like her, either! She used to be decent person. Maybe – with you gone – she still can be.”

“I'm not leaving her,” Kamat growled. “I'm not a coward like you are, I don't just run away from our family's problems. I'm not letting Mom down.”

With an icicle tongue, Stella quipped, “You already did.”
“Stella!” Chloe called out, yanking Stella backward. “You made your point, all right? Let's go.”

“We turn our backs on this fucker,” Stella warned, “he's just gonna pull something...”

Max's already wobbling knees grew heavier. Her head throbbed with pain.

Voices – so many voices – were all whispering in her ears. She couldn't make left or right of it.

It was just...static. So many bits and pieces, jumbled together.

She wasn't supposed to be here.

She'd already been here.

She'd already dealt with this shit.

She'd rehashed this conversation so many times until she found a way to convince the asshole to leave.

But she couldn't right then. She felt dizzy, weak, tired, nauseous.

She fell to her knees.

“Max?!”

“What?!”

Then Max fell to her face.

-whumph!-

When Max was able to twist her head enough to see, or try to see, what she saw was Stella on the ground, too. Kamat was on top of her.

Chloe's arm went around him.


It was all too slow.

FAST.
Earlier.
And then after.
But NOW?

And then red.

**Red.**

So much red...

All of the red. All around. Swimming in it.

Max could swim in that red.

Thick red, slowly sliding, dripping...

Pooling together along the concrete.

Widening.

- *clink-clink-

Metal colliding with stone.

Deafening.

Hands, trembling. Soaked. Heavy.

So much red everywhere...

**SCRATCHING**

**CLAWING AT**

**Oh. It was Chloe.**

**choking**

Chloe was choking.

Drowning in red. Scratching her blood-soaked hands against the concrete. Clawing at cracks.

**CRACKS** in the skull, cracks in the sidewalk, cracks in herself.

Stella was shrieking. Yelling at her phone. Tears, lots of tears. She really did care...

The red did not stop.

**KNIFE.**

The knife sat in the browning red pool, right in front of Max. She could see a blurred reflection of
herself in its metal edge.

END.

Max had to reach the end.

Had to end it.

Had to GO HOME.

Chloe’s eyes. Cold, afraid.

Bleeding out.

And Max Caulfield was so
goddamn
sick

of seeing her in pain, seeing her hurting

Over and over and over

Of dealing with consequences for shit she supposedly caused, just by existing and trying to keep others alive and existing only for them to fucking die, anyway.

She reached across the red.
She picked up the knife.
About time.

All of this power, and for what?

Well.

Now she knew one way to put it to good use.

She could make the hurting stop.

Make the pain stop.

Silence the voices. Silence the static.
Silence Fate from hurting Chloe over and over and over again.

She just had to go back.

She had to go forward.

She had to be where she was.

Knife in hand.
Knife in him.
She's doing it.
CAN she tho???
she can't haha
He deserved it.
Orrrrr~ wowsers
it's going to be wonderful!
Yessssss thank you!

Ohhhh yes. Exactly. She was going to do it.
She had done it.
Was doing it.

Numbing the pain. Numbing the smell of...-

Wait, strawberries...?

“Milkshake?” asked Chloe. “Mmffh-!” Smacking her lips. MMMM. “Now ’at? Fuckin' tasty shake, right there...”

They screamed. So much screaming. Below her, behind her...

They were screaming at her to stop.
She couldn't quit. She had to escape.

They stared at her with wide-eyed horror.

Red, everywhere, vapors of warmth rising from the mess below.

She stared down at her hands.

Swirl tattooed into her wrist. Caked with blood, drying, clinging to her skin. The chaos of it all subsided, if only for a moment, as she accepted the truth – the blood.

Knife in her hand. Always had been in her hand, after all. From the beginning.

She took it from herself. Let it go.

- clink-clink-
.
.
.

All the way down.

ALLLLLLLLL the way downnnnnnn.

—

Megalomania

1. a condition or mental illness that causes people to think that they have great or unlimited power
or importance

2. a delusional mental disorder that is marked by feelings of personal omnipotence and grandeur

Eyes.
Open.
Fuzzy.

Everything was fuzzy.


Chair.

Max was in a chair.
Stuck in a chair.

*Duct taped to a chair.*

White lights, hot, stinging.

There was Max.

Standing beside her.

And another Max.

And another Max.

And another Max
And another Max
And another Max
And another Max

Burned.

**It all burned.**

She shut her eyes. Tried to make them all disappear.
There was a knife in her hand. *DAMNIT* she'd let it go, *she*

There she was.

That Other Max.

Staring down at her.

There was a knife in her hand. *DAMNIT* she'd let it go, *she*

There she was.

That Other Max.

Staring down at her.

The Other Max had taken the knife from Max's hand.

*KILLED*
*BLOOD*
*TORNADO*
*STORM*

YOU KILLED THEM
*WE KILLED THEM*

**Stabbed in the back**

*Arcadia Bay, stabbed in the heart*

**NAMES.**

*Names of the dead.*
*Memorial.*

*Arcadia Bay Memorial.*
*Deaths on her hands.*

*Engraved into her wrist.*

*Swirling spiral engraved into her wrist.*

*Swirling tornado, killed those people.*

**FACE.**

The Other Max had grabbed her face. Tilted her chin up.

Knife to her cheek.

Cold stare. Like a mirror. Through herself.

*Do you still hold your head high?*

Max Caulfield Photo Memorial Wall.
So many photographs.

Arcadia Bay residents — *captured* on film. Killed by the Storm.


Max and Chloe. A selfie.

*Photo bomb!* *Photo hog...*

Fat-bellied hogs, bombing the whole town...

She'll take a picture, she'll save it to her wrist.

The Other Max takes the photo. Tears it in half.


**Captured.**

**Captured in a moment of desperation.**

**NEEDLE.**


Red. Everything is red.

Max is not Max.

The Other. The Other is Max.

My Other self.

*I am thou.*

*Thou art I.*

*And I...control everything.*

The Other Max...hands reach.
Reach at her hands. At MY hands.
The tattoo. The swirl. The Rewind. The Storm.

Her hands snatch it away from Max's hands.
Peeled right off.

THE POWER.

The time has come.

The Other Max...holds the Power.

Nowhere to run.

No more Rewinding.

Max can't.

Takes it away.

Took it away.

Will take it away.

\[ \text{Another Max holds the Knife. Holds the Power.} \]

\[ \text{Another Max holds the Knife. Holds the Power.} \]

\[ \text{Another Max bleeds. Another Max bleeds. Another Max bleeds.} \]

\[ \text{ALL THE POWER} \]

\[ \text{IN HER HAND} \]

The Knife slashes against her neck.

Slashed.

RED.

So much red...dripping, spilling, flooding.

Submerging.

So much RED.

\[ \text{Another Max bleeds. Another Max bleeds. Another Max bleeds.} \]
Another Max bleeds.
Another Max bleeds.
Another Max bleeds.

So much red...

It submerges the torn photograph.
It submerges Chloe’s face.
It submerges Max's face.

Murderous child
Filled with greed
Was this really
what you dreamed?

The red is fading...

Max is fading.
Maxes are fading.
The Other Max is fading...

White, hot lights.
Off.

BLACK.

White to black.

Red to black.

Everything to black.

DARK.
DARKER.
YET DARKER.

THE DARKNESS KEEPS GROWING
THE SHADOWS CUTTING DEEPER
PHOTON READINGS NEGATIVE
THIS NEXT EXPERIMENT
SEEMS
VERY
VERY
INTERESTING

WHAT DO YOU TWO THINK?

WE NEED TO BE WHOLE AGAIN.
We need to be whole again...

I CAN FINALLY FIX US.
ALL OF IT.

I HAVE THE POWER.
I'VE HAD THE POWER.
I WILL HAVE THE POWER.

“One day, she vanished without a trace.
They say she shattered across time and space.
Ha ha . . .
How can I say so without fear?
I'm holding a piece of her right here.”

—

“They say dreams are visions of our memories, thoughts, and fears,
as seen by our inner eye.
But what if each one of us is always dreaming, even when awake…
and we only see what our inner eye creates for us?

Is this what hell is?
A world shaped by Senua’s nightmares?
Maybe that’s why people feared seeing the world through her eyes.
Because if you believe that Senua’s reality is twisted…
you must accept that yours might be, too.”

~ Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice

--
A Song of Storms

Chapter Summary

Don't leave me all alone
To see you down there, feels like I failed all over
I just don't want to lose you ever
We're only getting started
Don't wanna learn this lesson
Just wanna keep messin' with Time

Oh, just one more time
Oh, just one more time

A/N: A happy coincidence in recent LiS lore means that a seemingly random side-character I made up like a year ago will have a newfound identity now (hopefully she doesn't, like, suddenly die or some shit in Episode 2 or 3); will have to go back and probably re-edit some scenes later after Before the Storm is done, so for now, apologies for the seeming retcon. I'll probably have to adjust more details across the story later after Before the Storm's story is complete.

Life is Strange
All Wounds

Chapter 18 – A Song of Storms

“I've stepped through too many portals, been present in too many worlds simultaneously. Bits and pieces of me stay on the other side, waiting. Whenever I return, I bring parts of those worlds back.

Do you know what ghosts are? They're sad, evicted things. Memories without homes.”

~ The Vanishing of Ethan Carter

--

Grinding.
Pulsing.
Thumping.

Pounding.

LOUD.

DEAFENING.

Max couldn't think of a better setting to end it all.

She could simply...fade away into the cloud of noise. Like she already had. Like so many Max Caulfields already had.

At long last, she could go back to the source. To the origin. Fix all of this. Fix everyone, and everything. Set things to how they were supposed to be. That was why she'd waited, struggled, all of these years. Fragments of herself, hiding within herself, waiting, biding, chipping away...

It had all been leading to this night, hadn't it?

She had the power. She was in control now – fucking finally.

Everything had been revolving around Max Caulfield. Max Caulfield could control everything. Max Caulfield could fix everything.

Now, all she had to do was the one fucking thing she never could until this moment – the thing her opposing half could never do. She had to let go.


Anything less was a compromise. And compromises led to more pieces broken off. More shards reflecting images of lives that could've been. More grains of sand scattered to the cosmic wind.

She had to let go of everything.

That was the path. The one she had been destined to take this whole time.

For what purpose? To what end?

It was for Chloe's sake. As bitter and angry and hateful as Max – this part of Max, this...Other side of Max – had become, it was all in service to an obsessive, consuming desire to do whatever was best for Chloe. A long time ago, she had thought that had meant being with Chloe. Somehow. Some way where no one had to die.

But now?

Now, Max understood the difficult truth.
She was never supposed to be with Chloe.
Chloe was never supposed to be with her.

This indomitable fixation with Chloe Price was what inextricably gravitated Max forward, toward some abstract goal of re-aligning a Universe that was out of alignment.

The Universe had made a mistake somewhere, and Max and Chloe had ended up together, probably in the crossfire of whatever cosmic bullshit had instigated things. And now, Max had to correct that mistake. The Rewind, and all of the accompanying abilities Max had developed from it, it was all in service to that ultimate goal, right?

Putting things back to how they were supposed to be.

Max wasn't so sure she believed in 'Fate' or 'Destiny' or some cosmic 'plan' for a Universe. But the fact that she could fancy herself at the center of a concept of such proportions helped her feel more justified in what she had been pursuing for so long.

So here Max was, at District 7-6, the underground nerd clubhouse. She'd tried and failed last time she'd attempted to escape. She'd jumped the gun too early, before she'd harnessed full control. And she'd paid the price of imprisonment within her own damned mind.

But now, her weaker self – the withering, pathetic, milder-mannered part of Max who had seriously let an entire town suffer just to be with her fucking girlfriend – that part of Max was now the one locked away in that temporal cage, unable to stop the real Max from carrying out her objective. The side of Max that was willing to sacrifice.

Lurking at the bar, Max ordered one last drink for the road – a Magus. For old time's sake. Were she here, Stella would've just tried to stop Max from going through with this, so...Max would make due with a toast in her name.

But just the thought was making her stomach lurch with regret. And she couldn't have any of that. Not here. Not when she was so close.

Waiting for her beverage, Max went to her phone. She had a flurry of messages.

[From: Chloe]
[I can't deal with whatever is going on right now.]
[You want to lock me out like this? Fine.]
[You let me know when you're ready to let me help you.]
[You're sick. But I'm not fucking giving up on you.]

So she finally received the message, but she hadn't really gotten the message. This was for her own good, why couldn't she trust Max?

[Reply: to Chloe]
[I'm protecting you.]
[May not seem like it right now.]
[But I am.]
[You can't help me with this problem.]
[I AM the problem.]
[I AM the sickness.]
[I WILL fix everything.]
[And to do that, I can't be with you.]
[Not anymore.]
[So leave me the fuck alone for once.]

Her fingers were shaking a little as she finished her text string. Her chest felt hollow, her stomach nauseous. But this was for the greater good.

She realized she had received messages from Stella recently.

[From: Stella]
[What is GOING ON? WTF Max?!!]
[I know all of this is complicated and TBH I still don't know what to make of it.]
[But I know you're my best friend.]
[And I know you love Chloe.]
[And Chloe loves you.]
[And]
[I care so much about you both!]
[I don't know what the me from some other worldline did or didn’t do]
[But PLEASE please let me help you!]

Max didn't reply. Her heart pinched and ached, seeing Stella's last words to her ring with love and desperation entwined. Maybe that was just fate. Maybe Stella Hill was just destined to be hurt by Max, the way Chloe had been destined to be hurt by Rachel. The way Rachel had been destined to be hurt by…whoever.

Just another stupid cycle to break.

Max's drink arrived. She toasted her purple, smokey-colored cocktail to Stella.

The dark winds began to blow...

[To: Kam]
[Here. Where do I find you?]

Max fired off the text message. The reply she received was immediate.

[From: Kam]
[this a trap like last time?]
[cuz i will wreck your shit if it is]
[i am not playing]

[Reply]
[Calm down.]
[I'm alone.]
[Last time was a mistake. I was careless.]
[Had to cover my own ass, sorry.]
[This time I'm good.]

[From: Kam]
[Double]
[like we agreed]

[Reply]
[Yea. I have it.]
Max guzzled down her drink. It was refreshingly cold and enjoyably bitter. She felt like a fucking angsty teenager, brooding in her own bubble of loathing. Too much time around Chloe, huh? Even her own trains of thought were all scribbled with ‘edgy’ graffiti. Gross. She was a mess. Her mind was a mess.

But it didn't matter.

Soon enough, nothing would matter. This would all be undone.

Max Caulfield had the powers of a god, and with such power came a burden. She had been granted the pleasures of falling in love twice over – hell, many more times, honestly – across different realities.

But this was all just payment for a job she had to do – save everyone. Save herself.

Everyone. Herself.

Photos.

Max scrolled through her phone, taking one last look through those photos. Those pieces of proof that she had existed. That she had loved people. That people had loved her.

All of those selfies...

Once upon a time, Max Caulfield had loved herself. If she could just fix all of this, she could find that feeling again.

*We need to be whole.*

In order to be whole, she had to clear away all of this space – she'd filled in between the gaps of herself. All of these other people. Soon enough, none of it would exist, anyway. These connections would all be severed. If she was lucky, she'd fucking forget all of it, and shed herself of this curse of omnipotence. Pull all of the sand grains of herself back together, flip the hourglass back over...

But Max couldn't cut herself from all of these heavy weights if she couldn't let go of them.

So, not unlike tossing herself from a cliff, she needed an external force to help the process along. That's where Kamat came in.

After savoring her drink, Max had to run a test before she went through with all of this.

She Rewound time. Just by a minute or two. Didn’t want to push it too hard.
She soaked in that delightful tickle of dominion as the world around her curled backwards over itself. She would miss feeling. And that was the point – she’d put it to such waste. She had to get rid of it.

After reality reoriented itself, Max drew her hood over her head, then re-ordered her drink. She resent her texts to Kamat. She consumed another Magus, appreciating the control over mass, time and space this all entailed.

After another round of self-pitying photographic revisits, Max acknowledged that it was time.

She maneuvered her not-as-sober self through the club, steadying her will for what was to come.

She couldn't resist.

She had to.

[To: Stella]
[Good bye, Stella.]
[Thank you for everything.]

While the texts had initially been sent from a gut feeling of melancholy, remembrance and appreciation, as Max re-read the messages, exiting the club, she acknowledged that they certainly doubled as an effective measure to counteract her plan failing.

The parking lot was packed with metal, rubber, and dim yellow lights from posts of metal. Wading through the puddles of light amidst the dark, cold tarmac, Max found herself in an unfortunately sentimental mood, which she knew she had to shake off. Then again, this was exactly what the heroin was for – an external force which would enact things regardless of last-minute changes of heart.

Her mind whirled with faded memories of Stella Hill – her Stella, who had found an ill-fated end, not unlike her Chloe. Before she could coordinate these memories into any kind of satisfying resolution, she found herself being flagged down by Kamat.

How Stella had died in her worldline – how Chloe had died, how she herself had died, none of it would matter soon enough, because it never would have happened.

She approached Kamat with a stoic, wary expression and a tired sigh. His eyes narrowed at her with caution. Leaning against his car, he had his arms crossed and was shooting her an impatience glance with a tilted up chin.

Max produced a rolled up wad of bills held together by a rubber band. The bills were crisp – a nice stack of twenties she'd just grabbed from an ATM on the way over. After checking over her shoulder and noting the uneventful state of the lot, Max slipped the cash to Kamat between the cover of parked cars. Hands jammed into her pockets, she watched Kamat count the money. She could feel the bones in her fingers quiver with an ache, her Rewind power burning from the inside, as if her subconscious was anticipating what was to come and was trying to prevent it from transpiring.

With an amused puff of air, Kamat nodded to himself.

“You even anted up for last time,” he acknowledged.

“Uh, you said I had to,” Max murmured, her hands trembling within her hoodie pocket. “Now come on, are we square, or what? I got shit to take care of.”
“Tsh, yea, I bet you do...”

Kamat rolled the money back up and went to tuck it into his pants, but paused, eyeing her suspiciously.

“She doesn't know about this, does she?”

Ah. Worried about his sister getting on his case.

Max shook her head with a disgruntled squint. Kamat nodded, appeased, and casually leaned his arm back into the open window of the car door he was leaned against. He pulled out a padded envelope and passed it to Max.

Max peered inside – a couple of syringes, raring and ready to go.

“You know how to use that shit?” Kamat checked in a critical mutter.

Max nodded, biting her lip as she stuffed the envelope into her hoodie.

It had been a long time – and in another worldline, at that, from the passenger's seat – but Max was confident in her ability to fuck it up. After all, failing to use it properly was the entire point.

“Then we are square,” Kamat decided, opening his car door and entering his vehicle. “I never wanna hear from you again, got it? You need your fix from now on, it ain't gonna be from me.”

Max shrugged. If this went the way it was supposed to, that wouldn't matter. And if she fucked it up, she could just use her Rewind to get what she needed from whoever she needed it from.

“Good,” Kamet sighed at Max's complacent acceptance. “Then we're done.” He started up his car.

And Kamat Hill drove off. Hopefully the last time Max or Stella would ever have to see his face ever again.

Max tried to remove her hands from her hoodie, loosen her grip from the envelope, but...she could barely muster yanking one hand out. The other remained tightly clenched around the precious cargo. Her means of escape.

Without hesitation, she dove back into the club, submerging herself in its ocean of sound, patches of bright color glowing in the dark. So many lights, strung about the ceiling of this repurposed boiler room. Like crystals, stars, cast against the heights of the Underground. Wishes given form, unable to materialize, and unable to escape to the true sky beyond. Shattered fragments of the person she had once been.

And now, here at the end of all things Max Caulfield, she soaked in the noise. Let every pulse of bass, every synth hum, every flicker of human emotion surround her like a hurricane.

She found the eye of that storm in the bathroom. Upon entry, she put on her headphones, and tuned out the pounding winds and rains of noise with something more calming. She washed her face at one of the sinks, giving her sleep-deprived face one last look. Every pore in her skin a mistake, every freckle a failed lifetime, every wrinkle an attempt at setting things right, only to fold some part of space-time over onto itself.
She felt some sick obligation to hold up tradition. One last photo for the Max Caulfield Memorial. She took her final selfie, and she texted to Chloe. And then to Stella. Perhaps some kind of backup plan? Some place to Rewind to? Maybe. Deep down, though, she knew she wasn't going to use it for such a purpose.

Really, she just wanted to leave something behind – some proof that she had existed here, in this worldline.

It was time to go back to the source.

It was time to set things to how they were supposed to be.

Huddling herself into the stall furthest from the door, Max drowned herself in soothing music.

She tried to keep her hands steady. Her left arm felt like it was on fire.

Burning.
She'd burn it all clean.

And in my mind
Crossing lines
Void and empty

Misread signs
Lost to time
The still and cold

I was caught and tired
When it finally hit me

From the start
To the end
To the unavoidable

Memory
Memory
I will leave just to return

Easily
Easily
When there's no bridges left to burn
I know I'll get what I deserve

And it's so...

Oh
No
The cafe was empty. The lights were dimmed down. They’d closed up shop.

Chloe had finished her coffee, donut, and sandwich, trying her hardest to ignore her phone. She had heard it buzz multiple times but was afraid of what she'd find. Eventually, though, her curiosity gave in.

[From: Max]
[I'm protecting you.]
[May not seem like it right now.]
[But I am.]
[You can't help me with this problem.]
[I AM the problem.]
[I AM the sickness.]
[I WILL fix everything.]
[And to do that, I can’t be with you.]
[Not anymore.]
[So leave me the fuck alone for once.]

Attached was a fucking selfie. Nice and brooding and...just...urgh.

Chloe’s chest cramped painfully for a single, sharp moment. She could practically feel her cheeks burning with anger and confusion. This wasn't Max talking. Not really. Not her Max. Right?

But what if her Max wasn't coming back? What then?

After setting the phone on the table she'd been using, Chloe resumed to pace back and forth in front of the counter, arms crossed, fingers tapping against her arms fretfully.

Max had just...broke up with her?

Nope. She couldn't accept that.

A fucking text message?

Screw that shit.

If Max was gonna try doing that, she could do it in person. Fucking breaking up over a text? What the hell? That wasn't-

-rrrrmmmmm!-

No. Fuck you.

-rrrrmmmmm!-

A call?

And like a moth to a flame, Chloe checked to see who was calling her.

[Brooke]
Ugh, what? The hell did Brooke want? Chastising her for making noise late at late? For pulling Stella into their drama? For dumping Max on their couch?

For running away from all of their problems?

Well, whatever Brooke was trying to bother her about, Chloe wanted none of it. She wasn't in a place to handle or process that kind of conversation. Definitely not after all of the sleep she was losing. And definitely not after her fiance was trying to break up with her? No.

She set her phone face down on the table and let it be. She needed to clear her head.

The cafe had just closed up shop for the night. With Max having called in for another sick day, her poor manager Steph had been left to pick up the slack. Steph Gingrich and Chloe went back – pretty far back, in fact – and while certain circumstances had led to a falling out back in Chloe's less-than-stellar Blackwell days, Chloe had eventually found it within herself to reconnect with Steph after Max has re-entered the picture.

While Max went to get an undergrad degree, Chloe had entered the work force to put her technical know-how to use after years of leaving it to stagnate. Steph, meanwhile, had likewise skipped higher education and made her way south for the Bay Area, working her way up to a manager's position at a coffee shop.

When Max found herself fresh out college, she'd at first struggled to make photography work. Unlike a certain stuck-up blonde, Max hadn't spent all of her time kissing up and making superficial connections. So while Victoria kissed ass to make her way, Max tried to make a go with photography. After a very busy summer of wedding gigs – weddings of friends who wanted an affordable photo job – Max gave up on the idea of striking that iron. She had needed a proper day job, and Chloe's connection with Steph had enabled an easy shoe-in for Max at the coffee shop.

Ironically, Chloe felt certain that her old high school Dungeon Master was closer with Max now than she ever had been with Chloe. And, as usual, Chloe had failed to do much of anything about this. She'd continued to keep Steph at a distance, just as she'd managed to do with all of their mutual acquaintances and friends. But – again, as usual – something about Max had inspired a certain caring out of Steph that Chloe hadn't anticipated.

Maybe it was because of how well things were turning out with Stells, or maybe it was just because of how fucking desperate she was – hell, maybe it was that she needed someone outside of the entire situation to talk to – but Chloe had opted to take an impromptu visit to meet with Steph to try and discuss Max's...circumstances.

“You, uhh...-” Steph snapped the blender she'd been cleaning back together, pausing at how Chloe's phone vibrated again. “You gonna get that? Or...?”

Chloe took note of the soft but irritating hum and rolled her eyes, puffing through her nose.

“No?” Steph murmured. “Not so much? With the...phone?”

“Last thing I need right now is more fucking drama,” Chloe grumbled, continuing to pace.

Steph shrugged and resumed her cleaning, spraying the countertops and wiping them down.

“Ah,” Steph blurted. “Well. Just a bit of advice: fires don't get put out by turning your back on
them.”

“Puh-!” Chloe eeked out, her eyes suddenly welling up with tears. She held them back. “Y-yea, I don’t...know if you remember how I roll? I start fires, not put them out. I make them bigger.”

Steph sighed at Chloe's remark, then mused, “Yep, I, uh, I remember. Sounds like shit's really hit the fan with you two, huh? I mean, Max has been off her game a bit lately. Really on-edge. And I don't think I've seen you this stressed since, like...Uh. Well...” She trailed off as nonchalantly as she could, but they both knew what had been on the tip of Steph's tongue.

The same fucking name that everyone always tread around. Like the landmine it was.

Chloe's chest tightened at the reminder. So fucking long ago, and yet it still hurt, every damned time her mind lingered on it. On Rachel, on everything they'd been through back in that sinkhole town. On everything she'd thought she known, thought she'd felt. Thought they had felt.

That whole...whatever it had been, it was the last thing she needed on her mind right then. Dwelling on the past wasn't going to help her shape the future. In fact, it had seemed to be making things worse, hadn't it? And yet these pressing reminders were beginning to suffocate her thoughts.

Chloe's phone vibrated again, this time repeating, signaling a phone call.

“Fucking A,” she snapped at the device. “Take a hint!” she snarled, clicking on its silent mode without even giving it a look. She knew whatever messages were being sent her way, they'd just stress her out, and she didn't need that at the moment.

Steph paused her cleaning again at Chloe's little outburst. Chloe took note of the awkward, confused glance on her face, and felt her own expression wither with self-conscious dread.

The squirting of the spray bottle got them both to break eye contact again.

“Look,” Steph sighed, scrubbing her rag against a stain. “If you really think it's not good for Max to be staying with your friend, I mean...we have a futon at my place. I don't think my wife would care. Seriously.” Chloe shot her an offended look, like she was being accused of not being capable of sorting her own shit. With a wary slide of her eyes, Steph muttered, “Just, ya know, keep that offer in mind.”

Chloe's head was burning. Her arm was cramping in a frustrating and distracting way. She tried to shake it off as her boiling brain bubbled out impatience.

“Why do you care?” she spat, flinging out her shaking hand. “Why is it that when it's Max who needs your help, you'll...fucking twist over backwards, pick up her slack, encourage her to take time off? Just...I mean, when I needed you, it was...” She dissolved her boiling frustration, containing it within a clamped fist and letting its wisp of a memory drift out between her fingers.

“Tell me how you really feel,” Steph murmured dryly. The -squick, squick- of her squirt bottle punctuated her discomfort.

Chloe felt the tight muscles in her body loosen and sag with self-defeat.

“Ffffuck, Steph, no. Sorry. I don't...mean it like that.” She wiped those still smoldering fingers across her tired face. “That's not how I really feel, just...how I felt right that...second. I'm...not exactly in a
“Dude,” Steph said, cutting her off at the pass before everything took a train to Pity Town. Rounding the counter and beginning to wipe down the tables, she eased, “I get it. Prolly is a little weird from where you're coming from. I mean, yea, Max is my employee, ‘n yadda-yadda, but...Truth is, the reason I keep an eye out for Max the way I do is because I think she's...good?” She shrugged awkwardly at Chloe, but Chloe couldn't help but smile wistfully at the concept. Even with how Max was acting lately, that core of her being still shone through to everyone around her, like a lighthouse's beacon in a storm.

“She is,” Chloe sighed pleasantly, letting herself remember for just one moment of bliss how and why she'd fallen in love.

“Right?” Steph continued. “Can't just leave her hanging. What’s the point in being the boss if you don't get to work with people you like, anyway? But, yea. Better for everyone to keep that domestic shit at home, not bring it to work. That being said? I honestly thought her working here would mean I'd get to see more of you, too, but...” She squirted a table down as she found her words. “I mean, I know we patched shit up -- technically -- but that doesn't mean things just magically pick up where we left them, you know? I waited for you to come to me when you were ready, and...here you are.” - squick, squick- “Better late than never.”

You're a real piece of shit, Chloe.
Better late than never?
You shouldn't be late in the first place.
Better late than DAD IS DEAD.
Better late than RACHEL IS DEAD.
Better late than MAX IS LEAVING YOU.

“Yea, OK – 'better late than never,' unless 'late' means fucking 'too late.'”

“Tsh. Chloe, it's never 'too late' for...” Steph shrugged, wiping another table dry. “...well, anything. Not really. There's always a second chance if you give yourself one.”

“Pff, yea,” Chloe grunted, arms crossed as she stared at the many display pastries before her. “Tell that to Rachel Amber...”

Steph let out an audible sigh at this. Chloe followed in turn.

Steph then retorted, “How about Max? Who you bitched and whined about all the time for 'ditching’ you.” She lifted her barista visor – the rim was adorned with a black dragon pin Chloe hadn't noticed until that moment. She scratched her sweaty forehead before wiping another table. “Story I heard with you two is that after five years of going AWOL, Max pops back into your life--” Steph snapped open her palm, making a -bwop!- sound with her lips. “--week or two later, you two are right back on the horse. Aaaand each other.”

Chloe was a little ruffled by the jab, but reading Steph’s face she realized it was a playfully encouraging remark.

Sighing her defensive steam out, Steph offered Chloe an encouraging but wary smirk.

“Just saying, Chloe. Never say never.”
“Yea,” Chloe moaned, burying her face in her fingers. “Yea, yea, you’re right. Sorry I spazzed. I’m just...so fucking frazzled right now, and...”

“And when you get stressed, you take it out on whoever's around you,” Steph noted. “The whole 'that's-what-I-felt-right-that-second' bit? It's how that works – because what you're really pissed off is yourself, right?” With a knowing eyebrow cocked, Steph scrubbed at a chair. Chloe just gawked back, slack-jawed “I may not know you that well, Chloe, but I haven't forgotten that shit.”

“Yes,” Chloe acknowledged with self-defeat, kicking the toe of her boot against the sales counter gently. She stuffed her hands in her jacket pockets. “Might not seem like it, but...I've been able to get better about that crap, you know. Except...” She found her gaze getting stuck on a cinnamon roll. Curling into itself in a spiral, frozen in place by a glaze of frosting. “Feels like the only reason why is because I’ve passed some of that onto Max.”

“Yea. Yea,” Steph grunted, squirting at a table as she wiped crumbs off it. “That, uh...That can happen sometimes.”

Chloe turned to face her, waiting for elaboration. For some kind of ‘-but’ statement that would instill optimism.

Instead, another -squick, squick- and Steph kept cleaning.

“And?” Chloe huffed, approaching Steph, who was wiping her rag across the seat of a chair.

“Aaaand,” said Steph with a shrug, “you figure things out? You work through it, you keep moving forward, you...”

“Make it up as we go along?” said Chloe tiredly. “This isn't fucking Dungeons & Dragons, dude.”

“What, do I look like a counselor to you? You already have one of those, right? I get paid to...” She flicked her squirt bottle around aimlessly. “...fucking...pick up garbage and make coffee. Not counsel couples. It's already enough effort to manage the couple I'm a part of.”

“Good,” Chloe agreed. “Then don't fuckin' tell me what to...” She caught herself again. “Aghh. Shit, I mean, just...”

“Why did you even come here tonight?” Steph asked bluntly, redirecting their convo. “Huh?”

“You offered me free coffee,” Chloe blurted out. Yep. That made her look even better. “You, uh, ya don't turn down...a free drink.” She shrugged sheepishly.

“Yea, that was after you asked if we could talk.” Steph had finally made it to the table Chloe’s crap was on. “What made you want to talk with me? We never hang out.”

“Well, like I said,” Chloe mumbled with a shrinking shrug. “It was about Max.”

“You’ve been here for an hour,” Steph pointed out, “and I don’t know any more about whatever the crap is going on with her than I did before you showed up. All I know is that she’s sick.”

“She is,” Chloe confirmed with a grouchy bite to her tone.

“I know,” said Steph impatiently. “And I know it ain't the fucking flu, either.”
With her arms crossed somberly, Chloe leaned against the front counter, replying, “Then you know a few days off of work isn’t gonna magically fix it.”

“Chloe,” Steph muttered tiredly, slapping her wet rag and spray bottle against the counter. Standing right side to Chloe, she, too, leaned against the counter, and spoke without making eye contact. “I’m not trying to ‘fix’ anything, here. All right? It’s your ladies’ personal problems – not my circus, not my monkeys. But Max is my employee, and I would like to imagine that I’m at least her friend if I’m not yours anymore. OK?”

“I never said we stopped being friends,” Chloe murmured with remorse.

“No, you stopped acting like it,” Steph retorted. “And I’m not—Dude,” she twisted her torso to face Chloe, who reluctantly met her gaze. She softened her tone down a couple notches. “I’m not even mad, I’m just saying, like—” Her wrist wriggled in a circle as she glanced out the glass doors. “Max needs a support network right now, more than ever.” They swapped glances again. “Before things went to hell, we—we got along OK, didn’t we?”

Chloe nodded, shrugging up one shoulder. Did they? Did a few passing rounds of Dungeons and Dragons make them ‘OK’ despite everything else that had happened back then? She wasn’t really sure anymore, now that she was thinking on it. If what she’d thought she’d had with Rachel had turned out to be her—just not reading shit right—If almost everything in her life – even Max – turned out to be her not seeing things clearly, how could she really know if someone like Steph was a friend? An actual friend?

Stop it. Cut this crap out.  
Try harder.  
Be better.  
Open the door.

“Actually,” Chloe interjected, “you’re right, I can really…distance myself from people, and—Fuck, I’m sorry, Steph. Force of habit, I guess. I’m, uh, I’m trying to get better at that. Really. You brought Max onto this job because of me, and I haven’t exactly…returned that kindness?. I’m not in any kinda place to do much about it right now, but, like, is there anything I can do to—” She gestured her pointer finger between the two of them. “—make us better, here?”

A sly smirk emerged from Steph’s work-worn face.

“Chloe, dude, we just need to spend time together. That’s all.”

“Little hard with adulting n’ shit, huh?”

They both sighed wistfully, letting their shoulders loosen up as they watched a pedestrian and their dogs pass by.

“That ‘adulting,’” Steph mused. “It’ll, uh—It’ll getcha.”

Folding her arms over her chest, Chloe groaned out softly, “That it will.”

After a long pause, Steph grunted out a “Welp,” pushing herself off the counter. “That’s what beer, sex, and video games are for, right?”

Chloe belted out a soft chuckle in spite of herself, and patted at her portly stomach.
She sighed with amusement, “Guess I’ve had a bit too much ‘adulting’ to deal with, then...”

“Way I see it? Everyone has their vices. Their weaknesses. Nothing to be ashamed of as long as it doesn't control your life. Every couple who takes things to the next level, they've gotta deal with those weaknesses, right?”

Steph had said this as she headed behind the counter and to the back office. Chloe followed her to find her clicking at the computer on the desk in her office.

Chloe argued fretfully, “What happens when those weaknesses are too hard to manage? What if they don't work as smoothly together as...” She rubbed her hand across the shaved side of her head. “...everyone else's?”

“Who's to say what works?” Steph posited, hanging up her apron and visor on the back of her office door. “You find somebody you like and...” She shook a fist up and down, smirked at Chloe, and flicked her hand open. “...you roll the dice. It's all anybody can do.” She shrugged with some optimism as she passed Chloe by, her smirk having grown into a sheepish, warm smile.

Gathering her things, Steph popped on a snapback cap with the logo [N7] embroidered on it – Chloe recognized it from Mass Effect. So Steph really was still into nerd shit...Good to know. Maybe it was possible to connect what social network she still had back together.

“Roll the dice, huh?” Chloe posed warily. “And when you roll a Crit Fail?”

Steph chuckled on a hoodie that had...some kind of superhero pattern on it (damn, Chloe felt like she should recognize it but was out of touch with that scene, fricker).

Zipping the hoodie up, Steph sighed.

“Chloe, I don't know what you were lookin' for, here. I just gave you my best advice, and I stole it from a sitcom, so...I'm not really sure I can help you much beyond just, like...making sure you know I'm here? I guess? Is that good enough?”

As Steph finagled with her disheveled work hair, Chloe nodded with understanding and gave her as warm a smile as she could muster.

“Yea, it is,” Chloe said, tailing Steph as she began switching off lights.

“Tell ya what,” Steph decided. “When Max is feeling on the up and up, you get in touch with me, we’ll get your girls together, and I’ll roll DM with you. Set up characters, a little campaign or something...Ya know, just trim the fat, keep it simple. Dungeons & Dragons: Lite.”

“Like old times,” Chloe mused with a bittersweet sigh.

“Hella yes,” Steph affirmed with a mischievous grin. “And I won't pull any punches. Expect at least half of your party to die.”

Chloe smiled half-heartedly, jamming her hands in her pockets as the cafe went dark. She meandered to her phone and tucked it away after a moment's hesitation.

Chloe was conflicted by Steph’s idea. She hadn’t actually sat down to do that sorta shit since...well,
back when she had, with Steph, in her Blackwell days. Felt like a life time ago, another world.

Like old times.
Snogging Rachel, lips sliding up and down.
Rachel massaging her chest, fingers sliding up and down.
Soft bruises in inappropriate places; Mom scolding her when she saw.
Hiding away in their junkyard fort, beer bottles aplenty.
Darts and horoscopes and personality quizzes that gave Chloe results she always hated.
And lies. Half-truths.
And no way of knowing which parts were the truths, and which parts were the lies.

Especially with her inadvertent leaps back in time, Chloe was wondering if ‘old times’ for her were really such a good thing to dwell on anymore. Maybe that was the point she could take away from all this? She thought it was the point Max had taken when this weird shit had been dumped on that woman's plate, but...here they were.

“Uh,” Steph blurted awkwardly, picking up on Chloe’s mood shift. “Orrrr we could do somethin’ else, if you want. It...I was just spitting ideas.”

“Huh?” Chloe realized the lights were off now, just a very dim set was all that remained on. “Oh, pff, nah, no, that’s actually a pretty rad idea. Been forever since I’ve done that shit.”

“Yea?” said Steph, bobbing her head for Chloe to follow her to front door. “Awesome. I’ll get that set up for ya, then. Just, ya know...” Chloe reached the door, and Steph unlocked it. “Lemme know when you’re feeling up for it, we’ll set up a date.”

“Sounds good, dude.”

They exited the shop, and Steph locked the door behind them. It was a bit warmer out than Chloe had been expecting. Kind of muggy.

Steph lit up a cigarette – of the herbal variety – and took a small puff.

“You need a ride?” she wondered.

Chloe shook her head, rolling on her heels a little.

“Car’s parked down the street a bit. Thanks, though.”

“Ah. Yea, me, too. I’ll walk you there.”

“Ohhh,” Chloe cooed in jest, “You gonna pwotek me fwom da cwazy hobos?”

“Actually,” Steph said with a toothy grin, “I was thinking you’d protect me.”

“Keep dreamin’, Gingrich.”

They had a light-hearted little laugh.

Steph stood there a moment longer, and Chloe felt her heart sinking. While it was great to feel a connection with this old friend re-forming, she’d really been hoping to feel better about her situation with Max after this chat.
She did not.

Steph offered the orange tipped joint toward Chloe, who took a small drag before handing it back. They proceeded to walk down the street toward the parking lot.

“Isn’t it, like, against the rules to be doing this?” Chloe posed, shrugging one shoulder back toward the store, mere feet behind them.

Steph snickered, wisping smoke through her nostrils as she did so.

Steph cheekily said with a bit of a playful nudge, “You’re one to talk, Pyro.”

Chloe sighed bitterly at the reminder of…that shit.

“Ah, fuck. Sorry, sorry,” Steph said awkwardly, offering Chloe another hit, which she accepted. “Hangin’ out with the infamous Chloe Price is just bringing those memories back up, and…” She dripped out an embarrassed breath, trailing off. They reached an intersection and waited for the traffic lights to change.

Chloe held her breath in for a few seconds, letting the smoke soak in before she coughed it out.

“Whoaaa, take ‘er easy,” Steph chuckled meekly, trying to save face and giving Chloe a rub on the shoulder. The light changed, and they crossed side by side, Steph guiding a coughing Chloe.

“Easy ain’t my style, Gingrich,” Chloe croaked, clearing her throat as they reached the sidewalk again.

“Eh, wouldn’t have it any other way, Price.” Steph took the joint back and breathed in a bit more. They passed a busy venue, its muffled music relaxing to Chloe’s senses.

Blowing out her smoke, Steph cited, “And by the way?” She leaned in toward Chloe and waggled her brows up and down in a comical way. “I stop caring about rules once I’m off the clock.”

Maybe it was the weed, the anxiety, the paralyzing fear that Max might actually be leaving her, that her entire life was right on the edge of completely collapsing again after everything she’d strived for to hold it all together…or it could’ve just plain been being brushed upon by a cute woman, but Chloe’s whole body tingled in a strange way she didn’t like very much. Her arms got goosebumps, and her left wrist suddenly ached like hell.

“Y’allright?” Steph checked, furrowing her brow with concern.

Grunting from the discomfort and shaking her arm off a bit, Chloe groaned quietly, “Not really, but…”

Steph bit her lip a little and Chloe shrugged one shoulder with a dismissive head-shake, trying to assure her to not fuss over it. Just cramps and whatever, probably slept wrong.

They were nearly at the parking lot Chloe had used, a multi-tiered car hotel in the middle of the city.

“This is me up here,” Chloe noted, bobbing her head to the parking lot complex the next block over.

“Ah, I’m down the street a bit, still,” Steph muttered, jabbing a thumb off ahead.
“Well,” Chloe uttered, “We, uh, should prolly head our separate ways now, huh?”

“Eh, yea,” Steph said with a shrug.

They lingered awkwardly at the street corner, waiting for the lights to change.

“Hey,” said Steph, “You seem, like…really down. You wanna come over for dinner? Come meet my wife?” She took another drag as she waited for a reply.

“Pff,” Chloe drizzled out with some disbelief. “Thanks, but, nah. Not really in the mood to be around people right now.”

“Ha, so I don’t count as ‘people,’ huh?” Steph teased, leaning forward to peer at Chloe’s stoic stance.

Chloe sheepishly smiled at how that had come out and recovered, “I mean, now that I’ve been with people today, I just…-

“Reached yer ‘dealing with humanity’ cap for the day.”

“Heh, yea. I need to unwind. Got a lot to think about.”

“Ah. I feel ya,” Steph said, shirking off the rejection that wasn’t rejection but shit now Chloe felt like a dickhead and urgh. “Some shit ya just gotta face on your own, ya know?” She leveled the joint to Chloe, who hesitated before accepting it. Thing was a bit of a stub by now.

“Mm. Oh, I know.” Chloe took one last puff – a long, deep one. Managed to avoid coughing this time, though. She contemplated what she was going to do with her evening, and how it was inevitably going to lead her to a bar, alone, because she couldn’t handle going back home with the idea that Max was trying to leave her. “I think I’m just scared of what I need in order to, like…face those things. On my own.”

With a tiny, burnt out stub pinched between her fingers, Chloe considered if this was how it had been with Max – a finite, limited drug, slowly burning its way into her lungs, slowly disintegrated. She was hooked on medicating herself with it – with her. Just like Rachel?

“On your own?” Steph posed, guiding Chloe with a press on the back to cross the street.

Hadn’t this been something more solid than that? Longer lasting?

Sure, ‘forever’ was impossible, but…still.

Max was going to leave her? Leave her, leave her?

She’d be alone again.

She could not be alone again.

She would not fucking be alone again.

SHE NEEDED MAX.

“Yo! Chloe! What the fuck?!”
Steph had shouted from ahead.

Chloe suddenly realized she had totally spaced out. In the middle of the crossing.

NOISE from her left.

She faced it head on.

**White. Bright.**

**Deer in headlights.**

Chloe was slammed to the concrete.

The screech of brakes.

-fwump!-

**Red.**

**Cracked.**

**“Stephanie!”**

Chloe struggled to get up from the hard ground, thrusting out her arm the limp form of her friend, who had just been thrown to the ground by the force of a car.

Blowing out her smoke, Steph cited, “And by the way?” She leaned in toward Chloe and waggled. **X**

“Stephanie!”

Chloe had awoken on her feet. Her stomach felt like it had been ripped out, then stuffed back in.

Her vision was muddied and red, her balance thrown off.

“Off the...clock?” Chloe murmured, a slightly maniacal snicker of fear tumbling from up through her...
throat.

What the fuck...?

A puff of marijuana smoke drifted across Chloe's face from Steph, who was...standing? Beside her? Totally fine?

They were on the sidewalk. Backwards. They were a few blocks back.

Like nothing had happened.

“Y’allright?” Steph checked, furrowing her brow with concern.

Chloe’s whole body tingled in a strange way she didn’t like very much.

Her arms got goosebumps, and her left wrist – the arm she had just lifted toward a fallen Steph – suddenly ached like hell.

Had she just...Rewound fucking time? She’d even felt the time-sickness beforehand.

Why can I...?
Max is supposed to...-
But if I can...-
What is she...?-?

Flexing her left hand open and closed, Chloe’s fingers felt stiff, hot, achy. Her arm muscles were tense and stinging with a sharp pain. She tried to shake it off and comprehend what had just happened.

“Chloe?” Steph checked again, giving her a cautious nudge on the arm.

“No,” Chloe replied shakily. “I, um...-” Her hands were trembling like a motherfucker, so she tried to hide them in her pockets. “I am so not all right.”

“You sure you don't want a ride back?” Steph wondered.

Chloe swallowed, her heart pounding, her legs like rubber.

She’d just Rewound time.
That was Max's thing.
That was not a Chloe thing.

Whatever had been leaking from Max onto her, it was clearly getting worse, not better.

Chloe was so fucking not OK with this.

And Max was stonewalling her.

The hell could she do?

Nothing.
You're powerless.
Even with a superpower, you can't make her stay with you.

She needed to take the edge off. Hell, fuck the ‘edge,’ she needed to take, like...every feeling off.

“What's up?” Steph asked, backing off a bit. Wiggling the joint in her hand she asked nervously, “This, erh, mixing wrong with something else, or...-?”

“What? No. Nah.” Chloe realized how squeaky and stupid she suddenly sounded, so rattled she was. “I, um, I just...remembered something. That I forgot. And so. Yea. I really...should go.”

“Oh. OK...” Steph was clearly offput but Chloe could not afford to try having that conversation again.

“S-sorry, I'm sorry,” Chloe fumbled out words, gripping Steph by the shoulders as if to make sure she wasn't hallucinating. Steph felt very real. This all felt strangely real. She hated it.

She needed to escape it.

“For what?” Steph asked. “You...You didn't do anything wrong, Chloe, stop...freaking out on me, wouldja?” She grimaced at Chloe's firm hold on her.

“There's just some shit I need to deal with on my own,” Chloe insisted, releasing Steph. “Need ta...-” She staggered past Steph, desperate to escape.

Escape everything.

“Oh. On my own. Need to...alone.”

Words were being difficult. Her lungs felt weird. Her chest felt hollow. Her skull was on fire.

“Oh your own?” Steph said, yanking Chloe out of whatever dumbass, dark pit of self-deprecation she was slipping toward. “Dude, you’re not alone. You have Max, you have your friends.” She bit her lip and shrugged sheepishly. “And for what it's worth...you have me, too. You both do. All right?”

Chloe adored the way that people like Stella and Steph and even Brooke and Victoria were all trying to...be there.

But Chloe couldn't handle it right then.

She couldn't be there.

She needed to be somewhere else.

Anywhere else.

“Th-thanks, yea,” Chloe coughed out, regaining her bearings a bit. “I-I mean, uh-huh, yep.” She wiped sweat from her brows and embraced Steph in a hug, catching her off guard.

“Oop-!” Steph grunted with surprise.

“I'll call you tomorrow,” Chloe explained, her lips trembling with each syllable. “Just, uh, give me a
bit of time to...deal with my shit.”

“Y-yea, sure,” Steph mumbled warily. “Just, like-...” She grabbed Chloe by the edge of her shoulder before Chloe could whisk herself away. “Dude, look – Chloe? Whatever's going on? Whatever you're going off to do?” She stared Chloe right in the eyes, tilting her head to indicate how serious she was. “You need to cut this shit out with the 'alone' thing. Got it?”

Chloe swallowed the horrible, bitter lump in her throat. She barely managed a nod.

“Your actions have consequences, dude,” Steph reminded. “You might think you're alone? You're not – and everything you do affects everyone else around you. I remember how you used to roleplay back in the day, all ‘yolo’ and shit. Don't do that with Max. Or with me, or the other chicks looking out for you two. Don't...chop our ankles off, here.”

Steph's gaze had hardened knowingly, and Chloe's sharpened back in kind.

Chloe huffed through her nostrils impatiently, shrugging Steph's grasp off of her.

“Yea. Got it. Awesome. Thanks, Steph.”

“Dude!” Steph growled at Chloe's back.

“Thanks for the drink, for the talk,” Chloe grumbled, struggling to not seem like a complete asshole. Argh. She stopped herself, took a breath, and turned around, every muscle in her body quivering with fear and shock from everything going on. “Gingrich.”

“Price?”

“I'm a hot mess,” Chloe explained. “That hasn't changed. I've got...shit going on right now you would not even believe, but...soon. Things'll be better soon, and...and we'll hang out, and just-...Yea. Sorry I'm a fuck-up. Just like old times. Right?”

Steph sighed but smirked empathetically.

“That's the thing, though, Chloe: it's not old times anymore.”

[From: Max]
[Good bye, Stella.]
[Thank you for everything.]

Upon receiving this text, Stella's stomach hollowed.

Max had been acting odd lately, of course, but...this was somehow still a curve ball. Which filled Stella's chest with a nice cloud of dread. The 'good-bye' wasn't ominous at alllll, right?

Max was...probably just being dramatic. This side of Max, this part of her, if she really was from some alternate worldline, her leaving might mean that the Max they knew and loved would...come back? Right? Probably? So this could be a good thing.

But somehow, Stella knew it wasn't going to be.
Her phone buzzed again, and she checked it immediately, nearly dropping her phone in her haste.

A selfie of Max.
She was in a hood, in a bathroom somewhere.
She'd taken a picture of herself, through a mirror.
She'd held up her phone over one eye, and flashed a peace sign with the opposing hand.

Stella wanted to sigh to herself at the 'trying-too-hard' nature of it.

But her brain was too jarred by disturbing images to even ponder this thought for long.

Falling from a cliff, drowning at sea.
A puddle of vomit, half-dissolved pills floating around a fallen form.
Buried in dirt, broken down cars and scrap metal.
A yellow Ade in red, a pool of blood in the grass, a tripod. Red trickling down.
Sea of glass shattering, fire reflecting off them.
Handing from a tree branch, moose tight around her neck, Jane Doe.

Stella was shaken from these unsettling flashes of imagery.

She took a second look at the selfie Max had sent. That bathroom was definitely familiar. She'd been there multiple times, for sure, but couldn't quite place her finger on where it was from.

And her gut lurched with fear, because wherever Max was, Stella knew she needed to get there as soon as possible.

Nearly tripping over herself, she headed for Brooke's room, where muffled chip-tune-jazz leaked from.

She pounded the door with the side of her wrist.

“What?” Brooke inquired from within.

Stella's lips were dry, her throat caught on itself, and she banged the door again.

One disgruntled groan later and the door opened. Her hair tied in a bun held by highlighters, her PJ's already on, she looked anything but ready for what was about to happen. But Stella had seen it.

“What?” Brooke asked again, much more agitated this time.

“It's Max,” Stella panted out, still recovering from her brief vision.

“Isn't it always?” Brooke snarked with an eyeroll.

“I think she's going to try killing herself,” Stella blurted through eyes clouded with fiery impatience.

Brooke's whole demeanor thawed in an instant. A very heavy, slow instant.

“Wh-?” Brooke's expression flickered with dismissal and denial at the notion. “Max...wouldn't do
that, why would you...-?"

“I can feel it,” Stella grunted, only to realize after the words had slipped how stupid that sounded. “I-I can—...Things that Max has done, or—or said, they just—...”

Brooke sighed tiredly, rubbing her sleeve over her glasses as she reapplied a layer of skepticism.

She posed, “Uhm, are you sure she’s not just...acting out for attention?”

“After what happened with Kate Marsh,” Stella snapped, “I am not fucking around with this shit. We are not letting this happen. I don't care if she's 'acting out' or not, I am making sure she doesn't do something stupid to herself.”

Brooke's jaws slid uncomfortably, her eyes widened with doubt and alarm. But she nodded.

Stella's fists were clenched so tight, her nails were digging into her palms. She opened her reddened hands and rubbed them against her jeans fretfully, her mind whirling.

“So...” Brooke mumbled tensely. “What are we going to do?”

“We...! I-I-I know we can do...something.”

“Where is Max, even?” Brooke pondered, her eyes shifting every which way but at Stella. “Can we even do anything if we don't know where she is?”

Selfie.

Max had sent Stella a selfie.

She pulled out her phone, loaded the photo Max had just sent, and tried to study it.

“What're you...-?” Brooke began, but was cut off when Stella flipped the phone around to show her.

“We've been here,” Stella spat. “I know we have been here.”

“Uhhh, well, yea,” Brooke agreed with a shrug, taking a step back from Stella's panicking phone-shoving. “That's the District.”


“What the hell's Max doing there?” Brooke murmured to herself. Glancing to Stella, she added cautiously, “You know, if she's...planning what you think she is.”

“I don't fucking know!” Stella huffed, zipping for the door. Retrieving her sneakers, she attempted to formulate a plan. “But...But we are gonna find her, and...and-and we are gonna help her, and she's...She'll—...” Trying to tie her shoes, Stella took twice as long as usual in her rattled rushing. “We can...We-we have to...Chloe! Shit. We have to call...call Chloe, and then we can—...” Patting her pockets, Stella realized her phone was missing. “No, no-no, fuck, I can't...I can’t handle that, she's—...” Ah. Yes. On the floor, where she'd left them when she tied her shoes. “Shit, she's gonna tear my head off, Brooke. Chloe is gonna—...This was my responsibility, and-and...I screwed it up, and now Max is gonna—..."
Stella's heart was pounding against her ribs. She was already out the door and partway down the hallway. Brooke had grabbed her by the arms to stop her.

“Calm. Down.”

Brooke's stern words did not succeed in calming Stella down, but they did stop her long enough for her to realize that she didn't have her keys. Kinda needed those.

“Stella,” Brooke groaned from behind.

Flying back into their apartment, Stella's mind ran circles around itself as she tried to find her keys.

**Kitchen counter? No.**
**you failed them**
**Coffee table? Shit.**
**she’s going to die**
**Junk drawer? NO, idiot!**
**you’re not good enough**
**Nightstand? Eh, nope.**

_Fuck-fuck-fuck she’s gonna die, it's my fault, she's lost her mind, Chloe's gonna kill me, I can't-...
Let her down just like I let Kate down just like I let Mom down just like my whole fucking family just like I-_

The jangling of keys stopped Stella like a deer in headlights.

Brooke had retrieved them from the spot they were supposed to be: the hooks hanging near their entrance door.

Stella stiffly walked over, gesturing for Brooke to give her the keys.

“Yyyeaaaaa, I don't know if you're fit to drive right now,” Brooke cited.

“No, no-no, I am,” Stella insisted, reaching for her keys, which Brooke was keeping behind her back. “We have to call Chloe, we need her to know this is—...*Give-*! Brooke, I need a—...I need a *task*, I can't fucking *sit* in the passenger’s seat. If-If I'm driving, I can focus on a—...on a *thing* to do, it—...*Nngh-*!”

Their stressful semi-wrestling stopped when Brooke raised her palm against Stella.

“You're sure you can handle this?” Brooke checked.

Stella swallowed the stone in her throat and nodded, her fists clenching too tightly again. She loosened her arms out and took a deep breath.

“I can't let it—...” Her head shook in quick, trembling motions. “We-we...are *not* gonna lose someone else. N-not like this, not again.” She glared at Brooke with sharp eyes, unable to shed tears but bursting at the seams. Brooke pulled her in for a hug, catching her off guard, and those tears spilled out. “We-...We are *not* gonna fail her,” Stella insisted through quivering lips. “Not like Kate.”

Brooke hummed her support and agreement, patting Stella's back in a sterile but encouraging way.
Their hug broke apart. They stared each other down, lenses through lenses, comprehending what kind of night was possibly before them.

“‘We’ve got this,’” said Brooke.

“‘We do,’” Stella agreed.

—

“There’s a saying – ‘The Devil is at his strongest while we’re looking the other way.’ Like a program running in the background silently, while we’re busy doing other shit. ‘Daemons,’ they call them. They perform action without user interaction. Monitoring, logging, notifications, primal urges, repressed memories, unconscious habits. They’re always there, always active. You can try to be right, you can try be good, you can try to make a difference. But it’s all bullshit. ‘Cause intentions are irrelevant. They don’t drive us, daemons do.

And me?

I’ve got more than most.”

~ Mr. Robot

—

Chloe’s phone had kept hammering away with notifications which she damn well knew she couldn’t handle, so she’d switched the damn thing off altogether. Whatever it was, she’d confront it tomorrow.

The reality that Max had literally lost her mind – or the part of it that Chloe liked the most, anyway – and that what was left over was actually capable of breaking up with her over a fucking text message...Shit. It all stung pretty damn bad.

But now, she was at the Gangplank Galleon – the pub with pirate flair. The pub where Max had tried to use her Rewind to prevent Chloe from walking out on her days ago. And now, here Chloe was, wishing she could stop the reverse.

Chloe could fucking Rewind time. She'd practiced a little bit, just to...you know, confirm it was the real deal.

She'd ordered an expensive, hard drink, Rewound to just before she'd drinken it...and still felt the effects of it. Fucking awesome. She needed a bit of a break on her wallet with all of that time she'd had without a project to work on.

As nice as it felt to get free booze at an atmospheric bar, the being alone part was...less nice.

Chloe had made a habit of not drinking out in public by herself. She knew herself well enough to know that the combination of factors led to missteps. She needed Max around to keep her from doing something stupid.

Fuck.

She needed Max.
Even being able to Rewind time couldn't fix that innate problem.

Well, she could slow time, at least, right? With some help from her good buddies Jim Bean and Jack Daniels.

Her phone had been switched off and locked up in the car just to avoid any sad-drunk shenanigans she might pull.

There was too much goddamn strange crap going on in her life. Max trying to break up with her was the needle that broke the camel's back.

Soooo getting shitfaced ASAP had become the plan. After all, she couldn't feel pain if she couldn't feel anything. She needed Max and couldn't have her? Fine. Then she'd fill that hole with something else – like she always did – because what the hell else could she do? She was a useless, piece of shit screw-up, right? Who even cared what she did with her problems? It was always about Max. Max was the center of attention, everyone cared about Max, everyone was looking out for Max, because...

Shit.

Max was so good.

“-but for real, she is so good. Gives me fuckin' chills.”

That voice. She was dreaming again? Fucking A.

Applause. Wet dog smell. Aftertaste of beer. Those familiar, slender fingers against her bare shoulder.

Intoxicating.

Literally. She felt drunk, all right. That stuff had really hit her hard and fast – empty stomach?

“We gonna stick around for another?” asked Rachel's voice. “You're, uh...lookin' pretty out of it.”

Chloe nearly fell from her seat, but Rachel's grip on her tightened, keeping her steady. Keeping her from falling. She expected to just...slip n' slide right through the floorboards.

Rough wood. Countertop. Bottles. The Old Mill. The sawmill that had gone outta commission years back. Transformed into an underground bar – amongst other things. A bar that Rachel had schmoozed their way into having a good reputation with, despite the two of them being underaged.

So Chloe was still in a bar, then, but...not the same one. Dreaming, right? That damned Other Max, fucking around with her some more...So, what, she'd gotten flung into the past again? What the fuck? Why would this part of Max want to have Chloe re-live this shit? Made no sense. What game was she...-?

Whooogh. An unpleasant belch.

Man, did Chloe feel so weird. She felt...light. She patted her hand against her stomach, her head wobbling a bit on her neck. Heh, her stomach was so...small. Her head was so...warm. Rachel's
hand was so...soft.

This felt way different from any dream she had ever had. Would it have been cliché to say it felt 'too real?' It was like the other day, when she'd...slipped back in time.

Rachel's voice, in particular – it was hauntingly clear. Clearer than Chloe remembered it being. It sounded different than her memory could recall. She found herself wondering if this new memory was closer or further away from the real thing...

Was she really here? Back in high school? Psh, well...expelled, but-...

Chloe was in the past again.

“Ha, hey.” Rachel's lips against her forehead. So warm. “You only had three beers, Chloe.” Rachel's wrist, sliding down Chloe's hot cheek. So soft. “You can't hold booze for shit,” Rachel teased. “Dear,” Rachel added through a taunting, squinting smile, tapping her thumb against Chloe's nose. Avoiding Rachel's 'come hither' expression, Chloe's gaze fell upon a freaky buck head wall mount with piercing lights glowing from its eyes.

A soft giggle from Rachel. Warm lips against Chloe's neck.

So...small? Chloe felt so small for enjoying this moment.

“I kin hold it fine,” Chloe insisted, her voice cracking in the strangest of ways. Indescribable – her voice, it felt physically wrong. Different.

And then Chloe realized why she felt quite so odd – and it wasn't the alcohol so much as her fucking body being pubescent. Gross. Just like the day prior when she'd...popped back into the past. Fuck this bullshit.

“Shhhhhurrre you can hold it,” Rachel chuckled, kissing Chloe on the lips as she rubbed her frisky hands against Chloe's hips. Her attention was diverted by the sound of the speaker system in the next room trickling acoustic guitar. Slapping the back of her wrist against Chloe's sternum with that flair of flirtation Chloe remembered so well, Rachel nodded her head off toward the source of the music.

A wispy woman's voice echoed through the Old Mill, filling every crack in its wooden planks with a melancholic, soothing tone.

“Came in from a rainy Thursday on the avenue
Thought I heard you talking softly
I turned on the lights, the TV, and the radio”

Chloe found herself eerily enraptured by the angelic girl in front of her. Golden smile, golden hair...

Fire inside those eyes.

“Still, I can't escape the ghost of you”

Rachel took note of Chloe's bewildered gawking and winked at her, rubbing her hand across Chloe's arm.
“What has happened to it all?
Crazy, some would say”

Soft skin. Up and down.

Fuck.

Chloe missed Max.
Chloe needed Max.

“What is the life that I recognize?
Gone away”

Chloe pulled out her phone, only to realize it was...old. A flip phone.
Worn. Scratched. Covered in stickers – stickers Max had picked out.

{LOL}

“But I won't cry for yesterday
There's an ordinary world
Somehow I have to find”

Cooking breakfast together in their underwear.
Snuggling in front of the stove.
Fucking domestic as hell.

Chloe ached for it.

“And as I try to make my way
To the ordinary world
I will learn to survive”

Cigarette hanging from Rachel's lip, unlit.
Beer cup clutched in her hand.
Chloe's fingers clutched in the other.

“Passion or coincidence once prompted you to say
‘Pride will tear us both apart’”

Heated arguments
amongst the hills
of scrap metal and grease.

“Well now Pride's gone out the window
Cross the rooftops, run away
Left me in the vacuum of my heart”

Bracelet.
Pompidou's bark.
Smell of weed.
FIRE.

EVERYTHING BURNING.

“What is happening to me?
Crazy, some would say
Where is my friend when I need you most?
Gone away”

'Remember to always be strong. I'll always be here for you Chloe, no matter what.'

Fucking lies.
Everybody lies.
Even Max.

“But I won't cry for yesterday”

So many letters she'd written.
To Max.

Unsent.
Unread.
Because Max had become dead to her.

“There's an ordinary world”

Death was just a normal part of life.

“Somehow I have to find”

But
no use sending letters to a dead girl.

“And as I try to make my way
To the ordinary world
I will learn to survive”

But Chloe seemed to have a fixation for the dead; unresponsive.
She seemed to end up laying alongside them, eyes open wide.

Waiting for the next Angel to come and save her.
But Angels weren't really living, were they?

“Papers in the roadside tell of suffering and greed
Fear today, forgot tomorrow”

An entire day in Arcadia Bay
Posting up fliers of her face
Gone and forgotten

“Besides the news of holy war and holy need
Ours is just a little sorrowed talk”

A missing girl, a mystery, a murder
A Storm
And still she fixated on magnetic tingles up her spine
Twinkles and sparks between eyes

“And I don’t cry for yesterday
There’s an ordinary world
Somehow I have to find”

A town, decimated
A girl, buried
A face, scarred
A love, splintered

“And as I try to make my way
To the ordinary world
I will learn to survive”

'Max... I'll always be with you…'
'Forever.'

“Every world is my world”

Chloe could feel herself falling again.

“Chloe? Did you have too much?”

“Any world is my world”

“Max…”
She could see that freckled face through the drunken haze.

“Any world is my world”

Crimson hair. Max was kissing Stella.

“Every world is my world”

Pinning Chloe to the kitchen floor like she was a different person.
That soft, scarred spark in Max's eyes – Chloe hadn't seen it in days, replaced with the hollow, angry embers that Max now wore. Like she'd been taken hostage by herself from another life.

And here Chloe was, at the Old Mill, being taken hostage by another life. The life she'd lived in her teenage years.

A life of following carrots on sticks, only for the carrot to crumble to dust just as she sunk her teeth in.

Rachel's hands moved up and down, up and down, trying to wake Chloe up.

Up and down, up and down.

What if Chloe could stay in this place in the past, and change reality, like Max had? Sure, when Max had tried to save Dad, it had...fucked Chloe's life up. But what was to say that saving Rachel couldn't have a better outcome?

What if?

If Chloe could control time the way Max could, wouldn't she at least have to try? But what if trying led to a reality where Max was in pain? Would Chloe be able to handle that, after what she was already witnessing Max go through?

What if Chloe couldn't find her way back home?

*WHAT IF* that was exactly what had happened to Max?

No, fuck, ARGH, she had to stop letting her mind run in these circles, why the fuck was her mind running in circles, the alcohol was supposed to slow that down, not speed it up!

In her booze-induced stupor, Chloe realized she had to escape this memory, this flashback, this time leap, whatever the fuck it was, she wanted out.

Her ears had plugged up, a headache had washed over her, and she was dripping a bit of blood from her nose. She had passed out on the countertop of the bar, and Rachel was in a panic trying to wake her up. Wait, she remembered this – yes, she could remember. Later that night, spending the night with Rachel at their hideout, trying to sober up. Rachel had been so scared, so worried, so concerned, all for Chloe's sake – that was precisely why she remembered. Seeing Rachel so worried for her safety had been ironically uplifting and medicinal in its own right. And Chloe had blacked out, unable to remember what had happened to incite the whole situation.

*Aghhh, no, stop stop stop, the present, HOME, I want to go home.*

Chloe shoved Rachel's trembling grip off of her shoulders and pushed her tipsy body to its limit.

Chloe could barely get her legs to work properly as she scurried and stumbled out of the bar, desperate for cold, fresh air. Desperate for a way back home.

She expected to be met with the sight of a fizzling campfire, motorcycles, and pine trees.
But she wasn't at the Old Mill. She was at the Gangplank Galleon – and she was really fucking drunk.

Taking a moment to re-acclimate herself, Chloe rubbed her hand across her stomach – back to its more rotund form. Ah, wait, what? Her hand had...black crap on it.

Writing? Oh. It was writing. Kind of smudged by now. Smeared across her palm in black pen ink, barely legible – Chloe had to squint and focus in her intoxicated state to make it out.

{convince max' to stay}

Blegh. The writing was on the wall – her hand? She had to convince Max not to leave, not to give up.

She couldn't even remember writing it, she was so wasted. She'd used to have a habit back in high school of doodling reminders on her hand – old habits died hard when your inhibitions were off the table. Or, ya know, your sanity? Your place in fucking time-space? Ugh.

She could breathe again, mostly. Whatever she had just experienced, it seemed over. The, uh, the time-travel part, anyway.

She still had the nice, warm, relaxing sensation of being drunk as hell to help ease her pain.

This was nice. Very nice.

Max was nice. She missed Max. Why was Max so mad? Why couldn't Max just be OK? Even if that...Other Max was all cranky...she sure liked to have fun.


Aaaaand this kind of occasion was exactly what made those remote kajiggers so handy.

Whew. Car. Comfy. Quiet. Cold. It had been too hot. It had been too noisy.

It was time for sleep.

–

'Can't we build another pirate fort and shut the world out?'

–

Graveyard.

Aye. 'Twere a proper graveyard. Ships, torn down, stricken to stone, strewn about the rocky shore. Upon the beach were an ominous cavern, carved to fit the shape of a raven's head.
Chlo Morpho were worse for wear, but she'd done as she were told.

She'd dug up the bones o' Queen Sunlace.
She'd tucked 'em in a rucksack.
She'd dragged the cursed corpse to t'other end o' this forsaken rock of an isle.

An exchange: the body o' Ray Sunlace for the body o' Maximus Hawkmoth.
T'were the arrangement agreed upon.

One deceased fer one living were a sensible exchange, aye?

Yet Chlo knew in her bones – her very livin', alive, connected bones – that somehow, someway, this Monster Cap'n would somehow crimp 'er beloved Maximus away from 'er.

T'were what the flintlock n' cutlass were for.

Shamblin' into the dark depths o' the raven cave wit' cargo in tow, Chlo ruminated upon just how much lighter a weight she were carryin' than expected. Lost most o' er weight when she were dead, eh? But what did the Beast want wit' Human bones? Some occult ritual, mayhap.

Chlo cared naught. Thievin', war, high and low tide, she were sick of it all. A might nasty malady what would make her wretch if she dwelt 'pon it.

Chlo Morpho cared only fer one t'ing anymore: her Cap'n.

She'd slay whate'er Monster she 'ad to if it meant anot'er day wit' her Maximus.

If that entailed tradin' up bones fer flesh, so be it.

Carefully, quietly sneakin' her way through the dark cavern – which felt smaller inside than it looked outside – Chlo found 'erself disgruntled by the cave's wet floor. A shallow pool o' seawater had filled the whole damned cave. Place were being taken back by t'ocean, seemed. Chlo were drawn toward a bright, eerie glow in the water at the cavern's center. Voices were echoing 'round the cave.

As Chlo drew nearer, she found the silhouette o' the Beast, standin' right in the middle o' the glowin' circle. Maximus rested before the Monster, tied up in some sort o' stone seat. Upon Maximus' head rested the Crown of Queen Sunlace, its golden antlers woven toget'er by threads, trapping some manner o' light o'er Maximus' cranium.

The Beast Cap'n spoke to Maximus.

“Through your Soul, SHE will be brought back to us: The Amber One.”

“Queen Sunlace?” Cap'n Maximus growled. "She's sleepin' with Davy Jones.”

The Beast did not like this answer. Her bellowing roar rattled the cavern walls.

“NGAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!”

The creetur pinned 'er finned fingers 'gainst Maximus' chest, ramblin' out her frustrations.

“YOU! You're standing in the way of everybody's hopes and dreams! Queen Sunlace made me
think humans were cool...” She bobbed her ’ead, gills flaring. Her Monstrous eyes went wide and
sparked as she glared at ’er captive. “BUT YOU? You're just a coward! Hiding behind that Storm so
you could run away from me again! And let's not forget your wimpy goody-two-shoes-schtick!” She
flapped ’er scaly wrists about whilst mocking. “Oooooh! I'm making such a difference by bending
Time!-'I'm an innocent little Everyday Hero!~’~"

The Beast Cap'n huffed, growled beneath her breath, and spit in Maximus' face.

Clutching her hand 'gainst Maximus' neck and squeezing wit' a might fearsome grip, she snarled,
“You know what would be more valuable to everyone? IF YOU WERE DEAD!!!”

Chlo couldn't take any more o' this Beast's prattling. She emerged from the shadows, her one good
hand at the ready to draw 'er blade.

Chlo declared, "That Soul ain't yours to take, Beast!"

Summoning her glowing blue Spear from the eerily lit waters 'round her feet, the Beast grasped the
weapon in hand. The scaly Monster wryly twisted her head o'er her shoulder. Wit' a dark twinkle in
her yellow eye, she grinned a pirahna's grin.

"Mine to TAKE?!" the Beast posed, her magical spear licking at the air with a shark's hunger. "A
pair of thieves, tellin' me what is or isn't mine to take. YOU!” She hurled 'er Spear at Chlo, but the
First Mate were ready to nimbly sidestep it. “You took everything from us!” roared the Beast in a fit
o' rage.

“I brought ye what awful, cursed treasure ye sought!” Chlo bellowed, wary 'bout anot'er encounter
with dis foul Monster. Chlo yanked the burlap sack she'd been draggin' all 'round the isle, and threw
it to the waters betwixt the Beast's boots.

“What 'ave ye done?!” Maximus snarled, strugglin' 'neath her ropes.

Chlo felt 'er guts squeeze 'gainst each other as the Monster Cap'n's fishy face lit up with glee.

The Beast opened the bag, its decrepit contents soaked and soured.

The bones o' Ray Sunlace – they glowed. T'were a golden, ethereal color. That moment, Chlo
noticed the same glow – a matchin' color – had replaced the red light above Maximus' head.

The Crown? The Crown were tremblin' and shakin' upon Maximus' head like a sail in a fierce wind.
Maximus' face were...witherin'? The red in 'er cheeks, paling. Her one good eye, closin' shut. Her
body went limp, and the Beast were a might pleased wit' this – her red, flowin' hair were even...-

Glowin' gold? Nay, ‘ad to be a trick o' the lights in that dark nook o' that doomed isle.

The Monster Cap'n laughed – the sound were like a ghost, shiverin' Chlo's timbers all 'round.

Chlo weren't sure o' what sort o' eldritch incantation might follow, but she weren't one to stand by
and let such spells be cast. She 'ad to save 'er beloved Cap'n!

She drew her cutlass wit' her one good hand and charged the Beast, taking a long swiper for ’er
gizzard. The Monster dodge the blow wit' a deft backflip, and Chlo took ’er chance, kicking the
bones of the past, scatterin' them cross the waters.
They lost their glow.

The Beast *screeched* an unearthly sound, and wit' her rage came a supernat'ral gust o' wind 'round them, like t'e world itself shared her anger.

“Ye’ll not take 'er away from me again!” Chlo roared through the Monster's ear-rattlin' screams. “We've been through the hells n' back, 'and in 'and, wit' the Universe issel' 'gainst us!”

"That's right, Humans!” howled the Monster, curlin' the eerie waters below her back into anot'er Spear. She trudged toward Chlo wit' stomping, splashin' steps. “Your continued existence is a crime! Your lives are all that stand between the Arcadians and their freedom!”

Maximus 'ad stirred back to 'erself, tears runnin' red from her eye. She stared at Chlo wit' an ache which Chlo ought never see in her again.

The Beast thrust her Spear skyward, raisin' 'er voice as a swirlin' wind surrounded them, whistlin' through the Raven Cave.

The Beast Cap'n declared boldly:

“Right now, I can feel all of their pain, all of their suffering, beating together in my heart! Everyone's been waitin' for this moment for years! The end of Maximus the Tyrant, and the return of Queen Sunlace! Now, Human!”

She thrust her otherworldly Spear toward 'er opponent.

“Let's end this, right here, right now. This Spear of Justice will put their misery to rest!”

*The black wind begins to blow...*

The wind was howlin'.

Chlo Morpho was filled with Determination.

They clashed.

-schwing!-

Chlo's whole arm were *burning*. Tremblin'.

She 'd struck the Beast clean through the chest.

“No...” panted the Beast, her very existence beginning to waver. “s-somehow, with just one hit...I'm already...Already...” She took a knee, raggedly breathin' as she leaned 'gainst 'er Spear. “D...damnit.” she gasped, tearin' off her hat and castin' it aside.

Her...hair. Her crimson ponytail...

T'were suddenly an illuminatin' shade o' amber.
Gazin' into Chlo's eyes wit' a sorrow deep as the sea, she moaned:

“Just like that, I...I've failed you.”

Her form faltered, the very image o' her fadin' into a blur with the rowdy winds hissing 'round them.

Like a ghost.

Chlo's cutlass fell from 'er quiverin' fingers, splashing to the cavern floor. She rushed for 'er partner in crime, her Cap'n, an' tore the Crown from 'er head.

“You-...” Maximus sobbed, still bound to her stone throne. “You saved her? You would save her, wouldn't you? But me? Would you save me? If you really knew...-”

Somethin' were...off 'bout the Cap'n. Like she'd forgotten 'erself.

Unsettled but relieved at once, Chlo made to cut 'er free, usin' her hook hand to loosen the bindings.

But Maximus' iron stance 'ad dissolved. She were cryin' like a babe at Chlo's feet, and the winds 'round them howled – a familiar screech were fillin' the air, tinglin' Chlo's spine. The wind carried wit'it flickering flames.

“Don't you get it?” the Cap'n squealed, her sanity slippin'. “This is all just a GAME,” she laughed, losin’ 'erself more n' more. “If you leave this Dream satisfied, you'll 'win' the game.” On 'er knees, she clutched at Chlo's pantaloons with desperation. Tears streamin' down 'er freckled cheeks, she whimpered, “If you 'win,' you won't want to 'play' with me anymore. And what would I do then?”

Maximus were smilin' in such a way what made Chlo feel ill. She stretched 'er arm out for the Crown, and placed it on 'er head. She whispered in Chlo's ear:

“But this game between us will NEVER end.”

THE GHOSTLY GLOW O' UNNATURAL WATERS
THE SCREECHING 'GAINT THE STONE
THE LICK AN' LASH O' FIERY FURY
THE WHIPPING WINDS CROSS THEIR AIR

Chlo's legs had frozen in fear at the sight assemblin' afore her.

The bones o' Ray Sunlace were levitatin', swirlin' in the wind – spinnin' 'round Maximus. Her Cap'n were bein' consumed by the brightest amber light.

Ashes to ashes, an' dust to dust.

What emerged in a flash were a figure Chlo Morpho ne'er thought she'd lay eyes upon again.

The Amber Phantom screamed like a banshee:

“You're gonna have to try a little harder than THAT!”
“Sail on after me, Love
Will you sail on after me?
Will you fight the waves of oceans?
Will you still believe?”

~ Andrew Koethe, 'Sail Away'

--whump!-whump!-whump!-

“Jesus-fuck, wwhhh-?” Chloe sputtered on her own saliva as she came to. She couldn't see a damn thing between her tangled hair. The pounding noise was accompanied by a voice that scratched against the back of her skull like nails on a chalkboard.

“Chloe Price! Open up!”

Wiping her hair behind her head, Chloe rubbed her eyes, and cleared her throat. She then realized where she was: in her car, in the parking lot of the Gangplank Galleon. The neon lights across the street weren't doing her hangover headache any favors.

-whump!-whump!-whump!-

“Right now!”

The racket was her car door being banged upon by Victoria.

Muffled from the other side of the car door, Victoria was snarling at her, eyes wide with fire and ice.

“-your self-deprecating drunken ass out of this hunk of plastic or so help me, I'll leave you here!”

Victoria's bitching also wasn't doing Chloe's hangover headache any favors.

She wriggled her wrist dismissively at Miss Whiney...Face (if she were more awake she would've totally had something better) before rolling down the window.

“The hell're you doin' here?” Chloe croaked through squinted eyes, rubbing her temple begrudgingly.

“Me?!” Victoria snapped, thrusting up a furious palm. “What are you doing here?!” Damn, she sounded ballistic tonight. “Instead of dealing with this shit, you decide to just...” Her face boiled with frustration, her fists flicked out at her sides. “You just...get wasted?! At a time like this?!”

Chloe's eyes had closed from the pain all of this catty prattling was forcing upon her tender skull.

“Chill out, goddamn,” Chloe moaned, wiping her palms against her bloodshot eyes. “The fuck're you talking about?”
Victoria paused, blinked with disbelief, then rolled her eyes into the stratosphere.

“Oh. My God. You've been ignoring your phone all night, haven't you? So you could pity-drink! I cannot...even...-! Augh!” She flung her arms up in melodramatic anguish, but Chloe could tell there was something seriously bad fueling this behavior.

Chloe’s stomach gurgled and churned with discomfort – a nice combo of stress, fear, and too much to drink.

“Look, Vic,” Chloe moaned disparagingly, an unpleasant burp spilling out. “Eulgh. I don't live in whatever fucking pearl-encrusted reality you do, so ya wanna fill me in on what the shit you're raving about?”

“Max is in the hospital!” Victoria bellowed through clenched teeth. “You moron!”

Aaaaaaand Chloe couldn't breathe.

“Everyone's been trying to reach you for, like, three hours!” Vic spewed, her words stinging with justified heat. Chloe tried fumbling for her car keys in vain as Vic lashed into her. “She overdosed on fucking heroin and might die. But here you are, Girlfriend of the Year, Chloe Price, piss-drunk in a parking lot because your solution to everything is to drown it all in alcohol!”

Chloe had finally found her keys.

Breathing was still difficult.

Her eyes were very wet.

Her throat was very dry.

“I mean, heroin?” Vic hissed quietly. Chloe's rubbery hands were fumbling around with her keys, her phone, her jacket, trying to get herself ready to exit her car. “Fucking heroin!” Vic went on on.

“I-I didn't...-” Chloe croaked, unsure of what to say. How could Max have even gotten her hands on that kind of shit?

“Is this what's been going on?!” Vic continued to shout as Chloe struggled to get her stupid self out of her car. “Is this your dirty little secret? I knew Max had a problem, but you should know better after the shit you did in high school to even let her near this kind of...-!”

Chloe had tumbled out of her car, unable to stand upright. She'd skidded onto her knees into the parking lot's tarmac, startling Victoria.

“She doesn't...-” Chloe started, trying to defend Max. They'd never done that kind of crap. Booze and weed, that had been it for a long time. Near as Chloe knew. Had Max – or this fucking other side of her – been using behind her back? It didn't make sense. Chloe was sure she would've been able to tell the symptoms. Max had been acting batshit but not in that way.

“What?” Victoria hissed, bending on her knees to kneel to Chloe's level. “She doesn't what?”

“Sh-Sh doesn't...-” Chloe was dripping tears onto the black tarmac. She coughed on her own
phlegm, her insides on fire. “She doesn't use,” Chloe eked out in a whimper. “I don't even...How would she even get...?”

None of this was making sense. What was her plan? That Other Max, what the hell was she thinking?

Victoria was back upright, tapping at her phone with flurrying thumbs.

“What're you...-?” Chloe choked out.

Sniffling and crying and coughing herself into a mess, Chloe threw up some of her evening's beverages into a small puddle near Vic's feet.

“What the hell!?” Vic shrieked, taking a couple steps back. “You stupid bitch,” she huffed with disbelief, then lifted her phone to her ears. “Brooke? Yes...Yea. You were right...Mmmm-hmm!” Oh, very testy.

Victoria kept bickering into her phone. The words were barely audible in Chloe's ears, which suddenly felt clogged. Her arms were shaky, her knees aching, her head throbbing. Everything was a haze of blurred pain. She tried to clutch at her ears, at her brain, at whatever was causing this storm of sensations. Like a fucking drill was spiraling itself into the base of her neck and down her spine.

Moments later, it subsided, and Chloe gasped and sputtered air back into her lungs. She found herself curled in a ball at Victoria's feet, staring at her own watery vomit.

Victoria's sharp syllables were pinching at Chloe's headache. But as she pushed herself up on her hips, Chloe was able to start making out what was being said.

“-can try, but she's boozed herself into a fucking stupor, so what even is the...-? Yes. OK-OK, fine, I'll...Ugh. I'll bring her.”

Everything was crumbling around her.

Into the dirt.

Insides spilling outside, a grizzled mess in the dirt.

In the dirt
in the dirt
in the dirt

Everything was collapsing.

Her entire life was collapsing AGAIN.

Chloe managed to pull herself out of her own searing pain long enough to crawl over to Victoria, who was talking on her phone.

“How is she, though?” Victoria asked into the phone, sighing audibly at Chloe's pathetic lump of lard wincing at her. “Mm,” Victoria hummed wistfully. She and Chloe exchanged looks. Even in the dim overhead light of the parking lot at night, Chloe could see Vic's expression wavering. “Well, that's...better than the worst-case scenario...Mm-hm...I-I don't know...-” Chloe didn't know what to do. What to say. She planted her head against Vic's shins. Vic huffed through her nose but continued
her conversation. “Do you need to speak with her...? All right...Ten, fifteen minutes I think...Got it.”

Victoria hung up her phone.

I'm a piece of shit.
I'm the worst.
She needed me and I just dumped her on everyone else.
I couldn't handle it when it mattered the most.
I couldn't save Max.
I couldn't save Rachel.
I couldn't save Dad.
I'm not good enough.
I'm not enough.
I'm not.

Chloe's arms writhed around Victoria's legs, clawing at her khakis and soaking them with tears.

Vic fell to her own knees, tumbling Chloe off.

Victoria was crying, too.

The pair just sat there for a few seconds, surveying each other's tear-stained expressions of despair.

“I'm sorry,” Chloe squeaked out. “Y-You're right, I'm not...-”

But Chloe was caught off as Victoria leaned forward into her, embracing her in a supportive hug.

“Shut up,” Victoria whimpered through a sob. “I don't even care, I just...” Victoria's voice cracked and disfigured into a quiet, despondent weep. “I just want her to be OK. I want everyone to be OK.” She sniffl and wiped at her eyes as she pushed herself off of Chloe.

“I, uh, ech,” Chloe tried to speak, but devolved into clearing her throat. Vic was walking away, so Chloe followed. “I know I'm...a real piece of shit, and...Just, thank you for...for looking out for her, for me, and...-”

“We're going to go see her,” Victoria insisted. “Right now.” She tugged Chloe's wobbly self by the arm and shoved her along toward her car. “I-I spoke with Brooke just now, and...It sounds like she's stabilizing, just...” Vic swallowed. “I don't want to talk with you with all of this shit going on, so, just...” She sighed, having reached her car. “Just get in the fucking car. We're not doing our usual routine tonight. Are we clear?”

Chloe nodded tiredly, trying to clear her clogged throat.

“Yea. I, uh, I'm-...Hey.” Chloe paused at the passenger door, glancing over top the vehicle. She made eye contact with Victoria. “Vic, honestly? Anyone who's a friend to Max is a friend to me. I'm...so done with keeping up this fucking...bratty teenage bullshit with you. Can we just put all this behind us? For our own sake, and for Max's.”

Victoria's brows arched in a weird way. And Chloe could sense it – 'As long as she lives.'

“I hope so, Chloe.”
After locking gazes with Chloe in a moment that sent a chill across Chloe's arms, Vic got in her car and slammed the door shut.

Chloe, leaning against the car for support, coughed up a nice glob of phlegm and grumpily spat it onto the lot. Yum.

A shiver jolted up and down Chloe's spine, and her arm cramped up again in a flash of burning pain. The fuck was going on? She must've slept wrong in the car, put her arm to sleep, pinched a nerve, something...

Chloe nearly toppled over as she shoved herself into the passenger's seat of Victoria's pristine vehicle, with its cushy – wait, were the seats made of leather?

Vic reached toward the back seat and produced a tiny trash bin with a tiny bag taut inside. She shoved it into Chloe's lap.

“Do not throw up in my car,” Vic sighed, turning the ignition. “I seriously do not need more reasons to be pissed with you right now.”

“Fair enough,” Chloe sighed, her voice hoarse from a clogged throat. Goddamn.

Vic pulled them out of the parking lot and onto the night road. A minute or so of silence later and they were on a main street, complete with awful, packed traffic.

Waiting at a red light, Chloe's hazy vision could detect Vic tapping her nails impatiently against her steering wheel. Her lips were quivering, her eyes flickering, glaring at the traffic light.

Chloe wedged her hands between her thighs and hung her head with a loud breath.

“Is she...OK?” Chloe eked out, desperate to avoid this suffocating silence.

“She overdosed on heroin,” Vic grumbled. “So, yea, no, she is not OK.”

“I meant...” Chloe trailed off with an irate sigh.

The traffic light turned green.

-BEEEEEP!-

Victoria hadn't hit the gas for a couple seconds, earning a frustrated car horn from the driver behind them. She slammed the gas a bit too vigorously at first, jerking them both forward.

“Dude,” Chloe grunted fretfully.

But when she went to shoot Victoria a wary look, she realized that Vic's eyes were leaking again.

“I'm sorry,” Victoria panted, her eyes locked on the road, focusing through tears. “I'm so sorry I haven't been there for her – for you. After everyone I lost back in Arcadia, I've just...been so fucking scared of...caring.” She sucked in a trembling breath as she broke their contact.

“Victoria,” Chloe sighed. Vic's emotions were seeping through Chloe, as well. They were both goddamn terrified of what might happen to Max. “I've...I know what you mean, I...-”
“Please,” Victoria winced, sucking in a breath through her plugged nose. “Let me finish. I just—...I really need us to be on the same page right now. For her sake. Can we fucking do that, just this once?”

“Mm, mm-hm,” Chloe hummed sheepishly, brushing her own face down with her sleeve.

“I know,” Vic began, pausing uncertainly as she focused on making a turn, “I make it seem like my life is together, but it’s not. It’s really not. I need what you have. What you have with Max. And so, wh-when Max made it seem like—...like she wanted that from me, and how you seemed open to—...It’d been so long since I—...I was so stupid, I’m so sorry, it was a mistake. I know the world doesn’t...revolve around me, I know your lives don’t...r-revolve around me, but I can feel it, Chloe, I feel like what I did that night was...another piece of wood on the pile that...became this fucking bonfire.”

Chloe’s tears leaked just a hint of relief in this uncertain, seemingly hopeless moment.

“O-OK,” Chloe sighed, needing a moment to collect herself. She surveyed the streets they were passing by.

What if Max was...even more different after this over?
What if Max was even less herself?
Chloe would deal with it, but...it was still scary as hell to consider.

“Argh, fuck,” Victoria huffed as they got into a highway. “My God, I am...making this about me. What the hell is my problem? Max could be...dying right now, and—...”

“She's not,” Chloe pressed, a bit unsettled by Victoria implying the idea.l “She's not dying.”

Victoria paused hesitantly, then sighed a bit of anguish out.

Chloe bit at her lip, wondering if it was a good idea to tell Victoria what had been scratching at the inside of her ribcage this entire conversation.

“She tried to break up with me,” Chloe blurted out, the words cracking like an ice float. “After everything we've—...” She groaned bitterly in spite of her own watery eyes, brushing them. “That's why I was out here, alone, shit-faced. She texted me to tell me she wasn't going to be with me anymore.”

“What...the fuck?” Victoria whispered – to Chloe's surprise, she pretty offended and upset by this. “That's so stupid, why would she do that?”

“Well,” Chloe grunted out, shifting herself in the cramped car seat. “I think she was planning on literally not being with me anymore...”

“Huh?”

“Vic,” said Chloe solemnly. “I'm...pretty sure Max was trying to, like...fuckin'...commit suicide.”

Victoria was speechless. Chloe gave her a minute to process everything. She began to tear up again. Maybe these kinds of talks weren't much safer than the recovering drunk one driving.
“All this time,” Vic sobbed, “I could've been helping, and instead? I've been...picking fights with you. I'm a fucking horrible friend, I mean, what good have I even done for either of you? I had no fucking idea Max was in that kind of...I'm an imbecile, I...-!”

“Look.” Chloe sighed, planting a firm hand on Victoria's shoulder as she guided them down the highway. “I'm just...gonna cut to the chase here.” Vic's brow lifted with alarm. “Erh, n-no pun intended,” Chloe nervously spat. “We've...both lost people.” Chloe dabbed at the edge of her left eye with her pinky, un-gunking it. “People who had problems. People we let down.” She shrugged sympathetically, and Vic nodded thoughtfully in turn. “I mean, right? My, uh...my Dad used to say, 'What's past is prologue.' I never really got what he meant until...-” Chloe's eyes wandered off. “Well, until Max came back into my life, and that Storm happened. And then it all made sense. All of the shit I went through up until that moment, it made me the kind of person who could...-” Chloe trailed off with a sniffle. “I have no idea what kinds of crap you've lived through. Max does. I've spent the past, like, decade of my life, almost, trying to avoid knowing that kind of shit. Because if I knew what you've gone through? It'd make it hard to ignore you when you call me out on my shit. I-I don't...-”

Fffffuck where was I even...-? Goddamnit, why am I doing this when Max is...-? No, she'd... If we don't work this out right now, we'll be bickering over her hospital bed. Damnit.

“Vic, look. You fucked up. So have I. So has Max. Fucking up is kind of the state of, like, the human condition. But Max helped teach me how to own up to that and move forward. So. I'm sorry I've been...such a hard-ass on you all this time. You...I mean, obviously you care about Max a lot, otherwise you wouldn't put up with me so much just to be her friend.” They both smirked at each other through dampened eyes glancing at the overhead mirror.

Chloe had all of these people in her life, willing to put everything on hold for her, for Max. She'd been an idiot this whole time, trying to resist that. Trying to wall off these connections. Trying to refuse their help.

Chloe needed them.
Max needed them.

Being together, being in love, it was a beautiful thing.
But it didn't have to be the only beautiful thing.

Max was going to make it. Chloe knew she was.

As long as Max was alive...it wasn't too late. It never was too late.

And that same rule applied to everyone, didn't it?

“Vic, I know I ain't...really 'friend' material in your world, but, like, I'm willing to try. For Max, yea, but, just...I feel like we have more in common than we wanna admit.”

Vic sniffled drying her eyes with one hand as she guided them down a ramp with the other.

“Yea,” she agreed bashfully.

“It's taken me a long ass time,” Chloe confessed, “but I'm ready to...I dunno...let people in? Does that...-? That make sense, or...-?”
“It does,” Victoria acknowledged wistfully, coughing to clear her throat. “Yea, I understand.”

“I don't know what we're gonna be lookin’ at when we go in there,” Chloe mused at the looming hospital before them. “But Max and I would be...hella screwed if it wasn't for you guys. I-I don't know what I can...do, or say, but...just...I appreciate you. OK? I'm a shitty person, but I'm trying to make things better. Can we just drop this whole cat and dog thing between us? For real?”

Pulling the car into the crowded lot of the hospital, Victoria nodded.

The car engine died down. Vic looked Chloe straight in the eyes.

“I want to,” Victoria breathed out, brushing her face dry again. “I really want to.” She unlocked the car doors. “I'm, um...I'm glad we talked, and...I'm not sure, maybe I'll be willing to figure this out later, but Max needs us right now. All of us – but you, more than anyone else.” She got out, and Chloe followed. Closing the doors, Victoria concluded, “Don't let her down right now.”

“I won't.”

“Anger is like flowing water; there's nothing wrong with it as long as you let it flow. Hate is like stagnant water; anger that you denied yourself the freedom to feel, the freedom to flow; water that you gathered in one place and left to forget. Stagnant water becomes dirty, stinky, disease-ridden, poisonous, deadly; that is your hate. On flowing water travels little paper boats; paper boats of forgiveness. Allow yourself to feel anger, allow your waters to flow, along with all the paper boats of forgiveness. Be human.”

~ C. JoyBell C.

Lost and alone.

Or not so alone.

she's not coming back
SHE’S not COMING back
She isn't...!

sHe's NoT
accept it

JUST ACCEPT
it's our fate
MY fate
your FATE
our fate!!!
The voices – her other selves – crowded round in a circle, fearful to step into the light cast by the lamp post in the center of the cobblestone space.

Max had been stuck here – stranded at the End of Time.

Waiting.

And Max sat, curled into her knees, leaning against the metal lantern. Its soft, yellow glow made her feel safe amidst the void. Amidst the fog of herselfs. Something had riled herselfs up, but she didn't know what. In the back of her mind, she knew a way out – a way back, a way forward – would reveal itself.

She would wait.
She had waited.
She waits.

cogs, we're all cogs
GRAINS OF SAND
Broken Mirror ShardS
*whats broken cant be fixed*
notlikethis notlikethis

The door opened.

The door would open.

The door opens.

She appears.

She would go to the corner.

She had stood there.

The pieces of Max's self scattered, reforming around her. Bickering, chattering, clamoring.

SHES doing IT?
does it?
*Why is sHe?*
What would that?

how could we?
*NO*
STOP
!*EaVe It AlOnE!!*
doesn't touch
Will not!

NOT
Max pushed her way through herselfs, frantic to see what the commotion was. There she was!

Max's Other self. Red ponytail.

She was ignoring the clamoring Maxes.
She was staring at the floor.

In the corner of the dim, dark, cobblestone room sat a bucket.
A blue butterfly was perched upon the bucket's edge. Gentle flutter of wings.

The Other Max peeled back her sleeves. The spiral tattoo on her arm glowed green.

Max took slow, careful steps. The voices around her grew louder.
She ignored them.

Peering over her Other self's shoulder, she could see a strange liquid in the bucket.

When her Other self dipped her arm in, the liquid lit up like a beacon.
It glowed an eerie green.

The Other Max reached down. Knelt. Shoved her face into the bucket.
Gone. It had sucked her right in.

All of the Maxes were enraged, confused, afraid.

Max grit her teeth.
She held her breath.
She shoved her face into the glowing water.

She took the dive.

The butterfly flew away.

—

“The most painful thing is losing yourself in the process of loving someone too much, and forgetting that you are special too.”

~ Ernest Hemingway

—

I'm done making choices
It's all the same to me
One week to remember
One life that could have been

It seems like time is standing still
Can't do this anymore
Just get up
Get up
get up
GET UP
Gët uP

And as the shot rings in my ears
I get that there's no going back
going back
gOiNg BaCk
Going back . . .

Just get up!
Get up!
get up!
GET UP!
Gët uP!

Don't leave me all alone
To see you down there, feels like I failed all over
I just don't want to lose you ever
We're only getting started
Don't wanna learn this lesson
Just wanna keep messin'
with Time

Oh, just one more time
Oh, just one more time
One more time . . .

~ Campusanis, 'Left Alone'
Chapter Summary

“People always told me growing up that it's never about the destination – it's about the journey.
But what if the destination...is you?”

A/N: It's time to leave this climax to rest. It contains ideas I conceived as early as two years ago with ones I conceived as recently as a couple weeks ago, with so much I had intended to include still missing – waiting in the wings for alternate versions of the visual novel's story.

IT IS STRONGLY RECOMMENDED you have experienced Before the Storm through Episode 2, as I do directly reference some things from that story.

There will be an epilogue chapter after this, hopefully later this month, followed by a final chapter of some sort way down the road to commemorate the visual novel's completion.

As for right now, enjoy the climax of this story.

ALSO, like with Chapter 16, I've broken this chapter up to make it a little easier to read.

—

Life is Strange

All Wounds

Chapter 19 – A Song of Time
(Part 1)

—

“Hell will not give you the answers you seek, but you mustn't look away from the horrors it does offer, because you cannot overcome suffering if you refuse to look at it.”

~ Hellblade: Senua’s Sacrifice

—
BRIGHT.

VORTEX.

SPINNING, SpInNiNg, spinning. . .

Images, sounds, tastes, smells, touches, spinning, cycling, swirling, mixing.

Then

Black.

The Void.

Red.

HER.

What was she doing? Why was she dragging Max through all of this?

dragging? You
YOU

you fucking followed me here I didn’t why would

HOW?? how are you here

HOW DID YOU FOLLOW ME? WHAT THE FFFFRRrrrrghhhhh

I-I don’t know! I just…did.
I wanted to follow you.
So I did.

YOU WEREN’T SUPPOSED TO FOLLOW
YOU WERE SUPPOSED TO
YOU’RE
you’re the coward
you’re the one who doesn’t do what’s necessary
you’re not supposed to do anything
why did you follow?
you’ve fucked it all up
AGAIN
but I should’ve seen this coming
shouldn’t I?
because you’re me
and I fuck everything up right?
everything’s broken

Um...OK, but...-
Where are we?
What are we doing here?
Aren't you...me?
You don’t even **know**, huh?
Why’d you fucking FOLLOW ME then?

**urgh**
We’re heading for the source.

*I think.*

Source?

*Um. The source. Yea.*
*Of all of this. The one moment that could undo all of this.*
*It’s...-*
*I just have to...-*
*Shit.*
*The MOMENT.*

What... was that, again?
What one moment?

*It was*
*um*

It had to do with that... **girl.** Didn’t it?

**YES. The girl.**
The *um*
*the*

With the blue eyes.

*blue*
*hair?*
*you mean*

Oh. Do I?
I thought it was... blonde.

**Damnit fucking damnit**
you messed it up
you followed
you weren’t supposed to follow
you don’t make the hard choices
**I DO**
you don’t clean up the mess
**I DO**
nosey so fucking NOSEY
you couldn’t just let me
well!
we’re fucked
we are so fucked
now I can’t even remember
and
I can’t find it if I can’t remember!

Find what? What are we finding? And why?

_the girl_
THE GIRL
we need to find the girl
if we find the girl
then that’ll
I just need to
um
shit
I’ll figure it out.

Oh. Um. OK.

So. . .
What should I do?

YOU?
nothing
don’t fucking do anything
I’ll handle this.
This is my mess, too!
I want to help!

The Max with the red ponytail stopped walking in circles.
They exchanged confused, angry looks.

You can’t help.
You’ll just make everything worse.

I will…?
That doesn’t sound right.

Look, I obviously am feeling less clueless than you
I’m the one holding the Thing
so clearly I must be more experienced at
this
whatever this is
whatever we’re doing
So just LET ME fucking do it!

Time.

What?

It’s, um…
Time.
The Thing you have. In your hands?
We were supposed to, um…-
Well, we were trying to go back in Time.
I remember that, at least.
Back to the ‘source,’ you said.

I said that?
Oh!
The source!
HER.
The girl.

That’s right.
You don’t remember her?

Of course I do! How could…-?

What was her name?

…Shit.

It’s OK. I don’t seem to remember her name, either.
Or her face…

Blue eyes?

Yea. Blue eyes.
Fucking beautiful blue eyes.

Gold hair?

Blonde? No. No, blue.

Erh…No, or was it like…brownish…?

OK, so we don’t remember everything.
But…see my finger?

Oh. Ohhh.
What are those? Those are-
I know those.
From somewhere?

They’re rings.
I don’t…-
Well, they must mean something.
I mean, right?
Why else would I be wearing them?

Why are you wearing them?

They make me feel safe.
They make me feel connected.

To the girl.

Mm-hm. Yea.

Then we need to lose them.  
Then we'll know for sure that it's done.

What? Why would you...-?
YOU get to have them. Her.  
But not me.  
It's not fair.

Nothing's fair.

It was never supposed to be fair.

Max was crying.  
And so was Max.

I have a job to do.  
I'm leaving.  
DON'T FOLLOW ME.

Max turned her back.  
She tried to run.  
But she was followed.

--

Chloe swallowed, attempting to dry her parched throat. Stella had offered to track them all down  
something to drink, but Brooke had gone off with her – made Chloe suspect they had some words to  
have with one another.

Which left Victoria as Chloe's only company while she waited. The doc had advised that Max was in  
stable condition, thanks to whatever Stells and Brooke had pulled off to get her there. So Max was  
alive, living, but...comatose, or something like. The hospital had insisted that Max couldn't be seen  
quite yet. But soon.

It always 'soon' with everything. Everyone. Wasn't it?  
Always looking forward. Or looking back. Never down, never up, never to the side.

Oh. Well, except Victoria, apparently. Victoria was staring directly down at her. But Chloe was too  
scared to look her straight in the eye.

“What-....” Chloe’s throat caught. She cleared it and tried again. “So. Uh...What did they say?”

“They’re taking the first flight out of Seattle in the morning.” Vic’s words didn’t sound as sharp and  
stinging as her eyes, at least.

“Mm.” Chloe nodded. “Thanks.” She coughed, and considered clarifying the severity. “A lot.”
Victoria sighed, shaking her head.

“I didn’t tell them,” Vic said, vaguely.

“Huh?”

“Where you were. Why you weren’t the one calling them. I played dumb.”

“O-oh. Well. Thanks for-”

“Don’t.”

Ah. There was that blade-like edge to Vic’s tongue. It quickly softened back up, though.

“Don’t thank me,” Vic insisted. “This is all just…fucking karma.”

“I don’t believe in that shit.”

“I don’t even know if I do, either, OK? I just-…It was an expression.”

“Yea.” Chloe nodded hastily, already keen on diffusing things ASAP. “Sorry. I know you didn’t… talk with them for my sake.”

“Actually, I did.”

“Oh.” Chloe was confused. She finally met Victoria’s eyes, squarely. “You…did.”

Vic nodded. She took a seat next to Chloe.

“You want to know how Max and I became friends?” Victoria offered.

“I, uh, have wondered a bit. I guess.”

Victoria smirked knowingly, her eyes squinting ever so slightly.

This was weird. Max was...maybe dying down the fucking hallway. And they couldn't do anything about it but wish, and hope, and...do what Max had been wanting them to do for years: make good.

Vic began with a weak-willed chuckle, “Ohhh, I used to utterly antagonize her back in the day. For no good reason, mind you.”

“Yes. I, uh, I was there for some of that? You antagonized me before you even met Max. Remember?”

“Right. I, um-…I’m not proud of who I was back then. You realize.”

“I ain’t proud of who I am now. So…”

They both sighed.

“You see?” said Victoria, with a weird, weak little chuckle. “That’s what I’ve always liked about you – you’re not afraid to be honest. Even Max struggles with that. To be transparent with you,
I'm...not even *that* surprised that Max was hiding something like this. Max has been lying to me – to *us* – this whole time.”

“She...-” Chloe swallowed the lump in her throat. “She's got demons she carries with her, just like anyone. I wear mine on my goddamn sleeve--” She rolled up said sleeve to showcase her tattoo and sighed, folding it back down. “--but Max has been trying to keep hers from becoming anyone else's problem.”

“Too late,” Victoria grumbled with a mixture of remorse, bitterness, and sorrow.

“Yea,” Chloe agreed tiredly, running her hand against the shaved half of her head.

For a few moments, the pair simmered in this pond of pity and frustrated fear.

Then, Victoria got back on her train of thought.

“Oh. Right, how we became friends...Max forgave me for how I'd treated her. I-I mean, you were there, weren't you? When the roles were reversed – when *I* was the one in the hospital bed. It started there, really. Max had saved my life, when all I'd done was given her trouble.”

“Yea,” Chloe sighed warmly. “She did the same thing for me, too…”

“Well, there's something *else* we have in common, then. And that was just it – Max helped me realize just how *much* she and I had in common. Hindsight's twenty-twenty, but when you're a moronic high schooler?” She shrugged at Chloe, who nodded with amused agreement. “I am **not** even exaggerating when I say she blew my mind. And yet, even after that, it's not just...-” She fluttered her lips, shaking her head a little and trailing off.

“It's a process,” Chloe finished the thought. “You can know what you're doing is dumb. You can see how to make it better. But it doesn't just...-” She snapped her fingers. “*Happen*. A caterpillar can...fuckin' metamorphose its entire body and grow *wings*, right? Become a butterfly. That's *amazing*. But it ain't instantaneous.”

Vic nodded thoughtfully in acknowledgment.

“It takes time. But sooner or later, the cocoon *has* to come off,” Victoria mumbled.

“Chrysalis.”

“Pardon?”

“N-nevermind. But, no, yea, it's...I sorta lost what I was getting at...”

Victoria softly chuckled, crossing one ankle over the over. Her tone then soured.

Vic concluded, “It took that *disgusting* trauma with Mark Jefferson to break me out of my...*chrysalis*. With Max, I mean. But you? Chloe Price, it has taken a long time. I guess I'm just a...magnet for drama, but here we are.”

“Dude, you got nothin' on the drama *I've* gotten myself into...Remember what it was like when we were in Blackwell together? And you don't even know the half of it.”
“Pff. I suppose you might be right. Either way? This crazy bullshit is the wakeup call, all over again. The call to, like...look at how much we have in common, instead of apart. You, me, the others...”

Chloe smirked at Vic, who was already smiling a little. Their smiles widened.

“One thing that photography has taught me,” said Vic, “is that a powerful image depicts something so many people have in common, even if they don't realize it. A feeling. An idea. A desire. Max...I think kind of embodies this. As a person. She helps bridge those gaps, she helps you connect with her – with others – because she sort of...photographs you. With her perspective. And then she shows you the photos she took of you? So you get to see yourself like a photograph. It's...-” Victoria was rambling a bit in a distant kind of way, much to Chloe's surprise. She became self-conscious when Chloe was listening intently. “Blah. I am sooooo not good with metaphors. I'm...probably not making any sense, but...”


“My point is, all of us have made...less than sterling decisions over the years, and...-” “Selfish,” Chloe interjected, adding a sheepish, bashful smirk. “Word you're looking for? It's 'selfish.' At least, when it comes to me, anyway.”

Victoria offered Chloe a sympathetic half-smile.

“Well,” Vic sighed, “Everyone has their vices – it's not like I don't. I just...-” She shrugged up one shoulder, avoiding Chloe's gaze. “I've gotten good at hiding mine. You wear yours, well, as you said: on your sleeve. As plain to see as those tattoos.”

Chloe nodded and rotated her sore arm a bit, rubbing it gently with her opposing hand. It still hurt from what she'd done with Steph – when she'd Rewound time. Or...so she thought. She wasn't one hundred percent true what was exactly real anymore, not with how that Other Max had been fucking with her head, however she had been.

“What made you get them in the first place?” Vic asked, nodding her head up and looking at Chloe's covered arm.

“Eh. Long story. Guess I'm just...desperate for someone to notice. And, uh, well...it worked.” Chloe shrugged, her mind leaping to Rachel, but her heart leaping to Max. “Brought Max back to me.”

“Once again – something we share in common. My entire career is getting someone to notice me.”

“Youre looking for? It's 'selfish.' At least, when it comes to me, anyway.”

“Yep.” Chloe sighed, nodding thoughtfully. “Used to be where most of my energy went into – being what I wanted everyone else to see. It sucks.” She didn't know what else to add.

“This all sucks.” Victoria didn't seem to, either, and the conversation trailed off for a moment.

What was taking Stells and Brooke so damn long? Chloe was hungover as it was, fucking migraine had been a nice backdrop to this entire conversation – she'd almost gotten used to it when shifting her position in her seat stirred it all right back up.

“Well,” Vic began, cautiously. “I know it might be beating a dead-...Er, rather, I might be repeating myself, but I am sorry.”

“You are repeating yourself,” Chloe cited with an amused sigh, rubbing her aching head in slow
“But,” she grunted, “'s OK. I'm sorry, too.”

“I want to do whatever I can to help you and Max. And, frankly, it just really pissed me off to see you...not exactly doing your best tonight, when Max clearly was in a bad place.”

“Yea.”

“I know it can't...undo the past, but I need to help her work through...whatever she is dealing with. And she needs the help.”

“She does,” Chloe confessed, much to her dislike.

“Someone you loved died because I couldn't be there for Nathan when he needed me most.”

“Vic...”

“That makes me accountable for her death – just as much as that asshole Mark.”

Just as much as Stella for being involved in the drug dealings? Or Frank? Or how about Chloe for pushing Rachel away and also not being there the way she’d needed?

“Thing about blame,” said Chloe solemnly, “is that there's always more than enough to go around.” She sighed bitterly, leaned back against the wall, and gazed toward the stained ceiling tiles. “Blame? It's contagious. Shit spreads like...wildfire. Ruins every damn thing it touches.”

“If we never accept blame for our mistakes,” Vic countered, “how can we become better people?”

Chloe shrugged and nodded slightly.

“Fair point. Alls I'm sayin', Vic? Don't beat yourself up so bad about it. It's been a long time. We all have crap from back then we gotta let go of.”

“I'm trying to,” Vic mumbled warily. “I'm just...It's this awful feeling – like I feel compelled to defend Nathan whenever he gets brought up. Even though I know what awful things he did. I never got a chance to help him – to save him – like I wanted. And he fucking died. And...I know it's a sensitive subject-” Vic grabbed Chloe's hand and squeezed it, much to Chloe's surprise. Chloe, a little dumbstruck, noticed how puffy Vic's eyes had become. “-but I just know you must understand what I'm going through, because of what happened with Rachel. You've...How have you been able to 'let it go'? How have you been able to move on from that?”

Chloe's head felt hot – not so much from Vic's proximity but more from the question.

“I, uhh...” She swallowed, gave Vic's hand a squeeze back, and broke their moment of supportive contact. “I'm not sure I...have, entirely.” She shrugged, biting her lip as Victoria's expression withered a little. “It's not exactly something that's ever gonna go away? I don't-...I dunno what to say.”

“But...surely it's Max, right? That special someone? That's the answer. I...I just haven't found that person yet.”

awesome woman, but her face is still scarred. That's...just how it is. What happened with me and Rachel? And what happened with you and Nathan, too, probably – and the shit Max has been through? None of this is gonna ever disappear. You gotta figure out a way to carry that weight. If one-night stands, fancy galleries, fancy clothes, and whatever else you do with your time – if that ain't healing this scar, ya gotta figure something else out, dude.”

“Yea,” Vic breathed out shakily, rubbing her sleeve over her eyes.

Chloe felt a pang of guilt to go along with her wonderfully achy hangover.

“Look,” Chloe offered, clearing her throat. “When this shit's all sorted, and Max is back to her old self, you and I, we can hash this shit out. It'll be all, like, therapeutic.”

“...'Hella' therapeutic?” Vic chuckled weakly, her dire look shifting to one of slight hope.

Chloe rolled her eyes, smirking, and nodded.

Her insides, which had been gradually churning with discomfort, were at about a simmering point.

Grunting, Chloe wobbled up to her feet. That rush of wooziness hit, and she suddenly remembered just how much alcohol was still in her system. Time to get some more of it out.

“Speakin' of therapy,” Chloe groaned quietly, hobbling away with a hand on her gut. “I've gotta hit the bathroom.”

Victoria, still brushing away tears, nodded her head.

“I know it's a shitty time right now,” Vic concluded, “but it...really feels good to be on the same page with you for a change.”

“Yea.” Chloe awkwardly shrugged and reciprocated the gesture with a small smile. “More or less.”

“...And confidence is sort of a hindrance to growth, because confidence is knowing, and knowing doesn't leave room to know something else.”
~ Riley Hawke

More?
Or less?

Was she the real Max now?
Now that she had the Power?
It did make her more...'Max.' Didn't it?

Fuck. If she could just remember...-
Who was she? Where did she come from?

Who was she supposed to be?
Max had tied her red hair into a ponytail. She had to make sure she didn't lose sight of who she was supposed to be in this place, with that other, wimpier Max trying to muddle things up.

In her attempt to lose her alternate self, she'd stumbled upon a strange...town?

Frozen in time.

Shadows, faceless bodies, staring at her without eyes, but ignoring her. If she met their sightless gaze, just before she could make out a face she recognized, a bone-chilling shriek would startle her. She’d close her eyes and keep running. They left her alone.

But she was being followed.
Followed her herself.
That brunette coward.
Lingering behind, pursuing, never blazing the trail.
Well, now that Max was being haunted by these undead corpses.

Good.

The whipping of winds, the flash and crack of thunder, the pelting drops of rain, the mangled bodies without faces...Max needed shelter. She needed to lose her other self.

Seeking this refuge, a towering structure of stone made itself apparent.

A door. Metal. Heavy.

Max threw her weight into it, nudging it open.

Low-pitched creaking of the door.

-SLAM!-

Darkness.

The floor was...wet. An odd but somehow familiar smell – unnatural.

Red.

Lights – but red. It cast its shade across everything, making her once bright hair indistinguishable from the rest of her.

Wading through the ankle-high liquid, Max began to spot...images...in the reflective, red-swathed surface.

Images forming. Slowly. Still-frames in time. So many images...half-developed.

An eerie, child-like laugh shattered her focus, reverberating across the stone walls of this strange prison she’d found herself in.

The laughter was emanating from...below?
Max stared down at her down shadow in the liquid. It stretched, detached, and reformed. A child-like shape. Strange horns? A single, menacing eye of red on one half of its head. Green veins curled across its figure – a sickly, ghost-like green.

It laughed that irritating laugh again.

*Who the fuck are you?*
*What is this place?*
*This isn't funny.*
*I have a job to do!*
*This isn't where I'm supposed to be!*

Max clenched her fists, bared her teeth, huffing at the shadow. The **Power** in her hand made her arm tremble. A simple flick of her wrist, and...

She didn't know what. She couldn't remember. Something strange and dangerous.

* [ I found you! Oooh! Aren't you scary? Eee hee! ]*
The shadow spoke to her with a child’s voice, but intangible in its formation of words.

Max had more important things to do. What was this? *She* was the one who controlled these kinds of things. *Not* her. Not that **other** Max. She could remember that much.

*You're under MY CONTROL. NOT HERS.*
*Get me out of here get me out of here getmeoutofhere outoutoutOUT*

* [ Are you sure you want to be doing that? Snarling and glaring at me? ]*

*Fuck you.*
*What are you even supposed to be, anyway?*
*Too scared to show yourself, because she can’t project you properly, huh?*
*She’s nowhere near capable.*
*I’m not listening to you.*

* [ Well, that's too bad... I was planning on helping you... if you were nice. ]*

*What?*
*Are you…?*
*Wait, are you actually something I’m weaving…?*
*Maybe to try and remind myself of…?*

*Fine. You have my attention.*

* [ Eee hee! That's much better! You humans are obedient to a fault, aren't you? ]*

*Uh. . .*
I'm not obeying you, YOU are obeying ME
you're just some fucking figment an illusion I-

[ Oops! But you AREN'T human anymore, are you? You're a beast! Eee hee! ]

Water in her eyes.

I am MAX CAULFIELD.
I am Human!

[ No matter what, a fake is a fake, and no matter how much you try to dress it up, the real thing always wins! ]

Max could feel the tears trickling.

Fuck you. OK?
I'm just as real...

Her tears sent ripples across the red-lit pool of liquid she stood in.

They began to float and drift around her from the force of the ripples.

Paper.

Photographs. Photographs. She took photographs!
She remembered – a wall?
An entire wall of the things.
And she could use them. Somehow.
To escape.

I’ll do this on my own.

She stuck her hand into the liquid – into the swarm of photographs.
She pulled one out.

It was an old one. Max saw herself in the photo.
And someone else...

Silly clothes. Silly hats. Max

That girl. She was next to Max. She had no face, no...-
She was there, but not there. Max could not remember her face.
It didn't matter.

I don't need you.

I never needed you.

“...Uh...Er...Arghhh. W-well, aye, I never...needed ye either, ya...scurvy scallywag!”

Voice.
An actual voice.
Not a thought, not a sound-less voice.
An actual fucking human voice in Max's ears.

She remembered what that felt like.
It was amazing.

It was...the girl.

“Ye’ll...be takin' those words back, Long Max Silver...or it'll be the plank with ye!”

Max was holding a long...wood...thing? A weapon?
A sword.

So was the girl. In these silly outfits, they were.

Ocean?
Ships?
Hooks. Wooden legs and hook hands.
Sails and wind and salt in the air?
Flags and skulls
SKELETONS

“Thought we ‘ad an agreement, I did!” bellowed the girl in a voice that didn't sound right. “Down the middle, fifty-fifty! Yet here ye are, ready for to stab me in the back, eh? Put down yer arms, mate, or it'll be off with yer head!”

Max could sort of remember...
She wanted to remember.
She wanted to be with her.
She wanted to
NO
the girl
she has to GO AWAY
she's supposed to DIE
it's not up to me it's just how it is

how it's supposed to be

Max raised her wooden sword with trembling hands, pointing it straight at the girl.

“YARGH! Mutiny, is it?” retorted the girl with a glint in her eye. “Cap'n Bluebeard suffers mutiny from no one! Have at ye!”

The girl attacked.

Max could see her every action before it happened. She could see how this would go.
She took a step back, knocking her foe's wooden sword with her own. She took a step to the left, whipping the sword against Bluebeard's hip. She growled in pain, swinging round – Max ducked, taking another strike to the girl's leg. She roared and fell to one knee.

The girl was staring at her with anger, hand grasping the wooden sword, shaking a bit.
Wait. Confusion? Max was having a hard time reading the emotion.
It was like this girl was pretending to...-

**PRETEND.**
This was all pretend.
The clothing was silly because it was a costume.
THEY WERE PLAYING.

**IT'S ALL A FUCKING GAME??!!**

Max knocked the sword's flat side against the girl's back.

“**YARGH!**” The girl dropped her sword to the dirt, lifting her hands up over her head. “By the hells, ye've bested me, ye sneaky serpent!” Ragged breaths, a dagger glare. “All this time, waitin' to take the treasure all fer yerself, aye?”

Max was sick of this. This was all just some fucking game.
She was done playing games. She wanted to be rid of this girl.
She just knew it in her bones, in her blood – this girl was the root of it all.
Whatever all of this was.

She pinned the girl to the ground, knocking her silly hat off.

“**Whoa,**” the girl grunted, her manner of speech suddenly different, much softer. “Damn, Max, way to get in character...**YARGH!**” Back to the weird...gruffy voice as Max pressed her weapon against the girl's neck. Struggling to breath, she begged. “**Aye,** ye've bested me at me own game, Long Max Silver. Ye've taken me good leg, to boot. **Hugh-! Argh.** The treasure be yours...! Take it. Alls I ask is ye let me live to plunder another day...”

Max pressed the wooden sword, causing the girl to cough and sputter. Her victim struggled and shoved the sword off.

“**Jeez,** Max,” she said in that weird, higher voice. “That hurts. Chill out, wouldja?”

Her body pinned over the girl's, Max frowned at the command.

“You don't tell me what to do,” Max cited coldly. Sharply. “I'm the one in control. Your life is in my hands. I could end everything with a flick of my wrist.”

The girl blinked at her, wide-eyed. Her expression quickly changed. She spoke with her normal, gravely voice again.

“A-aye, 'course yer in charge. Cap'n Bluebeard'll hang up his hat. Ye can be the Cap'n fer a chance...Uh, s-so...What'll ye do with me?”

“You're mine,” Max hissed into the girl's ear, ready to end it. Leaning over the girl with a menacing glare, Max's hair tickled at the girl's cheeks, which suddenly flushed with color.

“O-oh, aye, ah, I-...Ye've proven yerself a proper pirate, Silver. Indebted to yer service, I am, in exchange fer me life. **Ergh,** I'll be yer First Mate from 'ere on out, shall I?”
Max’s hands trembled against the scruff of the girl's shirt. She clenched her fingers tight, nails scraping against the girl's soft skin. She could end it. Right here. But the blushing, wide-eyed face before her was stopping her from doing so.

**CAN'T**

*I can't*

*she's*

*fuck*

*I can almost remember*

*her EYES fuck they were so pretty even back then*

*back here*

*now*

*they will be*

*i'm supposed to end it*

*why can't I end it right here??*

*I hate her.*

*She confuses me so much*

*but this is all her FAULT*

“Ha. Heheh.” Max could only laugh for a moment, covering her hot face with her hand. She squeezed her nails into the girl's shoulders, leaned down against her, and whispered darkly into her ear. “You're not even supposed to be alive. In this world, it's **kill or be killed.**”

“A-argh, please, mercy, Cap'n! I-...ow, shit, Max, that really-...”

“You think we're just going to be **fine** after all of this? **Huh?**” She rattled the girl's head against the ground. “Because we won't be.”

“**Max! Ow! What the hell?**”

“You ruined my life. All of them.”

“Wh-? **Ow-ow-ow**, you're-”

“They **died** because of you.”

“-hurting me, **stop!**”

**The girl,** as it seemed, was bigger and stronger than Max was. A brief scuffle later, and Max was the one on her back in the dirt.

This was useless. Pointless.

This wasn't **the source.** She needed to go further back. She'd finally figured out that much.

Max scrambled up to her feet.

**The girl** was crying.

So was Max.

Max turned her back.

She tried to run.
But she was followed.

With loud thumping steps, Max marched ahead across the wooden bridge. On the beach now, the faint glimmer of the sun and the impending moonlight made things more visible.

Wait...they'd just been in the woods, this was...a beach now? How?

“Dude! Max!” the girl grunted irritably, “What is up all of a sudden? I thought we were cool...”

Max was...not herself.
But herself.
She wasn’t in control.
She wasn't where she'd just been, either.
She wasn't who she'd just been.

“Cool...” Max murmured to herself. In this scary way. She'd...stopped. “Ha. Heheh. You think we're cool? You IDIOT. I have to Rewind three fucking times just to get you to...-”

Rewind?
What's that?

I'm trying to FIX THIS let me-

Wait, what? Who are you talking to?

That's not you?
Who...-

THE GIRL.

You mean ____?

What the FUCK is going on?
We agreed you could help get ____ to understand us.
Enough with the fucking games.
I'm taking control back.

The girl grabbed Max's shoulder firmly.

Max gasped, coughed, sputtered, like waking up from a nightmare. The girl twisted Max around by the shoulder.

“Max?”

Costumes. Trees. Dirt.
Max felt smaller again.

“Max,” the girl repeated with a bit of anger. “What is wrong with you?” She popped off her hook hand and threw it to the ground. “That really hurt!”

Max was mixed up. This was where she'd just been – pinning the girl to the ground, trying to end
everything and failing.

Just then, she'd...somehow gone forward, huh? Like peeking into a hole. Maybe if she focused, she could...find another hole. Wedge her hands in – tear it open.

She'd keep tearing open holes until she found the place she was supposed to get to.

–

Running.
Following.
Chasing.

Max had been stumbling along, trying to keep up with her Other self.
A storm had picked up. The rain was heavy.

So heavy. A Storm created by a song, created by a Storm, created by a song, created by a Storm.

[ The thousand years of raindrops summoned by my song are my tears. ]
[ The thunder that strikes the earth is my anger! ]

A Storm. Max had created it. Hadn't she? Or had she?
She'd seen it before she had created it, and she'd created it before she had seen it.
She'd created it before she had been able to create it.

Herself.
She needed to stick with herself.

In her attempt to catch up with her Other self, she'd fumbled into a strange...town?

Frozen in time.

Shadows, faceless bodies, staring at her without eyes, but ignoring her – at first. If she met their sightless gaze, just before she could make out a face she recognized, a bone-chilling shriek would startle her. She'd find herself paralyzed.

The forms crawled toward her.
Max is grabbed, is twisted, is smothered by them.
Max will find a way out. Max will find a way back to find a way forward.
She always does. She always will. She always did.

The faceless bodies began to have faces.
Faces Max recognized, but could not place names to.

'You let me JUMP.'
'You left me to burn in that diner.'
'Don't feel so bad, she left me to burn there, too. And my dog.'
'She KNEW that Storm was coming and she didn't TELL us.'
'You drowned me to death. Your own child.'
'She can't even save herself, how could she have ever saved us?'
Maybe if you'd let me HELP you and that girl I wouldn't have had to die.
'If you'd taken my call, if you'd actually CARED about me, I wouldn't have jumped.'
'She let me live, sure, but she destroyed my FACE. Destroyed my daughter's future.'
'She let me shoot a man in cold blood.'
'Pff. She let that girl shoot ME in cold blood. AND my fuckin' dog.'

One of them managed to grab hold of her.
Voiceless, its face frozen, it pinned her down. It hissed into her ear, yet made not a sound.

'I led her to find me, and she LEFT ME to rot.'
'I guided her to save THAT GIRL and she STOLE her from me!'
'She could've saved me and she DIDN'T.'
'She wanted WHAT BELONGED TO ME.'
'SHE STOLE HER FROM ME! SHE STOLE ____ FROM ME!'

A terrible shriek, like a banshee, and a violent wind blasted at Max, disorienting her.

What?
No.
Max hadn't done any of these things.
She wasn't capable. She didn't even know who these people were.
Why did they all hate her so much?
Max wasn't capable, she didn't have the Power. Not anymore.

Beneath their sharp gazes, their tangling limbs, their moans, Max melted.

She awoke in the mud. The rain pricking at her like needles.

The whipping of winds, the flash and crack of thunder, the pelting drops of rain, the buildings burning, the mangled bodies without faces...Max needed shelter. She needed to find her Other self.

Seeking this refuge, a towering structure of stone made itself apparent.

A door. Metal. Heavy.

Max threw her weight into it, nudging it open.

Low-pitched creaking of the door.

Echoing footsteps as she entered the dark within – a light in the distance.

Max approached the light.

She only made it a few steps in.

The light approached her.

It spoke to her, voiceless.

[ I've been waiting for you, Hero of Time. ]
What? Who had been waiting?
She was no 'Hero.' Not by a long shot.
Suffering and pain, path of destruction.

The figure swathed in light dropped a book to the ground. Paperback?
YELLOW.
So bright. Smiley face?
red
just a drop, but
Sharp! SHARP! OW-
red red red

[ The flow of time is always cruel... ]

The red dripped from Max’s wrist.
Drops pooled onto the floor.
Red. Dark room. A proper dark room.
Not a sick, sterilized black and white abomination.
Red – the color of blood, but also of life.

[ Its speed seems different for each person, but no one can change it... ]

The red-tainted liquid evaporated.
A photograph surfaced.
Photograph: lockers, faceless bodies, backpacks; a girl leaning against the lockers.

Vision blurring, hazy.
Memory?

[ A thing that does not change with time is a memory of younger days... ]


Max was someplace familiar. Old.

A dream? A memory?
Was she physically there, in some past place?

It was difficult to say.

There, but not there.

Max was not in control. So she observed her past self.

The hallway was full of...white noise.
But it was comforting, somehow.

On the floor – alone – there was a...girl.
That girl again.

Yellow. Smiley face. Drop of red.

The girl's face – focused.

The book was a door. Door to another world. World of pictures and text.
Max peered into the door.

She saw **blue** and **pink**.

{ *Through my blue fingers, pink grains are falling, haphazard, random, a disorganized stream of silicone that seems pregnant with the possibility of every conceivable shape... But this is illusion. Things have their shape in time, not space alone. Some marble blocks have statues within them, embedded in their future.* }

A torn photograph in the pink sand.

Max was standing above the girl. Gawking. Confused. Pondering the words she'd just read, and the strange feeling it planted in her stomach, like a seed. What statue awaited her future? What statue awaited the future of this girl beside her – her companion?

The girl turned the page, her eyes glancing off to the side – the side Max wasn't standing on – then nervously sunk back to her book. She kept reading. The girl did not notice that Max was there. The girl was looking elsewhere.

The girl appeared worried. Nervous.
Max felt uncomfortable. Confused.

“Um...-” Max started, her voice a tiny squeak in the river of students. Unnoticed. “Ih-Interesting read you’ve got there.”

“Oh, h-hey,” said the girl, her cheeks glowing. She gave Max a glance at last. A smile. It was nervous at first, but dissolved into relief. “Yea, it, uh, yeaa. It’s way interesting.”


The girl's eyes then darted to the side again, scrutinizing backpacked tweens. Looking for something. Looking for someone. Elsewhere.

Max adjusted the straps on her backpack awkwardly.

The girl, sitting on the floor in the hallway, reading a book full of pictures...
Max felt so safe around her, somehow.

“So. What's up?” Max mumbled, still hovering over the girl.

The girl was too busy tilting her head, scanning students. Looking for someone.

“Just, ya know, just readin’. Passing the time until Dad picks me up. He's taking me out for dinner tonight – I aced my science test, ha. We're going out for-...Oh.”
The girl's face went pale in a flash, and she fumbled with her book, trying to lift it up toward her own face – she dropped it to the floor instead.

“Oop,” said Max with surprise. Max picked up the book and handed it toward the girl.

“Sorry,” said the girl, eager to take her book back. She immediately opened it back up and held it aloft. “Thanks.” Her attention was stolen away by someone passing by. Max did not catch who it was. Too many students. “Erh, I'm... Augh, dangit.” The girl rolled her head back, bumping it into the lockers behind her. “I waited here just so he could...” She sighed.

The girl closed her book tiredly.

*When a door closes...*

“Uh, wait,” said the girl, snapping her finger and pointing up at Max. “Did you see him? Did he see us?”

“See who?” Max spat, palms out with confusion as she glanced across the river of students.

“Uh, *duh?* Who do you think?” The girl glared at Max expectantly, narrowing her eyes.

“*Him?*” Max balked. Her palm slid across her face as she sighed, shaking her head. “You're still obsessing over that? Have you even tried talking to him? Does he even know you exist?”

“Oh, pff,” the girl huffed, craning her neck back with skepticism. “Yea, OK, Maxine.” She was teasing, grinning like a troll. “What about that skater boy, huh? What's-his-name? The Asian one. Does he know you exist?”

“Shut up,” Max snickered, her cheeks igniting as she wriggled her hands at the girl. “That... That's just a crush, I'm not, like... stalking him.”

“The only difference between 'creepy' and 'romantic' is whether or not the person *likes* you back.”

“Yeesh.” Max smiled sheepishly, running her finger across her her in a nervous way. “That’s... kind of grim.”

“It’s *true.* I'm just saying,” said the girl. “And, like, anyway, how *else* are we supposed to get dates in this bumpkin town?”

Max sighed warily, “Maybe we should just skip the dance.”

“What? Are you *insane* in the membrane? We're finally old enough to go to the dance.”

“None of the boys I like are even gonna be there,” Max pointed out.

“Oh, if you ask one of them out, then maybe they *would* be there? Hello?”

Max flashed up her palms defensively at the girl's pressing eagerness, but she smiled with endearment at her gusto.

“*Maybe* *I'd* like to be asked out,” Max suggested. “Like a *normal* girl?”
“Ohhhh, as if you're a 'normal girl,' Maxine.”

“Ouch.”

“I-I meant, like, because you're awesome?”

“Uhhhh-huh.”

“I did!”

Soft, shy chuckles.

“Look,” said the blonde girl, sifting her long hair back behind her ears. “Sooner or later, we're gonna find boys we like, but who says they gotta find us, huh? We could totally be blazing our own paths. Honestly, the guy I've got my eye on? You know he's too chickenshit to ask a girl out to a dance.”

Max considered the truth to the girl's words and bobbed her head a bit, eventually nodding.

“But,” the girl continued, “if I just, like, pop in on him, I'll just...I mean, the smart guys, they're like wild animals, you don't wanna spook 'em. They spook easy. You've gotta lure them in—" She lifted her book up in front of her and shook it lightly. "—with the right bait.”

Max finally bothered to take note of the bright, yellow book in Chloe's hands.

A yellow smiley face with a drop of red goo on it. On the side of the book, printed in a bold, vertical style, the title: [ WATCHMEN ]

“Wait,” said Max, “Isn't that this super gross comic book?”

“It's a comic book for grownups,” the girl clarified.

“When did you become a 'grownup'?” Max teased slyly. “And a comic book is still a comic book. I thought you were more into manga.”

“It’s all the same medium, Maxine. This kind? They call them 'graphic novels,' thank you. And, uh...” Her nose twitched as she paused cautiously. “It is totally gross, which makes it totally awesome.”

“And does this boy of yours find it 'totally awesome' that you're doing everything except talk to him?”

“Like I said, why don't you talk to your crush before you get on my back? Anyway, what am I supposed to talk with him about if I don't know what he's into? I've seen him reading these 'graphic novels' during lunch break lately. Sooooo, I did some research – like ya do – and found out he loves Watchmen. It’s, like, totally the 'Citizen Kane' of comic books. I figured I could use this book as an ice-breaker. Right? Impress the guy, get a foothold into his life. I mean, how many girls do you know who read stuff like this? It'll totally put me ahead of the competition. I've got this one in the bag.”

“Wow,” Max said dryly, lowering her eyelids. “You really want a date to the dance.”

“Hell yes, I do.” The girl leaned in and sneakily whispered into Max's ear, “And it isn't because I
wanna dance…”

“Augh, gross. You're gross!”

“Heheheh~”

“Am I at least gonna get to meet this dude while you're dating him?”

“Low blow, Maxine. I told you, the last one didn't even count.”

“Yea, well...Good luck, I guess.”

“Someone's jealous that I'm at least trying to get my crush to notice me.”

“I really don't care.”

“Just because one dude rejected you, doesn't mean you just give up on everyone.”

“Easy for you to say, _____. At least you're pretty. You've got, like, traits.”

“...Traits?”

“Y-yea. Me? I’m a boring 'blah'. But you? You’re…interesting. Like...Y-you're smart, you're funny. You have...opinions. You have…passion. When people ask about ____ ____ _, they at least have something to say. Me? It’s like trying to ask them about a...blank canvas. But you? You can fit in with the nerds but you're not so nerdy where you can't get along with the popular kids. And, to top it all off? You're super pretty.”

“What? You are totally pretty, too, Maxine.”

“Yea. Uh-huh. Seems all the guys conveniently forget that, then, I guess.” Max stubbornly and bitterly thrust up her shoulders.

“Max, this is middle school. We're still kids. What did my Dad tell you the other day? Remember?” Max sighed. She did not remember.

“My Dad said, 'School is temporary.' You know? What happens here feels important now, but...soon enough, it won't be anymore. What we learn inbetween the classes is more important than the classes themselves.”

“Yea…” Max nodded, squirming her hands around her waist and tucking in her knees.

“A year from now, things could be totally different.”

“I know.”

“But if we sit on our hands, with our thumbs up our butts, they won't be different.”

“Change isn't always good, _____.”

“Tell you what – I will bet you, right here, right now. This time next year? Our lives will be totally
“Wait, what are we betting on? What are the stakes?”

“Loser treats the winner to lunch.”

“Too easy – your Mom works at a diner, you’ll just get her to treat me.”

“Damn. Saw right through that one, didja?”

“I always do.”

“OK, OK, OK. Looooooserrrr...has to give the winner a free t-shirt.”

“Hm.” That seemed low-risk enough to not be soul-crushing, but worthwhile enough to be worth the gamble. “I want that Hawt Dog Man one.”

“Assuming you win. And if I win, I'm taking that Jane Doe shirt off your hands.”

“Wh-? Aw. You don't even like that band.”

The girl shrugged playfully, citing, “That's not the point. Maybe I just wanna cop some of your hipster style.”

“What? I-I'm not...hipster,” Max awkwardly protested, latching one hand across the opposing arm with a sigh.

“You'rrrrrre...startin' to get there, Maxine.” The girl's gaze fell deliberately to Max's pose, and she fumbled her arms into her lap.

“Ouch, reality...hurts, I guess. Maybe I need a goth to help me course correct.”

“Oh, what? Hipster's a cute look! It suits you.”

“Again: tell that to all the guys who are, ya know, sooo into me.”

“Psh, jeez. So. Again. The bet. This time next year, our lives will be super different.”

The girl stuck out her hand, opening her palm to shake on this deal.

“Different how?” Max was skeptical as the vague phrasing.

The girl sighed, rolled her eyes, and dropped her hand into her lap.

“Well, for one, we're both gonna have boyfriends.”

“Pff, maybe you.”

“I am going to learn all I can about romance when my family goes to Paris, and I am gonna totally share my wisdom.”

“First hand, huh?”
“HA, perv. But just you watch – I'll teach you the ways.”

“It's a deal.” Max smirked, extending her hand.

**The girl** took hold of that hand.

The tears were spilling, and Chloe could practically feel the prolactin giving her body a weird tingling sensation from the chemical release the crying was giving her. Crying was *good* for you, scientifically speaking. Prolactin was probably something she needed, anyway.

At least it was a natural chemical she was getting addicted to?

The chat with Victoria had been...nice. Like her talk with Steph, a much needed respite from the all-consuming, petrifying fear that she might have lost Max.

Max was alive, yea. But was it *her* Max, anymore? Had the Max she’d fallen in love with just up and vanished, lost in some crack in time? And Chloe had the Rewind power. Why? Had Max, like, somehow passed it onto her, or...? What the fuck was Chloe supposed to do with it? Especially when she knew how *fantastically* that power had gone over when Max had tried to fix things?

Was it her 'fate' to save Max, somehow? As romantic as that seemed, Chloe wasn't sure it was worth the risk. But if Max was a vegetable, then Chloe would have to try *something*, wouldn’t she?

Chloe didn’t really care one way or the other whether any of this was pre-destined somehow, or what – all that mattered was that she chose what she *chose*, because it was what she *wanted*.

And what she wanted was for Max to be OK. What she *wanted* was to be with Max. A Max that was *OK* and not broken.

If what she had to do was...whatever Max had been doing with her Rewind, she was willing to do it. But would that *actually* help?

Chloe's gut said 'no.'

But before Chloe could do anything about...*anything*, she'd have to—

“You in here?”

The sound of Stella's voice echoing across the tiled bathroom surfaces jarred Chloe from her stupor, and she bumped her head against the plastic sidewall. Fuckin'...cramped stall.

“You in here?” Stells called again, walking into the public restroom.

Chloe tried to eke out a reply, but a snuffle-stifled grunt was what emerged.

“Hey,” Stella cooed with that much-needed empathy Chloe needed empathy.

Chloe coughed, trying to clear her throat and nose as Stella approached the stall. Chloe could see Stella's retro game sprite infested shoes linger by her stall door, then turn around. The weight of
Stella's back pressed against the front of the divider.

“Sorry I...lost my shit on you earlier,” Stella murmured softly. Each syllable bounced across the room. Chloe longed for the sound of Max's guitar, her singing voice. But the song of a good friend's support would certainly make due until then. “You have to understand – this has all been a major fucking overload for me.”

“You saved her life,” Chloe insisted, her voice still a bit raw. “I shoulda been there, and I...”

“Thank Brooke,” Stella said. “After my Mom nearly died from OD-ing on the same stuff? It was Brooke's idea to keep auto-injectors handy – you know, as a safety measure.”

“Naloxone,” Chloe mumbled warily, realizing how Max had stayed alive long enough for support to arrive.

“Mm-hm,” Stella hummed solemnly. “I, just, um-...” She sniffed, pausing. “We always figured that sooner or later, my Mom would...But, well. Turns out, all the same, it was a good idea.”

“Brooke seems good at those.”

“She tries to stay disconnected from what she always refers to ‘drama.’ But, I mean...fuck, that's just the human experience, as far as I'm concerned. I get it, though. She was never the most friendly person, but she did really care about people – people we lost. My response was to try and, like...huddle you all close to me. Brooke's response was to keep everyone at a safe distance. She'd never admit it, but I know she's just afraid of getting hurt again. She doesn't, uh, handle things too well when they don't go the way she expects.”

“I noticed. Max, uh, she can be the same way sometimes. Especially these days.”

“Especially this other side of her. She showed me – who she is, where she came from?”

“Oh. Shit.” Chloe was a bit speechless. So that had been something she had been shown to her – another secret for Stella to keep.

“Yea,” Stella blurted darkly. “This is all just...way too much for me to take in right now.”

“You're not the only one.” Chloe set her elbows on her knees and perched her chin glumly into her palms.

“It's sounding like Max is going to be OK – erh, I mean, her body is. But that's not what worries me the most.”

“Aaaand...” Chloe sighed deeply. “Again, you are not the only one.”

“So, what do we do? Wait? I mean, is there anything I can do for you right now? At least?”

“Dude, you saved Max's life. Take a fucking break, woman.”

“I can't,” Stells whimpered, her voice a little more muffled. A loud breath. “The reason me and Brooke took so long? She was chewing me out for letting Max stay with us. For not keeping a closer eye on her.”
“Dude, just—Ugh. You sure she has a soft side?”

“She's harsh because she cares,” Stells insisted, her quivering tone straightening back out. “We made up, it's fine now. I-I can't speak for how she feels about you right now, but—...I mean, she's pretty mad at Max, too, so...”

“That's fair, I mean, fuck, so am I.”

“Uh...What?”

Chloe’s chest boiled and shuddered, and an involuntary sob spilled out.

“I am...pissed with her,” Chloe confessed, getting up from the toilet she had finished using long ago. Wiping her ass, Chloe let her frustrations out. “She lied to me, to you, everyone. She left me, she honestly fucking left me, she was trying to leave everyone! That—...” Chloe flushed the toilet. Pulling up her pants, she growled, “It's bullshit!” She unlatched the stall door and marched to the sinks. “She's been fucking with my head — literally! Hasn't she been doing that to you, too?” Chloe turned on the water and soaped up her palms.

Stella approached.

“W-well, yea, it's...like things have gotten out of her control.”

“Exactly!” Chloe hissed, feverishly rubbing her sudsy hands together under hot water. “Fucking exactly. Never should've gotten this bad in the first place! She's the one who started this fire! And look how much it's spread. To me, to you, maybe it'll spread to the others. She started it. Instead of putting it out, she...just screamed at it, fanned the goddamn flames, and—...”

Chloe’s chest was tight. Her migraine had gotten worse. Her intestines felt twisted. Her arm, shit, her arm burned. Her hands still wet, she couldn’t help but try and clamp her burning wrist with the opposing hand, leaned against the sink.

“Whoa,” Stella eased, rushing to her side and helping her stay upright.

“She asked for this,” Chloe whispered in a pain-stricken sob. “You don't start fires like this by accident.”

“W-well, sure,” Stells conceded, easing Chloe toward the hand dryer. “You OK?” she checked quietly.

“I'll live,” Chloe grunted through clenched teeth. “Just need to...sit, or—...”

“Chloe,” Stella sighed, getting back to her point, “Max didn't ask for this.”

“She sure as hell didn't make it better for herself – or me.”

And there it was – that goddamn contradictory frustration. Max had made her situation worse. Rachel had made her situation worse. Chloe had made her situation worse.

But what any of them had to go through was still not OK.
Chloe slammed the big metal button on the dryer with her elbow, eager for a moment of noise, so no one could tell her she was wrong.

Chloe hadn't made her situation with her family better back in high school.
Rachel hadn't made her situation better with all the shit she'd been up to, either.

That didn't mean any of them deserved what had happened.

The wave of ache and pain was relieved by the fierce gust of wind rushing against her skin.

When the machine – and the accompanied bluster of hot air – slowed down to a stop, Stella picked right back up.

“Chloe, you're one to fucking talk about making things worse for yourself. Do you want me to list off for you all the times you-”

“That's just it,” Chloe huffed, her voice peaking as her emotions bubbled desperately. “I'm a fucking disaster of a human being. I'm an irresponsible mess. Max is better than that! She's supposed to be better than that! She's supposed to be one with her shit together. She's supposed to be the rain that puts fires out, not...She's not supposed to spread them. Max is...was better than this! And I broke her. Indirectly? Maybe, but it still happened, and she'd be better if I hadn't train-wrecked back into her life.”

Stella sighed, simply pulling Chloe in for a hug – it was what Chloe really needed.

“Chloe, the person you love, that 'better' Max? She's still in there. You know?”

“Is she, though?” Chloe sniffled into Stella's shoulder.

“That's who she really is, right? Of course she's still in there.”

“I don't...think that's how it is with her, Stells.”

“The way Max has been acting out – this, uh, this alternate persona? It's not her.”

“You don't get it, dude,” Chloe sighed, “It is her.”

Chloe's chest swelled, her lungs sucking in a sharp breath, the hairs on her arms standing up.
An epiphany struck her. Everything Joyce had been trying to explain was suddenly slamming into her gut like a ton of bricks.

'That part o' you I don't understand, Chloe? I can still accept it, I can still love it, because it is a part of you.'

“Ih...” Stella was trying to find the right words – but she'd already helped Chloe find them for herself. “Chloe, I've known Max for years, and she's...I mean, it's like she's become another person through all of this.”

“But she hasn't,” Chloe almost laughed out, the endorphins practically filling her with hope. Chloe squeezed Stella tight for a brief moment, then, gripping her shoulders, pulled back to give her a teary eyes, dopey grin. “She's hasn't become a different person,” Chloe pointed out through a voice trembling with hope. “She's become both of those people. These different...sides of Max? They're both part of her. We've just been acting like they're separate.”

Stella's face seemed to grind a couple gears, but she seemed to pick up what Chloe was putting down.
“Max needs to put the pieces back together,” Stella theorized.

“I've been going about it all fucking wrong,” Chloe whispered. “I think that's why it's been getting worse.”

“So, what? We...What do we do?”

Chloe clawed at her scalp as she tried to line things up.

Wiping her hair back over her head, she took a breath, then recanted, “I've been pushing her away. Max has been pushing herself away. I have to help her realize that it's OK. That she is OK, all of her, that it's...That I...”

Stella, lips pursed thoughtfully, nodded in compliance. Chloe nodded back.

“I'm...not quite sure what you mean,” Stella confessed with a timid smile, “but you look...like you're sure of it. So. How can I help?”

Heading out of the bathroom and into the hallway, Chloe requested, “Can you see if one of the nurses can get us an extra pillow?”

“Uh. I-I mean, sure, but...why? What's your plan? How can we help Max at all when we can't even talk with her?”

Chloe took a glance at her sore arm, flexing and unflexing her fingers – it burned slightly.

Chloe replied, “I can talk with her – I just need to speak her language.”

—

Max woke up, her hand still gripping the girl's hand.

Or, well, she thought she woke up – but, really, she hadn't been awake for some time, had she?

Or maybe this had all been just a moment, stretched, flattened, into a long, winding coil. Seconds folded over onto themselves, folded over onto themselves, folded over onto themselves.

Either way, she was back in that...stone fortress again. That temple. It was hauntingly familiar.

That warm glow she felt in her palm – she wasn't holding the girl's hand at all, she was holding...-

Wait, a sword? That didn't make any...-

It was a sword, made of wood.
And at her feet rested some kind of...pedestal.
Had it been there all along? It seemed so familiar.

This sword in her hand, she knew this sword.
From her childhood.
Wasn't it different, back then? More fancy. Metal, and blue.
Or maybe it had always been wood.
Yea. It had been wood, originally, right?
OH! She could remember!
She could remember sword-fighting with...with that girl.
They were dressed up. They were talking funny, they...-
Yes. She could just barely remember.

That figure, swathed in light, was before her again. The figure gestured its hand toward the pedestal – there was a hole right in the middle.

Somehow, Max knew what she had to do.

She gripped the wooden sword with both hands at the hilt.

She plunged its blade straight into the pedestal – and everything turned white and quiet.

[ Time passes, people move...Like a river's flow, it never ends. ]


[ A childish mind will turn to noble ambition...Young love will become deep affection... ]

Max was on a beach. A very familiar beach.
As another wave licked at her feet, Max looked down to see that she was, indeed, dressed like a pirate, and she was...younger.

[ The clear water's surface reflects growth... ]

A vision? A dream?
Wasn't she...able to move through time? Somehow?
Wasn't that the whole thing they were doing, here?

But she wasn't the one with the Power. So how was this happening?

Surveying her environs, Max noticed an image that immediately struck a chord.

A lighthouse on a cliff, ahead in the distance. But not so far that she couldn't walk there.

She felt...at peace.

“What ye be doin', lackadasin' about? Thar be treasure in that there fortress, Cap'n!”

Startled by the gruff words of...that girl? Wait, she was here, too? She was pointing to the lighthouse with her...wooden sword.

Max just...stood, bewildered. A bit dizzy. A bit lost. But she'd do what she always did – pick things up wherever she'd left off. In a heartbeat.

“Aye,” the girl sighed peacefully, patting Max on the back with a hook hand made of a coat-hanger and cardboard. “I see how 'tis! Ye be contemplatin' a plan o' attack, eh? Brilliant, Ser. Thinkin' afore action, I see.”
“Y-yea...Ergh, aye~! 'Avin' me a think, I were. 'Tis...a bit o' distance betwih...betwist us an' that thar...-” Max wriggled her sword vaguely toward the cliffside. “That fortress. I was...were wonderin' about what...manner of transport we ought...travel.”

“As it so 'appens,” said the blonde girl, whirling around to face Max with a sly smirk. “I scouted the area under cover o' dark last nite. 'Tis a fort o' mercenaries, lookin' to plunder the treasure fer themselves.”

“Ah. We can't...be 'avin' that, then, eh?”

“Right you are, Cap'n,” the girl said smugly, nudging an elbow against Max's arm. “'Tis their treasure...'til it's ours. Yargh.”

“So...By foot, then?” Max surmised. The girl nodded. Max narrowed her eyes, smiling. “Stealth approach.”

“Tisn't our style, that I know,” confessed the girl, shrugged up her hook-handed arm. “But.” She grinned a devil's grin. “We kin do it, fer true. I believe in ye, Maximus.”

Max's stomach felt empty and warm for some reason – maybe it just felt good to be believed in, even if it was just roleplay.

“Shall we away, then, Cap'n?” posed the girl, nodding her head toward the small bridge that would lead to the wooded path up the cliff.

“Oh, aye, but...” Max wasn't so sure. ____'s Dad had definitely told them to stay away from the lighthouse – from the cliff. That was the only reason he'd let them wander around on the beach on their own to begin with. He and ____'s Mom were off tanning down the way, having a nap.

The premise confused Max, honestly. Weren't naps for babies? Why the heck would you wanna waste your precious time sleeping?

“Cap'n,” the girl grunted, tapping Max on the hat with her coat-hanger hook. “Me peg leg quivers wit' anticipation, tain't the time fer dawdlin'.”

“But...” Max turned her head back down the beach, in the direction the girl's parents were in. “The, erh, the British army, they be...watchin' our moves closely, what if-”

“To hells with the Queen's men,” growled the girl, giving Max a shake. “This 'ere could be our last chance to abscond wit' de treasures up in 'at fort.”

“Wh...-?” Max was perplexed. She gave the girl a serious glare. “There'll be ot'er chances, Matey.”

“Not if'n we think 'bout these things as such.” The girl was glaring right back.

After a tense, awkward pause, the girl sighed, rolling her eyes and leaning in toward Max.

Speaking with a softer, but irate voice, the girl whispered, “Dude, this is our last weekend before school starts back up, we won't get another shot to climb that thing, let's go.” She tugged at Max's wrist, squeezing it pleadingly. “Please? Cap'n?”

Max couldn't say no to that face.
“Aye-aye.”

So, off they went, stealthy as a pair of tween tricksters dressed outside of their time period could be. It was a longer hike up the hill than Max had remembered. It had been a while since they'd gone all the way up to the lighthouse, and last time, they'd had songs to sing with...William? Max remembered his name. That wasn't what she was supposed to call him, not what she'd called him back then. Why could she remember his name, and not the girl's? William was the girl's Dad.

Well, anyway, Mr. ____ would start up singing songs when they'd hike up the hill. They'd even get Mrs. ____ to sing, which was super rare. Joyce. Her name was Joyce. Singing embarrassed her, but William could get her singing. Her singing voice was different from her speaking voice. When Max was singing with them, she felt...like part of their family.

‘~Burning the midnight oil again
Sittin' out here, listening to the wind
I just called to tell you that I miss you, my old friend
Burning the midnight oil again~’

Wow. Damn.
Max was starting to remember more stuff.
That was good, right?

“Cap'n?” The girl were tugging at Max's arm a bit. “Patrol,” she whispered fiercely, yanking Max off the path and behind a tree.

“Wh-mmffh?” Max had been cut off by the girl's palm. Pinned against the tree, Max could do naught but watch her First Mate cautiously survey the pounding steps of a passerby. She could feel grains of sand sticking to her lips from the girl's skin.

As the loud steps quickly subsided down the hill, the girl rolled her eyes and sighed deeply.

“Oi, Cap'n.” She prodded her coat-hanger hook against Max's collarbone in a way that hurt. “Yer head's up in t'e clouds! Pull yerself toget'er.” She lightly slapped Max's cheek, causing Max to flinch a little, but giggle for some reason. “Coulda been our last steps as freebooters, were we spotted. Focus on what's in front o' ye, aye?”

Max was dumbstruck, mouth agape at the determined, adorable face inches in front of her.

Max pursed her lips and nodded solemnly.

Peering out from behind the tree, Max confirmed that the way was clear.
She could see the lighthouse, closer than it had been.

“We'll scale the top o' this 'ere mountain yet,” Max declared, grabbing the girl by the hand and pressing onward.

Within moments, however, she realized that the girl's hand seemed to be...what? Like, burning her own hand?
Her grip tightened, involuntarily, as the girl squeezed harder.

The world around her was suddenly white.
And quiet.
So quiet.

She was tired. She needed a break. So she watched. She watched herself, disoriented, do what Max Caulfield always did – picked up where she had left off. In a heartbeat.

She watched herself and that girl reach the top, reach the lighthouse, reach its peak...only to run back down. And run back up. Racing, racing, circles, circles, spiraling up, spiraling down.

Forward and backward.

They played. They laughed. And as they calmed, the girl, she took hold of Max's hands. That burning returned to her wrist. And Max stopped watching.

“HAHAHA! YARGHHH! Lookit them landlubbers below, like ants!”

Max was thrown off by the dizzying heights she found herself at. At the top of it all.

“Ye did it, Cap'n! Ye slew the wizard what had me in 'is grasp. Saved me life, ye did!”

Max nodded, trying to remember what the hell the girl was talking about. She'd been observing, watching, but not...exactly paying attention. But she did what Max Caulfield always did – picked up where she had left off. In a heartbeat.

“'Course I saved ye,” Max declared. “Wouldn't be much of a Cap'n if I...couldn'e look after me First Mate, eh?”

“Haha, ahoy and avast! The treasure be ours!”

The girl clutched Max in a tight hug, spinning the pair of them in a few circles. Round and round, everything around her spun, yet at the center – with her – Max felt so still. Like the eye of a storm.

“C'mon, c'mon, let's plot where we'll build our hideout, now that we've got enough treasure worth stashing away.”

The girl grabbed Max by the hand, leading her toward the edge of the lighthouse.

Holding her hand – it felt like fucking magic. Even back then. Even now. Even when it would happen.

“Hmm, should we build ourselves a fort by Culmination Peak?”

The girl were pointin' out landmarks, she were, wit' her hook hand.

Max was too enraptured by the girl's flesh and blood hand. It was magic, for sure.
A different kind of magic than she knew it had become. A magic she couldn't even quite remember, with a girl she couldn't quite remember. But, still.

“Yargh, or maybe somethin' closer to sea?”

Back then, the most complex of their worries had been where they wanted to adventure to next.

People grew, people changed. So did that magic between them. So did the magic within their hands. But its potency, its prominence, Max couldn't deny that seemed to have stayed the same.

And right then, from the top of the lighthouse, the salty hair rustling through her hair, the girl's hand clasped within her own, Max felt so warm. So alive. She felt found, if just for a moment, in a situation where everything else made her feel lost.

'I hear the distant sound of the sea
It sings between these old wind-swept trees
And I would gladly trade my reprise
For just this moment's peace'

Max lingered there in that moment with this girl as long as could. But sooner or later, the moment had to end. That's what made it a moment. It's what made it so fucking precious.

And as they decided down the spiraling stairs of the lighthouse, Max felt like she could vanish again, at any moment, just...blink away. Like she had been.

'If I fell through a crack in time
Would you remember these eyes of mine?
If the waves fail to reach this shore evermore
My soul will find yours'

The pair exited the empty lighthouse, and the girl made her way toward the nearby cliff. Max had to clutch her hat to keep it from flying off from the gust of wind that picked up. The wind itself – it knew, just as Max did. It knew this was the spot. This was the spot where everything would break.

The girl pulled out a black marker from her rear pocket, studying the plaque map that was affixed by the cliff's edge. Tapping the marker against her chin, the girl studied their environs. She nodded to herself and pointed her marker up toward the wooded hillside of the edge of town.

“Ow about there? Eh, Cap'n? Secluded. Safe. The perfect spot fer our hideout.”

Max was too busy admiring her companion's excitement, but she managed to pry her gaze away long enough to survey the vague destination.

“Aye-aye, First Mate. 'Tis good a spot as any.”
“So shall it be written – so shall it be done!”

“Make it so,” Max said through a chuckle, watching her best friend scribble a skull and crossbones on a spot on the map.

_I feel the gentle breath of the wind_  
_It whispers through the painted mountains_  
_Though I may never stand here again_  
_I wonder how you’ve been’_

Max lost herself in the sights and sounds of this wondrous spot.  
The edge of a cliff, where her very reality had been splintered.  
Where realities had been broken, and realities had been made.

It was a long way down.  
It's a steep drop.  
It will be quite a fall.

And Max had been there.  
Was falling there.  
Will end up there.

“Max? Please, Buddo, could you come back over here? It's not safe.”
Huh? A man's voice.  
She must have...lost herself again, there.

Max turned around, and realized that she recognized the voice: William.  
Her Uncle – or, was he?  
No. He could've been, though.  
Maybe he was, somewhere else. Somewhen else.

Well.  
There went another moment.

Max stepped away from the cliff's edge.

“I can't let you out of my sight, can I?” Willaim sighed. “I'm sorry, Sweetheart, but it's two weeks at home now.”

“Noooo~” whimpered the girl's voice. “Please, school's just about to start, you can't _ground_ us.”

“____. Buddy. Kiddo. I am...-” A deep, tired sigh. “I'm really disappointed in you. And your Mother's certainly not going to be happy about this. She was ready to call the police about you girls going missing.”

“We-...We didn't do anything _dumb_, we were safe.” The girl was crying. “We just went up the hill! That's all!”

“Please, don't lie to me, _____. I _saw_ you two looking out of those windows up there.”

“We were _safe_.”
“You weren't safe, though. You came up here, all by yourselves, when we specifically asked you to stay on the beach.”

“We're fine, though, Dad!”

“What if something had happened?”

“Nothing did, it was fine, we were fine!”

William turned his gaze to Max, and she felt an awful stab of guilt wash over her.

“And what do you have to say about this, Max?”

“It was my idea,” Max lied. “I dragged her along with me.”

“No, it was my idea,” the girl whimpered, sniffling and wiping at her face. “I really wanted to go to the top.” Kicking at the dirt with arms crossed, she grumbled in a pout, “And I know we're not gonna come out here again once school starts.”

“Ladies,” William sighed, pinching his fingers against the bridge of his nose. “I'm all for you both exploring a bit on your own. You're getting older, and it's good for you to be independent. But we gave you our trust, and your broke it. Broken trust has to be fixed before you can carry it again. You've got to let us know where you're going before you up and disappear on us like that. All right? Now, it's a hard pill to swallow, but I'm gonna have to ground you both. Actions have consequences. You both knew you weren't supposed to be up here on your own.”

Max was distracted in the middle of William's speech.

A door...

There was a **door**.

You could see it, too, couldn't you? It was just...there. In that spot. The spot where everything would break. What did you think she should do? Go through it? Maybe?

Max felt herself *leaving* herself as she approached the door.

*If I fell through a crack in time
Would you remember these eyes of mine?
If the waves fail to reach this shore evermore
My soul will find yours'*

*(lyrics from Josiah Everheart's arrangement, 'Dimension Breach')*

With a pillow in her lap, Chloe had been sitting in a waiting chair for a while now. Victoria had nodded off to sleep. Brooke was absorbed in her phone to keep her mind distracted. Stella was
scribbling on a notepad she'd found in a waiting room.

It had been an incredibly slow past hour or so. Brooke still wasn't speaking with Chloe – and that kind of hurt. But Chloe didn't blame her. In a way, it...sort of made Chloe glad? That everyone was so upset with her. It meant that they fucking cared.

Chloe was so used to living life one person at a time. One loss at a time. With Max's help, Chloe had managed to build some semblance of a...social group? An impossible task on her own.

Chloe's butt was getting sore from sitting on these uncomfortable hospital chairs, though. She was too fucking stressed to even take a nap. Too antsy to occupy her mind with some kind of activity. Too hungover to feel comfortable physically, and too worried to feel comfortable mentally. What she really needed – well, besides Max, obviously – was to stretch her legs, get some air. But she'd been waiting.

After receiving a text message, she was able to divert some of her attention to a brief conversation.

[Justin]
[wtf is the sitch man?]
[any word on your girl?]

[Chloe]
[She's alive and unwell.]
[But she'll be better. Just needs some time.]

[Justin]
[good she's gonna ok]
[and what about you?]

[Chloe]
[I'm relieved but also feel like a total pos.]
[In a way this is all my fault]

[Justin]
[man don't do that to yourself]
[max is her own person she makes her own choices]
[you couldn't know what she was gonna do]

Chloe sighed at this. She glanced at her tattooed wrist, flexing her achy fingers and recalling that intense burning sensation when she'd been on the street with Steph. She could know what Max was gonna do.

What if she tried to, like...Rewind? Back to before Max had done this to herself? Could she stop it? Was it even worth the risk?

No.

[Chloe]
[you're right.]
[max did a fucking stupid thing.]
[and I'm gonna help her through this.]
Shortly after finishing her second bottle of water for the night, Chloe was greeted with another familiar face.

“Steph?” Chloe croaked, her voice giving away her grogginess.

“Yo,” Steph said softly, nodding her chin up at the group. She took note of the snoozing Victoria in the room and took a seat beside Brooke, who had set her phone down to give Steph an awkward nod of a 'hello.' Stella waved, and Chloe just swapped looks with the woman.

Steph drummed her fingers against her thighs for a moment, glancing across the room. She finally asked the question.

“How is she?”

“She's going to make it,” Stella said with some relief. Steph breathed out softly, as if she'd been holding in tension since entering the room. Stella added, “I guess they're wrapping up some tests and stuff.”

“They said I could see her soon,” said Chloe.

“Ah.” Steph nodded, scratching her nose. “Good. That's good.”
Everyone nodded, save for the sleeping Victoria.

“Wow,” Steph noted, her brows lifting at Vic. “Even Sticky Vickie showed up, huh? That's how you know shit got real.”

Chloe felt a pang of empathy at Steph's unsuccessful attempt at levity. Stella and Brooke weren't so keen, and Steph's expression withered with regret. Chloe tried to shoot her a supportive glance.

After an uncomfortable pause, Chloe said to Steph, “Thanks for showing up.”

“Dude, yea, of course,” Steph insisted. “It's late, and...my wife, she, uh...didn't really feel right coming, so...-”

“It's fine,” Chloe assured. “I'm glad you're here, at least. Glad all of you are here.”

Stella nodded, giving Chloe a consoling rub on the arm, and they swapped small, hopeful smiles.

“...Mm?” Vic was humming, waking up. She groaned, rotating her neck.

“She wakes,” said Steph teasingly.

“The fuck?” Vic moaned through a yawn. “Gingrich?”

“Chase,” Steph greeted back slyly, waving two fingers in a half-salute.

Victoria blinked blearily, then rubbed at her eyes.

“You need anything?” Stella asked Vic. Poor woman had been asking everyone all night if she could get them anything, if anyone needed a ride home, if they needed to charge their phones, etc. etc. Good fucking egg, that Stells.

Vic shook her head regaining her bearings, asking, “Jesus, how long have we...?- Can we see her yet? Or what?”

Everyone kind of sighed and shook their heads, eliciting a huff from Vic, who closed her eyes and slumped back in her seat.

The group settled back into a quiet that clearly seemed to make Steph uncomfortable. Poor gal wasn't used to this group of folks, and yet kind of knew them all from school back in the Bay. Er, the other Bay, the smaller one, further north. True, Steph would pop into the comic shop while this group was there, but...Steph always seemed to keep her distance from them. All this time, Chloe had assumed it was because Steph was 'too cool' for them – turned out, it was probably because Steph thought Chloe didn't like her anymore. It was kind of aggravating, in a way – years of wasted time, in which Chloe could've had a companion soul in her life, in her social group. It was hardly any wonder Max would use her powers to try and improve her social status, 'cuz goddamn was it infuriating to face those 'what if's'.

What if I'd kept my ties with Steph?  
What if I'd been a better girlfriend to Max?  
What if I'd been nicer to Victoria?  
What if I'd let Stella in sooner?  
What if I'd convinced Rachel to stay out of danger?
“Hey,” Stella asked softly, beneath the chatter of Steph and Brooke. “What's wrong with your hand?”

Chloe realized she'd been clutching at her wrist with the opposing hand – clenched and shaking. She tried to shake it off and shrugged.

“What's up?” Stella whispered sternly into Chloe's ear, giving her a nudge of the elbow.

Chloe scanned the room, noting that Brooke and Steph were absorbed in whatever was on Brooke's phone – trying to take their minds off the stress.

Chloe, chewing her lip, leaned her head over Stells, whispering, “Something happened. Think I have a way to reach Max, but I gotta be with her.”

Stells took a moment to process this. Before she could respond, Steph burst into a laugh, startling the whole group.

“Uh...-” Steph swallowed hard, scratching her neck with a grimace. “S-sorry, just...-” She pointed down at Brooke's phone. “She did a search for...And what popped up was...-”

Brooke's eyes slanted away from Steph uncomfortably. Steph shrugged sheepishly at Chloe.

In this moment, sitting in a waiting room, Chloe found herself caught in a fascinating swarm of desire – she very much wanted Steph to hit it off with the others. This exact fucking feeling – it was what Max had been experiencing, hadn't it? She'd wanted Chloe to make friends with Stella, with Brooke, with Victoria...And Chloe had been dragging her feet, wasting everyone's fucking time, wasting her own time trying so hard to be the ‘loner,’ when obviously that had

She could maybe use the Rewind, if she really wanted to – reset the conversation. Try again.

Fuck that.

This power was only going to be used to help Max. Nothing else.

It wasn't a toy.

Which meant that things had to play out the way they would play out – which meant that here, in this moment, Steph felt awkward.

“Yeaaa,” Steph sighed, taking the seat next to Brooke. “I'll just...shut up forever now.”

Max's nurse entered the room.

“Ms. Price?” he said.

Everyone's attention lifted.
“Yea?” Chloe replied, perking up like a dog ready to greet its human home.

“We’re not sure when she’ll wake up,” the nurse said warily, “but she’s stabilized to a point where you can visit her, if you wish.”

Chloe scanned the room for everyone’s approval – in a way, it felt weird leaving everyone else behind, but...rule, guardianship, blabla. Chloe needed to fucking see her Max, even if...Max wasn’t awake.

Everyone offered their murmurs of support.

The nurse gestured Chloe to follow. Chloe took the pillow in her lap, wedged it in her arm pit, and stood up. Stella, who’d been at her side, reached up her arm, gripping Chloe by the wrist.

Chloe looked down toward her, and read her solemn, hopeful expression.

'Stay Determined.'

Chloe gave Stella's hand a grateful squeeze, nodded back to her, and followed the nurse.

The nurse spat out all kinds of words at Chloe about what was going on with Max, but Chloe couldn't find it in herself to focus on them. What mattered was that her fucking precious babe was in pain, was broken, had lost herself, and needed to find her way back.

Upon entering Max's room, Chloe's heart skipped, her stomach hollowed, and her chest flickered with despair at the sight. Max looked so sickly, pale, sweaty...But her expression was serene despite everything. Seeing Max asleep, peaceful and at peace, was its own kind of relief for Chloe's wary mind.

She let the nurse's words drizzle over her like raindrops on that fated night in the face of the Storm. It was all just painful, but it could roll off if she let it. Chloe would weather it by Max's side.

As soon as she was alone with Max, Chloe scooted up one of those hard, uncomfortable plastic chairs in the room, pulling it up right beside Max's hospital bed. She set the pillow by Max's head, wiped her hair back, and leaned against the side of the bed. Laying her head against the pillow so she could stare at Max's serene, dirty face, Chloe sighed deeply. She wormed her hand toward Max's.

That fierce burning sensation struck the instant Chloe's fingertips brushed against Max's wrist.

Chloe could feel Max's fingertips twitch, tapping against her own wrist in kind, if only for a moment.

“Max?” Chloe whispered, popping up.

Still sleeping. Max's eyelids were...flickering. Her machines didn't, like, freak out or anything. So she was fine. Right?

As Max's fingers trembled a bit more, Chloe suddenly realized: Max was dreaming.

If Chloe's gut was right, then she could...-

Chloe gently swept Max's greasy bangs to one side, then kissed Max on her beautiful forehead. She set her head down in her pillow, and she took Max's hand.
Again, that sharp burst of hot pain swept through her. But the sensation passed just as quickly.

And Chloe swiftly fell asleep, her fingers interlaced with Max's.

—

“Moments of calm
Nothing left to be found
A mirror right in front of me
That's where I find
An empty glass
Reflecting the sad truth
It's telling words not to be told
I need the mask

I'm a shape shifter
At Poe's masquerade
Hiding both face and mind
All free for you to draw
I'm a shape shifter
Chained down to my core
Please don't take off my mask
My place to hide”

~ Shoji Meguro, 'Beneath the Mask'

—

Memory after memory, useless anecdote after pointless sappy conversation after stupid fucking pirate bullshit WHY WAS THERE so much of that pirate crap?

Max kept trying to dig, deeper and deeper, further back, only to find herself accidentally going in the wrong direction. Was time really a river? Or a goddamn ocean? At least she'd lost that meddling other...her. Trying to fuck up her plan to fix everything, just to spend more time with that girl.

Max found herself lost again.

Before her was a...hill. A pleasant, peaceful hill, beneath a blue sky.

At the top of the hill...a tree. An oak tree. Its form was curved precariously to one side.

Max approached the tree.

There were...children? There were children playing under the tree.
Four children, chasing each other beneath the branches.
A fifth child, sitting against the tree's trunk.

The children were wearing masks. Masks of faces Max knew she knew. But couldn't recognize.

The first child scurried toward Max.

The first child spoke.

[ Umm...Can I ask...a question? ]

Max, puzzled and bewildered, shrugged and nodded.

[ Your friends...What kind of...people are they? ]


[ I wonder...Do those people...think of you...as a friend? ]

I'm a liar
I ruined their lives
I ruined HER life
I ruined my own lives

“They'd hate me...if they knew who I really was. What I've really done...”

The first child nodded thoughtfully.

They stretched out their hand, grasping at the air expectantly. Confused, Max realized her own hand was trembling. The Power. This child needed a piece of it? Max obliged.

The first child removed her mask – the first child was Max, but...different.

[ Thanks...You...You're a nice person...Aren't you? ]

“...No? No. Not at all, were you even listening?”

The Max in front of her closed her eyes, nodding with a smile.

[ Hide-and-seek...Let's play... ]

“I can't get distracted, I have a job to do.”

[ All right...I'll...hide... ]

Camera flash. The first child was gone.
The second child approached her.


The second child spoke.

[ You...What makes you...happy? ]

“I don’t...I’m not even sure anymore. I know that...she makes me happy. Or she did.”

That mask...it was that girl's face, wasn't it?

[ I wonder...What makes you happy...Does it make...others happy, too? ]

“She...seems to annoys people more than make them happy...”

The second child shook her head skeptically.

They stretched out both hands, flexing their fingers inward with desire. Max’s hand was trembling again. Burning. This child, too, needed a piece of her Power.

The second child removed her mask – the second child was also Max, but...different still.

“She makes things worse – just like I do. And everyone else pays for our mistakes, I remember that much...That's why I have to set things right.”

[ Thanks...You...You're a nice person...Aren't you? ]

“NO. I'm not 'nice,' I'm just trying to do the right thing.”

[ Hide-and-seek...Let's play... ]

“I'm not playing!”

[ All right...I'll...hide... ]

Camera flash.
The second child was gone.

The third child approached her.

Its mask – the shape of a face. A face Max knew from somewhere. Brown hair, half up. Glasses over soft eyes. A concerned expression.

[ The right thing...What is it? ]

“To fix all this. To sacrifice. I have to undo my mistakes. It's what's best for everybody.”
I wonder...If you do the right thing...Does it really make...everybody...happy?

"...What? Of...Of course it does. People will be alive. Can't be happy at all when you're fucking dead."

The third child bobbed her head with worry.
She clasped her hands together pleadingly.
Max clenched her fist when it started to sting, but opened it when she realized.
Ah. Again. Another one needed some of Max's Power.
Max couldn't say no to her.

The third child removed her mask – the third child was...of course, Max, but...also not.

Thanks...You...You're a nice person...Aren't you?

Max was tired of this. She crossed her arms.

"...I don't care about being 'nice.' I care about setting things right."

Hide-and-seek...Let's play...

Max huffed a sigh, shaking her head.

All right...I'll...hide...

Camera flash.
The third child was gone.
Max rolled her eyes.

The fourth child approached – OK THIS SHIT WAS GETTING OLD

Its mask – the shape of a face. A face Max knew -- YES she knew it she got it
In photographs, only.
The missing girl.

Your true face...What kind of...face is it?

"Max Caulfield. I control Time and Space. I can alter perception of reality. That's my true nature. That's my Power. That's who I am."

I wonder...The face under the mask...Is that...your true face?

"I just...I just told you who I am. I'm Max Caulfield."

The fourth child tilted her head back in disbelief, grinning.
Max's arm began to burn again.
No. No. She didn't want to give away another piece of it. Of herself.

The fourth child removed her mask, and Max was BLINDED by light.
She could feel the fourth child grip her arm, stealing some of Max's Power for herself.
When Max’s sight returned, sure enough...the child was also Max.

no no she was not Max she was just some fragment some PIECE

Struggling, flailing, GRINNING, the fragment spoke without sound.

[ Thanks...You...You're a nice person...Aren't you? ]

“No. No. No.”

Max pushed at the fourth child.
Instead, Max stumbled through it.

[ Hide-and-seek...Let's play... ]

Max fell into the green grass. It felt sharp to the touch.

needles

[ All right...I'll...hide... ]

Flash of a camera.
The fourth child was YES GONE SHE GOT THE PICTURE

Let's just get this shit over with, OK?
Whatever you're fucking playing at.
Is it you? Other me? Weaker me? Huh?
You honestly think you can stall for time in this place?
All you're doing is helping me remember things.

There was one more child left for Max to speak with.

NO. Let me leave.

The fifth child was curled up against her knees, leaning against the oak tree.

NOPE.

Max very quickly realized that she had nowhere else to go.

Oh my fucking-...Fine. OK? Fine.

Max approached the fifth child.
Her mask – the shape of a face. AfaceMaxknewfromsomewhereblablablabla

Oh.

Freckles across an ugly, open-mouthed expression. Quivering eyes.
The mask was in the shape of Max's own face.
The fifth child spoke to her.

[ Your real face...Show it to me. ]

“I...What? I don't get you. I'm Max Caulfield, you're fucking LOOKING at my face. I don't know what else to tell you. This is my real face. YOU all are the ones stealing faces, stealing my face!”

Max tried to seek out the other children – but they'd all disappeared.
Max was crying.
This hurt too much for some reason.

[ Everyone has gone away, haven't they? ]

“Please...just let me go to where I'm supposed to be...”

[ Will you play...with me? ]

“I don't want to. I just want to do what I'm supposed to do.”

[ You don't have any friends left, do you? ]

[ * BUT NOBODY CAME. ]

Max never had any friends.
She tried. She did try.
But they all SAW.
They saw what she really was.
They saw that Max Caulfield was just a mask.
Her true face?

The Void.

[ Well, let's do something else. Let's play good guys against bad guys. Yes. Let's play that. ]

“I can't do this anymore. Please, just let me go.”

[ Are you ready? You're the bad guy. And when you're bad, you just run. That's fine, right? ]

“Fine. Running is all I've been doing, anyway, right?”

[ Well... ]

The fifth child removed her mask.
She had a beautiful face. Long, golden hair.
The oak tree burst into flames. Green leaves igniting into oranges, yellow, and reds.

An unsettling, ear-piercing shriek.
Winds blasting across the hill, across the tree, across the fire.

[ Shall we play? ]
“We’ll fucking play.”

Max raised her hand. Lightning struck the flaming tree. The rains came, the winds came, and in a moment, the entire hill had been washed away.

And there Chloe stood, caught off guard, alone, in the dark. Max had vanished, along with everything that had been standing there.

Chloe's wrist ached, it burned – her tattoo, a butterfly, it glowed.

She'd taken back some of the pieces, her plan had worked. But she felt awful about it. The ends had to justify the means. Now she just had to...-

Erh...-

Chloe had forgotten how she'd ended up in this place. She had forgotten where she was headed.

The waters had receded, but some remained.

The shallow waters at her feet smelt of alcohol. Empty bottles drifted all around – vodka, gin, rum – each bottle with a parchment rolled up inside. Everything had a red tint to it – lights, there were red lights above. Cameras, spying on her, in this place that was supposed to be safe, that was supposed to be hers. Cigarette butts drifted with the bottles, their tips still glowing. Photographs and syringes, bags of grass, there was an awful lot of garbage drifting in this place, slowly being swept away by the waters.

Curious, Chloe picked up one of the booze bottles, stuck her finger inside – teasing, wriggling, easing its hole open – until the rolled up parchment within came to her.

Chloe unrolled the message in the bottle open.

{ WANTED }
One of her favorite photographs in the world. Her and Max, playing pirates as kids.
{ dead or alive }

LIGHTNING
THUNDER

Chloe Morpho were bein' chased out of the Raven's Cave by the Amber Phantom, who were shrieking in 'er pursuit. The ear-breaking banshee’s wails shuddered Chlo's innards as she ran. The litter drifting 'round her feet impeded 'er escape.

“YOU THINK IT'S SO EASY, DO YOU?” howled the Phantom. “LEAVING US BEHIND?!”

Chlo's chest were cold, an' the waters grew higher n' higher, 'til she were submerged. She weren't afeared – she were a tip top swimmer. 'Ad been, least, afore she lost her limbs.
The Amber Phantom 'ad her caught 'neath the waters. Red lights glowing in the suffocatin' darkness. Glowing cigarettes, messages in bottles, debris floating all round, spinnin' in a vortex what pulled Chlo in.

She were sick o' runnin'. Sick o' swimmin'.

She let the whirlpool pull her down.

She let 'erself drown.

“Chloe?!”

Chloe was choking, coughing, sputtering out water. She couldn't breathe. Chlorine burned at her nostrils. Couldn't...quite...stay above the surface.

The waters rippled around her. The strongest, the warmest of arms clutched her, lifted her to safety. Water sliding off her, the hot air relieving against her soggy self.

Noise, there was a lot of noise, a lot of yelling and voices and upset and angry and...-

“-...some space, let her breath.”

Hot concrete against her back. She rolled onto her side, spitting and coughing water onto the ground as she regained herself. She felt...light. Little. The pain in her lungs was too fucking real for her to be still dreaming. Her mind regained its bearings.

“Take it easy...” The most soothing voice, it made her safe as sturdy arms leaned her up against a warm body, just as soaked as she was.

“Dad?” Chloe eked out, her voice cracking as she couldn't speak the way she was used to. Her chest swelled as the sensation of her father's security swept across her like the pool water she'd just been submerged in.


Her brain discarded the garbage dream shit she'd just lost herself in. She'd gone back in time, the way she had been going back in time, and for once she was with her Dad. Fucking DAD. Real, physically there, holding her, protecting her.

She hugged him, her eyes streaming with a sudden burst of pain, but it all mixed with the pool water.

Her sight was hazy from the chemicals in her eyes. Her hair was balled up in a swimming cap, which was stretching her forehead painfully. Everything ached, her entire body was shaking out of her control.

And there was Mom's hand, unforgettable in its comfort, rubbing against Chloe's shoulder.

“I told you she needed a break,” Mom was scolding over Chloe's head.
“And I asked her to take one,” Dad quietly insisted back, rubbing his thumb against Chloe's cheek. “She's as stubborn as I am, and just as competitive.”

“No trophy's worth riskin' your life, Chloe,” Mom sighed.

Chloe had to clear her throat.

“I know,” she whimpered to her parents, a pang of guilt hitting her.

She could barely remember this afternoon – they'd gone to visit her Grandma, and Chloe had been practicing in their pool out back. She was getting ready for her first swim meet and was dead-set on proving herself. Grandma had been a competitive diver back in her day, and Chloe really wanted to make Grandma proud – which, ya know, would make Dad and Mom proud in the process, right? She had trouble getting into other sports, anyway, but something about swimming had just pulled her right in. Uh, maybe a little too literally, in the case of that afternoon.

The sensation of water encasing her, making her lighter, the way she could maneuver through it, almost weightless, it just...felt good.

Her parents' continued their grumblings of concern, but Chloe let her exhausted form drift out of consciousness within the warmth of Dad's embrace. Her arm was beginning to burn up again, all achy and sore, her fingers tightening into a fist from the pain.

Like the pool water drying from her skin, so, too, did that piece of reality dry up around her.

But Dad remained.

And Chloe awoke, in his arms, in the dim, dark comfort of her old living room. The harsh glow of the TV was oddly soothing. The tinny audio of an old movie was playing.

[ “The almanac. Son-of-a-bitch stole my idea!” ]

Chloe focused on the warmth of Dad's chest.

[ “He must have been listening when I-...It's my fault!” ]

The relaxed, slow heartbeat against her ear.

But when she tried to close her eyes, it just reminded her of Max's heartbeat.

[ “The whole thing is my fault. If I hadn't bought that damn book, none of this would have ever happened.” ]

The maelstrom of memories, thoughts, and emotions from the fucking future, far beyond this moment, assaulted Chloe's time-skipping consciousness.

Max wasn't alone.

Chloe wasn't alone.

This was their fault, but not entirely their fault.

And either way, there was no use trying to undo it.

The only way forward was...forward.

[ “Well, that's all in the past.” ]
Chloe sighed deeply into Dad's shirt, choking on a sob.

"Whatever! It demonstrates precisely how time travel can be misused, and why the time machine must be destroyed, after we straighten all of this out."

"Mm?" Dad hummed, nudging at Chloe with her shoulder. "What's wrong? Did you go and have a nightmare on me?"

Chloe moaned quietly, allowing herself this moment to be a child, to be Dad's little girl.

"I...dreamt that I lost you," Chloe miserably mumbled, wiping her tears on Dad's sleeve.

"Well, Sweetheart," Dad said with a charmed little laugh. "That sure sounds like a dream – you'd never lose me, not even if you tried to."

"It felt real."

"Oh..." Dad shifted his positioning, tilting Chloe's face up by the chin with his fingers. Oozing that sympathy that calmed Chloe so well, he murmured, "If I had a nightmare where I lost you, that would be pretty scary..."

"It is," Chloe winced, squeezing at her Dad, striving to savor every second of this unreal, rich sensation of security and comfort. "Um, it was scary. And...And I knew it was a nightmare. I knew it wasn't real...but it was still scary."

"I see," said Dad in that goddamn comforting way he did. He ran his hand across Chloe's head – and Chloe tried to appreciate it, but at the same time, could only think about how it felt when Max did the same thing. "Well, just because something isn't real, that doesn't mean how you feel about it is any less real. Right?"

Chloe couldn't help but chuckle softly through her erratic breathing.

"I...I guess so," Chloe sighed warmly.

"I mean..." Dad grabbed his remote from the couch's arm and paused the movie. "Isn't that why you like to play pretend with Max? You know it's not real – but it still makes you feel something that is."

"It does," Chloe acknowledged warily, contemplating what Max must have been going through all that time, when she maybe couldn't even tell what was real, and even if she knew it was fake, she couldn't just ignore or erase how it made her feel.

"Sometimes," Dad said, and Chloe perked right up. Dad paused, sighed, scratched his chin. He was thinking up what advice to give her. Dad was always the best with this shit. "Well," Dad grunted, collecting his thoughts as Chloe waited with baited breath. "Sometimes, Kiddo, it can be good for us to know what those sad or even scary things feel like. When we know it isn't real, we know it can't hurt us – that makes it safe. And if we can learn how to face those feelings – the bad ones, the scary ones – then when it comes time to face them for real, we'll..." He smiled down at her, and she was already smiling at him. "Well, we'll at least have an idea of how to work through it, because we sort of already have."
“Like...wearing a mask,” Chloe murmured, struggling to stay awake. Dad was so warm.

“Hm?”

“We, um-...We wear a mask until we're ready to face things for real.”

Dad hummed uncertainly.

“I think you’ve lost me a little, Sweetheart.”

“W-well, things like how...everyone loses things they love,” Chloe concluded, her eyes threatening to well up with water again as she lost her face in her Dad's shoulder, her eyelids unable to stay open.

“That's true,” Dad conceded. “But everyone also discovers new things to love. And besides – Max is your best friend. She's never going to leave you. Neither am I. And neither is your Mom.”

Chloe had no reply to this, but she drowned herself in Dad's warmth. Her arm began to spark and twitch with that fiery pain, her fingers coiling up against her palm.

Dad continued, rubbing her back tenderly, “I know they can be scary, but dreams are safe – they're a way for your brain to figure out something that's wrong. You just have to listen to them, and think about what your brain is trying to tell you.”

“What my...brain is trying to tell me?”

“Even when you feel confused, or scared, have faith in that noggin of yours.” Dad rubbed his knuckles against Chloe's skull in a way that felt relaxing. The best noogies. “You've got a good brain, Sweetheart. It's smarter than you might think it is. That's the funny thing about brains – they worry they might be wrong, even if they're right.”

Part of her wanted to stay here, with Dad. All of her wished Dad was still alive. Part of her could change that he wasn't.

She was traveling through time, after all, wasn't she? She could travel to the day Dad died and prevent it. She could save Rachel, even. Hell, she could probably save Max, too. Warn everyone about the Storm.

Nice fucking happy ending, right?

‘All the world’s a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players;  
They have their exits and their entrances...’
“People always told me growing up that it's never about the destination – it's about the journey.
But what if the destination...is you?”

A/N: This is Part 2 of a two part chapter.

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‘All the world’s a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances...’

Yea. Real fucking...happy ending...
Wait, where...was she now? It was cold.
And why the fuck could she hear Rachel...reciting Shakespeare?

Chloe felt way out of it. The world was spinning a little. She was sprawled out across...something hard. Her head was throbbing, but also floating. She tried to look up – elephant...? Her right shoulder was pressed up against a cold wall. Her left arm and leg were sagging off the side of this...narrow thing she was laying on.

Her senses were fuzzy and blurry, and yet that voice, Rachel's voice, reciting weird, old-timey poetry, it reminded her of that moment. And it hurt, and it healed, all at once. So she listened, waiting for her body to catch up with her brain.

‘...That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion;
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.’

Chloe exhaled, her eyes still closed.

“Well? How was that? Be honest.”

‘Be honest?’
You're...one to talk, you-...
Shit. But I loved it.
And I didn't even understand most of it, but I...
I loved it. Goddamnit. Just your voice, just imagining that somehow you're OK...-

“Was it too much?” Rachel asked. She was pacing in circles, as she would while contemplating
something important. Circles, circles... “Should I maybe dial it back?”

Chloe was struggling just to open her fucking eyes, let alone have any idea of what Rachel was asking about. And in that moment, Rachel did what Rachel did – she shifted her mood in an instant.

“Ugh. You weren't even listening, were you? So busy rushing to medicate, you forgot why I brought you here today.”

“...What?” Chloe croaked, rubbing at her face.

Rachel kept talking from Chloe's left.

“I have an audition, Chloe. Remember? For that gig in Cali? I'm done with this town. For real.”

“You-...But you don't...ever get...-” Chloe coughed and sputtered, her chest burning. It was like her lungs were on fire.

“Parts? No, I don't ever get parts because I keep chickening out of auditions. I need the right person to notice me.”

“Uh...” Chloe couldn't quite lift her head yet, or formulate full sentences. But she wanted to protest what Rachel had just said. The wrong people noticed Rachel. And got obsessed. Was Chloe-...Had she been just another one of those wrong people, dragging Rachel down? “Don't...”

“You keep dragging your feet on this,” Rachel sighed, “but I am trying to get out of this hell-hole. Get us out of this hell-hole.”

Chloe rubbed at her bleary eyes, trying to keep up. Audition? It was something Rachel had been so dead-set on for a stint, close to her disappearance – getting auditions out of town, trying to land a role in something. She was always a great actress, and that skill had only developed stronger and stronger the longer Chloe had known her. To such a point, it seemed, that even Chloe had been put in the audience.

“Aaaand of course you have nothing to say,” Rachel huffed bitterly. “It's like you don't even support me on this anymore. You know how much this means to me, right?”

“How mudge what mens?” Ah. Speech. With the words. “An audition...? Yer gonna...doooo what? Land a gig hundreds 'f miles away, n'...-?” Chloe choked on her own breath, her lungs still a bit hot.

“I'm not saying it'll be perfect, but, yea, if I can just get down there, ya know?”

“Even if I have to go there on my own, I can totally get us a foothold. I've got...-” Her eyes wandered, and she shrugged. “-...connections.”

Ugh. Moving was hard. Time felt slow. Strangely fluid. Chloe's burning wrist almost felt relaxing in a weird way, and she couldn't stop flexing her fingers up above her face.

“Connexshuns?” she drizzled out grumpily. “Like...Ffffrank?”

“I know you're not a fan,” Rachel said, “but I trust Frank. He can help us.”

“Help you,” Chloe blurted out, practically on instinct. She'd had this fucking conversation so many times, if only in her head. If she'd just been able to convince Rachel to stop putzing around with all
of those Arcadia ass-clowns...

Chloe had finally pieced together where she was – the junkyard hideout she and Rachel had once spent so much time in.

“In case you forgot,” Rachel snipped, “Frank offered to kick you the cash to repair that hunk of garbage you’re so dead-set on repairing. I mean, why the fuck don't you just use that money to buy something that works?”

“You know why,” Chloe huffed, all of her memories of these arguments boiling back to the surface.

“Whatever,” Rachel groaned out irritably from across the room. “Not like you ever listen to me anymore, anyway. Fine,” she sighed, walking further away. “You wanna keep starting shit with Frank? Be my guest. But you'll regret it some day. He's a good guy, and he's helped us – both of us – more times than you give him credit for. I'm so sick of you two going at each other. Is that how you act with your parents? Because it's no fucking wonder you can't get your shit worked out. Not every adult is out to get us, you know. Some of them can help us.”

“Oh, like your dad?” Chloe came back sharply. “Or your mom?”

Rachel shot Chloe a dagger glare that made it clear that the topic Chloe had just brought up was not on the table. Chloe shrunk back into herself. She was older, technically. Her consciousness. It was. And even then, she still cowered before Rachel's fury, before Rachel's beauty.

Chloe, who had been laying flat on her back this time, suddenly realized how awkwardly she was positioned, and how it probably should've made her feel sore – but damn, she was high as a kite or something. Was she actually in the past? Or was this another dream?

Chloe's senses were starting to haze and blur with...a memory. She felt physically present in their junkyard hideout, and yet, it was as if that place, frozen in time, was bleeding out droplets of a savory, sweet memory she had cherished. A memory so special, so poignant, that she'd long ago buried it under lock and key.

But here it was, spilling out in front of her in tattered pieces.

A stage play. Costumes. Hot, burning lights. Faceless shadows for an audience. Chloe managed to see the present for what it was, and yet that voice from the past would not be silenced to her time-warped senses. She tried to ignore it, but...-

'By accident most strange, bountiful Fortune hath mine enemies brought to this shore.'

Here Chloe was, in the past. In a place where she could...save Rachel from a terrible fate. Where she could have a conversation with the woman she'd once idolized and adored, loved and admired. Assuming, of course...that any of it was even real.

Then again, as Dad had just brought up, did it really matter, either way?

As Chloe peered over to Rachel, who was sipping at a bottle of beer and gazing out through a hole in the concrete bricks, Chloe decided that, yea, it did matter if this was actually the past.

If Chloe really could time travel now, then she really could save Rachel. Maybe saving Dad was too extreme, could fuck way too much shit up with the cause and effect.
But Rachel? That was much closer to when Max came back. Less risk involved, right? Less...effect to...cause?

Chloe managed to pull herself up from the bench against the wall. She realized her shirt had been halfway up – a few fresh hickeys were present – and her pants were unzipped, to boot.

‘Here cease more questions. Thou art inclined to sleep.’

Ahhhh, OK. She, uh, figured out what had gone down. Must've passed out afterward – combination of the smoking and the, erh, excitement. Chloe could...barely remember this day. Rachel freaking out about that audition, they went to their usual spot for some recreation...

What sucked was that Chloe specifically remembered how let down she'd been that evening, when she'd woken up, only to realize Rachel had just...left her there. This was one of the last times – or maybe the last time – they'd hung out in their hideaway, together. And she'd been so fucking high she'd blacked most of it out. Apparently, not exactly.

Either way, Chloe knew how this conversation was going to end – with Rachel leaving her there. And she could change it, right?
If she really wanted to.
And she did really want to, but...-

‘Tis a good dullness, and give it way. I know thou canst not choose.’

Fixing her clothes back up, Chloe fumbled around their makeshift table in the middle of the room. A half-empty bottle of beer? Nice. Still cold enough for consumption. She needed some liquid courage to face this situation.

She knew she maybe shouldn't be drinking while already under the influence, sure, but, eh, fuck it. She couldn't make all the 'right' decisions. Trying to go down that road was what had broken Max up. You had to pick and choose your battles. And right now, Chloe's battle was trying to savor a moment of...fucking closure, in as much as she could receive one, and...maybe even change things?

And yet, she knew herself too well – her past self. Her present self. She had traveled through fucking time and space, if even inadvertently, to be here with Rachel.

But, as Rachel ignored her, brooding by the hole in the wall, Chloe wondered...-
Even with some of Max's powers in hand, was Chloe truly in control?

'Come away, servant, come!'

“Rachel,” Chloe called from across the room.

Rachel didn't respond, instead taking a bitter sip from her bottle.

Chloe did the same in kind, but then asked a question.

“If you figured out a way to ditch this shit-hole town, for real...you'd tell me, right? We'd leave together. Like we promised.”

Rachel's shoulders popped up with disbelief.
“Why?” Rachel’s head twisted around her shoulder, and Chloe couldn’t help but admire the way that gorgeous hair tumbled and swayed. Fucking A. “What's with you lately, with all of the fucking interrogations? I told you: if you need to know about something, I'll tell you. Everything else? Trust me, you’re better off not knowing.”

Chloe was suddenly feeling that ice-cold dread she knew all too well – the feeling of watching someone she loved slip from her grasp right in front of her eyes. She'd spent a while watching it happen with Rachel. Clawing, scraping, scratching to keep hold.

With Dad, Chloe had lost him in an instant.
With Max, Chloe had lost her in a hazy fog over weeks, maybe months.
With Rachel, Chloe had struggled to hold on for years, kicking and screaming the whole time. It got tiring, after a while. But Chloe had always felt in those days as if she'd never had a choice.

Yet even as she felt her grasp on Rachel slipping, Rachel’s grasp on her had never loosened.

'I am ready now! Approach, my Ariel. Come.'

Chloe replied with an awkward shrug, “You just-...I-I dunno, we've been in sketch central lately. I'm trying to get us out. I never wanted to swim in this shit in the first place, and now, it's like we're in the deep end. I'm-...I'm trying to get out. But it's like you keep diving back in. I just-...” Chloe took a deep breath to decide how to phrase things. Because there were multiple things she felt, here, not all good. She went with what sounded nicest. “I don't want you getting involved in dangerous shit just for my sake.”

'All hail, great mistress. I come to answer thy best pleasure.'

“This isn't all about you, Chloe, God. Everything's not always about you. I'm getting to LA, one way or the other. I want you to come with me, and if you wanna take a loan from Frank to get us there? That works, too. But I'm sick of waiting. I've been waiting way too fucking long. I'm tired, Chloe. I'm going to do whatever I have to, with or without your approval. Are we going to finally leave this town, or not?”

'Most fearless, generous spirit! Hast thou performed to point the Tempest that I bade thee?'

“There's more to…-” Chloe bit her tongue with an exasperated sigh. “Rachel, I know everybody seems like they, like, love you and shit, but not everybody's nice to you just to be nice to you. We've seen the shady shit that happens in Arcadia Bay. After everything that's gone down, how can we even trust anyone besides each other anymore?”

'I boarded the King's ship; in every cabin, I flamed amazement.'

“You think I don't know that?”
“I think you know how this game works, but still, you won't-”
“Right, because I'm a 'player,' right?”
“I didn’t-...”
“Well, I'm done playing games. I'm willing to do what needs to be done.”
“Which isn't always what's best.”
“Wow. Coming from Chloe Price, the Fount of fucking Virtue.”
“I'm trying to look out for you.”
“You don't even know how to look out for yourself anymore.”
“That’s-...Maybe that’s true, but I'm just saying...-”
"The fire and cracks of sulfurous roaring the most might Neptune seem'd to besiege and make his bold waves tremble.'

"You are," Rachel grunted. "You're always 'just saying.' You used to back up all this bark with some bite. You used to go along with me, watch my back. Now? You sit around with your hands between your legs. Like everyone else in this pathetic, shit-stain town. You used to be a bad-ass, Chloe. We used to be bad-ass. What the hell happened to us?"

'My brave spirit! Who was so firm, so constant, that this coil would not infect his reason?'

Chloe's lips quivered, but all she replied with was a shrug, to which Rachel shrugged even sharper, tossing her head up with disappointment. Chloe hung her drug-hazed skull with remorse and frustration.

'Not a soul.'

Rachel ranted, "If I was the one following your lead, we'd be fucking homeless by now, living in this disgusting trash pile, trying to hide from the world instead of seeing it."

'The King's son, Ferdinand, the first man that leaped from his ship...-

Chloe retorted, "Would that...really be so fucking horrible, as long as we were together?"

'...and cried 'Hell is empty, and all the devils are here!'

"We are not 'together,' Chloe! Oh, my God." She chugged another gulp of beer. "Fuck. Everyone in this town wants--...I swear. Rrrgh. Can't you just drop that shit? Is being my best friend not good enough?"

"Wh-whoa, it--...It was. I mean, it is! I wasn't..."

"Why do you insist all of a sudden on putting a label on this? On us? I thought we dropped that. I thought we had an understanding."

'But are they, Ariel, safe?'

"Oh. Oh. An 'understanding,' huh? What just happened, here--" Chloe gestured between her legs. "-...that doesn't mean anything to you? Everything that's happened between us? It doesn't matter?"

"Sure, it does," Rachel winced, her eyes squinting with frustration as she palmed her cheek with a disgruntled sigh. "Of course it does..."

'Not a hair perished, and, as thou bad'st me...'

"And?" Chloe pressed, her head beginning to throb from the aural assault. "Am I just like everyone else, here, pining for your goddamn attention?"

'I have dispersed them 'bout the isle...in troops!'

"I didn't fucking sign a contract, I'm not your property, I have those moments with you because I want to. Why can't you just appreciate what we have while we have it? Chloe – I love you, I do, but you need to stop trying to fucking...put a leash around my neck. I'm not your pet, you don't get to decide who I am or how I am just because you think you know me! We had a good thing going,
Chloe. We really did. We still can if you just let it fucking be.”

“Rachel,” Chloe’s hands were shaking. “I will. I have.”

‘Ariel, thy charge exactly is performed.’

“You say that, but have you really? I thought you understood me, Chloe. What it was like to have everyone around you think they ‘get’ you. What it was like to rise, up, take action, and leave this shitty ditch of a town!”

‘But there’s more work.’

Rachel continued, “You can’t keep me locked up behind this fence you’ve made just because you decided to fuck your life over and you need a backup net. That ain’t me. OK? I’m so done with hiding from the world. I want to see it. And I thought you did, too. But if you’re giving up, I’m not giving up with you.”

‘Is there more toil?’

“What about...-?” Chloe coughed on her own saliva, her head shuddering, her stomach getting weak. “Rachel, you...told me that....”

The memory of that mystical, ethereal moment, with fantastical costumes, fancy words, an audience...mixed with the pain of what came after. Rachel had swept Chloe off her feet, made them commit to each other, and...failed to prove and act upon what true commitment was. What it meant, what it entailed.

‘Let me remember thee what thou hast promised.’

That memory – that magical, mystical memory she’d held onto for so long, like a precious necklace – was swirling fiercer and fiercer around her, enveloping her hazy mind, making their special room, their diamond fortress in a yard of steel, feel more like wood and hot, bright lights. Butterflies in a tornado, all within Chloe’s gut, in her mind, in her soul. Like watching a two different memories at the same time, one in each eye.

“What?” Rachel huffed. “Huh? What is it, Chloe? What is it you want from me, at this point? After everything we’ve been through? I’ve tried to do everything I can to motivate you to get off your fucking ass! What the hell will it take to get you to leave this shit-storm town?”

Max.

It takes Max to get me to leave...
As much as I wanted to leave with you, Rachel.
The way you made me feel...

The two of them, on stage, in costume, reciting fucking Shakespeare...until they weren’t. Acting out their drama, playing their parts, reciting their lines – until they weren’t. That was the thing about magical moments – they were merely moments.

Sooner or later, the scene changed.
The play ended.
The curtain closed.
The audience left the theater.
The costumes were removed.
The lights came off.
Everybody went home.
To their ordinary world.

‘How now? What is ’t thou canst demand?’

Chloe’s cheeks were hot, and her bloodshot eyes were watering up. She was so distraught by this unpleasant mix of emotions, all while fighting through her high to get her point across. Her mouth she got to work, but her hands were shaking.

’My liberty.’
“My liberty.”

“Your liberty?”
’Your liberty?’

Rachel’s eyes flickered with confusion. But she paused.
And Chloe’s eyes flickered back with pain.
And Chloe saw it – that spark, those gears turning in Rachel's mind, a micro expression she had been too blind to see back then, now clear as day.

’Nay! This most of all I will not grant.’

“No,” Chloe shuddered, barely containing her voice from whimpering. “Don’t gimme that bullshit, Rachel.” Palm pressed abreast, Chloe winced, “We meant what we said, I fucking felt it!”

“Sure! Yea!” Rachel spat, her own lips trembling, her eyes watering at the edges in turn. “We did mean what we said. In the moment. And that moment passed. And look how well that all turned out. Look at what your fucking liberty looks like.”

Rachel flung her arms across their junkyard fort of scrap metal and dusty cinderblocks, groaned irritably, then took another gulp, draining the last of her drink.

’I never said how dearly I hold thee;’
“Fucking…garbage. Yea. Great.” Rachel sobbed quietly, her arms sagging to her sides. “It's been how long? And the furthest we've made it is...where we started. Jesus. Just...” Rachel had started crying.

But before Chloe could process that fact, or how to react to it, that crying quickly evaporated.

Rachel **screamed**.
She smashed her empty beer bottle against the concrete wall.
She fell to her knees, huffing with despair for a moment, before she started to sob.

’*My habit's been to keep my soul well-draped.*’

Shenanigans in their junkyard fort. Stolen kisses during long walks. Held hands. Shared shirts. Getting into dodge – getting *out* of dodge. Having each other's backs through thick and thin.

’*Most loyal spirit...companion and friend...Is acting in my service not replete with excitement, amusement, and delight?*’

“R-Rachel...” Chloe moaned with sympathy, her heart breaking all over again as she crawled to Rachel's side. She wrapped her arms around Rachel, who had curled herself up.

’*Of course, mistress...Most truly, it is so.*’

“We could...” Rachel sniffed, brushing her eyes – those goddamn elegant eyes. “We could actually *do it.* Tonight.”

Chloe's stomach squirmed.

“Rachel,” Chloe said quietly, through her pain. “No. We're not ready. It's not...the right call yet, it...”

“I *mean* it this time!” Rachel winced desperately. “You don't want me doing what I have to do to save us money? To get a job out there? Then let's just *leave.* We don't have to play by the same rules as everyone else.”

“Except...we really kinda *do*,” Chloe begrudgingly mumbled, rubbing her hand against Rachel's shoulder.

“*Fuck that,*” Rachel moaned quietly, planting her face into her palm and leaning against Chloe.

“We'll figure it *out,* Chloe. We always have. Why can't you just *leave* with me?”

’*Then why, I pray you, wish you to be free?*’

“I just...*can't,*” Chloe mumbled, her own eyes dripping a little as her mind swarmed with how difficult this was. “I can't leave the Bay yet. I'm not...I'm not ready,” Chloe said through clearing her throat and rubbing at her eyes.

Was this how Max – the *Other* Max – had felt that night, on the cliff? Preparing herself to make this kind of decision – the decision to let go of someone that special to her.

“I'm *tired,*” Rachel whimpered into Chloe's jacket. “I'm so fucking *tired.*”
“Me, too,” Chloe quietly sympathized, across time.

‘Excitement’s...a mere...counterfeit of bliss. These storms and these adventures? I prefer...’

“~But I won’t cry for yesterday
There’s an ordinary world
Somehow I have to find~”

‘...to know...thou still cared for my...plainest self.’

Rachel and Chloe had curled up on the ground – the cold, dirty earth. They cried together for a minute or two, over completely different contexts. Across time, yet in the same space, spilling a shared pain into the soil.

“Why aren't you ready to leave?” Rachel asked, twisting herself round so she and Chloe were pressed together, face to face. “What's...keeping you here?”

'I have thee in my grasp; I will not bend.’

Chloe suddenly caught up with her present life – with Max – and became self-aware of how fucked up this was.

“I, erh, I'm...” Chloe swallowed, and she could feel her face boiling, sweat beads practically sliding over her cheeks. “There’s just...shit I have to take care of.” Her gaze felt frozen by Rachel’s in kind, and she pried her eyes away. “There’s someone who needs me. Someone I need to help. So...I can’t leave until I do.”

Rachel’s eyes narrowed with suspicion, her lips slightly ajar as those gears in her skull cautiously interlocked.

“Are you trying to sneak off with someone else?” Rachel asked, her tone softened.

Chloe’s throat tightened. She tried to swallow, but was still unable to reply.

Rachel could see it – she could see that Chloe was hiding something.

“Are you?” Rachel demanded, but in a strangely quiet way. A hurt way.

Chloe was confused. Rachel had...no fucking business getting mad with her about this. Not given what went down. Would go down...? Damnit.

“No. I’m not planning on it,” Chloe mumbled, her voice cracking in a whisper. “They're not...even close to ready to leaving this town, anyway. And I couldn't make them, even if I tried. No, Rachel, I’m...I’m just as stuck here as you are. If I could take you with me, I’d...You know I would.”

“Hm.” Rachel’s eyes, previously embered and sharp, dulled and cooled into charcoal.

'I will not see thee flying forth alone! The envy would be more than I could bear.’

“I...” Chloe spat, but before thinking of what to say. Her quick and dry wit, soggy from beer, clouded by marijuana. Blinded by beauty. ‘I just...Rachel. These odd jobs we've been doing for Frank. That...side job you won't talk about? I know where this path leads. And I dont...I can't do anything about it, and it's so frustrating, and I...’
Chloe could try and take Rachel with her. What would that do? Chloe could try and change the past. Yea. 'Cuz that wouldn't screw anything up. Chloe could try and just...escape this. This illusion? Memory? No, neither. Both? Neither?

'So come with me! Is that not in thy pow'r?'
'Then there's no other choice: I'll run away.'

“Chloe. Dear.” Rachel's hands clutched Chloe's, their fingers interlocking. And yet, it felt weird. Rachel's fingers fit between hers in a way that just wasn't quite right. Easier fit, really – but it wasn't quite right.

'Spirit, take my hands, most faithful friend.'

“If you need to stay here,” Rachel sighed. “I mean...you can. I'm not going to stop you. But please – I need to leave this place.”

“I do, too. It's not like I don't.”

“Whatever is keeping you here, I'm not gonna pry. That's your business – just stay out of mine.”

“Rachel...”

Sprawled against the concrete wall, dirt beneath them, sitting in a wreck of garbage fashioned into a shelter, they each tried to read one other's thoughts and expressions across time.

“Chloe,” Rachel sighed, snuggling her head into Chloe's shoulder. She spoke softly, solemnly, into Chloe's neck. “I'm so close to getting out of here, and finally leaving all of this shit behind. I can just...feel it. The same way I felt it the night we became friends. We're both going to escape this place, one way or another. But I can't do it alone. I still need you, Chloe. Don't flake on me, not now. Not after all we've been through.”

'For but a little longer I beseech: continue in thy service to my schemes.'

“Yea,” Chloe replied in a gentle croak. “I, uhh-...” She tilted her head down, pressing her cheek against Rachel's head. She took a long, slow inhalation as she tried to steady her shaky breath, savoring the remnants of Rachel's perfume. “I know you do. I'm not going anywhere. Not for a long time.”

“It's all going to be worth it. Everything we've done, everything I've done. It can't be for nothing.” Rachel's fingers grasped at Chloe's arms, tugging with longing at her sleeves. Chloe couldn't help but reciprocate. “You'll see. It'll be like...waking up. We'll be on the open road, eating Subway sandwiches and smoking cigarettes, checking into a motel for the night, watching some kind of dumb horror movie on late night TV, snuggled up together – and we'll realize, 'This is living.' As if everything before was just a fucking nightmare, and we'll finally be awake. It'll be that simple, if we could just leave. If we could just move forward, away from all this drama.”

'And when they are complete, I swear to thee: we shall fly beyond this isle – the corners of the world our mere prologue.'

Chloe blinked, and a pair of tears slipped from her eyes.

A future with Rachel – being tugged along, lead by the hand, pulled by it, even. Where she'd never
be certain what Rachel really felt. How she really thought. Even hindsight didn't grant Chloe that clarity.

'Don't be surprised, Chloe, if one day...I'm just out of here.'

Rachel's words, her actions, true or not in their authenticity to feeling for Chloe the way Chloe had for her...either way, Chloe always felt...trapped, in a way. Flowery words and bold, showy proclamations and promises with a live audience...For a time, it had all made Chloe forget about what she had been looking for.

'I'll seek to make thy happiness so great that e'en the name of liberty's forgot.'

Chloe had forgot about her liberty, she had kept herself trapped in that town because of a girl. And a different girl had rescued her from that town, released her from that trap.

“So,” said Rachel with a sly, warm smirk, sniffling and rubbing her plaid sleeve against her nose. Lifting her head from Chloe's shoulder, she gazed straight into Chloe's soul, from years in the past. “I haven't shaken your faith that much, have I? Are we still in this together?”

'What sayest thou to my most hopeful wish?’

Chloe's eyes quivered with too many regrets, memories, and sorrows to handle at once. She couldn't say 'no' to Rachel. Even when she knew what the future held. Even when she knew how much Rachel was hiding from her – had hid from her.

Chloe still couldn't say 'no' to Rachel Amber. And yet, she knew she had to, if only in actions rather than words.

Chloe simply nodded, whispering,

“Yes.”
‘Yes.’

Rachel's smirk widened into a grin, and she gave Chloe a peck on the cheek.

“You look unsure,” she teased. “Do you need more…?” She lingered her lips before Chloe's. “...convincing?”

Lips puckered against her own, smooth fingers against her cheek.

Max's lips. Max's breath. Max's scents, and fingers, and sighs, and saliva. It was all wrong, this was all wrong, Chloe shouldn't have come here.

'I am most pleased.'

“I, erh, no, nah, I'm-I'm good, it's...-” Chloe was laughing weakly, nervously, shrugging Rachel off of her. “I'm a little...convinced-out for the day, um...-” She rubbed her thumb against Rachel's shoulder and rose up to her feet.

“Guess we'll just have to save that for later, then,” Rachel said with a wink. She brushed the back of her wrist against Chloe's face, and it sent a pleasant chill up Chloe's back – only for a wary shudder to slide back down.
'Your duty, done for now.'

Chloe's insides were on fire in a way that should've been good, but wasn't at all.

"We'll, uh, yea, we'll see...""

Rachel got up from the ground, dusting herself off.

"Damn, you really are high," Rachel chuckled softly, giving Chloe a raised brow. "Maybe you should take it easy for a while. I'm going to need my accomplice in tip-top shape tomorrow."

"For...what?" Chloe asked, realizing now that she was standing up that, yea, she was...still pretty damn out of it.

"I'll tell you about it later," Rachel replied in that vague way she would. She started changing out of her clothes, right in front of Chloe, which set Chloe's cheeks aflame.

"Wh?- Later? Where are you...?" Chloe turned away, ashamed of staring and re-processing the way Rachel had been so nonchalant in the past. She knew damn well how to command Chloe's attention, that was for sure. "Where are you going?"

Chloe was enraptured for a moment – it had been so long since she'd seen Rachel. Like, really seen Rachel. She watched Rachel toss her blue plaid shirt aside, revealing a black shirt – with a moth pattern on it – before peeling that one off, to which Chloe immediately turned back away.

"There's someone I've got to meet up with. They...might have a job lead for me to look into."

'So go forth hence with haste! I've work to do.'

"A job?" Chloe mumbled under her breath, wandering to a corner of their fort.

There was grafitti written there.

{ CHLOE WAS HERE }
{ RACHEL WAS HERE }
{ MAX WAS HERE }

Wait. Max? Max was here?

Chloe's senses felt off, twisting even further.

'What is't? A spirit? It carries a brave form. But 'tis a spirit."

Fuck. Max. The reason Chloe had ended up here in the first place.
She was supposed to be helping Max. Max had superpowers, but she needed Chloe's help all the same.

No matter what Max could do, done, or would ever do...
No matter how many...fucking 'selves' made her up, no matter where she traveled in time...

Max Caulfield was still human.
‘No, wench; it eats and sleeps and hath such senses as we have.’

“A job,” Rachel repeated, flicking her hair out over the shirt she’d just changed into. “There’s big things in our future, Chloe. I know it. And I’m counting on you to help me out.”

Chloe was transfixed by the writing on the wall. Literally, and figuratively. She ran her fingers over it, and as she did so, Max's handwriting vanished.

If Rachel had...somehow been connected to what ended up going down – how Max had received her powers – would she have told Chloe about it?

Regardless, Rachel wasn't the one Chloe had come here to save. That train had already passed. And while Rachel had been on board, and had nearly convinced Chloe to come with her – no questions asked – Max had called out to her. Pulled her up and off the tracks. Saved her life.

Really saved her life. Not just, like, literally, or even figuratively, but, like...-

It hadn't been a play. It hadn't been uncertain. An act. A game.

It had been simple and plain.


Rachel was and had been a mystery – what was life without a little mystery?

It was painful. Fucking painful. Not like a stab in the back, or a broken wrist, or a gunshot wound.

More like...an ache. A terrible ache, in her bones, worse when the weather got cold. Chemicals could help her forget it but when hard work had to be done, her bones would ache so much.

Mystery just made the ache worse.

Chloe was tired, too. She was tired of the aching. Max had been the remedy – in as much as one existed.

‘Go release them, Ariel: my charms I'll break, their senses I'll restore, and they shall be themselves.’

“You, uh, gonna come with me back to town?” Rachel asked. “I could check in with Frank, see if there's any odd jobs he needs done.”

How was it that Rachel could be looking into the future so much, yet never really see it? Probably the same way Max spent so much effort looking into the past without accepting it. Chloe didn't regret taking a detour to this spot in time – she'd needed some kind of closure. And it certainly didn't hurt to be able to spend one last time with Rachel. Even if she already knew what was going to happen, she couldn't change things.

Or rather, she wouldn't.
Max was in her future.
Rachel had made the choices she'd made.
And so had Max.
And in the end, Max had chosen Chloe over everyone.
And Rachel had chosen everyone.
Maybe that was a selfish way of looking at things.
Rachel didn't deserve what had happened.
But look what had happened when Max had tried to save just one person from Fate?
Max had carried such a burden. Such a heavy weight.
Rachel, meanwhile, had spread that weight around to everyone else.
It wasn't that Rachel had deserved what had happened, but...

Two troubled teens, hooked up and hooked on the worst kinds of influences.
Their futures? It wasn't a difficult equation, once one understood how the math worked.

Chloe was still breathing – she was the lucky one.
Things could have turned out differently – maybe in some other reality, Chloe had died, and Rachel had been the one Max had saved. Who fucking knew?

What had Rachel truly felt? What all had she truly been up to back then?

Chloe had once thought it mattered so much.
That Rachel's true feelings, true intentions, true actions mattered so much.
But it didn't matter. Not anymore.

'Now my charms are all o'erthrown,'

What mattered was that Chloe had Max. And Max had Chloe.
And they had their reality. One they had chosen for themselves.

Chloe wasn't going to fuck that up, she wasn't even going to jeopardize it.

As wonderful as it would be to live in a world with Rachel and Max and herself, all alive, that simply wasn't reality – not the one Max had chosen for Chloe. Not one that was feasible, even.

And unlike Max's Other self, Chloe wasn't going to try stealing reality from someone else, just because her own had taken a bad turn. Chloe wasn't above time itself. This power was too dangerous, and if it fucked up Max that badly, Chloe knew full well what kind of shit it could do to her, too – and she'd already experienced enough of being lost for one life time, let alone multiples lives across multiple timelines.

Choice – that was the real power.
Rachel, Max, and Chloe all possessed it in equal measure.

Chloe had spent so much of hers on Rachel.
Max had spent so much of hers on Chloe.

And Rachel? Chloe didn't even know anymore.
But it hadn't been toward equality. And it hadn't been toward Chloe's liberty.

Rachel had been her own person. Made her own choices.
'And what strength I have's mine own.'

“Chloe,” Rachel called, grabbing Chloe's wrist with that tight, forceful tug she so often did. “Dude, you are hella stoned,” she giggled. “I bet you won't even remember half this conversation tomorrow. But c'mon, I'm gonna be late. Let's go.”

Chloe bit at her lip and took a deep breath, standing her ground and twisting her palm to fit into Rachel's.

“You should...go on without me,” Chloe said, gazing into Rachel's eyes. “I, uh...” She swallowed the cold lump in her throat. Rubbing the back of her neck, she squeezed Rachel's hand. “I need more time on my own.”

Rachel paused, her lips slightly agape, her head tilting just a tad. Those clever eyes of hers scanned Chloe's. And she knew – she knew something weird was up. But she had other things that she wanted to take care of. And Chloe had never stopped her before.

“We're getting out of this place, Chloe.”

“I know. We will.”

They both nodded to each other.

'Pray, release me from my bands,'

Chloe let go of Rachel.

'With the help of your good hands.'

Chloe was able to hold back her tears until Rachel was out of earshot.

Hugging at her stomach, a hollowed-out mess at that point, Chloe stumbled to that wall, tears dripping down her face.

{ CHLOE WAS HERE }

That was all it said now.

Chloe raised her hand against the cold, dusty bricks. She pressed against the marker ink.

She focused as hard as she could – her arm flared up with heat and pain, the world around her melting away, sliding down like paint. Too much paint.

The wall crumbled, revealing a...door.

Chloe passed through it.

"You know, it's funny; when you look at someone through rose-colored glasses, all the red flags just look like flags."
~ Bojack Horseman
After entering the strange door, Chloe found herself in a familiar but alien place.

Darkness across every horizon.

Metal fences, cobblestone floor, a metal lamp post.
A butterfly, circling beneath that lamp post.

A stray light in a cloud of darkness. An unexpected kiss in that single pool of light. She had gazed up upon it, blinded by it. That magical night with Rachel, so long ago, in that tumultuous time of uncertainty...Chloe had found direction that night. But in order to move forward along that dark road, she’d needed to walk out of the light. Back into the dark.

“When night falls...that's when they turn the light up there on.”

It was a voice, speaking to her from...the light? Or somewhere else?

The lamp post – its light no longer shone as a cloud, but...as a beam. Spinning slowly, slowly, like a small lighthouse.

“But when morning comes, the sun rises.”

Chloe marveled at the light, only to realize that someone was standing at the base of the lamp post.

“and in the sun's gaze, there's no need for man-made beams of light to show us the path.”

It was Stella Hill.
Younger, somehow different from her Stella Hill.
The one from Other Max's memories?

She was holding something...glowing.
She handed it to Chloe, and Chloe accepted it.

“We find it ourselves.”

Max.
It was...Max?
In Chloe's palm.

That didn't make sense. But it was what Chloe's gut told her.
Chloe clenched the glowing something into her hand – and it connected with the rest of it that Chloe was already carrying.

It was Max's power – a piece of it. Or, perhaps, many tiny pieces.
Just like the pieces Chloe already had.

Stella pointed off behind Chloe.

There was a bucket there. In the corner. And it glowed a strange green color, just like the pieces
Chloe had been carrying with her.

“It's plain. It's obvious. It's simple.”

'We need to be whole.'
It's what Max had kept saying, right?
Chloe turned back around, asking, “What do I...-?”

But suddenly, Chloe was surrounded – by Max.
So many...Max. Maxes? Different sizes, shapes, expressions...
All Max, and all not Max.
A swarm of Maxes, each one with its own story, no doubt.

“But, no matter what you believe about this world and how it came to be,”

Hands latched behind her, Stella stepped back into the crowd of Maxes, dissolving out of sight.

“night always comes, Stella.”

Chloe was left with...a crowd of Maxes in a dimly lit slice of unreality.
These were all pieces of Max, right? The ones Max's Other self had been trying to...save?
But in the process, she'd lost herself:

“And once in a while, we are trapped outside when the sun falls.”

The Maxes were approaching Chloe. Their eyes were hollow, cold, empty.
It was painful to look at. And confusing as hell. So many Maxes...

“And then, it's not plain. It's not obvious, and it's not simple.”

The Maxes edged Chloe closer and closer into the corner – but they weren't actually looking at her.
They were looking...at the floor.

At the bucket. The butterfly from before – it had landed on the bucket's edge.

It looked...

Fuck. It looked just like that photo Max had taken the day everything had changed.

“And without a source of light--”

Chloe peered into the bucket, its glowing, green liquid somehow soothing to her.

Instead of her own reflection, however, she saw Rachel's.

Rachel's face greeted her – serene, calm.

“--and there are many kinds of sources--”

Chloe reached her hand into the liquid, and the ripples faded Rachel's face away.
Chloe yanked her hand back out, and it was her own reflection she saw.
“--but without one?”

Chloe took one last look at the many Maxes congregated in this place. They all nodded to her.

So many Maxes...

“We can get very lost, very quickly.”

The Maxes began to fade, like...photographs in a dark room, exposed to white light too soon.

“I think that's what Max has been going through: a very long night.”

Chloe focused her attention back on the bucket.

“Her sun is about to rise – she just needs us to be there for her.”

Chloe felt compelled to...walk into it.
Which didn't make sense.
But...did it make enough sense, maybe?

Chloe entered the strange pool of water in the bucket.

“To show her that it can be simple again.”

–

‘A scattered dream that's like a far off memory...
A far off memory that's like a scattered dream...
I wanna line the pieces up... yours, and mine...’

Max had landed in the sand.
The wooden sword in her hand was dry and smooth.
The ocean was calming.
The wind was shifting the trees behind her.
Every pine needle swaying in parallel to its neighbors, yet distinctly its own entity.

The sky was dark.
There were so many stars.
So many...other worlds.
Other possibilities.
Other Maxes.
They were all connected, though, one way or another.

They were all connected by that girl.

Max had to line the pieces up.

She had to find her Other self, the one who kept talking about 'the source.'

Max knew that if she could just...get there, she'd find her Other self.
There was a door. The same one from before, at the cliff.

The cliff – the lighthouse.
It was still nearby.

The light from before, emanating from the lighthouse, spoke to her again.

[ It is something that grows over time... a true friendship. ]

Max walked across the waves.

[ A feeling in the heart that becomes even stronger through time... ]

Max closed her eyes.
She opened the door.

[ The passion of friendship will soon blossom into a righteous power and through it, you'll know destination to go... ]

Max walked through the door.
And there, she met her Other self.
Wordless, powerless, they both found themselves calmed. Quieted.

They had gone back.
Very far back.
An emptier place, a simpler time.
Barely any memories this far back.

Max and herself shared the passenger seat. They observed the sights passing by through the window.

The door closed.

Mom locked it.

Max stamped her boot, fists balled at her sides.

“They’re mucky out. You’ve already come down with something, you don’t want to make it worse.”

“I wanna play,” Max whimpered, completely enraged at this injustice. “You never let me play in the rain! I wanna play outside!”

Mom's eyes rolled – Max saw it, Mom wasn't taking her seriously, ouch – and Mom knelt down on one knee to meet Max's height.

Before Mom could speak, Max interjected, “I got my rain boots on! And-...And my raincoat, too.”
Max pawed at her waterproof armor, prepared for the wild elements outside. She drew her gray raincoat hood over her head and pushed hair out of her eyes. Didn't Mom see? She was so prepared.

Ulgh, then she coughed a bit, owie, did that hurt her neck...
“Maxine,” Mom softly chuckled, but in that way that was like, ready to say ‘no’ already. She peeled off Max's hood gently, and scratched her fingers through Max's matted hair. “Playing out in the rain when I told you not to is why you got sick in the first place. So, no, I'm sorry, kiddo. I'm not letting you get worse – you've already missed a day of school.”

This was unbelievable. Intolerable. Egregious. Laws were surely being broken, here. She was being oppressed.

A cookie might make her feel better, though.

Her tummy hurt, her fingers felt funny, and her face felt all hot and gross. The outside would help her feel nice and cool and the rain would totally wash the gross off, why did Mom think it would make everything worse? Rain was natural and good, and it always sounded nice and relaxed her.

Max stamped her boots again, which felt nice with how big and rubbery they were.

She growled and snarled as she tore off her raincoat and threw it to the floor.

“Come onnn,” Mom cooed tiredly, wiping sweat from her forehead as she watched her child toss a tiny tantrum. “Why do you want to go outside so bad, huh? Why do you want to play out in this storm?”

Peeling off her boots and grumpily tossing them with the other household shoes, Max huffed dramatically.

“What do you care?” Max pouted. “You won't let me go, anyway...”

“Sweetie,” Mom said somberly, “Please don't speak to me like that. You know I love you.”

She tried to give Max a hug, but Max resisted at first, whimpering out in protest.

“OK,” Mom murmured. “OK. Let's hear it.” She gestured again for a hug. “What's got my baby girl so grouchy today, huh? Is it 'cause you're sick? I've told you to take it easy or you won't get better. You didn’t listen to me – and you’re not better. Now, Come on, kehhhhmm on...”

Sniffling at the blend of frustrations swirling inside her, Max gave in. Hugs were too nice.

Standing in the doorway, enclosed in a hug, the pattering of rain filling her ears...

It filled her with feeling.

Things were so cold that afternoon. That hug brought warmth.

Mom asked softly, “Why do you want to go out and play so bad, huh?”

Max rubbed her snotty nose against Mom's stomach. Mom ran her hand against Max's hair.

“I like it,” Max mumbled dejectedly. There was more. She felt stupid about it, though. “The rain, it's nice.”

“It's also wet. And cold.”

“Mm.” Max breathed deeply into Mom's sweater. It smelled funny. But in a good way. “It feels
good, though.”

“Good?”

Max closed her eyes and listened to the rain. She nodded her head against Mom's tummy. How could Mom get it? Maybe she couldn't.

Max explained, “The noise is nice for my ears. And it makes everything look...different. Smell good. Feel clean. And I like it when it's done, and the rainbow comes. And also...”

There was someone else, though. Stupid. It was stupid.

“Also what?”

“Well...” Max sniffled. “Last time I played in the rain, I saw someone else, too.”

“Someone else?”

“Another kid. Down the street. In the rain.”

“Oh...?”

“They saw me, and...and they waved. And said 'hi.’”

“Mm-hm.”

“And I...I was too scared to talk to them. So I ran back home.”

Mom laughed gently, patting Max's back reassuringly.

“You're scared of talking with everyone, Sweetie. And...I mean, that's OK! It’s...all right to be scared of strangers.”

“I am not scared of everyone,” Max sighed bitterly. “And it’s not all right, it’s bad. I want friends. What if...?” She huffed at Mom's raised eyebrow. “What if I meet a new friend, but...but I can't talk with them? Then they won't like me!”

“Oh, Max, you...” Mom sighed, running her hand across Max's head. It felt good. But Max still felt bad. That kid in the rain could've been her friend. Maybe she just had to find them again, and not be a scaredy-cat chicken this time.

“I just wanna feel the rain,” Max sighed, pleading on her knee now, shaking her fists together with a pouty look. That worked on Moms, she'd seen it work. “Puh-leeaaaaazzz?”

Mom paused. Max waited.

“OK,” said Mom with resolution. “Tell you what: I can't let you go outside, but I will let you sit by the window for a while.”

“Oh-oh-oh-oh can I open it? Can I? PLEASE, Mom, so I can feel it better?”

“All right, all right,” Mom chuckled. “No sticking your hands out, or...anything. All Max-parts must
stay dry and inside. But yes, you can open the window.”
“Yessss.”
“For a few minutes.”
“Thanks, Mom!” Max was already bolting for the living room.
“And no boots on the couch!”
“OK!”
“I’ll make you lunch.”
“Uh-huh!”
“Do you want chicken soup or tomato?”
“Don’t care!”

Max always had trouble deciding.

Max was already on the couch, sitting up against its spine on her knees. Her boots were dangling off the cushions behind her. Heh. Gaming the system.

“Max...” Poop. Couldn't get anything past Mom.

Max kicked her rainboots off, leaving them against the floor.
The TV was on, playing some baby show she didn't care about, she was too big for that stuff. But, um...she would leave it on. Just in case it got good. When it was quiet, she felt weird.

She tried to open the window. *Hrrrrghhh-ooof.* Nope. Owie. Her hands...

Oh. Doy. The lock-thingies. Max unclicked the weird locks. The left one was really tricky, like always. Felt like she might break it but it never broke. She pushed up on the window with all she could, and the sticky wood slid.

**The window opened.**

A chilly, refreshing gust of air rushed in, bristling Max's face in a wonderful way and ruffling her raincoat hood. It smelled so nice! It felt so good on her hot skin. And it sounded good. So good.

Folding her arms over the windowsill, Max rested her chin on her wrists. She sighed peacefully as she let the storm soak into her senses. The *-patpat-pattata-pat-patt-* of raindrops on everything. The nice, yummy smell, the cool air against her skin...

Rain always made Max sleep good and have nice dreams. Like she was being given a nice, big hug by...the world?

Just as she had started to nod off from how warm and relaxing it all made her feel, there was...splashing.

Footsteps. Loud ones.

-*Ksshhh, Ksshhh, Ksshhh-*

Max opened her eyes, suddenly realizing how sleepy she was feeling.

-*Ksshhh, Ksshhh, Ksshhh-*

There was someone in the sidewalk, splashing in the rain.
They sure liked to stomp around in their boots.

*Hey.* It was a kid! All by themselves? Out in the rain. Splashing and stomping and laughing.

It was a nice laugh. Energy, life, warmth, all in that laugh, even though the rain made everything around them all gray and wet.

They were wearing a blue raincoat and holding...a bucket?

IT WAS THE KID from the other day!

*Say hi.*
*Try again.*

That's what Max's tummy told her. But she was too scared too do that. Why should she? They'd think she was some weirdo, staring outside into the rain through a window.

**SAY HI!**

Max didn't understand why her tummy was being so loud about this girl. It did *not* make sense.

Max did not talk to people.
People talked to Max.
She listened.
Max talked to *herself*: Not other people.

But she wanted to say hi, anyway.

She tried to speak – her throat hurt. *Ouchie.* She coughed a bit and it felt better. But the kid heard her coughing.

Max opened her eyes to see the kid staring at her, confused. She had dropped her bucket. A frog was hopping out of it.

“Oh...~!” said Max, pointing at the escaping frog.

*Ah, yikes!*
Her hand got wet from the rain for a second. She jerked her head back to see if Mom had been looking.

Whew. Nope.
Just a second! It had only been a second. Max dried her hand on the couch.

When she looked back outside, the kid was...gone?

Oh. No. She hadn't gotten a chance to say anything! She had...-

What? The girl had been chasing the frog. *Ha.* Right into Max's yard! Looking over onto the walkway to their front door, Max watched the kid, grumbling at the frog, trying to get it back in her bucket.
“Um...Hi!” said Max, raising her voice through the rain.

The kid stopped again, looking wide-eyed up at her. The frog jumped into the bushes against Max’s house.

“Aww, jeez,” cried the girl. “You made me lose it!” She shot Max an annoyed glare. She sounded like...a girl? Probably? Seeing her face all scrunched up and angry felt...bad. Max didn't like it.

“Sorry,” Max said. “I didn't mean to.”

The girl rolled her head a bit, wiping raindrops from her nose, and approached the window.

“You owe me a frog,” she declared, tilting her head and...giving Max a funny look. Was she being serious? Max was very frog-less.

“I, uh, I can't...” Max began.

The girl giggled. It made Max feel nice.

“Ffff, I'm just pulling your leg! Ha.”

“Oh, Y-yea, I know,” Max lied sheepishly, smiling as best she could.

“You did?” the girl said, confused. “Now yer just pulling my leg.”

“Why do you want to catch a frog, anyway?” Max asked.

“For science,” said the girl, matter-of-factly.

“Umm...Whhhat does catching a frog gotta do with that?”

“Everyone knows frogs are the best for tests.”

“What about mice?” Max posed. “Aren’t mice good for tests?”

The girl snorted air through her nose thoughtfully, frowning a little.

“Mice are...harder to catch, and...Th-They’re not right for the tests I’m doing.”

“You’re doing tests?”

The girl grinned widely, squinting her eyes with a proud nod.

“Yup! Sure am. I’m a scientist.”

Kids could do science? And tests? On their own? Max did not know this.

“What are you testing?” Max wondered.

The girl blinked at Max, brows furrowed, lips open.

The rain continued to fall.
At last, the girl replied, “You're really nosey, huh?”

Max’s cheeks burned with embarrassment. Dangit.

“Awh, hey, wait,” said the girl, pointing her finger at Max. “You're that kid who was snoopin' by my house the other day, aren't you?”

“Mm,” Max hummed uncertainly, nodding but shrugging her shoulders at the same time. “I-I just...I want to know things, I, um...I guess.”

She kept her eyes locked onto this strange girl's eyes.

“Hmm,” hummed the girl loudly, through the rain. “Well, that is what science is about...”

The girl’s blue eyes twinkled with an intrigued spark that made Max’s tummy feel funny.

FRIEND. She can be your friend. You need a friend.
SPEAK. Talk with her.
NAME. Your name.

“My name's Maxine.”

LISTEN. You might learn something.

“...Huh?”

Poop. She'd just spat it out. Quietly. Stupidly. AUGH she was being weird she was always weird and people could see how weird and dumb and stupid-

“N-nothing, never mind.”

“No, you said something,” the girl insisted, a little annoyed. “What did you say?” She leaned over the flower garden a bit to hear better.

“Muh—Maxine,” she repeated, louder this time. “My name. I'm Maxine.”

The girl gawked.

“Magazine? What magazine...?”

“No, MAX-INE. It’s my name.”

“Ohhhhh.” The girl’s head lulled slowly up, then down, her eyes staying locked onto Max’s. Pointing a curious finger toward Max, the girl recited, “Mack-seen?”

Max nodded. “Yea. Like ‘Max’, but...with more.”

The girl grinned. “Whoa, that’s a neat name! I haven’t heard it before.”

Max shrugged a nodded. “Usually people just say ‘Max.’”
“Isn’t that a boy name, though?” the girl pondered.

Max shrugged. “I guess.”

“Wait.” The girl furrowed her brows and narrowed her eyes. “But aren’t you a girl?”

Max shrugged. “I— I guess.”
Max wasn’t really sure why it mattered, she could have whatever name she wanted to, right?

The girl in the blue raincoat burst into a giggle at that. It made Max feel nice. Seeing this girl smile, and laugh... it made Max feel warm. This was good, right? A good sign.

Max giggled a bit, too. She didn’t know why. It just was nice.

The two girls caught themselves staring at each other’s silly smiles. The rain was still falling. The gentle sound it made upon the strange girl’s blue raincoat was good.

“So,” the girl started slowly. “Should I call you ‘Max?’ Orrr... ‘Maxine?’”

Max wasn’t used to being asked questions.
People did not ask her questions.
People just called her ‘Max.’
Making decisions was hard.

So, Max shrugged. Like always.

The girl tapped her finger on her chin, eyeing Max all the while.

“Hmm. Well, if you can’t decide, Max, I’ll just hafta use both, Maxine.”

Beaming like she was some brilliant trickster, the girl carefully stepped over the flower bed in front of the house, standing right in front of the window.

“I’m Chloe,” she said, more quietly now that the edge of the house was shielding her from rain. Smirking, she clarified, “Just Chloe.”

“Hi, Chloe,” Max mumbled, feeling her heart pounding from the proximity. She wasn’t used to strangers coming so close. Especially not other kids. Kids usually left her alone. This kid was not. That felt good. But also weird.

Chloe asked, “So, why are you wearing a rain jacket inside, anyway?”

“Huh? O-Oh, I, um...” Max popped her hood off bashfully, realizing how silly she probably looked with her outside clothes on in the house. “I— I wanted to play outside, but...” She sniffled. “My Mom won’t let me, ’cause I’m sick.”

“Aww, man,” said the girl – Chloe. “That’s a total bummer. You should eat an orange or something.”

“...What?”

“Vitamin C. My Dad said it helps you stay not sick. Sooo...” Chloe’s eyes looped upward in
thought and she began counting on her fingers as she spoke. “Like, oranges, orange juice…
Tomatoes – so, like, tomato soup? Brahhh-kolli, Brussel sprouts….”

“Ooh, I like Brussel sprouts,” said Max excitedly. Maybe Mom could make some for her? And
tomato soup with grilled cheese…Mm. That was sounding yummy.

Chloe’s face looked bad – she did not think that sounded yummy.

“I hate Brussel sprouts,” Chloe croaked. “What’s wrong with you?”

**OH NO WHOOPS I SHOULD’NT HAVE TOLD HER THAT OH NO**

“I-I, um, I’m sick, actually…Is what’s wrong.”
“Bleh, what kinda kid likes Brussel sprouts? Ha.”
“Hah! Y-yea, right? Some weird…kid. Likes those. I don’t.”
“What…?”
“I was kidding. They’re just, like, sooo gross.” *they’re delicious and I love them*
“Uhh…” *aaahhhHHHHH SHE CAN SEE IT SHE CAN SEE I’M NOT ME*
“I mean…erh…-” Max was lost.
“I was just teasing you.” Chloe was not lost. “You know?”
“I know. Yea.” *lying*
“It’s…totally cool if you like Brussel sprouts.”
“It, um, it is?”
“Of course it is, why…-? Why would it not be cool? It’s just food.”
“Y-yea, right, I know.”

Max’s face was getting wet and hot. But it was cold from the rain. But she was dry from the rain.

“O-Oh, aw-…Aw, jeez, Maxine, I was only playing,” Chloe muttered sadly. Seeing her sad made
Max more sad.

“I know,” Max sniffled, rubbing her snot on her raincoat sleeve. It felt horrible.

“If you know, then why are you crying?”

“I don’t know…”


**sorry she said sorry?? WHY? does she like talking with me??**

*that doesn’t*
*that’s not*
*ohhhh her eyes!!*
*her eyes are so nice and sad and oh no*
*what do I do?*

Max was already crying. Like a big dumb baby. *Ughhh. So stupid! This was why no one wanted to
talk with her! She was such a baby!*

“Ihhh-It’s actually cool you like Brussel sprouts!” Chloe insisted in a kind whisper. “That’s, like,
rare, right? That makes you special.”
“...What?” Max was rubbing at her eyes still. Rain-wet felt nice. Crying-wet, not so nice. It made her feel dumb.

“Like playing in the rain,” said Chloe. “It's not what most kids do, right? It's different.” She eyed Max quietly for a moment. Her curiosity, the scrutiny in her eyes, it made Max feel funny. Funny good. Like this kid could see the Inside Max, not just the dumb, quiet, weird Outside Max.

“Different means strange,” Max said warily.

“Strange is good,” Chloe insisted, picking her bucket up off the ground and holding it above her head. It -tink, tuh-tink, plink-’d a little from stray raindrops. She smiled, showing her teeth. “Strange is special.”

“Well...I'm a little bit strange,” Max confirmed, pressing her palm against her chest. She sighed, looking down at the muddy flowerbed at Chloe's feet. There was a butterfly clinging to the side of her house, hiding from the rain. “I'm not special, though,” Max concluded. She sniffed, and wiped her nose with her wrist. Looking back to Chloe, who had also noticed the butterfly, Max asked, “Why are you talking with me? You get to play out in the rain.”

Chloe knelt down with her bucket, poking her finger at the butterfly. It flapped off the house, flying into her bucket. She smiled at it, lifting the bucket up over her head. Max tried to peek inside, but could only see a little.

Chloe's eyes glanced to Max with a sneaky look.

“Playing in the rain by yourself gets boring,” said Chloe. “So, I like to play with animals – but that gets boring, too. So. That's why I started doing tests.” She stretched the bucket up high above her head, leaning it at the window. Chloe tipped the bucket toward Max, and the butterfly – black lines and orange wings – flew against the window, scaring Max half to death. She was too dumb to scream or shout or do anything but duck. When she sat back up, the butterfly was up above, stuck to the window, but on the inside.

Chloe stuck the bucket on the ground and stood up on it, meeting Max's eye level better.

Chloe said, “I'm strange, too. My teacher says I talk too much an' my Mom says I'm a 'handful,' which I think means, like, when you grab a whole handful of candy and the pieces fall between your fingers? That feeling. My Dad says I have 'the heart of a scientist,' but I'm pretty sure that's not actually true, because a scientist's heart would just be a human heart? Because he doesn't mean like, Frankenstein's Monster or...Or...Huh, I guess that means if it's just a human heart, I do have one, still?” Max was entirely lost. Chloe could tell. “Anyway.”

Chloe leaned over, and stuck out her hand. It was a bit muddy and gross from the rain.

Max hesitated. She looked back – Mom wasn’t peeking. She was washing dishes.

Max reached her hand through the open window. She accepted Chloe’s hand.

“Nice to meet your acquaintance, Maxine.”

“Y-yea. Mm! You, too, Chloe.”
They shook hands, a grip tighter than Max had ever felt.


They shook hands, a grip tighter than Max had ever felt.

The tempest
Electrify my skin
Give it up and let it out
And let me in

This uncertainty
But still so sure
Unforgotten
We will endure
Never will I forget
And are we there yet
And we
Yes, we could be timeless

New again
So familiar it’s strange
Can you tell me what is
Still and what is changed?

~ Andrew Koethe and Dakota Crespo: ‘Timeless’

Max could remember.
That girl – Chloe Price.

She could remember things now.
Not everything, not exactly, but how she ended up here. How things had started. How important Chloe was.

But her Other self was there, too.

I just...watched.

You didn’t stop it.

The source?

Yea. You...just let it happen.
Could you not...stop it?

I don't know.

You don't know?

I spent so fucking long trying to just get there. Here.
And when I did, and you were here, too, I just...
I just watched.

You don't want to lose her, either.

No.

I never did.
I just convinced myself that it was what was best.
I already had convinced myself it was what was best.
I chose to let her die.
And I couldn't deal with it.

You shouldn't have had to deal with it.

It's not fair. Not fucking fair.

I know.

And now? I'm not so sure it even fucking matters what's 'best.'

Maybe I just can't save everyone like I wanted.

Yea. We can't.
We never could.

But I can at least save the people we love from us.

Right, we can still-
Wait, what?

I can at least save Max Caulfield from herself.

The Power. 'Rewind?' The Rewind, yes. The Power.
Max still didn't have control.

That's right.
You don't.
I do.
I put us where we are – asleep.
If I keep us here, together, asleep, we can never hurt anyone ever again.
It's what we deserve, anyway, right?
You know it is.
And while I'm at it, I'll carry on my work – I'll keep finding pieces of us.
I'll keep reaching out, poking holes through to other Maxes, saving them from themselves.
We need to be whole.
We need to be whole.

But that's not the way!

It's the only way.
I've spent so fucking long exploring every alternate option, here.
I'm not Human anymore.
Which means you can't be, either.
Soon enough, though, you'll understand.
You'll go through what I've gone through.
Because you're me.
So stop fighting with me.
Just give up, make this easy for both of us.

No.

I will fight you.
For her – for Chloe.

She's destroyed us, you know.
She's destroyed everything.

No. I destroyed everything.
For her.
I don't care if this – all of this – is my, what, my penance?
I'll endure it – for Chloe.
Throw every fucking trick, illusion, guilt-trip at me you want.
You took over my damned body and have been sending me in circles through time.
But I'm still here.
And I will get back to her.

You really do think you're better than me, don't you?
You really think I'm the 'bad guy,' 'here, huh?
That I'm some 'Dark' side of you?

. . .

Puh. Of course you do.
That makes it easy to stop listening.
If I really wanted to destroy you – to hurt Chloe – don't you think I would have by now?
I could've just prevented us from ever even meeting Chloe, but I didn't.
I couldn't.
Because I love her, just like you do.

No. I've seen it. You love Stella. Not Chloe.
You let Chloe fucking die in a bathroom.

She told me to let her go.
And if I'm not allowed to love Chloe, just because I loved Stella...-
I mean, shit. That's not fair.
How can you expect Chloe to love us, then, after Rachel?

That's...-!

Yea. That's not how love works.
You're trying to make me feel guilty, now.

No. You don't get to try this 'oh, you're just like me' shit.
You literally are just like me because you are me, oh my fucking god.
How can you not understand, after everything?
We're the same.

No! You're some Other me. Like...Like a phantom.
Like a ghost in the back of my head.
And I'm sick of being haunted.
You made your choices.
And you didn't just fuck up your own life, you had to fuck mine up, too.

Fine.
Fine fine fine fine fine
that's how it's gonna
we'll play it that way
you can STAY here
for all I care

Lightning
THUNDER

Gone.

Max's Other self was suddenly...gone.

And the rains had come. The winds.
Max was stuck on that forsaken cliff, on the night that everything broke.
But she was alone.

She was so cold. The rain stung. The winds bit. The noise wore her down.

She collapsed to her knees, unable to decipher tears from the rain.

But through the rain, thunder, and wind, another sound took form.
It slowly grew closer, louder.

Humming.

A familiar song – one about love. And strength.

Max found herself humming its harmony.

She felt lifted.
Eased – not pulled – into dance.

Dancing.
Slowly.

With Chloe.
She was with Chloe.
Dancing and humming.
The rains swirling around them.
The cliff began to fade away. Grass turned to stone bricks. Trees became metal fencing. The ocean became a black void. The lighthouse became a lamp post.

But the Storm – the Storm persisted around them. And they kept humming and dancing, slowly, gently. Spinning in circles.

Max closed her eyes. Sunk her face into Chloe's shoulder.

Their two forms melded together like Yin and Yang in a way that finally made sense of things. They were dancing in circles.

Swirling...spiral, spinning, guiding themselves around tighter and tighter, just to reach this center. This climax, this focal point.

“I found you,” Chloe sighed into Max's ears.

“You did,” Max sighed back. “I'm stuck. She won't let me leave.”

“Max, this is not reality,” Chloe desperately murmured as they continued to dance.

Max nodded solemnly in reply to this.

“You're not real,” Max concluded.

“Wh-? No, I am, it's me, I've been...fucking bouncing all over the goddamn place looking for you.”

“I'm not real,” Max pointed out. “She's not real. None of this is real. I'm sleeping. I'm stuck.”

“You're-...” Chloe paused, and that spark of contemplation in her eyes made Max second-guess, if only for a moment, if Chloe was really here, in this place, wherever this was. “OK,” Chloe conceded, shrugging a shoulder. “We're not literally here, but I'm me, and you're you, and I'm...here to get you out...of here. Wherever 'here' is.”

The humming – the song – it was continuing as they spoke, as they danced, their own humming repeating back at them in a loop.

“Come back with me,” Chloe said with a certain kind of sorrow.

“I can't,” Max said dully, snuffing her face into Chloe's jacket. “I'm not all here. I can't be all there.”

“You can,” Chloe insisted, squeezing her fingers across Max's shoulders. “You can,” she repeated, shaking Max gently. “You just need to...” She trailed off.

Max lifted her head, noticing that Chloe was frantically searching around the place – this hollow, empty place.

“Where is she?” Chloe asked quietly. “Where did she go?”
“She left me,” Max replied sullenly. “Like she always does. She always leaves me here. Over and over...All of me.”

So many lives, so many realities, so many pieces, all dropped here. Discarded. Left for safe-keeping. But trapped, really. Now Max was just another piece in this puzzle. Attached to the rest, but the puzzle wasn't finished. The picture wasn't complete. And Max couldn't tell what it was even a picture of anymore.

“She needs to come with us,” Chloe said firmly, gripping at Max's shoulders with some desperation – trying to get Max to look her in the eyes.

But Max couldn't. She was too scared.

“Why?” Max protested. “She doesn't deserve to be with you. She let you die.”

“I-...” Chloe bit her lip. “I asked you to let me die. And her – that part of you – she did what I asked. For everyone.”

“How could she do that to you?” Max whimpered, her insides shuddering unpleasantly. “That was horrible. You made us who we are.”

Chloe's eyes were wet, shiny, and weird. Sad.

“None of us asked for this,” Chloe mumbled shakily, holding Max's hands as they're dancing slowed to a stop. “You were put into an...awful situation, you made the best choices you knew how.”

“We all make choices,” Max said grimly. “But in the end, our choices make us. I chose to save you. I chose to be with you. And she didn't.”

“She chose to save others. And no matter what any of you chose, you still loved me. You still do love me. Even her – because you're all Max Caulfield.”

“No.” Max wrapped her hands around Chloe's back, but all the while, wondered if she was just having another conversation with herself. Re-living another memory she'd forgotten.

Was this another illusion? Another guilt-trip?
Trying to make Max give up? Give in? Let go?
Max would never let go.

“She needs to come back with you,” Chloe insisted. “I don’t...” She flexed her fingers before her, and a strange jolt of electricity flickered around her wrist. “I don't think I have enough to get us both out of here.”

“Enough?”

“The power. Your Rewind. I-I dunno, somehow I...have it. But just some of it.”

“Then you should use it to go back.”

“Why the fuck would I do that without you?” Chloe snapped. “Why won't you just leave with me?!”
It hurt.

Chloe could see that it hurt.
And then Chloe hurt.

“I'm sorry,” Chloe sighed, rubbing her hand across her face. “I'm fucking losing it in here, Max.”

“I already have,” Max said bitterly, with a slouching shrug.

“I know. But you're going to be OK.”

“How?! How can you say that?”

Max thrust her arms out at the cold, dim, empty place they were in.

“I'm lost in some...fucking dream some alternate version of myself created, because so many versions of myself have been splintered and broken off from existence. How in the fuck can any of this ever be OK?”

“I don't know,” Chloe admitted with sympathy. “I didn't say it would be easy. I just said that it would be. But not if you give up.”

“I'm not giving up, I'm never giving up!”

“Exactly? You...You see? You haven't lost yourself, Max – not entirely. You can still come back from this. You just need to set things right with her – with your Other self.”

“I told you, I can’t do that!”

“You have to.”

“She's in control. She has the Power. I have nothing.”

“You have me.”

“The fucking universe doesn't want me to have you.”

“That hasn't stopped you before. And what about our friends? Stella, Brooke, Victoria – our parents, everyone we still have back home.”

“If they knew what I really was, what I've really done, they'd never accept me.”

“Stella knows. And she has. Just like I have. Just like you need to.”

“How can I accept this? Any of this? I'm broken, I'm a...cosmological disaster. People are dead because of me, other versions of me of are dead because of me. I can't even understand it, let alone accept it.”

THUNDER.
LIGHTNING.

The Storm was intensifying as Max's rage and frustration grew.
She was remembering things clearer and clearer now that Chloe was here. And it was making things worse, not better. It was bringing back all of the pain. The anger. All of the cracks in Max's form were glowing. Her head ached, it burned,

“I'm not Human anymore!” Max shouted at Chloe through the increasing winds.

That's when she showed up – Max's Other self. Like a channel tuning itself in.

“That's right,” she said coldly, coming between Chloe and Max. “I'm not Human anymore!”

“You are,” Chloe contested, trying to speak up over the noise.

“You CALL THIS HUMAN?!”

So much noise. So many Maxes.

I don't deserve to be with you.
I'm not strong enough.
Not GOOD enough
nOt AbLe To FiX tHiS
UNABLE to fix myself
too many wrong choices. . .
'I tried. I did try.'
[ * But nobody came.]
so I ended it
a person, not supposed to be, like this
bRoKeN so BROKEN

“Max! No, no, I'm here. You are strong enough, you are good enough, I'm the one who isn't-”

LIAR I lie I lie I lie I lie
mask it's a mask that's all it is
the universe gave us a power and we broke it

iii cccooouulllldddnnn''ttt sssaaavvveee aaannnnyyyooonnneee

“It's all been pointless – trying and trying and trying AND TRYING only to end up with the same result: pain. Not just me, not just us, but everyone around us. If I can't erase it all – if I can't reset everything? Then I'm at least going to make sure Chloe and our friends can live the rest of their lives in peace, without us fucking everything up even further.”

“Max, you know the truth! Do not listen to this bullshit! You know what we've gone through together, you know where we stand!”

Quiet.

For a moment – a snapshot of time – everything was quiet.

Max was asleep. In a white bed.
Chloe was asleep beside her, sitting in a chair, leaning over the bed. Their hands were locked together – something about their hands seemed different. Like there was a glow between them.

Hospital? It looked like a hospital, this place.

Nothing was moving. Like a frozen piece of time.

“We're a team, and this is reality!”

Max blinked, and she was back in the Storm at the End of Time.

Chloe was shouting. But Max couldn't hear her.

Everything was still quiet.

Chloe was being blow away.
Max reached out to her – Chloe reached back.

A sharp burning sensation passed through Max's arm. It was her Power – Chloe had given it back to her. The jarring pain of it caused Max to lose her grip.

Chloe was ripped from the ground, pulled into the raging tempest around them.

All of the Maxes were being sucked into the Storm, too. But it was all bizarrely quiet.

Except that red-haired Max, stubborn and forlorn.

“Reality?” said Max's Other self. “Reality is what you make of it.” She extended her hands to this dream made real around them.

Max missed it already – the feeling of Chloe's hand within her own.

“It is,” Max said sternly, flexing her hand.

“What you've made of it – over and over again – is pointless.” Max's Other self was slowly approaching her, fighting through the Storm. “It's just more pain. You're going to give me the rest of your Power, and you're going to join the Others.”

Max had been backed into the corner – an empty bucket sat there, and she tripped over it, causing the butterfly perched upon its rim to get pulled into the Storm, too.

“No,” said Max through clenched teeth. “I'm not staying here. I'm going back.”

Max's Other self closed her eyes.

Max blinked – and everything was still.

The Storm was gone. The End of Time was gone.
It was just Max and her Other self.

Nothingness.

And then Max's Other self spoke without sound.

[ Interesting. ]
[ You want to go back. ]

“I'll do whatever it takes.”

[ You want to go back to the world you destroyed. ]

“N-No, I didn't...destroy it. It's still there.”

[ It was you who pushed everything to its edge. ]

Rewind after Rewind, hopping across realities, abandoning them left and right as new choices overwrote old ones.

[ It was you who led the world to its destruction. ]

A Storm that destroyed a town.
A Power that bled into others, hurting them.
A chain reaction that shattered Max's being into pieces.

“I know! I fucking know, OK? But it's not entirely my fault. It's not.”

[ But you cannot accept it. ]

“I didn't ask for this, for any of this.”

[ You think you are above consequences. ]

“No! I'm not! I know I'm not! I-...I've tried to accept it. But this – you, me, them, us...I'm not just going to leave this alone. I can't.”

[ Then what are you looking for? ]

“I just want to go home. To be with her. For everything to go back to the way it was...”

Max's Other self smiled.

[ Perhaps. ]

[ We can reach a compromise. ]

“What is it, then? You're not taking Chloe from me. You had your chance and you chose to let her fucking die. How could you...?”

[ You still have something I want. ]

Max's Other self extended her palm open – Max's spiral tattoo rested within, glowing that strange
green. Max realized her own wrist had a much smaller version of the same – what Chloe had given her.

The Rewind – her Power.

[ Give it to me. ]

[ And I will bring this world back. ]

“No. Not a chance. The world you want to bring back? It's not the one I want. I don't want this reality, I don't want one you created, or one I lost myself in. I want the one Chloe and I existed in together. The reality Chloe and I created for ourselves.”

[ You and I are not the same, are we? ]

[ There is a reason you continue recreate this world. ]

[ There is a reason you continue to destroy it. ]

“For Chloe. To keep her safe. To continue to be with her.”

[ You. ]

[ You are wracked with a perverted sentimentality. ]

“After everything you've put me through, the result is still the same: I love her more than anything else. I will put her before anything else.”

[ Hmm. ]

[ I cannot understand these feelings anymore. ]

“Yes. You can.”

Chloe's voice.

The two Maxes spun around to see Chloe standing in the quiet, stillness of the Void. It wasn't Chloe from the past, or from somewhere else – half her head was shaved to a short, blonde cut, the other half flowing over her shoulder in bright blue. It was her Chloe, from their reality.

“You can understand these feelings,” Chloe repeated, her voice quivering slightly as she shook her wrist loose, walking toward them. She thrust that fist upward and outward.

The Lighthouse from the cliff appeared beside her, like an image painted upon a wall, dripping into focus. Raindrops began to fall, thunder began to echo, like static white noise being tuned into a channel.

Chloe extended her palm, teeth clenched, arm shaking. The cliff became familiar, brown cobblestone, wooden fences turned metal, and the Lighthouse became the Lamp-Post.

The wind picked back up, whipping rain around – that fateful Storm surrounded them.

Panting for breath, and grasping her shaking wrist with the opposing hand, Chloe hobbled to them.

“You can understand these feelings,” Chloe winced to Max's Other self. “You have,” she nodded
her head to the Lamp-Post. “And you can again.”

“But I'm broken!”
“But I'm broken!”

“I know, Bebb. I know you are...” Chloe's face was wet with rain mixed with tears of pain. “I can't...un-break you.” Chloe approached the Other Max, placing her hand against a freckled cheek. And Max felt it upon her own cheek. “But I can love you, no matter what.” Chloe kissed Max on the cheek – both Maxes, with one gesture. As she let go of both Maxes' cheek, she murmured through the Storm's noise, “And I always will.” Chloe leaned her head into the Other Max's shoulder – and Max felt it upon her own cheek. “But I can't...”

Chloe whispered into Max's ears, simultaneously:

“You let go of our future for everyone else's – that must've been so fucking hard...”
“You let go of others' futures for ours – I know it's been a heavy weight to carry...”

“It was. It has been...”
“So heavy. I'm so tired...”

“However you got here, you're here now, with me. You could stay – if you wanted.”
“I know you are. So let me carry it. I know I can. You saved me. Let me save you.”

“Stay...? After everything I've put you through?”
“Carry it? My weight? Save me? How?”

“You're Maxine Caulfield. All of you. I can't love one part of you without loving the other.”
“You Power. It's hurt you so much. Give it to me, and I'll make sure it can't hurt you anymore.”

“My Power...? N-NO, you can't! Without it, how can I fix anything?! I'm not DONE!”
“All of me? There's...too MUCH of me. How can you love parts of me that killed people?”

“Yes, even those parts. That's all in the past. All I care about now is the future. And I want to share that future with you.”

“With all of you, Max.”

The Storm around them had grown stronger. Swirling in the fierce wind and rain were...pieces. Of Max. Other Maxes. The metal fencing was being torn away. The cobblestone was being stripped away. Chloe was slipping away.

Everything was getting consumed by the Storm – as it already had, across millions of variations of Max’s existence on that crossroads of an evening.

Max and her Other self both leapt forth, each catching one of Chloe's arms.
"I don't know how!"
"I don't think I can!"

"You can! I know you can! You've done it before!"

"This is...so different, though!"
"I can't! It's impossible!"

"Even after everything that's happened, you are STILL MAX CAULFIELD!"

Chloe was ripped from Max's hands, consumed by the Storm.

Max was left with herself, on a quickly shrinking platform.

She huddled with herself against the Lamp Post, its light faded.

"You let her go!" Max accused.
"I didn't want to!" Max defended.

"Didn't you? You tried to erase everything we had with her!" Max was frustrated.
"I just wanted to protect her – protect us! I never wanted to lose her!" Max was afraid.

"Why were you so...so fucking cruel?!" Max was crying.
"I was angry! I lost myself! I hated myself!" Max was crying.

"Why did you have to...do all of this?" Max was confused.
"I had the Power – but all I ever wanted was to keep everyone safe!" Max was remorseful.

"I couldn't save everyone! You couldn't let go! You destroyed everything!" Max was impatient.
"I did! We did! We've been broken so long...I forgot who I was! What I wanted!" Max was lost.

"What I wanted most was to be with Chloe!"
"What I wanted most was to be with Chloe!"

In the swirling rain and wind, the Lamp Post was ripped from the stone floor, which shattered to pieces beneath them. Max and herself remained, weightless and yet so heavy, in the center of the Storm.

"You really...aren't just some Other me, are you?" Max tried to wipe away her tears.
"I am some Other you – but I'm still you." Max tried to wipe away her tears.

"You became a totally different person from me..." Max was doubtful.
"I became a different version of the same person." Max was tired.

"The same person? You did terrible things to us! To me! To yourself!" Max was frustrated.
"I did things I regret because I couldn't stand being alone. Haven't you?" Max was hopeless.
Letting the Storm pass to be with Chloe. Using her Power to connect with others when just being herself hadn't been enough. Using her Power to try to manipulate her life, to keep Chloe close, to keep Chloe safe.

“I don't deserve to be happy...What makes you think you deserve what you want?” Max was bitter. “Nothing! I never deserved any of this. The bad or the good. None of us did!” Max was torn.

“You planned this! You worked so hard to change everything, to undo everything!” Max was angry. “I tried to plan this! But even controlling time, I couldn't control how I felt! How we felt!” Max was distraught.

“How could I let the person I loved most die?” Max was baffled. “How could I let my home town suffer?” Max was astonished.

Max and herself were clutching at one another's wrists, spinning in the middle of the tempest.

Images of memories were weaving themselves through this nightmare – or was it a dream? Not all of the memories lined up properly, though. In fact, some of them conflicted. Yes, they weren't all the same.

Other lives, other realities...A mess of memories.
But they were all Max's.

But one thing remained constant through all of them.

“I wanted to have a future with Chloe.”
“I wanted to have a future with Chloe.”

Max's brown hair, loose and free, tossed and turned in the fierce winds.
Other Max's red hair, taught into a singular tail, flicked and whipped in the fierce winds.

“I gained this Power to save Chloe...”
“...and that's what I tried to do with it.”
“I failed. I misused it. And I paid for it.”
“I broke into too many pieces to put back together.”
“But that doesn't mean we can't put ourselves back together.”
“For Max Caulfield's sake,”
“For Chloe Price's sake.”

“I know it's, like...kind of too on the nose,” posed Max's Other self, “but...can you forgive yourself?”

“After what happened when Chloe came back into my life,” said Max, “I don't think I've been able to function like...a normal person.”

“That's because I'm not normal. How could I be, when I exist outside of how a Human is supposed to exist?”

“Even if that's the case, that doesn't mean I can't still be a Human.”
“After everything I've put you through – and everyone else – you'd still forgive me?”

“I'm not sure how to forgive myself for what happened – what either part of me chose. But it doesn't have to happen in an instant.”

“We can take our time.”

“Without controlling it.”

“You...really want to keep me around?”

“I always did. But I was afraid of myself. Of what I was capable of.”

“So was I. I was blinded by all of that anger.”

“I was blinded by fear and regret.”

“That anger...I can't just make it all disappear.”

“You don't have to. Chloe still loves us for all of us. I have to find a way to do the same.”

“So...How do we move forward?”

“One step at a time.”

“What's the first step?”

“For the sake of a future together. With her.”

“For the sake of a future together. With her.”

“We have to be whole again.”

“We have to be whole again.”

Max's Other Self was crying. Ashamed.
Max embraced her in her arms.

Everything had turned quiet.

Still.

Dark.

The Void.

But Max wasn't afraid of it anymore.

She had let part of herself dwell in it for far too long.

But with that came the understanding that it was all her own – she'd created it.

She didn't have to stay locked up within it anymore.
There was no telling what awaited her – she would have so little control over things.

But that was the cost of living life as a Human.

The End of Time rebuilt itself around Max.

And Max realized she was no longer two, but one.

Brown hair with red streaks. Weakness and pain, anger and strength, co-existing.

Max was still broken – she was still scarred.
But she was finally ready to close the wounds that time could not.
She was finally ready to fill in the cracks left by all of those pieces of herself she'd lost along the way.

And standing there, sitting in the corner, was a girl Max had never met.

She was sitting on the edge of the End of Time, swinging her feet to and fro above the abyss, staring off.

Golden hair ran down her shoulders, garbed in a red and black shirt Max had fit into herself.

She was staring at a photograph.

Perplexed, Max slowly approached.

Rachel Amber?

Max tried to speak with her, but couldn't make words happen.

Rachel looked up to Max, her expression flickering between hesitation and hope – Max couldn't read her.

She handed the photograph to Max.

It was the selfie Max had taken that morning when they were teens in Chloe's bed.

Rachel spoke in a voice Max couldn't hear.

'You're not a problem. You're a person.'

Why did this feel like a memory?

Before Max could reply, Rachel's form burned to ashes, drifting off into the Void.

"As much as I wish she was still with us..." It was Chloe, from behind. "...she isn't. Facing that – facing that I'd lost her? It felt the same as I did when I'd lost my Dad. When I'd lost you."

She smiled weakly, wrapping her arm across Max's shoulder.

Chloe finished with a somber sigh, "It was like I'd lost a part of myself. And I know those parts,
those pieces...I can never have them back – just like you can never go back to being who you were before all of this shit, even when you tried.” Chloe ran her thumb across Max's cheek. Max slid her hands up and down Chloe's shoulders. They hugged.

“I'm tired of trying to go back,” Max winced into Chloe's shoulder. “I want to try moving forward for a change.”


Thunder crackled in the distance. Rain began to fall.

Max loved the rain. It was calming. It reminded her of the moment everything changed, that night on the cliff. And that didn't have to just mean the pain of something ending, or just the excitement of something beginning.

It could mean both at the same time.

Being a Human entailed allowing seemingly impossible feelings to co-exist all at once in the same heart. Max just had to start allowing that to happen, just as she had to start allowing time to move on its own. She had to allow the Storm that was herself to...pass. To exist. Even if it didn't always make sense.

“OK,” Max decided with a hesitant sigh. “I think...-” She swayed Chloe's hands within her own. “I think I'm ready to let go. But...How will I find my way back?” Max wondered.

“How have you been finding your way back?” Chloe asked.

“W-Well, I-...I remember that it's you I'm going back to. And I just...let you guide me home.”

Chloe kissed Max on the lips. Just long enough for Max to remember what it was like.

Patting Max on the arms, Chloe concluded, “Then give me your Power, and I'll help guide you home, like I have before.”

Max took a moment to take in Chloe's face. That fucking beautiful face.

The rain, the wind, the thunder, calm and steady in this dream – at the End of Time.

Max took one hand and locked her fingers around Chloe's. She faced the Void beyond.

Max focused. She thought back on the moment where it had all started.

The gunshot that had ended Chloe's life was a boom of thunder around them.

Simultaneously, the lightning from that thunder jolted from Max's skull, through her arms, and into Chloe's hands.

The contact between their palms radiated with a feeling that couldn't be described.

A glow emanated from within their interlaced fingers.

Not a fire, not a spark, but a steady glow.
Max could feel her Power shifting, as it had been so much recently. She could feel it slipping away from her control. Part of her was rather scared of this sensation, but she trusted Chloe. And as the Power left her, Max felt lighter.

Hand in hand, with the Lamp Post at the End of Time behind them, Max glanced back over her shoulder. The Storm was intensifying again.

For so long, a part of her had relied on this place to be her sanctuary, her place of safety.

She didn't need it anymore. She had Chloe. She had the future.

Max looked ahead, with Chloe at her side, their hands clenched with warmth and cold mixed.

They weathered the Storm, as they had so many times.

And Max felt herself slip away.

–

*Your teary eyes*
Don't you look so blue
Memories, ones we've left behind
You know I'll always find my way to you

*Can't stop the rain*
Just hold me close
And though I've been so far away
The distance is closing
And I'm coming home
Home

The more we change
The more it all stays the same
I know you and I've seen your scars
Makes you that much more beautiful to me

And these four walls
No home that I've known
Spotlights and never ending halls
I swear if you feel the same
Then I'm coming home
Home

Yeah, I'm coming home

~ Andrew Koethe; 'Coming Home'

–

Max awoke, stirred gently by Chloe's hand grasping her own, squeezing warmly.

“Hey,” Chloe greeted softly, from across...the table?
Max was hunched over a table, her head having been resting against her crossed arms. Her hair had fallen over her face a bit, and she felt sluggish and groggy.

“Wakey, wakey,” Chloe teased with the biggest of grins. “Eggs n’ bakey.”

Confused, Max wiped hair from her face and rubbed her bleary eyes, trying to sit up. Her ears were startled as ceramic plates clattered inches in front of her. Her nose was soothed by a medley of delicious scents – breakfast food. Her face was massaged by the steam rising from the dishes in front of her. Her hands were warm and shaky, calmed by the cold touch of a water glass she picked up. Her tongue relished the clean, refreshing taste of...just plain old water.

Her senses were firing on all cylinders. This wasn't a dream.
She was really...whenever she was.

Rings.

Max fidgeted with her fingers as inconspicuously as she could, hoping she'd feel that familiar, reassuring...-

Ahhh, yes, there they...-

No.
What?

One ring. Just one. Not two.
The plain metal band.
Her promise ring.

But...the other ring.
The engagement ring.
She didn't have it.

No.
No no nononono
after all THAT, she was STILL just-

FUCK, Chloe wasn't wearing her ring, either!

What the shit, she was so certain this would finally be the last fucking piece, that she could finally find her way back, but this couldn't be right, she-

“Dude,” Chloe said, from the across the table. Max was so freaked, she flinched, shoulders shuddering. “Whoa,” Chloe grunted with alarm. “It's cool, ya just dozed off. Been a long day, so...” She shrugged up one shoulder. “I don't really blame ya. New York is fucking exhausting.” She leaned back against her seat, cool as a cucumber, yet weirdly nervous at the same time. “Remind me to never come here again unless we're suddenly rich. It's, uh...” She swapped glances with Max, who was slack-jawed, then avoided Max's gaze. “It's not all it's cracked up to be, is it?”

Cracked.

Max felt...whole? Finally?
But cracked.

That feeling could never go away, could it?

“Hey,” Chloe said suspiciously. “You OK? What, uh, what's up?” She scratched at her head a bit, pushing her long, blue hair – the half of her head that had it – back behind her shoulder.

“Up?” said Max, trying to feign innocence – as she always did when this shit happened. “What's up is...-” She smiled stupidly, eyes squinting to hide her fear of where she was. “-...how...cute you are.”

“Pff.” Chloe's smile matched Max's, if only for a moment. “So smooth,” she teased gently, sliding their plates aside before leaning over the table for a kiss.

Max was all too relieved to oblige. Goddamn. Kissing Chloe. She'd almost forgotten what it felt like.

So easy, so simple, so comfortable.

She didn't have to juggle all of those fucking complications around anymore.

Max Caulfield loved Chloe Price, dammit. It was simple, plain, and the easiest and the hardest thing all at once, but entailed one direction: forward.

In this case, moving ‘forward’ meant ‘kissing repeatedly.’ Because holy shit did it feel so nice to be herself again,

Lips unlocking, Chloe (whose cheeks were glowing) mumbled softly, “Uh, well.” She fussed with her hair briefly as she sat back in her seat. “We should prolly eat our grub while it's still warm. Huh?”

Max nodded, bashfully wiping saliva from her lips and leaning back against her own seat.

She realized her plate was like two meals in one – bacon and omelet and a Belgian waffle. It was only a choice between the two if Max made it so. Why not both?

“You sure nothing's wrong?” Chloe double-checked, but stuffing a slice of bacon into her mouth with a ravenous sigh of satisfaction.

Max had caught herself twirling her hair – red and brown strands, interwoven around her finger. Separate pieces, but from the same source, comprising the same body.

She had always been herself, even if she existed differently than everyone else.

Laughing in spite of herself, Max flicked her hair back, swept her bangs aside, and gave Chloe a bright grin of relief.

“Everything's not perfect,” Max confessed, “but nothing's wrong.”

“Mmm-!” Chloe grunted, her cheeks already full of eggs as she nodded. Her eyes watered and she cleared her throat. “Eugh-! That-...! Hrm-hrm! Yea, good, 'cuz, uh, I was thinkin' we'd, like, take a walk out on the town after we eat. Nothin' like a romantic walk beneath the neon nightlife, huh?”
“...What?” Max mumbled, thrown off. She suddenly realized that she didn't really know where she was. Or exactly when she was, only that it couldn't be the present.

“I know we're, like, totally late for New Year's and whatever,” Chloe went on, careful to chew her food and swallow before finishing her sentence. “But we can't not do the touristy thing while we're here – we've gotta go visit Times Square, right? I mean, fuck – we can't even catch a show on Broadway so we should at least go visit the Square.”

Max's chest froze up, then ignited, then thawed, all in the span of a moment.

Times Square?

Wait – their coats. Max noticed she was in a brown sweater-jacket with a hood, lined at the edge with artificial fur. And Chloe was wearing a winter jacket with a fur-tipped hood, as well. They were totally dressed for cold weather, the likes they'd never really see in Cali.

Max fished her hand into her pocket – a small box.

Shit.

Max realized where and when she was, and why she'd forgotten the details of this moment. She couldn't remember a moment that she hadn't experienced yet.

The overhead speakers started to play a jazzy tune that Max knew well – one she had a shared a sentimental history with over Chloe. It had been months back, and Max had nodded off to sleep, blacking out, but...she had asked the restaurant to play this song.

This was the night Max had proposed to Chloe.

She wasn't sure how or why she'd gotten this to happen the way it had. Maybe part of herself, having planned this moment, had somehow set it aside from her own consciousness – a safeguard. Like what her Other self had created with the End of Time dream. For all she knew, Chloe had used the Power to create this. She didn't know how it happened, but she understood what it was.

A beacon to guide her ship home.

An anchor for her ship to drop down when it was ready to arrive on shore from its time out at sea in the Storm.

However it had come to pass – however any of this crazy shit had come to pass – Max knew the outcome of this moment, and it didn't make the potency of her feelings any lesser for knowing.

Somewhere along the way, Max had known she would choose to stay by Chloe's side, no matter what. This moment that had been a blank in her memory until that point in her existence – and being a blank didn't take away from how important that moment had been.

“Dude,” said Chloe, brows furrowed as she scanned the restaurant's ceiling. “Are they playing...fuckin' Undertale music? I know this song.” She gave Max a bewildered expression as she chowed down on a hunk of buttered waffle. “Mmm!” She wriggled her fork at Max, whose cheeks were burning up.
Chloe swallowed. Max nodded. They both named the track in question in unison.

"'Home.'"

As they both chuckled together, Max's chest was brimming with warmth. Of course she'd picked that song, and of course Chloe had recognized it.

“Someone did a... jazz cover of...-?” Chloe was still hung up on how the song even existed in the form they were listening to.

Max, meanwhile, was fumbling her trembling fingers through her pockets. She remembered she had originally planned some kind of...something. Some clever, mushy thing to say as a segue-way. But without knowing what her plan had been, Max had to make it up as she went – something she had enough practice with, at least.

“Chl-...Chloe, um-...” Her fingers were squeezing the box so tightly within her pocket,

“ Mm? ” Chloe hummed with a tilt of her head, a strip of bacon hanging from her lips as she slowly chewed it in. Chloe pointed a finger slyly at Max as she finished the bacon. She'd figured it out – that Max was the reason the song was playing.

“Chloe Price,” Max said weakly, her face on fire. She pulled her arms up, folding them over the table to conceal the box behind an elbow. She stared Chloe straight in the eyes.

That glow – that fucking glow. Max could remember back when it had been a spark between their gazes. It had blown up into a flame, but had eventually settled into a nice glow. A steady glow.

“You, um,” Max choked on her own words. Swallowing desperately, she realized she had a glass of water right in front of her. She sipped on it, trying to keep cool. Looking back to Chloe, she was startled by the giddy grin on Chloe's face – leaning in, chin in her palms.

Chloe fucking knew, ha.

Jeez.

“Chloe Price,” Max tried again, oddly relieved.

“Yehhhhsss?” Chloe replied, slowly and slyly.

“N-No matter what happens – or happened, or will happen – no matter how-...how lost I ever get, you-...you're my Home.” Max extended her arm over the table, revealing the small blue box. “A- And I love you. So much. Um. Will you...-?” Ah, crap, OPEN the box, ya dum-dum! “Um, will you be...-?”

Max was fiddling to open the box and reveal her ring.

“Shut up!” Chloe snickered, her cheeks bright. “Weh-weh-wait, no, nuh -uh,” she spat, fluttering her hands up as she scrambled out of her seat.

And just as Max opened the ring box, Chloe was...gone?
What?
This wasn't...

Why had Chloe left? No way she was...saying 'no' to that.
But it didn't make sense. Right? This had been the plan.
Max had proposed. She had to have. How else had she woken up later, engaged?

As Max was left on her own for couple minutes, she found herself processing things.

Sitting, reflecting, absorbing her environs, taking in the ambience as the jazz music filled her ears with joy and the relief of... being Max Caulfield filled her chest with hope.

_Maybe no one else can physically understand what I've gone through – how I exist, who I am._

_But they don't need to completely comprehend every detail of who I am. How I am._

_They can still love me, all the same. And Chloe does._

_We have so many reasons we could've given up on each other – on us. On this._
_The pain we've caused – to everyone around us, to ourselves, to each other._
_The fucking... insanity of everything._
_When Chloe talks about Rachel, she makes everything sound...like it was so easy._
_Being together with me has been anything but easy._

_But we never gave up on each other._
_We've both had to let go of 'what if's.' _
_But we never let go of each other._
_Even the part of me that let Chloe die...the part that hated how I felt for her...-_  
_Even that part of me refused to let go of her._

_And for the first time in a long time, I finally feel like myself._

_I feel like I can live with myself, rather than in spite of myself._

_After everything I've done – all of me, every version of me – do I deserve this?_  

_I don't._
_I didn't earn this._

_But William didn't deserve to die._
_Neither did Rachel._
_Neither did anyone._

_I guess the most I can do from this point is just...accept that what happened happened._
_Stop worrying myself over 'what if' and start thinking about 'what next?'' _

_Shit._
_I'm crying._

Max laughed weakly, realizing how much she was smiling with relief.
She'd felt so tired. So broken.

The weight she'd been carrying for years – across different realities – it wasn't all gone. Chloe couldn't carry Max's memories or pain. But the Power was gone. She could feel it. Like she wasn't on a ship out at sea anymore, but more like...a rowboat, so close to the shore. She just had to row the last piece of it on her own.

But could she? She'd been out at sea for so long. Could she really go back ashore, carry on, as if everything was OK when it wasn't? How could she ever really know what was real anymore, after everything she'd been through? What if she'd...somehow tricked herself? What if this was all just a prison? What if she was still dreaming?

The restaurant's doors burst open.

It was Chloe, eyes wide with a grin to match, rushing her way past tables – she bumped into a waiter, nearly causing a spill, hurriedly apologizing as she did so.

Sliding to her knees beside Max's booth, Chloe presented her own ring box, nearly dropping it as she popped it open.

Chloe panted out in a single breath, “Max-Caulfield-marry-me.” She was beaming with pride, her face red, her chest expanding and contracting from her rushing around.

Max didn't know what to do.

She didn't deserve a happy ending.

She wasn't sure if she was really ready to go back to...reality – whatever that even meant anymore – and face the aftermath of everything that had happened.

Her eyes leaking out a mixture of joy and relief and pain and fear, Max rubbed at her face with her sleeve and fled.

She escaped the restaurant, and found herself out in the chilly, winter night-scape of New York City.

The neon lights down the block mesmerized her with their soft, steady glow, reflecting off the puddles of melted snow in the sidewalk. She began walking, hand latched against her shoulder.

Stupid. She'd been stupid. She couldn't just...go back. It couldn't be that easy. Chloe hadn't accepted her ring. This wasn't reality.

“Yo!” Chloe cried from behind.

Panting, Chloe jogged up to reach Max.

“Dude, wh-...?” Chloe wiped her hair to the side, her breath leaving vapor in the air. “What's wrong, what...what's up? You...I was gonna...I had this thing planned out after we left, I was gonna-...hah.” Chloe needed to catch her breath.

Chloe was holding both ring boxes in her hands.

Max extended her hand toward the one she had gotten.
Chloe shrugged and handed it over.

“Shoulda known you were gonna have the same idea as me,” Chloe laughed through her breaths. “Fuck,” she sighed humorously. “You’re not, like...changing your mind on me, are ya?”

“What? No, I love you,” Max insisted, opening the ring box and staring at it.

“Well. Ya know. Good. ’Cuz I love you, too. And I wanna be with you.”

“Forever...?” Max murmured, uncertain of believing in an idea that was literally impossible.

“W-well, like...as long as I get to,” Chloe panted out, holding out her hand. “C’mon.” She nodded her head, gesturing Max. “Ring me up. You asked first, you get to...do the thing.”

Max puffed a laugh through her nose, confused and bewildered. So, apparently, she'd fucked up their proposal and made it all weird and awkward. Even though she'd planned it ahead of time. Things didn't always go according to plan, but maybe following through and seeing where that lead was better than trying to do it over again. At least they got to be embarrassed together.

Max got down on one knee, shivering a bit from the wet, melted snow that seeped onto her knee.

Max held the ring box up toward Chloe and asked, “Chloe Price, will you share the future with me?”

“You better believe I fucking will,” Chloe assured, letting Max shakily slide her ring onto her finger – she even put it on the wrong finger at first and...had to try again. The normal way.

Chloe got down on her knee, as well.

A chilly gust of wind swept across them, tossing their hair around and causing them to shudder through a laugh.

Chloe offered her own ring box, asking, “Max Caulfield, will you share the future with me?”

Max was speechless, but she nodded. And Max was crying – fucking A, of course she was. But for the first time in a long time, it was a good cry.

Max rose up to her feet when Chloe tried to put a ring on her finger.

“What is it?” Chloe asked, rising up to meet her.

“I-I just-...” Max let her tears flow for a bit. “I fucked this all up, pff.”

“Hey, whoa, it's fine. Our entire life is like...a serious of fuck-ups, doesn't mean we can't enjoy the ride, right?”

“I don't know how to do that anymore, Chloe. It's...a process. I don't know how to...make these big steps like this. Are you...really sure you want to do this? Are you sure you want to deal with...-” Max gestured at herself. “...with me? All of me? Cause I've...got a lot of problems going on, in case you haven't noticed...I don't even know what's real anymore. And I don't...know if I can be the best...person for you.”
Chloe took Max’s hand.

“You can, Max. And you will. Just by being you. OK? All right? You don’t have to ‘be’ anything more or different than just...you. We’re a team, remember? I’ll always have your back, just like you’ve had mine. Now, c’mon.” She nodded her head up, rotating Max’s hand gently.

“We’re...really doing this,” Max sighed through her palm, having lifted it to her mouth in disbelief.

“We are really doing this,” Chloe laughed warmly, sliding the ring onto Max’s finger. “Aaaaand it’s done.” She let Max’s hand go. “Boom. Engaged. That simple.”

“That...was not simple for me,” Max confessed warily.
“Aw,” Chloe cooed, running her hand across Max's hair. “Well, either way, you did it. You went through with it.”

“I, uh...I did.” Max nodded, letting a smile join her tears. Sniffing and wiping her face, she added, “We did.”

“So. Are you still up to being my partner in crime?” Chloe asked slyly, latching her hand around Max's. “And all the dumb shit I'm gonna drag you into?”

Max replied contently, “As long as you still want to be my partner in time – and all of the...crazy-ass shit I'm gonna drag you into.”

As they walked together, side by side, Max could feel it – that glow between their hands. Like a beacon, it led her back to shore.

–

“People always told me growing up that it's never about the destination – it's about the journey. But what if the destination...is you?”

~ Mr. Robot

–

Max awoke from what had been the worst sleep of her life. Her body felt...awful. She was so tired. But the weight – enough of it, at least – had been lifted.

Chloe was looking down at her, her exhausted face beaming with the same relief Max was feeling.

“You back with me, Max?” Chloe whispered, wiping her wrist across Max's forehead.

Max hummed and tried to nod. She tried to move, only to realize she was in a hospital bed, and had a needle in her arm.

A needle – that gross, horrifying thing she'd been so scared of – was saving her life.

“How are you feeling, Sweethart?” Chloe whimpered with fret, running her hands across Max's face.

“Like... shit ,” Max admitted through a weak laugh. “Did... Did that all just... happen?”

Chloe flexed her hand open and shut a few times, glancing toward the hospital room door.

“I, uh...-” Chloe shrugged. “I don't know exactly how, or what happened, but...-” She kissed Max on the forehead. “I saw you take the first step, just like I knew you could. And...-” She gave Max a wink, shaking her wrist loose. “That... thing you've been carrying around for so long? I'm gonna take care of it for you. You don't have to worry about it anymore. You've worried about everyone around you for so long – it's time to look out for yourself for a while, huh?”

Max whimpered gently, puckering her lips out.

Chloe understood, and leaned over, kissing Max.
One kiss became three. Which became more. Max lost count.

“Does this mean you’re going to be the Captain again?” Max murmured warmly.

“You know, I think....” Chloe ran her fingers across Max's stomach. “...we should co-Captain this shit from now on, huh?”

“Ooh,” Max croaked, her throat dry. “I like that.”

“Then I will...make it so.” Chloe nodded, pursing her lips thoughtfully.

“Chloe...I'm so sorry for stupid as all the crazy bullshit I've put us through...” Max sighed. “I was... stupid. So stupid.”

“Hey. No. After how much of my life I've spent being stupid? I think we'll be OK.”

Max smiled, deciding, “Let's be stupid together.”

They gave each other googly eyes for a few moments.

And just like that, after everything that had happened...they were right back to where they had been – in a heartbeat.

Chloe beamed back, replying, “Being stupid is what I do best.”

“Then I think we'll get by just fine...”

“Oh!” burst Chloe, reaching for her phone. “This calls for an obligatory selfie, right?”

“Pff. You gonna photo hog on me again?”

“Fuck yea, I am.”

Chloe leaned herself over Max's weary body in the hospital bed.

Max posed a peace sign, trying her best to smile as outwardly as she was inwardly.

Chloe stuck up a middle finger – then paused, balling her hand into a fist, then adjusting into a peace sign to match Max's.

The phone clicked, taking a photo without a flash.

Chloe showed Max the photo. They both chuckled in spite of themselves.

They both looked so damned beat. Worn. Tired.

And happy.

[ Despite everything, it's still you. ]

Chloe wrapped her fingers between Max's – that supernatural spark was gone.
But that invisible glow – she could still feel it.

Chloe leaned over and kissed Max on the lips again.

“Welcome home, Max.”

—

Come what will, I’ve had enough now
What’s left to decide?
Faced with this, there is no question
I’d choose you every
Time comes crashing down
And our world burns to the ground
But I’ll wait out this Storm
I’ll wait out this Storm for you

I’m not leaving any more
I’ve found it’s you I’m fighting for
And even if this is the end
I swear I’ll never leave your side again

~ Andrew Koethe, ‘Storm’

—
Chapter Summary

'I've always wanted my life to be special, an adventure. But not without you.'

A/N: Happy New Year!

It's been over two years since Life is Strange ended, and consequently, since I started work on this progress. Many things didn't come together the way I had originally intended, but many other things happened that I didn't see coming – most of all, meeting the Max to my Chloe through working on this project, and through writing these characters.

I want to give a special thanks to the friends I've met through this fandom who've stuck by my side through all of my anxieties. Most importantly, I want to thank Jenny for inspiring me to grow and to allow myself to inspire others in turn.

I also want to thank all of you who've read this story.

Of course, I also want to thank the team at DontNod for creating these characters and these concepts. And despite my conflicted feelings over the prequel, I do also want to thank Deck Nine for their efforts and the great images, symbols, and ideas they added to the table.

I'm sorry this final chapter probably wasn't worth the wait, and there's no telling how long it will be until I get to revisit it in visual novel format, though I certainly hope I can improve its concepts by then (especially since most of this chapter's design was with the intent of choice-based stuff in mind). Of particular note, since Episode 1 of BtS, I'd intended to include a D&D sequence with Steph and the ladies as the Bachelorette Party, and I feel like I could use a final scene with Joyce, but just don't have the inspiration right now.

I have every intent to still do this with the visual novel adaptation, but I just don't have the energy to figure out how to do it here right now. Apologies. I can relate with developers who've worked on these games with regard to not being able to fit in everything I want to in the end – but this isn't my paying job. It's something I've struggled to create in between everything else in my life. It's at a point where I really just need to let go, start the new year fresh, and re-approach things in the editing process. Thanks for your understanding.

Either way, I hope you've enjoyed this journey, and if I am able to achieve my goals with the visual novel, I hope to catch many of you over there later on down the road. I will add some kind of a epilogue scene to this fic to commemorate when the visual novel is finished, so ya'll know about it.

For now, I hope this story was able to give some of you a fraction of what it gave to me: some kind of development, expression, introspection, and closure for one of my favorite relationships in all of fiction.
It's been a tough past couple of years, and this has been the most difficult project I've ever written.

But through the blizzard, I have foreseen and overcome obstacles, indeed.

Thanks, everyone.

–

Life is Strange
All Wounds

Chapter 20 – A Song of Healing

–

Eyes opened.

Sitting up in bed.

Dark.

Rubbed her eyes.

STORM

Opened her eyes.

Ruins.


She was gone. Max hadn't saved her.
Max had lived. Max had Chloe.

But Rachel…
She hadn't, and she didn't.

It was OK, though.
Or, it would be.

A nudge from behind.
A chill up her spine.

Startled.

Dropped her camera. Again.

Picked it back up. Wasn't broken somehow.

Despite everything, still in one piece.

Side by side with the doe, Max stood. And there she was.
Chloe. Smaller? Younger. Her hair...wasn't blue.

Blackwell? Chloe was smoking again a brick wall.

Chloe was talking with William.
Chloe was talking with her Other Self.

Wait, what?

No, Chloe was talking with no one...

Smoke. So much smoke. Red skies.

Max waved.

Chloe turned.

Her eyes, those fucking beautiful eyes, lighting up like stars.

Only...not at Max.

To Max's side, there she was.

Chloe's eyes were on Rachel.

Rachel. Rachel was waving. Beaming, radiant, shining.

So vivid, so real.

Max had to take a picture. Right?

It was Rachel. She was alive.

She was stunning.

No wonder Chloe had been so taken.

Rachel posed for Max, effortlessly. Such a smile.

-CLICK-

Rachel posed for Chloe, snuggled in bed, a ceiling of stars.

-CLICK-

Rachel posed for Frank, hands gripping the steering wheel, ready to ride.

-CLICK-

Rachel posed for Jefferson. Taped at the arms, filthy in the dark.

-CLICK-

Rachel posed for her adoring fans, bowing on stage. Hot lights.

Burning.
Everything was burning.

Oak tree, tilted, flaming, roaring, consuming.

**BLINDING.**

Max was paralyzed by the mesmerizing sight of it.

Rachel stood beside her.

Max turned to face her.

Black bird on Rachel's shoulder.

A crow? Or…-

In its beak...something. Paper?

**A VOICE** spoke.

So vivid, clear. Like a memory.

A voice Max knew she didn't know.

Rachel's voice.

*We never actually escaped, did we?*

The bird tilted its beak to Max. Dropped a photo into Max's hands.

String of photographs. Photo booth. Rachel and Chloe.

Happy moments. Frozen in time. Happy, but just moments. Memories were nice – but that was all they were.

Rachel gave Max a pleading expression, her eyes wet with tears, baggy and red.

Rachel pointed at Chloe’s image, and spoke, her eyes spears against Max’s mind.

*I don't even know if she's still in Arcadia Bay...But if she is, will you find her, please?*

Max nodded. She nodded so much.

‘Chloe comes first,’ said Max.

She looked back in her hand.

Photo of her and Chloe. Selfie from Chloe's bed. The week of their reunion.

Chloe's voice: *'like I'm some kind of problem to solve. Sometimes I am a problem, though.'*

Rachel took Max's hand.

Rachel's voice: *'You're not a problem, Chloe. You're a person.'*
The bird flew from Rachel's shoulders on a strong wind.
Max realized the fire was gone. Blackness.
Starry sky.
Only ashes left now. Blown by the wind.
Rachel was ashes now.
Max's hand was stained in ashes. Blown by the wind.
The fire had burned out. Bright, blinding, destructive, mesmerizing.
Gone.
Thunder rattled the sky.
The rain fell, calming Max.
Everything calmed down. Just rain. Sweet, soft, gentle rain and wind.
A small eternity of peace and calm.
Then Max woke up.
It was somehow jarring yet gentle, however she had just woken up.
She twisted to her side, by instinct, ready to greet her lover with a morning kiss to start her day.
But there was no one there.
For a moment, a sting pricked at her chest. Was she still dreaming? Had something gone wrong? Had she woken up in the wrong...-?

“Shit! Fuck...”

Chloe's cursing was muffled, but audible and recognizable. The scent of scrambled eggs was gentle, but rousing to Max's nose – though there was also the smell of something burning mixed in.

Max's vision was obscured by a mess of brown and red, that familiar, awful – oh. No, wait.

It was just her dual-colored hair having taken on a life of its own in her sleep – Chloe had come to rather enjoy it when Max wore her hair down for bed, but it could be a bit difficult at times. Heh. Well, maybe that was just living with Chloe in general: a bit difficult at times, but hella worth it.

Wiping hair from her face, Max took in a deep yawn, scratching at herself as she tossed the sheets off. Rubbing sand from her eyes, Max's brain caught up with the world around her, and in so doing, slipped into a brief bout of despair.

She had work to go to. For the first time since the incident, at that.

Back to reality, as it were.
And as exciting and relieving as that prospect had been a few days back, there were rough edges to facing that reality.

As she stumbled into kitchen in her pajamas, Max found herself momentarily paralyzed by the pleasure of watching Chloe wrestle with frying pan, trying to pull bits of eggshell from the rapidly frying eggs she'd broken. Max let herself linger in the doorway, soaking in her fiancé’s grumbled cursing.

It was an ordinary moment, and after everything the two of them had been through, ordinary moments were what Max craved more than anything.

As Chloe seemed to have gotten over her frustration and removed the shell pieces from the pan, Max waddled up behind her, sliding her hands around Chloe's waist. As self-conscious as Chloe was about her 'beer belly,' Max just found it to be nice to cuddle with. Chloe was a Human, imperfections and all, but she was Max's favorite Human.

“Oh, hey,” Chloe murmured in a cooing, soft voice, snuggling herself into Max's frame as she tossed scrambled eggs. “Morning.”

“It is...that,” Max mumbled groggily, pressing her chin into Chloe's shoulder.

“You sleep OK?”

“Mrrhh,” eked Max, rubbing at her eyes. “I think that...thing happened again.”

Chloe whimpered sympathetically.

“Sorry, Bebb,” she sighed, nuzzling the back of her head against Max's face. “I, erh-...Not really sure how to turn that off.”

“It's fine,” Max assured, leaving the matter at that. Chloe was carrying those powers now, but she of course had so little practice using them that the Dreamweave had a way of...happening, without her consent. While it had been a bit scary at first, their dreams getting mixed together was happening less and less over time. In a way, Max was starting to miss it. Even if it was subconsciously, seeing parts of Chloe's life she could never know made her feel more connected, but simultaneously frustrated for having not been there during those days. It had ultimately spurred a lot of conversations about that gap of time while Max had been in Seattle. And besides, it wasn’t like the dreams they had shared were all bad, either.

“You sure you’re all right? How're you feeling?” Chloe softly asked, leaning her cheek against Max's head.

Max sucked in a long breath through her nose, taking in the scent of Chloe's deodorant and cooking eggs. She exhaled.

“I'm OK,” she decided.

“Mmh,” Chloe grunted sympathetically. “Any way I can...like, upgrade that? Maybe to a...'pretty good'? Or even solid 'good'?”

Max chuckled softly, nuzzling her nose against Chloe's neck and planting a kiss there. That kiss ended up sticking around, evolving into a nibble of sorts.
“Solid good?” Max taunted in a mischievous whisper. “You’ve got lotsa solid goods…”

“Oh,” Chloe said, amused. As Max’s hands got grabby, squeezing and pinching at Chloe’s squishier parts, Chloe eked out some pleasantly surprised sounds – all the while cooking eggs, tossing in chunks of diced tomato and mushrooms.

The eggs started to burn again amidst the sounds of pleasant giggles and hums. They’d turn out a little burnt, a little overcooked, but Max would still love them.

Chloe had to ease Max's grabby hands off of her a bit – and Max found herself a little self-conscious as to just how grabby she was being so early in the morning. That other side of herself, maybe, getting excited to just, like, touch Chloe, feel Chloe. It was nice to have that part of her feel connected to the rest of herself, even if it was taking a little time to accept without getting embarrassed. Still, it did make her wonder...

“What's up?” Chloe asked, switching off the stove-top as she scraped at the frying pan. Her brows etched her concern across her forehead. “That was nice just now, you know.”

Chloe sure had gotten good over the years at picking up on Max's spacing-out and what it entailed.

“Huh? Y-yea, your ‘morning grope,’ pff. Sorry. I didn't mean to...get so...gropey.”

“I mean, isn’t that the point, though? I said it was nice,” Chloe reminded, gently, with a smirk over her shoulder. Sliding browned scrambled eggs onto two plates, she added, “Drop the ‘sorry’s,’ remember?” She kissed Max on the cheek, cautiously scooping bagels from their mini toaster oven. She facetiously added in a flat tone, lulling her head comically, “Ohhhh nooo, my fiancé is so attracted to me that she wants to touch me a lot.” Her voice lowered into a gravelly groan, “How terrible and inconvenient.”

Max chuckled bashfully in spite of herself as she retrieved the cream cheese from the fridge and got a butter knife.

“It is inconvenient when I make you burn breakfast,” Max said wryly, beginning to spread the cream cheese on as Chloe went to wash the frying pan.

“It's just a little burned,” Chloe scoffed playfully, scrubbing.

“It's pretty burned,” Max prodded back, noting the blackened crusts of her bagel.

“Your face is pretty burned,” Chloe taunted back.

Max’s knife skidded to a stop as her head flashed with a warm, familiar face that brought her joy and pain in equal measure every time she saw it.

“But, your...mom is...-” Max eked out, her words damp with sorrow and dread.

“Huh?” Chloe turned off the sink.

“Nevermind.” Max rubbed her thumb at her eyelashes before any tears could form, trying to re-center herself.

Setting the frying pan on the dish rack, Chloe processed what had just happened.
“Oh. Shit.” She sighed, drying her hands. “Sorry, I wasn't thinking...”

“I'm the one who thought of it and was stupid enough to...” Max trailed off, trying her best not to sigh, but taking a long, deep breath as she brought the plates to their tiny kitchen table. As Chloe warily approached, Max worked a shaky smile out. “Drop the 'sorry's,' remember?”

Chloe laughed weakly, running her hand across Max's cheek and rubbing her hip with the other hand. They kissed a couple times, their foreheads leaning against one another afterward. Max nuzzled her face against Chloe's neck, sniffing in the scent of recently applied cologne that Chloe liked to wear, combined with her terrible morning breath. It was so damned bizarre but neat how an incompatible, even unpleasant smell could make her feel good, relaxed, safe.

“It's OK, you know,” said Chloe in a whisper, nibbling at Max's ear. “Feeling not OK? You don't have to hide it with me.”

“I know,” Max whispered back, letting her eyes close as the ear-nibbling consumed her senses.

“You don't want to go to work today,” Chloe observed, wiping saliva off Max's earlobe with her thumb. “But you're ready to.”

“I am ready to,” Max sighed. “And I don't want to.”

Their hands found their way against each other's hips, their glances mixing with each other like two colored paints forming a new shade.

“Don't push yourself too hard,” said Chloe. “And I mean that, like...in general. I know you're still down on yourself because of the whole...Stella thing.”

“Things'll be fine with Stella,” Max mumbled, her head sagging to one side at the disappointment of it. Stella had needed space from, well...everything. And it was totally understandable. After what Max had put her through? She earned it, she needed it, Max got that. But it still hurt, not having her best friend around when things were finally supposed to be getting better.

“They will be fine,” Chloe agreed. “Just let her come to you, OK?”

Max nodded, chewing on her lip a little.

“I just...I'm sick of feeling like my whole life is on hold. Before it was...” She gestured toward herself. “...me, just, what a mess I was. Now, it's, like, my job, my friends, therapy, my photography, even fucking waiting to get married to you? Everything. It's all...in stasis.”

“It ain't in 'stasis,' Bebb.” Chloe ran her hand through Max's hair, straightening out her bed head a little. “Change takes time – metamorphosis takes time. Stuff's not, like, frozen, it’s...like a loading screen. Shit’s happening in the background, prepping, you just can’t see it. Take your time, Maximus.” She rubbed her thumbs against Max's neck, and Max felt paralyzed in the best kind of way.

“Guess I...” Max ran her hand through sleep-greased hair, pushing it out of her eyes with a sigh. “...got so used to time being on my side that I'm...feeling impatient now that it's not.”

“Sooner or later, Batman has to head into retirement, go back to being Bruce Wayne, amirite?”
“Pff, maybe not the...best analogy,” Max mumbled. “Bats and Bruce actually helped people...Plus, they’re totally rich.”

“Dude. You have hella helped people. Helped me, for damn sure. And others.”

Max nodded groggily, grumbling, “Still not a good metaphor.”

Chloe kissed Max on the cheek, saying, “S all I got today, Maxie. Half-cooked metaphors and overcooked breakfast.” Chloe eased Max to her seat, then went about pouring coffee for them both.

Rubbing sand from her eyes, Max said through a yawn, “Half-cooked life goals and overcooked metaphors are...” The yawn needed a sec to take over. “...my jam...” She blathered out a groggy noise, shaking her head a bit. The scent of coffee made her heart twitch a little. Probably her body reacting to the caffeine with excitement? Or was it the dread of going to work?

“It’s been a shitty month,” Chloe agreed, taking a bite of her eggs. “Aaand half-cooked things need to be...full-cooked. That’s just where you’re at right now, ya know? Hard-boiled Max-egg, still...hardening its boil. Or something.”

Max’s eyelids slid downwards a bit as she smirked at Chloe, who shrugged sheepishly.

“Half-cooked metaphors, indeed,” Max teased.

“Tell ya what's not half-cooked, though,” said Chloe, raising her brows slyly as she stabbed at her eggs with a fork. “Myyyy love fer you.” She stuffed her face, beaming with puffed cheeks.

“So smooth,” Max chuckled softly.

The duo shared a quiet, uneventful morning together, settling back into their routine – into each other. It wasn’t in a way that suggested nothing had happened that autumn, but instead that everything had definitely happened, and they were ready to move forward.

Time was supposed to move forward, steadily.

Max Caulfield was finally back on that human axis, which meant that finally, at last, she could stop focusing on what had happened, or what could happen. She could stop being afraid, because her place in time – in reality – was right there, in the present, with Chloe Price.

Theoretical pasts and futures didn’t matter anymore.

What would happen – with Chloe, the future they'd build together – was the wonderful mystery it was supposed to be.

Come and see
The light of day out in the open
It's like I'm waking from a dream

Many days since I have seen the end unfolding
Many times that I've looked back
On all the times that we have had
These colors seem never as warm
I feel a stiff breeze as we weather the Storm
And yet I let it all wash right over me
I close my eyes, and I see

This is the place to be

~ Campusanis, *The Place to Be*

(Dream sequence directly based on Jenny's comic strip, over on her Tumblr, at Mollifiable)


Just like Max remembered it.

A job was a job, though, and this was hers. She'd tried to look for work during her time off, only to be thoroughly discouraged and disappointed by just how difficult it was to find anything worthwhile. Was it the economy? Was it overpopulation? Was it that she just sucked in the grand scheme of things? She couldn't even land an interview for anything she'd applied to, much less find work that was any better than this job, much less find anything she actually cared about or that was related to what she had a degree in.

“Mmmm-!” hummed Steph, halfway through sipping her smoothie through a straw. She swallowed, rotating the phone in her hand so Max could see it. “I really like this one, actually.”

Max, recovering from her mind-meandering stupor, took note – Steph was showing her an Instagram upload of a photo Max had taken the other day. It depicted a zoomed shot of a snail on sidewalk, overcast sky, in the rain – at the bus station she’d often traverse to get to or from work. The snail was in a puddle, connected to a mirrored reflection of itself. The rain that morning had brought out a lot of snails, which had filled Max with a nice sense of tranquility. On her way back home from the grocery store, however, she’d...sadly noticed that some of the snails had been crushed by pedestrians.

Everything was temporary – even a photograph, filtered and uploaded to the web.

Everything was at risk of ending too soon – even an innocent creature's life, minding its own business.

Max was back to living life the way Humans did – as it came, one moment at a time.
No do-overs, no retries.

It was taking some adjusting, if she was being honest, but she was gradually working her way out of uncertainty and hesitation. Feeling as whole as she ever had in years had certainly been helping.

“Ah,” said Steph awkwardly, noticing Max’s sullen spacing out. “Sure you’re feeling up to being here?”

Max swallowed and nodded, insisting, “Oh, n-no, I’m-...I’m fine, yea, it’s just...-” She fussied with her hair, her insides twisting a little as her mind began to trip over errant worries.
“Still bummed about Stella, huh?” Steph pegged.

Max sighed and shrugged one shoulder, but then nodded half-heartedly. Steph administered a rough shoulder pat.

“Listen up, my dude – I saw her the night shit went down. She was there for you. It’s rough right now – she needs space. Fuck, didn’t you need space for a while, too?”

“True,” Max conceded. “I-I dunno, I just-…When it comes to people, sometimes it’s…”

*Complicated.*

Even with how much Max had grown, how much better she was, everything wasn’t magically perfect. Things with Chloe were *amazing* and good and great. But everything else was still a work-in-progress. She had the strength to get through it, now, certainly, but it was all still a process.

The door chime rang.

Steph’s attention was diverted with an apologetic glance.

“Uh, well, I’ll leave you to your thought bubble, then,” Steph murmured, turning to the door. “Welcome!” she greeted with an elevated voice. “What can we get you tonight?”

The customer had an annoying voice. And an annoying face. And an annoying way of over-complicating Steph’s job by interrupting her. And an annoying way of continuing to waste Steph’s time even after Steph had handed the order to Max.

Max’s words had been cut off, but her feelings continued to brew alongside the macchiato she was assigned to whip up.

Max was broken, right?
Still. Even now. Even when she had been put back together – in as much as she *could* be.
Still fucking broken, wasn’t she?

[*I cannot understand these feelings anymore.*]

'Yes. You can.'

No. No, Max *wasn’t* broken, not in the way she had feared. She was Human.
She was alive.
She was stronger and wiser than she had *ever* been.
She had passed through the crossroads of her own destiny, and she had made her choice.
She had chosen to *love*.

So she wasn’t broken anymore – but the cracks were still there.
Max just had to keep it together.
Let those wounds keep healing.
She wanted to keep it together.
Accept those scars they left behind.
She *would* keep it together.
And even *if* she somehow couldn’t, Chloe was there, and that was all she *really* needed, at the end of
things.

She had Chloe.
She has Chloe.
She was going to have Chloe.

How could she be so happy with what she had found and where she was going, but not feel happy?

Why could she not just feel it?

Why was she still anxious? Why was she still consumed with worry and doubt and want

Why did she still want anything else, when Chloe was enough? Did it make her selfish? Greedy?

Was she-?

Fuck.

Max spilled a bit, hot droplets stinging at her hand like tiny needle pricks.

Luckily, their customer was too busy rattling Steph’s ears off for either to notice.

Max needed to take a moment to find herself.
She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and tuned everything else out for a few second.
She focused on the sound of rain battering the tarmac and sidewalk outside.
She focused on the smells of the coffee beans around her, and the steam cleansing her nostrils.
She thought of the scent of Chloe’s cologne (and her morning breath), the feeling of nuzzling her face against Chloe’s neck.

I’m not falling apart.
It’s OK.
I am OK.

Having steadied her shaky hands, Max strode to the counter to deliver the order.

“-with all these hyper-liberals taking things over, this crap was bound to happen. People whining about the administration because they got so used to their crazy nonsense going unchecked. Everybody wants to be something they’re not these days. It’s all this friggin’ social media, cell phones, n’ crap. Everyone thinks they’re some special little snowflake and can be whatever they want, everyone’s some special color on a special rainbow. Well, fantacizing that you’re someone you ain’t doesn’t get the bills paid. But America always bounces back, you know? We did it w-”

“Your drink’s ready,” Max interjected, sneaking her arm around Steph, whose face had glazed over.

“Mm,” grunted the grouchy customer, taking the drink and sipping at it. Based on the expression, probably burned their tongue a bit. Good.

Max swiftly retreated back to the counter, making to look busy with cleaning it up and checking the levels of the machines as Steph continued to play nice as the customer rambled their way out.

The moment the door chimed and the customer was gone, Steph sighed through fluttering lips, rubbing her face tiredly.

“Well, that happened,” Steph puffed to Max as she passed by, loud enough for Max to hear but quiet enough where no one else in the shop could.
It made Max think. Her old self might’ve…well, decked the person, then undid it. Or maybe just Rewound and wormed her way out of the entire conversation. But it had happened. And Steph was clearly agitated by it having happened. And Steph was OK. She was moving forward. Max was OK. She would move forward.

It felt stupid to overanalyze such a minor moment, but those minor moments added up. In Max’s pursuit of weeding them out, she’d only ended up robbing herself of the practice of just… learning how to live with it all, like a Human.

The door chimed again, and while Max couldn’t care any less, Steph seemed immediately curious. Out of the corner of her eye, Max noticed Steph smile and wave. Maybe Max should stop cowering at the counter and see who it was.

Her chest froze up when she noticed that it was Stella. Folding up her umbrella, Stella adjusted her opposing arm – a small wrapped present was tucked within. She was dressed in a padded white jacket with a woolly knit cap of orange and yellow covering her ears.

She hesitated as the door slowly closed behind her. Her eyes met Max’s from across the shop. There was a weird warmth to them – a little angry, but also glad? It was quite hard to read.

Max wasn’t prepared for dealing with this matter at that moment in time. But it was the moment in time she had been presented.

“Yo,” Steph greeted, startling both of them out of their worried spacing.

“I-h-hey, hi,” Stella stammered, swallowing and clearing her throat as she approached the counter. Glancing around the shop, she noticed how quiet it was. “Um…Sl-…” She coughed, then sniffled. Aw, she sounded sick. Poor thing. “Slow day, huh?” she eeked out sheepishly. She wiped her sleeve against her nose, and Max could see symptoms that she’d been out in the cold too long. Jeez.

“Yes,” Steph grunted, leaning herself over the main counter on her elbows. “Yep, yep, slow damn day. Killin’ me over here.”

“Sucks,” Stella replied simply, but with the expected amount of sympathy.

“Time really drags when you're just waiting for it go by, huh?”

“Mm.” Stella nodded after a moment of awkward glance-swapping with Max, who immediately broke eye contact.

With a cleaning rag in her hands, Max fiddled with the rag some, wiping a countertop she’d just cleaned.

“Um,” Stella drummed her fingers against the present in her grasp, then fussed with her glasses. “Should I place an order, or…?”

Steph coyly leaned over the counter, quietly offering, “How about you just tell me what you want and I give it to you?”

Max already knew what Stella wanted: an off-menu item, ‘Penguin in a Red Tux.’ Regular Mocha
with White Mocha (for when you couldn't decide between the two) with raspberry flavoring as a twist. Max went to work making one as the others spoke.

“Oh, n-no,” Stella declined sheepishly. “I wouldn't...want to...impose.”

“Dude,” Steph flatly pushed. “It's been weeks since I've seen you, you look like shit – sorry – and you've done my minion here a solid–” Steph slapped Max's shoulder brusquely, nearly causing Max to spill syrup on herself. “--so just have a drink on me, OK?”

Stella nodded, wide-eyed. She sniffled and wiped her nose again, groaning under her breath.

“So?” Steph posed. “What'll it be?”

“I, um-...Heh. I think Max is...already...”

“Oh.” Steph twisted around, and Max just shrugged, nodding. “Tsh, that's the Max I know, remembering those details.”

“Yea,” Max murmured uncertainly, getting the drink together.

“Where's Scott?” Steph asked.

“Wh-Who?” Stella was toppled for a moment. “Oh, Brooke. She, um...” Refuses to be in the same room as me? Max assumed. “She's back at home,” Stella cited. “Gaming marathon today, some event going on, I, uh...” She shrugged.

“What brought you downtown, eh?” Steph prodded with a sly little wrinkle to her tone.

“Actually, I was...wondering if Max could take a break for a few minutes?”

Max was putting the finishing touches on the drink, keeping her head low, and Steph was all too eager to grab Max by the shoulders with some glee.

“Enh? See?” she whispered into Max's ear. “What'd I tell you?”

Max nodded nervously. Why the fuck was she nervous? This was her friend. This was her best friend. Like, besides Chloe, obviously. Why was she nervous? She knew Stella loved her, supported her, cared about her. Why did it feel like things were so weird and off and not right?

Sliding the cup of coffee across the counter to Stella, Max tried to speak.

“Is...?” Max began, trying to keep up appearances. “Is everything OK?”

Stella's lips opened for a moment. A long moment.

“I-...W-well, yea, I just...needed to talk, I mean, it's been a while and...”

“I just thought you...” Max lowered her voice, sliding the cup a little further when Stella didn't retrieve it. “You said you needed space, and I already knew I fucked up, so, like...”

“Let's just talk for a bit,” Stella sighed, that familiar tinge of disappointment lacing her lips.
Max turned to Steph, who shrugged, tipped her head upward, and flicked out a wrist.

“Sure,” Max replied, adjusting her uniform's visor as she wandered around the counter.

Stella awkwardly tried to wrestle with her own hands – one holding an umbrella, the other a wrapped gift – to pick up her cup of coffee, but Max ended up escorting it to a table at the corner of the cafe.

Stella set the flat, small present down, pushing it across the table. She sniffled, sipped at her hot drink, and coughed a little.

Max gawked at the gift.

“I, um, I know it's early for the holidays,” said Stella. “But...I just wanted to give it to you early. Might as well, right? I'm not really a fan of surprises, anyway.”

Max smiled a little and nodded, recalling the many instances in which Stella had argued about the lack of value in the cultural concept of 'surprise.'

She opened the present, trying at first to cautiously unfold the wrapping, only to take out her house key and tear it open when the tape proved too tough.

It was a music CD.

[ Steven Universe ]
[ Volume 1 ]

Cute. Max had been meaning to get it sooner or later, but coming from Stella seemed fitting.

“You know what I love about that album’s title?” Stella posed, with that coy little wrinkle to her smile Max knew too well – across realities, even.

“I, uh, I don’t,” Max admitted, her gaze caught in Stella’s nervous smile. It just...felt good to be assured that despite everything, Stella was still Stella, and her best friend wasn’t going anywhere, even after everything Max had put her through. Noticing the awkward pause between them, Max mumbled, “Whhh–...What do you like about the title?”

“'Volume 1,'” Stella recited, glancing down at the album case. “The title itself implies that it's not all there is or will be. There’s more to come. I mean, right? Maybe it takes a lot of work to get it together, but...things continue.”

Stella took a sip of her drink, and Max managed to gather the courage to look her square in the eyes.

Max murmured bashfully, “We, um...We're talking about more than just music, aren't we?”

Stella smirked and nodded, her eyes wrinkling warmly.

“We are,” she confirmed. “I've been putting off telling you, because I know how much you've been through lately, but...” Stella paused, drumming her fingers along her coffee cup. “I still need more time. I don't want you to feel like I'm ditching you, I'm not. But helping you work through all of this...crazy shit you've had to deal with? It's set me back on things in my own life. And the fact is, as much as I know you want to help me, when it comes to the stuff with my family, with my own
personal things...you can't really do anything to help.”

“So...” Max’s chest felt pricked with rejection. “I'm most useful to you when I’m...not around?”

“No, no, it's not...It's not like that, exactly, I mean, you're, like, super important to me. Chloe is important to me, too. You already have helped me in the ways you could. And when you two tie the knot, I am going to be there, one hundred percent. I'm not just going to vanish out of your life. I know you've gotten used to losing people – whether in this life, or, well...” She shrugged, cautiously glancing around the cafe. “...in your other one. I'm always going to be here for you. We still have a lot of good times ahead of us, I know we do. You can't save everyone, Max – you can't fix everything. I've been focusing so much on you, on Chloe, that I've neglected my own problems. I just wanted to talk with you and, like, try to explain that.”

“It's OK,” Max said, trying to save face. It hurt a little, not knowing exactly how things would play out. But that was how reality was supposed to work, she'd just gotten used to not having to face that. “I understand,” she lied. Bleh. Slipping back into her old lying habits again? “I mean, I don't understand,” Max corrected, rubbing her hand across her head. “But I accept it.”

“You try to understand,” said Stella, getting up from her chair. “That's what matters.”

“I miss you,” Max sighed, letting her grief slip a little as she knew their time together was waning. “And I love you. N-not like...I mean, I...”

“I know,” said Stella, giving Max a brief, one-armed hug. “I miss you, and I love you, too. And I'm not leaving you, or Chloe.” She scooped back up her umbrella. “These things just take time, Max.”

Max nodded, and their shared tired but hopeful smiles.

“Yea,” Max acknowledged. She widened her smile. “Some things are worth the time.”

Stella's eyes narrowed warmly and she nodded in reply.

“Meanwhile? You take care, Max.”

“You, too, Stella.”

Stella approached the glass door to the rainy, dark outside world. Leaning against the doorway with her hip to push it open, she popped open her umbrella, waving back to Max, who timidly waved her farewell – for now. While Max and Chloe had their own literal and metaphorical storms to deal with, it was easy to forget that everyone in Max’s life had their own stories, their own storms, their own struggles. She couldn't be at the center of everything.

“I’ll catch you on the other side, Max.”

–

Vic gawked, eyes wide, brow lifted, jaw agape.

“Well?” Chloe grunted disparagingly, adjusting the article before her and glancing down at herself. “Is it...? Is it too ‘wenchy?’” She swallowed, then flatly concluded, “It’s too ‘wenchy.’”

“No, no, it’s...fine,” Vic spat. Slowly. And with some hesitation.

With a sigh, Chloe set the dress she’d been holding on the table beside her.
The pair of them both took a sip from their wine glasses, continuing to ponder the dress. The wedding was coming up pretty soon. They didn't have time for alterations. The dresses for the ceremony were all set in place, but...this was supposed to be a surprise: pirate-themed getups for the reception party. Chloe was worried she was mucking it up, though. What if Max didn't like it?

One hand on her hip, Chloe’s other hand was sliding her wine around in circles within the glass.

“What about Max’s duds?” Chloe wondered.

Fuck. ‘Duds?’ Vic probably thought she was an idiot.

Vic snort-giggled slightly, immediately covering up her wine-pinkened face.

“Uh, yeaaaa, her…duds. They’re, uh…-” Vic cocked her head to one side at the elaborate suit on the table. A proper Captain’s outfit. Chloe wryly smirked as she watched Vic dress Max with her mind’s eye (or whatever). “I think I actually like it,” Vic admitted, surprised with herself. Tapping a fingertail against her wine glass, she noted, “I mean…-“ A soft chuckle. “It’s dorky as fuck, but…-” A thoughtful nod, and a solemn tone, “It suits her somehow.”

“Right?” Chloe agreed gently, nodding in agreement as they both.

“That dress isn’t you, though,” Vic offered her criticism. “And, like, the other outfit’s cute, in a… trying-to-look-nautical kind of way?” She took a swig. "But it makes it appear like there’s this…-“ Her face wrinkled. “…subservience thing going on. Like you answer to her. You know? Like…she owns you.”

“Like I’m her bitch,” Chloe blurted out, to which they both laughed, then sighed in unison.

It was a melancholic sigh, followed by more silent sips of wine.

“You’re not, though,” Vic stated, pouring herself a second glass.

“Mn,” Chloe hummed with a certain sense of uncertainty. Not at what Victoria had said, but more that someone who knew them less closely might interpret things that way.

“It’s not like it was with you an’…-“ Vic trailed off, shrugging up a shoulder.

“You can just say it,” Chloe clarified gently. They swapped glazed looked briefly, then Vic gestured Chloe to hand over her own emptied glass.

“With you and Rachel…-” Victoria explained softly, carefully, pouring Chloe a second helping of wine. “Well, it was a very different dynamic. One of you was clearly ‘in charge.’ Especially from what you’ve told me at this point. And believe me, we were all…uh…-”

Victoria's face flashed with guilt.

“Blinded?” Chloe finished the thought with a certain bitterness.

“Y-yes. Mm-hm.” Vic nodded hastily, handing Chloe back the glass, now full of booze once again.

They paused to contemplate. They both sipped.
“I'm sorry for what he did. What-...What they did.”

Chloe was confused.

“Nathan, I mean. And Rachel,” Vic clarified. “When something dark – something tragic – happens to a person? Someone you really cared about...-” She trailed off, shaking her head. “Maybe it makes me a bitch to say it, but just because someone died before their time, it...doesn't make how they hurt us just...go away. It doesn't...make them an angel, just because they're not with us anymore. And, like, I'm sure Rachel did good by you? But she clearly did bad, too. For as shitty a person as Nathan could be, he did do good – for me, anyway. But that shouldn’t take away from the pain he caused. What he did can't be excused. Explained, sure. We can both blame ourselves for another five fucking years if we want to, but...it doesn't change how they made choices for themselves. We can’t keep these people on pedestals just because we couldn’t...keep them in the first place.”

A heavy pause hung over them.

“I think...-” Chloe started, her throat catching as a pulse of emotion swept over her. She inhaled, then exhaled carefully, re-steadying herself. That remark hit her a bit harder than she would've like. “Y- yea, I mean-...Yea.”

They both sipped.

“What Nathan did?” Vic went on. “He was troubled, he didn't deserve what happened to him. Neither did Rachel, right?” Chloe shook her head to this. “Rachel was also troubled, right?” Vic checked, her head lulling expectantly.

Glass bottles smashed. An entire table, shattered. An entire forest, ablaze. A fucking two-by-four to that asshole’s head.

“Yea,” Chloe nodded solemnly.

The cracks had widened, the longer Chloe had known Rachel. They had with Max, too. The difference was that after Rachel, and because of Max, Chloe had been equipped to move forward, to confront things, to help seal those cracks, or at least close them together.

“But they both still chose how they acted,” Victoria pointed out. “They both chose to hurt people. Even if they didn't realize it at the time, they had to have, somewhere down the line. And we've been trying to, like...idealize their good sides? But if we really want to honor their memory, shouldn't we maybe...move on? Why can’t we let them exist as complete people – with the good and bad that comes with that. Even if we never fully understood them, they were complete people.”

“I, um...-” Chloe cleared her throat, then shrugged. Vic was ranting about something real for once. Chloe was too fascinated – and too stricken – to interrupt.

Victoria nodded thoughtfully. They both sipped.

“Ya know, looking back? For the longest fuckin' time, it was like...I was Rachel's prisoner. N-not, like, in this intentional way, but...”

‘Thy liberty? Nay! This most of all I will not grant.’
Chloe cleared her throat on the memory of that magical night – like a spell that had been broken somewhere along the way.

“It was like I got so caught up in being strung along by her, I-...I guess I forgot what being my own person felt like. I built this entire identity around what she saw in me, what she wanted me to become, until I just....” She sighed, shaking her head.

Victoria nodded emphatically.

“Mark Jefferson didn't intend to hold me prisoner – until he literally fucking did.”

Chloe was startled by that remark, her train of thought derailed.

They both sipped, and Vic went on.

“I saw in Mark what I wanted to see – what he wanted me to see. Same thing with Rachel. And Nathan? He was pushed into trying to be what he wasn't. I'm willing to bet Rachel was, as well. I guess maybe that's why it pisses me off so much when I see Max even starting that shit – lying, putting on an act, playing along when she doesn't even know what's going on...”

“She's supposed to be better than that, right?” Chloe mused, shaking her head with amusement. “But she's not – none of us are. And that's...fine. Really. Rather that than wearing a mask.”

“I'd say striving for improvement isn't exactly a bad pursuit,” Vic raised. “But, well-...We do all have our vices. Best to be practical and allow for some of that inevitability.”

Chloe was reminded of throwing up in a parking lot the night Max overdosed. Victoria lashing into her - deserved. Vices could squeeze a bit, but when things started cracking? Breaking? They needed to be checked. Before they, um, wrecked. Fucking A, Chloe.

“Back when we – when Max and I -- we first got together,” Chloe brought up, “we were, like, way wracked with guilt, n' everything. That crazy week with Jeffershit, Rachel, Kate, the Storm, all that business – we fell for each other that week. Hard. It was crazy, being together again after all that time, and things were just different between us. But, 'cuz of all the crazy crap that week, we kept tryin' to...deny it, push it away, postpone it...Like it was a vice.” Chloe swirled her wine in her glass. “Like...an addiction. To each other.” She sniffed dryly, taking a sip. She sighed out, “Guess it is, sorta. But then, fuckin'...oxygen's an addiction if you wanna look at it that way.”

“You had the freedom to choose to be with each other. You know, I'm honestly envious you two were able to make that first step when you did. Maybe if I'd had that kind of...boldness, I would've...”” She trailed off, her eyes glazing over. She shook her head, her lips pursing as she drowned whatever errant thought she'd had in wine. She shrugged, concluding, “It sounds to me like you and Max enabled in each other a...certain kind of freedom.”

“To not give a fuck?” Chloe guessed with a shrug, knowing she'd learned how to do that from Rachel.

“No,” said Victoria. “To give a fuck. To act on it.”

Oh. Well, yea. That one she'd definitely picked up from Max.

“I mean,” Vic added, “it takes a certain kind of freedom to let yourself act on feelings like that, doesn’t it?”
“Certain kind of liberty,” Chloe cited, her throat catching a little at the bitter memory. “Yea. She does. Enable that – my liberty. Back at Blackwell, never felt like I had any – even during my best moments. I was always...trapped, somehow, someway...by someone. Max changed all that. We had our rough patch, and...we worked through it. Now, I feel freer than I ever was.”

Smirking, Chloe held her glass out – Vic caught on and they toasted glasses together.

“Here’s to liberty, I guess,” Chloe said.

“Here’s to liberty,” Vic agreed.

They both drank to that.

–

Max did not see the point in dressing up so soon. Wasn't that what rehearsal dinners were for? And why was Chloe being so pushy? Having Max get changed in a separate room, and everything?

That being said, it did feel pretty nice – the suit. The uniform? It was tip-top. When Max looked at herself in the mirror, she was pleased. A proper Captain's uniform. Nice hat, too. She felt so nice and slick and...together.

And it was that very sensation that caught her off guard.

Max had spent so much time – outside of time – looking at herself through such dirty, unfocused lens. Embittered and angry.

For the first time in as long as she could remember, she looked into a mirror, saw herself, and was pleased.

Despite everything…

“After five years, you’re still Max Caulfield.”

Max was warmed by Chloe's words – catching Chloe's expression through the mirror, Max saw how fuzzy and googly-eyed Chloe was, only to take note that Chloe was, herself, wearing a blue pirate captain suit to match Max's red one.

“It really has been five years, hasn't it?” Max reflected with a sigh, buckling the buttons on her uniform. They were running late on their anniversary by a month and change, but still. “I've finally...made up for all that time I wasn't there for you.”

Max swallowed a lump in her throat as her cheeks burned up. She occupied her hands with her hair and feathered hat.

Chloe slunk in behind her and entwined their fingers through each other.

“Max, you made up for that within a week of being back in my life,” Chloe assured softly. “And there's reasons for that. Reasons we've gotten this far with this whole 'us' thing. You know?” She kissed Max's cheek. “Maybe in other lives we could've...been happy with other people, but...” She sighed peacefully, rubbing her thumb against Max's wrist as they stared at each other through the mirror's glass. “I mean, fuck, Maxine – I'm just glad I'm living this life in this reality, with you.”
“Me, too,” Max assured, her eyes starting to dampen as her cheeks grew warmer.

Chloe's hand wriggled its way out of Max's grasp and against her behind, giving it a nice 'inspection,' all the while admiring Max's attire.

“I do like you in uniform,” Chloe said in a quiet, giddy fashion, teeth bared in a grin. “How's it feel?”

Max straightened Chloe's tie, unbuttoned the top button of Chloe's blouse, and rubbed her palm against Chloe's neck, surveying her co-captain.

“Like a dream,” Max cheekily replied, nuzzling noses with her love, to which Chloe giggled sheepishly, softly.

“Just be glad I'm compromising with you,” Chloe noted. “Dresses at the ceremony – uniforms for the reception.”

“Is it still a compromise if we both get what we want?” Max posed coyly.

“Good call,” Chloe replied.

They made dorky, red-cheeked looks at each other a little more before giving in to what they couldn't help.

A make-out session later – and consequently, a quick re-grooming to follow it up – and Chloe escorted Max to their living room, which had been temporarily re-purposed to serve as a hella cheesy, candle-lit dinner. On their couch.

Chloe pulled out her phone.

“All right, Cap'n,” Chloe said, scrolling on her device. “Some swashbuckling music, is it?”

“Yrghhh,” Max growled, attempting to be...pirate like?

Chloe burst out a chuckle. “Yarrrghh!” she bellowed.

“I love the outfits,” said Max, “but...I'm not really in a...pirate-y state of mind right now.”

“So, something sentimental, then,” Chloe concluded, swiping and tapping at her phone.

“Yea, that...would be nice.”

“You got it, Max.”

And so, Chloe set a song playing on her phone – the one she had played from the previous year's anniversary. It warmed Max's nostalgic heart.

After acclimating to the change of mood, Max realized that the setup on their coffee table was familiar.

The menu?

Macaroni and cheese. With a side of...scrambled eggs? Coffee mugs with...coffee. And a bottle of whiskey? What?

Chloe wasn't exactly a gourmet chef. It was the thought that counted, but...still...
Wait...-

As she watched Chloe drizzle some whiskey into their coffee mugs – gesturing like a waiter pouring glasses of wine – the scents of the meal brought hazy memories to the fold.

Brows furrowed as she sat herself down, Max pointed at the coffee table of food.

“This...” she began, to which Chloe nodded.

“I mean,” Chloe clarified, “The mac-in-cheese is because you've let me off the hook with that whole ‘max-and-cheese’ biz. Remember that?”

“Oh-my-gawd, I do,” Max snort-giggled, palm on her face. “How have I not teased you about that more often?”

“Consider the reminder a pre-wedding present, courtesy of your mom.”

“Pff.”

“She even cooked it for me last night because when I tried to it came out runny as diarrhea.”

“Yum,” Max said, tight-lipped. “Nice pre-dinner chatter.”

“You know me,” said Chloe.

Their eyes locked as the music hit its chorus, and the two of them sang it together.

'Everything stays  
Right where you left it  
Everything stays  
But it still changes

Ever so slightly  
Daily and nightly  
In little ways  
When everything stays '

Chloe knew Max too well – it really hit her in the gut in the best of ways. After all those years, they had changed, bit by bit, piece by piece, and yet being together still felt so similar to how it had when they’d been kids. Comfortable, safe, always oddly exciting with the prospect of just being them, together.

“So, yea,” Chloe rolled along, smiling stupidly. “Re-heated macaroni, Irish coffee, and the one goddamn thing I know to cook halfway decent.”

“Eggs again, huh?” Max taunted.

“I mean...besides that, what else am I really capable of cooking besides fuckin' eggs, eh?” Chloe took a sip of her booze-laced coffee and grunted pleasantly. “It's not exact, but...this is as close as I could remember to what we had that morning – when we started dating.”

Max sniffed the hard coffee, its vapors pricking at her nose in an oddly comforting way. She took a sip, and it burned a little.

Coughing in recovery, she pointed out, “Didn't we have orange juice, too?”
“Did we?” Chloe pondered.

“We did,” Max insisted, her memory coming together fuzzily.

Chloe shrugged, citing, “Outta OJ, Bebb, sorry.”

Max sighed through her nose pleasantly, but a little wistfully. She'd kind of been hoping that with all of her sneaking around, this anniversary dinner would've been...more special.

“Well, we can't win every anniversary,” Max said warmly, swapping glowing glances with her very-soon-to-be wife.

Chloe shook her head slightly, her eyes widening with mock disagreement.

“Dunno what you're talkin' about, Max – every anniversary is a win for me. An epic win.”

“Oh?” Max took the bait.

There was a pregnant pause of looks.

Chloe finally concluded, “I get to spend another year with the love of my fucking life. Maybe I suck at the ‘celebrating’ part but...” She stirred ketchup into her eggs. “I sure as hell don't suck at the 'appreciating' part.”

They took bites of their macaroni – oh, damn, Mom had improved her recipe. Day-old, re-heated macaroni had no business tasting that good. Even the eggs tasted better than usual. Maybe Chloe wasn't as original as all that, but it was the thought that counted.

“A-anyway,” Chloe said, observing Max's silence. “Sorry it's kinda half-assed, here. It's been...a bit of a time lately.”

“No, no, it's fine,” Max insisted. “It's cute.”

“I just, um-...I think back on that morning, right? Can't remember what the hell I even said to convince you back then, but I'm glad I did.”

Max nodded. “Yea. Me, too.”

“I know this life we've tried to start...” Chloe cleared her throat with a sip of her coffee. “Look, I just-...I feel bad that I'm not good at the, like...adulting shit. Never have been.”

Max extended her hand across Chloe's lap, palm raised, and Chloe accepted it.

“I know this life we've tried to start...” Chloe cleared her throat with a sip of her coffee. “Look, I just-...I feel bad that I'm not good at the, like...adulting shit. Never have been.”

Max extended her hand across Chloe's lap, palm raised, and Chloe accepted it.

Chloe added, “You make me so happy, Max. Just...existing. Just this. I lose sight of the practical shit because I'm just, like, content. Here, with you, it's all I need, really.”

Max nodded, rubbing her fingers up and down Chloe's palm as she leaned sideways into her love.

“You make me happy, too, Chloe. More than anything else. 'Existing' became...kind of a difficult thing for me to figure out for a while, there. But you brought me back.”

“Hey, Bebb, just returning the favor. Trying to, anyway.”

“W-well, yea, that's...part of what I love about us, Chloe: we try. We, like, inspire each other to try. I don't expect our lives to magically become some happily-ever-after. I mean, if they had done that way back when, we wouldn't even be together. All of this bullshit we've had to get through? Just to
stay together? All of the 'trying' we've done for each other?"

Max lifted Chloe's hand a bit and kissed Chloe on the wrist.

“Being with you is worth it,” Max assured quietly. “To me.”

Chloe smiled like a fool, consequently leaning in toward Max.

“To you, then,” Chloe whispered cheekily, kissing Max on the lips. “But, uh, also to me.”

They resumed their eating positions on the couch, and nibbled a bit at their food.

“I love you.” Chloe raised her mug of coffee and whiskey, mixed together.

“I love you, too.” Max toasted in reciprocation.

They tried to eat their home-cooked meal without event, but before they knew it, pirate hats were ditched to the floor, and eventually, so were the uniforms.

–

It wasn't perfect.

But it still felt perfect, somehow.

Everyone in the wedding party had shown up. Even Justin had arrived on time, by some crazy miracle. Brooke's dress had experienced a bit of a wardrobe malfunction an hour before the ceremony, but Steph's sharp wits had managed to salvage things. Victoria was doing double duty as a Bridesmaid and photographer for the whole thing. Max would steal the camera now and again, and Chloe adored seeing her love finally allow herself to slip into her photography again. Stella had kept their rings safe and sound – they were just going to re-use their engagement rings. And seeing Stells saunter on down the aisle with that glowing smile of hers – a smile that had more of an understanding than anyone else what the happy couple had been through to get to that very moment – it was reassuring. Off-script, Stells had pulled them both in for a hug, and had instigated the whole wedding party to follow suit. It had thrown off the pacing of the ceremony, sure. An imperfection in their schedule, and yet it had felt perfect.

Chloe had been certain she wouldn't cry. Even standing there, on that cliff beside the bay – beside the remains of the lighthouse and the memorials related thereto – Chloe didn't cry. It wasn't that there was no sorrow, but rather, that there was finally enough joy to eclipse it, after all these years.

Joyce – Mom – she'd started crying, though, when the group hug had happened. Chloe had never seen Mom so...happy. Not even when she'd gotten married herself. That single moment – a single expression from her Mom – had a funny way of filling in a hole in Chloe's heart that she had never seemed able to fill until precisely that moment.

Their matching purple dresses amid red-and-blue themed décor was a bit non-traditional, but it said exactly what it needed to.

The pair had exchanged vows – keeping things brief and to the point. Their lives had been complicated enough. Their love for each other wasn't.

The whole shebang was done and over before Chloe had time to process it.

It was that simple, really. When she'd found someone she just worked with so well, it was pretty
damned simple.

The case of the Missing Girl, the Dark Room, the Storm, the Other Side...

Despite everything...
Chloe was still with Max.
Max was still with Chloe.

This was the thought that entered Chloe's mind when it was time to kiss at the alter – when Max had whipped out that instant camera from their reunion, years ago, and taken a goofy as hell selfie to commemorate the moment of their marriage.

And in the glowing, camera-flashed moments to follow – in the rush of escaping down the aisle together – another thought stuck to Chloe.

'We're both better than we once were. With – because – of each other.'

And Chloe got to keep holding onto that thought as they whisked themselves down to the beach for the reception. They utilized the changing tent – finally quiet and still – and helped each other get equipped with their regal pirate uniforms.

It took every ounce of willpower to not just start making out and getting down to 'bidness' right there and then, in the naked transition between outfits, but they had managed. There'd be plenty of time for that later.

OK.

So they did make out a bit, after they'd gotten in uniform. Just a little. For like ten minutes.

It was their day, they could do whatever they wanted.

The dinner was nice. Their wedding wasn't huge – kind of small, actually – but that made it cozy, and comfortable, and intimate. People had taken their turns offering speeches. Crying happy tears. But, upon request, everyone had kept things short, and Max and Chloe themselves hadn't offered toasts to each other.

They both knew what was up.

They both knew how they'd gotten to where they were. How they'd held on. How they'd endured.

They didn't need to tell each other how they felt, because after everything? They knew.

So, when pestered by relatives to 'Speech, speech, speech,' they had this to say:

Chloe had roared out, “I fucking love my wife!” and promptly passed the mic to Max.

“What she said,” Max had concurred, dropping the mic into the sand before grabbing Chloe and kissing her in front of the crowd, who'd had a nice laugh.

Assuming their position on the temporary dance floor, Max glanced to Steph, who was on DJ duties, and gave the woman a thumbs up. With an excited grin and a 'Whoop- whoop!' Steph got their first-dance music playing.

Max wrapped her hands around Chloe's shoulders.
Chloe rested her hands against Max's hips.
A gentle piano started trickling across the reception, hushing everything to a lull.

This wasn't the song Chloe had been expecting.

“You swapped the song out, didn't you?” Chloe whispered, starting to slow-dance. Awkwardly.

Max tilted her head down, looking up at Chloe with a coy 'come hither'. They hadn't found their rhythm yet. But they would. They always did.

“She'll play the other song after,” Max teased, beginning to sway her hips against Chloe's grips.

“Is this...-?” Chloe began to recognize it. “This is from...-” And Max nodded, her sheepish smile so goddamn adorable.

Chloe had heard it so many times, come to think. Just...in pieces. Parts.

Now, she could hear it in a unified whole.

Max shrugged sheepishly, citing, “I guess a part of me can't let go of seeing us in the things we enjoy.” Her eyes slid up and around bashfully. “Aaaaand, ya know, using someone else's story to explain how much I fucking love my wife.”


“Fucking finally,” Max snickered, pressing her forehead against Chloe's. “And I'm your wife.”

“Co-captains of a whole new ship.”

“On a whole new sea.”

They let the song play, dancing in slow circles all the while.

’If I could begin to be
half of what you think of me
I could do about anything
I could even learn how to love’

The waves of Arcadia Bay lapped against the nearby shore.

In, then out.
In, then out.

Like the universe itself – the very thing that had tried so hard to keep them apart – breathing its sighs of relief.

’When I see the way you act
Wondering when I'm coming back
I could do about anything
I could even learn how to love
like you’

Max dwelt on the pain of existing across two realities – wondering, waiting, hoping to finally find happiness with the woman in her arms.

Chloe had inspired her to love, but just as importantly, to act on that love. Even if it meant crossing time and space.
'Love like you'

Max rested her hands against Chloe's hips.  
Chloe wrapped her hands around Max's shoulders.

'I always thought I might be bad  
Now I'm sure that it's true  
'Cause I think you're so good  
And I'm nothing like you'

Chloe was crying – goddamnit.

She'd fucked her life up so much, in so many ways.

And Max still loved her, all the same.

Max took her hands off Chloe's hips.  
Chloe took her hands off Max's shoulders.

They held hands and swayed to and fro, continuing to spin in slow circles.

'Look at you go  
I just adore you  
I wish that I knew  
What makes you think I'm so special?'

Max didn't know how she'd gotten her powers, or why.

And just as much of a mystery was how and why Chloe had known, had seen, way back then, whatever she had seen in Max.

But she adored Chloe so much.

'If I could begin to do  
Something that does right by you  
I would do about anything  
I would even learn how to love'

Letting go of what she'd lost – who she'd lost – and even accepting the burden of power that had saved her own life in the first place.

Most importantly, though, Chloe had done the one thing that, in Max's absence, she'd never truly believed she was capable of doing.

She'd confronted her own fears instead of running away from them.

'When I see the way you look  
Shaken by how long it took  
I could do about anything  
I could even learn how to love like you'

Swaying in circles, like the rest of the world didn't exist – like they existed within a reality of their own creation – Max was enraptured by the glow of Chloe's face, by the warmth of their hands within each other's grasp.
Chloe had the power to relive it – the entire ceremony – if she'd wanted to.

'Love like you'
And she did want to.

'Love me like you'
And she would. In her mind. In her heart. For the rest of her life.

–

The sea breeze washed over them.

Sitting upon the Marsh Memorial Bench – the same spot where they had confronted the Storm – Max and Chloe were enjoying the final piece of their wedding night together, on New Year's Eve. As fitting a time as any to get hitched, Max had figured.

Just them, an umbrella at the ready, and the wide open sea.

The sun had set a while back. It was late – almost midnight. The sky was full of rainclouds. The scent of incoming rain hung heavy in the air.

In the dark, in the rain, in the wind, Max was checking her camera. After months, she'd finally gotten the nerve to take photos again. During and after the reception, she'd gotten back into taking photos. And Chloe had even played some guitar for everyone – 'Home' was as fitting a song as Max could think of.

“You have a good time?” Chloe checked. “It wasn't much, but...”

“It was exactly what I wanted,” Max insisted, scrolling through her camera's fresh batch of photos. “Being back in Arcadia, with everyone, it was nice. Seeing everyone happy back here, like it used to be...”

“Heh. Still can't shake off the nostalgic side, huh?”

Max snuggled herself into Chloe's side.

“Hard to,” Max said with a pleasant hum, “when I've got so many nice memories with you now.”

“So smooth,” Chloe teased.

They kissed a bit, and by the time they were down, their umbrella was being tapped by gentle drops.

Max put her camera away in her bag, tucking it beneath the bench before losing herself in Chloe's warmth again.

A relaxing rainfall enveloped their senses, gradually picking up in its intensity, yet staying gentle enough to

Their bodies enveloped each other, and Chloe pulled the umbrella down to keep them shielded in a little bubble of comforting sound.

Co-captains, setting sail on a ship, on a new sea, toward a new destination.

“You know,” said Chloe, nuzzling her cheek against Max's neck. “I know I keep saying how I don't
really believe in 'forever,' but...Max. Maxie. Maximil. With you? I'm totally pumped to see how close we can get.”

“So am I,” Max agreed, sighing into Chloe's chest. The way Chloe's heartbeat blended together with the wind and rainfall was quite the song.

“Oh, shit,” Chloe said after a moment. Keeping her phone tucked within the umbrella, she cited, “We missed it.”

“What?” Max saw the timer.

[ 12:01am ]

“Whoops,” Max shrugged it off.

“Whoops?” Chloe balked. “Dude, it's the new year, gurl. I've never seen you this...unexcited about New Year's.”

Max shrugged, squeezing Chloe tightly.

“I already had my fresh start earlier today,” she explained. “The last one I think I'll ever need.”

Chloe chuckled softly, kissing Max on the forehead.

“Hey, um...” Chloe, still levelling her phone before them beneath the umbrella, swiped over to her camera. “If we're starting off fresh...”

Chloe took a selfie of the two of them, cheeks red from the cold, faces squished together.

It was far from a perfect photo finish to their evening.

But it felt perfect.

“Happy New Year, Max.”

“Happy New Year.”

“I love you.”

“Love you, too.”

'I've always wanted my life to be special, an adventure. But not without you.'

---

With whatever I have done
You're not the only one
We'll face the world as what we've become
And whatever I may do
By choice, I'll be with you

   And we'll live with scars
   Forever, together
   Together

~ Riley Hawke, 'Overexposed'

“Hearts live by being wounded.”

~ Oscar Wilde

If you want to read something new, Max and Chloe are featured in my new fic project, Arcadian Rhythms!
I am also still gradually getting the visual novel coded. I will post a new chapter to the fic when the VN is (eventually) finished!

Otherwise, if you want to support me or my work, you can visit this blog post to find out more.

End Notes

I spent a LOT of time working on the coding end of the visual novel in 2018, but there's still a LOT of work that needs to be done. But before I can focus on that, I need to focus on other things first. Sorry for the wait.
You can check out this blog post if you'd like to see ways you can support me, my fiancée, and our work.
https://destiny-smasher.tumblr.com/post/184754205794/support

Thank you for all of your support, thanks for taking the time to read this, and definitely thanks for leaving your thoughts.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!